



WISHTRESS



NADINE BRANDES

Wishtress

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CHAPTER 1

MYRTHE



I didn't cry until I was twelve years old.

Mutti and Pappje had caught the pox . . . from me. I'd recovered a fortnight prior and was still weak, unable to fully walk normally again. Oma said the pox ate away some of my bone. That didn't stop me from sitting by their bedsides—in agony—day and night.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Myrthe," my mutti rasped, reaching out a hand so frail the veins popped like scars. I gripped it in my own. Then I grabbed Pappje's limp one. I held the two to my lips. Kissed their knuckles.

"I'm here." How long would they know that? How long would they see and comprehend? Pappje hadn't woken in days. Not even when we half-heartedly celebrated my birthday on the winter solstice last week. Mutti was just as bad. At least that's what Oma said. Every time I asked her when they'd get better, she responded with a crisp, "They may not."

They grew worse by the day. Oma did what she could for them. Soup. Water. She made me chop and haul firewood into our humble

canal cottage despite my limp and the shooting pain up my left leg every other step.

I didn't complain.

But none of our efforts changed the sickly pallor on my parents' faces.

So I chopped more firewood. I plucked feathers from geese bought from *markt*, and while Oma boiled the meat, I stuffed the feathers into quilt squares and laid them over my parents.

Oma was wrong. *I* got better. So would Mutti and Pappje.

Chills seized Mutti's body as though the three quilts atop her were made of paper. I adjusted them. Again. Pulled my own hat off and settled it over her icy brow.

That's when the burning began in my throat. A fist of fire constricting my air. It moved to my eyes. Was I growing ill? This foreign sensation hurt, but it felt *right*. Like sorrow straining for release.

I bent my head over their clasped hands, listening to Mutti's raspy breathing. This was all my fault. If I'd gotten better sooner, maybe they'd still be well.

"Oh, Mutti . . . I wish you'd never known me." Never birthed me. Never hugged me and caught my illness. "I wish this would *end*."

Get better. Get better. Please get better. It had been so different being under Oma's cold care these past several weeks. *Come back to me.*

Mutti's shivering stopped. Pappje's hand turned weighted, more limp than the riverfish we ate in summer. My thumb swiped over something wet.

I looked at Mutti's and Pappje's hands in mine. Water smeared their knuckles where my face had rested. Wetness covered my cheek, too. Tears—things I'd seen on Mutti's face but never felt on my own.

Pappje's hand turned to ice in mine. It suddenly didn't feel like a hand at all. Startled, I dropped it. His arm fell with a slam against

the edge of his cot. A chill entered my chest, though I couldn't place why.

Something had changed.

Something unnatural.

"Is he dead?" asked a shaky voice beside me.

I nearly jumped out of my calfskin trousers. Mutti struggled to prop an elbow beneath her. Trembling, she stared at Pappje.

I didn't know which to react to first—her question about Pappje or the fact she was up. Awake. *Talking.*

"Mutti!" I threw myself into her arms, remembering at the last minute to be gentle.

She didn't return the embrace but instead slid out of my arms. Color was already returning to her face. "Mutti?"

She had eyes only for Pappje and scabbled for his hand, nearly toppling out of her cot from the effort. "Koen. Oh, Koen, don't leave me alone."

"Mutti, I—"

"Give me peace, child," she snapped. I startled away. "I'm not your mother."

I had yet to look at Pappje. I wanted to grasp the joy of Mutti's return. But . . . what did she mean she wasn't my mother?

"Ilse." Oma stepped into the room. If she was surprised to find Mutti awake and recovering, she hardly showed it. "Do you know this child?"

"Wilma!" Mutti reached for Oma. "Your son . . . he is . . . oh, he's *left* us."

"Yes." Oma stared at the scene, held captive by the still-cold body of her own child.

Tears streamed down my face, but I sat. I waited for Mutti to comfort *me*. For her to see me. Why was she so angry at my presence? "Mutti?"

“Get this child away from me!” Mutti collapsed over Pappje’s body. “Oh, Koen . . .”

Oma yanked me into her bedroom—the only other room in our small home. I stumbled to the bed when she released me, sobs tearing from my chest. “Oma, what did she mean?”

“You’re crying.” She said it like an accusation, then turned her back to me and rummaged in an old trunk.

I sniffed. Not sure I liked crying. The more I did it, the less in control I felt. I was wet everywhere. My eyes, my nose, my face. But more than that, my chest *hurt*. “Why did Mutti say she’s not my mother?”

Oma whirled on me with a small bottle clutched in her hand. “Because you removed her memory of you.” She sounded . . . triumphant. “I was at the door, listening. You said you wished Ilse had never known you. Your tear struck her hand.”

She pressed the bottle against my cheek. I was so confused—so surprised—I didn’t think to move. A moment later, Oma held the bottle aloft and a small tear bounced around the bottom of the jar like a trapped guppy, flickering silver and white and magic.

“Finally.” She corked the bottle and placed it in her trunk. “You’re the Wishtress, Myrthe. Each tear you cry has the power to grant a wish.”

Wishtress? I’d heard of her—the most powerful Talented in all of Fairhoven. No, in all of Winterune. Maybe even the world. A Wishtress was born every hundred years or so. Always female. A heroine of the kingdom. That’s all I’d ever heard of the Wishtress—all anyone could tell me.

I couldn’t be the Wishtress. I was poor. Brittle boned. Distaught. I couldn’t even *cry* until today. Then I thought about what Oma said. “*You removed her memory of you.*” Because I’d cried and made a wish . . . Mutti couldn’t remember me?

Another part of my words—my desperate prayer—teased my

memory. “*I wish this would* end.” I wished their sickness to end . . . and it did.

“I . . . I killed Pappje?” I gripped my hands in front of me, as though they could keep the broken whisper from reaching Oma’s ears.

But she heard. And she nodded. “You used a raw wish. More dangerous than spark on cotton.” She faced me head-on and grabbed my shoulders. I couldn’t tear away from her intense gaze. “You’re never to use a wish again, Myrthe. Not until you’re trained properly. I’ve studied the ways of the Wishtress my entire life and will teach you in time. Every tear you cry must be bottled. I’ll protect them. I will protect *you*. Otherwise you could end up killing others.”

My small form seemed to shrink beneath the weight of her words, unable to comprehend much else other than I killed my own pappje. And I made Mutti forget me.

This was my fault. All of it.

I wanted away from Oma. Away from her knowledge and her icy words. Her lack of feeling and her victorious glint over this new discovery.

I didn’t want to be the Wishtress.

I wanted to be Myrthe, holding my parents’ hands again . . . before they’d gone cold. Praying for them. Hoping for them. Caring for them and hugging them.

I fled the bedroom, knocking the doorjamb with my hip in my disjointed attempt at haste. I burst into the main room. It was empty of life. Pappje lay on the cot. Cold. Dead.

Mutti was gone.

The front door hung open on its hinges, cold night air not yet breathed on by spring gusting into the room and causing the fire-place to flicker.

I ran toward it. “Mutti? *Mutti!*” I could see nothing in the darkness. No. She couldn’t leave me. She wasn’t well enough!

I reached for my coat, but Oma stayed my hand. "I'll find her."

"She's my *mutti!*" I had to help. Had to fix this.

"She doesn't remember you. She doesn't want you."

Doesn't want you.

Oma slammed the door behind her, leaving me in our cottage with the body of my dead pappje.



The next morning, we stood over two graves.

She'd found Mutti frozen and lifeless less than a mile from our home. Oma didn't let me see her. Didn't let me kiss either of them good-bye. Instead, she woke me from where I'd curled in the corner by the fireplace. "Come say words over their graves."

I had no words other than, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I fell to my knees. This was so much worse than when they lay side by side trapped in illness. At least then I had hope. I could tuck myself into their arms and will my love for them to warm their bodies.

Now they lay in the earth, blanketed in darkness. I wanted to be with them, but I didn't want to die. I sniffed hard as the similar frightening burning built in my throat. There was no stopping it from spilling over in hot tears.

Oma knelt beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, an uncharacteristic show of tenderness. I moved to lean my head on her chest, but something cold and hard met my cheek.

A glass bottle.

"Let it out, child," Oma whispered as the first tear slipped into the vial. "Just keep crying. I'm here."



CHAPTER 2

BASTIAAN[©]



FIVE YEARS LATER

Bastiaan's soul was 107 years old.

His bare feet pressed into the dark soil between rows of blood-red tulips, sending his youthful body forward and leaving behind their signatures of ten toes and young soles. Scattered amid the tulip rows were women of varied ages. One bent over a row of purple buds, a woven basket in one arm and her hand stretched toward a stem. Another rested on her knees, a handkerchief pressed to her brow.

None moved. None breathed. Statues of blood, bone, and frozen breath.

Bastiaan fixed his gaze forward. Ahead, over the hill of carefully tended tulips and beyond the stretch of mature grain stalks ready for harvest, rose a windmill, its wide base pregnant with memories. Its wood-lattice blades paused midrotation.

Home.

He'd been away so long he'd near forgotten what that word meant. His fingers itched, begging him for permission to return

his surroundings to life, but Bastiaan resisted their call. *Not yet.* He stopped at the front door. It hung open—inviting him back in. He both dreaded and desired what was about to happen.

With a bone-deep breath, he stepped over the threshold.

Sunlight spilled through the open doorway and wide windows, the end of springtime as it had been for the past thirty-two years. Bastiaan took in the equally familiar and foreign space. White stone counters and rough cabinets carved by his own hands before he understood woodwork. A worn and dented table beneath the widest window.

A young boy sat on a tall stool, one foot resting on the lowest rung. His fingers were frozen midtap on the table, his chin resting on the palm of his other hand. His eyes were closed. Anyone might think the boy asleep except for the distinct lack of rise and fall from his chest.

Tears burned Bastiaan's eyes as he gazed upon the lad. A face he'd missed until he'd forgotten the boy's features altogether. As with every return it felt odd to find this boy, this place, unchanged despite even Bastiaan's absence. This time, he'd been gone so long that the Stillness, as he'd come to think of it, had begun to feel more constant than the Aging.

And that's what frightened Bastiaan most.

The itch in his fingers reached an intensity reflective of screaming. He raised his right hand and tugged off his leather glove, finger by finger, until skin and air met like long-separated lovers. A single silver line shone against the tanned pad of his middle finger. The mark of magic—of a Talent.

For years Bastiaan had longed for this moment, yet now that it was upon him, he hesitated. A dim panic threatened his mind. This time in the Stillness had changed him. Scarred him. He was far different than the man who'd first entered it. No one would understand. No one could *know*.

He feared the return of the noise. Of the life.

If it's too much for me, he thought, I can always reenter the Stillness when the next full moon renews my magic. And with that glimmer of reassurance, he pressed his fingers together and snapped.

The Talent Mark dimmed to grey.

Time resumed.

The rhythm hit first—the feeling of time moving once more, the sun inching across the sky, back to its original position when he first stopped time. The weight of aging took control of his body again. Bastiaan could never explain how *tangible* time was to him. He *felt* each second pass just as he perceived his own pulse. Each hour dissolved into his skin like moisture, promising to bring wrinkles and weakness and decay.

The sounds struck him next. The whoosh of lungs exhaling, a flutter of bird feathers on wind. The buzz of a fly and the laughter of the women gardening outside.

Bastiaan squeezed his eyes closed, breathing deep through the return. When he opened them again, the boy was staring at him. Earth-brown eyes set in a tanned face. Messy black hair ruffled by the breeze through the window.

He looked Bastiaan up and down, then slid cautiously off his stool. “Welcome back, sir.” He reached for the straps of Bastiaan’s pack. Bastiaan flinched but wasn’t sure why.

The boy slowed his movements as though approaching a beaten stray. He slid the pack from Bastiaan’s shoulders, then set it on the ground next to a set of stairs that spiraled upward in the center pillar of wall. Then the boy withdrew a small leather book from inside his coat. He flipped it open, then dipped a pen nib into a jar of ink on the table. “How long were you gone?”

Bastiaan stared at him.

The boy waited one, two, three breaths. “What’s your name?”

“Bastiaan Duur.”

The boy made a mark on the page. This moment felt familiar, as though Bastiaan had lived it before.

“What’s *my* name?” The boy’s pen was poised over the book, ready to mark Bastiaan’s answer, as though this question were merely standard and not actually effortful.

But Bastiaan couldn’t answer it.

The pause lengthened. The patient cheer slipped from the boy’s face as slow confusion took its place, then gradually morphed into horror and then hurt.

Bastiaan broke from his stupor. Something inside him knew that to fail to answer this question would result in damage even his Talent couldn’t repair.

The boy opened his mouth, but Bastiaan held up a hand. “Wait.”

He clamped his lips shut, hope creeping into his wide eyes. Bastiaan took in his small form, gangly limbs, mussed hair, and chin lifted in an attempt to keep his emotions in check and present himself as a man.

Bastiaan’s emotions remembered him before his mind did. Somehow he knew the boy was ten years of age. He knew he loved the boy as a son, even though less than ten years separated them—well, ten years according to the Aging. But if he loved him so deeply, how could he forget his name?

“It’s okay, Bastiaan,” the lad said in a small voice. “You said this might happen. This is why I ask the questions.”

“No,” Bastiaan said roughly. “It hasn’t happened.” Not yet. He closed his eyes and sifted through old memories, pushing himself back to the origin—seeing the boy on the banks of an icy canal, so small Bastiaan almost mistook him for a stump. Fingers black with frostbite yet still holding up a whetstone and flask of oil, saying in a weak voice, “Can I sharpen your skates, sir?”

Bastiaan had stopped, his skates sending a spray of ice shavings along the edge of the canal. “What’s your name, boy?”

“I have none,” the boy answered through blue lips.

“All things have names.”

“What need is there for a name if I’ve no family?”

“A name is your own. No matter how poor you get, you can never lose it.”

“Then give me one.”

Bastiaan blinked and returned to the present. The boy still sat in front of him, only in this scene he was taller. No black fingers, no sallow skin. Healthy. Hopeful.

And this time, the boy had a name.

“Runt,” Bastiaan said.

Runt’s round face broke into a toothy grin. “Welcome home, sir.” Then, as though recovered from Bastiaan’s appearance and memory lapse, Runt plopped into a chair and slapped his small book onto the table. “How long were you in the Stillness?”

“Thirty-two years.”

The scribbling stopped. Runt lifted his head slowly and swallowed hard. “Thir . . . Thirty-two?”

“Years.” Bastiaan released the word as though expelling the weight of two lifetimes. It was supposed to be days. A few weeks at most. But things hadn’t gone as planned. Not at the start.

And certainly not at the end.

Fire. Illness. Father.

Bastiaan shook his head. No, that wasn’t right. “I’m . . . confused.”

“You look it.” Runt slid from his stool and disappeared up the spiral stairs. He descended moments later with a leather-bound book in each hand, both much thicker than the one he’d been taking notes in. He slid one toward Bastiaan. “Usually you retrieve these on your own, but . . . I think you need my help.”

Bastiaan opened the book and two words were scratched across the first page in his own handwriting. *The Stillness*.

Runt passed him the dipping pen and inkwell. “Write about the past thirty-two years in this one. Then read through them both.”

“What’s the other book?” Though Bastiaan felt he should know.

Runt flipped open the cover on the second journal and Bastiaan read *The Aging*.

“I can’t write in these.” Bastiaan pushed *The Stillness* journal away from himself. “It would endanger me should anyone find it.” He was surprised his old self had even started the habit. Then again, he’d changed a lot in thirty-two years.

“Nah, no one but you can read them or write in them.” Runt seemed to have recovered from Bastiaan’s entrance and adopted the role of mentor—albeit a half-grown one. “You got the journals from a Talented in Gevanstad, remember?”

A rush of warmth toward the boy filled Bastiaan’s chest. Right now he needed Runt more than Runt knew. Because recovering from thirty-two years in the Stillness—thirty-two years of failure and heartache that weren’t supposed to have happened—seemed impossible.

Bastiaan’s fingers itched, longing for his time snap to renew. “How long until the full moon?”

“More than a fortnight.”

“That’s a long wait.”

“It’ll get easier once you’ve fully recovered.” Runt slid Bastiaan’s glove toward him.

Bastiaan held it for a moment, then tugged it on. “Thank you.”

He picked up the dipping pen. The ink might as well be his own blood for all the pain it caused to return to the beginning and write. The goal, the hopes, the hatred he felt for the old man . . . and how drastically that had changed as the years slid by.

He didn’t stop writing when Runt put a plate of stew in front

of him, or when he set a bowl of water at Bastiaan's dirty feet for a soak, or when the sun set and Runt lit the candles and the women left the tulip fields.

Bastiaan forced himself to remember everything and to write it . . . in order that he might forget.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



CHAPTER 3

BASTIAAN[©]



Bastiaan was neither dead nor fully alive. He'd been so long in the Stillness that he'd forgotten the sounds and feel of daily life. The mere hum of Runt and Mother conversing in the garden startled him his first few days back. Then the memories of what had happened in the Stillness threatened to cripple him.

He kept waiting . . . waiting for the announcement. The news to come.

It didn't come. *Since 1798*

Life and time rumbled past, feeling painfully disjointed. When Bastiaan had found himself lingering in bed one morning, dreading the interaction with his own mother, he finally took action and headed to the Fairhoven summer markt on the day it opened—the loudest day.

That was two days ago.

He'd yet to return home. Yet to eat, really. Bastiaan sat in the dirt, barefoot and unshaven, his head back against a wood post that held the edges of a markt tent tight against the early season wind gusts. Eyes closed.

Waiting.

Summertime had hardly tiptoed its way into the breeze—cautious about being swept away by its vicious cousin, Winter. Gossip from the washerwomen floated through the air as smoothly and fine-tuned as the canal ships up and down the Vier. The country of Winterune’s notoriously long winters often trampled any evidence of spring. Even the summer breeze through the market still carried a chill, but the sun sent down splashes of warmth when the drifting clouds allowed its rays through.

“Don’t stab me for coming too close.” The voice was soft like the approaching colors of the new season.

Bastiaan opened his eyes. A young woman, pale as a shell bleached from the sun, stood before him with a loaf of dark, round bread. Unlike the others who had mistaken him for a beggar, she met his gaze with her own—not with pity but with curiosity. As if she desired to know his story.

She held out the bread. “For you.”

“I’m no beggar,” he said. “And I certainly wouldn’t stab you.”

“You’ve watched passersby since dawn, almost like waiting for an enemy.” She delivered this comment with a smile to soften the implications. “Whether beggar or assassin, you’ve eaten nothing all day.”

She’d been watching him? Had she seen the bent of resignation to his spine? The tension from the overwhelming noise and sounds of *life*? “I’ll be fine.”

“Though your mouth is protesting, I’m certain your stomach is not.” She tossed it through the air with an expert flick. It landed square in his lap.

Bastiaan liked this woman. With an incline of his head, he took the loaf. Still warm. “Thank you.”

Someone bolted past them, knocking the woman’s shoulder. She stumbled forward a few steps and grimaced. By the time she

regained her balance, Bastiaan stood scanning the crowd. “Check your pockets,” he told the girl.

She turned toward the crowd as well. “I have no pockets.”

Lucky for her. Unlucky for the pickpocket. He finally spotted the thief—a stocky, young blond man still running, yards beyond them already. Since the woman didn’t seem concerned about losing a coin purse, Bastiaan didn’t give chase.

The woman’s brows crashed together. “Sven?” She took a few hesitant steps after the perpetrator. “Sven!”

“You know this thief?” Bastiaan asked.

“He’s not a thief.” She sounded confused. “He knocked into me is all.”

Without apology. Practically sent her to the ground.

Sven waved a hand in acknowledgment, but he neither stopped nor turned. “Not now, Myrthe!” Strain edged his voice. Urgency. He shoved through the crowd until he reached the dark, carved, scaffold-like structure that housed the frost bells. He grasped a plank and began to haul himself up.

Myrthe gasped. “What’s he doing?” She darted through the shoppers, dodging left and right but with a jilted gait. Had Sven’s knock injured her?

She wasn’t fast, but she was efficient. Bastiaan stayed on her heels until they both stood at the base of the tower. “Are you okay?” he asked. “If his impact injured you—”

“I’m fine.” She looked away from the tower long enough to give him an appreciative smile. “It’s an old injury.”

All the more reason Sven should have stopped and checked on her. But Myrthe seemed unbothered by his disinterest. Bastiaan turned his focus to the tower. Sven reached the top in four long stretches, then he got a firm grasp on the cord to the frost bell and pulled.

The deep *clang, clang, clang* sent the markt into a stunned

silence. This bell was reserved for winter ice alerts. No one rang it off-season, under severe penalty. It broke the system, caused confusion.

All eyes lifted toward the bells. Resignation entered Bastiaan's gut. It had finally happened. There was only one reason to demand attention in such a drastic way.

Sven threw himself against the top railing and bellowed, "The king is dead! King Vāmbat is dead! Assassinated! By a Talented."

The trampled earth beneath Bastiaan's bare feet lurched. He pressed a hand against the bell tower until his head—and heart—cleared. They couldn't save him. The king—Bastiaan's king—had died.

The communal shock was broken by shouts. As Sven descended the scaffolding and set foot back on the ground, people swarmed him seeking answers. He lifted his hands. "That's all I know. I came straight from my position at the *schloss*. Heard the news from a militair."

The murmurs grew. A report straight from the *schloss*—the palace of their country. It held enough clout to stir the whole city.

Once people realized Sven had no further information, they pressed coins into his hands as thanks. Then the theories began, all shopping abandoned.

"Assassinated by a Talented? Now the crown will never let commonfolk travel to the Well of Talents."

"Maybe his heir, the Murder Prince Mattias, will be different."

"Not likely. We should strike out for the Well while there's chaos at the *schloss*."

Even though Bastiaan's glove covered his Talent Mark, he slid his hand into his pocket all the same. If people realized he had a Talent, their growing frenzy would find a new target. Commonfolk had always been hungry for Talents—for an edge over their constant hunger and working to make ends meet. Talents were seen

as a strike of gold, better than coming into an inheritance from a dead, rich uncle.

A trip to the Well of Talents was always suggested as the easy fix. As though traveling for days to an unmarked Well to then battle four Trials in order to access its magic water were *easy*.

After the Talent talk died, a new question arose again and again as though repetition itself might procure an answer.

“How did the king die?”

“What sort of Talented did this?” This question contained an undertone of awe—as though the Talented who killed the king was fighting for the people. Making a statement.

“Maybe it was a wish,” Sven said.

Bastiaan straightened at this bold suggestion. A *wish*? This boy’s head had been in the canal too long. The last known Wishtress had died over two hundred seasons ago. He’d spent half of his own life searching for any research or records of the Wishtress Talent. There weren’t many.

Myrthe rolled her eyes. “That’s quite a speculation.” She, at least, seemed grounded.

“I’ve heard rumor of wishes being sold right here in Fairhoven.” Sven’s voice rose as his theory picked up speed. “For all we know, this could be the home of the Wishtress herself!”

“Sven, you don’t know what you’re saying!” Myrthe’s voice turned shrill, and she moved to grab his arm. He’d do well to listen to her. If the mob believed what he was saying, they’d tear this market apart. “There’s no proof the next Wishtress is even *alive* yet.”

The crowd pressed closer to Sven, ignoring the girl. “They say it was a Talented who killed the king. They must know something.”

Bastiaan could bear it no longer. The announcement was his purpose for waiting in the market. He left the crowd behind, left the limping girl behind, tucking the bread loaf under his arm.

His king was dead. Memories came in waves—of the mentorship, the fathering, the friendship he'd shared with the crown of the land.

And how he, Bastiaan, was the Talented who'd killed him.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



CHAPTER 4

MYRTHE

*I*wish . . .

An unfinished sentence—two little words—that prefaced countless dreams, hopes, and desires. Greed, lust, selfishness. It always started with those two words—words I despised almost as much as I despised the thaw.

Almost.

I sat on the grassy bank of Canal Vier—the main canal of Fairhoven and Winterune’s life source. My home rested in a field near one of the four fingers of this mighty canal, my doorstep practically on its banks. It made skating in winter that much easier.

Made it feel like the Vier flowed and froze only for me.

Though it was summer I gripped the laces of my ice skates in one hand and a small glass vial that held a wish in the other. The hand holding the wish trembled.

You stole it, Guilt whispered in my mind.

I made it, I retorted in a mental tug-of-war with my confidence. *It’s rightfully mine*. Yet I still shot a glance over my shoulder at our canal house with its carved-wood gables and shutters tied open to let in the fresh air.

I had met Oma's wish quota this week. One wish per week to cover my room and board. When I was younger, it was one wish per day. But then it got harder and harder to make myself cry so she relented.

She didn't need to know I created one extra. But if she *did* find out I'd kept a wish for myself, all frost would break loose. "*You don't know the rules. You don't know how to use it safely.*" She said those words as often as "good morning" and "hurry up."

"So teach me," I whispered to the sky. She had promised, once, to instruct me in the Wishtress ways. Every age day she allowed me to use a wish for myself. She would write up a contract, we'd discuss the terms, and then the wish would be used. Safely. The right way. *Oma's way.*

I was of age now. Seventeen years. Seventy seasons. Finally. "*At seventy seasons, your wishes are your own,*" Oma would say.

Three months ago marked my season age day—my half birthday. My seventieth season. I woke up expecting fanfare. Freedom.

But Oma said nothing to me other than, "*Snuff that fire in the hearth.*"

I'd hoped once summer markt began she'd take me into the wish booth. But three days ago she went to markt Opening Day, expecting me to join her an hour later. She gave me the extra time because of my limp—the one remnant of the pox that served as a constant reminder.

But no word about my Talent.

Oma refused to use a wish to heal me. She said I needed the reminder of the severity of wishes. It worked. I was too afraid to use a wish on myself. What if I ended up causing my own death? Or making the crippling so bad that I couldn't ice-skate? Skating was the one thing that didn't hurt my bones. I could speed along with no resistance, keep up with my peers, taste freedom.

A distant whistle met my ears. I shot to my feet, my pulse

entering a sprint. Through the trees on the other side of the canal came a form I had been both dreading and longing for.

Sven.

I waved and tucked the wish into my pocket. He used a pole to vault himself over the narrow branch of canal, landing lithe and limber on my side. Skin pale as a winter sun, eyes blue like icicles, Sven set down his pole and approached me with a grin. “You gonna kiss me good luck?”

I’d kiss him good anything to feel his lips on mine the way he kissed me in the winter. But summer had come. His kisses weren’t the same in spring. Too light. Too quick.

“I have something even better for you.” My heart swung to and fro. I wasn’t the only one about to take rash action. Since Sven announced King Vāmbat’s assassination yestermorn, the entire capital of Fairhoven had entered a frenzy. *Militairen* wanting Talented captured. Commonfolk wanting Talents for themselves—willing even to defy the law and make a pilgrimage in search of the Well.

Commonfolk like Sven.

I wasn’t about to be left behind. Not now that Oma failed to keep her promise. I needed help. I couldn’t live this life of slavery any longer. “I’m coming with you.”

Sven’s summer-sun smile dimmed like a sunset. “It’s *markt* season—your oma needs you.”

I stood tall. “I’m of age. My life is no longer restricted by the demands of others.” Couldn’t he see? I could make my own decisions: where to travel, what to pursue . . . who to marry. After all, love was a choice. And I chose Sven.

We chose each other.

“You’re a very capable girl, Myrthe, even with . . .” He glanced down at my feet. They were firmly planted in the soil, but I knew he was imagining my limp and the fact I couldn’t run. Why couldn’t he

remember me as I was in winter? On skates? When my legs seemed to work like everyone else's?

"This is no canal skate race. I'm taking the *pilgrimage*. I'm going to find the Well of Talents, once and for all."

"Is the Murder Prince funding your journey?"

Sven let out a hollow laugh. "He relieved me of my position as schloss cartographer."

I reached for him. "Oh, Sven, I'm so sorry." Sven had been so proud when the schloss took him on. It had promised food in his belly, travel, adventure.

He was the first cartographer since the slaughter of Winterune's cartographers fifteen years prior by a wild man. And the destruction of all maps to the Well.

He'd been brave to apply. To pick up the mantle of a lost trade.

"How will you find the Well without a map?"

Firm lines of determination turned his jaw to angles. "I'm not helpless."

"I'll help you." He had no idea how much I could help—how easy I could make this for him. For us.

"Even if I manage to find the Well, I still have to defeat King Vāmbat's Trials. I get it, Myrthe. The desire for a Talent is tempting for everyone—especially us commonfolk who aren't allowed to seek one in the first place."

"The crown is *blaming* Talented right now. If you come back with a Talent, what's to stop them from accusing you of the king's murder?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take—a risk a lot of people are willing to take. A Talent could protect us. Provide for us."

"You don't even know what type of Talent the Well might give you."

"That's the beauty of it. It could be anything! Have you ever heard of a Talent that wasn't appealing?"

I hadn't spent my life dreaming of having a Talent like so many others. But I'd heard of others—Talents to heal, to make bread, to start flame, to grow plants, to perceive truth or hear thoughts.

"I want a Talent, Myrthe. And I'm going to get one. That's worth angering the crown over. But . . . people *die* on this pilgrimage. Almost all of them. I can't . . ." He took a deep breath. "I can't put you at risk like that."

My growing irritation melted. He wasn't refusing me because he thought I'd be a burden. He was trying to protect me. "Sven, I don't want to go to acquire a Talent. I want to learn *about* Talents. How they work and how they're supposed to be used."

I skated a dangerous line. Should I tell him? No. Yes. Not yet. I must. I wanted freedom. And I wasn't sure I had the courage to leave without his help. Oma would find me—she'd use a wish and track me down.

I couldn't do this alone. Shouldn't do it alone. I knew what happened the last time I used a raw wish. Pappje died. Mutti died.

I didn't trust myself to manage this Talent alone. Not yet.

"Ah, sweet Myrthe." Sven looked pitying. Almost . . . patronizing. "Your heart is good, but I'll be accompanied by four of my fellows. Strong, smart men. No need to worry yourself." *Or come*, he didn't say.

"Five companions are better than four."

He laughed.

I grew annoyed now. I thought he'd want my company. Instead I was having to *persuade* him. That's not how relationship should be.

"You don't need a Talent," he continued. "You're perfect as you—"

"I already have one," I said flatly. "I'm not going for myself. I told you, I'm going to help." Only I no longer felt quite like helping. Or going. Or telling him my secret.

Sven gaped. "What . . . Do you mean you already have one?"

“I’m not sure how to make it any clearer. I. Have. A. Talent.”

“When did *you* achieve a pilgrimage?” Then, as if realizing what he said, his amusement disappeared. “What are you saying, Myrthe?”

I felt close to tears. This wasn’t the freeing reveal I’d envisioned. *I love him*, I told myself. That was supposed to muster up some sort of emotion to strengthen me, but it didn’t. It felt more like trying to convince myself of a lie.

But I needed Sven to help get me away from Oma. In exchange I’d help him—us—find the Well. “I never made the pilgrimage. I was born with the Talent.”

“No one is born with a Talent,” he rebutted in a relieved tone as though calling my bluff. “Not unless you’re the—”

“—the Wishtress.” My words were a forbidden whisper.

Sven’s lips clamped shut. He wasn’t smiling now. “You aren’t the Wishtress. I would have noticed.” Something tainted his voice. A strain of . . . was that jealousy? “You’re common.”

Why did he see it as a mighty honor for *him* to be common yet seek a Talent, but he sneered at the idea of me being common yet the Wishtress? I plunged my hand into my pocket and withdrew the vial containing the singular wish. “Need proof?”

“You could have bought that,” he croaked weakly.

My laugh sounded shrill to my own ears. “You think I could afford a wish?” He shrugged. My eyes burned a warning, starting as a coal and building to a flame until a tear blossomed. No. Not now. How was it so easy to cry in front of him yet I had to burn my own arm with a poker to bring forth a tear for Oma?

Best use this moment to my advantage. I needed Sven to believe me. I needed him to take me with.

“Fine.” I threw the vial to the dirt, letting the liquid wish splash out and soak into the earth, losing its magic. Sven lurched toward the discarded glass, too late. “Then I’ll show you.”

Everything within me screamed to stop. To stay my hand. To remember what happened last time.

My tear spilled over onto my cheek. Hot then cold, leaving a trail of fire and ice. I scooped it from my cheekbone with the pad of my pointer finger as I'd done a hundred times. But instead of dropping it into a glass vial for Oma . . . I let the tear rest on my skin.

Did I dare?

Sven stared. In that moment I felt no affection toward him and yet at the same time a desperation to prove my worth.

I stretched my hand over the waters of my small branch of Canal Vier, willing my voice to be steady. Water bugs skidded back and forth along the ripples from the bank, oblivious to what was about to come. This would be a simple wish. Nothing more. Besides, I was of age.

"I wish for these waters to turn to ice." *Please work.* I flicked my finger and the tear dropped into the shallows of the canal.

Where I anticipated a *plink* of droplet on water, the wish hit the smooth shallows with a sky-shattering crack. Sven and I both jumped. A burst of cold, white blue spread from the place of impact like a splash of winter. Thick ice sped across the waters, a parched creature lapping up the liquid of the canal and digesting it into a hard, resilient snake.

My forearm twinged under Sven's grip.

The cracking stopped and evening sunlight skipped along the glassy surface of the frozen canal. The very sight of the ice sent my heart sprinting for my skates. Rather than succumb to the urge, I lifted my eyes to Sven's. He stared at the ice, but his jaw worked as though grinding through a hundred meaty thoughts.

I opened my mouth, unsure what I was about to say, but he spoke first in a quiet voice. "Forgive me."

The tightness in my chest eased. "Of course."

“This”—he gestured to the canal—“You . . . are amazing. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

My arms dropped to my sides. What could I say? That I killed my own parents? That I’d lived in shame my entire life? That the longer I made wishes for Oma, the deeper I desired to escape her?

“Yesterday you accused the Wishtress of murdering the *king*. How could I know my secret would be safe?”

“*Did* you kill the king?” he asked in a whisper.

My gasp stuck in my throat. How could he ask that?

“It’s okay if you did—”

“Of course not!” The peace I thought I’d feel having my secret known had yet to come. My lungs seized the same as though I’d stepped outdoors at the height of winter. Eyes burned. Tears built.

“I didn’t mean to distress you.”

I shook my head, embarrassed. “I’ve . . . I’ve never told anyone this.” And Sven’s first thought was asking if I killed the king? “I suppose I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

“You’ve never told anyone?”

“Well, Oma’s known since I was little.” And my cousin, Anouk. But for some reason I didn’t want Sven to know that. He’d always admired Anouk and I didn’t want to shift the focus to her.

I had already crossed a forbidden line in telling Sven about my Talent. I couldn’t tell him about Oma’s wish business hidden beneath the tent flaps at markt. “Oma forbade me from telling anyone . . . for my own safety.” And for everyone else’s safety.

I eyed the pulse in his neck, listened to his rhythmic breathing, waited for his heart to stop or his body to go limp like Pappje’s, even though logic told me there was no reason for it to happen. I’d frozen one tiny branch of canal, nothing more.

I willed away the cloying emotions, but not before a tear slipped free. Out of habit I lifted it from my cheek with care. I scrutinized

the wish for a moment. I could save it for Oma—use it to fulfill next week’s quota. But in an act of defiance I moved to flick it away.

“Wait!” Sven’s shout echoed over the darkening canal. “You can’t just discard that. It’s . . . wasteful!” He scooped up the tossed vial. “Here.”

Old anger flared up at having my tears valued more than my heart, but I dropped the wish into the bottle. It bounced and danced, kept captive by the cork. Sven stared at the tear for a long second, then held the vial out to me.

I tucked it into my pocket. His gaze followed my movements. Of course he was tempted. Who wouldn’t be? Yet he did give it back to me. That was . . . noble.

“Now I *really* can’t take you with me.”

“What?” Even after I’d told him my secret? “Why?”

“It’s a greater risk now that the king is dead. Militairen will be unpredictable. Talented may be rising up. Even if they’re not, they’ll be hunted until the king’s killer is found. The Trials themselves have claimed many lives. How can I lead a woman into that?”

“You’re not *leading* me. It’s my decision. You can’t deny that I’d be invaluable.” I’d been waiting for the day to leave. To start living my own life. To discover *why* I’d been born the Wishtress and how to use it without Oma’s control. I needed to find the Well of Talents for myself and demand answers from it.

“If anyone else learned of your Talent—”

“They would learn only if you told them.” The sky darkened as the sun dipped behind the trees, reflecting my clouding mood.

“Don’t you think my companions would wonder where all the wishes were coming from? Or why everything happens so easily? Even if people didn’t suspect you, they could suspect me and who knows what they’d do? Blackmail. Torture. Maybe even kill me!”

In truth I hadn’t thought of that. My hopes vanished with the

sun. It wasn't a new feeling. I was used to being denied things I wanted.

"Then take this." I pulled the wish from my pocket.

His mouth said, "I can't." But his eyes—and the twitch of his hand—screamed out his desire. Oma would flay me for handing over a wish without a strict contract. I of all people knew the damage that could come from a raw wish.

But *I* was the Wishtress. Not Oma. And this was the boy I chose to love. "Take it. And come back to me."

He took it. "Thank you, my love." He kissed me. I clung to him, hoping for some flare of heart assurance of comfort. But he pulled away too soon and hoisted his pack onto his shoulders.

He called me *my love*. That must mean he chose me, too, right?

"Be safe," I whispered as he left me standing alone by the canal.

I stayed there long after his departure, body unmoving but mind spinning. I'd told him. Shown him. *Gave* him a wish, even. I'd waited for the day I'd be free of my secret. So why did I feel like instead of leaving my cell I added another padlock?

I could attribute it to nerves, but something deeper in my mind admitted . . . I regretted telling Sven.

I always told myself that I chose him—I *chose* to love him and I would stick by that. But after today, I saw once and for all that he never chose *me*.