

Chapter 1: Morwen

April 1 Reinhardt's Corner

Reinhardt's Corner is the provincial capital of the Southeast Province. Situated roughly one hundred kilometers south of the Sangre River and fifteen kilometers east of the Meridian Highway. The province is irrigated by numerous small channels of water, fed by the Sangre, and crisscrossing the landscape on the way to the ocean. Because of rich soil and easy access to water, the Southeast Province produces large amounts of agricultural products.

It was annoying. And it had been distracting her all evening—the sound of water falling drop-by-drop into a deep pool, echoing as though she was deep in an underground cavern. None of her friends or anyone else in the room seemed to notice it, but Morwen shivered, thinking that she'd experienced this moment before.

The room was enormous—larger than her family's entire house, and yet it didn't seem crowded, though at least one hundred people were attending the party . . . event? Party wasn't quite the right word. This was more of an extension of the business workweek, going deep into Sunday night. Except for Morwen and her group of close friends, whom Mr. Haussler had invited and welcomed, or at least tolerated for the sake of his daughter.

Morwen noticed a pattern in the room. The closer a cluster of people was to the main entrance, and to Mr. Haussler, the less wealthy the people appeared to be.

She looked around, half listening as Greta told the old story about the time her father loaned money to a man to start a local restaurant. The final loan decision rested upon a meal the prospective owner had prepared in Mr. Haussler's home. It seemed a clever way to get a free meal, to Morwen. She'd had heard the story before, but liked the way Greta's voice sounded as she described the night that strange man

had cooked for them, and how he had eventually opened five more restaurants, including a branch in Central City, where Council elders regularly dined.

People at the party were mostly from Reinhardt's Corner, local business owners, important customers and employees of the bank, and other associates of Greta's father. There were also a few people from Central City present—representatives from the Council Bank, which owned a large stake in his regional bank. Mr. Haussler's office was in the South East Provence Headquarters. People came to see him when they needed help—loans for capital equipment or animals, money for seeds, or money to pay workers during the planting and harvest seasons. During good years, farmers like Morwen's dad made a decent profit and were able to repay loans quickly, but there were bad years, too, when Mr. Haussler would be forced to foreclose on farmers who were less prepared for the lean times. Ultimately, the Council bought out or took possession of the foreclosed lands, adding it to their already extensive holdings within the province.

Someone was playing a harpsichord and the meter of the music blended with the sound of the dripping water, a metronome for the song. Morwen located the source of the music. It was a woman half way across the room, bent over an expensive looking instrument. She seemed to be concentrating on her playing, at first, but then she turned her head to look directly at Morwen. The face was more masculine than feminine, and the woman had dark, dead-looking eyes with a cynical smirk to her mouth, which was surrounded by week-old beard stubble. Morwen turned her head away and nearly dropped her drink at that sight. Again, no one else noticed, and when she looked again the face was that of an ordinary woman, still intent on the music.

There were a number of odd things about the room tonight. She knew that Mr. Haussler liked to add aromatic wood to the fireplace, along with the pine or oak or whatever he'd managed to purchase that year. The scent always gave the house a pleasant smell. But tonight the room didn't smell good at all. Instead, it reeked of

damp and musty rot, like a tomb. She shivered again and tried to ignore the anomalies.

The business of banking never stopped, even though this was a Sunday. Technically, business was forbidden on the Sabbath—whichever day that happened to be; it depended on the prevailing faith of the region or town. Morwen glanced at the woman playing again, allowing the music and the voices of her friends and the hushed tones of a group of businessmen close by to wash over her. She was trying to pretend that the sound of water didn't exist when everything in the room froze and then faded. Her mind fled to that other world—the bizarre world Morwen had been experiencing with increased frequency.

Different scenes flowed in front of and around her like a river flowing over a boulder in its course. She was apart from this world and the images she saw playing out, and yet she also often played a part in the visions. They began innocently enough tonight:

She and Greta were walking along the street from the Haussler house toward the barn where Whirlwind was stabled, passing people and businesses, including the dress shop where the wedding gowns were being made. She'd seen this snippet of time before, and allowed the walk to play out one more time. They encountered people from the town, sometimes exchanging pleasantries, nothing odd about that.

Next, Morwen saw herself at home—home, and yet something was very wrong here. Part of the scene was familiar enough—birds flying and performing a synchronized dance over a nearby field. They would dive deeply from the sky and then pull up, to play along the tops of the grasses—but nothing else was as it should be. No one was moving around the farm, not even the dogs. It was too quiet for the family farm, or any farm. Where were her father and mother? Morwen's perspective changed as she floated around the property without effort—and then she saw them. Her father, lying in a pool of blood with half of his head missing; her mother collapsed on the back porch, with a bright red stain still growing on the dress over her stomach. Farm animals lay peacefully throughout the yard and even in the

kitchen garden, which didn't make sense. The garden was forbidden to animals. And none of them were moving. A sudden sound beside her—close by—and her own view exploded in a shower of colors. After that she was surrounded by darkness, a bone-chilling cold, and again, the sound of dripping water.

A face appeared out of the darkness—difficult to see, since it was surrounded by a brilliant white light. It was a masculine face—the same beard-stubbed face she'd seen on the woman at the harpsichord, but now the eyes were different. They seemed kind and gentle and yet there was an inconsistency between the eyes and the bitter set of the man's mouth.

That scene faded and another disturbing image formed. She'd never seen her uncle in a vision before.

—But there he was. He'd told her that it was impossible for her to ever see him in a vision. —But there he was, lying on the ground, his body twisted into an unnatural position and leaning up against the trunk of a tree. A horse covered in lather and stained with blood stood nearby with its head down. Her uncle was obviously dead.

Next, a series of battle scenes played out—massacres, really. They happened below her, she was flying above the towns as soldiers rushed from building to building murdering everyone they saw. Towns burned, the innocent died, even children—so many deaths, so much destruction, and for no apparent reason she could see.

Finally, she found herself back in a shallow seaport town—another town with dirt streets, burnt out buildings, and hundreds of corpses littering the ground. These people looked as though they'd been dead for days, still lying in the dirt, but there were not enough people left alive to bury everyone. This was an echo of one of the massacres she'd just witnessed. Her descended to street level.

Two living figures were there: a young woman in her early twenties, roughly the same age as Morwen, with black hair and grey eyes. This was a face the visions had revealed to her many times before. But this time the woman's expression was

different—she was suffering, sobbing, but at the same time angry. There was a wild, murderous expression in her eyes.

Another girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen years of age, with bright red hair and fierce green eyes stood beside the woman, the familiar woman who was now on her knees, bent over one of the bodies. The woman and girl were both dressed like men, wearing military-style tunics and pants; their clothing was dirty and smeared with blood. The young girl was half supporting the woman, while guarding her with an expression that said she was ready to fight an entire army to protect her companion. The red haired girl glared back at Morwen, her hands clenched into fists. She wanted to comfort the kneeling woman she'd seen so many times before. She'd been sure that she would meet this woman one day, and that they would become good friends.

Finally, the visions faded again. It felt as though she was coming out of the trance, awakening . . . or maybe going back to sleep again. Which world was real and which was the dream? She couldn't say.

Greta and her friends had seen Morwen like this before. But this time, instead of the little smile that played on her lips as she gazed into space, there was a look of shock and horror in her eyes. She cried out: "No! For God's sake, no!"

Now everyone in the room was looking at them, looking at Morwen. There were muttered comments,

"It's that Beck girl, Greta heard someone say. Other guests stared at the group with frowns and looks of discomfort on their faces.

Morwen's awareness returned slowly. Greta's arms were wrapped around her and were holding her upright in the chair. She was shaking from the experience. The trance had been intense and frightening. It was a full fifteen minutes before she felt well enough to stand.

"I'm sorry," she told her friends, "I must have fallen asleep." It was what she always said after a vision came. Greta took one hand and led her up the stairs to the room where she was staying.

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It was not the first time Morwen had seen some of the images in visions, but she'd never seen her uncle, alive or dead, and she'd never seen the young woman whose face she knew so well in such pain, and there had been so much death. Nightmares had been plaguing her for the past month, and they were becoming more frightening and brutal. She didn't know what they meant, or if they were images of things that would come true, or not; she prayed they were not. Her feeling of dread was reinforced by the sound of dripping water, which had not stopped. It was stronger now, and didn't pause, even after she'd gone upstairs and to bed.

The day after the party, Morwen and Greta walked through town, trying to stretch out their remaining minutes. They barely noticed most of the people around them as they talked. Morwen had come to visit and to help with wedding plans. But it was time for her to ride home. She knew how her father worried and suspected he'd been up, waiting for her since before sunrise.

"Do you think Jim will want to move into town to work for your father after the wedding?" Morwen asked.

"I honestly don't know," Greta said. "We've talked about it, but haven't made a decision yet. Working for Dad makes a lot of sense, financially. But I'm not sure either of us wants to live here in town. It would be nice to get away from my parents for a while. You know, put some distance between us. Jim has the farm, of course. It's not as big as your dad's, but he thinks we can make a living, and he might be able to buy more land from his brother, Andy. Andy doesn't want to work his share of the inheritance. Last month he was talking about moving to Central City. Who knows? Maybe *he'd* like to work for my dad." Greta and Morwen laughed. "Why do things have to be so complicated?"

"I wish I knew," Morwen sighed.

"Are you going to tell your dad about last night?" Greta asked.

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“I don’t know. I don’t think so. He’s got enough to worry about. Planting season is almost here. I wish I didn’t have these . . . you know.” She stopped. By tacit agreement they normally pretended the visions never happened.

Greta nodded. “Yeah. Me, too—sorry.”

They were passing the store where the dresses for Greta’s wedding were being made. It was on the way to the stable. Greta looked in the direction of the shop, and then at Morwen, raising her eyebrows.

“No,” Morwen said. “We are *not* going inside. If we go in, we’ll be there all afternoon.”

“Awe, come on. Yours should be almost ready. Don’t you want to try it on?”

Morwen shook her head. “I’d like to, but I can’t.”

“You’re no fun.”

“You know the saying . . . Life on a farm is its own kind of fun.” Morwen laughed, but her laughter soon faded.

“What is it?” Greta asked.

Morwen stood still, looking around the town with an alarmed look on her face. “I’m not sure. This looks familiar, too familiar.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen this before.”

“Seen what?” Greta scanned the street, looking for whatever was upsetting her friend. “The town? Of course you have.”

“No. It’s like something from a vision I’m remembering; call it *déjà vu*, but a lot stronger. Weird.”

“I don’t see anything weird happening.”

“It’s not something you’d notice. It’s more like the situation is just eerily familiar. Everyone on the street is in exactly the same place I saw them . . . last night—everyone. That red horse drinking from the trough: see the way his reins have slid down and fallen into the water? And the man over there, on the porch and under the awning, looking at us, there’s something about him I . . . I don’t like.”

“Who? What man?” Greta looked around.

“He just went into the barber shop. But I’ve seen him before.”

“Lots of people come into town—all the time, Dad deals with buyers from all over. You probably just don’t remember running into him.”

“Maybe. But the thing is, I saw him going into that barber shop in my vision last night, wearing identical clothes.”

“That’s not unusual, especially with businessmen. Their clothes are almost like a uniform.”

But there was more to it. It wasn’t just that one man. It was everything—she’d experienced this before and it felt as though she’d seen it again and again. Right on cue, another memory clicked in: Mr. Hardy was passing them on horseback. *Hello girls. Wedding’s getting close, isn’t it? Clears his throat...* Morwen played the dialogue out in her mind, hearing Hardy’s baritone.

“Hello, girls. Wedding’s getting’ close, isn’t it?” Mr. Hardy said, and then he cleared his throat, just as Morwen remembered. Greta smiled at him and nodded.

Then the vision of the walk ended—a little snippet that time had revealed to her come true. This was how her uncle described visions. The question was: What about the other things she’d seen—the bad ones—were they about to come true, too? Or were they just a dream? What if everything came true?

Morwen wanted to turn around and go back to Greta’s house, to the safety of her room inside the family home. She wanted to stay and talk with her friend all day and all night and try on dresses and forget what she’d seen. But she couldn’t. Morwen shook her head to clear it.

“I don’t know. It’s probably nothing,” But Greta didn’t look convinced. She obviously thought there was something wrong.

She hugged Greta goodbye and then went to the stable to pick up her horse. Whirlwind was already saddled and anxious to stretch his legs. Morwen led him back outside to where her friend waited.

“I’m sorry, Greta. I’m just in a strange mood—probably from last night. I’ll see you soon.”

“You’d better be back here Friday for the fitting!”

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Morwen nodded, and then leapt up onto the back of the horse without bothering with the stirrup. She waved as the horse trotted out of town.

She rode Whirlwind as fast as his legs would carry them. She loved the way it felt on his back, with the wind blowing her hair and the deep rhythm of his footfalls traveling through her chest, like thunder. She'd spent two nights at Greta's, but now she was anxious to get home.

The visions had come out of nowhere, unbidden, and there was no way to predict if a vision was important, or if it was just her mind playing around. They'd been so clear. She experienced the world with eyes and ears and even smell. It often felt as though she traveled somewhere when the visions came. The 'real' world stopped and the people around her appeared frozen—in between time.

When it happened, Morwen knew she could move around and through whatever tableau time had laid out before her. This allowed her to see what was happening from different perspectives. Her uncle told her how this all worked when she was younger. He was trying to prepare her for the likelihood of having visions, so that when they came she wouldn't be so afraid. But it didn't help; hearing about something was much different than experiencing it.

She knew her uncle had visions, too, only his were much more intense, and *he* could control what he saw. He told her that female members of the family received only a splinter of the ability, but that the males inherited the full tree. He said that visions *could* become debilitating without training, if you let them. She wondered what his life had been like when he was her age.

She understood that she would begin to see potential future events as she grew up—that what she had was insight into things that *might* happen to *her*, echoes of the future, but not the capability to direct her vision just anywhere, or toward other people. It was frustrating. She would eventually get used to the flashes of what might be, and learn when to ignore them and when to pay attention.

The Wastelands and the Wilderness, The Story of The Balance, Part 2

It was mid afternoon when Morwen arrived home. She waved at her father as Whirlwind slowed to a walk and automatically made his way to the barn. Once there she removed his harness and saddle and then rubbed the horse down with some hay, before turning him loose in the small corral behind the barn.

“Hi, Papa,” Morwen said, as she hugged her dad. “What are you making?”

“Just a little table.”

“You never stop, do you?”

Her father smiled and shrugged. “What else would I do?”

“How about relaxing a little?”

“Plenty of time for that . . .”

“I know—I know, when you can’t do anything else,” Morwen finished.

“How was Greta?”

“Oh, you know. The wedding’s almost here and she’s going crazy. Just three more weeks.”

“I remember what it was like. Did you see Johan in town?”

“Just a little,” she said, looking away. She didn’t want to talk about what had happened. “Is Mama inside?”

“I think so. It’s been a while since I saw her. She’s either inside or out back in the garden. It’s time for her to plant, too—the kitchen garden.”

Morwen thought back to the lounging animals of her vision, trespassing where they weren’t allowed. Her father’s head, half of it gone... She yawned and stretched her arms high and wide. “I never sleep so well as I do in my own bed,” she said, pushing the image aside, thinking that maybe it was just a scary dream.

“Me neither.”

“I think I’ll go help Mama in the house.”

“Good idea.” Karl turned back to the table, smiling now.

Morwen stopped at the top of the steps of their small front porch and looked back out across the fields. They would soon be plowed under and seeded, but for now the wild winter grasses were drying in the sun. Light touched the tops of the longest stalks and the birds dipped low above them, playing a game of dare—to see

who could fly closest without touching the grass. The smell of fresh bread wafted through an open doorway, but then changed to what she'd sensed the night before—dank, cold—the smell of rot. She shivered, but closed her eyes, wanting to feel the sunlight on her face, warm and welcoming. But instead, she heard the noise of dripping water again, louder now, and she felt a chill in the air.

When she opened her eyes, Morwen knew she was truly waking up this time. There was darkness—a space completely devoid of light. It was so dark that she wondered if her eyes still worked at all. The air was dank, and the smell of decay and rotting wood and of other dead things that she didn't want to think about was all around.

She sat up, tears running down her cheeks, and leaned forward to hug her knees. There were no sunny field of grass and she was sitting painfully on a hard rocky surface—somewhere. This was a vision she'd experienced, too. Morwen wished that she could wake up from this nightmare and be back at home, safely in her own bed, but knew there would be no waking this time.

She had been experiencing one last day over and over again, visions and dreams and memories all mixed together—a recurring nightmare that had come true. How many times had she awakened to this darkness?

Morwen held on to the good memories of that last day—hoping that one day .

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The visions had never revealed how this dark future might end—maybe it didn't. Would she ever see her father again? Ever see sunlight or an open sky, or birds playing, or smell bread baking in her mother's oven? What about the other horrible things her vision had revealed? Her only companions now were the dripping water, the smell of death, and the darkness.

Morwen opened her mouth and screamed until her voice faded to a raspy moan and her breaths turned to sobs, and then—gradually—her consciousness faded again, back to another restless sleep.