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THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND THE WEIGHT OF TWO WORLDS:

AN EXPLORATION OF FAITH IN FANTASY

by

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ABSTRACT:

This project is two-fold. The first section attempts to determine what it is that makes Tolkien's writing, specifically within *The Lord of the Rings*, stand out against other Christian fantasy, particularly within modern evangelical culture. The purpose of this is to determine how he uses faith within his fantasy differently, and makes that faith-based writing meaningful to his readers without leaving them feeling preached-at. The second section is an excerpt of my own novel, *The Weight of Two Worlds*, in which I have attempted to use Tolkien's methods to incorporate faith in my fantasy writing.

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The Lord of the Rings and The Weight of Two Worlds:

An Exploration of Faith in Fantasy

I have been reading *The Lord of the Rings* in a cyclical fashion since I was ten. Cyclical because it continues to be relevant through each cycle of my life—a thrilling story, a distraction, a reassurance, a discovery, a comfort. That’s twelve years of reading now, and my bound copy of all three collected books is growing old and worn with use, collecting sticky notes and napkins to mark the pages that I turn back to most often. A slip of notebook paper marks the page where Tom Bombadil sings to the ponies, because when I read it aloud to my sister over Christmas break when she was twelve, it made her laugh. Tissue marks Aragorn’s song about Tinúviel, or Luthien, the beautiful elven-maid whose name is on Tolkien’s wife’s tombstone, and whose name I wanted to give my firstborn child when I was too young to know better. More tissues, between the pages where Legolas announces his leaving to the white shores, a description of a land “*where the leaves fall not*” – a description I have come to associate with heaven. And most important, marked appropriately with a bright blue square of paper, is the passage where simple, devoted Samwise, a gardener who only left his comfortable home for the sake of a friend, decides not to turn back in his search for Frodo. Even when he’s near certain that his master is dead, that he’ll have to go on alone into the darkest place in the world, that he has failed his one task and lost everything, he sits himself down and sings. And I don’t know why this passage is so important to me, so monumentally important, except that somehow, in a way that I can’t quite pin down, this passage looks like my relationship with God.

When I was young, and my relatives were just starting to accept that they were never going to find an activity—soccer, fencing, singing, guitar, swimming, ballet, pottery—that I liked better than reading and writing, I was constantly given books that had the whole journey laid out for me. They were moral, evangelical, and predictable. There might have been epic battles with satanic enemies, and magic based on the miracles of Christ, and that might have been quite exciting and even well-written, but it always ended in the same place, and told me exactly what I was supposed to learn from it. I was encouraged to write these kinds of stories, to make sure that God featured in my fantasy because if he didn't, I wasn't properly "using my gift." But while these stories left me feeling like I had just left a rather empty Sunday School, I got something different from Tolkien: exactly what I needed. Each reading it was something else. When I felt I had failed everyone, when I felt alone, I re-read Sam's song, his hopeful musical defiance against the gloom of Mordor. When I wanted to give up – on writing, on trying, on placing my trust in anyone – I re-read the Sam's speech to Frodo about life going on, about love growing greater in the midst of pain, about the stories that scare you being the ones that matter. When I was told that there are proper places for women to stay, I laughed, because Eowyn, the shield-maiden of Rohan, killed the Witch-King on Pelennor fields and left his beheaded monster rotting on the grass, so how was a silly little rule supposed to stop me? In the end, I found God in *The Lord of the Rings*, and I did not need a book of Christian explanations to help me out, because God was everywhere, in whatever passage struck me, in whichever capacity I needed him.

During my junior year of college, I worked at *Image*, a literary journal that is focused on faith and the arts—not necessarily Christian poetry, photography, etc, but

artistic works that wrestle with the general idea of faith and doubt in an honest way. *Image* is not interested in obvious or didactic works, intentionally shying away from writing that would make the life of Christ and Christ-following look bright and easy. In this microcosm made up of people who want to see and acknowledge the idea of a mysterious and complicated faith, I distinctly remember my boss saying that whenever she interviewed new intern applicants, without fail, they would list Tolkien as an influence, a patron saint. Why, I wonder, did we all choose him? Was it because we all felt the same, felt how *different* Tolkien was from these other moral tales of Christian fantasy? How was he so successful at including an honest, sincere faith, a faith that meant something, in a fantasy world that, as he once wrote in his Letters, was “not a Christian world” but rather a “monotheistic world of natural theology” (220)? Certainly there is faith in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Christian ideals—hope, courage, humility, sacrifice. There seems to be an over-arching sense of God too, especially in the way that events work so beautifully together for good. Yet an actual religion is never mentioned, and not only did Tolkien explicitly say he hadn’t written a “Christian world,” but he also included elements of many pagan mythologies. None of this fits with today’s brand of popular evangelical Christian writing, which insists on pragmatism, so what, then, has made it so endearing, so successful in the realm of Christian readers?

My goal is to find out exactly what it is that makes Tolkien’s writing different, what sets it apart while still letting it remain such a prominent example of faith in fiction. As a writer I want to figure out how Tolkien accomplished this deep, non-explicit expression of faith that appeals to Christians and non-Christians alike, and I want to attempt to emulate that in my own fiction. This project is an attempt to do that, an

exploration first of what it is that Tolkien does, and second of how I might incorporate it into my writing. In the following pages, I will discuss the religious elements of *Lord of the Rings* and whether it can be considered a truly Christian or religious work; I will discuss how Tolkien's expression of faith in fiction differs from the contemporary evangelical philosophy of Christian Art; and I will focus on the aspects of Tolkien's faith in fantasy that I can bring into my own writing—the three most key aspects being a use of source material from varying cultures, religions and myths, a moral structure of good and evil that still finds moments of complexity, and a refusal to participate in outright Christian didacticism within the work. Following these discussions is an excerpt of my own fantasy novel, *The Weight of Two Worlds*, and an analysis of how I attempted to apply Tolkien's philosophy of Christian Art as I wrote it.

As a student of literature, I know that the interpretation of books should be based upon the text itself, not necessarily on the writer's intentions. But because this project culminates in my attempt to re-create Tolkien's process of authentic faith-based writing within my own fantasy world, it becomes necessary that his thoughts be considered. This is not so much a question of what does the book say, but of how it is saying it. How exactly is religion coming through in these novels? What made Tolkien different from more didactic Christian authors when he was writing *The Lord of the Rings*? And so of course, there must be discussion of the text, of its possible Christian and non-Christian elements, of its popular reception and its distinctions from the works of other writers; but there must also be discussion of what he was thinking, what he believed, that allowed his work to be so set apart.

The Lord of the Rings as a Christian Work

Tolkien himself said that *The Lord of the Rings* was "of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic book, unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (letter 142)—the revision of a book being, of course, one of the most important parts of its birth, because it is the time when the author thinks most clearly about what they are trying to accomplish. But Tolkien also made clear, especially in opposition to the popular and much more didactic C.S. Lewis, that he had not written the book in order to write a Christian book. In fact, the famous friendship nearly broke up over his criticism of the "blatant" religious imagery in Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Cline). Judging from this and from the content of his books, Tolkien wanted nothing to do with this kind of purposeful, symbolic writing—he wrote because of his love of language and fairy-stories, his desire to create something that would provoke thought and entertain. As Catherine Madsen writes, "He was not trying to encode Christian ideas in his work any more than he was trying to deny them" (37). Tolkien wrote once that "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (letter 142). This inability to pin down exactly where God is located can be frustrating to some.

Adding to the complication is the fact that there are many elements of *The Lord of the Rings* which do not seem Christian, but rather seem closer to other religions. Tolkien was a scholar of mythology, and borrowed much from the mythos of pagan traditions. It is easy to point out the book's obvious animism, most obviously with trees that hear and move. This, however, could be said is more the artistic license of an author who loves nature than a pagan influence, especially when one considers the story of Tolkien's ents as the more literal translation of the walking forest in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In his

Letters, he wrote, “Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill’: I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war” (163). The real evidence of pagan religions is in the specifics. We see classic divination in Galadriel’s scrying pool, not only in the description of it as a pool with the power to “show things unbidden,” but in Galadriel’s very characterization of it: “this is what your folk would call magic, I believe...this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel” (353). Magic pools, mirrors, or other future-telling devices are a basic motif of fairy-tales and pagan folklore. The concept of “Northern Courage” found in pagan stories is also a staple for Tolkien, the ideal found in tales like *Beowulf* that courageous men will go into battle knowing their own doom and face it bravely anyway. This is exactly the situation that Aragorn and his men are in when they march on the black gate, not to mention the situation that Theoden believes himself to be in many times as he leads his men into battle, and yet it is not a concept that we expect to find in Christian stories, because it is a view that doesn’t hold any hope for an afterlife. Additionally, and perhaps the most pagan of additions by Tolkien, is the description of Gandalf as identical to descriptions of Odin in Norse mythology, an old man with a long white beard, brimmed hat, and staff—not to mention Tolkien himself referred to Gandalf as the “Odinic wanderer” (Curry, 101). He may be considered a Christ figure by many, but it is impossible to deny that at least in his physical description, Gandalf is taken directly from the Norse god. Tolkien took bits and pieces of what interested him from many cultures and religions - not just Norse, which was his prominent inspiration, but also Finnish, which he acknowledged inspired him through the epic *Kalevala*

(Handwerk), and Celtic, which inspired the description of Tolkien's elves (Gunnell). Tolkien believed these to be "true myths," and is recorded as arguing with Lewis (before Lewis's conversion to Christianity) on the value of them to lead people to the cross (Hart), using their shared love of Norse mythology to explain the love of God in many ways. In fact, he thought that the Gospel itself could be better understood if it was looked at as a myth or fantasy come true. He clarified, "I do not mean that the Gospels tell what is only a fairy-story; but I do mean very strongly that they do tell a fairy-story: the greatest. Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story. But since the author of it is the supreme Artist and the Author of Reality, this one was also made . . . to be true on the Primary Plane" (Letters, 100–101).

Despite his view on the connection between myth and the Gospel, the pagan influences in the books continue to cast some doubt on its Christianity. Yet there are also many possible Christian elements to point out in Tolkien's famous trilogy. In his book *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, Peter Kreeft writes that though God is unnamed in *The Lord of the Rings*, he is present "as the sun is in sunlight." This imagery of God as light without a visible source is very common in Tolkien criticism, especially since light/dark imagery is so prominent in the work itself. The presence of some kind of faith, or the effects of what we would expect to be some kind of God, are present but hard to nail down. Catherine Madsen suggests that Tolkien "seemed to present religious feeling, and even religious behavior, without ritual, revelation, doctrine—indeed without God" (35). "Religious feeling" could perhaps encompass the often pointed-to morality of the characters, their unceasing hope, loyalty, humility. There are plenty of instances when

one member of the fellowship gives up his life or safety for another: Gandalf in staying back Moria, Sam following Frodo to Mordor though he is warned it will be “the death of him,” (397), Aragorn and Legolas and Gimli running across lands for Merry and Pippin. And perhaps by “religious behavior,” Madsen refers to the struggle with temptation that Frodo endures, which is often compared to sin, or the urge to call on the names of old heroes and legends in time of distress the way Catholics (like Tolkien) might call upon the aid of saints. Frodo calls on Elbereth, one of the Valar, countless times, including while avoiding the ringwraiths in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and while facing Shelob in *The Return of the King*. But it is difficult to say whether any of these qualities truly count as explicitly Christian; many of these traits are important in other religions, and even in the moral and ethical practices of non-religious individuals.

The function of divine providence within *The Lord of the Rings*, while more difficult to discern than religious behavior, might be more compelling evidence of God. Most agree that it exists to some extent, but disagree on how. One oft pointed-to instance is Gandalf’s return from, seemingly, death - he says that he was “sent back” until his task is done, apparently by some higher power, but it is unclear who (491). Another important instance is Gandalf’s idea that Bilbo and Frodo were “meant” to find the ring. He tells Frodo with certainty that “there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker...Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it” (54). Peter Kreeft writes that divine providence should be found in this work “not in a part but in the whole, in the ordering of the whole, in the relationship among the parts.” The idea that every action matters and fits so neatly into a bigger picture seems to suggest a designer to it all, and Tolkien was not pointing to

himself as the author. He is pointing to another power, as Gandalf keeps suggesting there is “more than one power at work” (54), though he never names it. Madsen agrees that the fitting-together of characters and events throughout the story consists of some kind of pattern that suggests a deity. “Even sin is not wasted but woven into the pattern,” she writes. For example, she points to the fact that “Gollum is the sacrificial goat that takes away the sins of the world” (41). Indeed, Gollum’s role and his ultimate death is perhaps an even bigger evidence of God’s working in Middle-Earth than the hints of a higher power or the return of Gandalf from death. Though pity and mercy, Christian virtues, do not reform him, he has a part to play. This is set up from the very beginning, harking back to Bilbo’s pity in choosing not to kill Gollum when he had the chance: “Even the very wise cannot see all ends,” says Gandalf, “[Gollum] is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many” (58). And in true keeping with the way Tolkien’s world is set out, it is the free will of both Bilbo and Frodo to show mercy that leads to a greater power being able to intervene later—had they not saved Gollum, “luck” or “providence” could not have saved Frodo on the ledge of Mount Doom. As Patrick Curry explains, “Without [Bilbo and Frodo’s mercy], there would have been no Gollum; and as Frodo says, ‘But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring’” (96). There is room for free will here, which is important to Christianity, and free exercise of moral virtues, which are rewarded. But ultimately even the most ruined character, who never tried to exercise mercy or kindness, can be used for good in the divine plan. This divine providence, set off by the free exercise of human

virtue, seems perhaps the most obvious over-arching religious feature we have so far found—but again, it is not explicitly Christian.

Tolkien does one more thing that, I believe, is most notable in his Christian aesthetic, and more prominent than any of the other possible Christian elements mentioned. Though it is not necessarily exclusive to his particularly Catholic beliefs, he does include an over-arching framework of morality, of good vs. evil in his novels, enough that it stands out the most of any of his religiously-inspired elements. As I have mentioned earlier, characters exemplify moral characteristics, such as Frodo's mercy for Gollum and Sam's loyalty to Frodo, without being themselves Christ-figures; but more than this, the framework of good and evil also sets the stage for all the story's conflicts. Tolkien uses a great deal of light vs. dark imagery to help set this up. Gandalf is "the white" when he is sent back to Middle-Earth, and purified, and other good characters like Galadriel are also clothed in white garb, while Gondor is called the "White City." Conversely, Mordor's towers are all black, and it lies under dark clouds; Sauron sends out "Black Riders" and his orcs can only travel under cover of darkness. Yet despite what might seem like a very obvious and somewhat trite visual symbol for good guys and bad guys, Tolkien doesn't let it become over-used. He includes plenty of characters that help to flesh out the concept of good and evil and make it more complex, complications like Boromir and Gollum: Boromir is tempted to take the ring and tries to, which is a violent and evil act, but his temptation comes from a good intention to lead and save his people. He doesn't have the strength to withstand the power of the ring, but he is still ultimately portrayed as a flawed, but good, character. Gollum, similarly, is constantly walking the line between good and evil acts, and we see this very clearly portrayed by the two sides

of his personality that are constantly at war with each other (Gollum and Smeagol). He is not necessarily a creature fully of darkness or of light, but in the end, though he falls to the darkness, he is used for a good purpose. We even see characters like Saruman, who is at first glimmering white but eventually grows dark over time, and Aragorn, who is originally described as very dark until he is revealed to be good and moral, and is afterwards associated more with light. Frodo says famously of Aragorn that a servant of the enemy would “seem fairer and feel fouler,” (168) and indeed, although most of the enemy’s servants are very dark and ugly, sometimes this is the case.

This framework, one that can sometimes be tricked and complicated but one that nevertheless stands fairly rigid in separating good and evil, is necessary in understanding Tolkien’s aesthetic. He believed that the exposure of the difference between the dark and light, the good and evil, was crucial in fantasy, because both sides were needed to make it work. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” he wrote that “the possibility of [sorrow and failure] is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world” (153). Tolkien called this Joy the “evangelium,” or the good news – he believed that the idea that light would win out in the end of a fantasy story, the idea of a happy ending, was the same as the good news of Christ winning out over death. Tolkien gives us the idea that singing about the light and beauty of the world while you yourself are in a dark and hopeless place, as Sam does, is not a lie – the hope and belief in that light is real, and that light may not show up all at once, but in the end, it will come. Perhaps this is the place where I see God in *The Lord of the Rings* most fully.

Still, because there is no named God in *The Lord of the Rings* (though there is one very distant one in *The Silmarillion*, which we are choosing not to bring heavily into this discussion since it has had much less popular impact), anxious Christian readers have often attempted to justify the vague faith that they find in the books but fitting them into an allegorical setting. This simply does not work out. Gandalf can be called a Christ figure, but despite his Christ-like return from death, the fact remains that Gandalf is clearly based on Odin, a Norse god. As a war leader, he seems quite a bit less pacifist than Jesus was, and we must remember that he is neither all-powerful (his staff is broken by the witch king), nor the only one of his kind. Gandalf even goes so far as to say that were the ring offered to him, he would most certainly fall to its evil, a very mortal and human trait. And of course, one could argue that the ring is symbolic of sin, but if it were, Frodo would have had to call upon the help of God, Gandalf, or some divine power to be saved from it—certainly sin does not usually leave us by the violent help of creatures devoured completely by it, like Gollum. The ring may look like sin in the way it provokes temptation, but the way it is destroyed, and the fact that it has nothing to do with any sort of surrender to a deity, doesn't fit a Christian perspective on the role of sin in our lives. While it is certainly true that Tolkien was inspired by elements of the Christian life, it takes a great deal of twisting the text to make it come out as a straight allegory.

Yet despite never naming or attempting to explain the presence of any specific deity, *The Lord of the Rings* continues to be counted among the best of Christian fiction, to be recognized by people of all faiths as an inspiring account of religion or, at best, something close. Much of my research comes from Madsen's essay on faith in Tolkien, and she clarifies within the paper that she is an atheist herself, yet still Tolkien's efforts

are noted and appreciated. A religiously uncertain fan of the books once wrote to Tolkien in awe, saying, “You create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp” (413)—a method of writing that is perhaps unintentional for Tolkien, and certainly difficult for anyone else. We can point out sacrifice, hope, and providence in the work, but when it comes to concrete evidence of Christianity, we are left with Tolkien and the Lamp—a faith that is everywhere, but not pinned down. I believe that the work resists allegorical interpretations because it springs from a different religious aesthetic philosophy than the one that many evangelicals hold today.

The Lord of the Rings as compared to Contemporary Evangelical Art

I have already touched on the ways in which the didactic Christian fiction that I was encouraged to read and write as a child left me wanting in the sense of wonder and mystery that Tolkien gave me, a wonder and mystery that felt much more akin to the way God seemed to me. Perhaps this tension between being a “Christian writer” whose worldview came out in the writing and being simply a lover of fantasy who had no intention of preaching is what brought Tolkien into the position he now holds as patron saint of the honest, faith-seeking fantasy-lover. It could also explain his broad popularity—leaving out the name of God and aiming first for quality writing gives a larger audience the chance to connect with the novels. Christian readers like myself can read alongside atheists like Madsen and we can both appreciate faith without feeling talked-down to, as we might when reading some of today’s Christian novels (which often include dialogue that confirms obvious religious metaphors just in case we didn’t catch

them). Just the back-cover descriptions of some of these books make you want to cringe with the lack of mystery: “a story about consequences and the hand of God in the midst of life’s circumstances,” reads one “classic Christian fairytale” (Edgell). “A story of unconditional love, forgiveness, sacrifice...” reads another, which is a work of Christian fantasy (Huff). Sadly, we don’t get much opportunity in these types of works to find any of this enchantment for ourselves when it is so laid out for us.

For some the idea of making God’s presence less than obvious in a work of fiction seems like a cop-out strategy, a lukewarm philosophy that is really just trying to gain footage in the “secular” world. Today, there is an overwhelming isolationist ideology in the Christian world, an identity defined by its outsider status. This is particularly present in the evangelical Protestant variety of Christianity, which has created businesses as safeguards to ensure that purity from the mainstream can be achieved. “Not of this world” is not only an over-quoted Bible verse but it has also become a brand, selling T-shirts, jewelry, Christian music albums, and plenty of Zondervan novels. The idea of evangelical separateness from the taint of “secular” society, especially within the arts, consumes a large part of Christian culture, and one that Tolkien likely would not be accepted into.

Tolkien, in fact, does the opposite: rather than remove himself from the secular world, he embraces everything from Jesus to Odin and Beowulf, tying them all together into a jumble of truth that represents the whole human culture. *The Lord of the Rings* is a compilation of a thousand stories, even in itself, and the characters themselves know it. They are always harking back to the “great tales” of those that came before, singing songs and telling stories about the history that shaped the world in which they live, and

they see themselves within that grand collection of stories. They recognize that they're another piece of the narrative, as when Sam famously states, "Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on...I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside..." (697). And as a fiction, within our own world, *The Lord of the Rings* works in the same way – it acknowledges its place in a long tradition of stories, pulling them all into itself, pondering the way it's been shaped by a history of story-tellers and language-makers, not all of whom have professed the same faith.

Because Tolkien is from a time before this frantic separation of explicitly Christian and non-Christian medias, and perhaps also because he was Catholic and thus not as interested in the separation, many evangelical writers and critics have taken great pains to write volume pointing out precisely how God is hidden in *The Lord of the Rings*, using the same allegorical notions that, as I discussed before, seem not to fit. *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings*, by Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware, is one such example, given to me by a concerned relative in my early stages of Middle-Earth obsession, written by critics desperately trying to convince others of the metaphors that might be used the evangelize through Tolkien. These critics seem unable to justify the story's usefulness to a Christian reader without obviously religious symbolism. Yet for many, it is the very absence of trite and over-used allegorical symbols and explanations that makes Tolkien stand above the pragmatic and tiring work of "Christian writers" today. The attempt to push Tolkien's multi-faceted work into a gospel format flattens the work as a whole. Madsen notes that popular Christian critical opinion on Tolkien's work has "tried to take the enchantment out of it. It has tried to make an independent imagination a means to a

religious end” (36). Like few others who came before and after him, Tolkien seems to have fully trusted the direction of God in a way many of today’s paranoid world-fearing Christian artists and writers don’t. He didn’t bother with trying to explicitly represent Christ or mentioning the name and story of the Christian God a certain number of times in the narrative; he simply trusted to his own Christian and Catholic imagination, wrote what he thought was interesting and beautiful, and light came through on its own.

The proponents of Christian media who insist on obvious religious teaching in all of their art seem to be reading (or watching, or listening, etc), for the most part, to teach or confirm ideas they already have—not to explore, not for the experience of the art itself, which is what Tolkien wrote for. One of his great influences, George MacDonald, wrote that fairy-stories “cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth... Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another” (*The Light Princess and Other Fairy-Stories*). The attempt to create rigid parameters around what *The Lord of the Rings*, or any “fairy-story,” should mean is an affront to the genre, which is all about mystery and discovery. The general evangelical (and perhaps Protestant) attitude toward art, of course, is a strong resistance to mystery, which is why most prefer their fantasy to fit into allegorical guidelines like those set down by C.S. Lewis. Protestant art is meant to be pragmatic, and in general the community places a strong importance on the literal, the explicit. If the Bible should be taken at face-value, literally, and should mean the same thing for everyone no matter what, then they conclude art should be the same. If it is too complicated, and does not state its usefulness obviously, then it is of no value.

The idea that Christian writers, artists, and general creators are responsible to create exclusively didactic works is, I believe, a mistake. Writers in Tolkien's time, which was not so long ago, were not agreed about the idea of didactic responsibility, which caused the famous disagreement between Tolkien and his good friend, C.S. Lewis. In my experience as a writer, these days, the debate is less of a disagreement between friends and more of a war, with clear lines between sides. With the name of Jesus as a word that sells big to a niche audience, Christian companies creating everything from books to clothing lines have adopted an "if you're not for us, you're against us" mentality. The popular treatment of the *Harry Potter* series by church communities seems a prime example of privileging explicit didacticism in art: despite Rowling's profession of Christianity, and despite the fact that the series promotes Christian ideals of self-sacrifice, loyalty, and humility, the fact that it includes magic and wizardry without making these wizards obvious allegories of Christ or using the name of Christ explicitly makes them apparently anti-Christian works in the eyes of the Protestant public. I remember dozens of children being banned from reading them at my Christian elementary school, parents talking about how they were wicked, and articles being passed around about why they shouldn't be allowed in the school library. *Christianity Today* hosted a guest writer who compared the books to "rat poison and orange soda" because they were both dangerous and irresistible to children, and could lead to involvement in serious real witchcraft, which "can and does lead to death" (Komschlies). Focus on the Family figured that because we might have a hard time convincing public schools that the magic was distasteful, it was best to focus on the problems of "foul language and youthful disrespect" in order to get the witchcraft books out of children's hands (Keim).

BBC News even reported one of several book-burnings held during this time, as a way “for Christians to get rid of items that prevent them from communicating with God” (bbc.co.uk). Yet a series like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which includes just as much magic and wizardry, is perfectly acceptable, because Lewis was outspoken within the fiction about which biblical stories each of his own stories allegorically represented. We were reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a class together and gleefully discussing Aslan as a Jesus figure at the same school that banned *Harry Potter*, and not a single parent complained.

Is it the commercialization of Christianity that makes it this way, with various companies promoting the idea that their type of products are the only acceptable ones for people of faith? Tyndale’s website says that they exist to “minister to the spiritual needs of people, primarily through literature consistent with biblical principles” (tyndale.com); Not of This World, which sells books along with clothing and music, says their mission is to offer “an alternative to the mainstream mall stores” with products that “reflect a clean and positive Christian lifestyle” (notw.com); Capitol Christian Music Group offers “music and music-related content consistent with a biblical worldview” (capitolchristianmusicgroup.com). All of these descriptions suggest that anything outside of the brand is un-biblical, unclean, negative. Art of all kinds, including and especially artistic, imaginative literature, has a specific job to do in these brands. Alissa Wilkinson, a writer for Christianity Today, points out that Christian art is starting to carry a reputation for being pragmatic at the cost of artistic quality:

What we have had is a whole market segment characterized by an ethos that said
copy those guys over there but change a few things, and it doesn't really matter if

it's very well made or innovative: we'll support you because we all love Jesus.

Along with that was the sentiment *if you don't support this Christian product and its maker, then you're harming Christians overall...* So that's the cultural landscape that American Christians who want to make movies or music or art or whatever are working in today (Wilkinson).

This cultural landscape holds a troubling conflict for Christian artists and writers, myself included: either we must make work that is pragmatic and support work that is pragmatic, even though it's either low-quality or assumed so; or, we can focus on the quality of the work without the pragmatism, but then we are cast out of the "Christian" fold and assumed a part of the "unclean" mainstream world. That ostracism may be rooted in a desperate assertion of identity, a marketing technique, or extreme piety, but wherever it originated, the harm it is causing is evident. Christian writers like me often feel like they must make a choice between writing what is beautiful and writing what is acceptable to Christian markets.

Wherever the barrier between Christian and secular art came from, there is no denying that Tolkien has somehow located himself somewhere right on the center line. Though many have tried, attempts to pin everything down as metaphorically biblical in *Lord of the Rings* don't work. Yet it still comes across as the "fundamentally Catholic" piece of fiction Tolkien claimed it to be in his letters, even without any obvious references to religion, especially not to the religious specifics of Christianity. Perhaps something about Tolkien's own earnestness helps to push the story in this way—yes, it has to do with the light and dark, the good and evil, the theme of hope and humility, the calling-upon of historical saviors, the way everything fits together in such a way that it

must only have been orchestrated by an invisible, unnamed power of good. But it is also the earnest desire of the writer to make something beautiful, something enduring in a dreary grey world. God is love, God is beauty—to Tolkien, God is innately present in fairy-stories. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” a defense of the fantasy genre, he wrote that “we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made; and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (145). He felt that creating a world of fantasy reflected himself as a creation of God, and he didn’t feel that he had to include obvious metaphors for that joy of creation to come across. As a writer he was true to that above all else. It is clear at any rate that he cared very little about the opinions of his critics.

Tolkien is not the admirable influence he is to people of complex faith because he left out the name of God; this choice is not a stylish way of appealing to a larger audience. Tolkien is influential because although he doesn’t include the name of God, *faith remains*. We return to the idea of “light from an invisible lamp,” a surrounding presence of the sacred and the holy that speaks for itself without needing to be pointed out or explained. Perhaps it is the very pervasiveness of it that defies didactic attempts to explain it—it is within everything, and thus impossible to easily point out. Jance Chance writes, “For some thousand pages Tolkien refrained from taking the Lord’s name in vain; invisible, it illuminates the whole” (47). Indeed, it seems in many ways that had Tolkien included obvious religion in his works, it would have come across as vanity or “overkill” considering the way the work as a whole is already religiously laid out. This, Tolkien said, was conscious in the revision; he was aiming for a Catholic work. But more importantly he wrote the original, and created the story, without worrying about who

would interpret which kind of religious meaning into what. The idea that “all truth is God’s truth” works on Tolkien’s fiction, in this way, much like the life of Gollum—used for a great purpose, though he himself never intended it.

Concretely summarized, I believe that there are three elements which Tolkien uses to create the engaging faith-based fantasy that embodies *The Lord of the Rings*. First, he takes raw material from all of God’s creation. This pan-cultural embrace of multiple mythologies, this way he has of tying all stories together in the same way his characters tie their life stories to the lives of their ancestors, proves to the reader his strong belief that faith is the one true myth, that every aspect of Creation can be used by the Creator. Second, he places these pan-cultural elements into an implicit moral structure of good and evil, not one that knocks the reader over the head with its bluntness, but one based on the idea that all fantasy is innately Christian--that the evangelium of a happy ending is the same as the evangelium of Christ. And third, perhaps most notably in the face of today’s artists, he does all of this with a strong antipathy to didacticism.

It would seem that *The Lord of the Rings* endures as so beloved and as such an exemplary work to people of complex faith and non-believers alike *precisely because* it does not adhere to the conventions of “how to write a Christian novel” today. It does not include the name of God, nor is God allegorically represented in any one character; instead, the idea of God is in everything, in the way the story moves, hiding in one or two aspects of each character the way the image of God hides in us. It does not reject non-biblical magic or secular references; instead, Tolkien chooses pieces of all the religions, mythologies, and cultures that he studied and loved, and by including them in this mysteriously God-lit world, illuminates the truth in them without elevating them above

Christian truth. It does not attempt to didactically teach a moral or even remind readers of a religious message; instead, it lets the story and the characters learn what is believable for them to learn along their journey, and trusts that the reader will take what comfort they need in the reading, if any. And thousands of readers have responded to this trust with enthusiastic love. Non-Christian readers have seen the “light from an invisible lamp” and been drawn to it without feeling like they were outsiders to the story. Christian readers have noticed a difference in this book, some have perhaps even seen a change in their Christian faith because of this book, and held onto it. Everyone wants to feel that their experience is valid, that they are being taken on a journey, not manipulated. This is what *The Lord of the Rings* does. It takes the reader on a journey, and what they take back from it is theirs alone. And this is why writing the way Tolkien wrote is so important to me: I want to learn, after all, how to turn on an invisible lamp in my stories too, how to take the reader on a journey where they can feel free to learn whatever they need. I want freedom from the moral predictable. I will never write a Middle-Earth, but perhaps I can write that world’s small, humble, Samwise-like companion. *The Weight of Two Worlds*, and the excerpt of it that follows, is my attempt to do that.

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THE WEIGHT OF TWO WORLDS:

An Excerpt

I remember my brother telling me the story of Rand and Rainier, back when we were children, living with our clan of orphans in the forested outskirts of Tarin. Rand and Rainier were twin brothers, leaders of their young clan. This was back in the very old days, when Monicans had control of the whole North, not just the mountain caves, and when Nokrelum, the capital city, was large and flourishing, and the nights were full of movement and noise and life. It was long before we associated with the humans, long before we fought with them.

Rand and Rainier grew up in peace, when Monicans kept the forests safe and the humans never ventured close, and they knew nothing of danger. They grew proud and rash and they made a game of waking up and hunting in the daylight, when their eyes were weak. Though they had respect for the hunted, and their connection to the animals they ate, they were foolish and made sport of killing beasts that were different from themselves—deer, rabbits, and birds. One day they went out at midday, when their eyes were weakest, and they challenged each other to shoot down the biggest game while nearly blind with the light. Rand said his hearing would lead him to the beast, while Rainier said he would feel for its energy as it passed through the trees. And they separated from each other, and when Rand had been waiting a while in the bushes, he heard a rustling in the trees and saw a shape moving before him, and he shot it down with his arrow, and when he heard it fall he let out a cry because he could no longer feel the heartbeat of his brother out hunting nearby. And when he went to the game he had killed,

he found that he had killed Rainier, his brother, shot through the eye, his energy drained before he could be healed. And Rand called on the life force of the entire forest, pulling energy out of every animal and tree and blade of grass, so that the forest wilted, but he could not bring Rainier back, and so Rainier perished, even as his brother poured the energy of the forest into him. And Rand perished in grief and was buried with his brother beneath the mountain, and that is how the barren lands came to be barren.

My own brother, the storyteller, did not hunt. I asked him if it was because he was afraid of shooting me. “No,” he said. “I leave the hunting to the better hunters.” He was talking of Hawk and Judah—our leader and his adopted follower, his ward, his half-brother, the one with human blood.

The further I walked, the more the trees disappeared. I was coming upon what they called the barren lands, an area of Duma I had only heard about. It had been dense near the border, but as I went north, the plants and trees thinned out into long empty stretches of rocks and dust, making the nights brighter and the walks harder with no living things to borrow energy from. I had been walking for four nights. There was very little to tell I was going in the right direction, since the tracks I’d been following had long since blown away in the dust.

I wasn’t certain that this whole trek was worth the effort. I hadn’t wanted to be in Duma in the first place, after I had spent years trying to get out. But I couldn’t go back to Aveline without Claudi.

“Alone in the barren lands,” I muttered, kicking a rock out of my way. “A great opportunity.” I was echoing Jesse’s words from a few months ago—Jesse, Captain of the King’s guard and the idiot who got me into this mess. I missed him.

In the old stories Aidyn used to tell, the myths that were the last things we knew about our dying culture, the mortals always bucked against fate. It didn’t matter who they were – Monican, human, fey, even the dragons would try to escape destiny if they saw it coming. And that’s how the stories go because that’s what we do. So I guess it’s no wonder that when Jesse told me about joining Princess Claudi’s guard to the eastern border, I tried everything to get out of it.

“I don’t see what it has to do with me,” I said, when the subject first came up. “If the King thinks the Princess is old enough to settle the agreement with Duma on her own, that’s good news – she’s heir to the throne, it’s more than time she started taking responsibility, but I don’t see what it has to do with me.”

Jesse smiled, pulled off his gloves and threw them on the table, going to the washbasin to clean his face. The evening was hot, and he spilled half of the water over his hair, sighing with pleasure before sitting down on the stool in the corner to pull off his boots.

“The King is putting together a group to send with the Princess to the border,” he said. “Some of the Guard are going, and a guide. But he also wants to find an attendant who will stay by her side after the journey. Protect her, do whatever she needs.”

“Does she not have ladies in waiting?” I asked.

“They would be useless on a journey, and even more useless for protection.” He looked up at me with an expression that, after four years of apprenticeship to the man, I knew all too well.

“No,” I said. “No, no, it’s not me, I’m not looking after her.”

“Come now, you’ve been my apprentice all these years, you’re more than qualified—”

“No, I am *not* going back to Duma,” I said, turning my back to him and striding across the kitchen. I stopped at the fireplace and pretended to stir the soup.

“Neither is the Princess,” Jesse said, and I could hear his footsteps following me across the room. “The border, that’s all, she isn’t crossing the border.”

“I’ve only just barely made it on the Castle Watch.”

Jesse grabbed hold of my shoulders and turned me around, pride still evident on his face.

“Yes, and we have plenty of people on the Castle Watch. We can spare you here. This is a great opportunity for you!”

“An opportunity I don’t want!” I replied, shoving him away. “No one wants a Monican looking after their princess!”

There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs and Roland, Jesse’s newer and younger apprentice, popped his head into the kitchen.

“Tamar’s looking after the Princess?” he asked, and I sighed loudly and went back to stirring the soup.

“She seems a bit obstinate to the idea,” Jesse confided. “But she’ll come around.”

“I’m not doing it,” I repeated.

Jesse grabbed a handful of wooden bowls out of the cupboard and tossed one over to Roland, then came up behind and filled his own with the ladle he pulled out of my hand.

“That’s fine,” he said, the childish grin still on his face. “I’ve told the King you’ll do it, but I suppose I’ll tell him not...”

“You’ve told the—?” I hissed and turned on him, grabbing the ladle back and brandishing it at his face like a sword. “No! You’re the Captain, tell him you’ll do it yourself, you mad old man!”

“Now that’s rude, I’m not old at all. I’m not old, am I, Roland?”

The little boy shook his head vigorously, grinning at the argument between us, and Jesse continued to act completely unflustered by the turn of events.

“Then you’re the tallest child I’ve ever seen,” I muttered, serving myself and sitting down beside Roland at the table. Being some kind of personal squire for Princess Claudi was certainly not what I wanted. It sounded dangerous and complicated, and like the type of thing I might get thrown out of Aveline for if I messed it up.

“You might at least try it,” said Jesse.

“It’s a job, it’s a permanent job, working for the throne. It’s not a new stew recipe. You can’t just try it and then quit.”

“Claudi’s a lovely girl, nearly your age. You might be friends.”

“Oh, we might be friends. That’s likely. God, you’ve told the *King*, what’s wrong with you?”

“If you’re intimidated, Tamar, you can go ahead and say so,” he teased.

“I bet you’d get knighted if you save Claudi’s life,” said Roland, fishing a chunk of potato out of his soup. “Wouldn’t she get knighted, Jesse?”

“No doubt,” Jesse agreed.

“I’m not going to get knighted because there is nothing to save Princess Claudi from,” I said. “She’s settling disputes and attending ceremonies and shaking hands with other royals, she’s not going to war.”

“Then I don’t see what you’re so worried about. The job isn’t difficult.”

“I’m worried because I’m me,” I said. “Have you seen me? Eyes, skin, accent?”

“I think your accent’s nice,” Roland piped up. Jesse set down his spoon slowly and deliberately, finally looking at me with a serious expression.

“I knew exactly who and what you were from the moment I found you,” he said. “I don’t think it makes any difference, and our King doesn’t think so either. You are a highly skilled guard and that is what he’s looking for.”

“And what about Claudi, what is she looking for?” I asked. “How do you know she doesn’t think it makes a difference?”

“I think you will find out if you meet with her,” he said. “That’s all. Just meet with her. If she doesn’t want your company, she’ll say so. That can hardly hurt you, can it?”

And at the time, I thought perhaps it couldn’t. But now that I was here, alone in the barren lands, trapped in Duma, following a path I wasn’t sure of, and certainly not able to return to the safety of Aveline without the princess, I realized it could.

I kept walking, remembering. This night was not as bright as others. There were clouds over the moon. It was nearing spring, but the air was still full of the chill of the

fierce Dumerian winters I remembered, and I hated being out in the open without trees or even grass to gather warmth from. I moved fast across the emptiness. It was so barren that I thought perhaps I would just walk through the day, too—there was nowhere to hide from the sun and sleep, so I might as well stay alert and keep going. I still had the blue-tinted glasses in my pack that I wore every day in Aveline, to make my eyesight level with the humans in the light. I could put them on soon and keep going. The sun was just starting to turn the sky purple, but not quite rising, casting funny shadows across the rocks and I stopped, leaning against a large pile of them, resting before the coming of daylight.

As I closed my eyes, exhausted, wishing I could draw energy from the cool rock against my back, something stirred above my head.

I turned, taking a few steps back, thinking it must be nothing because if it had been a human, even an animal, I'd have felt the energy nearing me. Unless, of course, it was someone like me.

A figure, a shadow behind the rock, above me. Humans could disguise their rhythms, sometimes. Trained scouts. I took another step back, laid a hand on one of my blades, and in a single moment, the figure stood, the outline of a bow and cocked arrow pointing at me. I was just as quick as any human. My *shimas* were out of sheaths, one in each hand, instantly.

“If you recognize Monican fighting you’ll know your long-range weapons don’t outmatch me,” I warned. “I know how to use these.”

The figure inched towards me, leaning to a better angle to see my face, and I could tell that it was a male, maybe a bit younger than me, with eyes that caught light and

glowed in the darkness. Monican, then. I recognized it now, the barely perceptible energy of my own kind, not jarring as humans and animals because it matched my own energy so closely. I stepped forward, holding up my blades, ready to take him.

“Wait, hold on!” He dropped from the higher ground suddenly, landing solidly on his feet and holding his hands out to me. “Hold on. Wait. *Te foe gana.*”

I stayed warily crouched, bare blades still held out.

He gently laid his bow down on the ground and held up his hands again in surrender.

“I thought you were a scout,” he said in the Monican tongue. “Your clothes. My mistake.”

“Who are you?”

“Well, not a threat to you,” he said, his mouth tipping a bit as he raised his eyebrows and gestured at my posture, my blades. I stood and lowered the weapons, trying to look more relaxed. He darted forward, startling me, but only offered his hand.

“Ren Khabet,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion, but took his hand and stepped into a quick greeting before backing away.

“Tamar,” I said. “Where’s your clan?”

“I haven’t got one.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you’re travelling through the barren lands all by yourself.”

“And where’s yours, then?”

“Elsewhere,” I said curtly. “As it so happens, I am looking for someone.” He didn’t need to know, of course, that my clan at the moment consisted of myself and the human princess of a neighboring country.

“Well, thank God it’s not me,” he said, voice catching on a bit of a laugh as he eyed my still-stiff posture, one hand still resting on the hilt of my blade.

“I’m trying to find Nokrelum,” I said, after a moment.

“Aren’t we all?” He sat down on the rock behind him, unlacing one of his boots and tugging it off to shake out some dust and gravel. I continued to stand there, watching this stranger with suspicion. He was hardly bigger than I was, but about the same age, with shaggy black hair that hung down in his silver eyes and brown skin a few shades darker than mine. His clothes were homespun and dusty, in typical Monican colors of dark blue and green. His earth-symbol hung on a cord around his neck.

“I take it you don’t know how to get there, then,” I said. He shrugged, tying his boots again with little interest in me.

“I hear things,” he replied. “If that’s where your clan is hiding, how is it you’re out here, all alone?”

I tensed, thinking of Claudi and the way she had disappeared. This boy couldn’t know anything about that, couldn’t be one of the captors - he would recognize my clothes if he were. I reminded myself of this fact several times before answering.

“We were separated,” I said.

Ren stood up, picked up his bow and slung it over his back. He looked me over, eyes resting first on the earth-symbol around my wrist, then on Aveline’s royal crest on my shoulder.

“You don’t particularly look like you stole that outfit off a *yenkin* scout,” he said.

“I’ve been in Aveline,” I said. “Refugees need work.”

“And now you’re back?”

“Now I’m back.”

“Did the humans throw you out?”

I glared at him and he held up his hands again in surrender.

“Alright then,” he said. “Sorry I asked.”

“And what are *you* doing out here, then?” I asked. “It isn’t the most convenient place to camp out.”

“You mean the complete lack of energy, anywhere?” he asked sarcastically, waving his hands around at the rocky scenery. “But you forgot to mention the view.”

“Alright, keep your secrets,” I said, turning and to walk off. After a second of laughter, he dashed ahead of me.

“I’m not keeping secrets,” he said, walking backwards in my line of sight. “I’m making jokes.”

“Well I don’t have time for that. I’m trying to find Nokrelum—”

“And your clan. You mentioned. But it’s almost dawn.”

“What does that matter?”

“Do you plan on walking for all twenty-four hours of the day, or are you on a human schedule?”

“I’m in a hurry.”

“Well, the Silver Falls only show up at night,” he said, slowing down and allowing me to pass. “You won’t find Nokrelum if you stumble across it in broad daylight.”

I stopped walking, turned and faced him as he fixed me with an almost-grin.

“Silver Falls?” I asked. “What is that?”

“That’s how you’re supposed to find Nokrelum,” he replied.

“So you do know how to get there!”

“I’ve never been there. I’ve never *seen* there. I’ve just heard some stories about how to find it.”

“Does this by any chance mean that you’re out here looking for it, too?” I asked, crossing my arms across my chest. He sighed, looking down in defeat and kicking at the dust.

“Honestly? It might not exist. I just want to find people. Monican people. You’re the first I’ve seen in days.”

I did not mention that he was the first I’d seen in years, up until the night they took Claudi.

“There are scouts up in these areas,” he added eagerly. “Real ones—I saw some two days ago coming down out of the northern pass. And there is an outpost about six miles west of here. If we both travel in that direction, it would be safer not to travel alone.”

“And I suppose you think traveling with you is going to keep me from getting wiped out by Dumerian soldiers?”

Ren laughed, running one hand back through his black hair, embarrassed.

“I was actually kind of thinking you’d be a bit of extra protection for *me*,” he said. “It appears you do know how to use those blades. From a distance, though, I might be helpful too.”

“Well, if you know some things about finding Nokrelum, then I guess...”

“I can’t promise anything, but apparently they don’t tell the stories of the lost Monican homeland in Aveline,” he said with a smile. The idea that I might let him travel with me seemed to perk him up from defeated to elated. He really was lonely.

“As long as we make good time,” I said. “And you stick around until we find it.”

“What do you want, my word?” he teased, clapping me on the back happily.

“We’ve only just met.”

* * *

We found a cave, just after sunrise, to escape the blinding daylight. Ren pulled a heap of fruits and nuts out of his pack, and laughed at my surprise.

“Some fey, back about a day’s walk,” he said. “Water-dwellers on the edge of the woods. They wanted my compass in return.”

“Impressive,” I muttered, as I took some of the offered food. There were nuts and bush-plums, the later somewhat bruised but still delicious. “You managed to barter. Most people get robbed.”

“Sure, most people who dress like human scouts,” he said. “Seriously, you soldiered for Aveline? Is that the only way to get out of here?”

“I didn’t soldier, I guarded,” I replied. “And now I’m heading for Nokrelum.”

“Wasn’t the paradise they said it was?”

“Do you always have so many questions?” I scooted back against the wall of the cave, pulling a few drops of energy from the pit of a plum before tossing it out into the day. “We should sleep, I want to leave at sunset.”

“It might not be there, you know,” he warned me. “It’s all rumors. I’ve never met anyone who actually saw it, not since it was destroyed.”

“They rebuilt it,” I insisted. “Go to sleep.”

“Yes ma’am,” he muttered, smiling at me inexplicably and lying down against the opposite cave wall, using his pack as a pillow.

I settled down a few feet away from him, my vision getting worse with the light, but I refused to close my eyes while he was still awake. I was waiting for the steadiness in his breathing, for the lowering of his nearly-identical energy into a slow, thumping rhythm. Once he was asleep I could sleep too - I could be on guard, this time, for the change in energy when he woke. I needed sleep to travel, and needed him to lead me there. Besides, even if he wasn’t to be trusted, I had nothing left to steal.

I thought of Claudi, of the nights sleeping beside her in tents as we traveled to the Dumerian border, through the hills and forests of Aveline. Human energy was so erratic, so distinct, and it was so easy to sense her presence. It was even easier to tell the moment she fell asleep, and I would always wait then, too, until she was sleeping before I closed my eyes.

I still had nightmares—not all the time, not brought on by any certain thing, just bubbling up every now and again by nothing in particular. For the first few weeks I didn’t realize that Claudi knew about them. Claudi was the Princess, after all, and she was perfect, and perfectly ignorant, and she didn’t, and shouldn’t, know anything of the

troubles I dreamed about. When I first met her I didn't think she should even care, not about a hired refugee Monican like me. I expected little to nothing in the way of conversation or connection. But that was underestimating Claudi. Ignorant, yes. Innocent, yes. But uninterested? No. Claudi wanted to identify with me just like she wanted to identify with everyone. She was curious about the experiences of everyone she came across. It was a desire for empathy, for a knowledge of the world she'd never experienced.

When I found out she knew about the nightmares I had, I was a bit alarmed. I knew what I was there to do, to protect her, but I didn't know, going into it, exactly what it would mean to spend every moment of every day with Claudi Dimitri. I didn't know that she would be sweet, and curious, and ask about my culture, and want to hear me tell stories. I didn't know that she would start to feel like family.

I found out one night when she woke me up. It was about three in the morning and I woke up to find her kneeling beside the mat that I slept on, and she didn't have to shake me to rouse me because at her slightest touch I sensed her energy, closer than it should be, and I flicked my eyes open, pulled myself straight out of nightmares into the tent. I sat bolt upright, trying to figure out what was wrong, and she just looked at me, with calm written all over her face, and said, "I thought I should wake you."

"Is something wrong, Princess?" I asked, glancing around and straining my ears for outside noises.

"No," she said, "I just thought you'd rather I woke you. It was a nightmare, wasn't it?"

I stared at her, speechless.

“You have them often,” she explained. “You talk a bit. In your sleep. So I can tell. I figured at this point it’s best to just wake you. I wasn’t sure though. If you’d rather I didn’t, I can stop.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to...”

“What do you dream about?” she asked, sitting back and arranging herself cross-legged on the floor in her pure white nightgown. Her face was still that perfect calm, and she didn’t seem to realize, to notice at all, how strange the whole thing was. The princess waking me from a nightmare and not upset about it and wanting to know what bothered me. She acted like it was all normal. Perhaps, I thought, this was how she generally acted with her serving-girls she’d left behind in the castle.

“I...don’t...” I stumbled, staring at her incredulously. She kept watching me, eyes penetrating and patient.

“My brother died,” I said finally. “Years ago. I dream about that.”

“Ah,” she said. “I’m sorry. Is that the name you call, in your sleep? Aidyn?”

I stared at her, and dumbly nodded my head.

“Yes,” I said. “His name was Aidyn.”

“Do you mind?” she asked, with a tilt of her head. “If I ask about it? Does it bother you?”

It certainly wasn’t comfortable, but I couldn’t think of a good reason to object. I didn’t really know, honestly, how I felt, whether it bothered me or not. I hadn’t talked about it before. And being asked about it by Claudi, in the middle of the night, was more shocking than anything. So I shook my head.

“Was he smaller than you?”

“No,” I said. “He was older. Six years older.”

“What was he like?”

I took a deep breath and thought about how to answer this question. Picturing him in my mind was difficult, because of the nightmares. I generally tried to avoid thinking of him at all, so I could avoid thinking of the nightmares.

“He raised me,” I said finally. “He would tell stories. Sing songs. He was a brilliant storyteller. And aside from that he was quiet. And gentle. He kept people together.” There was a lot more I could say, but it was hard enough to say just that. How do you describe, without taking hours, a person who was, and always will be, your entire family? Your entire life?

She must’ve seen that on my face, that I couldn’t keep it up, that it was harder than I expected. She patted me on the shoulder, said goodnight, and stood up, her nightgown swishing past me as she made her way back to her own bed mat. And I lay back down, slowly, wondering why the Princess, a human, who didn’t understand anything we went through in Duma and never could, was the first person I’d been able to say a word to about Aidyn since the day he died.

For the past few nights, the nightmares had changed. Now I dreamed about lying on the floor of the tent, helpless, losing her.

* * *

When I woke in the cautious half-light of sunset, I felt unusually rested and warm. I had woken many times in the night, but always Ren was asleep, his energy never changing. I shifted, turned my head, and realized that Ren was still asleep now with his

hand reached out towards me, his fingertips resting just barely on my arm. I pulled away, and he woke suddenly, looked at his own hand, and pulled it back against his chest.

“Sorry,” he said. “I can tell you’re not used to it, the sharing.”

Sharing energy through the night—I remembered it. When I’d had a clan, a family, years ago, we had done it. Touching, even barely, while we slept would keep our energies flowing through each other, keeping us warm and healing the hurts of the day. No, I wasn’t used to it anymore. I hadn’t been near other monicans in a very long time.

“I don’t mind,” I said.

Ren sat up, began to rifle through his pack. “I haven’t been on my own for very long,” he said, not looking at me as he spoke. “I have trouble sleeping without sharing. Clearly you misplaced your clan quite a while ago.”

“Yes.”

“Did you leave them?” he asked, throwing me another plum and glancing at me now, curious. “To go to Aveline?”

“You worried I’ll leave you?” I asked, taking a bite of the fruit. He shrugged, but the nonchalance of the gesture didn’t hide the pained look on his face.

“It wouldn’t put me back much,” he said. “Did they come with you, or did you leave them?”

“So many questions,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Neither. They died, and then I went to Aveline. Did you leave yours?”

“I would never do that,” he said, looking genuinely offended. “If yours died, who are you looking for?”

I nearly choked on a bite of plum, and pretended it was a cough. “I am—I just—I think one of them is still alive. So I’m looking for her.” A useful lie. I could talk about the Princess if he thought she was a Monican friend.

Ren nodded with a look of sympathy. “Well, don’t worry. If she’s alive, we’ll find her.”

* * *

It became quickly apparent as we travelled that Ren did not enjoy silence, and that he had not enjoyed being alone in recent weeks, or months—however long it had been. He followed me the way Roland, Jesse’s younger apprentice, used to back in Aveline, complimenting and telling stories and asking questions eagerly. It was unsurprising from a Monican unused to life outside a clan. It was clear that he missed his terribly, and his energetic giddiness with me was a joy at having someone, anyone, else around.

“What was Aveline like?” he asked as we walked. “What did you guard, their human treasures? Lifeless shiny rocks? They like those.” He laughed.

“Treasures, yes, something of that sort,” I said, thinking of all of Claudi’s gold rings.

“How long were you there?” he asked. “Living in human cities all the time, sleeping at night, must’ve been exhausting. No wonder you want to find Nokrelum.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” I said.

“Well, maybe in Aveline they’re easier to deal with, they made you a guard and all, gave you a uniform. I doubt they chase you out of the city with sticks, in Aveline. That’s what people say.”

I shrugged. “Tell me again what to look for,” I said. “About the Silver Falls.”

* * *

The Silver Falls was supposedly a waterfall in the mountains that only showed up at night, to make it more difficult for humans to find. Ren told stories that claimed the entrance to Nokrelum, the underground city in the mountains, was hidden behind the falls. I didn’t believe this until we found it.

It was not a waterfall. It was what remained of a waterfall, and in its absence the minerals it had left on the bare rock face of the mountain glinted and glowed silver in the moonlight.

“This is Silver Falls,” said Ren, joyously clambering up the rocks to run his hand along the smooth mineral surface. “It must be. It’s only visible in moonlight.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t appear to have a city behind it,” I said.

“It’s a hidden city. Of course you can’t see it yet.” His eyes glinted with the same silver shine as the rock. I sighed and followed as he continued to walk along, inspecting it.

“It could be charmed,” he said. “A hiding charm, from the fey.”

“That’s a heavy barter,” I replied. “You would have to give up miles and miles of trinkets.”

“Perhaps Nokrelum is bursting with trinkets. What about over there?” He pointed to a collection of twisted trees and vines growing along the wall, and made his way in their direction.

I followed him as he picked his way toward the trees, filling slowly with nervousness. My plan extended to finding Nokrelum, and then to hoping that the Princess would be there, and alive. It had not yet extended beyond that. But as we approached the trees, I knew we had found it. I could feel it: the thumping, rhythmic, steady energy of Monican bodies nearby, large numbers of them, their energies matching mine but so much louder, too loud a feeling to ignore. Ren turned to me with a look of pure ecstasy, and I wished so deeply that I was eight years old again, a child drenched in Monican stories and not wearing the uniform of Aveline’s soldiers. Were I a child again, I could share his joy.

“It’s real,” he whispered. The trees were pressed close together so that they almost formed one giant tree, with gaps filled in by vines that reached out onto the rock and covered what must be an entrance beyond. Ren pressed his palms against one of the rough, living trunks, and I did the same.

The slow, gentle flow of low-level energy that radiated from the trees and vines was easy to control, to manipulate, especially with Ren’s help. With a bit of concentration it wasn’t difficult to pull energy out of a few of the trees, redirect it through myself, pour it into others, forcing them to bend and shift. I shaped one side, Ren the other, and without speaking, tapped into the energy around us, we made an opening through the foliage—unsurprisingly, to reveal an opening like the mouth of a cave in the wall behind.

We had to duck to enter the mouth of the cave, a natural opening that shut out the small light of dawn as it began to rise. Ren was quick to suggest hiding the entrance again behind us. As we moved along in the cramped darkness, small lights began to appear - the type of lights that wouldn't hurt Monican eyes. They were small flakes of glowing minerals, pressed into the walls and held there so they seemed to me like a fixed pattern of stars. The first step to a Monican paradise, of course, would be to make it always night.

The tunnel gradually widened until we emerged into an open space, full of more fixed stars and alive, suddenly, with echoes of voices. A woman appeared, looking surprised but not unhappy to see us.

“*Te foe gana!*” she exclaimed, striding forward to pull Ren, and then me, more grudgingly, into a greeting. She studied my clothing with doubt. She wore typical Monican colors, as Ren did, homespun cloth, her earth-symbol embroidered brightly on her shoulder.

“You are new here, yes? Who sent for you? I am Kara, my charge is watching the gates today. I can find your clan if they are here.”

“No one sent for us,” said Ren, looking around with a measure of awe that I had only ever seen on the faces of children. “We just found it.” He turned to me excitedly, smiling wide, grabbed hold of my shoulders and shook. “We *found* it!” He turned back to Kara, beaming. “How big is it? How many clans are here?”

“Come, I’ll show you,” she said, smiling. She was clearly fond of reactions like Ren’s, while my own reaction was much more anxious and subdued. She waved for us to follow as she turned and made her way down another stone hallway, and we emerged into

an even bigger opening - huge, the size of Claudi's Palace, but open, with lofts carved into the walls and, so far above our heads, a ceiling open to the lightening sky. Ren's eyes only turned wider and wider. People milled about, talking in groups, sitting around a fire in the corner, moving in and out of passageways all around us.

"There are ten main clans that have formed here," said Kara. "But many others, individuals and small groups, who have been separated from clan members and wait here, hoping to be found. There are nearly three hundred of us in Nokrelum. There are neighboring cities, smaller, but like this one, in the mountains around us."

"It's beautiful," said Ren, looking around wildly. "It's amazing."

"Yes," Kara agreed, and smiled again with amusement. "Dawn is rising; would you like a place to sleep? What are your names? I can check to see if anyone here knows you."

Ren introduced himself, then looked over at me. "This is Tamar, she has someone she's looking for..."

"It's alright," I said quickly. I wanted to find the Princess right away, but first I had to slip away from these two. "My searching can wait for the morning. A place to sleep would serve me better now. We have been travelling a long time."

"Of course," said Kara. "Come with me."

* * *

We were given our own room, carved out of rock but lovingly so, less like a cave and more like a home with stone walls. It was a simple dwelling, a few cots placed close

enough to share energy between them, with thick blankets and pillows. It was comfortably dark, with a wooden door that had slats for airflow, and several pots of water in the corner for washing or other needs. Kara gave us a few directions to where we should come when night fell again, in order to connect with clan leaders and find people we might be missing.

Ren was clearly anxious to look more at the city, but Kara was clearly tired, and I reminded him that everyone in the city was going to sleep. He reluctantly agreed, but once we were in our cots, he tossed restlessly with energy that did not slow. I could sympathize. As much as I was worried about the Princess, this place was bigger than her. Finding this city was so much bigger.

I would wait for him to sleep, and then I would go and find the Princess as soon as I could, without his prying eyes. I wanted very much not to bother - I wanted to share the kind of joy Ren had at finding this fairy-tale place, without the worry of Claudi hanging over my head. What was she to me? An employer, that was all, a human treasure to guard. Without her I was free to enjoy this paradise, to live here, spend days and years here. Without her I wouldn't have to go back to the world of politics, I would never have to deal with the sidelong glances of her advisors. I could, instead, go back to wearing Monican clothes and remembering what it was like to share energy through the night. I could join a new clan. These people would understand where Aidyn's loss still ached like a phantom limb, they would know me the way Jesse and Claudi and all the humans never could. These people would heal me. The human princess, with her gold rings and bright dresses and light, airy voice, with her energy that shifted so quickly from weak to strong and weak again—she could never do that.

Claudi was important, though, and I wouldn't have found this place if I hadn't been looking for her. When Claudie was kidnapped, I was the only one to go after her. Perhaps because I was the only one who knew the terrain in Duma, or the only one who realized that doing so would not set me against Duma's army, since none of the guards believed my story. I was the only one who saw clearly in the dark, who understood the Monican tongue, and yet they preferred the story that these Monican soldiers were sent by Duma, who was known for using us as weapons, or that they were sent by me, an agent of the enemy who told them where to find the Princess. None of the guards had wanted me there to begin with, unlike the Princess, who seemed pleased with my company, and spoke to me often as we rode. None of them listened to my stories, Monican fairy-tales I had learned long ago from Aidyn, stories I would not have told around the campfire if Claudie had not asked me to. None of them asked me questions as she did, about myself, instead of about Duma - what did the earth-symbol I wore mean? Did it bother me to ride during the day? How had I come to Aveline? At first I thought she must be bored with the travel, passing the time as we neared our destination at Duma's capital, where she would negotiate the terms of our treaty regarding ports and trade. I thought she was only interested because she had never met a Monican before, and I seemed to her strange and exotic. But she asked questions of the others, too, of the dozen guards who travelled with us, about their families and their training back in Aveline. And none of them went after her when she was taken. I was the only one.

Of course, perhaps I had more incentive than they had to find her. I was a refugee in Aveline, and already disliked for my race by many in the court. If I returned without the Princess, after being appointed her most close personal guard and protector, I risked

everything. In a panic over what was seen as Duma's betrayal, I - the Monican who had come from Duma to start with - was likely to be blamed. I could lose more than my position if I did not find her. If it was judged a mistake, I could be banished; if it was judged that I was a traitor, I could be killed. So while the others returned to Aveline to stir resentments and bring back armies, I slipped away and went after the Princess.

The night she was kidnapped was the only first time I had realized why the humans feared us. They were bigger, naturally stronger, had much better eyesight in the daylight, and always outnumbered us. I thought, always, that their fears were irrational, driven by hatred of what they did not understand, the same way they feared the darkness because they could not see the beauty in it. But the night that Claudi was kidnapped, I felt myself drained by my own kind. I felt Claudi's energy decrease suddenly, seconds before I noticed the energy of others around me - something I had not sensed, as I slept, because theirs were so alike to my own. I woke feeling Claudi being drained, and thought she was dying, and jolted upright. There were people in the tent, people who had come noiselessly, without me waking to the presence of their energy, without alerting the guards who stayed outside the tent and all around our camp. All of this, and the flash of their eyes at me, silver, and I knew that Monicans were, for some reason, here in our tent, dressed in the uniforms of Dumerian soldiers, ready to take the Princess.

I jumped up and it was already too late. In the time it took me to register this most improbable of circumstances - the one and only circumstance I hadn't been trained for in the slightest - I realized why the humans feared us. Because in the space of an instant, in a single touch to my wrist as I began to unsheath my shimas, I was drained to exhaustion, to collapse, nearly to sleep.

I had never been drained before. I had drained myself, nearly, trying to heal others, but we don't drain each other as a weapon. Humans, perhaps, if we can get them - it's near impossible to get close enough unless they are already off-guard, or sleeping, because they have such long-range weapons. But never each other, never another Monican. Never at all, if we can help it. Draining people is what the Dumerians used us for in the war, just simple weapons to exhaust or kill the enemies in one touch. We have never wanted to be weapons.

But we can be. I felt it, and it was something to be feared.

They took her then, with me on the ground, shocked, unmoving, listening hard as I struggled to reach an arm out and touch the grass, pulling energy back from it. I could hardly move, even to expand my lungs. It felt as if I had shriveled up and gone lifeless. I laid there and listened to the voices fading, listened to hear them taking our horses, discussing how disgusted they were that Aveline had a Monican guarding their Princess, talking in my language about their route north and to Nokrelum. I knew they were not truly sent by Duma. Duma would have destroyed Nokrelum if they knew it was re-born, and they had few outposts in the north. I also knew that I would not be able to catch them. I would not regain my strength fast enough to reach Claudi. I would have to find them again myself.

Here, in the soft darkness, feeling that it would be nicer to forget her entirely, I forced myself to remember why I came. I turned to Ren, who was inspecting the flecks of mineral-stars on our ceiling with a look of contentment. It occurred to me that it might be difficult to sneak off and locate the princess if he noticed my missing energy and woke up.

“How long were you without a clan?” I asked.

He was startled. “Two months,” he said.

“Now that we’ve got here, are you going to tell people what happened to them?”

“Now that we’ve got here, and you going to go look for yours?” He threw the question back at me with an expression of both interest and accusation.

“Yes,” I said, standing up. “Right now.”

“You changed your mind?” he asked eagerly, moving to get up with me. I waved him away.

“Not with you,” I said.

“Why?”

“I like to keep my emotional reunions to myself.”

I wandered back down through the passageway towards the huge open room we had first entered, what seemed to be the central space of the city, a gathering that broke off into the dozens of passages that housed rooms like the one we were placed in. The city seemed to be laid out like a wheel with branching spokes, and that large room with the open ceiling was the center. I walked briskly, touching one hand to the wall occasionally to brush against the mineral stars that I so admired. Nearby, in another branching room, a child cried out, and a parent answered.

This place was perfect. As far as I knew, it was infinite, and completely serene, hidden in these mountains. I had rarely ever seen a Monican adult in my life - they were carted off so often to camps in the east, or killed before reaching adulthood by human villagers, or starved or froze to death because they were driven away into places like the barren lands, where there was nothing to sustain them. When I grew up, my entire clan

was orphaned children, and the older we got, the more of us met our ends. But not here. If there were any orphans here, they were adopted into new clans now. This was a place of parents, and grandparents - a place of generations.

I emerged finally into the open room from before. The fire was put out now, and the sky was bright with the light of day, which meant the place was quiet. This was the time to find Claudi, if she was here, though the city was asleep and I couldn't very well ask for directions. If they had simply killed her, I would have nothing to find - then again, they could have killed her in the tent, and they took her instead.

In a space this size, I couldn't very well wander about trying to find the Princess without raising suspicion. Someone would be awake, and would know what I was after, or guess. I had one chance to locate her, perhaps, if she was close enough. I sighed, leaned back against the wall of the empty meeting place, and closed my eyes.

It took great concentration to feel for energies that were not immediately close to my body. Others were better at the skill, having honed it with practice. I had put my energy into learning to fight, instead. But I could do it, but how far I could do it, and through how many layers of rock, with how many other energies to distract me...I would see. I closed my eyes.

About a dozen were easily within my range, subtle, sleeping energies of Monicans whose rhythms stayed quiet and serene. Claudi's energy would be awake, and erratic, immediately recognizable as human. I searched for it, pushing further and further into the walls.

There are so many people here. I began to lose connection with my own surroundings as I pushed my mind to feel for energies far outside me. *Did she say three*

hundred? I have never felt so many rhythms all in sync. Little groups of them, sharing energy in clumps as they slept, family units grouped into larger clans. It hurt my head to reach for them. There were so many, and they were all so alive. *Focus, focus.*

I found her, a ways off, to the east of me and somehow above me, buried in the mountain but not so far from the further spokes of the wheel that she couldn't be considered a part of the city. I would not have found her if she were a Monican energy, but her human one, bright and awake and fluctuating wildly, I could pinpoint. I concentrated harder, my eyes still closed, trying to pinpoint her location better in my mind...

The feeling of something against my throat broke my concentration, and I dropped my search, opening my eyes to find myself cornered by Kara, the woman from earlier. Her expression was not particularly threatening, but the arrow notched and pointed at my neck was.

"I was told to stop you if I found you wandering," she said. "The Princess from Aveline had a Monican guard when she was taken, and your clothes suggest it might be you."

A dozen curses ran through my head, but I said nothing. If I hadn't been focusing so hard on finding Claudi's energy, I might have noticed hers creeping up on me. If I had at any point been able to find another set of clothes, I wouldn't be in this situation. Guarding the princess, it was important to look the part, but it wasn't exactly practical.

A few others joined her, another woman taking my shimas from their sheaths as I held my hands up in surrender. A pair of men took hold of my arms to lead me away somewhere as Kara's bow stayed trained on me.

“So, you do have the princess here, then?” I said, not bothering to hide my interest.

“We will take you to her,” said Kara.

“I would--” I began, but a third man stepped into my view and I stopped short. He was taller than the others, and in my slowly weakening eyesight as the sky brightened, I felt like I recognized him. When his face turned, to reveal burn scars across his cheek...

“Judah?” I asked. He had failed to take much notice of me, looking like he was only interested in leading the others to my destination, but he stopped short then and studied my face.

“...Tamar?” he asked after a moment, waving Kara out of the way as he approached me to look closer. She stepped aside, but did not lower her bow.

“It’s really you,” he said. “We thought you were dead!”

“Your following would like to make it so,” I said, cocking my head towards Kara.

“Lower your weapon,” said Judah, gesturing to her, but she scowled at him and refused.

“I’ll not take orders from you,” she said.

“I know her,” said Judah. “She is my clan from years ago. We can trust her.”

“We are not going to release the Monican guard from Aveline, asking about the princess, on the orders of a halvie,” said Kara. Her voice and posture had gained the threat that I had not seen in her expression before. “You can speak to Hawk. If he says she goes free, then she goes free.”

“Hawk is here too?” I asked incredulously.

Judah glared at Kara a moment, then stepped back.

“I will find him,” he said. “You can take her to the princess now, but she will be freed by nightfall. I promise,” he added, looking at me. “I will be back by nightfall.”

He turned and disappeared down one of the passageways, while I was forcefully led down another, feeling a hundred times more confused than when I arrived.

* * *

“Tamar! You’re here!” Claudi stood immediately when I entered the room and rushed to me, embracing me in a manner so like Jesse’s that I wondered if it was human nature to always hug people as tight as possible. It occurred to me that, without being able to feel another’s energy, perhaps this was how they felt in themselves that the other person’s presence was real.

“I am so glad to see you!” she exclaimed, backing away enough to look at my face. I ducked my head and saluted her, an arm across my chest.

“I am relieved that you are well, Princess,” I said. “I apologize for what happened...”

“You mustn’t apologize, seeing as you’re the only one who bothered to come after me,” she replied, turning back to her cot. “Come, sit with me. You are the only one, yes?”

“How did you know, Princess?”

Claudi shrugged, a look of annoyance on her face. “If there were others, I would think they’d be here with you. Not to mention that you seem to work better alone, and the other guards I had didn’t trust you enough to follow you here.”

She was more perceptive than I gave her credit for, and I nodded.

“It is truly wonderful to see you,” she said happily, “though of course, less so to see you in here with me. I’m certain you’ll be a help, though. What have you found? I admit I was kept asleep for the journey and I am not entirely certain where I am, or how much time has passed. I hope my father hasn’t declared war already.”

“This is a Monican city, Princess, in the far north of Duma. The barren lands are all around, just rocks and dust, though I feel that hidden somewhere in the middle of the mountains there is water and life. You have been here a matter of weeks. I do not know what your father has done in your absence - the others went back to inform him, but they had no horses, so they may not have gotten far. I came straight this way.”

“Tamar,” said the princess, taking my hand. “You were the perfect choice for my protector. You shall be knighted.”

“Only if I get you out of here,” I replied, and a smile reached my face for a moment as I remembered Roland and Jesse suggesting my knighthood for saving the princess.

“Well,” she said, “that seems to depend upon what they want. Perhaps you can speak with them for me. I know they understand my speech, but they prefer to talk so that I don’t know what they’re discussing. And I have tried to make it clear to them that I am willing to help them - they know, or they should know, that I came to Duma only to negotiate on their behalf, for refugees. I told them, anyway. I told them that I would take their demands, too, but they seem to only want to frame Duma for my capture, rather than using me to achieve any political ends. I’m not sure exactly what that means. Do you understand it?”

“I will ask Hawk,” I said.

“Who is Hawk?”

“Their leader, I should think. He knows me, he should tell me what he wants. We grew up together. He led my clan, when I lived here in Duma. When I was a child. Though of course, we knew nothing about a hidden Monican city then.”

Claudi looked startled, then embarrassed.

“Oh, Tamar! I’m sorry. I should have known you would have friends among these people.”

“Why should you? I didn’t know, myself, until I arrived. I hadn’t expected to see Hawk and Judah again at all, certainly not here. Though I suppose if anyone would find this place, it would be Hawk. He was always motivated.”

“Hawk and Judah,” Claudie repeated. “They are family of yours?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “Monican culture has family groups, which stay together often, but your chosen clan is more important. Often it includes close members of your family, but also close friends, mentors, distantly related families - a group that you spend most of your time with. Hawk and Judah are brothers by blood, but they are not related to me. They grew up with me and my own brother, and other unrelated children as well. We were an orphan clan.”

“I suppose clan is very important in your culture,” said the princess.

“Yes,” I agreed. “People feel very lost without one. They will join a new one quickly if theirs is gone, or spend all their energy trying to bring theirs back.”

“But you had no clan with you in Aveline,” said Claudie. “Did you?”

“No, Princess. I knew of no other Monicans in your city.”

“Did you feel lost?”

Of course the answer was yes, at first. But I hadn't had a choice aside from staying. After a while, though, it had ceased to ache.

“I had Jesse, Princess,” I said. “The Captain of your father's Guard, my trainer. He nearly adopted me.”

“Yes, Jesse recommended you for the position with me,” she said, nodding. “My father is quite fond of him. And I have grown quite fond of you.”

I felt myself at a loss for comment. Informing the Princess that I enjoyed her company, but had also recently contemplated forgetting her altogether in favor of living here in Nokrelum, seemed inappropriate. I opted instead for expressing my thanks.

“Do you think they will come soon to talk with you?” she asked. “Perhaps it's best if you are my voice with them. Tell them I have always cared for Monican rights, and I can get Aveline behind me.”

“I will tell them, Princess, though if you have already said so, I doubt that's what they are after. They will wait for nightfall, I expect, to discuss it. They are sleeping now.”

“Ah, yes. I can't distinguish the days and nights here. In that case, would you tell me another of your stories, Tamar? I have been frightfully bored.”

“Of course, Princess.” I leaned back against the wall, and she folded her legs up close to her body in a position of comfort to listen. She was still wearing her riding clothes and braids, her gold circlet still resting against her forehead. We might well have been around the campfire again, travelling. I thought a moment, searching for story.

“I can tell you the story of how the barren lands came to be barren...”

* * *

Before nightfall, Judah slipped inside the room, closed the door behind him, and stared at me.

I remembered him only as a child, and seeing his sudden height, the hardness in his eyes and his features, was like a strange dream. But some things were the same: the way he stood with his weight on his right leg, the shape of his eyes, the scarring that marked just the left side of his face. His size, taller than the typical Monican; his silver eyes and his erratic energy at odds with each other, betraying both his human and his Monican blood.

His gaze never strayed to Claudi. He just kept looking at me, up and down, as if to convince himself that I was really here.

“Hello,” I said finally.

Judah’s face flicked up into the childish smile I remembered, his eyes still full of disbelief, and he started talking frantically.

“Tamar—*des frea*—how did you get here? I mean, I thought, and Hawk said—it’s really you, isn’t it?”

I nodded vaguely, smiled half-heartedly at him.

He crouched down to be level with me, eye to eye, and reached out timidly as if to embrace me, then pulled away.

“What happened to you?” he asked, a frown of concern and confusion crossing his face as he spoke.

“A good many things,” I said.

I glanced over at Claudi out of the corner of my eye, sitting there silently, watching with interest but remaining politely silent.

“I never expected to find you here,” I told Judah. “Or Hawk, though of course if anyone could find this place, he would.”

Judah nodded, still looking reluctantly cheery, then frowned and asked, “Where is...?”

I cut him off before he finished the question. “Aidyn is dead.”

Judah’s happiness at seeing me was shattered at once.

“When?” he asked.

“Years ago,” I told him. “About five years.”

He bit his lip. “How?”

I glanced, just a moment, in Claudi’s direction, and said nothing.

“I’ve been in Aveline a few years now,” I told him, after a moment.

“Yes. Your clothes said as much. How did you end up with her?” He seemed to have finally noticed Claudi.

“I trained as a guard,” I said. “She needed protection. I watch over her, I’m not a soldier.”

The look of confusion on Judah’s face was almost heart wrenching. He looked at Claudi with guarded superstition and a flash of hatred.

He leaned a little closer to me, eyeing her suspiciously. “She does not understand us.”

“No,” I assured him. “She only speaks the common.”

“Has she hurt you?” he asked. “We can protect you here. If the royal family protected you in Aveline, we understand, but you mustn’t feel you need them now. You can come out of here, with us.”

I took a deep breath. Judah was my first friend, and I wished desperately that I could say the things he expected of me.

“I want to stay with her, with Claudi,” I said. “I work for her because I want to, Judah. I don’t believe she is like the others. She has been kind to me.”

Judah blinked, incomprehensive. I knew he could not understand now. When I had first met Jesse, my trust came slowly, too. I knew Judah thought I was being manipulated. I recalled the nights we had spent together in the woods outside Tavin, our clan curled up together in the trees, sharing warmth. We were always hungry, the older boys were always anxious. The humans did that to us. We had learned to curse them from the day we learned to speak.

“She is human,” he said slowly. “Blind, *tre-vaka*. She is nothing. She is not your clan, Tamar, we are.”

“Claudi is for us,” I said. “She is not like us, but you know Aveline has been fighting for us, and Claudi is our best hope right now. When she takes the throne...”

“No!” said Judah suddenly, sitting up straight, moving back away from me. “No, we have a hope of our own. We are strong, we can fight for ourselves.”

He stood up, his lips pressed together in a thin line. He looked angry, but he was hurt. I was a part of his clan, long before I had pledged loyalty to anyone else.

“I will send Hawk in when he returns,” he said flatly, and he turned his back on me and left without a goodbye.

* * *

Hawk arrived at our room hours later. His face, his outward features, were familiar as ever: the perfect skin, the charming smile, the gorgeous features that won everyone's heart. He had the same look on his beautiful face that he always had, at once both liberated and rebelling against a cage. His bright silver eyes were still full of schemes and elaborate plans, full of hope, so you could almost see the wheels turning behind them. But they were also shining with revenge, just like they always were. He was always a hard one to figure out, given to sudden swings between playfulness and rage, between a mischievous child and a battle-scarred adult.

I had to take in the look of him for a second before I could speak. By my reckoning, he had to be in his twenties, nearly his thirties now, not a older child anymore but very much an adult. He was old enough now to be a father. I could not keep myself from the thought that Aidyn might look like this now, had he lived.

He crouched in front of me, lifting a hand to sweep back his hair, shiny and black as ravens' feathers. Claid stiffened beside me, but Hawk did not acknowledge her.

"You came back," he said, his voice was just as warm and fluid as I remembered.

"Not willingly," I admitted. "Duma is as bad as always."

Hawk shrugged. "Of course it is. No one else in their right mind would have come back to this side of the water after making it to Aveline. But we have our own city

here. It exists, as I always said it would - you remember? I am so glad you found us. Safety across the water is desirable, but this...this is heaven.”

He looked so invigorated, so alive, as if he had just been crowned the king of Duma. His words were true. Nokrelum was better than Aveline, a fairy-tale city that we barely believed had ever existed, that we had only spoken of in the past-tense and never dreamed of re-achieving. That was the way our clan, living alone in the south, had always seen it, except for Hawk.

“It’s amazing,” he continued, standing now and pacing, because he was too full of this idea to keep still. “Almost perfect, almost like it was before. But it’s still dangerous. It has to be kept a secret, it’s not safe. It’s not in the open like it used to be, we cannot publicize its location, so many of us are never able to find it. But that is going to change.”

Hawk’s voice was building another world in my mind. It was drawing me in and pulling a curtain around me, so all I could see was his view of things. Would it not be perfect, if all the children hiding out like we once had were able to make their way here? If all the surviving clans could escape their caves and work camps and come to this place?

“It is perfectly courageous, what you’re doing,” he assured me, crouching down again. “With the humans, I mean. Showing them that we are not afraid, that we can come out of hiding, we are on their level. And to fight Duma through Aveline is a good step, but you know Aveline will fall eventually. We can use Aveline to a point, but don’t you agree that it will be better to do something permanent? To stop this from ever happening again?”

He was serious now, all of a sudden angry and full of revenge, just with those last two sentences. He looked down at the floor, then up at me again, his eyes flaring.

“We can wage our own war,” he said quietly. “To bring Nokrelum back. To get our freedom back. And we can do it without them, without Aveline’s help—we cannot take the risk of them betraying us after they have used us up, as Duma did once. They may think they are capable of standing with us, but they will break their bonds. Their loyalty changes as quickly as their energy. That is how the humans are - with us, with each other. We have to be united, just us against them. It’s *our* war. And we don’t have to lift a finger to fight it once we get it started.”

I tried to pull myself away from his piercing gaze, and failed. I was glad Claudi didn’t speak the Monican tongue, and could not tell what he was saying—not just because it was a frightening idea, but also because it was stirring in me. It was an idea I knew I could not support, but I wanted to.

Families, parents and children together and safe, in such larger numbers that what I had seen. Life in peace, without the humans to threaten us. Nokrelum restored, and not in hiding.

Perhaps it was not Duman that needed to be fought. Perhaps it was all of them.

“I know what you’re doing, Hawk,” I said finally. “Aveline is already on the verge of declaring war over the kidnapping. You want them to wipe each other out, both sides gone. I want to fight for freedom too, but not like that.”

“We cannot live beside them in peace,” he insisted. “We tried. Look what happened to us!” He waved his hand around at the dingy little room. “Look what happens

when humans and Monicans try to have a relationship—you end up with abandoned children, scarred, unwanted creations like Judah.”

“Judah is your *brother*,” I said, and the cruelty of his speech cut through the flowery words. I could not trust him.

“Will that take away his scars?” Hawk asked. “I could have so many more brothers, if we united the clans here, all across Duma.”

“You want to kill the innocent humans along with the evil,” I said. “That is not our way.”

“There *are* no innocent ones!” He stood up. “There are innocent-looking ones like this—” He pointed at Claudi. “—who will fool you into thinking they are not like the others, and then leave you when they have taken your energy, used you up. They are not able to give real loyalty. They have no clan. They are not like us.”

I stood and placed a protective arm between him and the Princess.

“They have made a pet of you,” said Hawk, shaking his head. “They are the evil ones, not me. Either Monicans will be free, or humans will. Make a choice.”

I shook my head.

“I want both,” I said.

Hawk went to the door, looking back at me sadly.

“You speak just like your brother,” he said.

I caught my breath. It surprised me how much the memory could still hurt.

“He always wanted to see the good in everyone,” Hawk continued. “He never wanted to do the dirty work to get his freedom—he told you fairy tales when he should have been teaching you to survive.”

“He did,” I said. “Without the fairy tales I would never have lived this long.”

“And what happened to him?” Hawk demanded.

I didn’t answer.

Hawk’s voice lowered. “What happened to Aidyn?” he asked again.

“He’s dead,” I told him, and I met his eyes harshly.

“Exactly,” said Hawk, and closed the door behind him.

When Hawk left the room, Claudi turned to me immediately, a curious look on her face.

“He seemed highly motivated in that speech. What did he say?”

“A great deal,” I replied. “Mainly that your being here, with the whole of Aveline believing Duma’s taken you, will start a very beneficial war.” I left out the bit about him nearly convincing me that he was correct.

“Beneficial, in what way? Not for Duma, surely.”

“No, for the Monicans. Hawk, and his followers—who are many—believe without an army of our own, it would be easiest to sit back and watch the humans destroy each other.”

“Why would he want to destroy the humans?” Claudi asked. The look on her face was deeply concerned. She sat down at the small table in the corner of the room and watched me pace about. “Dumerian humans I suppose, they’re terribly cruel to you, but certainly the casualties in Aveline wouldn’t be worth it? Perhaps I should talk to him and arrange a deal for safe passage into Aveline, for him and his followers. They’d be treated well there.”

“They would be treated better than here,” I agreed. “But not what Monicans would call *well*. This place is their home. It’s their culture. They don’t want to be refugees somewhere else, and Aveline isn’t all friendly either. Many of your citizens wouldn’t want any more of us in their cities and towns, they’re already angry.”

The princess furrowed her brow. “Well, you didn’t mind it. It’s better than war, certainly. They should know that war is what started all this hate, you know.”

“Yes, a human war. We weren’t involved that time until the end. This time, Hawk thinks, we should be starting it.”

“What? No, that’s not how it went,” Claudi said, shaking her head. “The Monicans were on the wrong side of the Dumerian civil war, from the beginning, that’s what got everyone so angry.”

“I think you’ve been told the story differently.”

“How do you tell it?” she asked, with more curiosity than with argument.

“There *was* a civil war,” I said. “Years ago. Before then all the Monicans lived in the mountain country, here, in the north of Duma. They had a small population, and they kept to themselves. There wasn’t much interaction between them and the humans, and the Dumerian people didn’t bother them. It was back when Monicans kept the forests safe and the humans never ventured close, and they knew nothing of danger...”

This was the story the way Aidyn used to tell it. It was always Hawk’s favorite, perhaps one of the only stories that Hawk would sit and listen to, so we heard it often. I came to imagine it vividly. Telling it myself made the imagination stronger: I could see the cities, Nokrelum before it was hidden away, villages built into the side of the

mountains and fires warming the cold nights of winter while Monican children ran and played in the streets the way that human children do.

“When the war broke out,” I said, “and Konnemara was trying to break off and become their own country, Duma came to the Monicans and asked for help. They were losing, and they told the Monicans they needed healers to keep them from being wiped out on the battlefield.”

I could see this too, the way the humans would look from a distance, day-scouts straining in the light of day to see them coming to the base of the mountains, going out to meet them instead of raising an alarm because in those days they did not know that Duma was their enemy. The humans would send men, white-haired commanders with great war-horses and shining leather saddles, and the Monicans would send clan leaders - young men and old women, parents and orphans, all on foot and chatting amongst themselves. They would have delegates to translate between the languages, and the humans would make promises. They would make promises of trade for fruits and vegetables that don't grow in the mountains, for horses and silks, for the support of Duma's armies if invaders came from across the sea. They would make promises of gratitude and the clan leaders would chatter, urged on by their young men and women who wanted so much to see the world outside the mountains.

“Lots of Monicans left with them,” I continued. “But when they got to the battlefield it turned out the humans weren't as interested in healers as weapons.”

They wanted Monican strength to help them win—wanted them to drain energy from their opponents. I could see the quiet young Monicans who had left, arriving at the battlefield, horrified by the smell of rotting flesh, frightened by the screams. Nothing but

threats would make them fight when all their hands wanted were to heal the Dumerian boys hidden away in tents, crying for their mothers. They would beg the generals just to stop fighting, stop sending them so many injured, stop causing this pain, and they would get the tip of swords in return. These were healers, not warriors. Their shimas if they had them were ceremonial, they had never tasted blood.

But they would taste blood on the tip of human swords, under the crushing weight of knowing that these men knew where to find their clans in the mountains. They would see the front lines, feel themselves filling up with energy each time they drained another rebel soldier, and with fury each time they saw another of their friends fall. Eventually they would grow red-hot, and strong, and in the dead of night they would rebel themselves. They had become weapons, and they would kill.

“Just before Duma lost the war to Konnemara,” I told Claudi, “a group of Monicans being held in the camp slaughtered a whole troop of Dumerian soldiers. They ran off into the wild after that, heading back to their home in the north, but before they could get there Duma retaliated to make sure they wouldn’t have a home to return to.”

“What do you mean?” Claudi asked.

“The Monican home city, the city of the tribe leaders, the center of the whole race was Nokrelum. All the clans were built around it. But it wasn’t always inside the mountain like this—it was much bigger, the size of your capital city in Aveline, Princess, and not hidden. That city is the one the humans destroyed.”

The humans had the horses that the Monicans didn’t, and it made them faster. But they did not pursue the weapons that they had created and let loose on themselves. They rode straight past them, to the city where their clans who stayed behind were still waiting

peacefully, grandparents and children sleeping with shades drawn, knowing nothing of what happened in the south, still imagining their young ones to be healers. They woke to the light of day streaming in, to the sight of bright torches and brighter swords. Their screams were lost in the mountains and their scouts ran out of arrows that flew blindly, hitting none of their marks. When those broken young men and women who had fought for Duma returned, all they saw was ash and smoke.

“Everyone from the surrounding villages saw what happened and fled,” I explained to Claudi, winding the story down. “They scattered across Duma and went into hiding or made tiny little settlements other places. But at that point it was too late, because they were bitter, and the humans were bitter. The government told the story differently, and the people believed that the Monicans had come promising to heal and instead sided with Konnemara to betray them. The Monicans, of course, blamed the humans for the death of all their clan members in Nokrelum, and that led to violence on both sides. Monicans would lash out against humans, and they would lash back. So that’s how it started.”

“With the slaughtering of one city? The whole population was cut down to this?” She waved her hand at her surroundings, indicating the small cave-like husk of the new Nokrelum. It was barely bigger than her personal castle at home, and surely the largest number of Monicans she’d ever seen together.

“The Monicans had a small population to begin with,” I explained. “They were hunted down, and more Monicans were dying than humans after a while. It wasn’t an even fight anymore. Aveline tried to intervene—that’s where your history comes in, Princess—and asked Duma to give Monicans their own land, apart from Duma where

they could be safe and alone. But Duma had just lost to Konnemara, and lost the whole western plains, so they refused to give up anything else. Monicans started fleeing into Aveline, if they could, just to get away from Duma.”

“Refugees,” said Claudi. “Like you.”

“Like me, yes,” I agreed. “But Duma makes it hard, sets up outposts along to river to stop people trying to get across without permission. If they catch Monicans, they will send them to work camps in the south. That’s our official land now. So...That’s why. That’s why we hate each other.”

Claudi looked at me intently, stood to face me. Her riding clothes were tattered and muddy now, and her luminous hair was tied up against her head in an unwashed braid that looked more functional than royal. But her fingers were still full of gold rings, and the circlet of gold still rested on her head, a ruby between her brows—the Monicans were not interested in such lifeless objects, and wouldn’t think of taking them.

“But *we* don’t hate each other,” she said with deep concern. “You and me.”

“No,” I said. “Of course not, Princess.”

* * *

It was midday when Judah entered the room on silent feet, so far into the day that I imagined everyone else in the city was fast asleep, except me and Claudi. She perked up with interest, but as usual, was respectfully silent. She must have been taught, at some point, how to behave when you are taken captive: sit quietly and wait for a rescue.

I was sitting on the floor with my back against the cot where Claudi sat above me. Judah crouched beside me, giving her a wary glance. He was quiet. His scarred face was half shadowed, half in light.

“Does Hawk know you’re here?” I asked.

“No. I just figured, we never finished talking earlier. Hawk has been busy discussing strategy, and I should be sleeping, but I’m sorry. You have lost a lot and it must take time to adjust back to life with us.”

I waited. His face betrayed him, as his lips twisted and his eyes strayed. He was arguing with himself.

“I’m trying to understand you,” he said, grasping for the words he needed to express what he really meant. “Wanting to protect the humans is foreign to most people here, but I suppose it makes sense in Aveline, to survive. Now that you’re here, though, with us, you must remember that we have not been with you all this time. We are all the same way we were when you left, and you are the only one changed. I need you, we need you to remember what it was like, when you were here in Duma, when the humans were nothing but a threat to us. They are still.”

His voice was different. It didn’t shake or falter, like it usually did. I wondered if it was the “late” hour that made him more confident, or if it was just that we were alone.

“I know Hawk is too ambitious, perhaps,” he continued. “Over-zealous. But he has always been so, you remember. And he has rescued many of us, me especially, and even you, back then. He wants you back now that we’ve found you. We both do. You mustn’t hate him.”

I sighed.

“I don’t hate him,” I said. “You shouldn’t think that. I could never hate him, not after what he has done for all of us. But I can’t let him start another war. Not when there are still other ways to get our freedom.” I looked over at Claudi, who couldn’t understand the Monican speech but still listened intently. She had power, if we got her back to Aveline, power that could change our fortunes.

“No one can know that for sure,” said Judah. “Promises are just words with them. Some of us feel better knowing at least that the tides are in our hands and not theirs, even if it doesn’t work out the way Hawk thinks it will.”

“Do you feel that way?” I asked.

There was silence. Finally he said, “They cannot be trusted. Even if she promises to negotiate with Duma, to arrange safety for us, there is no way to guarantee she will do as she says. Humans cannot be trusted.”

“But you can be trusted,” I said.

“Of course.”

“You are half human, Judah.”

He did not speak, but I could feel him tense.

“Should you not give them a chance?” I asked.

“Having human blood does not make me one of them,” he said, his voice harder now. “They never gave me anything. Hawk was the one who cared. If I give them a chance, it will not be because I owe them anything. I don’t owe them anything for their blood.”

He stood, his form towering over me now.

“Just try to remember,” he said softly. “And try to understand us. It is good to have you back with the clan, Tamar, and I wouldn’t want to lose you again.”

He turned back to the door, which had been shut behind him, and knocked for the guards to let him out. It didn’t budge.

“*Ken na vaca*,” he said, his voice wavering now. “It’s me, open up.”

“Why?” asked a voice, and laughter came from the other side of the door. “You don’t think the room is a good fit for you?”

“Let me out,” said Judah. The forcefulness in his voice came across sounding closer to sadness.

“Blood belongs together,” said a second voice. There was more laughter.

“Then send for my brother,” Judah replied through the door, his fists balling up. The door was reluctantly opened, and he slipped out without looking back at me. The guards were still laughing.

“Why do they treat him like that?” Claudi asked, as Judah left the room. She looked unreasonably upset.

“Because he’s a half-breed,” I said.

“A what?” she asked.

“Most people call them mutts,” I clarified.

“Oh,” she said, understanding. “I suppose that isn’t very kind, is it?”

“No. Then again, half-breed is not much better. I don’t believe we have a kind word for mixing Monican and human blood.”

“I didn’t know...I had never...” she stopped, looking embarrassed, but I knew what she meant.

“You don’t see them often,” I agreed. “I have never met any aside from Judah. Most don’t live long.”

“Is there something wrong with them?”

“No, Princess, but they get abandoned. Nobody wants them.”

“I see. Because they don’t fit in.”

“Well...” She was right, or close enough. “Yes. And because human-Monican relationships do not turn out well.”

“What happened to Judah, then?” she asked, nodding in the direction of the door where he had left.

“Judah is Hawk’s half-brother,” I said. “Their mother abandoned him when he was a baby. I imagine his father was less than kind to her. But Hawk found him and brought him back, and shortly after their mother died, and Hawk raised him. Monicans don’t want to claim those children any more than humans do, normally, but Hawk felt sorry for him. So he took him in, protected him from the others, made the clan accept him. I don’t think Judah will ever stop feeling like he owes everything to Hawk for that.”

“Oh. That’s quite tragic, but I meant...” Claudi reached up and touched the side of her face. “What happened...?”

“Oh,” I said, realizing suddenly that she would want to know about the scars. I was used to them, so I hadn’t thought of it. To me they were just a part of what Judah had always looked like.

“He was like that when Hawk found him,” I said. “After his mother abandoned him. When he was a baby. The scars go down onto his chest, too, and his shoulder. We always figured he was burned.”

“Why would that happen?” Claudi asked, horrified, and it wasn’t a question that was meant to be answered, but one that hung there in the air. “How could someone do that to a child?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it was an accident. We won’t know.”

“If Hawk took him in, and raised him,” said Claudi, “why do the others treat him like that?”

“He’s still not really Monican,” I said. “At least not to them. Even though he grew up with us, was raised by us, has always lived with us. He’s still got human blood, and it scares them.”

“But he’s been with the clan since you were young, right?” Claudi pressed. “And Hawk’s the leader, isn’t he? They trust him.”

“This clan is not the same one I left,” I said. “Hawk and Judah are here, but this is a new clan that they joined. Yes, Hawk is still the leader, and they trust him, but his power isn’t like a king’s or a captain’s. Hawk can’t force them to be kind to Judah. He can force them not to fight with him, to try to hurt him, but he can’t make them accept him. They would have to do that on their own.”

“And they refuse to accept him, because of the human blood,” said Claudi. “It’s very sad. He seems so caring.”

“Judah is just passive, really,” I said. “He tries not to make waves. Because he wants them to stop fearing him.”

“You trusted him, when you were in the clan, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, nodding. “We were children then. I didn’t have any notion of hating someone who was in my clan, of being afraid of someone who I played with.

Aidyn liked him, and Hawk liked him, so that was all that mattered to me. But now, in this new clan, things are clearly different. And it's not just them that are afraid of him. I'm certain Judah feels a bit afraid of himself as well."

"Why?" Claudi asked. "What do you mean?"

"Because he doesn't know what he is. Just think, if you were to find out you were half-Monican," I said, "even without hating and fearing Monicans, like most humans do, you would be a bit confused about yourself, wouldn't you? Since you've never been a part of that culture. You've only ever been around humans."

"Until you," she pointed out. "I've been around you."

I stopped, fell silent, and nodded, surprised to find that I hadn't considered this.

"You're right, yes. You have me. And I have you. So I guess the two of us have actually experienced both. That scares them too. Because they've never seen Monicans and humans get along, not since long before the war. And people are always scared of what they don't understand."

* * *

I could tell that about three days had passed. Claudi was still on a human schedule, and woke occasionally during the night when we received visitors, but mainly stayed awake during daylight. I tried as much as possible, at first, to be awake constantly, but it became apparent that it did no good—we weren't going anywhere—and I allowed myself to doze when I felt like it. We talked about strategy, what we might do to get out of here, how we might negotiate. I did not think most of her ideas would be helpful

against Hawk. I grew increasingly frustrated with feeling all these Monican energies outside the doors and being unable to join them.

Early one night, when Claudi had fallen asleep, Hawk came back again. Once again he was all smiles and warmth.

“Tamar,” he said. “I don’t see any reason to keep you in here all the time when, during the night, there are plenty of us here to guard you and the Princess from escape. Tonight is the night of beginnings. You remember? We have a celebration here. Much grander than the ones we used to have when you were little. You should join us.”

“You’re just trying to get me away from Claudi,” I said, but without a great amount of conviction. He laughed.

“I’m just trying to get *you*! Tamar, the fighter, the tree-climber, Aidyn’s sister. My first clan. Do you blame me for wanting that? Aidyn is dead. Winter is dead. Kai and Scipio disappeared to the east. And you are alive, and here with me and Judah again. Come and celebrate with us.”

My gaze turned back to Claudi, curled in an ungraceful lump in the corner where she slept soundly. I knew what Hawk was doing. It was clear that locked up in here with Claudi, I only bonded with her all the more. He wanted to get me to bond with him again, with his clan and the people here, to remember where he thought my loyalty should lie.

“You have made it clear that you won’t be going anywhere without the Princess,” said Hawk. “And she won’t be leaving. I can promise that. Does she really need your presence while she sleeps? Come out with us. Your earth-symbol still hangs there on your neck. You are Monican still. Come out, and I will put shimas back in your hands.” He smiled, a sight I well remembered.

It could not hurt to leave for a matter of hours. I wanted badly to see the other side of these walls. I cast another glance at the human in the corner, stood, and followed him out. The door closed behind us with a sound of finality, but Claudi did not stir, and the guards at the door watched me go without any hint of surprise.

* * *

The night was dark, with bright stars shining coldly over the mountain. Hawk had led me through the halls lined with mineral rocks, halls already empty with everyone out at the festival. When we emerged into the open air I gasped, without meaning to - the cool night was something I had not realized I missed. Hawk looked back at me, smiled, and waved me forward.

Noises came from ahead of us, sounds of my language being called happily across the meadow. It was secluded, this space, a valley surrounded on all sides by steep mountain walls, a clearing cut off from the world around but not from the sky. It was safe, and the trees growing all around were so clearly touched by Monican hands; they grew just so, in sculpted shapes, some like shelters, some like steps, some in the shapes of people and animals. The sound of a creek came from somewhere nearby. Crowds emerged as we approached, groups of people scattered about, talking and laughing, children chasing each other and scrambling up the trees. Their heads turned when Hawk appeared; they seemed to sense his presence, and gather to him with expectation. He pulled many of them into short greetings as he continued walking.

“The sparring will be here,” he said to me, pointing to a cleared area ahead of us. He spoke quickly with a man who approached him, asking him to bring my shimas. They felt light and perfect in my hands. The weight of caring for Claudi lifted slowly.

“Come,” he said, smiling brightly and clapping me on the shoulder as he moved back to the center of the clearing. He put up a hand and motioned for the others to gather around, and they did so slowly, talking amongst each other, gathering their children. I felt small in the midst of them. On the edge of the crowd I saw Ren, watching me with a sullen expression, and I gripped my shimas tighter. The weight settled again. I looked around for Judah, but didn’t see him.

Hawk motioned to the crowd to let through some others – nine men and women of various ages, most at least a few years older than Hawk, some a great deal older, wrinkled and wizened. These ten together, I presumed, were the clan leaders of Nokrelum.

The Night of Beginnings was one of the only Monican holidays. It marked the first night of spring, the end of winter and the beginning of new growth and life, especially up here in the mountains. It was traditionally celebrated with an outdoor festival, singing and dancing, storytelling, lots of tournaments for shima fighting, hand to hand fighting, throwing spears and archery--at least that was what I was told as a child, though our clan had never had more than ten members, and we were alone in the forests outside Tarin, living in the trees. We didn’t have the means for such grand spectacles, let alone for the great feast of winter stores that was supposed to follow. We always celebrated anyway, though, the important part--being together, being thankful for the clan that kept us warm through the winter.

The clan leaders stood at the center of the circle, and each said their piece - short blessings and hopes for prosperity, thankfulness to their clans for the work over the winter, praise and happiness to see new members or to know that all of their members were alive and happy now in the spring. Hawk was the last to speak.

“This night we celebrate beginnings,” he said, “and we celebrate endings as well. Spring cannot begin until the winter ends.”

I stiffened, filled with nostalgia. These words I had heard before. The same words he had said, the same way, every year that we celebrated together with our first clan, long ago. The same words he spoke before we would eat our scavenged “feast” and Aidyn would tell us stories through the night and Judah and I would wrestle on the forest floor. Here, the words fit better.

“The spring is our hope,” he continued. “We are of the earth and each time we survive the winter we have hope that now we will live with new life the way the earth does.” He touched the earth-symbol around his wrist, the carved circular shape tied with a cord to keep it in place. “Winter gives way to spring, and our tragedy will give way to joy. Our oppression will give way to victory. Our true Night of Beginnings will come. And tonight, we hope, and we fight, and we feast.” He smiled winningly as the crowd nodded their appreciation, some of them murmuring agreement. And he waved his hands in the air.

“Let’s begin!”

They cheered and disbursed. Hawk looked back at me, and I looked back at him, uneasy with the memories of the old speech and the nuances I felt creeping into the new. Perhaps I hadn’t realized that his plan was always this.

“Come,” he said. “You must enter the tournament.”

It was exhilarating, fighting Monicans, using shimas against others who could use them instead of against humans with their long, heavy single blades, their slow movements and weighted armor to protect their fragile flesh. For years I had fought in Aveline, against opponents who were worthy, but boring. The humans were always taller, even the women, and always stronger, either from birth or from the effort of lifting heavy armor and weapons. Their blows could beat you down, if they could catch you, but they struck the same blows over and over, never asking you to move, to dance. Here, everyone was more like me - faster, constantly moving, small and darting like fish. We needed no armor. We could be careful with each other, and if we slipped, we could heal the cuts and bruises in an instant. It was a real fight.

It left me breathless. I had never really fought Monicans, aside from little childish scuffles, although I had watched Hawk and Aidyn with envy when they defended us against the human townsmen from time to time. Since I had begun to fight, and to train, Jesse was the best of opponents I had ever had, in skill, because he had no fear of me, and because he knew all my moves. Here, fighting my kind, bladed in the half-light—they were so *fast*. Their moves were short and quick, fluid, unpredictable. They were not trained; they knew how to win a fight because there were times in their lives when they could be killed if they didn't.

Despite how interesting the fights were for me, I continued to win them, moving up the tournament ranks. Hawk watched from the sidelines with a smile of surprise slowly growing on his face. He called me over between bouts, grinning.

“I suppose I shouldn’t wonder, since they picked you to guard the princess,” he said. At his mention, I had a sudden desire to return to Claudi - what if she woke to find herself alone?

“I can’t quite make it out,” he continued, “what it is that you’re doing, that defeats all of them. They are very skilled, all of these you’ve beaten. Now I want you even more desperately on our side! You must have a trick.”

“No trick,” I replied.

“I’ll see about that myself.”

He walked over to the weapons master, the man who was running the tournament, and spoke briefly in hushed tones. Then he took a pair of shimas, turned to the crowd watching, and raised them proudly in the air. The crowd cheered.

“You’ve convinced me!” he said proudly, grinning. He was popular with these people, and it was no wonder. He was charming, beautiful, a natural leader, and an incredible fighter. He had always been so in his youth, and even more so now. If ever there was a face of the Monican people, he would be it. I was not surprised that the clans wanted to follow him into battle.

He turned to me. “Do you need to rest first?”

“I am ready,” I said.

The circle around us took a few steps back, their cheers falling to a hush.

Hawk approached me playfully, twirling one of his shimas with a casual confidence. Shimas are short blades, made to about the length of one's forearm, and matched to each other for both the left and the right hands. Their fighting style is necessarily close and quick, and because of the thinness of the blades, requires more dexterity than strength. They are Monican weapons, through and through, and Hawk was the master of them.

He attacked suddenly, a harsh opening move, feinting left and striking to the right. It was unexpected, but not quick enough that I could not block. He advanced, and I let him keep attacking, blocking him but not striking back, as I assessed his style. The others were fast and could move easily; Hawk was as well, but combined with an aptitude for faking. He fought as if he were playing cards. It kept all my attention on catching him at the last second, instead of planning my own counter-attacks.

He had a tell, I noticed after a moment. His whole body moved towards the fake, when he made one, but his eyes stayed on the target he planned. I watched the eyes, caught his next move, and stepped forward, forcing him back.

A look of surprise crossed his face as I moved swiftly into a counter, lunging for him and darting away. He tried the fake several times again, tried a double-maneuver with his blades crossed over my chest, but his eyes gave him away and I continued to push, backing him up further and further. I could not fake the way he could, but my attacks were strong, and though he blocked them, he did so with effort. I was winning this bout.

He stopped attempting to fake and lunged straight for my neck with one blade as he blocked an attack with the other. I ducked away, catching him and weaving even closer, and before I could attack again he dropped his blades, a signal for the bout to stop.

I slowed, and lowered my shimas in surprise. Hawk looked at me with wonder.

“You *do* have a trick,” he said. “You fight like Judah!”

“What?”

“Judah, he’s the only one who can beat me. Monican speed and human strength. That’s what you have!”

“I have no such thing, you know I’m Monican blood,” I said.

“No, no,” said Judah, shaking his head. “But you trained with them. Trained against human fighters, against swords, and you picked up their ferocity.” He turned to the weapons master and asked, “Where is Judah? Call for my brother, bring him here. He must fight Tamar.”

“I doubt very much he wants to fight me,” I said.

“Nonsense, he will do what I ask,” said Hawk. “He always does.”

The crowd did not cheer when Judah appeared a few minutes later, but they did part for him to get through. He was silent, and looked confused. Hawk clapped him on the shoulder.

“You must fight with Tamar,” he said happily. “She is just like you! You might finally be beaten!”

“Doubtful,” said Judah, casting a wary glance at me, but he took the shimas from his brother and faced me seriously. Hawk backed away as Judah and I sized each other

up, and I remembered so many scuffles with him when we were children, rolling around together in the dirt with sticks. He had always been bigger than me, he always won.

When he began fighting me now, I realized that once that Hawk was right.

Judah matched me effortlessly. He was tall like a human, and had some of their stocky build, and I could use my Monican advantage of speed and agility against him; he could also match my darting moves, following me around the ring, blades flashing as quickly as mine. When I countered him, he was more than strong enough to block me without being thrown off, and he seemed to understand and anticipate my moves before I made them.

Fighting him tired me. I could not keep up the combination of the moves I used against humans and the ones I used against Monicans. The strength and the movement together were too exhausting, too demanding, but I held my ground as long as I could. He began advancing.

This felt like a real fight - dangerous as humans, rhythmic and beautiful as Monicans. When he finally cornered me, blades crossed against my throat in a clean mock-kill, I was not surprised.

“You’re good,” he said, holding the blades at my throat for a second before lowering them.

“But not blessed like you,” I said. Judah scowled.

“More cursed than blessed,” he replied. Hawk approached us and embraced his brother.

“Tournament winner!” he said. “Unfair, but much better than the rest of us, don’t you think? Doesn’t she fight like a halvie, too?”

“I never entered the tournament,” said Judah, pushing away from Hawk and casting a furtive glance back at me. “Tamar wins.”

He fled from the circle.

Hawk watched him go without much emotion. He was right. I fought like a halvie; I behaved more like a human, at times, than Judah did, because while he was trying to fit in, I was trying to maintain balance between my worlds. Aveline and Duma, Claudi and clan. I would always be Monican, but it was no longer my only identity. I was more like Judah than the rest of them. I felt my blood betraying me, too.

I had to get the Princess back to Aveline. If I had to earn Hawk’s trust first in order to do so, then I would. But I was half human now, too. I had befriended Claudi, been raised and trained by Jesse. I could not see their people killed.

Hawk turned to me. “It is getting light. We will go indoors soon for the feast. I suppose you will want to return to your Princess?”

I smiled as brightly as I could.

“No,” I said. “She will be fine without me.”

“You will stay and feast with us?”

I nodded, and Hawk laughed happily and led me back inside.

* * *

The feast was rowdy and warm, hundreds of people from at least ten clans coming together for food and drink that had undoubtedly been saved up for a good time in order to provide for this occasion. There was meat, fresh hunted, but only a little—more of the feast was fruit and vegetables, easy for Monicans to grow and control. A great deal of the

food consisted of dried foods and meal that had obviously been stored, but I was glad for it. Music was played, and people laughed. The open-ceilinged hall of the city was barely big enough to hold everyone, but they managed, and the noise carried out into the lightening sky. Hawk introduced me to his clan, which he said was forty-six people in all—beginning to push the limits of what was considered far too many people, he admitted, laughing, but they were mainly young and unmarried, and would eventually start families, at which point some would join their partner’s clan, or start new clan groups of their own.

“We have room enough that you can join,” he said. “Of course you’re not really re-joining, really, are you? Just coming back!”

“Coming home,” I agreed.

Hawk looked at me with curious happiness. “It always would take a fight to get you on my side, wouldn’t it? Your brother would always be that way, too. Though of course he chose to shout, which isn’t your style. I wish he was here.”

“Yes,” I said, looking around the room at the families around me, the happy children, the comfort. “So do I.”

“Clan is the most important thing,” he said, looking stoic. “I’m glad you’ve returned to ours. We missed you. Especially Judah. He missed you desperately, he was always hoping you would come back.”

Hawk walked away then, distracted by the clamoring of a younger clan member striving for the leader’s attention, and I attempted to find a place in the room to sit down and eat. Everyone was unfamiliar, and I couldn’t find Judah anywhere.

Suddenly, a hand tugged roughly on my arm, and I turned to find myself facing Ren, who glared at me fiercely.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, and I stared.

“What...what do you mean?”

“Come with me,” he said, pulling me out of the crowd, to the edge of the room.

He spoke in a hushed voice. I was bewildered, and frankly a little threatened, though with his size and admitted lack of close-range fighting prowess I knew I should not be worried.

“First of all, you lied to me,” he said. “*Unless*—listen—unless she really is.”

“Who is what?”

“Unless the Princess really is your clan.”

“Are you asking me if I’m a halvie? I know I did well against Judah, but—”

“I did not say family, did I? You know what clan means. Is it true, what they say?

That she came to negotiate with Duma to release Monican refugees to Aveline? That she promised to fight for us?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “I told Hawk I believed she could change things, but he would rather get them all to kill each other.”

“She is on our side?” he pressed. “She will listen to you?”

“She has listened to me.” I looked around, making sure no one else was listening to our hushed conversation, but the room was loud and there was little interest in the two of us.

“Would you die for her?”

I caught my breath. Ren’s silver eyes stared into mine, waiting.

“Yes.” Was that not the job I had applied for, the oath I had taken? “Yes I would. She has more power than any of us to do good. Her life is worth it.”

“She is your clan, then,” he concluded, dropping my gaze. “Well, at the least you didn’t exactly lie.”

I had never exactly thought of Claudi as my clan, and to be honest I hadn’t when I told Ren I was looking for a clan member, either—I had thought of it as a lie. But if he wanted to forgive me, I was not going to stop him.

“Listen,” he said. “I love this place, but I cannot stop thinking about the people I lost. I cannot replace them, not with you, not with any of this. I need to know what happened to them. And I will help you get the Princess out of here, if you promise me she will use her power to help me.”

“You want Claudi to find your clan?” I asked. He shook his head.

“Not find them,” he said. “Find out what Duma did to them.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There is no time now,” he said, glancing over his shoulder, his voice now barely more than a whisper. “Duma changed them, somehow, my clan. They were taken, and they came back...but not the same. If the Princess will help me find out what happened to them, I will help you. But she must keep her word.”

“Yes, I will get her word,” I promised. “But how exactly will you help me...?”

“I saw you fight,” he said. “You should not need my help with the guards.”

“Hardly,” I agreed. “But the weapons master has my shimas.”

“I will get them for you. That is my gift. You must tell no one that I was involved, and in two days I will meet you in the woods on the edge of the barren lands. Do you agree?”

“Yes, yes,” I said quickly. “Of course.”

“I’m serious about this,” said Ren. “I came here thinking I would join another clan and someone here would be able to tell me what happened to the others, someone would know. But no one knows, Tamar. This is serious. The princess has to get Duma to tell her what this is. This is bigger than the war. She has to listen to me.”

“You clearly haven’t met her if you think there is any chance she wouldn’t,” I said. “She might knight you, too, but not if we don’t get her out of here.”

“Meet me around the corner from the room where they’re keeping her,” he said. “I will bring your shimas. Can you take both guards at once?”

“It would be easier with help,” I said, nodding towards the bow on his back, but he shook his head.

“I need to keep this place as an ally,” he said. “They can’t know that I helped you.”

“Then I’ll take two at once,” I agreed, and he nodded. After a long, wary gaze, he turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Ren met me, as he said, around the corner from where the two guards stood in front of Claudi's room. This was a good time for an escape - everyone was still down at the feast, celebrating, loud and boisterous. He quietly handed over my shimas.

"When I meet you I can bring food," he whispered. "And clothes that don't give you away as an Aveline guard in a matter of seconds. There are a few more people I have to talk to here, people who might know something."

I nodded distractedly, peeking around the corner. One of the guards had shimas, the other a long spear. I wanted to knock them out, somehow, without draining them - that would be more respectful, I thought, or perhaps it would just make me feel better.

"If you get out, you must promise to wait for me to join you in the woods," he said again, placing himself firmly in my line of sight.

"I told you not to run off when we first met," I said. "You didn't even give me your word, and here you are. I gave my word, didn't I?"

With that, and knowing I didn't have much time, I left his side and swooped around the corner.

The guards noticed me at once. Before they could complete their exclamations of surprise I went straight for the closer one, with the spear, and knocked it aside the way I would a human's broadsword. I kept the spear down with one blade while keeping the other between myself and the second guard, and used a high-kick that Jesse had taught me to knock the spear-holder in the head. He fell to the ground.

The one with shimas was much more difficult. He was on me in quick enough time to actually cut the side of my arm before I managed to block him. I threw everything I had at him, knowing from the tournament that I could surely beat him but wanting to

make sure it was challenging enough that he wouldn't have the energy to call for help - at least not loud enough to be heard over the din of the celebration. He was fast, I would give him that. Not as clever as Hawk though, or as strong as Judah. In fact, when I tried one of Hawk's feinting moves on him, ducking left and then quickly shifting right, he fell for it enough that I could use my more advanced strength to knock one blade from his hand. It clattered to the ground and I parried the other one quickly, aiming one of my blades for his throat. He lifted his hands in surrender, and I high-kicked again - another clean fall to the floor. I checked again quickly that both were unconscious, then went to the door.

I burst into the room to see Claudi standing with her back to the opposite wall, looking frightened.

"Tamar!" she exclaimed. "I heard fighting!"

"You heard me fighting," I said, waving her towards me. "Come, quickly."

"You didn't tell me about this plan!"

"This plan occurred roughly twenty minutes ago. Come." If the princess was upset about the commanding way I was speaking to her, she could express that after I had rescued her from captivity. We did not have long before someone noticed she was missing. She rushed to my side.

"Stay behind me," I said, striding out towards the direction Ren had pointed me. I kept my shimas out and ready. "Tell me if you see anyone." It occurred to me that in the fairly dense darkness of these passageways, she would not be likely to see anything, but it couldn't hurt.

“You disappeared while I was sleeping, where did you go?” she asked, hurrying to follow. She held onto my shoulder to keep from stumbling in the dark.

“To a party. Also, I made some promises you’re going to have to keep. There’s a boy called Ren who’s going to meet us in two days.”

“Do you know your way out of here? Do we have horses?”

“They don’t keep horses here,” I said. “Horses require more space than they have.”

“How are we going to out-run them on foot?”

“Hopefully we will get a head-start. They aren’t likely to be able to find us if they have to do it during the day. Their eyesight is too poor, they will have to wait for nightfall.”

“Won’t your eyesight be bad, too? They took your glasses.”

“Yes. But I have you.” I turned the corner sharply, causing Claudi to stumble, and stopped suddenly. Judah stood blocking the last passage that led outside, alone and holding shimas in his hands.

“I knew you would sneak off,” he said. “I could tell when you fought me.”

“And you didn’t warn Hawk?” I asked. He shrugged.

“Hawk was proud to have you back. Much more than he would have been to have me. I let him have his moment.”

“Either that, or some part of you wants to let us get away.”

Judah tensed, holding his shimas out towards us. I kept Claudi behind me and said to him, in the language she understood, “You already know I can’t beat you. And it isn’t because of your training.”

“You’re not going to talk me out of this,” he replied. “Go back.”

“Judah.” Claudi spoke slowly, causing both of us to look at her with surprise as she stepped out from behind me.

“My people have done terrible things,” she said. “You have every right to hate us, but it will ruin you. You can’t erase half of yourself.”

“Stop,” he demanded, holding one blade out threateningly in her direction. I blocked it, and she continued.

“Your life is so much harder than mine will ever be,” she said. “But I can help you. A world where humans and Monicans can live together without fear is a better world for you than a world where humans no longer exist. I need people like Tamar to help me make that happen. You can help me, too.”

“A world where humans don’t exist anymore means the rest of us won’t be afraid of humans anymore,” he said, wavering.

“If you think Hawk is going to accept you the way he does the rest of his clan, once he gets rid of all the humans,” I said, “then you’re wrong. Hawk is mad. Once he eliminates the humans, you will be an eyesore to him.”

“I’m an eyesore to everyone!”

“Not to Tamar,” Claudi said quickly. “She has a clan here, and a clan of humans in Aveline. It can happen, Judah. You can have both.”

“Princess Claudi’s plan will work,” I said. “You can come with us and see it for yourself, or you can stay here. But you know it will work better than Hawk’s. You know that.” I paused, waiting to see if he blades would lower. We had very little time.

“I was your clan in the beginning too,” I reminded him gently. “Still as much as Hawk is. I don’t need you to change your blood to stay that way.”

His blades lowered then, and he shook his head, looking angry and defeated.

“Get out,” he said. “Just get out of here.” He stepped aside to let us pass.

I rushed to accept, but Claudi stopped before him. He flinched as she reached to touch him lightly on the shoulder.

“Will you come?” she asked.

Judah looked at her a moment but then fixed his eyes on me with longing. He brushed Claudi’s hand away.

“Tamar, we have always been friends,” he said. “More than clan. But Hawk saved me. I was ugly and ruined, and he saved me. I can’t leave him. I can do this for you, but I can’t leave him. I will try to stall him if I can, but I can’t stop him coming after you.”

I nodded. There were many words to say, but I had no time to say them.

“Thank you,” I said, taking Claudi’s arm and pulling her out with me into the dawn.

We ran across the barren lands in the full light of day. Without the shaded glasses I usually wore to guard Claudi, it nearly blinded me. There was very little to hide us, no trees and bushes like there had been in the middle of the mountains where Nokrelum hid. I had to hold onto Claudi as we ran, her hand or her wrist, and sometimes in the light I would stumble, feeling useless. I kept asking her to look back, to tell me if anyone was coming, but she always said no.

The Princess often had to stop. She was highborn and used to horses, and still wearing her riding clothes, heeled boots that fit well in the stirrups but did not help in running over rocky terrain. Her legs and her lungs were not prepared for our flight, and my eyesight slowed us too. With every rest stop and every stumble I was less and less sure of our safety. Judah would stall Hawk, but he would not stop him. He would come for us.

Several hours passed, and the sun began to slide behind the clouds, relieving my eyes a bit though night was still far from upon us. Claudi stopped again to rest, and I urged her on.

“If I can see better now, so can they,” I said. “I think they will have found the guards I fought very quickly. Judah can’t have stalled them long.”

“You think they will come after us now?” she asked, breathing hard, sitting on a rock with her head in her hands. “Now that it’s not so bright?”

“I think they will. If it gets light again they will have to stop, but they will start out now.”

“I can’t keep running,” said Claudi. “I can’t. Can we walk?”

“For a few minutes,” I agreed, helping her up. As I grasped her hand I gave her energy, a small burst of mine, enough to help her along. I was exhausted, but she needed it more. Hawk and the others would not tire the way she did, but I couldn’t keep her going until she collapsed.

We were walking still, and still in the slight respite of the clouds, when Claudi turned her head and told me, “Someone’s coming.”

I turned abruptly, but I could not see well enough in the glare of the light on the rocks. I shielded my eyes with my hand. “How far?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Close enough an archer to hit us?”

“Hardly. Only with a very good bow.”

“How many?”

“I see just one.”

“More will be behind.” I adjusted my shimas on my hips and pressed Claudi’s shoulder to urge her ahead of me. “Our only chance is to keep running until the light returns and blinds them. Run!”

Frantic and desperate, with the sound of Claudi panting by my side, I remembered running from humans years ago. Running from the city to the safety of the trees, Aidyn catching me up in his arms when I lagged behind, hearing the shouts of villagers behind us.

Claudi glanced behind. “There are more!” she shouted. “The one in front is gaining on us.”

I looked back myself, and could barely make out movement in the distance, and one figure advancing. Too tall to be Hawk. As he got closer I knew it was Judah by the way his bow stayed fixed across his back, never aimed at us, and by the faint voice that I heard urging us on.

The first arrow whizzed past my ear, between the Princess’s head and mine. It was fired from behind Judah, from the angry crowd led by Hawk that continued to press in closer and closer. I grabbed Claudi, nearly tripping her, and moved her directly in front

of me, my back shielding her from more arrows as we ran. She glanced back frantically and I shouted, "Keep running!"

More arrows shot past. They went wide. Trying not to hit Judah or myself was clearly throwing off Hawk's aim, or the aim of his clan members. After a few shots they got more accurate - one barely missed the Princess's shoulder, flying straight over mine. *They're close now, I thought. Close enough to get the right angle. Close enough not to miss.*

The sun came through the clouds suddenly, like a candle being lit. In the space of a moment the wind picked up and as it ruffled my hair it also parted the clouds, blinding me and stopping the arrows. Claudi reached back and took hold of my arm to keep me from falling. There were shouts behind. I heard Hawk's voice in particular. Another arrow flew by, incredibly wide now, nowhere near us. I heard the sound of another one whistling through the air, and then a sudden gasp, and a scream.

I turned and through my blindness saw Judah just feet behind us, his form knelt on the ground.

"Go!" he shouted at us, his voice pained, and he collapsed.

Claudi pulled me back to a sprint, and I could see nothing but the image of Judah in my mind. Hawk's voice behind me was screaming his name over and over and I knew this was the type of accident that makes rivers run dry.

It makes mercy run dry, too. There was nothing to lose now and the arrows started flying again, many more this time than before, arrows from every archer Hawk had brought with him and flying all around us. I was not surprised when I felt the sudden stab in my back between my ribs, deep and sharp. I stumbled, my breath stopped, but Claudi

kept pulling me forward, pulling, and my feet continued to move. They stumbled on until the arrows stopped, until we were out of range, the daylight and the grief keeping our pursuers behind.

When we finally stopped, and Claudi turned, she screamed to see the arrow in my back, and I collapsed on the ground.

The blood was hot. I didn't know how long we had kept running, but the sun was fading again now, and the air was cold, and against the cold air the blood was hot, almost burning hot. I felt the heat of it almost even more than the pain. I felt it pumping and spilling, over my back and down my legs and now over my chest and it pooled on the ground beneath me.

Claudi dropped to her knees in the dust beside me and shrieked my name.

"Tamar!" she gasped. "No no, we have to stop this immediately, we can fix this. We must stop the bleeding, can you move?"

"Princess," I said, struggling to get my voice out of my chest. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

"No I'm not hurt, focus, Tamar! You have to fix this right away, this is...this does not look good, can you heal it? Ren will come and help you, won't he?"

"Listen," I said. "Listen. Princess. You...you have to go to the edge of the forest and meet Ren there. He won't be coming until tomorrow, and you can't stay out here with me or Hawk will find you. There is no protection out here."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "I'm not going without you! I demand that you fix yourself and come with me."

I gave a bit of a gurgling laugh, feeling the blood at the back of my throat, its metallic taste in my mouth.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to,” I said.

“No!” she shouted, and there were tears in her clear blue eyes. “You can heal yourself! You can fix it, Tamar, and you have to start right away.”

“Takes...energy,” I muttered. “I haven’t...haven’t really got that.”

“You can take it from somewhere,” she said. “Can’t you? From the trees? Or...grass? Something!” She sniffed and wiped her eyes, and I focused on the searing pain across my body because that was easier than focusing on her crying over me.

“There’s no energy...in this place,” I said. “Not here. Trees are dead...everything’s dead.” I took as deep a breath as I could, wincing and gritting my teeth as my lungs protested. I was over. I was not going to survive this. But that was alright, I supposed. Dying while protecting Claudi was just another part of my job, and probably the reason I had gotten the job in the first place—I was useful, and disposable. I could accept that.

“What about me?” she asked quietly. “You could use my energy, couldn’t you? You’ve healed me before with yours. That would work, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said faintly. I didn’t have the breath to explain that I had never tried it with a human before, that I didn’t know how her energy would transfer. I had transferred mine to her, yes, and I could read hers, I could feel it, but it was different from mine. Monican energy was all the same, quivering pulses that were tame and measured to the earth’s communal heartbeat. We were in synch with one another, and the reason I could transfer that to Claudi was because something controlled can enter what is wild

without making it any worse. But I had never tried taking the wild, untamed, unchecked, constantly fluctuating human energy and putting it into anything else. Their energy wasn't centered, it was off-balance and had no rhythm. That was why they couldn't heal and grow things, like Monicans could. They didn't have enough rhythm to feel the earth's energy, to push or harness it like we did. I had no idea what energy like Claudi's would do if I brought it into myself. I had never even thought of transferring human energy before, and I wasn't sure if it was possible. Their energies were all so individual, so unique to each one of them, and I felt, in my fevered state of pain, as if taking Claudi's energy would take a part of her soul into mine.

"Tamar," she begged. "Please. I need you. You don't have to die right now. You must come with me. Please."

"I would have no control. You are weak already from the run. I might drain you," I told her. "I can't...I can't do that."

"You won't drain me," she promised. "If you do, you can take care of me. You can bring me back. You've saved me just now, and right now you're dying, and I could maybe save you, so please." Tears dripped down her face and she brushed them away frantically.

"Taking care...of you...is my job," I said. It was painful to talk. "Your life's more important."

"You!" she shouted angrily. "Stop that! I need you! This isn't a question of what you think is more important! I want to help you and you have to let me!"

I felt dizzy, weak, laying there on the ground and feeling like I was falling. My chest felt tight and I knew I wasn't getting any air because my lungs were probably filling

up with blood. The pain, searing, excruciating pain, was actually beginning to dim now and be replaced with a cold tingling and numbness. It was almost over and Claudi was sitting there glaring at me, shouting at me, telling me to come back. Dear, kind, innocent Claudi. So demanding.

“Tamar,” she said, her voice low and angry through her pouring tears. “This is not just a job. You are my friend. You didn’t have to leave your people for me, but you did. And I need you to stay with me. You can’t leave me here, you have to try something. You have to try, you can’t die here without at least trying. I’ll order you if I have to.”

Her voice was so desperate, I could tell what her face must look like even though my vision was getting blurry. She was the Princess and it was my job to die for her and by all rights I couldn’t, shouldn’t, let her save me. That was the opposite of what I was meant to do.

But she was also Claudi. The girl who promised to make a change, who listened to my stories, knew about my nightmares. She was the person I trusted and believed in, now, more than my old clan, more than anyone. And that made her more than the Princess. More than a job. That made her clan to me, just as Ren said.

“Tamar,” she whispered. “Please. Just try.”

I struggled to take another breath, felt the blood rising again in my throat.

“Alright, Claudi,” I whispered, and as she pulled the arrow from me I reached out with one shaky, bloody hand and rested my fingertips on her arm.

Her energy was restless, shaking and twisting, immensely fragile and wildly powerful all at once. It had no pulse, no frequency, and it scared me to pull it towards me, even as I could feel my own beat slowing and fading out. I tried to control it, channel it

slowly, closed my eyes and focused hard on the transfer, trying to find a pattern in the chaos of her energy and trying, with difficulty, to be gentle with the flow from her center to mine. But it didn't work. Human energy has a mind of its own. Almost as soon as I touched it, it flowed, not gentle and controlled as I had hoped but more like the raging of a sudden waterfall, from Claudi into me, pouring over my injuries and knitting them up and bringing strange, raging life to my limbs. It woke me up like a lightning bolt. It almost *hurt*, the suddenness, and it scared me how impossible it was to control it. I cut it off as quick as I could, pulling my hand back after just a second with a jerk like I had been burned, afraid because I couldn't measure how much I had taken. I could feel it rushing through me, willful and independent and chaotic, and for a few moments I felt *human*. I felt what it was like not to have the earth's pulse in your chest, the rhythm of all the rest of your kind beating alongside you. I felt what it was like to be a beat on its own, lonely and disconnect and so loud, the world's most powerful force and its weakest link at the same time. I felt what it was like to have all that power and to be afraid of it, afraid of what's inside you, unable to understand yourself and yet enamored with all that there is yet to discover.

It faded reluctantly, and I was relieved to feel my own energy again, my own rhythm asserting itself, steady and constant, predictable. I gasped in a breath, realizing that I could do that now, I could breathe. I felt weak still, but the bleeding had stopped, and I could breathe—two positive signs.

I sat up just barely and looked over at Claudi.

She had fallen over—she was lying on the ground now beside me—and her eyes were closed. For a second I panicked. I reached out with my blood-soaked hand and touched her on the shoulder, shook her. “Princess!”

Her eyes flew open, blue orbs staring straight back at me through the dark. She smiled.

“You’re better,” she said.

“Are you alright?” I asked. “Is anything wrong? How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” she said, sitting up. “I’m tired...but I’m fine.” She wiped a few beads of sweat off her forehead. “I feel like I just ran ten miles. That was strange. Is it usually like this for you?”

“I don’t usually heal these kinds of wounds,” I told her. I sat up slowly, testing out the new strength in my limbs. “That would have drained me, for certain.”

She frowned innocently with confusion.

“Then why didn’t it drain me?” she asked. “I’m exhausted, I fell over for a second, but I’m awake. And I could walk if I have to.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Human energy is...different. It’s strong. I mean, it’s crazy, it’s unpredictable, maybe it’s not always strong like that, maybe sometimes it’s weak. Your energy fluctuates, it’s not steady like ours.”

“So does that mean I have more when I want it?” she asked. “When I’m trying to have more?”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, shaking my head again. The memory of her wild, unchecked energy flowing through me made me nervous. I shivered and

glanced around us at the burnt-out landscape, trying to decide where we could stay for the night and rest and get our strength back. We were both operating on only half-power now; neither of us were really in a state to travel.

“Can you walk?” I asked Claudi.

“Yes,” she replied. “Can you? Let me see your injuries.” She pulled back the corner of my bloodstained shirt, but the whole thing was too slippery and covered in blood to make out whether the wound had fully closed or not. Besides, it was fully dark out now, and that meant I could see and she couldn’t.

“We’ll deal with it in a minute,” I said, and I held out my hand to her, and slowly we helped each other up.

Final Thoughts

As a conclusion to my project, as with any good experiment, some analysis is necessary. In what ways is *The Weight of Two Worlds*, my contribution, emulating and differing from the principles of faith-based fantasy found in *The Lord of the Rings*? In my introductory essay I discussed Tolkien's philosophy of faith in art as focused on the following: the unashamed use of raw material from nature, myth, and various religions as a source of inspiration; the use of a moral structure of good and evil to filter these elements into; and the non-didactic nature of the story itself, which despite clearly portraying good and evil allows it to also reflect the complications of real life and connects with readers who are in various places on their journey of faith. Of course the section of *The Weight of Two Worlds* represented here is only an excerpt of the full story, but nevertheless it should provide the basics needed to make some sort of comparison regarding these elements.

Tolkien had many ways of incorporating materials from a variety of sources into his art, as opposed to sticking only with sources that might be considered religiously "clean." He used material from various cultures and religions, and from mythology - both our own and the mythology of the fantasy world itself. I have attempted to do the same in the creation of my fiction. In particular, the Monican culture is based in part on a combination of several Native American cultures, especially in their view of the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. I was very interested in the Iroquois tribe especially when I was younger, and loved the way that they interwove spirituality and nature: the figures of Father Sky and Mother Earth drove home the idea that nature could

not be separated from the people who lived in it, and I tried to use some of this cultural aesthetic in creating my world. I find this especially evident in Hawk's speech, stating, "We are of the earth and each time we survive the winter we have hope that now we will live with new life the way the earth does." Monican culture also views themselves, as a group, as interconnected, and highly values the clan unit, which is similar in many aspects to several Asian cultures, especially Japanese, which was also an interest of mine in high school. I was very interested in the heightened sense of family and community in that culture, where these bonds seem to be treated as more important and lasting than they are in the United States, and particularly I liked how that culture would often begin to refer to non-blood relatives as family when they became very close with them – referring to friends as aunt/uncle, big brother/big sister, etc to show how much they mean to you. I wanted to reflect some of these elements in Monican culture as well.

My story also uses elements of myths, as Tolkien did (though it is difficult in some instances to distinguish myths from religions). This is not quite as clear in the given excerpt as it is in later portions of the novel; races such as the fey are mentioned, borrowed heavily from Irish/Celtic mythology, but do not play a large role in the current story. However, as Tolkien did, I also made use of mythology within the story itself. The characters have myths that are particular to their own worlds - in this case, most especially, the myth of Rand and Rainier, and how the Barren Lands became barren. The characters even have, to some extent, mythologized their personal world history, as in the story of the war that Tamar tells to Claudi. This is intentionally similar to Tolkien's writing, where stories like that of Beren and Luthien are both true and myth to the

characters who are currently journeying through their own story, and are often harkened back upon by those characters reflecting on the similarities in their own lives.

These myths within the story are important in a faith-based context because they serve to support Tolkien's assertion that faith is the "true myth," and that all of our stories are a part of the ultimate story of faith. The fact that Tolkien's characters recognize they are within a story themselves and that, to some extent, mine do as well, is a clue to the reader that the connection of stories in this way is an important one to make. In *Lord of the Rings* we read Sam saying, "Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on...I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside..." (697). And in my own story, Tamar reminisces, "In the old stories Aidyn used to tell, the myths that were the last things we knew about our dying culture, the mortals always bucked against fate...And that's how the stories go because that's what we do. So I guess it's no wonder that when Jesse told me about joining Princess Claudi's guard to the eastern border, I tried everything to get out of it."

Another element of Tolkien's faith-based fantasy is the inclusion of a moral structure, upon which these various materials - cultures, historical elements, religions and myths - all hang. On this element is where I intentionally differed slightly from Tolkien's method. I admired Tolkien's ability to maintain his obvious light vs. dark, good vs. evil aesthetic without making it didactic; he included complications like Boromir, doing evil with good intentions, and Gollum, doing good with evil intentions, and he also included visual complications like dark Aragorn and light Saruman. Yet I also wondered if the

moral structure could still be achieved in a story where the good and evil aesthetic was further complicated, where anyone might not be what they seem.

In order to help make my experiment with the moral structure in this way work, I first complicated the light/dark imagery. Monicans are nocturnal, and love the darkness, but to them the darkness represents sight, while the light of day represents being blind. Having two cultures that oppose each other in what it means to “see,” but that both physically look human (rather than one being orc-like and grotesque) forces the reader to examine characters for good or evil on an individual basis. It is not immediately clear from the imagery used which side a given character is on. In order to further this goal, the first-person story structure allows for more insight into the inner struggles of the main character, who like the reader must make individual value judgements about the people around her. Her decisions on whether to trust Ren, Hawk, and Judah, and on whether to stay in Nokrelum or to leave with Claudi, are central to the plot, and do not always follow her first instincts. Initially she distrusts Ren because they have never met, and wants to trust Hawk because of their shared past; however, Ren ends up being a great help to Claudi and Tamar while Hawk is the one who orchestrated Claudi’s kidnapping.

It is difficult, as a writer, to say whether I succeeded in my attempt to complicate Tolkien’s moral structure while remaining true to the idea; however, I can say with assurance that I did at least make great efforts to follow his lead in regards to Christ figures in the novel. Though there are not two opposite good and evil sides like Tolkien had, individuals carry moral aspects of Christ-like attitudes without there being one central Christ figure, which Tolkien’s characters often do as well. Hawk and Judah could easily be compared to Boromir and Faramir: brothers, one ambitious to a fault where his

intentions turn ugly, the other less loved and less powerful but ultimately willing to sacrifice himself in a Christ-like display of humility. Neither Faramir nor Judah are Christ figures in an allegorical sense, but they certainly display Christ-like attitudes at moments. Similarly, Tamar's extreme loyalty and, again, willingness to sacrifice herself for Claudi does not make her an allegory for Christ in the novel, but like Samwise and his devotion to Frodo, Tamar's devotion to Claudi may at some points represent the loyalty that is one aspect of Christ's love.

The third element of Tolkien's faith-based fantasy aesthetic is a non-didactic approach that allows readers to come as they are and participate in the journey. To that end I hope I have succeeded. The characters and ideas in *The Weight of Two Worlds* have been with me for a long time, and I have tried to write the kind of story that I would want to read, something that would both entertain me and make me think, perhaps even something that could further my walk with God the way that *The Lord of the Rings* has. Tolkien taught me that the light and the dark in the world are both necessary, that just because the dark gets thick enough to block out the light doesn't mean the light is not still out there, waiting to dawn. I hope that perhaps my story has shown that the light and the dark in people is necessary too: that we carry both inside of us. The presence of light means everyone has a chance to change for the better, and the presence of darkness means that our good actions are even more heroic. We are not just good because we are on the side of good. We are good because we have overcome, because our hope has won.

At the very least I can say with certainty that though it is yet an unfinished product, with not nearly the level of editing needed for publication and certainly not destined for Tolkien's level of fame, I have nevertheless been on a journey while writing

it. Just as Tolkien wrote, the sub-creation of a fantasy world is an act of mimicking the Creator in whose image we are made, and I am glad for that opportunity – to create, to discover, to journey, to explore.