

Legends thrive in every place and age. They are told around the campfires of shepherds and the fountains of nobles; they drift through the consciousness of one age and pass on to the next. Always changing as times and tellers change, yet they have an odd persistence, coming back to the same themes again and again. Legends connect an endless multitude of listeners to a common dream, and thereby to each other; they knit together the fabric of culture.

This is a tale of the Age of Spirits; told by merchants and travellers, warriors and sages, it has fragmented into a thousand variations. Whether sung by a bard to a tavern of strangers or repeated by a grandmother to a circle of children, it has captured the imagination of audiences across the lands. And so, in this Age of The Sun, let me tell you a story both new and old, both remembered and forgotten: The Legend of the Tree of Life and Death...

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In the Age of Spirits, a kingdom called Haareng stretched along the coast of the Twilight Ocean, from the Bay of Firs in the north to the Giant's Forest in the south. Its people were prosperous, tilling fertile land and trading with other nations along the coast. Its capitol, Amerel, was a bustling port at the mouth of the Veren River, and it was said that treasures from across the world were collected there by King Ogin.

Although the vaults of King Ogin were said to contain countless wonders, the king's most prized possession was kept not in a locked chest, but in the king's garden. Amidst exotic flowers and lush grasses there grew a gnarled tree, leafless branches stretching in all directions. This was the Tree of Life and Death, known better by its other name, the Tree of Wishes. Although it showed no outward sign of life, the tree nonetheless gave an impression of overwhelming vitality, such that no-one who saw it doubted that it still lived.

According to the people of Amerel, the Tree of Wishes was a vital national treasure. Hadn't the king used it to end the drought four years ago, and to stop the flooding before that? No-one knew exactly how, but the tree surely granted wishes, perhaps to those who ate its fruit, or smelled its flowers. When the island raiders were plaguing the coast, hadn't a sudden storm decimated their fleet? And before that, when the giants came out of their

forest, the previous king had convinced them to return. If not for the Tree of Wishes, all of Haareng might be destroyed, but because of it, it would surely continue to prosper.

Every spring, the royal gardeners would inspect the tree thoroughly, looking for any sign of new life. In living memory, the tree had only sprouted twelve times, each time growing a new branch which bore leaves, then in the next year a single flower which would mature into a fruit. So when it was announced that a new branch had sprouted, the people of Amerel rejoiced, and the news spread throughout the kingdom and beyond. Passed from traveller to merchant, travelling with caravans across deserts and crossing oceans on ships, the news spread wide and far...

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The news of the sprouting of the Tree of Wishes reached all the way across the continent to the port city of Ulms-Iber on the Dawnssea, capitol of the country of Kolum. It had been a dusty year in Ulms-Iber, full of petty arguments and not-great news, so a hopeful rumor was well-received, even if it was no more than that. Haareng and the Twilight Ocean were so far from Kolum that to most in Ulms-Iber, the news of the sprouting sounded like something from a fairy-tale. But there were those who took it seriously: Travelling merchants asked each other for information about Haareng, nobles considered the political implications, and in a quiet corner of the city, someone started preparing for a very long journey.

But who would start a journey based on little more than a myth? What kind of person would consider leaving behind even an uncomfortable life to journey across a continent?

1. **Perhaps someone whose life was more than merely uncomfortable? Someone desperate enough that the rumor of a wish seemed a better prospect than what Ulms-Iber had to offer?**
2. Perhaps someone whose life was too comfortable, who longed for a taste of adventure and perhaps didn't comprehend what that really meant? Someone who wasn't afraid to leave a life behind because they took it completely for granted?

3. Perhaps someone with a strong sense of duty? Someone who had the best interests of a nation at heart, and who saw no alternative to a desperate chance?
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Arel bumped into someone and stumbled to the ground. “Watch where you’re walking, waif!” and the stranger moved on, no sympathy for a dusty beggar dressed in rags. Picking herself up, she limped along, skirting the lower market of Ulms-Iber on side-streets where beggars were tolerated. A lanky teen wearing a tattered robe and head-wrap, she attracted little notice from the people of the city: Just another vagrant, another sign of the times. She in turn paid them little mind, too focused on her own bleak thoughts.

She hated the city, nothing but dust and closed doors. She hated the people who turned away, too uncomfortable to even look at her. Even those who offered her money were hesitant, as if she might somehow betray their paltry ‘trust.’ Mixed with hatred was an exhausting cloud of despair. Nothing to look forward to, only problems in the future. As bleak as her present condition was, where would she be a year from now, or five? That thought kept sticking in her head, and the conclusion was inevitable: she’d still be wandering the streets, still working for the king. Not King Mera of Kolum of course, but the king of Muck, Lom the One-Eyed, Master of Crooked Alleys.

She hefted the purse she had lifted from the stranger earlier and knocked twice on an unmarked door. The shutter opened and closed, and then the door did the same, leaving the alley empty.

“Catch any fish?” Milo’s words were quiet but firm.

Arel silently dropped the purse into an outstretched hand.

“Stay in for a while then. Wouldn’t want anyone to mistake you for a thief.”

Arel went down the hallway to the back room, ignoring the sounds of laughter from the tavern in the front. She sat down on a cot and closed her eyes. These hours spent confined in the dark back room were perhaps the least favorite part of her days. At least out on the streets she had something to occupy her mind, scanning the crowds for targets and reeling in her ‘catch.’ Here in the back room, hiding from the outside world, there was nothing to do but think, and thinking these days felt like an endless parade of misery.

Two years ago she had learned the hard way that money wasn’t worth a thing unless you had power. Before that, living on the streets, she had

dreamt of a rich life and peeked into nobles' gardens with wide eyes. She'd been good at begging, but of course she didn't keep any of what was given to her: Milo collected that for king Lom, in exchange for one meal a day and the right to find a dry place to sleep, which was a good deal compared to the beating you got if you tried to cheat him. Which is exactly what she had done, eventually.

Someone had dropped a purse and just left it there, so she picked it up and decided two things. First, since the man hadn't put it in her bowl, it didn't really belong to Lom, did it? Second, she was going to buy a meal and eat it before anyone would ever find out. For a moment at least she could be like the merchants that ate in the market every day, because of her lucky find!

Maybe the vendor who sold her the meal thought he was doing her a favor, but he certainly wasn't stupid enough not to report her, and he handed over the money she had paid along with his usual sum just to be safe.

She then found out that actually, any money dropped on the street did belong to Lom, and that by kicking you in the stomach, even a meal you've already eaten can be taken away from you. Of course, nobody believed that she'd really just found the money either, and so she was 'promoted' from beggar to cutpurse.

She was good at lifting purses, and her old self would probably have enjoyed it, but some part of her had finally given in, and she didn't seem to be capable of enjoying anything any more. She spent more and more of her days somewhere between anger and despair, and she wasn't even angry at Milo or king Lom: she knew better now than to defy them. She had grown more violent recently, but she didn't feel any joy or release in it: it just seemed an appropriate way of responding to the world.

The door opened and someone was roughly shoved inside, falling to the floor. She heard Milo's rough voice from the corridor:

"...and don't think to try that again!"

The door slammed and locked this time. The form on the floor moaned softly but didn't seem inclined to stand; she vaguely recognized him as Oli, another of Milo's fishers. Oli had always been a bit rebellious so it was no surprise to see him getting punished, but this time it looked like things had gone a bit farther than usual. Arel just sat there as he lay on the floor and groaned: whatever he had done was none of her business.

After a while he seemed to come to his senses and noticed her.

"Arel."

“Oli.”

They were both silent for a bit.

Oli finally mustered the strength to crawl onto one of the cots, at which point he groaned again and closed his eyes.

“Want to know what I did this time?” it sounded as though even talking was painful for him. Arel didn’t really, but she waited for him to continue, since she knew he would regardless. Oli grunted and winced.

“I tried to get out of this damned hell-hole!”

Oli’s vehemence was surprising, but Arel still didn’t say anything. This was different from his usual antics, she guessed.

“Had enough, and thought I’d just walk out of the city and starve to death in the wilds if that’s what it took.”

Arel blinked. Not much point in that, and look where it had landed him regardless.

“There’s a rumor, had you heard? The king of Haareng has a tree that will grant a wish. Seems like a good excuse, right?”

“I don’t even know where Haareng is...” he mumbled.

“The guards at the gate were looking out for me though. Guess king Lom’s got a lot of friends in this—” he spat “—city.”

He continued softly, “...I get it, you don’t even care, do you. Might be nice, not to feel anything.”

It was true that she didn’t care, but she certainly didn’t feel nothing. She felt awful. All the time. Rage and misery, even apathy could only dull their edge a bit. She turned away from him.

“...well at least you’re not like those bastards!” again she heard a spark of real anger in his voice. She knew, though, that there was nothing anyone could do about king Lom. That was one of the foundations of her reality, just one of the unchangeable properties of the world. King Lom ruled Ulms-Iber, not just the back streets but all of it, and to go against him resulted in punishment, just as surely as throwing a ball up meant that it would come back down. A familiar surge of frustration sent her thoughts back into a spiral of misery.

In the evening when Milo let her out, Oli was unconscious.

“Good job this morning. Catch another big one if you can.”

Milo let her out the side door and into the alley. The sun was just beginning to set, so most customers would be heading for home, as merchants packed up their stalls. If she didn’t find a mark fast, she’d have to find someone shopping at the night market, but those customers tended to be

much more wary. She relaxed just a bit as she started moving towards the market, letting her brain focus on the task at hand.

There, a teenager, maybe her own age, buying dried fruits from an open stall. Probably gullible, and—she saw him hand over a silver piece and watched the merchant dig for change—rich. She hesitated a bit as her mark tied his coin pouch securely to his belt and looked around suspiciously, as if afraid someone was watching him. After the incident with Oli earlier, finding such a perfect mark felt somehow off. Not only was he rich, but he had no idea how to protect his purse, and she knew that his suspicions, though well-founded, would only serve to distract him from her task.

She approached as usual, a beggar with a slight limp walking along the edge of the dimly-lit street, clutching an empty bowl. As he walked past, her limp turned into a stumble and she lurched next to him, quickly cutting the exposed string of his pouch and secreting it into her cloak, at the same time hooking a weighted ‘bird’ in its place so he wouldn’t notice the absence.

“Oh!” he looked around quickly before looking at her, just the reaction she had been expecting. What he said next surprised her though: “I’m sorry.” Confused, she merely coughed and limped back towards the edge of the road. She was the one who was supposed to apologize. She felt him look at her awkwardly for another moment before turning back to his path. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him give another furtive glance at his surroundings, and as she slipped into narrow alleyway she watched for the inevitable purse-pat but it didn’t come. He was even more stupid than she had imagined.

Without wasting time, she returned to the side door of the Stumbling Boar where she handed over the goods to Milo once more. He looked genuinely surprised at how quickly she had returned, but when he opened the pouch he actually gave her a short stare. She nodded towards the kitchen and he grunted assent. Another day, another meal. The gruel was the same as always, but at least it quelled her gnawing hunger a bit. She finished her bowl quickly and went to the back room, not interested in kitchen gossip or the roars of laughter from the front room.

Oli was still asleep on the same cot; she guessed he must have gotten quite a beating. None of the other fishers were around, which was fine with her. She lay down and went to sleep quickly, exhaustion taking over from hunger. Before she drifted off she vaguely hoped that Milo wouldn’t wake her for a night shift tonight.

When he inevitably did, she smothered her thoughts and stood up blearily,

heading towards the door. He grabbed her arm, though, and whispered "Wait." She turned to look at him with a blank expression. Besides Oli, two other fishers were sleeping in the back room now, but Milo knew she didn't like to work with a partner. He gestured towards Oli, miming picking him up. For a second, her mind raced, thinking of... too many things.

Was she finally going to become one of the 'them' that Oli had mentioned just that morning? She *did not want* that. She didn't even care for Oli particularly; that morning he had only talked to her because she was a person to talk to. What meagre camaraderie existed between Milo's fishers couldn't be called as much as friendship even, and she didn't share Oli's anger at Milo and what he represented. But part of her fundamentally refused to become... something.

But her merciless internal logic marched onwards. Milo was asking her to do something. No, he was telling her to do it. What would she do? She would obey what he said. There was no other choice, she had learned that.

Milo saw her hesitation and shook his head, pointing to Oli.

"Look," he whispered.

She looked at Oli, sleeping soundly, his face a mass of bruises. She blankly looked back at Milo, and he grabbed her arm and placed her hand against his forehead. A shiver went through her as her thoughts spun out of control.

"Oh," she said quite loudly.

Milo gave her a harried look and put a finger to his lips. He mimed picking up again. This time she complied, grabbing Oli's clammy shoulders and hoisting him, along with Milo, before quietly carrying him outside. Later she would remember the sheer *wrongness* of the corpse, the flesh cold and stiff where it should have been warm and flexible, but she barely thought anything at all as she and Milo carried it through the streets. She didn't even wonder where they were going until they came close to the seawall.

They put the corpse down as Milo walked ahead to talk to a guard, and then they carried it through an empty guardhouse and up two flights of stairs to the top of the wall. By that point, Arel was completely exhausted, and she hardly registered what Milo was doing as he pushed the corpse over the edge. The crashing waves below couldn't quite mask the sound of the body hitting the rocks, and Arel stumbled to the other edge and vomited loudly into the street below. Milo grabbed her by the collar and hauled her up to face him. He looked a bit different than usual, but there was no mistaking the finality in his voice:

"It's too bad that Oli killed himself. I don't know how he managed to

get up the wall without the guards noticing, but it's happened before. Now let's get back to the Stumbling Boar and get to sleep."

Arel stared at him blankly for a second, and then looked down. Milo seemed satisfied with that and they made their way back to the tavern. She didn't go to sleep though.

For a while, she just sat on her cot, shivering. Something had broken again, she thought, because her normal thoughts didn't seem to be working. Where yesterday had been filled with anger, frustration, and misery, blended with hunger and exhaustion, she now felt completely empty. Tentatively, she tried to feel sorry for Oli, or even angry at the world, but neither worked. She honestly had never thought of Oli as a friend or even fellow, despite their shared hardships, and an undeserved death was no strange thing in the city. She had seen corpses before at public executions and abandoned in alleyways, even. Trying to piece together some coherent train of thought, she reached backwards, and latched onto something.

She hadn't wanted to become one of 'them.' She wasn't even certain what that meant, but she knew that there was a difference between Milo, an impersonal force of the world, and herself, a... person? Her thoughts stumbled again. Milo had looked... scared, up on the wall. Maybe he too was a person. She dropped that mystery and started over again.

She hadn't wanted to become one of 'them.' What would she do now? But the harsh voice that normally thrust her forward on the path of obedience and survival seemed to be gone. The first hints of dawn were starting to creep into the room, and she asked herself again: what would she do now? She didn't know any more, but arbitrarily she decided that this day would not be the same as the ones before it. She made the decision not out of desperation but out of a kind of innocent curiosity.

"What if today were not like yesterday?" "That would be interesting."

And suddenly Oli's words from the previous morning came back to her: "...get out of this damned hell-hole!"

He had done it, at the end, she thought, and so would she, only better. She would get out of the city alive, and why not? She would visit the King of Haareng and make a wish.

Suddenly her hunger and exhaustion returned, and with them the crushing weight of despair. She flopped down on the cot and let it wash over her, misery blotting out her other thoughts.

About mid-morning her hunger woke her. Her mouth tasted foul and her arms ached; she had barely slept, but her stomach felt like it was on fire.



She remembered the last night with barely any reaction, a familiar apathy was seeping back into her thoughts as she headed towards the kitchen. As a fisher she earned two bowls of gruel each day, and having lost one yesterday on the wall her hunger was vicious.

After breaking her fast she finally noticed that Milo wasn't around. This wasn't unheard of, and she knew exactly what was expected of her, so she left by the side door, getting one of the kitchen hands to lock it behind her. Find a mark. Approach. Lift their purse. Return the purse to Milo. Somehow today she wasn't following her usual routine though.

She was still standing in the alley outside the Stumbling Boar, in fact. And when she thought "What am I doing?" the answer surprised her. She was leaving Ulms-Iber. She was leaving Ulms-Iber to travel to Haareng and get a wish from the King there. Even more surprising than that thought was the fact that there was no counter-thought, no immediate and devastating reply from the other half of her brain. She felt almost off-balance for a moment, and then for an instant she felt an exhilarating sense of freedom, before it was crushed by a wall of despair.

But although her mood had soured, she realized that her goal had not changed. She was still leaving Ulms-Iber. She was still headed to Haareng. Those were the new facts of her existence, and it was as if the old ones had been shorn away.

Having figured out what she was doing, Arel was faced with a decision: should she try to sneak out through one of the city gates, as Ori had done, or should she try to stow away aboard a ship, and leave by sea? She knew that Haareng was on the Twilight Ocean, which was far to the west, and that Ulms-Iber was a port on the Dawnssea, but beyond that, she had no knowledge of geography.

1. She should try to leave by the Northgate, where heavy traffic may mean distracted guards. The Northgate was also furthest from the Stumbling Boar and Milo's territory, although king Lom has people throughout the city.
2. She should try to leave by the Southgate, which also has heavy traffic, but which was much closer to the Stumbling Boar.
3. **She should try to leave by the Westgate, where little traffic might mean lazy guards, although it was quite close to the Stumbling Boar.**

4. She should try to leave by stowing away on a merchant vessel. Arel had no experience with ships, but had heard of fugitives being caught hiding on boats before, and it seemed least likely that Milo would look for her at the docks.
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Arel decided that the Westgate was the safest option: being close to the Stumbling Boar was a risk but it also meant she could leave more quickly. It was also the right direction to reach Haareng, she thought. Now she faced another choice, however: in her condition she probably couldn't walk for more than half a day, and everything outside the walls of Ulms-Iber was foreign to her. Should she steal some money from a merchant while she's still in the city, try to steal some food from a stall, or just leave?

1. She should try to steal some money from a merchant, like she'd done a hundred times before. It's true that sometimes she'd been forced to run to one of the bolt-holes scattered throughout the city, and if that happened it would delay her escape from the city, but she'd not actually been caught once (which was why she still had both hands).
  2. **She should try to steal some food from a stall. Normally this was forbidden, since the merchants all paid protection money these days, but Arel had done it a couple of times when Milo had given permission. Stealing from a stall was harder than lifting a purse because the people who ran stalls were more savvy than the easiest marks, but what Arel needed most right then was food, not money, and there was no guarantee she'd be able to exchange money for food outside the city.**
  3. She should just leave. Now that she was no longer obedient to king Lom, even if she hadn't acted on that attitude yet, a part of her was silently screaming in fear every second she stayed in the city. Milo's absence that morning might even be an opportunity, and if so, she should grasp it while still she could.
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Arel swung by the lower market on her way to the Westgate. As easy as it would be to steal someone's purse, she couldn't buy something with the money in the city without attracting attention, and what she needed most right now was food. Unlike Oli she wasn't prepared to settle for starving in the wilds.

She hadn't stolen food from a stall in a long time, but her hands were still quick and her eyes were sharp. She had to do it unnoticed, though: there would be no point in running to a bolt-hole if she were discovered. Luckily, the merchants who paid protection money let down their guard a bit. There was some unsanctioned thievery of course, but it wasn't common enough to warrant true vigilance.

Of course, in her current beggar's rags, anyone smart would be keeping an eye on her if she wandered near their stall. Not everyone in the world was smart though. She drifted down a row of stalls near the edge of the market, quietly noting which merchants took note of her approach. Her clothing might make her look like someone desperate for a meal, but it also kept her anonymous: nobody really wanted to pay attention to a beggar. She picked her mark and walked on quite a ways, circling back through a warren of alleyways to approach again from a different street.

As expected, nobody seemed to realize she was the same beggar as the one who had just walked past, given how quickly she had circled around. When she came to her mark, the proprietor was still negotiating avidly with a customer who had brought a cart and was obviously looking to buy in bulk, and she easily palmed as many vegetables as she could comfortably carry under her robe and walked on without him being any the wiser. She could only hope that none of king Lom's observers had noticed, but she was relatively confident she had gotten away with it. No time to stop and enjoy her plunder, though: she headed for the Westgate, taking twisting alleys and side lanes to avoid notice as much as possible.

When she reached the gate, she slumped down near the mouth of an alleyway with a clear view of the traffic, just another beggar in a city full of them. The guards at the gate were clearly not too serious about their duties, waving most traffic through without so much as a word. They even seemed to have a flagon of wine in the guardhouse at the gate, which she saw passed out to the two guards on duty once in a while. She watched patiently as the traffic passed by: Carts loaded with merchandise both entering and leaving the city, some solitary travellers with walking staves wearing long robes against the heat, a few peasants from the fields outside with some business in the city,

and even a group of pilgrims with broad hats and intricate pendants.

She had to think of a way to get through the gate without attracting the notice of the guards. They doubtless had some part in king Lom's business, just like her, and if they grew too suspicious she'd end up like Oli. She immediately wished she had asked him which gate he had tried to leave by, but all she could do now was hope it hadn't been the Westgate. Thinking about the traffic through the gate, she decided she had a few options, although she didn't exactly like any of them:

1. She could try to tag along at the back of a caravan passing through. The carts were big and dusty and the guards might not notice an extra person at the end of the line. Caravans always had plenty of guards and laborers walking alongside, but her clothes would stand out, and if the people of the caravan noticed her they might suspect she was trying to rob them and turn her in.
2. She could ask to join a band of pilgrims, if another group passed by. She didn't know much about the Spirits, but she had heard that pilgrims usually traveled in open groups and welcomed any who wanted to join them. The guards would probably be hesitant to stop someone on a religious mission, and the pilgrims weren't likely to immediately report her even if they wouldn't let her join them.
3. **She could pretend to be on king Lom's business outside the walls. She was pretty confident that the gate guards were in his pay one way or another, and they'd probably let her through, but they'd almost certainly report the incident to their superiors, and she didn't know whether they'd send someone to follow her or not. If she was lucky, nobody would care enough to bother coming after her once she was gone.**

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Arel approached the guards alone, wearing her beggar's rags. She chose to approach a few hundred feet ahead of a caravan, so the guards wouldn't have much time to think about their decisions. Her heart almost lept into her throat when she saw them immediately take note of her approach. This wasn't going to be easy.

“Now where do you think you’re going, fisher?” the words were like ice-water on her spine. Dressed as a beggar, why would they know she was a thief? She didn’t recognize either of the guards at the gate... Had Milo already told them to look out for her? That shouldn’t be possible; he had been gone when she left and she wouldn’t even be expected back at the Stumbling Boar by now. She wasn’t about to abandon her plan now though.

Even as a familiar feeling of futility settled over her, she said “The king told me to visit someone out in the fields.”

“So even a beggar like you can get an audience with the king himself?” the guard laughed in a nasty way. His partner eyed the approaching caravan, but the first guard called out in the direction of the gatehouse:

“Hey Milo, some see what we’ve got over here!” Arel found herself horrified for the second time in their short conversation. Sure enough, Milo appeared at the entrance to the guardhouse, holding the flagon of wine.

“You want sh’more already, you greedy bastards?” he yelled, before focusing his bleary eyes on the person standing at the gate. Suddenly he seemed to become a lot more sober. Staring directly at Arel from not more than twenty paces away, he said in a cold, almost quiet voice:

“Come here now.”

Arel felt suddenly calm. The despair that had been clinging to her a second ago was somehow gone, all she felt was purpose and a sense of simplicity. She living in the world of yesterday where Milo’s word was absolute. She was living in a new world where she was going to go to Haareng and fulfil a wish. With calm, serious eyes, she said one word, “No,” and then she ran. The gates were open, the guards weren’t expecting it, and before they had even turned to see where she was her foot had touched down outside the walls.

She was hungry and exhausted, but her body felt light as a feather, and her head was filled with a single thought: run. She didn’t look back; didn’t see whatever happened behind her, barely even heard shouts and sounds of pursuit. For a few minutes after the initial seconds she heard heavy boots and panting breath behind her, and even Milo’s voice shouting “Arel!” but fueled by an oddly overwhelming sense of rightness she ran on, head down, bare feet pounding on the dry road, adrenaline filling her veins. The guards were wearing armor and soon found that they couldn’t keep up. Milo should have been able to chase her down: he was a strong man, and she was a half-starved teen, but he’d gone through more than a flagon of strong wine with his friends that morning, and he’d been drinking more than they had.

He wasn't going to give up easily though, and Arel found that her initial burst of speed was fading. She started gasping for breath, her legs and lungs suddenly felt like they were on fire. Milo was a good distance behind but he hadn't stopped, and she found she couldn't keep up a full sprint. Loping now and gulping air, she found her exhilaration being slowly replaced by fear, but she kept going. She focused all of her thoughts on running, willing her uncooperative legs to keep moving. The running had turned from a dream into a nightmare, but she kept going.

Finally, having pushed her body to its limits, she dropped to the ground. Milo was nowhere to be seen, but the idea that she had actually escaped seemed ridiculous. She crawled to the ditch at the side of the road and lay in the dust, coughing and choking. Even thinking felt like a monumental effort, so she just lay there.

It wasn't until she opened her eyes that she realized she had lost consciousness. She was immediately assaulted by a combination of exhaustion, pain, thirst, hunger, and fear. She didn't know how far she had run, or how long had passed since she'd crawled into the ditch, but she knew she couldn't stay where she was.

Looking around, she found her surroundings completely alien. Open land stretched away for what seemed like forever; crops growing on either side of the road. She could still see the city, and when she looked back it appeared both frighteningly close and endlessly distant. She had never been this far from a building in her life.

There were farmhouses spaced along the road, and nearby something that looked like a run-down shack. A little ways ahead the road turned to skirt a bit of marshy land, and in the distance ahead she could see foothills rising to meet mountains, but mostly her surroundings seemed overwhelmingly empty.

Her body seemed to decide that she had had enough time to look around, and insisted that her biggest problem right now was thirst. Her throat felt lined with dust, and even crouching on the ground, she felt a bit faint and dizzy. She didn't see anything that looked like a well nearby, so she only had two options:

1. She could drag herself to the nearest farmhouse and beg for water. Surely that wasn't too much to grant a stranger. It might make following her trail easier, but was that really such an important concern right now?

2. **She could head towards the swampy area ahead and look for a puddle to drink from. It certainly didn't sound appealing, but in her present condition, she wasn't sure if she could deal with human contact, and the bushes growing in the low land might leave her a little less exposed than she was currently.**
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She gathered her energy and stumbled onwards in the dry ditch. It took her far longer than she had expected to reach the bend in the road, and when she got there, she didn't see any standing water. There ground was soggy in places though, and she wound up pulling up clumps of dirt and grass and squeezing precious drops of muddy water into her mouth. The scrawny bushes growing in the small marsh did little to ease her feeling of exposure, but at least she couldn't see the Westgate directly from where she was any more.

She found herself chewing on some moss and thought about food. Immediately she remembered, as if crystal clear, the moment at the gate when she had started running. In that desperate instant, the vegetables she had stolen from the careless merchant in the city had been forgotten, and for all she knew they were still lying on the ground before the gate, crushed into the dust beneath the hooves of oxen and the wheels of caravans. Her mood returned to a familiar darkness, but at least she no longer felt dizzy and faint. Just exhausted, hungry, and afraid.

She realized reluctantly that her hunger would have to wait. She was no stranger to skipping meals, and the most pressing problem was being discovered by Milo or someone he sent after her. She knew that she wouldn't be able to travel much farther, either, so she'd have to find some way to hide herself. Stuffing handfuls of wet moss into the pockets of her tattered robe, she considered her options.

1. **She could crawl into a nearby field and hope that she wasn't discovered. Some of the crops were high enough already to cover her from the road if she lay down, and there were far too many farm plots along the road for anyone to search them thoroughly.**
2. She could sneak into a barn or farm shack and try to hide there, but if someone was looking for here they might go so far as to check buildings

along the road. The idea of being surrounded by walls was appealing to her though.

3. She could try to walk further on the road and see if a better hiding place presented itself, but she could see pretty far in this flat country and nothing obvious lay on the road ahead.

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Arel decided that hiding in a field would be the safest option. Not far ahead was a field with some waist-high grass growing in it, so she approached it and carefully walked along the edge without disturbing the plants. The green stalks were planted too closely for her to slip amongst them, so she walked away from the main road until she came to the far edge of the field.

A thin track separated that field from the next, and to her dismay she saw that the next field was growing some kind of flower, which barely came halfway to her knees. Sleeping there she'd be hidden from the road, but completely exposed to anyone coming from the other direction. Still, she lay down to test the hiding spot and she couldn't actually see any farmhouses from it directly. When she thought about getting up again and finding a better spot, the fact that she was already prone quickly became quite convincing.

Exhausted and hungry, her mouth full of dirt and uncertain of what to expect from the next day, she finally let sleep take her. Based on physical exertion alone she should have slept quite soundly, but the strange environment and a thousand nagging doubts made her sleep fitful. Between the unfamiliar night noises of the countryside and a host of nightmares, she found herself constantly jerking awake, but as soon as she did so, her fatigue would drag her back to sleep. When morning finally came, she stared blearily at the brightening sky in confusion for a minute before she realized what it meant: Today was her first day outside the city.