

# 1

As Fief rode up the path toward Bartle's cottage, he saw that the land had suffered in Bartle's absence. Nothing but weeds grew healthily on this land. Squinting toward the mountains, he understood finally what Bartle spoke of when he mentioned his sweeping views. Rolling hills led off into cloudless blue skies that framed white-capped mountains on the horizon.

"Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" A high-pitched childish voice chirped ahead of him on the path. Fief saw a cap of wild dark curls bounce around a little girl's head as she hopped up and down with a dirty doll clutched to her chest. She grinned at him excitedly but she was missing some teeth.

"Hi," he said back. He stopped his horse near her and looked down at her with a kind smile. She had the same olive skin and brown eyes as Bartle, with thick dark lashes and the same impish smile. "Who are you?"

"I'm Grey," she said, but with her babyish voice it sounded like she called herself "Gwey."

"Was your father named Bartle?" he asked, even though he already knew.

She nodded her head up and down excitedly.

"YES and I told my ma you was coming, Fief. An' I told her that, and she didn't believe me. 'Cuz I told her what my da said, and she didn't believe me. So *you* tell her, kay?"

Fief was confused by her rushed words, but he was instantly alert. Bartle had left on the king's quest when Grey was still a newborn. They'd been gone for the past few years and there was no way she could remember him.

"My GreysHELLA is smart," Bartle had always told anyone who would listen. "She was sitting up and looking around long before the other kiddies her age. She'll probably be smarter than Fief himself."

Fief shook his head at the memory.

"How did you know my name?" he asked Bartle's daughter. His heart was pounding in his chest. He held his breath while he waited for her to answer him.

"My dad told it to me," she said. She raised her arms to him. "He said you was coming."

The world spun a little.

"When?" he asked.

“Today!”

Fief didn't have time to register his shock. Grey was about to have a tantrum. Her eyebrows were pressed together and her face was getting red. It reminded him of the king's youngest son, one of Fief's favorite people. He couldn't help but smile as she stamped her foot in impatience. Leaning down, he waited for her to come closer so he could lift her into the saddle with him. The first thing she did when she was seated in front of him was to lean back against him and lift up her doll so it was inches from his face.

“This, Molly,” she said. “Kiss!”

Fief leaned away from the dirty doll.

“No,” he said. “YOU kiss it.”

Grey lowered the doll to her own face and kissed it on the forehead. She tried to lift it so he could kiss it too, but Fief refused.

“Let's go see your ma,” he said, moving the horse forward on the path.

“Are you going to tell her, Mister Fief?” Grey asked.

“Who?” Fief asked.

“My ma.”

“Tell her what?”

“That my da not comin' home no more.”

Fief couldn't figure it out.

“How do you know that?” he demanded.

“He told me so,” the child said. “I saw him an' I told my mommy but she don't believe me. She slapped my face. But when you tell her 'bout my papa I'm going to say 'I told you so,' because I did!”

“You saw Bartle?” Fief clarified. “When?”

“When he died, Mr. Fief,” she said.

They arrived at her cottage, and Fief had trouble holding on to her as she squirmed for him to let her down off the horse. She hollered for her mother as soon as her feet touched the ground, and dashed toward the house.

Bartle's wife came running from inside, hope dying when she saw it was only Fief and not her husband. The woman was dressed in rags and clutched a cleaning cloth in her work-worn hands. Her ringleted-hair was more gray than brown, and it fell to her shoulders in ratty knots. Fief had met her many times over the years, and remembered that she once looked beautiful. Now, she looked used up.

"Madame, I come with ill news and tidings from the King," Fief said.

"Bartle?" the woman asked, her face whiter than snow.

"He is gone," Fief said gently. "He died at my side."

Her reaction wasn't what he expected. Fief watched uneasily as the woman's eyes shifted from him and pinned to her child's.

"*You*," she said to the child in disgust. "*You* did this!"

The woman hurled herself at her daughter, snatched her up and began shaking and pummeling Grey's body with her fists. Grey screamed and tried to get away, but her mother hurt her before Fief could pull them apart.

"I'll kill her, I'll kill her!" the woman screamed over Grey's wails, her voice cracking.

Fief angrily shoved the woman away and watched as she fell to the dirt. He found Grey crawling away with his horse between her and her mother. He picked the child up and held her close to him, horrified as she clung to him in terror and buried her face in his neck.

Moaning, Bartle's wife picked herself up and staggered away.

"Keep her away from me, or I'll kill her," she said in a guttural sob, slamming the door shut behind her.

In the silence that followed, Fief stared at the door in shock, uncertain what to do next. It took him a few moments of listening to Grey's whimpers before he realized he needed to take the child to see a healer. He carefully climbed on his horse with the dirty child clinging to him. He turned his horse away from the cottage as his anger slowly burned away and was replaced by fear.

Had he just become responsible for a child?

He remembered passing a small village not far from Bartle's cottage. He rode back to it as slowly as he dared, asking for a healer to the first person he saw. When he got to the healer's home, he saw the man was in his yard pruning the garden. Eyeing Fief approaching with Grey in his arms, the man quickly closed his gate with a loud clank, separating himself from Fief and Grey.

“I’ll not see that one,” the healer said. “She’s cursed.”

Fief gripped the horse’s reigns so tightly it flicked its head in irritation.

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

“She’s touched by Death,” the healer said. “When she came around here, that child said she saw my dead wife.”

Shaking his head in refusal, the healer tossed down his pruning shears and went inside, muttering, “Won’t do it.”

Fief was dumbfounded. He wanted to burn the man’s house down. If he weren’t the king’s chosen man, he probably would have. He hadn’t survived the horrific loss of his best friend, only to watch the man’s daughter be shunned from the people who were supposed to take care of her. It was too disrespectful to tolerate.

It reminded him of his childhood, and the way he had been shunned as a small boy in the village where he lived with his mother. She had dropped him off at the Tower the day he turned 6 and never came back for him.

Fief’s heart dropped when Grey whimpered in his arms, and he felt sorry for her. Looking down, he saw that the child was staring at him with the corners of her mouth turned down. Her big brown eyes looked at him pitifully and he couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

He had nothing left to do but take the girl with him. Because Bartle died while in the king’s service, his wife and daughter became dependents of the crown. Until he could get the child back to see the King, she was Fief’s responsibility.

Remembering the nearby river, Fief rode away from the village, eager to shake this town from his boots. He came to the water and dismounted. He took the child to the water’s edge and knelt there, trying to carefully pry her from around his neck. Examining her, he realized she was in a state of disarray. She had scratches all over her face and the beginnings of bruises on her arms. Dried blood was caked around her nose, and one of her eyes was swollen.

“You’re dirty,” he said gently. “When was the last time you had a bath?”

Grey didn’t answer him.

“Well, let’s get you in there so you can clean up,” he said, pointing to the water. “I don’t want a smelly kid riding on my horse.”

His words seemed to register with her. She blinked at him with tear-streaked lashes.

"I go wif you?" She asked in a small, trembling voice.

He nodded. "I promised your father I would tell you stories about him," he said. "I can take you to meet the king, and we'll figure it out after that."

Grey tilted her head to the side like she was listening to something.

"My papa said you're good," she said after a moment. "He said ta stay wif you. Da, how come, why was mama mad, was I a bad girl?"

Fief's brow furrowed. He thought she was talking to him, and didn't know how to handle the question.

"But Da, she hurted me!" Grey continued, sounding like she was near tears. Fief realized she was having a conversation without him. Shifting his weight to see her face better, Fief saw that her eyes were unfocused, as if she saw something that he couldn't. Reaching out, Fief pressed his fingers to her cheek. Turning his head to look where she was looking, he recognized his old friend Bartle standing there and smiling at them.

"Bartle?" he breathed, frozen.

Bartle's lips moved. To Fief, he looked exactly the way he'd seen him so many times in life that for a second, Fief wondered how he could have been so wrong. He had watched Bartle die, and had buried him with his own hands. Had he buried a man alive?

Grey said slowly, "Your hair is getting long, Wizard. Hey, I'm countin' on you...to take care of my GreysHELLA. Don't muck it up...Da, can I say 'muck?'"

Fief watched Bartle's lips move, and he rejoiced when he heard the tinkle of Grey's laughter.

"Nuh-uh, Dad!"

"I cannot believe it," Fief breathed. "You can see the dead."

Grey waved at her dad, and Fief watched as her eyes re-focused and settled on him. She was quiet as she stared at him, blinking her doe eyes slowly. He dropped his fingers from her face. Bartle had disappeared.

"You really stink," he finally said, pushing his hair out of his eyes. Grey made a funny face at him, like she was frowning at him for teasing her. "Get in there!"

She turned to stare at the water.

"Fief," she said, "what am I s'posed to do, get in there we-ked?"

“Yes, take off your dirty dress, and get in there naked,” he said. “I’ll figure out some of my clothes you can wear.”

Grey giggled, kicking off her shoes. “I can’t wear your clothes, you’re a boyyyyyy.”

Grey hitched up the skirt of her dress and tried to pull it over her head but the waist tie was too tight, and it was stuck under her arms, trapping her half-in and half-out of her clothing. He had to help her untangle herself so she could plod into the water and scream at its chilliness.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” she said dramatically, shaking her body like she was shivering. Fief shook his head at her, and unsaddled his horse while he waited for her to finish.

“Wash your hair,” he reminded her.

“Wif what, Mr. Fief? I got no hair soap!”

Fief dug out a bar of soap from his bags and handed it to her. Grey took it and started to lather it, but the soap slipped out of her little hands and into the water.

“Oops,” she said, staring at the water where it had disappeared.

“Can you swim?” Fief asked, annoyed.

She looked at him from under her lashes and nodded her head. Fief realized she thought she was in trouble. She was watching him to see if he was going to get mad at her.

“Then swim under there and get the soap,” he said, smiling at her. “That’s the only one I have.”

“Okay!” She smiled and immediately sucked in her breath before dropping under the water to search for the soap. She flailed her arms and legs as she stayed under, searching for the soap.

Fief shook his head at her, watching her carefully in case she needed him. Finally, she came up for air triumphantly, holding the soap above her head.

“I gots it,” she gloated. “An’ I held my breaaf a long time, Mr. Fief. Didja see?”

“I saw,” Fief assured her. “Now get to washing.”

Grey started washing, but a few minutes later he realized she was playing again. He had to keep an eye on her or she’d get off track. He was scolding her again when he heard a horse’s hoofbeats approaching.

“Come out of the water, and dry off now,” he called to Grey, turning to stand and face their visitor. He saw it was a woman with brown hair tied into a long braid. She raised a hand in greeting, and smiled at Grey in the water.

“I gots no clothes, Mr. Fief,” Grey protested, kicking about in the water.

“I’ll find you something,” he assured her.

“I guess I’ll hafta walk around we-ked,” she said seriously.

“I don’t think so,” he snorted.

“Why come?” she asked.

“You’ll be cold,” he reasoned.

“No I won’t, I like the cold,” she argued.

“Well, people don’t want to look at naked little girls,” he said.

“Why come?”

“You mean ‘how come,’” he corrected her. “And they don’t want to see you naked because it’s improper.”

“What’s *improper*?” she asked, not understanding the word.

“It’s rude,” he explained.

“Like burping?” She smiled at him. “I can burp *real rude*.”

He grinned back, but turned away from her as the woman finally arrived at their little camp.

“I heard you had little Miss Greyshella in your care,” the woman said. “I help the Healer. I brought you some supplies.”

“Thank you,” Fief said. “Why is that?”

The woman looked him in the eye and then looked at Grey.

“It’s not her fault that she’s a Keeper,” the woman said. “She’s just a little girl. She should be able to live a normal life with people that love her. I figured you probably could use some help. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Fief said.

He offered a hand as she dismounted, and took the pack of supplies she offered.

“What did you call her—a Keeper?”

“Keeper of the Dead,” she clarified. “A person blessed with the ability to see ghosts and speak for them.”

Fief frowned. “I’ve never heard of that before, I wonder if it’s a form of wizardry. What is your name?”

“Tessa,” she said.

“Tessa, did you know Bartle’s family?”

“Yes, my family has lived in this town longer than his,” she said. “Bartle’s parents died here, and so did his wife’s.”

“Yes, his wife,” Fief said, anger rising at the memory. “We met.”

Tessa frowned when he heard Fief’s tone.

“What happened?”

“She hurt Grey when I came to let her know Bartle has passed.”

Tessa’s eyes widened, and she turned to stare at Grey.

“So it is true,” she breathed. “Bartle is gone. Grey told her it was so.”

“For the safety of the child, I am taking her back to the King,” Fief said. “Bartle died while working on behalf of the Crown. That means Grey and her mother are the King’s wards.”

“I’m so glad she’ll be taken care of,” Tessa said. She sighed. “Everyone knows Grey has been neglected while her mother slowly let go of reality. I had hoped you were here because you heard the child is a Keeper. I thought perhaps you were taking her to the Wizard’s Tower.”

They both looked at Grey, who was talking to herself while she played. The child was trying to spin in the water and feel the waves she was creating.

“Did Bartle’s family ever show signs they might have Wizard’s blood?” Fief asked.

“Not that I know of,” Tessa said. “That’s not my area of expertise. But none of them had eyes like yours...the blue Wizard’s eyes.”

Fief nodded. "We spent years together, and I never noticed it," he said. "That's why I ask."

"Keepers once lived like Wizards, traveling the land and helping people keep in contact with their Dead," Tessa said. "Some of the best campfire legends I know are all about Keepers."

Fief was intrigued. He would have to contact his Master at the Wizard's Tower to speak with him about this.

"Do you think I could trouble you to write me at the Tower and repeat those tales as best you can remember them?"

"Sure thing, Wizard," Tessa said. "So long as you take care of this darling, I would be happy to help."

"I will take care of her," Fief promised.

"Good," she said. "I wish there was more I could do. I brought Grey some dresses, a nightgown, a brush and some shoes that should fit her. I also brought her ties for her hair and a warm cloak. She's about the size my daughter was a year ago, so if they don't fit now, they will soon. Do you have any children, Wizard?"

"No," Fief said. "I have no idea how to care for one, so I fear I may have been a little hasty with this trip."

"Well, I can teach you a few things," Tessa offered, "because there's no going back now. Grey, come on out now, I have a surprise for you."

"You do?" Grey asked, sounding excited. She had ignored Fief when he asked her to come out of the water, and was playing while he wasn't paying attention. Now she came out quickly and waded to Tessa, shivering pathetically.

Tessa grabbed Fief's towel where he'd left it, and used it to scoop Grey out of the water. Fief paid attention as Tessa warmed and dried Grey efficiently, rubbing the towel through her hair. Tessa helped Grey put on one of the dresses she'd brought, and then combed and pulled Grey's hair into a bun on the top of the child's head.

Grey pulled out the edges of her skirt, examining the dress, and smiled.

"I wike it!" she said, doing a little twirl.

"I like it too," Fief said. She looked like a little doll. "Thank you, Tessa."

"Dank you, Tesha," Grey repeated. She gave the woman a hug, and Tessa grinned.

“Be a good girl for the Wizard,” she told the child. “Do as he says the *first* time he says it, okay?”

“Kay,” Grey agreed, still staring at her dress. Tessa kissed her on the top of her head.

“Good luck,” she said to Fief. “Keep her safe.”

“I will,” Fief said. He watched the woman leave, then started packing up his saddlebags. “Are you ready to get on the road? We have several hours of light ahead of us.”

“Horsey?” Grey asked, pointing at it.

“Yep, we get to ride out now,” Fief said. He saddled his horse with their gear, and then climbed up. Leaning down, he pulled Grey up into the saddle with him. She immediately made herself cozy, leaning back against him so she could get comfortable.

“Oh no, oh no,” she wailed instantly.

Alarmed, Fief looked around.

“What is it?”

“My dolly,” Grey cried. “My Molly Dolly!”

“It’s probably back at the house,” Fief said. “I’ll get you another dolly.”

“No!” Grey screamed at the top of her lungs, sobbing. “My doooooolly!”

Fief could feel her shaking in tears over her doll. She wailed and cried as they found the road out of town. It broke his heart how miserable she sounded but he was definitely not taking her back anywhere near her home.

They’d been riding for a while before Fief realized the child was very quiet. Peering down awkwardly, he was finally able to see that she’d fallen asleep in his arms. Her long eyelashes fluttered a little as she dreamed.