Like in bees in the flower fields covering the prairies of center Wyverna, people bustle about from shop to shop. There are more people on this single street than in her entire small village of Milleoaks.

*Well, maybe not. Sure feels like it though.* Jannell thinks as she travels the busy lower market district of Lumierna.

With nothing more than a bag of possessions and coin she has saved up to rent a room in an inn temporarily, Jannell set off at the age of sixteen from her parent’s bakery for the kingdom’s capital. Her brother was the one to inherit the shop and she wasn't going to settle by marrying one of the wheat farmers and working under her brother for the rest of her life. She wants her own bakery and here is where she will try and start it.

*First,* she comes to a stop, heavy with the realization of her mistake. *Where am I going to work? How does one even open their own shop? Where am I going to live after the inn?*

Shuffling off to the side of the road Jannell’s bag slips free from her shoulder and she follows its lead dropping to the dirty path.

Curls that have fallen loose from her top knot tumble forward as she buries her face in her hands, “What was I thinking.”

Sniffling, Jannel breathes in a strong floral scent over the pungent scent of the city. She lifts her head to a girl around her age dressed like the end of the rainbow. Her dress a compilation of every color of scrap fabric she can find.

“Hello.” The girl shines like the sun, brightening the dreary market with wilting homes and heavy shadows.

Jannell watches as a breeze blows a few petals from her hair. “Hi?”

The colorful girl plops down in the dust beside Jannell and holds her hand out, “Faerydae.”

“Jannell.”

Shaking hands, Faerydae brings up, “You’re not from here are you?”

Jannell shakes her head, curls falling from her top not, “No, a small village in the center.”

“I’ve never been further than farms right outside Lumierna,” Faerydae says up to the clouds.

“What’s it like?”

“Um…flat?”

The girl with long flowing brown hair chuckles, “That doesn’t sound very appealing.”

Jannell laughs with her, “No. It’s not.”

“You alone?”

“Yeah. I want to start somewhere new.”

Faerydae is aghast, ”So, you don’t know anyone here?”

Shaking her head, Jannell answers, “Not a soul. Was planning on staying at an inn until I find somewhere to rent. I’ve been saving for years.”

“No no. That’s no go.” Faerydae determines.

“What? Why? What’s wrong.”

“What happens if you can’t find rent? Or your savings are depleted too fast?” Faerydae whispers. They both watch as a guard patrols the other side of the street.

Jannell swallows, then answers, “I better start searching for work so that doesn’t happen.”

“You can stay with me.” Faerydae smiles.

“I can’t burden you like that, we just met.” Jannell puts her hands up.

With Jannell’s hand raised, Faerydae takes the opportunity to link her arm to Jannell’s and leans in supportively, “Us girls need to protect one another.”

“You sure?” Jannell shrinks bashfully.

“Positively.” Faerydae nods exaggeratedly.

“This way. This way!” Faerydae skips and spins down the trail to where her garden sits on the outskirts of Lumierna.

“You’re seventeen and you already have your own garden?” Jannell taps her fingers on a few leaves of a ( ) bush as she passes it.

“Yep, but I don’t own the land. I was more gifted a plot when I turned sixteen by my family head. When I pass and become the soil, someone else will continue the garden.”

Jannell sighs dreamily, “ I wish I was gifted a bakery. Wouldn’t that have been nice?”

“Instead you left the clean countryside for,” Faerydae waves her hand at the city walls, “That.”

“Guessing you’re not a fan of the city.”

“I only go in there to sell my herbs and no more. I need to roll in a lavender bush to get the scent off of me.”

Jannell lifts her sleeve to her nose and sniffs.

“Here we are!” Exaggerating having to balance by putting her arms out and stepping one foot in front of the other, Faerydae crosses the fat log bridge over the small stream and pauses under an ivy arch.

Jannell pauses at the log and Faerydae waves her hands encouragingly. Cautiously and with significantly less grace, Jannell follows the peculiar girl over the river and into the garden.

“Oh wow,” Jannell exclaims as she walks in circles taking in the mystical world around her. Blooming flowers dance in the wind to music created by wooden wind chimes. “This place is amazing.” She reaches up and touches a drying bundle of ( ) amongst the many different kinds strung above them like a fragrant spider web.

“Thank you. I think so too. And this is home.” Faerydae swings her arm out to a canvas hut.

“Are you sure I won't be impeding by staying with you? I don’t know how long it will be for me to get a place of my own.” Jannell clasps her hands together.

“Oh nettle pricks.”

“Nettle?”

“I can’t leave you to wander the city and the guards find you instead. Plus you can save a lot more coin not having to pay inn fees.” The herbalist puts her hands on her hips with a huff.

Jannell’s shoulders drop, “I pictured arriving, getting work, moving into a room to rent then opening my own bakery. I didn’t really plan on *how* I would do all that.”

“Guess you can always see if there is any elderly bakers with no children to take over their shop.” Faerydae smiles cheekily.

“Yeah? You think that will work.”

Faerydae playfully hits Jannell on the shoulder, “No! But honestly, it will be my honor to help a fellow girl out and have you stay here. It’s lonely anyway, plus I think the inn between the city gates and the potato fields needs a baker. Well, I say they do, because their current one is old and grumpy.” Faerydae takes Jannell’s hand, “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

Jannell’s face warms from the heart radiating up from her palm. “Okay.”

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With Faerydae’s soiled-covered fingers around her wrist, Jannell is guided down the dirt road scared with wheel tracks leading to the inn. Jannell can’t tear her eyes away from the mountain peaks. They still steal her breath away whenever she sees them. She grew up without even seeing a hill, towering peaks of earth was unfathomable to her and dropped her to her knees when they first came into view.

“We're almost there.” Faerydae spins around to walk backward facing Jannell.

Jannell’s attention is pulled away by colorful girl, “Are sure there’s work?”

“I hope so. If not…you can…we will build an oven at my house and you can bake there.”

Jannell laughs, “Sounds like a plan.”

Coming up to a small inn at the end of an apple orchard, Faerydae declares, “We're here!” She begins skipping to the entrance. “Fredrick?” she calls. “Fredrick!”

“What!” A man’s voice shouts from inside.

Reaching the door Faerydae pokes her head in, “Hello!”

“Oh, Faerydae. It’s you. Do you need something child?”

“Matter of fact,” Faerydae steps inside pulling Jannell in with her, “I do. My friends a baker and is looking for work.”

“I don’t know. I already have a baker. He’s not the best but he’s been here forever.” Frederick scratches his beard.

“How long is forever?” Jannell points behind him and the innkeeper follows her finger to where the old baker sleeps in a chair beside the oven as smoke begins to billow out.

“OH!” Frederick jumps in a panic, “Mathew wake up!” The elderly man barely opens his eyes to shout of his name. Whipping back to Jannell he points at her then at the smoking oven, “Hired. Now go fix that before he burns my inn down!”

“Yes. Right away.” She nods. Smiling back at Faerydae who gives her an encouraging two thumbs up, Jannell leaps into action to pull out the burning loaf before it catches on fire.

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The sun shines through the breaks in the tree canopy as the two girls sit near the river. The sound of running water playing a song with the birds above them.

Sitting behind Jannell on a log, Faerydae twings another daisy into Jannell’s golden top knot, “I love these curls.”

“That’s because you don’t have to live with them. You have beautiful straight hair that never seems to tangle.”

“Yeah.” Faerydae drops her arms in front of Jannell and rests her head on top of the other girl’s, “You’re right. It is pretty.”

“Pft.” Jannell spits as hair gets stuck in her mouth, “Pft Pft I take back what I said. It’s everywhere.

Faerydae hugs onto her keeping her from running away, “Too late.” She wiggles her hair in Jannell’s face.

“Stop!” Jannell giggles, batting the curtain hanging over her. “You’re ridiculous.”

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Standing up from cooling oven Jannell is taken by surprise letting out an “oof” as Faerydae jumps onto Jannell wrapping her arms around her from behind. “ Nell! You done yet? Let’s go home.”

“I have to finish cleaning out the oven first.” Jannell rests her hands on Faerydae’s arms.

Faerydae rests her chin on Jannell’s shoulder, “Fine, did you make anything extra for dinner?”

“Yep added some rosemary to a loaf, it smells amazing.”

Faerydae’s mouth begins to salivate, “I’m so glad I found you.”

\*\*\*

Walking through the garden the bottom of Jannell’s dress is snagged by a thorn, “Biscuits!” The fabric tears as she pulls it free.

Griping to herself, Jannell plops down on the stool outside of Faerydae’s hut

She crosses her legs bringing the fabric up to be examined. Sighing, jannell’s finger wiggles through the hole in her gown. “Guess I’ll have to start putting aside money for a tailor.”

Faerydae pops her head out of the hut, “Why is that?”

“I’m starting to get holes in my dress.” Jannell shows Faerydae.

Grabbing Jannell’s arm, Faerydae pulls her inside the home, “Promise not to tell anyone but–” She removes needle and thread from an herb jar, “I can teach you how to fix that.”

“What! We can’t!” Jannell says in alarm.

“Why do you think my dress is made from scraps? It’s constantly getting torn, so I sew on a new piece.” Faerydae lifts the stacked fabric pieces.

Jannell’s mouth gapes, “But–”

“No one will know, plus the law is dumb. People need to know more than one trick to survive, especially when you are out on your own.”

Swallowing hard, Jannell nods, “Okay. Teach me.”

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Water runs in small rivers through Faerydae’s hut. The girls squeal with laughter as they avoid stepping into the puddles and scampering into the dry safety of their hammocks. Rocking, their giggles begin to subside into long drawn-out breaths.

Light flashes illuminating the room. They scream in unison and hold their hands over their ears as thunder rumbles across the forest. The wind rattles the canvas walls threatening to take it with it in the storm.

“Nell?” Faerydae squints into the dark as her hammock moves.

“Scoot,” Faerydae tells her as she climbs into Faerydae’s hammock.

“Off. You’re crushing me,” Faerydae whines.

“Don’t be a baby.” Half on top, Jannell snuggles into the side of Faerydae as the wind continues to howl. “This is better.”

Another flash of light sends the girls clutching onto each other. With their arms wrapped around the other Faerydae smiles, “Yeah, way better.”

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Dressed down to only their under tunics Faerydae dips her hands into the sudsy wash bucket with their soaking gowns. She pulls her hands out and blows through her fingers creating bubbles that float across the garden.

Jannell’s curls bounce as she hops about trying to pop each one of them. “Pop. Pop. Pop.” She says as she pokes each bubble.

“Bubbles incoming!” Faerydae calls cheerfully as she makes another batch.

“I still have to pop all these ones!” Jannell says back.

“You’re going have to pop faster.” Faerydae teases and blows through her soapy hands.

“Watch me.” Jannell hikes up her gown and begins running around the garden to get them all before they float over the garden wall, a wall she now finds hard to imagine leaving past.

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Lying on their backs separated by a couple of handfuls of clovers Faerydae points at a cloud passing overhead, “A rabbit.”

“A biscuit.”

The floral-scented girl drops her hand back to the grass, her fingers brushing the back of Jannell’s. Pulling her hand back a few leaves, Fearydae says, “You think every cloud looks like a biscuit.”

“Well, they do.”

Jannell’s heart thumps in her chest as her fingers search through the clovers until they feel the warmth of Faerydae’s. She can’t speak as she gently taps Faerydae’s hand.

Faerydae sucks in her bottom lip, failing to bite back a smile forming. Turning her hand over she invites Jannell in to intertwine.

They lay there with the fresh scent of clovers and dandelions around them as they hold hands. Their faces each turning pink from the warmth, they blink stealing a glance at the other girl. Their lips turn into lines as they try to hold back their grins. Jannell breaks first and her smile is the sun breaking through the clouds and shining onto Faerydae. Glowing, Faerydae grins.

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“You’re a squirrel, you know that right!” Jannell calls up to Faerydae who is several tree limbs above her in the ( ) tree in her garden.

“And you’re a groundhog,” Faerydae laughs pulling herself up another branch.

Jannell, with wobbling legs, hesitates as she reaches for the next branch, “No, I’m careful.”

“Excuses!”

Reaching a seat made of a single plank of wood nailed to two branches near the top, Faerydae gets comfortable. Huffing, Jannell shakingly flops onto the seat and doesn’t look down as she situates.

“Oh, I hate you for always wanting to come up here.”

“You love me,” Faerydae teases shouldering Jannell.

Jannell bumps back, “You know I do.”

Their bodies lined side by side Faerydae turns her hand palm up in her lap. Tentatively, Jannell slips her hand into Faerydae’s their fingers interlocking. Hazel eyes rise to meet ones the color of acorns. Wetting her lips nervously, Jannell jumps from Faerydae’s lips to her eyes and back to her lips.

Together they close their eyes and lean in. Petal soft lips brush like a warm spring breeze. They pull back with giddy smiles spreading from ear to ear. Fingers curling into the other girls' hair they lock their lips together.

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Arms wrapping and legs tangle, the hammock swings rocking the two girls to sleep.

“Faerydae?” Jannell whispers.

“Yeah?”

“What are we?”

“We’re friends.”

“Yeah, but–what *are* we.”

Faerydae closes her eyes sighing internally. They are in love. They are two people who want to be together but will never be seen correctly by society. They will never be anything except the baker and the herbalist who live together. If anyone saw them like this, without clothing and cuddled beneath a blanket, they would cease to be anything. They will cease to exist. Maybe in the big garden in the sky, they will be able to be who they truly are.

Nuzzling her nose to Jannell’s she answers, “We’re us.” She parts Jannell’s lips with hers breathing her in.

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“Ready?” Fearydae holds a basket of her herbs to sell to the grocer in the market. It has been a year since Jannell had moved in with her and 8 months since the first time they kissed.

Jannell exits the hut tying her hair up into a knot, “Ready.”

The coins shift in Faerydae’s hand as she recounts them. The empty basket from selling the product under her arm, “We have extra if we want some treats.”

“I’m a baker. I can *make* us treats.” Jannell crosses her arms, “Do you not like my stuff?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure how to tell you,” Faerydae bluffs.

“Hey!”

“Kidding. The point of a treat is getting something you don’t normally have. What is something you can’t bake yet but love?”

“Um, gingerbread?”

“Then let’s get some gingerbread.”

“How may I help you?”

Jannell stops at the threshold of a bakery. A young man around her age stands by a full shelf of baked goods.

Faerydae pushes on the center of Jannell’s back, “What? Nice buns got you captivated?” Scooting around Jannell Faerydae sees what or who has caught her friend. The boy sets down the loaf on the shelf and brushes his hands off on his apron.

“Anything I can get for you?”

Jannell chokes out, “Do you have gingerbread?”

Faerydae hops from Jannell’s dilated eyes over to the baker. Hair and eyes the color of bloomed pinecones, nose too big, eyes droopy. She can tell from Jannell’s expression they are looking at two different people. She’s tried. She’s tried so hard to see men the way she should, but she can’t. She can never feel the same tug on her heart for them as she does for women.

Her chest constricts as she realizes, the way she felt the first time she saw Nell is the way Nell is looking at this baker. Fearydae swallows the hard reality down. Being together as they are now, they are always one kiss away from the noose. She loves Nell, but she is not a man, she can never truly ask for her hand. She would rather let Nell go and retreat to the background if it keeps Nell alive. Her dandelion-haired friend deserves to live a long and happy life.

“Yeah, it’s two days old. Is that fine?” He answers.

“Perfectly fine.” Jannell awkwardly tucks a loose curl behind her ear.

“You two from the neighborhood?” He makes small talk as he grabs the gingerbread and begins packaging it.

Faerydae puts her arm around Jannell, “No. I’m an herbalist we live outside the city but *she’s* a baker.”

“Fae–” Jannell starts not sure where Faerydae is going with it.

“Really?” The boy brightens handing over the desert.

“Y-yeah. I bake at an inn.”

“I’m Giles.” He holds out his hand.

“Jannell and this is Faerydae.” She takes his hand shaking it. Their fingers linger as if they don’t want to separate.

With a goofy smile on his face, Giles’ cheeks turn rosy, “It’s nice to meet you.”

With the chirping of crickets filling the silence in the hut, Jannell hooks her fingers on the fabric of Faerydae’s hammock and gently swings her, “Did I do something? You’ve been quiet since the bakery.”

Staring at the branch ceiling of the hut, Faerydae’s breath shudders as exhales from the tears caught in her throat. She has to do this, she has to.

Linking her finger to Jannell’s who is holding her hammock Faerydae searches for the words she doesn’t want to say. “Nell, I–I think you should court the baker.”

“Excuse me?” Jannell pulls her hand away.

Faerydae wipes at her eyes, “You like him, well you at least think he’s cute.”

“I’m sorry.” Jannell crosses her arms.

“No!” Faerydae swings her legs over the edge of her hammock sitting up. “Don’t apologize. Please, it's okay. It’s not something you can control. We–Nell–we were never anything *official*. We *can’t* ever be official.”

“Faerydae.” Tears form in Jannell’s eyes. “I want *more* with *you.*”

“We’re friends, that's all we will ever be seen as.” Faerydae’s soul sags.

“I love you.” Liquid leaks down Jannell’s cheeks.

“I love you too, but I can never give you marriage, children, *a bakery*.”

Jannell opens her mouth but no words come out, only tears continue to fall. Faerydae is off the hammock and encasing Jannell in an embrace. “You are talking to a boy, not leaving the kingdom.” She rubs her cheek against Jannell’s.

“What about us?”

“We–” Faerydae wipes one of Jannell’s tears with her thumb, “will always be friends.”

“Friends until the end?”

Faerydae shakes her head, “Even in the afterlife.”

Unable to stop herself, Jannell mashes her lips to Faerydae’s with the intensity that this might be their last night to have all of each other..

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“Nell!” Faerydae prances through her garden to her best friend as she arrives home from her day with the baker she has been dating.

Jumping with news, Jannell hugs Faerydae, “He asked me to marry him.”

Faerydae swallows hard, “Don’t forget to visit me.”

“Every day I can.”

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“Nell!” Faerydae stands up from the river, leaving the bucket she was filling on the bank.

Jannell with confidence from the experience of living there for a year, skips across the log bridge and takes Faerydae’s hands, “I’m pregnant.”

Jaw dropping, Faerydae squeals with delight and pulls her friend into a hug.

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Faerydae puts her hand to Jannell’s showing belly of her second trimester as she rests her feet beneath the ( ) tree.

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The baby with Jannell’s hazel eyes and blonde curls laughs as Faerydae tickles his face with a flower.

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“Got you!” Faerydae scoops the giggle toddle as her best friend, the mother of the child she often pretends was there together, watches from the shade of the hut they once lived in together.

“Ah blhhh” Faerydae blows raspberries on the little boy's belly as he squirms and laughs.

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“Nell! Stirling!” The garden lady calls with glee as they arrive. Her two favorite people. The two people she wants to see every day for the rest of her life. She wants to grow old with her friend as she watches little Stirling turn into a man and one day have children of his own.

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The wooden windchimes are the only sound in the garden.

There is no vibrance to bring color to the plants. No laughter to sing with the wind. No love to spread the warmth of the sun. Life has disappeared from the garden after it lost its heart.

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Faerydae stands in the center of her garden but the world past her ivy walls is a glowing mist.

She knows where she is. Faerydae closes her eyes. She remembers everything. All she can do is tend to her forever garden and wait. Every night she prays that she has to wait for a long time.

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“Faerydae?”

The voice carries across her garden like the first rays of sun after a stormy night. The herbalist turns to see the only person she has ever fallen in love with standing at the ivy arch entrance.

Tears pour down Faerydae’s face. She cries because she is happy to see her friend. She weeps because she knows it is too soon.

“Oh, Nell!” Faerydae sprints throwing herself into Jannell’s arms.