

To most, there was the welcoming smell of baking bread wafting through the predawn streets while the small village slowly came alive with the sounds of birds cooing and cocks crowing in the distance. The only sound Neve was trying to concentrate on was the brushing of her skirt against the cobblestone street and the only smell . . . well, let's just say it wasn't carnations and an ocean breeze. It had been a long four weeks, and the pale-skinned woman was tired. This month had been especially taxing due to the disease outbreak, but she did her work as expected.

This can't be happening to me!

I will kill you all!

Momma? Where are you, Momma?

Neve put her palms against her ears, but she couldn't silence the voices. It would be several more hours before she could finally rest, finally having a moment of peace and quiet . . . and then it would start all over again.

"Good 'morrow, Miss Pettaway." The rotund shopkeeper smiled with his entire chubby face as he waved, making it appear as though his eyes completely disappeared.

Neve tucked the chocolate curls that had fallen out of her up-do behind her ears to hide the fact that she had just been covering them. Many in the town were suspicious of her, and murmurings that she was crazy or a witch—she was neither—were expected when a stranger came to town right before a blight. She'd seen it too many times to let it trouble her. That aside, she did her best to appear normal because she couldn't afford to be subjected to society's "cure" for insanity or witchcraft. "A lovely day to you, Sir," she politely returned as she fought back the turmoil inside.

Bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong . . .

"Hurry up," she whispered.

. . . bong.

It wasn't the clock she was speaking to—human tracking of time was no concern to her, nor was the cart carrying the dead that incidentally meandered in her path; Neve was more than accustomed to death. No, it was her human legs that could never bring her fast enough to her destination: her release, their release.

You can't keep me here!

Neve shuddered as she could feel the hatred vibrate through her body.

T . . . t . . . take any . . . anything you you you want . . .

She could hear the frail old man's voice as clearly as if she was standing beside him. They were starting to interact, and if she didn't hurry, she might lose one to a place it wasn't meant to go. That had only happened to Neve once, but it was a thought she had to push aside for now.

The dust swirled up behind her as she strode to the small cottage erected outside of town. It once belonged to a woman and her three children—the father was on a merchant on a ship that never returned when the youngest child was still an infant. Their deaths brought Neve to this town, and she lived in their abandoned home for the past three moon cycles.

Neve's palms pressed flat against the wood door as she pushed it open. She stumbled, tripping over a child's toy as she made her way back to the bedroom, the only room she had redecorated. Several minutes later, she had stripped out of her layers of bulky clothes, cleansed her womanly form, and laid on the silk cloth that covered the straw mattress. Seven candles flickered around her as she prepared for the release.

D . . . don't touch meee, the frail voice pleaded just before Neve let out an unearthly scream that mimicked the cries of women giving birth. But Neve wasn't giving birth to a new life . . .

The full moon rose, greeted by the midday sun, and Neve could finally rest.

The waning moon rose the following day, and so did Neve. Over the years, she often wondered what it'd be like to dream but eventually decided the first day after a full moon was exactly what her dreams would be like—quiet, serene, free. Like good dreams, it always ended too soon, and fairly quickly after rising, Neve was back to work.

The clock tower chimed three times before Neve had bathed, got dressed, and started the walk back to town. Death didn't pause during the full moon (and was often more active), so she would spend most of the first week catching up on her work.

"Care for a ride, ma'am?"

Neve was too focused on her upcoming schedule to hear the rhythmic steps of the horse pulling the creaky wood wagon. "I'm good to walk," she said politely, her voice soft and kind but refrained from looking directly at the man.

"Don't worry, there aren't bodies back there yet," the man said jovially.

It was evident by the flies buzzing around that this was a death cart, and while the stench was subtle, it was unmistakable. Neve was unphased by death but finally looked at the man with a questionable expression.

His head blocked the sun, which gave him an almost unearthly glow. As she allowed her eyes to connect with his, she recognized him immediately. The leathery skin was new, as was the blue hue of his eyes, but it was without a doubt him. Neve gasped and forced her eyes away. *No, no*, her voice repeated in her head, but her heart began to beat faster. She pushed her feet forward and started walking towards the town again without another word.

This time, she heard the cartwheels grinding against the dirt as the man continued alongside her. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't realize there was anyone left who was offended by death. My apologies. It's a warm day, and I was trying to—"

"I'm not offended," Neve interrupted sharply but continued her pace. She cleared her throat, not intending to come across so rude. "It's just," she began. *I can't be seen with you*, her inner dialogue continued. She sighed and shook her head, looking to the town that was still several miles ahead.

"It's just . . . what? Oh, I get it. A lady of your obvious position in society can't be seen in the company of a gravedigger, right?" he retorted with contempt as he motioned his head towards her run-down house behind them. "Well, good day to you, m'lady." The sarcasm was sharp and made Neve cringe.

What Neve wouldn't give to be filled with the confused voices that had consumed her only a day prior, but she was an empty vessel with only her thoughts and the warnings of the Council swirling around.

You are forbidden!

You failed your job because you were distracted.

Selfish!

Imprison her!

"But it wasn't my fault," Neve whispered to the settling dust in front of her, and the memories came flooding back.

It happened rarely, but the vessels were always strained when it did. A lunar eclipse on a full moon meant the souls couldn't be released and had to remain for another cycle. Neve had survived them before, but this one was different in one way—she met a soul that was like no other.

The human was a warrior, late teens. He was facing a foe that was triple his company's size in the middle of a winter that seemed to have no end. Neve had woken from the release of the night before to a field of dead warriors. It would be a busy time, but she was one of the strongest vessels and chosen by the Council for this assignment. She wasn't the oldest or most experienced, but she had more than proven herself capable.

As Neve entered the battlefield of corpses and a few looters, she heard a man call out to her. The snow around him was red, and she knew he would soon join the others on her list.

"Greiða," he managed to mutter. Though, from the rasp in his voice, his lung had collapsed.

Neve looked around for someone else he could have been talking to, but there was no one else near enough for his failing eyes to be able to see. Against her training—against the rules—she went to the man and crouched beside him, the red snow crunching like the bones of the broken warriors the day prior.

"Greiða," he whispered again, but Neve shook her head; she knew there was no help for him.

She felt the pull of her work urging her back and waited for the warrior's eyes to close before rising to attend to her duties. She'd return for him in a day or two after his body gave up. Until then, there was nothing she could do for him.

Neve straightened herself up and whispered in her own language a wish of peace for the warrior, but as she took a step away, she felt his hand clasp onto her ankle. Startled (and slightly annoyed), her head turned sharply back at him. Eyes narrowed, she looked deep into his eyes, ready to spit a human curse at him. But at that moment, she felt something she'd never encountered in her thousands of moons on Earth; she felt her own soul stir. Startled, she stumbled back and out of his reach. At that moment, the gravity of her work was diminished, and she was pulled into his.

"Steɪ," he managed and seemed to slump into the frozen earth.

Neve was going to explain that she had work to do, that she'd return, but the gurgling of blood in his throat and rhythmic rasping of his breaths drew her in, and she settled on the ground next to him. Her hand caressed his face as she somehow instinctively tried to comfort him, although she had no experience in such things. She remained in that position for two days while his body succumbed to the inevitable. Occasionally, his eyes would open, like he was checking to ensure she was still there, but would flutter and close soon after. In those moments, she felt electrified, and the addiction to the new sensation overruled her responsibilities.

"What are you doing?" her brother interrupted her after the sun set that first day. It wasn't uncustomary for others to help during cycles of a lunar eclipse when there was overwhelming death.

"I'm taking his soul," she explained with conviction, although it was also threaded with confusion.

"He's still alive. You can return later. It doesn't look like he has much longer," her brother chuckled.

Neve became uncharacteristically angry. "Then I will wait for him!" she snapped.

Her brother opened his mouth to refute her decision but sighed and returned to work.

Neve cared for the warrior until his final, difficult breath when he looked into her eyes, and his soul seemed to join her instantly. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye, but she wasn't mourning his death. Instead, it was an expression of joy, of complete and utter bliss. Without a thought to her work, she stood from the corpse and left the field. She walked amongst the trees for three moon rises without knowing the destination.

"Is this what it feels like?" Neve asked as she sat on top of a white mountain, unaffected by the cold.

The voice inside her shared the same blissful tone as hers. "This is how it should feel," he replied.

Neve avoided her responsibilities for the entire cycle, but at full moon, when his soul should have been released but remained because of the eclipse, she was visited by her brother again.

"You have to return," he said kindly but with a strained voice.

"I don't want to," Neve explained as simply as a child refusing to eat the meal placed in front of her.

"I . . . can't do this alone," he explained as he gripped her hand tightly, clearly in distress.

"What if I stop? What if I stay here forever?" Neve asked as she stared at the scenery below.

"The Council won't allow that. You will be . . ."

Neve stopped him and sighed. "I know. A wistful thought."

"Why did you come here?" her brother asked as they both stood.

Neve started to explain what had happened but stopped herself. Although she understood the soul with her now was important, she didn't know how to explain it. How do you define love when you have nothing to compare it to? "I don't know," she finally said in resignation as the two made their way to a village that was plundered that night.

As she collected souls that cycle, the man's soul was the loudest presence among them, and the two became so tightly entangled it silenced all the other voices within her. When the next full moon approached, Neve started to feel a whole different set of unfamiliar emotions: fear, sadness, and desperation.

"Valhöll is not where I want to be," he confessed on the night before the full moon.

"I don't think you get a choice," Neve teased, masking her sadness.

But how do you hide your real emotions from the person who is truly connected to your soul? She couldn't. "You had a choice," he said solemnly, referring to her staying with him while he died.

"Perhaps I was frozen to the earth and couldn't move," she continued to tease. Sadness was overwhelming her, and she felt his too. They knew they'd be separated soon. The noise of the others within her was becoming overpowering.

The next night, she returned to the battlefield where she had found him dying weeks prior. The rotting bodies had been scavenged, and only a graveyard of scattered bones remained. The sight would have made most humans uneasy, but it was nothing Neve hadn't seen many times before. Since this was the place of their meeting, they had agreed that maybe returning there would somehow allow him to stay with her.

Neve set up her bed and candles, bathed in the nearby stream, and laid down before the full moon crested the horizon. Their souls made love for hours in a way that two souls connected could, and when the moon was low in the western sky, Neve felt a pain unlike any she had felt before. While she'd been distracted by her lover, the other souls were trapped. Desperate to be freed, they were fighting against her and against each other. When she was finally aware of them, it was too late. Bad ones consumed good souls, and they burst out with a force unlike any she had experienced. Through the turmoil, the lovers tried to hold on to each other. But as the moon set, their grasp failed, and his essence was released with the others.

Neve sobbed, her body bruised inside from the violent release, but her soul is what caused the most pain; it had been shattered.

They didn't even wait until the next moonrise; the Council took Neve during her rest period, and brought her to trial.

"Three souls were lost, compromising the balance of the universe!" The seven's voices reverberated as one in the hollow chamber.

The following night, after his rest, her brother was brought in to recount the month of Neve's absence. No one there had any experience like Neve's. They judged her harshly and convicted her of treason. For the subsequent thousand moon cycles, she was forced to remain locked in a type of ethereal isolation chamber, left to feel the gravity of her loss to the fullest. When she was released, she had to swear loyalty to her job and never again come in contact with the soul that had led her astray.

Neve could hear the wailing of women who had lost children and husbands during the night. Aside from the epidemic, some thieves had entered the town and killed a barmaid before meeting their demise. Unfortunately, there was word that these were the first of a dozen or so such pillages to come. There was heightened tension in the air which mirrored Neve's.

"This village has seen many victims."

Neve was shaken from her ruminations by the voice of her brother. "Aye. Perhaps it will slow, and we can move on," she said, her eyes catching the man with the cart as he moved across the lane in the distance. He touched the brim of his hat as he noticed her looking in his direction.

Neve shuddered outwardly, but her insides fluttered to life.

"Making friends with the mortals?" her brother teased.

Neve casually hooked her arm with her brother's and tugged him in the opposite direction. "Don't I always?" she replied with a smile, masking her turmoil. "Just the other morning, I was greeted with a 'good morrow' instead of a suspicious glance." While her brother was instrumental in her imprisonment, she harbored no ill feelings towards him. He was, after much consideration—and she had been granted plenty of time to consider everything—just doing his job, and she had burdened him during an especially taxing time.

He let out a sincere chuckle as Neve guided him towards the bar where the murders occurred. A man wearing a paisley tie with a cloth held up to his nose and mouth was peering onto the grisly scene with objection. "It surprises me that they can be so terrified of blood and flesh," Neve's brother noted as they made their way to a dark corner away from the investigation. "How can they not know it's only a vessel?"

"How could they know that?" Neve interjected. "Humans are ignorant because that's Their rule." She glanced up, even though They, the Council, didn't exist in a visible space.

"And we exist because we broke that rule," he chuckled.

It was true, though, that Neve and her brother, who wasn't her real brother, were once human and had souls like the ones they collected now. As many before them and many in the unwritten future would undoubtedly do, they questioned the superstitions and religions taught to humans about life and the afterlife. It was one thing to question it, but another entirely to embrace the knowledge of the eternal order of the universe.

Neither Neve nor her brother could remember their human lives. When they stepped out of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, everything that tied them to the place and souls they'd be responsible for was stripped from their memories.

"And yet you mock them, brother, but would you rather have them join us?" Neve took a step towards the bodies as the entourage of men exited through the door, glancing back at her brother with a look of rivalry as they did. She'd her share of demonic souls she'd transported over the moons but preferred to keep the numbers to a minimum, especially this early in the cycle.

Neve hovered over a woman's body and began the process of accepting her soul from the rotting corpse while her brother grumbled and began on one of the thieves. "You owe me."

Her smile was short-lived when the near silence in the room was interrupted by a man clearing his throat. "I thought they said they were ready."

"My sister was just saying goodbye to our cousin," Neve's brother began. "And I was cursing these men to hell."

It wasn't the first time they'd been caught, but it was definitely a rare occasion. It was easy to come up with an explanation, but this time, Neve froze. *Of course he'd be here*, she groaned inwardly. Neve was too wrapped up in her work and gloating to hear the cart's wheels crunching on the street outside.

With possession of the soul, Neve stood and looked the part of a shocked relative. The truth was she was surprised and terrified. Could he feel their familiarity? Could he feel the pull towards her as she did towards him?

"Mind giving me a hand," the man said to Neve's brother after a brief pause as she passed by him.

Neve looked at her brother from behind the man, shaking her head to discourage his interaction with the familiar human. What if her brother could see who this man was, too?

“Don’t you usually—“

The man cut her brother off mid-sentence. “My son is home sick with my wife. He usually helps.”

There was something in his words that comforted Neve. He had a family and a wife. Perhaps his soul was locked with theirs now. “I will be gathering supplies, brother,” Neve said calmly, and her brother nodded.

Outside, the white puffy clouds were collecting together and turning the day gloomier than it already felt. Villagers shuffled through the streets, hurrying to their next destination. Neve was unsure if they were scared of the storm, the illness, or another attack. It wasn’t her concern, though, and she finished the afternoon of duties without her brother.

Neve returned to her borrowed cottage at dusk, more to keep up appearances than for any real purpose. She didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, and most certainly didn’t entertain guests, but she wasn’t a bit startled when the door swung open suddenly.

“You found my abode,” she said lightly as her brother walked in. “It wouldn’t hurt you to close the door, you know.” Stepping over the dusty toys on the floor, she shut the door while her brother looked around.

“Nice place you have here,” he joked as he kicked a ragged doll across the floor.

“I suppose you still prefer the middle of the field?” She smiled, actually pleased for the company. “What took you so long? I gathered fifteen more souls while you acted the role of apprentice gravedigger. Considering a new trade?”

“Not if I can help it. That was hard work discarding those corpses. Did you know that—“

Neve interrupted this time. “The bodies aren’t our concern, brother. You should’ve been helping me.” It felt good to have the situations reversed, to be the one that was following the rules while her brother mingled with the mortals.

He pushed his fingers through his light brown hair, a very human gesture, Neve noted. “The thing about that is that man needed help, and I knew you could handle things today. Did you know that his son is only nine and can dig a grave in ten minutes? I think that’s fast because it was nearly thirty before I was done with one.”

“Did you at least get the souls of those flesh bags before you covered them with dirt?”

Her brother rolled his eyes. “You know I did. Give me some credit, my poor mourning sister. Rest easy knowing our cousin was covered with the darkest soil.”

“I always said you were the best,” she replied with a grin and a kiss on his cheek. “Now, are you free to help tonight, or will you be building a bonfire and drinking ale with the humans?”

“About that,” he began, once again fingering his hair. “I need you to do something for me tonight.” He was very cryptic in his tone, which put Neve on edge. “I’ll cover for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Neve asked suspiciously, arms folded across her chest.

“That man I helped today, Jonathan, well he’s as busy as we are. With his son sick . . . well, I know you have more than a curiosity about human cures.”

“Get on with it, brother. I don’t see a point to where this is going. My curiosity is simply that. I would never use my knowledge to prevent Their natural course.” Neve felt like she was reciting the oath she’d sworn, like maybe her brother was testing her. Perhaps he did recognize the soul of the gravedigger?

He held up his hand and shook his head. "I'm not asking you to do anything against the rules, per se. Hear me out." Her brother continued without waiting for her to acknowledge his request. "This plight that the humans are expiring from, you know how to mend them, don't you?"

Neve bit her lip but didn't disagree.

"Jonathan needs his son's help, and he'll die within a week if nothing is done."

Neve remained silent, weighing her choices, feeling the burden of this request a little more because it was the son of the soul she loved who needed her help. "What do I need to do?"

The house was twice the size of the one Neve was borrowing and stood solitarily on a hill about three miles east of the village. The fields around it looked neglected but could still be salvaged as farmlands with some time and effort. The wooden cart Jonathan carried the bodies in was resting next to a large boulder halfway between the main road and the house, but the horse was no longer attached. Neve could see the animal and a person in the far distance, apparently meandering through the tall grasses; there was likely a pond there.

The moon had shifted from its midday overhead position to the edge of the dark horizon by the time she was walking up the path to the front door. By all accounts of what Neve understood of human illness, this family should have fared well. However, with the boy's contact with the diseased bodies, it wasn't too surprising he'd caught it.

Neve fidgeted with the satchel of herbs as she waited for someone to answer her knock. She knew she shouldn't be there, not just because of the interference but also because of him.

"Who are you?" a little girl said through the cracked open door.

"Elizabeth, that's not nice. Please come in. You must be Neve." A short, slender woman with strawberry blonde hair opened the door while the girl with identical hair and big blue eyes ducked behind her mom's skirt.

"I am. It's nice to meet you, Ma'am," Neve said politely.

"Margaret. Please call me Margaret. Would you care for a cup of tea? You must be exhausted from the walk here." Margaret touched Neve's elbow and urged her out of the entrance into the kitchen.

"Thank you, Margaret. I'm quite alright without tea, though. How's your son doing?"

Margaret's face fell, and worry lines appeared on what seemed previously to be flawless skin. "Not well, I'm afraid." Neve had seen mourning parents before, broken and completely devastated by the loss of their child. But this was something she had never been privy to witness: the strength and determination of a mother to save her child. "Will that," she motioned to the pouch Neve was holding, "help him?"

Neve had never tested her medicines on humans, so there was no guarantee it would work. She had watched the humans experiment with medicine over thousands of their mortal years and had carried the souls of medicine men, apothecaries, witch doctors, nurses, physicians, herbalists, druids, and healers during that time. She weighed the trends, the politics, the religions, and the outcomes of all she'd seen. "This will help him and the rest of you, so it doesn't spread further."

"Oh, thank you!" Margaret cried and moved to embrace Neve.

Neve took a step back and spoke with caution. "This is not to be shared nor spoken about. I'm doing this as a favor for my brother, who spoke kindly of your family. I'm sure you can appreciate the position this could put me in if others were to find out."

Margaret paused to listen to Neve speak and responded with a reverent bow of her head. "Of course. How can I help?"

Neve explained the process, how the use of certain combinations of herbs would help remove the illness from the body. "I brought the ones not native to this land, but I will need to gather some from your garden. Please boil these in the water while I get the others." Neve handed the woman cinnamon bark, cloves, and eucalyptus leaves before walking outside, little Elizabeth in tow.

"Are you a witch?" the girl asked.

"Most certainly not," Neve replied. The last thing she needed was to be accused of witchcraft because of a naïve human child.

"Are you an angel then?" she queried.

Neve shook her head, this time with a smile. "No, not an angel either. I was just taught things, and now I'm teaching your mother. See that?" Neve pointed to a sprig growing in the garden.

"That's rosemary!" the girl exclaimed.

"See? You're already as smart as I am."

"Careful, she's bound let that compliment go to her head. While you get to leave tonight, we will be stuck listening to her boasting. Isn't that right, pumpkin?" Jonathan had joined the two in the garden without either of them realizing it. "Why don't you take that to your mother, and I'll bring in the secret ingredient."

"No fair! I want to know what the secret is!" Elizabeth puffed out her cheeks and flared her nostrils.

"Run along, Pumpkin."

Neve couldn't help but giggle at the sight of the tiny girl's red ringlets bouncing as she stomped her way back to the house, but then quickly cleared her throat and looked back at the plants when the realization hit that she was alone with Jonathan. "I can manage alone," she said.

Jonathan didn't hear her or didn't care that she'd said it. "I'm really grateful for your help, ma'am. I told your brother not to disturb your mourning, but he insisted that you would want to help."

She remained silent but rolled her eyes at the thought of her brother volunteering her for a human activity. Maybe this was payback for taking the woman's soul and leaving him with the thieves?

The silence was only broken by the whistling of the breeze as it danced across the field.

"Elizabeth seemed to take a liking to you. It's unusual for her to like any woman other than her mother." When Neve didn't respond, Jonathan touched her arm. "I'm sorry about this morning. I assumed you were someone who you obviously are not."

"You don't know who I am, even now," Neve commented, hoping that if she spoke the words, they would be true. She squeezed a lemon to test for ripeness.

"You are the woman helping to save my son. That's all I need to know." Jonathan joined in the testing of lemons and plucked one from the small tree. "I will expand this garden someday if death ever takes a holiday."

Neve's soul stirred inside her. This wasn't fair. This wasn't right. To be with his soul doing human things was all she ever wanted. "That will be lovely," she said softly and turned her face towards his.

Jonathan was about to speak but stopped and tilted his head. "You seem very familiar to me."

Neve used every ounce of strength she had not to cringe. She wished he hadn't spoken those words. She wished she hadn't turned to face him. She wished she hadn't come. "I suspect you run across a great deal of women walking into town. I'm sure I'm no different than they."

Jonathan gave her a skeptical look and studied her for a moment longer.

He was about to say something when Neve waved toward the house. "I'll be right there, Margaret." She walked past Jonathan before addressing him again, afraid that her eyes would give away her lie. "I'm certain I've never seen you before this morning."

“Thank you again,” Margaret said tearily. “I can already see a difference.”

Neve smiled as she stood outside the threshold. “Remember to rub the oil on the soles of his feet thrice daily and use the soaked cloths to breathe in the aroma.”

Elizabeth toddled forward with a basket of breads and a fistful of dandelions. “I picked these for you, Miss Neve.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth. They’re beautiful. Many blessings to you all,” Neve said as she turned to walk home.

“Let me give you a ride,” Jonathan spoke up suddenly. He had been quiet since Neve left him in the garden.

She didn’t know if it would be more effort to argue or just accept the ride in silence. “I’m fine to walk,” she said without much conviction.

“We couldn’t allow that,” Margaret insisted. She seemed to be the motivation behind the offer, which made Neve wonder if Jonathan still suspected there was something more to her than just a woman walking to town.

“The cart is over here,” Jonathan said flatly. “I’ll get the horse.”

When Neve accepted Jonathan’s hand to help her onto the wooden bench, she felt the connection stronger than she had since that morning. By the way he jerked his hand away after she was seated, she had no doubts; he felt it too.

Jonathan returned shortly with the horse and harnessed him to the wagon before taking a seat beside Neve. They rode in silence for the first mile before Jonathan tried to make small talk. “The weather has been nice,” he said.

“Yes, quite lovely,” Neve replied. “And really, I’m fine to walk if you want to stop at the crossroads ahead. It’s not far, and I wouldn’t want to keep you from your family.”

Jonathan didn’t disagree, and when he tugged the horse to stop, he rested the reins in his lap. As he spoke, he looked ahead toward the flickering lights of the town. “Why can’t I shake this feeling that we know each other?”

“Perhaps we did in another life,” Neve finally offered after several moments of uneasy silence. She swallowed hard and gathered the basket and flowers. “You have a wonderful family, Jonathan. I’m sure there are many envious of all you have. Take care, and thank you for the ride.”

Neve stepped down without Jonathan moving. Not that he was a rude man, he was just caught up in the confusion of his undeniable pull towards Neve. He was a faithful man, however, but Neve knew on some level, he was grateful she’d been strong enough not to give validations to their connection.

Several weeks later, just before the full moon, Neve returned to her residence to find a note placed on the doorstep. “*We couldn’t possibly thank you enough for giving us our son back. May God bless you in your life as you have blessed ours. ~Margaret*”

It was little consolation, but Neve was grateful it had turned out well for Jonathan and his family. After that full moon’s release, Neve left the village to attend to her work in other parts of the world.

It was roughly four hundred moon cycles before Neve thought about Jonathan and his family again. In order for her to sanely continue her work, she had to push aside that meeting.

Neve was working a few hundred miles from the town where they lived when a letter arrived for her.

Dear Miss Neve,

I don't know if you remember me, but you once saved my life when I was only a child of nine. It might seem peculiar that I am writing you now, but it is long overdue that I extend my deepest gratitude for what you did.

This is not the primary reason for this post, however. I am writing at my father's request, who surely doesn't have long left on this earth. He insists on you coming and says you will understand his request.

While it is not my place to argue with my father, I will confide in you that I think his mind has lost its sense. However, I am a loyal son and am doing his final bidding.

If it pleases you, we would like to have you as our guest at my father's request.

Your grateful friend,

William

Neve read the letter at least a hundred times before she cast it into the fire. If she went, their souls would be united again; she had no doubt. If she went . . .

"You couldn't have known," Neve whispered into his aged hand she clasped between her youthful ones. After the family's shock when they saw she hadn't aged had simmered down, they left her alone with Jonathan, who was too frail to get out of bed.

"I . . . always . . . knew." The pauses between his words were lengthening while the beating in his chest slowed. "Margaret . . . never . . . knew. She . . . never . . . suspected."

Neve had learned that Margaret died seventy-five moon cycles prior. Neve didn't know who carried the kind woman's soul, but she hoped that what Jonathan said was true, that Margaret didn't know her husband's soul gravitated toward another's.

Neve felt the same desire to stay with Jonathan as she had in that life when he was dying on that battlefield. But Neve knew the consequences of her actions if she chose to try that path again. There would be no third chance; she would be released of her duties and cast off into the nether.

"We . . . will join . . . soon," Jonathan whispered, his eyes fluttering.

"We can't," Neve wept while her head rested against his chest.

"We . . . must." Jonathan's final breath forced out the last word.

This time, it was Neve calling out for help in the language that only her kind could hear. She cried out to them for a day, but when no one came, she had no choice but to accept Jonathan's soul.

Shaking, she called his soul to her. At that moment, everything else faded as the two lovers finally united again.

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