

ANNA HEBB

Purple Haze Sample

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Prologue

The four princesses gathered at the feet of their parent's huge martial bed, their father half kneeling, half lying at the side of their dead mother. He was crying out loud, almost howling.

"This is so weird. Seeing him like that, I mean," whispered the oldest princess, Deidre, matter-of-factly.

"Bit pathetic if you ask me, he is the King. He is supposed to rule his kingdom, supposed to be strong!" said Venna, the second eldest princess, bitterly.

"Ven!" Maureen was shocked by the coldness in her sister's voice. "It is the love of his life! It is our mother!"

"Don't see you crying your eyes out," mumbled the oldest, not to anyone in particular. None of them cried. The truth was that, as much as they loved their mother, they were not very close to her. In their father's kingdom when the girl reached the age of fifteen, she was separated from their mother as

the main caregiver. Then, they were prepared to impress a boy their age or an older man to marry. They were trained to dance, negotiate, write, play piano, and all those other things that made them more desirable to men. So all three of them did not have a bond with their mother anymore, and they were not crying.

Unlike the fourth princess, Kesaia. She was the youngest one, only thirteen and had just lost her best friend, her beloved mother. She was trying to hold it together but could not, tears and runny boogers were all over her face. She was gently leaning on Maureen for support. The protocol prevented the older sister from holding and comforting the little one. Only she knew how much she wanted to do so. Kesaia kept mumbling, "Mommy, please no. Mommy, wake up," but the Queen was lying still. The Monk was preparing her body and soul to leave this world. Everyone was buried deep in their own kind of grieving.

A few months ago, the Queen went to visit her family in a small town, not knowing there was a deadly virus spreading around. She found her sister on her death bed and could not help but to hold her as she died. She stayed there to help the doctors; she isolated the town by closing the gates and not letting anyone in or out.

Including herself.

When the situation seemed to be under control, the Queen ordered the test on her blood to make sure she did not have the virus. When the test came back clear, she left for home.

She developed the first symptoms two weeks after she came back. Knowing very well how it went, she secluded herself in one of the bedrooms. The Queen did not let anyone help her in her illness. Food was delivered from the balcony above her, and she had no contact with her family. Finally, when she was already so ill she could hardly speak, she gathered her family on the balcony in the next bedroom to say her final goodbye.

“I will now go and lie down. In about three days, I should be dead. Send the medics into my room then and they will prepare my body for the last mass. Do not make it as usual on the town square. Gather a few people, just the closest ones, and do the ceremony in one of the rooms. Once done...this will be hard on you, my love.” She looked at her husband. “You must burn my body.”

The daughters were shocked and the King opened his mouth to say something.

“No,” the Queen cut him off. “No arguments. You must burn my body. I saw what happened and I don’t want that for my kingdom, for my family. You must promise me that. You know it has to be done.”

Burning the body of the monarchy was against

every rule in the kingdom.

“I promise, my love,” said the King.

“We promise,” the daughters repeat after him.

Now, five days after the conversation, they were standing there while the high priest did his speeches. The four daughters could see their mother’s body very closely. The three older ones were trying not to look, but the youngest noticed the smallest details that had changed on Queen’s body during her isolation. She was much slimmer and her skin was very thin. She had large dark circles under her closed eyes.

I hope she did not suffer much, Kesaia thought. Suddenly the monk stopped talking and it was over. They would burn her now.

The Princesses heard people shuffling behind them and waited until everybody but them and the King were gone. The burning would happen only with them as witnesses. Nobody else would know. When the doors closed behind the last guest, the King got up. His eyes were puffy and hands were trembling as he started to wrap the Queen’s body in the blankets. He was failing miserably, and Deidre approached him.

“Here, I will do it, Father.”

He stepped aside without any objections. Moments later Maureen joined her. They wrapped the body tight and tried to carry her. Their father then

said, “No... Let me,” and he took his queen into his arms for the last time. He left the room and the girls followed him, keeping their distance. They could hear him talking to their mother; they did not want to overhear their very last conversation. The castle seemed too empty and too quiet. Every now and then they could hear the wind blowing through the walls, like the castle itself was mourning.

They reached her favourite spot by the garden lake. The boat which would carry her burning remains through the water was ready. Gently, the King put the fragile body in the boat, unwrapped it, and tucked the extra fabric under her.

“I will let you say your final goodbyes,” he said and stepped aside.

“It was an honor to serve you, my Queen,” the oldest daughter said with a deep bow.

Venna said nothing, only kissed her fingers and placed them on her mother’s cheek.

Maureen said a quiet and personal prayer.

Kesaia started to cry again and grabbed her mother’s hand. “Don’t leave me, Mommy, stay with me.”

She spent the longest time with the body. Finally Maureen, who was the closest to Kesaia, wrapped her arms around her little sister since nobody was watching. She said, “It is ok, my darling, it will be ok.” Yet the little sister did not want to let go. When

Maureen tried to pull her away, the mother's hand squeezed Kesaia's hand. All of them gasped and the King turned back to them.

"She is alive!" Kes screamed. "Don't burn her, Father, she is alive!"

But the dead woman's hand released its grip and softened again. Seeing the father's confusion, Deidre stepped in. "It is just a muscle memory spasm, Kes. It happens sometimes, my dear," she said slowly and gently. The little girl wanted to argue but then she looked at her mother. She saw the same dark circles and paper-thin skin she'd had on her deathbed.

"It just felt so real, I am so sorry."

Venna and the King pushed the vessel into the lake. The Princess, in the water up to her knees, held the boat while her father lit the fire. What was left of their beloved queen turned to flame. The girl pushed the burning body further and came out of the water. Deidre grabbed her father's hand and reached for Venna's. Reluctantly, Venna gave it to her sister. On the other side of the King stood Kesaia and Maureen. The little one cuddled into her father's coat, sobbing.

"Goodbye, my love. The kindest and the warmest person I have ever known," the King said.

They watched their mother drift away in silence when Venna noticed something. "Dee, look at the smoke," she whispered. "Is it... purple?"

The oldest princess focused her sight on the smoke.

The colour was vivid and unmistakable. "Father..." she started but he cut her off quickly.

"Yes, I can see, it is probably the bedding. Don't think twice about it."

But the purple haze settled above the lake like a spring fog at dawn.

"The body and the fabric should be burned already. Why is there so much smoke? Father? What's..."

Venna's question was interrupted by sudden, loud gasps and a scream from Maureen. "Kesaia! No!"

The youngest princess collapsed. The King picked her up. "Too many emotions for one day, you saw how upset she was," he said.

"Will she be ok?" Maureen asked, stroking her hair.

"Yes, she just needs to rest. Let's go back home, my ladies."

They started to walk. Venna was left behind, and Deidre had to prompt her to come with them.

Venna was still looking at the boat. Something did not seem right to her. The purple haze was thick and now covered the whole area of the water. At the edge, where she was standing, it looked like someone cut the fog—it did not touch the ground. She could barely see the boat, as the haze was the thickest there. The Princess stretched her arm and it disappeared in the fog. When she moved her head to look at her sisters and looked back the boat was gone.

“DD. It is weird that...” she started.

“Hush! It is not the time for your suspicious mind.”

Venna shrugged and followed her sisters, father, and the little one he was carrying.

3 Years Later

Chapter 1

Deidre

Deidre kicked her sister's door open in an unlady-like fashion.

"I cannot believe it! After three years of basically ruling this kingdom, those old farts still don't want to name me the Queen! What utter—" She stopped, seeing a sleepy and messy head lifting up from the bed. But the head did not belong to her sister. She straightened up. Named queen or not, her subjects could not see her that way.

"Who are you?" she asked. The guy looked at her, eyes wide with fear, and swallowed loudly. She looked around and saw the evidence from the night before; a few jugs of wine, clothes on the floor, an ashtray, and a silver tray with Melodyne—a popular party drug against which Deidre was fighting for the last two years. She clenched her fists in anger.

"VENNA!" she roared at the top of her lungs, walking towards the bed.

The spiteful "WHAT?" came from behind her.

From the bathroom?

She turned around and walked in there, not thinking about what she would see. Her younger sister was sitting on the toilet, doing something she should be doing alone, surely not with the open doors and a man in her room.

“What are you doing?” Deidre could not believe her eyes.

“Taking a hangover dump! What do you think I am doing?” Venna snapped.

“Why didn’t you close the door?”

“It is my bedroom. I should not have to.”

The oldest sister’s voice came down to a whisper. “There is a man in your room!”

Like a shout out, they heard the bedding move in the bedroom.

“Venna, I need to go to the bathroom,” the man from her bed said. Without any word she finished, completely unbothered by the presence of her sister.

“All yours dear,” she said to the guy and walked out of the bathroom. She said to her sister, “Are you coming or do you want to watch him as well?”

Deidre left the bathroom, feeling her face growing hot with anger. The naked man covering his manhood bowed deeply and mumbled, “Your Majesty...”

“Oh... Just go....” Deidre said and the unknown man went into the bathroom. At least he closed the doors behind him. Venna was already on the

balcony, smoking. The oldest joined her and sat down. Fresh air calmed her down and she found the situation ironic.

“Why are you like this?” she asked gently.

“Like what, like myself? What’s wrong with a little party?” Venna said.

“Your partying is too much for the King’s daughter,” Dee said gently.

“I am much more than just a king’s daughter. I am—” They heard the doors crack open. They both look that way.

“A life loving party animal who does not care about anything and anyone other than herself and who she will have in the bed at night?” Maureen, the third sister, entered the balcony. As usual, she was dressed in black, her pale skin contrasted against her raven hair.

“I heard you shouting at the crown advisors. I take it the meeting did not go as you planned?” She addressed the oldest sister, skillfully changing the problematic subject.

The memory of the meeting came back to Deidre. Frustration and desperation washed over her.

“Oh they are awful! For almost three years I have been trying to rule this kingdom! With your help I am doing a very good job!” She winked to her sisters “Those old farts don’t want to hear about me being queen. “This is our legacy, we cannot just change it,”

she said in an old man's voice. "Or 'Your father is not dead, you cannot change the law just to suit yourself.' Do you know what they actually proposed? They said that if I marry some lousy prince from some shithole he will be king but I can still rule at his side. They would rather crown some stranger and let him be a king than name me queen!" she ranted to her sisters.

"That's outrageous! How stupid they are," Venna said. "I am sorry, Dee, but I think you are a better ruler than our father ever was. You changed so many laws; gave so much back to the people. They love you! Perhaps a bit less since you took the Melodyne from the streets."

The oldest princess punched Venna's arm.

"Speaking of which, where the hell did you get it? You should not be able to buy it here. You should not be using it," Deidre told her off.

"Don't worry, sis, I just wanted to see what the fuss was about and I would rather drink. I found the bag in Kesaia's room when I went to wash her yesterday."

"Hold on. Let me get this straight," said Maureen. "You found a bag of black powder, which could or could not have been a bag of a hard and extremely addictive drug, in our comatose sister's room and thought 'Hmm, let me try it' instead of 'I should inform my older, wiser sister?'"

“Pretty much, yeah.” Venna laughed with Maureen, but Deidre grew furious. They stopped giggling when they noticed her red face.

“That’s not funny, ladies! This is even more concerning than you trying it. Why on earth would there be a bag of Melodyne in the sleeping beauty’s bedroom? It’s very suspicious.”

“You are thinking too much into it, probably one of the servants dropped it by mistake.” Venna shrugged the problem away. Of course, it was not her problem, not really. She was not the oldest princess and not the acting queen.

“Servants are not allowed to use it! No one is allowed to use it! I need to know which servant. I should put you in a cell!” Dee said in a strong, deep and peremptory tone. She was aware that her sister’s calling that tone “The Queen Voice” and found it very different from her own friendly, sisterly one. Since she took over—not officially of course—she’d adapted a different sound of her own voice. She needed the advisors to listen to her and it was very difficult with a soft woman’s expression. It was still difficult, but with her head high and “The Queen Voice,” she found it a bit easier.

Hearing the change of the intonation, Venna lost all of her cockiness and swallowed hard. The middle princess was not scared of many things, but she was scared of Deidre when she switched to acting as the

Queen.

Maureen stepped in. For some reason she was the one who had a calming effect on the oldest sister's second nature. "I am sure that was just professional curiosity, sister. You know Ven used to want to be in the King's Guard; she needs to know what the drug does. She will never take it again! But she needed to know."

Venna was nodding her head quickly, her eyes wide in fear. "Yes, yes that is it. I will never take it again, I promise." She did not really think her sister would take her to the cell but she was not one hundred percent sure. She knew she would get some sort of punishment.

"I remember the times when you would find it suspicious as well, Ven dear. Now you just shrug. Like you don't care," Deidre continued, her voice softened.

"Lots has happened since then. For example, you dismissing my ideas," Venna answered.

"When they are ridiculous! I take your ideas and advice very seriously when they make sense. Without you—both of you—I would not be able to rule this kingdom." She smiled warmly at her sisters and grabbed and kissed their hands with gestures full of love. "I might be angry sometimes but I need you here with me to support me."

Maureen smiled at her and Venna rolled her eyes.

“Supporting me means you don’t do the drug I worked so hard to remove from our castle and kingdom.” She squeezed Venna’s hand hard.

“We love you too, Dee,” said Maureen. “I am off to the library.” She waved at them and left.

They sat in silence for a moment.

“So who is the guy you slept with?” asked Deidre in her genuine sister voice.

“I don’t know. I hope he is gone now.” Venna smirked and looked inside the room “Wasn’t great anyway.”

They both laughed.

“You know what’s in two days?” Deidre asked, careful not to stir the anger in her younger sister.

“Ugh yeah... My ball, where I was supposed to choose my future husband. What a bore. You know I will not do it,” Venna said.

“You have to, Ven, you are at that age. And you are the oldest.”

“No,” she corrected her sister, “*you are* the oldest. With Kesaia going into a coma, you dodged the arrow.”

“I did what had to be done, Ven. Don’t hate me for it.”

“I understand, but I remember how much you did not want to marry this Prince Alton or what’s his name. And now you are forcing me to do the same thing you hated to do,” Venna said, voice rising and

fist clenching. Ready for a fight.

"I am not forcing you to do it, it is the advisors. They don't listen to me in those matters. If it was up to me, you would be my own Queen's Guard." Deidre smiled, remembering Venna's dream from years ago, before their mother's death, before Kesaia. "But you can discard those dreams too, those people will never allow a woman to lead the King's Guard."

"Oh Dee... Just imagine if all of those old farts die and we could rule the kingdom as we want."

"They don't need to die, Father just needs to get back right in his mind."

"HA! They will die before it happens! You could be the Queen and I will be the head of your guard. We would be unstoppable! But no, you want me to marry some old boring—"

"He does not have to be old, you can go as young as fifteen." Deidre winked at her sister.

They both laughed. Suddenly, Venna sat on the balcony railing, shifting her legs to the other side, so they were hanging in the air. For a split second the older sister thought she wanted to jump, but that was what old Venna used to do a lot. She used to live for danger and adrenaline. She was the most courageous of the four of them and no one could tell her what to do. Even their parents. She had the most curious brain. She smiled at that memory of her sister. She changed the most since everything

happened. She seemed like she did not care if she lived or died.

With her back to Deidre she said, "I need adventures in my life. I don't want to be a wife to some prince. Young or old, I don't care. Not the ones found at the ball. I want to find a husband I can meet at the tournament or during a journey. Someone who will kiss me passionately in front of my father and is not scared of anything. And the most important requirement is that I want to marry because I love someone, not because I have to. Do you understand?"

Deidre looked at her sister, understanding fully what she meant. She signed heavily. "Unfortunately, that is not how it works," she whispered more to herself than her sister. Venna jumped down on the floor, and hurried to the doors.

"Where are you rushing to?" Deidre asked

"Toilet, this might be the long one," Venna shouted with a laugh.

Deidre rolled her eyes and thought about what Venna had said. Yes, she dodged an arrow three years ago when her mother died and Kesaia went into a coma. Before the Queen got sick she had her ball, just like the one for Venna in two days and she did choose a suitable candidate. The wedding was scheduled a year from then. That was supposed to be two years ago. Six months after the Queen's death, it

was clear that the King wasn't suitable to rule and she as an oldest daughter stepped in. She wrote to the prince—whose name she no longer remembered—and his parents, explaining the situation. She recommended postponing it, but they wrote back and after all of the bad events in her kingdom, they decided to betrothed him to someone else. Apparently, he was very happy now with a wife, a kid, and another one on the way. Good for him. She felt the same way as Venna, but she did not oppose her parents. She was the oldest and she did what she was told. She doubted Venna would be as argumentative toward her parents as she was to her, but their parents were not in the picture at the moment. She got up and left Venna alone.

Maureen

Maureen, as usual, spent the whole night in the library going through mountains of books. Kesaia was the youngest and her favourite sibling and she was looking for a way to wake her up. She was also searching for a reason why she went into a coma on the same day their mother died. She was sick of all the rumors she heard around the city and university when she went there. Apparently, the dying queen cursed her or transferred her own soul into the youngest of her daughters. All those ideas were ridiculous and not true. But the truth was unknown to everyone, so people believed rumors,

even ones as impossible as this. Deidre was too busy running the kingdom to find the solution and Venna was... Well not interested in anything really. Not anymore. The middle sister was just enjoying her life of freedom. Maureen envied her a little; she wished she cared a little bit less sometimes.

Somewhere in her bones, she knew that she was the one who was supposed to find the solution for Kesaia's conundrum. She knew each of them—even the sleeping beauty—had a role to play in this game. The sisters called Kesaia a sleeping beauty because, even though in a coma, within those three years, she grew to be a spectacularly beautiful woman.

The doctor spent the first ten days of Kesaia's coma attempting to figure out what had caused it and when she would wake up, but he had no answer. Day after day the other sisters began to give up, growing used to her unresponsive state, but Maureen never gave up. However, three years later, she was no closer to finding out how to wake her up.

The King was a different story. He lost his mind over the youngest daughter's state. He would only leave her room to take a bath every week or when Maureen and her sisters came by to visit. He was eating there, sleeping and talking to Kesaia constantly, waiting for her to reply.

And the purple! Oh, the purple was driving her

insane.

After about two months of Kesaia being in a coma, one of the servants noticed her new hair growth had changed its colour. At first their father went crazy and shaved her head bald—no one was actually sure what he wanted to accomplish. He did it for a few months, but then he stopped with no reason given. Her hair had grown long since then, the colour of lavender blooms in the spring. She looked beautiful and very similar to their mother. For Maureen however, the purple hair was very bizarre, as the colour was exactly the same as the haze above the lake where they burned their mother.

About a year after letting the purple hair grow, their father decided to make the whole room purple as well. At first he ordered the bedding to be changed to any shade of purple. Then followed her night gowns and the colour of the walls, curtains, and every single piece of furniture. He painted it himself. Now the room looked horrible, like something Venna would throw up after one of her nights out. When Maureen went there to take care of her sister, she tried not to look around much.

A soft voice disturbed her contemplating.

“Princess Maureen, I thought I would find you here,” a servant boy said with a smile. “It is time for Princess Kesaia to be bathed and changed.”

His name was Envan and calling him a servant boy

was cruel. He was her friend.

She smiled and said, "We are all alone here Envan, there is no need to address me so officially."

"I better not risk it." He smiled and winked at her. The boy sat down on the opposite chair and asked, "Did you find anything?"

"I actually don't know, as I don't know what I am looking for," she said honestly. "Two days ago, I found a book called *Water Creatures in the Ancient World of Tyoge*."

"Hold on," Envan interrupted. "What is Tuoge?"

Maureen smiled. "Tyoge," she corrected him. "It is an ancient name of our world. It covers much more land than our kingdom, so much more I cannot imagine it. The book describes this water creature called the Water Seraphim. This thing apparently lived in the area of our kingdom, actually not far from the castle. I compared the maps. Look!" She pulled the book out from the massive stack in front of her. She opened it to a marked page and walked to the wall which showed their kingdom.

"See the similarities of the landmarks? This is where they had their kingdom." She was pointing at the big blue part of the map.

"This is our ocean and it is connected." She traced the blue line with her finger. "Too many other water reservoirs, including the area where Lake Nobo is, now."

Envan seemed fascinated. He was the only person who wanted to listen to her talk about her findings.

“And what do those Seraphims do?” he asked curiously.

“Well, everything apparently.” She was excited she found something remotely useful in her never ending searches. “But it says that they pitied humans for mentally stuck brains and backward technology. It was very easy for us to get something from them. They treated us like puppies or kittens. But they always demanded something in return, usually nothing important. Like the next rock you see or nice stick you find on a hiking trip.”

Envan smiled. “Sticks and stones, Maureen. Sticks and stones.” He took the book from her and checked the cover. “*Water Creatures in Ancient Words of Tyoge, Legends, Myths, and Fairy Tales.*’ You missed that bit, princess.”

She smacked his arm. “This was the best I could find that is even remotely connected to our case.”

Envan looked confused. “I don’t want to be a buzz kill, but I do not see the connection, Maureen.”

“Look.” She took the book from his hands and opened it at the picture of Seraphim.

“They had purple hair,” he whispered and Maureen grinned like a horse.

She wished she could be in the library forever, but it was time for her to go to take care of her sister.

Envan walked her to Kesaia's room; she took a few big breaths and entered the purple nightmare. Even though she'd been there hundreds of times, she never got used to the surrounding purple and cringed at the sight of it.

"Father," she said gently.

The King jerked his head up and stood too quickly, which made him roll back and almost fall. Maureen looked at her father with fear. He looked so much older than he did three years ago. He used to stand so tall, his back always straight, short black hair and beard always neat and perfectly cut. His hazel eyes were sharp and knowledgeable. Every ruler in the kingdom looked up to him. He was kind, fair, wise and fierce. Every woman wanted to be in his bed, but he only had eyes for the Queen. Their love was like something from a fairy tale. They met once and fell in love. He was very young, but it did not stop them. There were a lot of rumors about them, but none really remembered how Maureen's grandfather agreed to that marriage. For all she knew, her mother was not a princess which technically was not allowed.

She approached the ghost of her father and put her hand on his shoulder. "It is time, Father, let me do my duty."

He looked at her with his hollow gray eyes. Within those three years he went completely gray—his eyes,

his hair. He had a hunchback now, from all the time he was crouched over the bed.

“Ok, ok, Maureen. But remember...” the King said, his voice breaking. Like it was physically painful to be away from Kesaia.

“Yes, I know, I will send for you the second she wakes up.” Maureen smiled gently. “Go eat something or sleep. We will not be long.”

Those were pleasantries they always exchanged. She knew her little sister would not wake up and that her father would not eat or sleep. He would be sitting in the chair outside the bedroom waiting for Maureen to finish bathing Kesaia. Since she was now sixteen, a young woman already, their father was not allowed to tend to her. At first the sisters had rotated, but Deidre and Venna were making too many excuses not to, so Maureen was doing it full time now. She looked at her beautiful sister lying there on the bed.

“Perhaps a true love kiss would wake you, my dear.”

Firstly she changed her bedding. Kesaia was very thin and light, since she was only fed through a tube. Maureen had no problems whatsoever with lifting her from the bed. Then the sleeping princess was bathed with warm cloth and soap. Next, Maureen dressed her in one of those hideous purple dresses and brushed her hair. That was her favourite thing

to do. The youngest princess's hair was long, thick and the colour seemed so unnatural, yet so right.

"I found something," she said to her sister. "I think your condition might have something to do with a legendary water creature called Seraphim. Their hair was exactly like yours."

Of course Kesaia did not answer.

"Envan came to get me to tend to you. He is so sweet. I think he might know I have a crush on him." She paused; thinking if she should say out loud what she suspected about herself. She needed to tell it to someone and who would be better to keep the secret than a sister in a coma. "I saw some changes in me recently," she said, hoping their father would not hear them. Just in case she whispered with excitement.

"Do you remember what I told you last time? It is growing in me, I can feel it. I really think I might be the first one in the kingdom in years. I am scared to tell anyone, because.... It is not exactly forbidden but people don't have it anymore. I already don't have many friends, if they find out I will be an outcast. They will think me weird or worse, mad." She looked back at the doors. Their father let the sisters talk with the little one as long as they wanted, but sometimes he would lose his patience and check on them. Not this time.

Maureen continued, "I found this book. It is called

Miracles and Enchantments for Beginners. I will read it and try to make some magic. Once I master it, I am sure I will be able to wake you up with my powers!”

Kesaia's hair was done. Maureen kissed her sister on the forehead and said her goodbye. When she exited the room, her father was, of course, there and he jumped up.

“Is she awake?” he asked, his face and voice full of hope.

Maureen had to stab that hope in the heart.

“No, Father,” she said. “Not yet. I am done, you can go back to her.” And he ran into the room, his other daughter already forgotten.

Sometimes, Maureen was jealous of Kesaia's relationship with their father. None of the other sisters had it. When she was still a little girl, she could walk into the very important meeting just to see her Father and the King would allow it. She knew her sisters envied Kesaia as well. Venna was too proud to admit it and Deidre was hiding it behind rude comments. Her explanation for the King's favoritism was Kesaia's similarity to the Queen. But Maureen understood why the King and the late Queen adored the youngest sister, because she loved her so much as well. She was the sun on a cloudy day and a fresh rain after weeks of drought. She loved life and everyone in it. At the age of ten, she knew every single person who worked in the castle. She

was just a breath of fresh air in the old dusty castle.

That's why Maureen had to find a way to wake her up.

Venna

The two days Venna waited for her Suitors' Ball passed too quickly. She woke up to Lola coming into her room tweeting happily, as she usually did. This time she was alone but she knew she drank too much. She ran to the bathroom to vomit.

"Good morning, my Princess! A very important day today, I hope.... Oh." She saw the jug of wine on the floor. "Well, I got the dresses for you. You need to choose one."

Venna was not ready for her, let alone choosing and wearing dresses.

"Not now Lola..." Venna shouted between one stomach spasm and another.

"Oh dear, princess." Lola was standing above her, shaking her head, her hands on her hips.

"Too late for preaching," said Venna, hugging the toilet bowl. "Can you come back in an hour?" she asked her servant, knowing well that the schedule was very tight today.

"Well... No, the Queen—sorry, Acting Queen—said you need to be at the greeting ceremony at noon, which gives us two hours to get yourself ready. I will go to the kitchen and get a special hangover cure from Gasto. It will make you feel better."

“An hour of peace would make me feel better. I am not sure if I can eat or drink anything at the moment.” Venna gasped for air, sure she would puke again.

“I am afraid you have no choice. I will be right back.” She disappeared and Venna wanted to shout after her, but barfed again.

It took Lola a while but she came back with some green goo drink claiming it would fix her. It tasted surprisingly refreshing and nice. After drinking it, Venna threw up one more time. She was still not at one hundred percent but Lola needed time to do her hair, makeup, and everything else. She would probably be late and Dee would be mad. Venna was scared when Dee was mad. She was under such pressure running the kingdom and Venna sometimes felt guilty for making it harder for her dear sister. She did not mean to.

Lola was ready for her, holding three dresses.

“That was your father’s request.” Lola pointed at the fourth dress which looked like what Venna just left in her toilet but with glitter.

“Let me guess, purple... No way I am wearing it.”

“That’s why it is on the floor, not on the hangers.” Lola smiled. Venna looked at the ball gowns.

“Alright then, let’s try them.” Firstly she put on her undergarments, Lola insisted that she wear a bra. The first gown was perfect...for a night out. It was

a long silky silver colour with thin straps. The leg opening almost reached her hip.

“I mean, I love it.” Venna caressed her body under almost see through fabric. It felt like a second skin. “But is it appropriate for a princess’s Suitor’s Ball?” She ducked down, opened her knees and came back up like a cat. Lola laughed.

“Venna Kariel! I did not think I would hear a sentence like that from your mouth! You find something inappropriate! Unbelievable!”

Venna laughed. “I don’t think I want that much attention around me. Also, it might give my dear old sister a heart attack. Then I would need to step in as ‘acting queen’ and nobody wants that.”

“Yes, Venna, nobody wants that”

The Princess threw the dress at the servant.

“So that’s a *no*.”

The next dress was something between black and burgundy and it was hideous. It had long sleeves and a high, tight collar. Even their mother would not wear something so awfully prudent. She tried it on and she looked like a nun.

“No way! Who chose this one Lola?”

Her friend giggled. “I did, just for fun.”

Venna gladly took the dress off. The third dress was covered with a bag so she could not even see the colour of it. She took it from the hangers and saw a blue card attached to it. “*Wear this, you will love it.*”

Dee,” she read out loud.

“Did you see what it is, Lola?” the Princess asked.

“Oh yes,” she said “You *will* love it. Open!”

Venna smiled because Dee, among many other talents, loved fashion. She has been sewing and designing her own clothes since she was little. Occasionally she had something designed for her sisters, so Venna was really excited. She unzipped the bag and took out some kind of a suit. At first, she was puzzled. *She wants me to wear a man’s suit...* She hung it on her wardrobe door handle to look at it in full scale and gasped.

“Oh my! Trees have mercy on those suitors,” she whispered and looked at Lola who was smiling wide. It was a suit but the beauty of it was beyond what Venna had ever seen.

“Put it on!” Lola shouted as she could not hide her excitement any longer. So Venna did. Even without her makeup and hair done she looked stunning.

The trousers were made from shiny leather but were light, flexible and comfortable. Perfect for dancing and fighting if necessary. The blouse was silky and the colour was deep emerald. Venna wondered how they made the fabric in such a vivid shade. The coat was made from very light fabric. It was black and had golden and emerald embroidery of flowers and leaves on the sleeves. The backside of the coat was very long so when she walked it looked

like she had a gown on. The whole outfit looked like it was made just for her. When she looked in the mirror it was like she saw herself in a brand new light. She seemed taller, more beautiful and more confident. Her hazel eyes were sparkling and her deep brown hair seemed shiner.

“This is a masterpiece,” she whispered to Lola. “Who made it?”

“Probably Madame Seamstress. I don’t see anyone else pulling this off.” The servant girl was watching her with big eyes, correcting and adjusting the outfit on the Princess.

“I wish I could wear trousers,” she whispered to herself and Venna smiled. “The seamstress did not design it, though,” continued Lola. “Acting Queen Deidre did.”

Venna knew that already. Now, her oldest sister wore only her simple blue dresses. She used to dress like a proper princess. Her passion for clothing grew weaker since their mother died. Venna did not know if it was because Deidre did not have time or because the Queen had been the biggest supporter of Deidre fashion designs. Lola started on Venna’s hair. She quickly braided it so the Princess was comfortable on the dance floor. She put a minimal amount of make up on her face but she made her lips a bloody red.

“You will be irresistible, Venna.” Lola smiled at her

work. "Are you nervous?"

Venna smirked. "No, why would I be?"

"Well you are supposed to choose your future husband today! Isn't it exciting!"

"Lola! You should know me by now! I am not planning to choose a husband today. The Suitors' Ball for princesses is a stupid and old fashioned tradition. I do not understand why I need to choose someone to marry. I will just enjoy myself looking like this. I will try not to drink too much so my sister is happy. But I have no intention whatsoever to choose the husband. I will treat it just like another party."

"The Queen will not be happy." Lola seemed concerned by Venna's statement.

"The Queen can bite me," the Princess said and stuck her tongue out.

"Venna!" Lola laughed. "You naughty, naughty princess." She slapped her butt cheek "I think you should marry, perhaps a good shag will give you some discipline."

The Princess laughed out loud. "I can assure you, my dear, shagging has nothing to do with my discipline. Otherwise I would be polite and obedient like a puppy." Venna winked at her friend. They both giggled and headed out to greet incoming guests.

They were a bit late. They found Deidre, Maureen, and a few servants standing at the entrance hall.

Deidre was wearing a bit more of a festive long blue gown, with her long blonde hair falling on her shoulders. She was wearing the Acting Queen Tiara and she looked magnificent. Maureen, as usual, was dressed in black and her dress was quite similar to the hideous one Venna tried earlier. Her messy black hair looked like a lion's fringe around her plum and pale face.

The newcomer looked at the doors, still closed.

"Sorry we are late," Venna said and all heads turned to her.

"Ven," Maureen gasped. Venna turned around to show off her gown. Deidre grabbed her hand and swirled her a few more times.

"This is your best work so far, Dee. You've outdone yourself."

"Oh Venna, you will find a husband in no time! If they can only see you now, they would be queuing up to get at least a dance."

"Would?" Venna said and suddenly noticed that the entrance hall was empty.

"Would?" she repeated louder, clenching her fists. She was looking at the gathering of her sisters, her friend, and servants but no guests.

"It is still a bit early," said Lola gently, touching her arm. "Just after noon, some people think it is fashionable to be late by at least an hour."

Venna did not hear the words from her friend. She

could not believe it.

“Nobody came?” Her eyes filled up with tears. Yes, her opinion about this ball was awful and she did not want to find a husband here but... she was not expecting this. She still was sure lots of suitors would come and she could have her fun, teasing them. But the worst of all were the faces of her sisters, Lola, and other servants. Full of pity, each of them tilted a bit to the left with eyes wide open.

She felt rejected and betrayed. Because somewhere in her cold lonely heart she hoped she would meet someone on that ball. Someone, maybe not even a real suitor. A tall, handsome guy who would fall in love with her. At the beginning, she would play hard to get but she would love him as well. Love at first sight. They would date in secret for a while. He would sneak into the castle just to see her. Deidre would not approve of this love and it would be forbidden. This would make it even more worth the effort. Finally, the mysterious stranger would win the approval of her sisters and her father and eventually they would marry. Then maybe even Kesaia would wake up.

“Leave us,” Deidre ordered everyone, seeing her sister state. They quickly obeyed, leaving the front doors closed behind them. Maureen approached Venna first, trying to hug her, but she slapped her arms.

"I did not want this stupid ball anyway. Save me the boredom of entertaining those rich assholes," Venna snapped, not angry at her sister, just angry in general. She wanted to sound like she did not care but her body revealed her true emotions.

The tears were already rolling down her cheeks and her nose was running and she could not control her jaw tightening. Her voice broke and her hands were shaking.

"Who needs a husband! This is stupid. Thank you for the gown Dee, but nobody will see it. I'm just going to get drunk in it." She was crying at that point. Maureen approached again and this time Venna did not avoid her. She fell into the embrace of her sister's arms.

"Lola is right, it is still early. Stop crying," said Deidre, a bit sharp. Maureen gave her a nasty look.

"Don't look at me like that. You know Ven... You know her reputation... She did it to herself. However, even I was not expecting...nothing." Those words were like sharp knives stabbing her heart. She was aware of the fact that she was the most difficult of all four of them, she always had been. Yet when said out loud, she found those words unfair. Lola rushed through the doors

"I told you it was too early," she said with a genuine smile. "The first guests are arriving."

"Lola. Take Ven to her bedroom to fix her makeup

and make her more presentable. Do it as quickly as you can, please,” ordered the acting queen and Lola obeyed with no further questions.

When in her bedroom, Ven forgot about all the other feelings and she only felt emptiness. Lola was tweeting around her about who was coming and which of the suitors were the most handsome but the Princess did not listen. Her thoughts were focused on herself. Was she really such a horrible person, that so few people wanted to celebrate with her? She never cared about the rumors that spread like a wildfire, but perhaps she should pay more attention to them and to how she acted. While, of course, pretending like she didn’t care. She hated her past, she hated her choices and all those men who allowed her to take advantage of them.

Does it mean I hate myself?

What if she never found real love? What if she died alone? Perhaps she should choose today anyway, the least boring suitor. Could she settle for something like that? Be a wife to someone who is so uninteresting that it makes her puke, just for the sake of not being alone. She would need to lie with him and give him children. A shiver of disgust went down her body.

“Are you ok?” Lola asked, concerned “Are you feeling better? You are ready, we can go back.”

Without any word Venna got up and walked to the

doors.

“Come, let’s get it over with.” Lola quickly ran after her.

They reached the ballroom from the back, so she could see how pathetic her Suitor’s Ball was. The servants already made the sitting arrangement smaller. Quite a few families came. Venna was a bit taken aback by the number of people there, however she knew Dee invited over one thousand people and there were maybe two hundred in the room, from which maybe twenty were suitors and the rest were the families and servants of the houses. She heard the attendances whispering that so few people came and how many came when Deidre was being suited. Of course, the oldest sister has a lot of people trying for her hand. She was the most beautiful of all of them. She was tall and her posture was impeccable, Venna never saw her sister hunched. She had big beautiful blue eyes and long blonde hair. She always looked like the poor defenseless princess from fairy tales who needed her prince. So compared to the oldest sister Suitor’s Ball, this was nothing.

In the end it turned out she did not need her prince after all. She was doing a great job being an acting queen. She was the fiercest and wisest person Venna knew.

Lola rushed to let Deidre know that Ven was ready. The Acting Queen raised and gestured to the servant

to play a little trumpet. The room grew quiet.

“Dear guests,” the oldest princess started. “Firstly I would like to thank you all for coming. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to my kingdom.” Some people gasped and mumbled something. “If my father and my late mother could see you they would be happy as well. These are challenging times for *my kingdom* but I can assure you that I have everything under control. My father will still have a kingdom to come back to.” She winked at the crowd and some forced laughs went through the room.

“I am sure most of you were here four years ago for my own Suitors’ Ball and remember how much fun we all had. Please don’t think about our difficult situation at the palace and enjoy yourself as much as you can.” She gestured to the side doors and the servants started bringing in jugs and bottles of wine. “This is a vine from our own vineyard; I hope you will love it as much as the rest of us. If it is not to your liking, we have other things like beer and whiskey or some fancy cocktails.”

At the end of the room a massive curtain went up and there was a bar with a bar keeper behind it.

“Now, without any further delay, let me introduce you to my younger sister, Venna Kariel.”

Lola pushed the Princess forward and Venna stepped onto the platform with her sisters. People start cheering, shouting and whistling. Venna stood,

confused, and did not know what to do.

"Smile, my Princess," Lola whispered behind her ear. So she did. Somehow this crowd gave her encouragement. She lifted her arms and turned around.

"Thank you!" she shouted and Deidre gestured to the servant with the trumpet. "Thank you," Venna repeated. "I am glad at least you all showed up." The room laughed. "Let's drink and eat and find me a husband!" The crowd cheered and did as she told them.

Venna took a free seat on the right side of the oldest sister. Maureen was on the left.

"So you are on board with it now?" Deidre asked with hope in her voice.

"Oh no," Ven replied. "But we might have some fun, that's the least we can do."

Maureen leaned toward her. "Are you ok, Ven?"

"I am perfectly fine," Venna replied too quickly and waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Let's just forget about before, it is not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Not as bad?" Dee smirked. "Less than half of the invited families showed up. There are exactly twelve men you could choose from. There were supposed to be about a hundred. Now I don't know who you want to settle for. I was thinking before about the sons of the Grenald's but they are not here. The

Whitelands guy was nice as well but they are not here either.”

Maureen got up, while doing so she elbowed the oldest sister in her ribs. “Ouch!”

“I do not believe that the most powerful families did not come here just because of Ven’s reputation. If anything she should have been known as adventurous, brave, and courageous. That would bring the best guys to our doors. There must be something else. I will find out.”

And she was off.

Deidre reached out to her sister’s hand and squeezed it gently. “It will be ok.” She gave Ven a reassuring smile

“It will be as long as they give me more wine,” Venna replied, putting her normal mask back on.

“No pressure, sis, but I need to wed you off. This is what father would do if he could. I need to follow the rules,” the acting queen said with a heavy sigh. Venna looked into her glass of wine, swirling it on the side.

“Have you ever considered the fact that the rules can be changed? Especially now when we are in charge?” she asked, finishing off her wine.

Dee said nothing.

“Fine, I’ll dance with them,” she mumbled, standing.

“They are supposed to ask *you* to dance!” her older

sister shouted after her, but she was too far away to answer.

She approached the first table and asked for the candidate. They showed her a skinny little boy with long arms and legs and long blonde hair named Amtar. He got up and started talking with her. She took him by his hand and started to dance.

“So the deal is, Amtar,” she started, “I need you to put aside all the bullshit your family told you,” on the word *bullshit*, the suitor’s face turned red, “and be real with me. To marry you, I need to know the real you. Do you fancy me?”

“It would be my greatest honor—” Amtar started.

“Erhgh, forget it,” she growled, dropped his hands and moved to another table. The next candidate was a short, big, and muscular guy named Tonker. To the same question he answered,

“Of course I fancy you.” He laughed. “You are a piece of nice ass. Not as nice as your oldest sister though. Does she need a king? I am a bit younger but I can be a really good king inside and out.” He laughed again. “Can you ask her for me? If I marry you, could I have some of your sister too?”

She left him on the dance floor as well.

The next one was named Vicous and was her type. He looked very fragile, with his triangle face and long silver hair, dressed in all black. He looked like he had some elven blood in him. When they started

dancing, his body and movements seemed familiar.

“Do I know you?”

Gracefully he leaned closer to her and answered, “Yes, from your bedroom two nights ago.”

He winked at her and she remembered.

“No,” she said and wanted to leave but he kept hold on to her.

“Come on, you know what to expect and I don’t see anyone who is more suitable for you. I will take you to my house and you can live there. We can have as much wine, sex, and Melodyne as we want. Is this not what your goal is?”

“Oh dear. No!” She stopped moving, hoping her sister was watching her closely. “Let me go or I start screaming and the guards will escort your whole family out.”

He did not let go but leaned closer to her ear. “Oh, come on, Venna,” he whispered and his hand slid dangerously close to her bottom. “You know you want me, you screamed my name so many times that night.”

She had enough when he squeezed her butt cheek. She heard the commotion behind her, but she was not a silly princess. Before the guards even reached her, she grabbed his hand.

“You just made a big mistake. I don’t even remember your name so it must have been really, really small.” In one second, she kicked him between his

legs, punched his chin while he was bending in pain, and twisted his arm. In a hunched position, she gave him to the guards.

“Please escort Vicous and his family out of the castle, they will not be staying here tonight.”

She moved forward like nothing happened to the next table, but the young man at it looked at her like she was a monster. Ven just waved her hand at him and moved on to the next one, where the suitor from this family disappeared.

She gave up, grabbed a glass of wine from the nearest table and went to dance by herself. She was swirling and flailing and moving her hips in every direction. A few times she caught the sight of Deidre shaking her head but she was too busy with people approaching to stop her. The more wine she drank, the more freedom her body gained. She felt the music in her veins and was showing off a bit, hoping all those boys who came here tonight were watching her. She hoped they were jealous of her drunken freedom and carelessness. She kept grabbing the wine glasses from other tables and dancing. She thought about her sister, probably watching her and thinking about how inappropriate she was behaving. But Venna did not care, her hands were up and she was having the time of her life. She started to trip over her own feet when suddenly everything stopped. Someone grabbed her hand. She was sure

it was one of her sisters, but when she turned around to start an argument, she saw a man. Very handsome man.

“May I have this dance, princess?” he asked with a weird, thick and foreign accent. She looked him up and down and she admitted to herself that even though he was not her type, she wanted to dance with him. He wasn’t very tall, maybe just five inches more than Venna. He had a beard, which was unusual in their kingdom, and dark brown hair, the colour almost matching Venna’s. His face was square and his body big and very muscular, like he did hard labor every day. His eyes were small and dark green, hidden deeply in his face. She could see in them kindness and bravery. He looked like a man who did not think twice to run into a fire to rescue a dog. He was wearing a mask, which was not covering much as it was laced and gray.

“Not much of a mysterious mask,” she blurted and didn’t know why. Probably because she wanted to say something.

“Oh, my sister insisted that I wear it. May I?” He pulled her toward him with unusual strength and grabbed her other hand, leading the dance. He took total control over her.

“Any suitable candidates for marriage, my Princess?” he asked.

“Hmmm, I mean.. Yes umm, you know. The

usual." What was wrong with her? He wasn't even that handsome, but somehow she forgot how to say words. WORDS!

"Well, princess, I don't, that's why I asked." He smiled at her gently which made her legs weaken. It was good that he was holding her tight.

"What about you?" she asked after a moment of silence.

He laughed out loud, so much he tilted his head backwards. His laugh, even though it hurt Venna a little, was genuine. She hadn't laughed like that for a while in the castle.

"I cannot marry you, princess, I am not a suitor."

"Why are you dancing with me then?" She gritted her teeth in annoyance.

"It may look like dancing but I am actually rescuing you. I did not want you to make a fool of yourself by tripping over and landing on your face. How much did you drink?"

That pissed her off.

"Who do you think you are? I am..."

"Oh, I know very well who you are. And I am the person who is not afraid to talk to you like a normal human being. Stop drinking that much, you are..."

"Oh, let me guess Mr. 'I like my women submissive.' I should not drink, I should not swear, and I should not smoke because I am a woman, a princess even. It is not appropriate."

He was annoying, but they were still dancing. She wanted this moment to last forever.

He grinned at her, and despite all of the anger she liked his smile. She could not help it and smiled back.

“Your sex and position in society has nothing to do with your behavior. You are destroying your body. Alcohol is poison. You should not drink it at all if possible!”

“You will not tell me how to live my life Mr. Stranger. I will have you hang for it.”

“We both know you will not do that. Think about it, princess. Dig deeper to understand why you don’t want to be in control of your life, why you don’t want to feel. If you heal here,” he poked her head, “you will heal here,” and he pointed at her breast. No, not breast, heart. “Only then everything you want will follow. Trust me!”

Venna was speechless

“Who are you?” she whispered

He pressed a bit tighter to her body and leaned closer to her ear. So close she inhaled his musky smell. It made her dizzy. “Let’s say someone who looks out for you in the shadows. I will take you to your table now.” He did as he said. She was still in shock, too drunk on wine and him to argue. He sat her down next to Deidre who was in a full conversation with some old chap.

The handsome stranger squatted next to her chair, took off his mask and put it on the table. His face was a little bit familiar, but rough. She could see the scars from some illnesses he probably had when he was a young child. Suddenly she had the urge to touch his face, caress him.

“Think about what I just said, princess. There is so much more to life than what you are doing.”

He got up and her eyes followed him. Without any further word, he disappeared.

Venna looked at the room full of her guests. Everybody was enjoying themselves. Talking, drinking, and laughing at her expense. Maureen was maneuvering between people to gather information. Deidre was approached by many people, each talking for a few minutes. Each of them walked around her chair like a vulture, waiting for a free moment. Was she really drinking so much? Of course she was. What about last night, by herself in her room? She drank so much she had been puking all morning. She looked at the table, her plate still full. She didn't eat properly either. She started living like that after their mother died. There was no supervision from anywhere. Deidre was trying to run the kingdom and Father was not there. Could she be better? She needed motivation. She elbowed her sister

“Do the trumpet thing, Dee.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” the oldest sister said

to the person she was talking to. "What?" she said through her clenched teeth.

"You know, the trumpet thing, where everybody gets quiet. I've got something to say."

"I am not sure this is a great idea, Ven. You had quite—"

"Oh my! Fine." Annoyed, the younger princess stood up.

In one second, Venna jumped on the table, surprised that she was able to do it without falling. She kicked a glass so it shattered on the floor, making the room quieter down. All eyes were on her.

"Get down!" the acting queen shouted, standing up, trying to grab her sister's coat, her face red from embarrassment.

"I have something to say to everyone. An announcement. If you may." She bowed deeply. She was not sure why, but it felt like an appropriate thing to do.

She looked at Maureen, who was smiling. She was also looking for the guy she danced with and could not find him. Venna did not even know his name.

"Dear guests, I hope you are enjoying yourselves. I think it is safe to say that this party is a total bummer, as nobody here wants to marry me." A few people smiled. "I will make it easier for you. In one year, we will host a tournament. The prize in this tournament will be a marriage with me and I

promise you that whoever will become my husband will get a quiet, obedient wife. There is a catch though. The candidates will need to fight *me* and win to marry me.”

The rumors spread around the room and Deidre hid her face in her hands.

“So not only will you get me as a wife, but you also start the relationship with good old biting. You know, ‘Teach me a lesson.’” That was supposed to be a joke but no one laughed. “In one year! Everybody who is up to it can enter. No matter the family name or status. Thank you for your attention.”

When she jumped down, the room was still quiet. Some people got up and approached Deidre with arguments but some left without a word. The Acting Queen looked at Venna, her face was pale and her eyes wide open with terror.

“What have you done?” the oldest sister said.

King Fregon

“I remember when you were born, my little one. Your mother was very ill, she had a fever and the doctors said we might lose her. I... I am ashamed but I was considering getting rid of you just to save my queen. I have this guilt in my life and I will never forgive myself. I will spend all my time making it up to you. Your mother did not want to hear about it. ‘She’s special,’ she kept saying. Who was I to argue with her?

She was right, of course, my queen was always right. It was not like I did not love my daughters, of course I did. But Deidre was just so perfect all the time, Venna was argumentative, and Maureen always kept to herself. And you, you my dear Kasaia...

When you were born the sun was shining for two months straight, even though they were winter months. You almost never cried, you were always laughing even as a baby. Everyone in the kingdom adored you. You were happy. You loved your life and enjoyed every second of it. Your mother and I would give you the world. You were so young when your mother got sick. Up until the last minute, you believed that the queen would be ok. You broke only when you saw her dead on her bed. My strong, little girl. I think you were giving hope to everyone around you.

When the Queen was gone, my world shattered. But I thought you would bring me up. So when you collapsed at the lake side and did not wake up, the last bit of hope for a normal life was gone. It is asleep just here next to you. Deidre and Venna hardly visit you anymore. Maureen comes to give you a bath. You will be sixteen in a few months... Or maybe you already are.

Time is cheating on me. I do not know what it is. I just wish there was something I could do to wake

you up. The haze above the lake is still there, thick and unmoved as always. It is the same colour as your hair. The exact colour..."

"Father, it is time," Maureen disturbed him.

"The haze above the lake has the same colour as Kesaia hair, isn't that right, Maureen?" the King asked her.

"Yes, Father," she answered, puzzled.

The King got up. "I will be right outside, tell me if she wakes up."

"I will, of course. But maybe you can go eat something or have a nap?"

"Maybe." He left the room.