

**Along divergent paths: A two-part thesis in creative and technical writing**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
DOCUMENT OVERVIEW	vi
Abstract for Part I: Creative Writing	vi
Abstract for Part II: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication	vii

### PART I: SENCHEN RISING: IN FALLON’S HANDS

CHAPTER 1: THE AWAKENING	1
CHAPTER 2: THE BIND	4
CHAPTER 3: THE DELIVERY	21
CHAPTER 4: THE PATH	31
CHAPTER 5: THE SEVERING OF BONDS	41
CHAPTER 6: THE INQUIRY	55
CHAPTER 7: THE CLEANSING	65
CHAPTER 8: THE CHALLENGE	74
CHAPTER 9: THE CLEARING	84
CHAPTER 10: THE KEEPER	93

### PART II: PICTURING THE FUTURE: VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	102
Research Questions	103
Definition of Terms	104
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	107
How has literacy evolved to include visual communication?	107
How can visual communication impact student learning?	111

What Core Visual Design Principles Are Essential to Educators?	119
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS	124
Procedure for Analyzing Three Universities' Websites	125
Interview and Survey Development	125
Data Collection and Analysis	126
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	128
Sample Characteristics of Courses at Three Iowa Universities	128
Courses that Potentially Include Visual Communication	128
Participant Description	132
Data Analysis and Discussion of Interviews	133
Trends in Visual Communication Goals and Objectives	133
Trends in Visual Communication Coursework and Assignments	139
Trends in Visual Design Principles	144
Trends in Accessibility, Comprehensibility, Affectivity, and Usability	148
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	151
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS	153
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	154
WORKS CITED	155

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## DOCUMENT OVERVIEW

Due to the difference topics representing each co-major—Creative Writing and Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communications—this thesis is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on the creative writing portion of my thesis—the first half of my young adult fantasy novel. Part II focuses on my interests in visual communication and secondary education as fulfillment for the rhetoric portion of my master’s degree in English.

### **Abstract Part I: Creative Writing**

*Two magical books—one good, one evil—each concealed and protected...until now.*

It began 300 years ago in the secluded mountain town of Cennfhain. There, the battle between The Senchen and The Shadows raged until virtue triumphed and bound evil into the Book of Umbra. A family of scribes—the MacBaharins—were chosen to preserve The Book of Illumination that recorded testimonies of the battle and the incantations used to defeat The Shadows. Now, The Shadows have returned, seeping from their parchment prison and seeking the one person who according to the prophecies possesses the power to release them on the world.

Fourteen-year-old Fallon has dreamed about this moment for years. In two weeks, The Passing Ceremony will officially decree her adulthood in the eyes of The Council and the laws of Cennfhain. She will be free to make her own choices and make her opinion heard—without having to shout them. She may even be free enough to practice her magic. But when Fallon learns the true purpose of The Passing Ceremony, making choices and being an adult isn’t as simple as she thought—especially when she is accused of murder and fleeing for her life. Caught between The Council’s plan to steal magic and a malevolent shadowy force determined to kill her newborn sister, Fallon must find the strength, courage, and magic to defeat the ancient evil threatening to destroy everyone and everything she loves.

**Abstract Part II: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication**

Literacy concerns have existed for decades—bound by the ability to read, write, and speak within a cultural and societal framework. With the advent of the Information Age, however, literacy has evolved to include visual communication—the ability to ‘read,’ interpret, understand, use and create information presented in pictorial or graphic images. Because secondary (and elementary) educators are the main resource for improving the quality of students’ visual literacy skills, it is necessary to raise important questions concerning how visual communication is positioned within teacher preparation programs. This study investigates the evolution of literacy, the impact of visual communication on learning, and critical visual design principles educators need to create usable instructional materials and equip secondary students with visual literacy skills. Applying these findings to an analysis of three teacher preparation programs in Iowa reveals that although research proves the importance of visual communication in today’s technological society, limited opportunities exist for future secondary educators to acquire these skills.



## **PART I: SENCHEN RISING: IN FALLON'S HANDS**

### **CHAPTER 1: THE AWAKENING**

His hand shook as he drew the serrated blade across his left thigh. Blood welled from the shallow cut and splattered on the stone floor. His warm breath collided with the frigid air of the bed chamber. The white puffs dissipated as the shadows swallowed them. If disappearing were that easy, he wouldn't have to murder. He never killed them outright, but the victims always saw his face last before being indentured to evil.

A groan filled the room. He looked at the body heaped near the fireplace. A dirt-smeared arm extended from the rags. The fingers flexed. A glimpse of pity flared, and he flinched at the path of ragged fingernail fragments on the floor. The darkness in his mind strangled this last portion of humanity.

The man flexed his fingers around the handle of the knife before slicing his leg again. Sweat beads pooled on his forehead and blood pulsed beneath his temples. Battling The Shadows' magnetism and denying them free access to his soul only prolonged his torment and left him weak.

He pounded his fist on the fresh wound and clamped his mouth shut. His jaw ached, but pain kept him vigilant against the malevolence hovering just beyond his peripheral vision. That sniveling little apothecary, curse him, had promised that the herbs would keep him alert, but instead they attacked his mind and body leaving him vulnerable to the darkness.

It pressed around him until his breath came in ragged gasps and specks of light flashed in front of his eyes. He swayed on the short, wooden stool. His chest heaved, and he gripped the brocade canopy around his bed. The movement sent a jolt of energy through his exhausted nerves, but it evaporated in moments. His heartbeat resumed its sluggish pace, and he slumped against the rough cut stone of the wall.

Gods be damned for making him The Shadows' servant. He tightened his fingers around the handle of the knife. He just wanted peace. Since he had touched that foul black book, dark thoughts invaded his mind, and he could hear an incessant ticking. Tearing apart his quarters for the source hadn't helped. *Tick*. It had only made the countdown louder.

*Tock.* Crushing his great-grandfather's pocket watch hadn't ceased the noise. *Tick.* It only destroyed a family heirloom. *Tock.* Sleeping hadn't cured him. *Tick.* The sound plagued his dreams. *Tock.* Only smashing the servant's head with a chunk of firewood had brought silence...until now. With each passing *tick*, rage surged inside of him. He pressed his hands to his head and screamed. Control of his mind and body seeped between his fingers.

The body on the floor twitched and an eye fluttered open beneath a tangled mass of hair. The man staggered to his feet, kicking the stool towards the fireplace. It bounced off the heap and skidded to a halt near the door. "You are to blame!" he hissed.

"I was whole. Whole! Do you hear? For weeks!" he spat. "No dreams...no eternal ticking...no urges." Light reflected off the tip of his blade, and he took a step forward. He struggled to maintain his balance. "Until you." A mewling sound came from the old woman curled on the floor.

"Something inside of me is clawing its way out for you." He took another step and swayed. "I tried to resist. But can a moth resist the lure of the light? Can a spider ignore its next meal struggling in its web?" Sweat drenched his hair and the collar of his cloak. "Can you hear it?" He cocked his head. "Your life is ticking away." He stood to his full height with his arms outstretched and palms up. His body swayed to the silent pendulum swinging inside his mind. "Tick tock." The shadows around him deepened and writhed about his feet. "Tick tock."

"Don't worry," he whispered. His muscular chest expanded to fill his lungs to capacity. Dropping his arms to his sides, he glanced down at the shadowy mass near his feet before focusing on his prey. Dark clouds pooled in his eyes until his pupils were black and opaque. His voice was soft, almost loving. "The pain only lasts a moment."

Striking with a suddenness that belied his earlier weakness, he stabbed the knife into the wooden bedpost and seized the heap with both hands. Firelight emphasized the bulbous masses churning beneath his face and down his neck. He yanked the old woman towards him until he filled her vision. She recoiled, her feet sliding uselessly on the floor. "But," he smiled. "That moment will come again and again for as long as you live!" The woman's bloodshot eyes widened. She clawed his face and chest and screamed weakly. "Shhh..." he

crooned. His mouth stretched wide as if unhinging to devour her.

A black mist boiled past his teeth and lips. The woman's open mouth gave the inky cloud easy access. It flowed into her until her cheeks bulged. She convulsed and her hands tore at her throat. Her eyes rolled back and she fainted. The man laughed and released the woman. Her head dropped to her chest and her arms hung limp at her sides, but her body remained upright as if invisible strings held her aloft. Ebony liquid leaked from her nose and the inside corners of her eyes. Another disposable servant.

He backed away from the tangle of floating rags. The wounds on his thigh throbbed, and stillness reverberated in the room. The ticking, however, lingered—a subdued reminder of The Shadows' demands and growing power. He sat on the edge of his bed. The straw-filled mattress crinkled beneath his weight. All of his muscles urged him to lie down, but he couldn't indulge in such luxuries. Not yet, at least.

Time grew short between offerings, and the disappearances of these sacrifices were more difficult to conceal. This one had been a fighter, despite her age and injuries. He hoped her trade in midwifery would help silence any suspicions about her prolonged absence. At least she had no family to cause a ruckus with The Council.

The first signs of daylight filtered in through the long, narrow window near the door. The Shadows had fled into the woman's body, but they would return to him. He wiped his hand across his face. They always came back because he possessed the book—a curse of a book. Soon he would be free of cursed pages and The Shadows, if his plan worked.

The midwife's fingers twitched and she lifted her head. The Shadows swirled in her sockets before fading away to reveal her dull, brown eyes. "The child comes," she croaked and lurched forward.

## CHAPTER 2: THE BIND

Fallon pushed the hood of her cloak off her head and followed her father through the tangle of branches concealing the cave. It helped that the fall foliage had long since fallen prey to winter's blustery winds. Otherwise she might not have spotted the potential shelter, and they would still be plodding along the path to Cennfhain at this late hour. With her father all wrapped up in his thoughts, he had been as observant as a horse with blinders. Some hunter he was. He probably wouldn't have noticed a deer unless it poked him in the rear with an antler.

This trip had been misery on horseback with the blowing snow pelting her face and frigid winds blurring her vision. Her damp hair hung in tangled ringlets, and water dripped down the collar of her cloak. Listening to Nana's lectures on the wonders of weeds would have been preferable to being tortured by nature and her father's silence, which said a lot!

Fallon pulled at the reins of her horse to urge it up the short incline. It whinnied. Stupid horse. It could be a little more thankful that she had found a warm shelter, if it were big enough to hold all of them. Still, she shouldn't take a bow just yet. Knowing her luck, she had probably spotted the one cave occupied by a huge, mangy bear slumbering away the winter.

She jerked the reins again, and her horse tossed its head. Ahead, her father tied his horse to a branch near the cave entrance and removed his sword. She had picked up the massive blade once...and promptly dropped it on her foot. The gods had allowed her to keep all five toes, but her father had scolded her and taught her to use a bow and arrow instead. Exhausting hours of practice had developed her accuracy. She had the scars to prove it.

Fallon tied her horse to the nearest branch and notched an arrow. She twitched her nose and held her breath trying to smother the sneeze threatening to erupt. Her eyes watered with the effort. The shadows were deep here, and the cave entrance looked even darker. Too bad the full moon wouldn't arrive for another week or so. Light always provided a little reassurance when it proved the demons and creatures from her imagination weren't real.

Fallon stooped beneath the low entrance of the cave behind her father. Only a midget

bear would fit through this opening. Small or not, any animal would fight if something invaded its home or cornered it. The cave, if it could be called that, would be sufficient for the evening, but the horses would need to be tethered outside. At least they were out of the wind.

Despite the cave's smallish size, the far wall lay concealed in shadows. Her father peered into the darkness, his sword at the ready and his weight on the balls of his feet. Fallon looked to both sides ready loose an arrow at the first sounds of any bear snores. Her father inched his way forward, his foot sliding through the pebbles and dirt. Fallon slipped to one side of the entrance and pressed her back against the jagged stone wall. Rocks dug into her shoulder blades, but she ignored them and focused on the dark.

How could her father see anything? She could barely make out her father's outline as the shadows swallowed him. Fallon shivered. Nothing creepy like bats with their rat faces and veiny wings had better fly at her! She might accidentally shoot her father with an arrow.

Her fingers ached from gripping her bow, so she relaxed her grip. Where was he? The cave couldn't be that deep. If it weren't for his current mood, she wouldn't put it past him to play some kind of morbid joke on her—the highlight of this wretched outing. His brooding silence was almost more painful than cooking or sewing lessons. It wasn't fair. He was ruining one of her few chances to escape the watchful eyes of Nana who insisted that knitting a mountain of baby booties for her unborn brother or sister taught her responsibility. As if hunting—something she actually loved—didn't teach responsibility, not to mention provided a basic need. You couldn't eat booties, but if she had to knit one more pair, she would cram them down Nana's throat.

Fallon balled her fist around the arrow. The last time she had been annoyed, the broom she had used to sweep out the horse stalls had mysteriously burst into flames. Controlling her magic was about as easy as controlling her mouth. Nearly impossible. She shivered as the warmth of power tingled through her body and raised goose flesh on her arms and neck. Heat infused her hand until it glowed white with a faint tinge of gold. She clenched her eyes shut and tried to calm herself with thoughts of the farm—the herb garden now covered in a dusting of snow, the cows methodically chewing hay, and the barn with the

fluffy gray kittens that would chase rocks across the ground. Fallon's hands prickled as the heat faded. She released the breath she had been holding and opened her fist.

A golden orb the size of a piglet's head shot from her palm into the back of the cave, and her bow and arrow clattered to the ground. Her father's curses echoed around the cave. Using magic was one way to coax her father out of his silence. The orb had embedded itself in the wall. It illuminated tiny fissures in the stones and a web of hairy roots drooping from the ceiling. Insects fled. Their needly legs clicked against the stones. Her father pushed himself to his knees using his sword. He glared at her and stalked towards her. Fallon wrapped her hands in the hem of her cloak to ward off the trembling. Dirt smeared his cheekbone and coated his wet cloak. She gave him a tentative smile. "Sorry?"

"Go secure the horses and brush them down for the night. I'll start a fire."

"But I'm cold...and hungry."

"And the sooner you finish your tasks, the sooner you can warm yourself and eat."

"I didn't mean to, Father. It happened so fast." He brushed past her. She shoved a curl behind her ear. It sprang loose again. "And I've done a good job of controlling my magic and denying its existence, even though it is just as much a part of me as the blood in my veins, or...or the nose on my face," she shouted after him.

It wasn't fair! Just because he had a dose of gloominess with his breakfast didn't mean she had to suffer too. She could always march out there and tell him just what she thought of his attitude lately. But arguing with her father while he brooded would be as effective as arguing with a rock. At least she could throw the rock!

Fallon leaned her bow and quiver of arrows against the cave wall before going to do her father's chores. She couldn't escape them, even on an outing. The horses' coats glistened with melted snow. She removed their bridles and slipped on their halters before tethering them to thick branches near the cave entrance. The little clearing provided just enough room for them to graze. Her father had removed their gear and the horses' saddles before disappearing into the cave.

Her horse snorted when she brushed a little too forcefully. Her father probably dozed by the fire with his toes and holy stockings near the flames for warmth. His mouth

would be half open. She should toss one of those cave bugs in it. He deserved it. Mother and Nana had tried to wash wicked thoughts out of her mind and mouth with lemon weed soap, so she had bitten the bar in half and chewed it until she foamed at the mouth. Picking the seeds from her teeth had been worth the shrieks of her mother and grandmother, but the stomachache hadn't. She would never admit that out loud, though.

Fallon patted her horse's neck and apologized before entering the cave. The orb still lit the cave, but it had dimmed. She didn't know how to turn it off. It wasn't like it had a wick or anything. A small fire burned in a shallow pit with a roasting rabbit skewered over the top. He sat on a rock across from her and stared into the flames. His hair had come loose from its leather bind. The dark waves curled towards the stubble along his jaw. The flint dangled from his hand.

What was with him? He had grown silent and more distant the closer they got to the rendezvous point where they would escort their guest back to the farm. He didn't even scold her when she tugged on branches so snow showered him as he passed beneath. That proved something was wrong.

Fallon extended her hands towards the fire and rubbed them together for warmth. The elegance of the back of her hands did not reveal the calluses at on her left palm or the ones on the fingertips of her right hand. Okay, so the knuckle of the left ring finger bulged slightly from when she had jammed it jumping out of the hay loft. But each line upon her palm, the raised freckle on her pinky, and the hardened nub of skin where her charcoal rested as she wrote endless notations on plants and herbs did little to reveal what her hands could do. If she had known that these *normal* hands would commit murder by the end of the week, she would have severed them herself and presented them to the wicked Council in a gift wrapped box.

But she didn't know. All she cared about was the smell of roasting meat making her mouth water, and her father's distant mood. She turned the spit, and watched her father. He hadn't moved. At least he hadn't burned their dinner. Otherwise it would have been dried biscuits and tea. A feast worthy of any poor hunter! His mood fit this dark little cave. Still, his silence made her impatient.

“So... this is what it would be like to travel with scaly Daley, the town’s most lovable mute!” Her father glared at her, and she gave him a mischievous grin in return.

“Fallon, how many times do I have to tell you not to use that nickname?” His voice cracked, and he took a drink from the water pouch.

“I’ve lost count, but I think it’s more than one hundred and less than two thousand. My goal is to wait for the two thousand and first warning. What’s yours?” She rested her chin in her hand and leaned forward as if eager for his every word.

“My goal is to raise you as a respectful young woman,” he replied. Fallon scowled.

“I do respect Daley...to his face. Isn’t that a step in the right direction? Besides every time we visit Master Dom at the forge, Daley just stares at me with those soulful eyes. It’s creepy.” Fallon’s voice trailed off when she noticed he no longer listened. She sighed.

“Father?” He didn’t respond. “Father...” She sang out. Still no reaction. She couldn’t even tell if he blinked. Hell and flood waters! It wasn’t fair! She had looked forward to this outing, almost as much as her upcoming Passing Ceremony. No nitpicking mother or grandmother wanting to poke her with sewing needles as they measured her for her ceremonial dress. No scrubbing floors or dishes. Apparently ragged fingernails and dry, cracked hands were the perfect complement to her ornate dress. No lessons in arranging her hair. Like the deer and squirrels she hunted really cared about ringlets. She shoved a curl behind her ear. It sprang loose again. Why, she could have a more engaging conversation with the rabbit carcass skewered on the spit!

A deafening pop erupted from the back of the cave and a cloud of dust filled the small dark space. The horses stamped their hooves and whinnied. Her father looped a ragged piece of cloth around a stick, lit the tip in the fire, and investigated the source. He traced a shallow hole in the cave wall with his fingers before bending down to examine the ground. No remnants of the orb remained, except a scorched smell. He stood and stared at the indentation in the wall. She couldn’t see his face when he spoke. “Do you not understand the danger of using magic? To yourself? To this family? If The Council finds out—”

“If The Council finds out, so what! What can they do about it? Throw me in the keep? Starve me to death? Torture me by sending scaly Daley to stare at me morning, day



and night?” Fallon stood and walked towards him. “Really, Father! How can they blame me for something I was born with? Isn’t that a bit like blaming me for being a girl or for having freckles?” She swiped a hand at the blackened web of roots hanging above her. They disintegrated and pieces peppered her face and shoulders.

“I have grown up with your warnings about The Council.” Fallon mimicked her father’s deep voice. “The Council is dangerous. They will take you from us.” She pointed her finger at her father and wiggled her eyebrows. “They will eat your babies!”

Fallon leaned forward. “Seriously, I have never even seen them. They could knock on our door, and I would let them in, offer them a cup of tea and some fresh baked bread with huckleberry jam. I could meet them in the town market and think, oh, there goes another bald old man, but never know that I just brushed the hand of death.”

“Enough, Fallon!” The muscle in his jaw ticked. He grabbed her elbow and dragged her to the wall. She yanked her arm loose. “Take a good look at this! You have just given The Council all the evidence it needs. We can burn the brooms and fabric you singe, but how will I conceal this? Bring the whole cave down?” He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “We must talk.” He gestured to the rock she just vacated. “Sit, daughter.” She crossed her arms and remained standing.

“Look, I know you are confused, but you wouldn’t have understood if I had explained sooner. Now your Passing Ceremony is soon, and this can’t wait.” He placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Please sit.”

“Aren’t you a well spring of words, now,” she mumbled and stalked back to the fire. Fallon sat and tucked her cloak around her. He dug in the canvas satchel and offered her a biscuit. Fallon loved the saltiness of the flavor, but this tasted bland. A halo of light from the fire fought the deepening shadows in the cave. He sat next to her and removed the rabbit from the heat. Her stomach grumbled.

The firelight illuminated his angular nose and deep set eyes. He furrowed his brow. “You must know what motivates The Council. They are ruthless. They have one desire and that is to eliminate all magic from this world, and I suspect those who possess it. That includes you. What do you think The Passing Ceremony is for?”

“What about The Passing?” He wasn’t going to keep her from it, was he? She had dreamed about it all her life! To be old enough to make her decisions and opinions heard. Oh, people heard them now, but it would be heaven not to shout them. She suppressed a snort. As if the age of fifteen magically gave credibility to her views and beliefs. Still, she would be an adult by law, and she would be able to tell her mother that being a lady meant slow death by boredom.

“This is why you brought me on this outing against mother’s wishes, isn’t it?” she asked. He nodded. The logs in the fire whistled as the flames consumed them. “But why now? You’ve always warned me about using magic, and I’ve heeded your advice.” She held up a finger to silence his retort. “Most of the time. But never once have you mentioned anything bad about The Passing.”

“Every child looks forward to this ceremony because it means they can make their own choices.” He shook his head and looked away. “Fallon, how could I steal the dreams of my daughter?”

She flexed her fingers and scrutinized her outstretched hands. “I still look like your daughter. Why is it suddenly acceptable to take my dreams two weeks before the ceremony?”

“You and your unborn sister are in great danger, and I don’t know if I can protect you anymore. I can’t go through it again.” He wrapped a cloth around his hand and pulled the hot meat from the skewer.

“What are you talking about? What does any of this have to do with the fact you are determined to crush the only dream that has kept me sane during mother’s monotonous lessons on snagging a husband. Like I will meet any suitors in the middle of the forest besides bushy tailed vermin.” She paused and looked at him. “How do you know the baby is a girl?”

His stare was almost as intense as scaly Daley’s. His eyes traveled over her face as if trying to memorize it. Fallon wanted to pull her hood over her head to hide the dusting of freckles across her high forehead, and the slight point to her ears. At least they lay flat, she thought.

“I just know. And I know The Passing can be fatal for those who possess magic because you had an older sister who died during the ceremony.” He shredded the cooling meat with his fingers before offering a chunk to her. Fallon pushed his hand away.

“A sister?” she whispered. There was nothing in their home to indicate that another child had been born before her. No charcoal sketches or hand-me-downs clothes. No doilies with the uneven stitches of a novice sewer or old rag dolls! Why the secrecy?

An ache settled in the center of her chest, and she masked all emotion on her face. The urge to shout left her trembling. She pressed her hands together to stop the shaking and sat up. She couldn’t identify the feelings that squeezed her heart, let alone find the words to express them. A deep breath steadied her nerves. “Why haven’t you spoken of her?”

Her father’s fingers dug into his knees until the tendons on the back of his hands looked ready to burst from his skin. Fallon narrowed her eyes. “I am not a little girl anymore who needs your protection from danger or the truth. I can take care of myself.”

“If I tell you the whole truth, you will be in great danger. The MacBaharins have always been in peril because of the secrets we have guarded for 300 years. Even your mother does not know. I wanted to protect her, you, and now the baby, especially when I failed your older sister.”

“So I am in danger because of our family’s past, and if you speak the truth I will be in danger.” She ignored the heat from the fire and leaned forward. “Plus I am at risk because of my abilities.” She leaned back and sighed in feigned contentment. “Ahhhh...nothing like the comfort of death. Shall we slit my throat tonight or tomorrow? Dull knife or a sharp one for a quick end?”

“Fallon, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t be angry at you for keeping this from me? Don’t be angry because I’m cursed with this magic?” Fallon thrust her hands in her father’s face. “It would be so easy to just plunge these two burdens into the fire and burn the magic out of them.”

He grabbed her hands and held them in the warmth of his palms. “Please, listen. Your life and the life of your unborn sister are entangled with the past, present and future of this family and the fate of Cennfhain.”

“Thanks for those words of encouragement. Wait! Let me get comfortable before you heap the fate of the world on my shoulders too.” She wiggled until a shallow burrow formed in the dirt around her.

He stood and ran his hands through his hair. “There is nothing, Fallon, nothing you can do to prevent what has been prophesized for 300 years.”

She scowled. “I knew you were a gifted story teller, but I didn’t know you were a talented pessimist, too. Is this where the earth shakes and the sky collapses on my head?”

He turned around and pointed his finger at her. “Don’t jest! You have always used that acerbic mouth of yours to deny what you demand to hear, but refuse to believe.” He seized her shoulders. “Look at me! It doesn’t matter if you want to hear the truth or not. The truth always makes itself known. Some ways are more violent than others.” The words hissed from his mouth. He let go of her. “You have a choice. You can hear the truth about The Council and your sister from me, or you can let the truth reveal itself to you in whatever way fate decides.” He returned Fallon’s stare.

“That’s a *choice*?” she asked. “I am doomed either way. It’s a bit like choosing between being eaten by wolves or hung at the gallows. Is being burned at the stake an option?” He frowned at her. Fallon popped a piece of the rabbit meat into her mouth and chewed. She had tried to keep the sarcastic tone from her voice, but the word choice did little to hide her anger.

A few moments ago, Fallon only wanted to distract her father from his thoughts. Now that she knew the source of his earlier silence, she wished she could shut him up again! Fallon swallowed that comment. If she had to ingest many more of those bitter words, she would vomit.

Her father looked on the verge of collapse despite his muscular stature. Skin sagged on his cheekbones and exhaustion filled the bags beneath his eyes. The gods should strike her down for her selfishness and her patron saint should sell her to the wood nymphs in the forest. She had waited forever for The Passing, but Fallon choked back her resentment. Her father owed her the truth, and her sarcastic comments just might prevent her from hearing it.

She held her breath a moment before speaking. “I’ll try, Father. Please,” she said.

His shoulders tensed, and Fallon reached towards him. “Tell me about my sister.”

He nodded and took her hand. “I don’t know whether to begin at the end or end at the beginning.”

“Is that not the same thing?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I suppose they are.” He sat and took a deep breath. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“Yes, but part of me is hesitant. As you said, the truth will come out, and I would rather hear it from you.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Your sister’s name was Keeley.” He cleared his throat. “It’s difficult to say her name, even now. She was a spirited child, very much like you. She had untamable dark curls and a pointed chin that jutted out when she wanted her way. And when she was angry, her blue eyes were daggers.” Fallon leaned against her father to give him strength, and he wrapped his arm around her.

“Like you, she had the rare gift of magic. She delighted in it, although she didn’t set things on fire.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Your mother and I knew The Council’s laws against magic, but we thought we were safe from their power, since we lived outside the boundaries of Cennfhain. Apparently The Council did not share our view, especially when magic was involved.

“I was hunting when The Council’s soldiers arrested Keeley. She was just a girl—only eight years old.” His grip tightened on her hand.

“But why didn’t Mother stop them? She could have refused them or fought them, or hidden Keeley.”

“Your mother did hide Keeley, and she fought the soldiers despite her condition.”

“Was she ill?”

“No, she was pregnant with you. Keeley stayed hidden while the soldiers confronted her. They pulled dishes from the cupboards, emptied the pantry, smashed furniture and threw my books in the fire. When the soldiers began beating your mother, Keeley disobeyed orders and confronted the soldiers with her skinning knife.”

Fallon couldn’t decide if Keeley was fearless or thick-witted. “I’m sure a scrawny

eight year old warrior in petticoats struck terror into the hearts of the soldiers.”

“Only the two she stabbed in the lower back and the one whose hands were engulfed in flames when he tried to grab her. One of the soldiers struck her with the hilt of his sword and knocked her unconscious.” Her father shut his eyes. When Fallon closed her eyes, it sharpened her memory. Could he see it happening?

“How do you know all of this if you were hunting? Did mother tell you?” She looked at him over her shoulder.

He hesitated. “In a way... yes. But I also gathered information from other sources.” He was hiding something. Her father had taught her the art of reading the smallest of signs—a disturbed leaf or overturned soil—to follow the trail of an animal. But reading subtle signs applied to people as well. He always averted his eyes when he wanted to conceal emotions or information. So what was he hiding now? She would find out sooner or later. That was a promise.

The warmth of the fire caressed her face and legs through her leather pants, but she shivered anyway. All of this time, she had resented her parents for the endless hours of pulling weeds and hauling hay as punishment for using her magic...when they caught her. The discipline had been to protect themselves against the loss of another daughter, and if truth be told, to protect her. It worked. She had lived six years longer than Keeley. Fallon crossed her fingers and promised to forgive her parents in her prayers to the gods. She refused, however, to pardon them for the oozing rash that always erupted on her legs and arms after wallowing in the nettle patch. The memory made her itch.

Fallon rubbed her arms to ease the prickling sensation. “Did she die from the head injury?”

“No,” he hesitated. “She died as a result of The Passing Ceremony.”

Fallon straightened. “You lie! How could she die from The Ceremony?” She pushed away from him, but he held on to her arm.

“I am capable of many things, Fallon, but lying about your sister’s death disrespects her memory.”

Fallon tilted her head and regarded him. “And keeping her existence hidden

celebrates her existence? You didn't trust *me* with this family secret, and yet you want me to trust *you*? To take your word on everything? I would not have hesitated before, but now..."

"I know you are hurt and angry. If your mother knew I had told you," he smiled, "I would be sleeping in the barn for weeks, maybe even months."

"So you both lied. You may have wanted to protect me, but your secrets do more injury than The Council *ever* could." Had everything in her life been false? The patience her father demonstrated when he taught her to hunt and defend herself? The cozy evenings with her parents murmuring in front of the fireplace, her father's stories about ancient magical creatures, and the warm mead making her drowsy?

"Listen to me! I won't risk another daughter's life. I will do anything to see you safe, and that means protecting you from a barbarous ceremony run by murderers."

"How can someone die during The Passing? Wouldn't the town's people grow suspicious if fourteen year olds suddenly dropped dead?"

"Death during The Passing is a rare occurrence. It hasn't happened for fourteen years since your sister died, and before that it was thirty-three years. Often times, the parents are grief stricken and blame themselves given their role as The Nexus during the ceremony. The Council has a way of being...persuasive."

"A convenient story."

"To call it a story reduces it to fantasy or a bard's tale told to scare children. It is the truth and part of your history more than you know. Keeley died because The Council forbade her to have a nexus. They feared her power, which had already killed one soldier."

"From a skinning knife?"

"No. According to The Council's official report, Keeley's magic didn't just burn the soldier's hands. It reduced his internal organs to ashes before charring his skin. One witness swore he could see flames in the empty sockets." His body trembled. "Because of Keeley's power, The Council bound her to the stone ceremonial table while she was still unconscious, forced The Passing herbs down her throat, and left her there knowing that without a link to the conscious world, she would die once all traces of her magic had been eradicated."

"And the soldiers did nothing to stop them?"

“Why would they? The Council commands them and disobeying orders puts their families at risk.”

“So instead they allowed a child to die? “

“The soldiers did not know that would happen. The Council doesn’t announce their intentions.”

“They were passive witnesses to her death. It still makes them just as guilty of her murder.”

Shadows darkened his eyes, and he sat silent for a moment. “And they will all pay for what they have done.” Coldness wound its way into her limbs, despite the fire’s heat. His eyes almost looked black. “I won’t risk your life, Fallon. I can’t. I will do what I must to protect you.”

“And who will protect me from all of your secrets? I am older than Keeley was, and I can take care of myself.”

He shook her. “Think, Fallon! I will not apologize for concealing your sister from you. And this isn’t about your age or skill in handling a bow. It’s about what motivates The Council. Keeley could control her magic because I encouraged her to practice and ignored the danger. You’re lucky if it is only the broom you catch on fire.”

“So you’re saying a few singed twigs means I cannot take care of myself? If you had to sweep the barn on Nana’s whim, you would have burned the cursed broom, too, and made it look like an accident!” He opened his mouth to speak, but Fallon ignored him. “I am terrified of The Passing Ceremony now, as much as I hate to admit it, but The Council requires all fourteen year olds to attend. They will note my absence.

“Besides, how will I ever be recognized as an adult? And if I am not an adult, I have no right to hunt, to own property, to marry scaly Daley if I wanted—not that I want to, although he couldn’t tell me what to do or complain about my cooking since he probably doesn’t have a tongue, and if he tried to kiss me, I would kick him in his—“

“Silence!” Fallon shut her mouth and crossed her arms. “I have a plan, but it is not without risk to you and your unborn sister.”

“Let me guess. We’ll stuff a sumomo in my mouth. I’ll curl up on The Council’s



silver platter, and you can decorate me with wild onions before sneaking me into their—”

“Look, Fallon, we don’t have time to indulge your drama or your imagination.”

“We have plenty of time. The Passing is two weeks away.”

“Yes, and I will be hunting during that time. We will have another mouth to feed.”

“Since when do babies eat meat?” she mumbled.

“You try my patience, young lady! I have never beaten you in your life, but by the gods you are acting like a child, and I will treat you as such if this continues.” Fallon glared at him. “Think well, daughter, before you speak.” He glowered in return and jabbed a finger in her direction to emphasize each word. “Do you understand? Can you manage to listen and not speak?” She lifted a shoulder in reply. “Good.” Fallon examined her fingernails in silence.

“According to public records, no child has ever died during The Passing. However, The Council’s private records indicate twelve deaths...about one death every twenty-five years since the town’s forefathers established The Council. Each of these deaths involved children who possessed an unusual amount of magic.” Fallon leaned against a rock. She hoped he couldn’t see her grinding her teeth to bite back questions. How had he gained access to The Council’s private records?

“Your magic flows through your veins. It courses throughout your body and into your hands. It is so entwined with your soul that when The Passing Ceremony drains your power, your body cannot function.”

Then wasn’t forbidding her to use her magic like denying her air? He claimed they had lied to protect her, but maybe fear of her magic, and therefore fear of her had been a part of her parent’s decision. Accidentally torching small patches of grass wouldn’t have offered them much reassurance about her control, but she would never harm another person.

“There is only one way to preserve your magic and your life.” He touched her cheek. “The Council has branded our family, which means your children and your grandchildren will be watched. You have not aroused suspicion, but your magic will make itself known soon enough. And with two children in our family who possess such a gift, The Council will seize your sister as soon as she is born.”

“So not only am I destined to die, but my abilities have also sealed the fate of my sister.” She lifted her hands and let them drop in her lap. “You call this magic and these hands a gift? I call them a curse, a hex, a plague attached to the end of my arms.”

“And they are connected to your destiny and your sister’s. Every decision you have made and will make directs the course of your life and shapes the world your sister will enter.” His eyes gleamed. “Will you preserve your life and guard the life of your sister?”

“But how?”

“There is but one way...The Bonding Ceremony.” He filled their teacups with herbs and then poured hot water over for steeping.

“No, I will not! If The Council finds out, they will hang our whole family or burn us at the stake. You would ask me to risk the lives of Mother and Nana? Yours? My unborn sister? Is it not better to take a chance with The Passing Ceremony?”

He picked up a handful of pebbles and tossed them up in the air. Most of them landed in the fire. A few landed in the flames, but rolled out. And even fewer landed completely outside of the flames. “Do you really want to leave your fate in the hands of chance? You and your sister are connected by blood. The Bonding Ceremony will connect you by magic. During The Passing, you can channel your magic to your sister where The Council cannot detect it. And afterwards, you can summon it back.”

“Wouldn’t my magic taint her blood and bind her fate to mine?”

“Taint is a strong word, Fallon.”

Fallon shook her head. “I won’t infect the baby with my burden. I would rather stand on the ceremonial alter and face The Council and all of its soldiers with these two hands. Don’t you see?” Her fingertips glowed. Something scurried deeper into the cave. “This magic damns my life. How could you ask me to condemn my sister’s when the possibility exists that she can lead a normal life—one without fear? ”

“Because she isn’t and won’t ever be ordinary. This baby is the third daughter who will fulfill the prophecy written by our family generations ago. In truth, it is your fate that will be bound to hers. You are the only one capable of protecting her through your gift.”

“And is there a prophecy about me? One that tells me what to do?” She walked

towards him, so she could see his eyes. They were almost black in the murkiness of the cave. His shadow on the cave wall loomed over her.

“Only the one inscribed in your heart, daughter.”

Decision making wasn't what she imagined. It involved making a choice between two equally damning options. Why couldn't there be a third one where she and her family lived happily ever after? Fallon clasped her hands together and pressed them to her mouth. Her eyes closed in prayer. If her father spoke the truth, the baby would have its own struggles. She couldn't add to them.

“I'm sorry, father. I can't. It will use my magic to protect my sister, but I won't purposely infect her with this.” The tips of her fingers flared with magic. “You know how destructive this magic can be.” She gestured towards the wall in the back of the cave.

“As you wish, but know this. When you go through The Passing Ceremony, I cannot be your nexus. The Council won't allow it. I am sorry.” He held the tea out to her.

She slipped her hands around the warmth of the cup, and sipped. It smelled strong. Curls of steam drifted past her vision as she welcomed the scalding liquid down her throat. She felt so cold and alone. Her tongue tingled from the heat of the tea, but she welcomed the slight pain.

She hadn't realized the trip had exhausted her so much. Holding her head up proved difficult, and her muscles had a mind of their own. The metal cup tumbled from her fingers. Her father caught her as she slumped.

Everything looked blurry, and Fallon blinked rapidly to see why it felt as if she floated through space. Could she fly? Her head bobbed to one side, and her neck hurt.

“Shhhh. I am sorry, Fallon. But this is the only way. I will not lose another daughter to that bastard Naylor and The Council.”

Fallon felt the ground beneath her once again, and she wanted to laugh. Flying, indeed! Father had carried her to an empty spot in the cave. He pushed a cushion under her neck, but a stone on the ground dug into her side. Her eyelids drooped. She tried to sit up, but her muscles refused.

Something passed close to her ears like a stick being dragged through the dirt. What

was Father doing? He rustled around in his pack. “Father?” Their provisions thudded to the ground and drowned out her faint voice.

Gods have mercy, she was so thirsty! “Water,” she tried again. Something landed in the dirt near her head, and cloth rustled. Were those pages being flipped? Her fingers dug into the gravel and made ten shallow holes in the dirt.

“Go to sleep, Fallon. We will talk in your dreams, although you will not remember any of this.” Fallon blinked again. His face floated above hers, but she couldn’t see his body. His fingers massaged her temples. “I do this out of love for you and your unborn sister. You do not know the burden of knowledge I possess. The signs, daughter, do not lie. After 300 years, The Shadows have arisen, and they seek the one child who can banish them forever. This is the only way to protect your sister.”

She couldn’t understand any of the words he said, but the sounds were melodic and calming. Her eyelids fluttered against a bright light. A gossamer ribbon of light rose from her chest. The sinuous movement hypnotized her. So beautiful! She would close her eyes only for a moment.

“That’s right, daughter, sleep.” He soothed. “And when you wake, we will meet our guest. We must not keep the midwife waiting.”

### CHAPTER 3: THE DELIVERY

Fallon yanked a patch of nettle weeds as the late afternoon breeze hustled her words her words away. Her fingers bled from the needles. The wicked plants were probably trying to punish her for ripping them from the ground. Wasn't it enough that Nana had her pulling weeds in winter? The baby's life and hers were at risk, not the pushy midwife's! If that woman poked her one more time with those sausage fingers, Fallon would serve them for breakfast. Fallon had every right to be in her parents' bedroom during the birth.

Fallon mimicked the midwife's raspy voice. "Put her to work elsewhere. That girl has no purpose here," No purpose? If Nana hadn't pushed her from the room and clamped a boney hand over her mouth, Fallon just might have announced what that woman could do with her purposes! She tore another clump of dirt and nettles from the earth, and threw it into the growing pile of debris near her ankles.

The wicked midwife could always fall ill with an accidental pinch of dried warton or a dash of pox oil. That damnable woman should thank her patron saint that the herb stores were low, and that Fallon couldn't remember what either of the medicines looked like. She should have paid attention to the useful lessons!

Fallon swatted at the loose hair sticking to her face. A smear of dirt extended up her cheek into her hair where bits of fuzz and pieces of wheatgrass dangled. She glared at the second story windows of the house.

The nettles were a few inches taller than she was, and the front porch was just visible. In the dying sunlight, Fallon could see the door standing open. Odd! Hadn't she slammed it hard enough to be heard in Cennfhain? Fallon was half tempted to leave it and plead ignorance, but she knew all too well how easily a cool breeze could find its way into the bedrooms on the second level. Even if she wanted to leave it wide open out of protest for her banishment, the baby didn't deserve that kind of welcome into the world.

Fallon pushed her way through the nettles and wiped her hands on the front of her dress. She brushed at the snow clinging to her hemline on her way to the house. Nana had been smart when she planted the nettle weeds around the herb garden a few years ago because

they had protected the delicate leaves and medicinal plants from predators. If only the weeds had been successful in choking out the sunlight and starving the herbs. No more suffering under the mid day sun until her skin resembled the red clay along the Moraq River. Nana had salvaged the herb patch by cutting down the nettles, but forgot about the roots. The next summer the nettles had grown back with a vengeance spreading all the way to the horse barn.

Nana cuffed Fallon on the head earlier this season for pointing out the mistake. Nana knocked her a second time when Fallon told her that she should be thumping herself for making such a bad decision. Ever since then, Nana's list of complaints about Fallon's behavior had steadily grown along with Fallon's chores. In a short time, however, she could turn a deaf ear to Nana's orders.

Fallon stomped up the stairs to clear the snow from her shoes. Goose bumps tingled up the back of her neck. A blackbird landed on the railing not far from her and twisted its neck to stare in her direction. If Fallon hadn't seen the glassiness of two ink-colored beads, she would have thought the bird had been eyeless. It cawed. Two more blackbirds landed on the railing. She waved the hem of her dress at them and clapped, but they just stared at her and hopped farther down the railing.

If Nana saw them, she would have Fallon sprinkling the last of the dried angel's breath on the railing and placing gourds filled with dragon tears in all of the window sills. According to Nana, blackbirds only brought one thing—ill-fate. "Sit there, you creepy old birds, and when I come back with the sweeper, you'll wish you had flown away!"

A tiny twitter came from her other side. A smaller bird with golden eyes landed near her hand. The blackbirds ruffled their feathers at it and made pecking motions, but it turned back towards Fallon and chirped softly. It had such lovely, golden eyes. As she latched the front door behind her, she hoped the mangy blackbirds wouldn't attack the more delicate bird.

Moans and muffled words drifted from the second floor birthing room. Fallon stiffened and her breath came in gasps. She doubled over and clutched at her chest. Every muscle in her body strained towards her mother's bed chambers. The pain lessened, and she leaned against the stairway railing. She gulped air to slow her heart. Another burst of pain

ricocheted through her and she grabbed the rail before she fell.

What was happening to her? “Nana! Help me, please!” Nana wouldn’t hear her weak cry. Although her grandmother was partially deaf, Nana used it as an excuse for not listening when it suited her. Fallon pulled herself up the stairs. The pain eased with each step, but she feared it would return.

Fallon pressed her left ear to the cool, smooth pine of her mother’s bedroom door and tried to hear what was happening. Dull, shriveled petals the color of dusk littered the floor where Fallon had kicked the small wooden table containing the carved vase on her way to the herb garden. She needed medicine, or at the very least reassurance that she was too young for heart failure, but everyone was focused on the delivery.

Maybe she could knock on the door to ask for an elixir and then conveniently check on mother and the baby. Fallon had faked illness before to avoid lessons and punishments, and Nana knew it. More than likely Fallon would only succeed in getting a lashing across the back side with Nana’s cane. Trying to reason with Nana was like trying to reason with a runaway horse. When Nana’s mind was set, there was only one path she was going to take even if it was right over someone with her gimp leg.

Fallon sat down with her back against the door and her knees pulled to her chest. If Nana caught her here, she would be cleaning out the barn for the rest of her childhood. Who cared! It was too dark to pull weeds now. Besides, she would be an adult soon, and Nana’s cane could no longer threaten her into submission.

She rubbed her hands up and down the length of her arms. Mother probably hadn’t remembered to close the windows this morning considering her water broke during breakfast this morning. Instead she had removed the tea kettle from the fire and stepped out of her wet petticoats as if birthing were an everyday occurrence, and not a potential danger.

A bird cawed. The loudness startled Fallon. Those creepy blackbirds were probably watching her and waiting until she fell asleep. They would begin with the soft flesh of her face, and then move on to strip the skin from her throat. Two of the feathery evils would wrestle over the stringy nerves behind her eyes. Gods save her! Sometimes her imagination made it difficult to sleep at night.

Fallon used the door to push herself upright. A brief but acute pain sliced at her left palm. She pulled her hand away. A sliver of wood the length of a sewing needle had imbedded itself along the lifeline of her palm. She tentatively touched it and her hand throbbed. What else could possibly happen? First her father had left on his hunting expedition and refused to take her, even though she had tried to make him feel guilty. Then she had to pull nettle weeds, and now those creepy blackbirds had her looking over her shoulder. Why not a splinter as well, complete with an infection?

Considering her hands were covered in little cuts, a sliver shouldn't have been anything too painful. Fallon looked at it closely. A small portion of the sliver protruded from her skin. She could feel the rest of it just beneath the surface of her skin. Only the gods knew how old the wood was. If she knew where the tongs were, she would remove it herself before it swelled and oozed. With her luck, it would break off inside of her palm, and then they would have to cut it out. She decided to leave it until Nana could remove it.

A breeze tickled the hairs on the back of her head, and she turned toward the window a few paces away. A flurry of feathers banged against the window, and she slammed the window shut. Too bad one of their necks hadn't been there to feel the force of the window.

Her mother let out a piercing cry, and Fallon hastened back to the bedroom. She peeked beneath the door, but she only succeeded in pushing the sliver further into her palm. She sucked in her breath and slowly released it through gritted teeth. Fool! She could barely tolerate a little sliver, so what made her think she could have broken a bird's neck with a window?

The reverberations of footsteps told her there was activity going on in the room, but she couldn't see anything. Pain stole the breath from her, and urgency filled her. She pounded on the door. "Nana? Mother? Please let me in. I can't breathe." Being on all fours didn't help. Fallon struggled to her feet. She kicked the door once. "Please, Nana! I'm not faking!" She groaned and cradled her belly. Her internal organs were being yanked through her stomach.

Why wouldn't they answer the door? Fallon used her forehead to knock against the door. "Please..." She whispered. If she let go of her stomach, she feared she would be



turned inside out.

Her mother cried out. Muffled voices drifted from underneath the door. She caught snatches of commands. Push! Harder! Breathe! All feeling had drained from her legs so she lay down and curled in front of the door. Was this what it was like to give birth? It was not as if she had never seen a birthing before. Another pain racked her body and she curled even tighter. Okay, so it was a piglet, but wasn't that the same thing?

Her stomach gurgled. She had completely forgotten about food. Breakfast had been long ago. Maybe her stomach protested out of neglect. A hunk of bread and cheese from the storeroom might alleviate her agony, if she could make it there. The waning moon cast little light through the second story window. Fallon crawled to her bedroom to retrieve a candle stump from her bed stand. The farther she moved from her parents' room, the more her misery intensified. The splinter in her palm and the ache in her knees paled in comparison to the torment inside her body.

Fallon grabbed the candle and rested against her bed. The flint shook in her hand as she lit the wick. It tumbled from her fingers, and she left it there. Now what? She couldn't crawl back down the hall dragging a candle with her. She stifled a shriek as she stood. The flame danced in the air currents, and her hunched shadow flickered on the wall.

A movement beyond the flame caught her attention. The halo of light only penetrated a few paces in front of her. A shiver raised the hair on her arms. Fallon stopped and lifted the candle higher trying to illuminate the hall, but the flame bent towards her like the tapered tongue of a snake. It fluttered out. How was that possible if the hall window was behind her?

In the darkness, Fallon trailed her fingers along the wall to guide her to her mother's door. Her mother wailed. Fallon dropped the useless candle and covered her mouth. Partially digested boiled egg leaked between her fingers. She wretched until her stomach emptied sodden bread as well. In the dark, Fallon stumbled towards the birthing room and pressed her hands to the door.

"Mother? Nana!" The flesh of her palms moistened as she concentrated on hearing what was happening on the other side of the door. A tingling sensation traveled along the

contours of her hands as the temperature changed from cool to warm to scalding. Fallon jerked her hands back from the door. Another dry wretch racked her body, but she thanked the gods that nothing came up.

A cry, wrapped in despair, wound its way through the door. She placed her hands back on the door. Once again the tingling sensation returned. This time it felt as if hundreds of bees were stinging her palms. She should have cried out, but a faint, luminosity outlined her slender hands. The golden radiance soothed the heat and the misery in her stomach. She focused on the power churning beneath her palms.

She tilted her head to listen, not for the cries on the other side of the door, but to herself. She could feel the rhythm of her heart forcing her blood through its chambers. The blood sounded like the rapids of the Morag River. She imagined a red river bubbling and churning through her veins. She didn't know how it was possible to be so in tune with her body. Maybe it was just instinct, like a bud that lies dormant waiting for just the right time to come forth during the spring.

Fallon could see a pale ribbon extending from her heart to the door. She swiped at it, and the airy line dissipated and then reformed. It extended out from her body like when she pulled her winter woollens over her head and her hair stood on end. She tried gripping it with her hands, but grabbing a cloud would have been more productive. The bond grew taut and dragged Fallon towards the door.

She leaned back to use the weight of her body to counteract the force, but it jerked her forward, her body fused with the wood. Faint memories from the trunk of the tree teased her: woodland animals scampering among the branches; moisture coursing through heart of the tree; small buds clinging to the limbs in a late spring frost; the pain of being cut down and separated from what it had always known.

The memories grew faint as her heart pressed against her breast. Her chest ached as she struggled against the force. Fallon couldn't tell if she was even breathing as the force pulled her through the door and into her mother's bedroom. The line extended from Fallon's heart to her mother's bulging belly. The pain in Fallon's chest diminished, but the whispery bond between her and the baby remained.

Sheer white curtains billowed in the wind on either side of the double bed. The quilt, a series of brightly-colored mismatched fabrics, had been thrown to the floor. A small bedside table held an unlit candle, and the colorful rug she had woven for her father out of strips of dyed pelts lay half under the bed in a heap.

Fallon rushed to her mother's side. "Are you all right?" Her mother didn't respond. The tangled sheet around her mother's waist was soaked with effort. A grimace etched a furrow between her eyes. Nana dipped a cloth in the water bowl on the small wooden stand and gently bathed Aurora's face. "Not much longer, daughter. Only a moment, really," Nana said in a cracked voice. Aurora sucked in her breath, and her body went rigid.

"A moment can seem forever. I...can't...push anymore," she panted and collapsed back into the pillows on the bed. Her fingers gripped the bed linens searching for anything to anchor her. Shadows crept out from beneath their hiding places in the room. Nana tossed the cloth back into the bowl and reached for the candle stub sitting on the side table.

"We need to have some light in here, dear. My new grandchild needs to see the world as he enters," Nana said putting the lit candle back where it belonged. *She. The baby is a girl*, Fallon thought. The flame danced in the breeze that drifted in from the open window. Nana tugged the window closed, leaving just a crevice before returning to the foot of the double bed. Her ample hips blocked Fallon's view.

"Let me help!" Fallon demanded. Nana ignored her. At least the midwife hadn't yowled about Fallon's disobedience, yet. They could scold themselves hoarse. Nothing would chase her from this room until her sister appeared. She crossed the room and grabbed for her mother's hand. Fallon's fingers passed through Aurora's fist.

Nana's words interrupted her bewilderment. "I see the crown! Such an abundance of hair! Push hard, Aurora. There's a good girl." A blackbird cawed outside of the window. Aurora sat upright. Her knuckles turned white as they gripped the sheet. A moan escaped as she tried to push.

"You're doing fine," the midwife crooned. "The child is coming. It's coming."

Fallon's concentration wavered between confusion about her hands and the baby's well-being. Was she in the room or dreaming? Why couldn't she touch them? The flame on

the candle jerked as if someone had blown on it. A boiling mass of shadows pooled from beneath the bed, encasing it in darkness. They writhed like a pit of snakes.

“Push, you cow!” the midwife bellowed. Pain and exhaustion mingled together in the scream that erupted from Aurora.

“Mother! Nana! Can’t you see that?” Fallon said. Her voice wavered. No one answered her.

Nana sat down on the bed and braced Aurora’s body in the upright position as Aurora teetered on consciousness. Labor had lasted for more than thirteen hours and every contraction, every push was evident in the lines on her forehead. Her hair hung in tangled strands about her pale face. Nana reassured Aurora in soft whispers and rubbed her back.

The darkness intensified as it swallowed the bed. The veins in her mother’s forehead stood out. “Mother!” Still no one answered her. Why didn’t they answer? Or do something.

Fallon pressed herself against the wall as the shadows wrapped themselves about the midwife. Her ebony eyes glittered as mist deep as a sightless night slithered down her throat. A coughing spasm engulfed her and she grasped the bed post to steady herself. It only took a moment for the coughing to cease. Revulsion tightened Fallon’s throat as an inky vapor wafted from the midwife’s pores. It shrouded her body.

“Your destiny awaits you little one!” The midwife’s hands supported the baby’s head. Puffs of shadow curled around the baby’s neck. The bond between Fallon and the baby tightened and pulsed with golden light. Darkness encompassed the fading shimmery link.

The baby’s heart beat slowed. “No!” Fallon shouted. She fumbled for something, anything—a weapon of some kind, but her hands wouldn’t seize anything. Fallon couldn’t feel any part of her flesh, only the dying connection between her and the baby.

A knife solidified out of the darkness, and hovered near the midwife’s hand. The black handle gleamed and the glassy black stone embedded at the base of the curved blade glowed like a demonic eye. Fear sliced the remaining strand of Fallon’s calm. Panic rose in her throat and strangled her ability to speak. She whimpered as her mother collapsed on the bed, and the black mist tightened its noose around Nana’s neck. Nana’s eyes rolled back in

her head, and she crashed against the side table. A whirlpool of shadows enveloped Nana's body lying on the floor.

The midwife smiled in Fallon's direction as she cradled the baby's head and neck in her left arm. The next contraction failed to push the baby free. Its soul lay suspended between worlds—both in the past and present. The midwife plucked the knife from the shadows with her free hand. The black stone shimmered and glowed brighter. “Yesss,” the midwife rasped. “Blood of yours and blood of mine, dark and light shall be entwined.” the midwife chanted. The blade of the knife pressed against the infant's throat and a trickle of blood appeared.

The baby cried. Fallon lunged forward as a contraction forced the baby's shoulders and the rest of its body from Aurora. The bond between Fallon and the baby flared a brilliant gold scoring a path through the darkness. The shadow's grip loosened on the midwife's hand, and she dropped the knife. The baby lay at the foot of the bed still attached by the umbilical cord and the magical bond with Fallon. It cried and flailed its limbs.

Fallon struggled toward the bed. She could feel her strength and magic draining with each step. The midwife dove for the knife, and Fallon flung herself at the midwife. They skidded across the floor. Fallon only had a brief glimpse of the knife before the shadows closed over it again. They hissed around Fallon in human-like whispers, but she couldn't understand the language. She struggled to keep the golden light wrapped around her for safety, but she could feel it fading.

Fallon grappled for the knife beneath the shadows. Her hand closed around the hilt. She pivoted as the midwife charged her. The knife connected with something solid and then passed through as if slicing smoke. Fallon felt a shudder travel from her hand to her arm and throughout her body. She looked up. The midwife's mouth hung open, spittle dripping down her chin. Blood soaked the midwife's apron and coated Fallon's hand. Time lagged as the midwife's body slumped to the floor. Her head cracked against the floor boards. The shadows uncoiled themselves from the body, and the inky smoke dissipated.

Fallon backed away from the midwife. The dresser stopped her retreat. The midwife's eyes were still open, but dimming as Fallon turned her head away taking deep

gulping breaths. A thin, bloody trail marked Fallon's path as she put distance between herself and the midwife. The midwife's hand reached in Fallon's direction. Her fingers twitched and then lay still. Fallon drew her legs to her chest and hugged them to keep her body from shaking. "Mother? Nana?" she whispered.

Faint golden flecks floated in the air like specks of dust in sunlight. The baby! She thought. With what little strength she had left, she pushed herself to a kneeling position. Using the dresser drawer to pull herself into a standing position caused a wave of dizziness to sweep through her. Bottles crashed to the floor as she tried to steady herself. Two steps away from the bed, Fallon crumpled to the floor with the knife still clutched in her hand.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PATH

Patches of sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees and illuminated patterns of gold on the earthen path before her as far as Fallon could see. It stretched until it blended with the horizon. She twisted around wondering what she was doing in the forest on her horse with her father. Hadn't she just been in her mother's room and her father on a hunting expedition? Where was the snow?

Fuzzy forest creatures with beady eyes sat up on their hind legs and stood still except for the twitching of their rusty tails. She wondered how long they would sit there before traipsing off to bury the acorns stuffed in their mouths. They must have keen memories since they were always able to find what they had buried, even under layers of snow.

"Father, how—" she began.

"Fallon! I told you that we will arrive when the sun is overhead. Please don't ask how far again," he said. She bit her lip and glanced down at her hands. They were covered in scratches and her palm ached. The lace on the cuff of her dress was splattered with dried blood.

"Father," she tried again. "What is—"

He slowed his horse and turned in his saddle to stare at her. "No questions." Couldn't he see the blood covering the bodice of her dress? Couldn't he see the numbness in her eyes and her fear of feeling because if she did, she might not be able to pull herself together?

"Father? The bodies—" Fallon refused to speak their names because that would make this nightmare real. The midwife's dull eyes haunted Fallon. Saliva welled in her mouth, and she spit.

"Now that isn't part of a lady's training," he said. Part of a lady's training? Neither was murder, unless there was something about becoming a "lady" that everyone had neglected to tell her.

“You can’t just leave them there! You can’t! I have to know, to see!” Fallon turned her horse around. It wasn’t as easy as she thought it would be because the overgrown foliage on both sides of her made the path dangerously narrow. She kicked the horse’s flanks.

“Fallon, stop! You don’t know where you are or what you are doing. We are in—“

The last part of his sentence was lost in the pounding of hooves. She gripped the reins tighter and leaned forward. Her heels spurred the horse, but it could only move so fast because of the damp, rotten foliage that smothered the path.

What were they doing in the forest? And when had her father come home? God, her eyelids felt heavy. A weight settled in her limbs making it difficult for Fallon to stay upright in her saddle. The horse panted and flecks of foam sprayed out the sides of its mouth. Its hooves slipped again, and they slid down an embankment.

She tried to grip the saddle horn, but her fingers disobeyed. Fallon toppled to the ground, rolling even further down the hill. She managed to hook her arm in a vine to stop her descent. Her horse must have regained its footing because she could hear it plowing through the forest in the opposite direction. At least it hadn’t fallen on top of her. She sat up to test her arms and legs and take note of her surroundings.

The forest hummed with a life of its own. Time seemed somehow different in the forest. Maybe it was the darkness that lurked in the crevices of every plant or the trees’ roots concealed in shadows. The colorful foliage that sprung in every direction at the base of the trees anchored shades of dark gray and black to the forest floor. Birds shrieked from the tree tops, but she couldn’t identify specifically where the sounds came from. They had the power to seem everywhere at once.

Fallon needed to move. She climbed the few feet to the path her horse had been following. Everything on her body worked. Only a twinge of pain in her shoulder gave her trouble. She looked back the way she had come. Her father had completely disappeared. It was one thing to be in the forest alone on horseback, and quite another to be on foot with no weapon. She could always sing. Her off-key pitch could frighten starving animals.

The path refilled with shadows and darkness surrounded her. If the forest seemed dusky now, when twilight came she would be blind. She shivered thinking of the midwife



and how the dark had thrived around her until Fallon had killed her. The pressure closed in on Fallon from all sides. She needed to move to clear her head. It was not as if she were some defenseless child. And yet, here she stood fearful of the dark...especially when it came alive.

Anticipation of The Passing paled in comparison to recent events—the midwife’s death, not knowing if Nana, mother and the baby survived, and her father’s absence! Tears formed in her eyes, but she wouldn’t give them the luxury of falling. She wiped them away with the edge of her cloak. Crying was a waste of time.

The rustling sounds of the forest returned as she continued in the direction of the farm. The sun had moved past the horizon, but its colorful rays provided a little light. The whinny of a horse alerted her to her father’s presence ahead. In her relief not to be alone, she almost called out to him.

He had dismounted and was crouched to the left of the path, one hand sifting through the debris of pine needles and decaying leaves that layered the path. A dark curl of hair had sprung loose from the strip of leather that bound his hair at the nape of his neck. It hung over his eyes.

He looked imposing, despite the fact that he was crouching. Nothing could conceal the sheer size of him. He had always looked that way to her, even though she knew she shared his lean build and height. Maybe it wasn’t his height, but the confidence of his movements. Fallon admired that about him. He was a patient teacher showing her how to notch an arrow, pull it back, and release in one fluid motion. It seemed such a natural part of him that she wondered if he had come from Nana’s womb carrying a bow and arrow. Fallon watched as he pressed his fingers to his nose, and then stood to grab the bridle of her horse. It nuzzled his shoulder and then stood docile, the traitorous fiend.

A subtle change in his behavior alerted her to his mood. It was one that she recognized when mother and he were discussing “elder” matters at the wooden table in the kitchen. Although she couldn’t hear her parents from where she sat across the room, she would often just sit and observe them. A person learned a lot just by watching. The way her mother tilted her head and stuck out her chin often preceded her pushing back her chair and

slapping her palms on the table. Her father's jaw muscles usually flexed when he tried to be patient with Aurora.

Here on the path to the farm, it was the same thing. The change wasn't detectable in what he said, for he was silent. Instead it was a slight difference in the angle of his head. She watched his surreptitious glances into the forest, as he ran his hand along the length of her horse's mottled gray flanks. He tugged on his horse's stirrups and tightened the saddle belt. The horse stood patiently, even though he had probably performed all of these equipment checks back at the farm. He mounted his horse, shifted her horse's reins to his left hand, and cantered toward Fallon's concealed position. His brow looked relaxed, but he leaned slightly forward in the saddle.

Fallon watched the shadows that followed in his wake. It was if a long black cloak streamed behind him as he rode. She frowned. Why was she seeing things in the shadows?

"Let's continue," he said as he passed her. How had he known she was there? He didn't look in her direction, nor did he chastise her. Her father simply dropped the reins of her horse and continued along the path away from the farm. Fallon put her foot in the stirrup and mounted. She looked in the direction of the farm.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Fallon," he called over his shoulder. How had he known what she was thinking?

"But Father! We have to get to the farm. They need us!"

He stopped his horse and turned in his saddle. "We can't help them here, Fallon."

"That's why we must return to the farm!" She jerked the reins, and her horse whinnied in protest. At least it had stopped. "I'm going to the farm with or without you. It is my fault they are hurt." She didn't add, "Or worse," because that would mean no hope. "It is my magic that did this."

"We don't have much time—"

"And yet you waste it by riding away from the people who need us most! Is this what you did when Keeley needed you?"

"Don't you dare!" He glared at her and fisted his hands. It was a good thing he was still mounted and a few paces ahead of her, or he might have struck her off his horse. "You

don't understand what is happening or where you are, but that doesn't *ever* give you the right to accuse me of abandoning our family. Everything I have done, and everything I do is for all of us." His voice shook. "You don't know the risk I have taken in coming here."

"You want to talk about risk?" she snapped. "Whatever you think you have sacrificed for this family wasn't enough! They are all dead! Dead! There isn't anyone! And you...you just keep riding towards Cennfhain or god knows where, as if we are on a daytrip, and... what? Do you think a warm fire will greet us when we return, and mother will kiss you like always and put the baby in your arms? There's nothing left! No one! Just me who couldn't do a cursed thing to stop it, and *you* who wasn't there when we needed you!"

She hadn't meant to say that, but when it came out, Fallon knew those were her true feelings. Resentment at his absence, her guilt about the midwife, and the loss of her family. A bird twittered in the canopy of the forest. It had a haunted quality to it. "My soul is damned. What else do you want from me?" she asked.

"I want you to know that I am protecting you the only way I know how—in your dreams. It's the only way I know how to warn and guide you. What you are seeing isn't real."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a slight shimmer in the midst of the darkness. It wasn't the type of golden shimmer that occurs as trees wave their branches and disrupt the sun's efforts to reach the ground. Instead it gleamed and hovered. When she turned her head to get a better look, it disappeared.

"And what I'm feeling? Is that not real either?"

"Only you know that answer. But, Fallon, you need to listen to me. We don't have much time before I am detected."

"Who would know? If you do have the ability to walk my dreams, then it is my mind that you enter, and only my mind that knows you are here."

"It's not who you should worry about. It's what."

"Why should I believe you, let alone trust you? First you kept Keeley a secret and now you suddenly reveal your ability to walk in dreams. What else haven't you told me?"

“I haven’t told you that I know what happened at the farm and that your mother and Nana are alive.”

Fallon’s shoulders slumped, and she pressed her fingertips to her eyes. “And my sister?”

“I do not know. I can enter Aurora’s and Nana’s dreams and relive most of the events, but since the baby’s fate lies in the empty parts of their memories, I cannot say for sure. Come, Fallon.” He moved his horse near hers and reached out. His hand covered both of hers. Odd, she thought. She ought to have felt the warmth of his touch, yet she felt nothing.

Fallon looked at him. He had a strong face. His eyes were his most mesmerizing feature. They were a multi-hued green, like they had been blended from all the shades of moss you could find in the forest. She had his eyes, only hers were an almond shape that turned up at the outer corners. Where his nose was long and sharp with a knot on the bridge where it had been broken, hers was small and petite.

He stared at her. “I don’t expect you to understand now, but you will in time. There will be things that you must do, even if you don’t know how. You are an intelligent girl. I can hear it in the questions you ask. And your heart knows what is right. The best choices are molded from these two qualities.” He smiled and touched her cheek. Fallon couldn’t speak. Tears threatened to fall, and she took a deep, shaky breath to calm herself.

“You will have three choices any time you encounter the unknown,” he said. “You can whine and complain about the unfairness of it all and use that as an excuse to do nothing. You can do what is easiest, or you can do what is difficult.” His calloused finger tilted her face so that she looked him in the eyes. “All choices are tough to make when little time to consider exists. Even the strongest man struggles with this. But, Fallon, I am not asking you to be the strongest man. I am asking you to be you and to find strength in the most desperate situations. Take a look around you.”

She scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. He gestured toward the path. She hadn’t noticed how it forked off to the right. She had been too angry to pay attention to her surroundings. Trees on both sides reached their gnarled roots towards each other. It was

more like a memory of a path, an indentation in the foliage rather than a passage. She was surprised that he had even noticed it.

They stood side-by-side their horses barely a hand's span apart. "I used this path when I hunted as a young man. The forest creatures were abundant here because there was little threat from people. This path has existed for generations, even before your great-grandmother's time, but people have forgotten. We often forget the past until something reminds us."

"What does any of this have to do with me? Please just say what you mean."

"I can't. It is forbidden by those who watch." He stared at her without blinking. A snapping sound behind them jarred him from his reverence. He had been trying to tell her something. She could feel the faint unspoken words probing her mind. "We must go. They have found us."

"They?" She stared into the overgrown path. The longer she looked, the more visible the overgrown path became like someone had shined a light through a hollow log to illuminate its inner secrets. It entranced her.

The spell broke when her father drew his bow and arrow and whipped the horse around with pressure from his knee. The arrow was notched and drawn before he said, "Fallon, you will be required to make a choice no child should have to make. He will be there to guide you when you most need him. Do not fear him."

"What do you mean, *he*? Why not you?" She twisted around in the saddle to look at her father.

He avoided her question. "I do not believe your sister is dead. It is your destiny to find and protect her. You are bound." Her father scrutinized the forest. Leaves rustled on their right, and something snapped. If something was trying to sneak up on them, it wasn't being very subtle. There were only two things that stalked their prey so carelessly, wolves when they were in a pack and bears.

"Show yourself or my arrow will find you." His voice commanded an answer, yet no one or *nothing* replied. His muscles were steady as he trained the arrow on the place where the last movement had occurred. "This is your last warning!" She wondered if her heart was

even beating. It had stilled in her chest, and she forced herself to take regulated breaths. She loved the thrill of the hunt, but not if she were the one hunted.

All was still. The light breeze that had been at their backs the entire way dissipated. The swaying of the branches froze. Even the birds' chattering had silenced. It was as if all the life had been sucked out of the forest. Her father still held his bow at the ready. His eyes scanned the area of forest. The bushes shivered and his arrow flew into the swaying branches. Everything was still again.

"Did you get it?" she asked. Her voice came out as a whisper.

"I don't know, Fallon. It sounded as if my arrow struck wood rather than any living creature, human or otherwise." He had notched another arrow and was scanning the forest with his eyes. The muscles in his forearms bulged. She could see one ticking beneath the surface of his skin.

"What do you mean or otherwise? Wolves?" Her voice caught on the word as she spoke it aloud. She had seen a wolf only one other time in her life, and its eyes had haunted her more than its howl. Her father had told her that they rarely traveled alone, usually in packs.

One branch snapped and then another. This time it was in front and behind them. More broke to their right and left. They were surrounded and in danger. Birds cawed overhead. It sounded like a chant—the rhythm slow and even.

"Fallon!" His voice sounded distant with a faint echo. She had been so hypnotized by the birds that she had forgotten the danger. Snaps closed around them.

"Fallon..." his voice was low and even. "When these things attack, I want you to flee. These creatures are here for you, although they should have waited for The Passing Ceremony."

"These are part of the ceremony?"

"Listen to me!" He sounded as if he were yelling in a canyon. Sounds bombarded her from all sides making it difficult to understand him. "Do not trust...your magic...a guide...run!"

An ebony mist drifted across the ground. The leaves disappeared beneath the boiling black mist. Her horse rolled its eyes and danced away from the tendrils licking its hooves. Fallon moved closer to her father until they were side by side. She reached over and grabbed the hunting knife from his waist. The feel of the hilt made her stomach heave and she almost dropped it. She wished she had dreamed about her bow and arrows.

Whatever was out there sounded big. Bigger than one arrow could kill, let alone a six inch blade. If it were wolves, they were patient predators who liked to toy with their prey. Although her father could notch and let fly five arrows faster than she could lace the leather thongs around her boots, she was afraid. Too many bushes rustled around them.

Her horse reared and she landed in a heap on the ground. She dropped the knife. Fallon scrambled to her feet. Her hands were covered in blood, fresh blood. Fallon thought she saw the midwife lunge at her from the bushes. Her eyes were red. An arrow struck the midwife in the side, and she fell. Fallon screamed. The midwife's craggy fingers gripped handfuls of the mist and dragged herself towards Fallon.

"Fallon! You are a MacBaharin. You must find the strength to do what needs to be done!" Two more arrows flew from his bow and struck the midwife in her neck and ribcage. She vanished beneath the mist.

The bushes closest to them parted and a mangy snout emerged. It sniffed the air and pointed in Fallon's direction.

"Go, Fallon!"

"No! I won't leave you." She stood her ground. Fear of the wolves and her blame towards her father caused the tears she had managed to keep at bay to spill down her cheeks. She hated crying! Hated it! And she hated feeling helpless even more.

"Go, now!" He pushed the toe of his boot into her back, but his foot passed through her. "Choose, Fallon, choose. Please, I can't stay here much longer."

"I will not leave." Through her tears she turned to face him, but she couldn't see him. She could only see a golden thread that had materialized and extended from her heart to the overgrown path. Her eyes blinked rapidly trying to clear her vision. It pulled at her, and Fallon took one step forward before planting her feet. "I will not leave him!"

She whipped back to face the beasts and flexed her fingers. Nothing happened. Fallon shook her hands and willed her magic to come forth. He would be angry with her...if they got out of here alive. Her hands remained normal, but the golden thread grew brighter.

“Father!” She knew that her lips had formed the word, but there was no vibration in her throat where words originated. Snowflakes spilled from the sky and melted on her skin. The sun’s light intensified, as well, and a hum filled the air.

Something slammed into her from behind and she fell. The mist wafted over her turning day into night. Coarse hairs brushed her legs, and she flinched. She had the distinct impression that something very large and ominous towered above her and pinned her legs.



## CHAPTER 5: THE SEVERING OF BONDS

Fallon awoke in a fetal position on the floor. She tore at the woolen blanket entangled around her legs. The wolves! Her father! She groped around for a weapon. She thought her heart would burst from her body. Fallon blinked trying to focus. Where was she? What had happened? She had been in the forest with father when...when what? She massaged her temples trying to make sense of her surroundings.

Time seemed endless, especially when locked in her bedroom. Last night she tried to try to climb out the window to see more than just the four white walls that imprisoned her. The slope of the roof combined with the thin frosting of snow had changed her mind, so she went to bed.

God, the dream! Although the details sifted through her consciousness, fear, despair, and hopelessness lingered. She rested her back against the wall beneath the window. So real! Even deep, slow breaths did little to reduce the anxiety. Her father had tried to tell her something. A path and a choice? Don't trust her magic, or was her magic a guide? Everything happened so fast. Concentration had been impossible.

She scratched her ankle and sucked in her breath at a brief pain. Dried blood caked her fingernails. She pulled up the hem of her nightdress. Five shallow scratches stretched from calf to ankle. They burned. Great, she would add dangerous dreams to her growing list of worries that included her family and murder. At least she knew Mother and Nana were alive, if she believed a dream...and her father. Even if he had lied, Fallon knew she had to find the baby.

She pictured the stillness of its small body lying between her mother's legs. Its head faced away from her, and its hand lay fisted against its chest. In the dim light of the room, she couldn't see whether the baby breathed. Fallon closed her eyes.

How was she going to explain her side to The Cennfhain Council? She couldn't even explain it to the squat little man who had visited her a day ago. Instead, she stared at the large mole clinging to the corner of his mouth like a brown barn spider. It waved its bristly legs in rhythm to the opening and closing of his mouth. The monotonous voice droned on

and on forever. Fallon couldn't remember what he read from the parchment, and her words fled when he paused for her confession. When he poked her in the arm, Fallon had thrown her breakfast at him before the guard pinned her to the floor with a knee in her back. She couldn't contain the high-pitched giggles that erupted as the weasly little man wiped cornmeal from his tunic.

Fallon's hips had dug into the wood, and breathing had been difficult with the air being forced out of her by the large woman on her back. A few more hysterical laughs escaped her. What could she possibly have said to satisfy any of them? That the shadows had come alive, possessed the midwife, and tried to kill everyone in the house? If The Council knew magic was involved, she would die, and then who would find her sister? Fallon's back popped as the woman dug her knee in one last time before dragging Fallon to the bed by her hair.

Heavy footsteps reverberating in the hallway hauled Fallon to the present. Father? Fallon needed to know more. Why had he entered her dreams? What would The Council do if they knew he could walk in dreams? He could have just awakened her. Mother? She trembled. All she needed was a reassuring hand to smooth her hair. She loved the softness of her mother's hands, and the way she trailed a finger down Fallon's nose. Nana's hands, roughened from weeding the herb garden, could be so gentle when putting salve on a scrape. One touch, one word could give her strength and hope.

Keys jangled outside the door. She wouldn't let this woman tower over her. As she pressed her palms to the floor to stand, a tingling sensation slithered down her arms to her hands. The wood softened to the consistency of clay along the Moraq riverbank. Her hands sank into the floor. She tried to snatch them away, but the suction held her captive.

It was this *power*, this cursed magic that had caused all of the misery of the last few days. And it made her feel alone. She didn't know where it came from or how to control it, but she would find a way to rid herself of it.

Someone inserted a key into the lock. Fallon focused on the little knot of wood between her splayed fingers. A faint golden glow emanated from beneath her hands. She rocked forward to the balls of her feet and then used the momentum to snatch her hands

away. Her hands ripped free with a sucking noise so loud that whoever was at the door would surely hear.

The pins inside the lock clicked. Fallon kicked the blanket to cover the indentations left in the floor and scrambled to the bed. She drew her knees to her chest and tucked her hands beneath the folds of her cotton nightdress. The tips of her bare toes peeked out from underneath the ruffled hem.

The door swung open and dishes clattered on a tray. Fallon sighed and dropped her head to her knees. She shifted just enough to peek from behind the tangle of chestnut bangs to stare at the woman who stood there with another meager breakfast of cornmeal and water. Where was the fruit spread and bread?

“What am I? A sick chicken?” Fallon grumbled. The woman dropped the tray on the side table and the water glass crashed to the floor. Fallon pushed herself against the wall and stared. The woman loomed over her. Her nose sat like a squashed pear upon her face. Her lips were pinched together and a muscle ticked in her jaw. Deep lines burrowed into her forehead and along the corners of her eyes. A mass of disheveled gray hair was bound into a braid and tied with a dirty cloth. It hung over her shoulder like a lizard's tail.

“If you were a sick chicken, I would have rung your neck by now.” Fallon froze, not because she was shocked the woman's words, but because she had finally spoken. Fallon had tried to talk her before, but the woman always ignored her.

Long, jagged stitches held her tunic and leggings together, and a thin leather belt held a knife against her hip. Fallon eyed the knife. “What're you starin' at?” Fallon looked up. “I'm not going to skin you, at least not today.” The woman's words came out on a wheeze.

The corner of her lips twitched, and Fallon couldn't tell if it was a smile or scowl. “Get up, girl! Eat your meal and be dressed by the time I return. You,” she jabbed a finger toward Fallon, “have an appointment with The Council today.” The clipped way she spoke left little room for argument. The woman turned to leave.

Fallon scrambled for words. “Please, I want to see my mother and Nana. Why am I to see The Council? Who are you?” She reached toward the woman's sleeve, but she grabbed Fallon's wrist.

“Don’t ever touch me, girl, you hear? Not if you want to keep those long, slender fingers attached to your hands.” Fallon snatched her hands back and tucked them under her nightgown. The woman smoothed her hand over her knife and stared at Fallon. Her eyes were unreadable in a mass of wrinkles.

“I am called Mairi. You are afraid. It shows in the rush of questions...the way you look at me. I like that.” Again Mairi flashed the smile that was not a smile.

Fallon wanted to throw something at her. It was probably a good thing nothing was close at hand. Instead, Fallon responded, “I am not afraid! I’m tired of being alone, locked up my room where the only company that will listen to the truth is a bird with golden eyes that sits outside my window begging for crumbs. But most of all, I’m tired of being ignored!” Fallon stood trying to keep her head held high. Mairi stared at her. Something about the dark depths of the woman's eyes resonated in her memory, but she was too focused on catching her breath after the whirlwind of words that erupted from her.

“Maybe you would do well to imitate the bird and take what *crumbs* you are given. And don’t worry. The Council will give you their full attention. They do not look kindly on young *ladies* who do not know their place, nor do they favor young *ladies* who have committed murder.” Such scorn in her voice when she said “ladies.”

“What do you know about murder? What do you know about anything that has happened?” Fallon sneered.

Mairi just shook her head. “You young ones are always so oblivious to world around. It is your ignorance that gets you killed.” Her finger reached out and tilted Fallon’s chin upward until she could stare down into Fallon’s eyes. Fallon took a step back until her calves touched the bed. “My advice is to do as you are told and watch that sharp tongue of yours. Or I might have to remove it.” Mairi spun on her heels and left without another word. The lock clicked.

Fallon pulled on the handle and pounded on the door. Her foot crashed against the door shaking it in its frame. She gave it one last kick in frustration.

At least someone had acknowledged her existence. She had begun to feel like a spirit floating from one day to the next. Her stomach grumbled. Maybe the food would bring her back to life. She could see faint threads of steam meandering off the cornmeal.

Fallon still hadn't learned anything about her family since she had awakened, and that was the worst—not knowing. Mairi told her to take what she was given, which was nothing! There hadn't even been any movement in the herb patch these last few days, except the leaves falling from the nettle weed. At least she hadn't seen a tiny grave being dug. It would have severed the cords that she kept tightly wound around herself for self-preservation.

Fallon ate her breakfast. She pulled her sleeping gown over her head taking care not to get her long hair tangled in the buttons. Her father always said that in the sunlight her hair was the color of a polished nut from a buckeye tree. The coldness burrowed into her bones as she grabbed her winter leggings off the back of the chair. It wasn't the most flattering clothing to address the Council in, but its thick leather would help protect her legs from the snap of the wind on the long ride to town. The woolen shirt felt harsh against the skin on her wrists where the soft cottony undershirt did not protect her.

The keys jingled in the door again as she finished securing the last button on her tunic and tightened the laces to the hides strapped to her feet.

"Good, you're prepared!" Mairi's two steps covered the distance between them. She jerked Fallon's wrists together and tied them with a sinewy length of leather.

"What are you doing?" She managed to yank one hand free. Mairi caught it and ground the delicate bones in her wrist together. "You're hurting me!" Fallon struggled against Mairi's hold until her feet tangled in the blanket she had left on the floor.

"Hold still, girl, or I will only wrap them tighter..." her voice trailed off. "What is that?" The imprints of Fallon's hands were clearly discernible. The glow had disappeared and the wood around the impression had hardened to a glossy finish as if it had just been oiled.

Still grasping Fallon's wrists in her left hand, she bent to run her gnarled fingers along the impressions. The edges were smooth like rocks shaped by the current of the Moraq River. Mairi flattened her palm against the floor and it smothered the two imprints.

"I didn't-" Fallon began.

"So... you have a bit of magic in you. I can feel a faint trace." She stared at Fallon.

"No! I don't...I don't know what it is. If it is magic, then it is a curse."

"When is your Passing Ceremony?" Mairi asked. Fallon clamped her mouth shut.

"No matter. Once The Council finds out about this, a murder trial will be the least of your worries." The woman made quick work of tying Fallon's hands together. "Let's go!" She left the room without glancing back to see if Fallon followed. Her strides were so lengthy that Mairi was halfway down the long hall before Fallon managed to catch her.

As Fallon passed her parents' bedroom, her steps faltered. She didn't want to look inside the room, but she forced herself to. The sun streamed through the parted curtains. Dust motes highlighted by a sunbeam whirled on the air currents. The room looked so serene, until she noticed the darkened patch of wood. The patch looked like the moist area left in the soil when she emptied the dish water off the porch. It raised the hair on her arms and the nape of her neck.

Fallon realized she couldn't hear footsteps. She looked toward the stairs. Mairi stood by the wooden table at the top of the stairs and observed her. The dried petals had been swept away. Fallon turned her back on the room that would haunt her dreams and joined Mairi.

"Do not speak when we go downstairs, or you will regret it. Do you understand?" she asked.

"Why can't I stop? Is my family there?" asked Fallon.

"No, it's you who aren't there."

"What do you mean?" Fallon asked. Mairi poked a finger into Fallon's back hard enough for Fallon to grab the railing with her bound hands.

"Keep moving!" Mairi ordered.

Earthy scents that made her feel safe, beckoned her down the stairway. At the bottom of the stairs, Fallon saw her mother bending over a clay pot. Flowers and herbs at various stages of growth spilled over the rim. Velvety leaves and spidery thistles melded together. She separated a tender shoot by gently brushing back the stems and leaves crowding around

it. Her shoulders were slumped, and a slight bulge beneath her apron showed a hint of the recent birth.

"Mother!" The snipping knife paused in above the shoot. Fallon rushed toward her, but a hand tangled in her hair jerking her back. Fallon strained against the hold. Her bound hands reached out, clawing the air. Her head was pulled so far backwards that it was difficult to see her mother.

"Mother, why haven't you been to see me? I saw him in my dreams, mother. Why haven't you been to see—?"

"I told you not to speak!" Mairi hissed. "I should have bound your mouth as well." One of Mairi's arms coiled around her neck and the other pinned Fallon's arms to her side. Why wasn't her mother rescuing her? Didn't her mother care? Didn't she love her? Fallon struggled against Mairi's hold.

"Mother! Do something!" Fallon's hair stuck to the tears streaming down her face. Nana rushed from the herb room and enveloped her mother in a hug. Her mother's fingers trembled and she sliced off a hunk of leaves. The pruning knife clattered to the floor. Aurora covered her face with her hands. The base of her palm pressed against her mouth. Mairi dragged Fallon to the door. "Mother!" It was more of a whisper than a shout. Mairi's crushing hold made it difficult to breathe.

"Please...Mother!" Fallon managed to whisper at the front door. Her mother's lips trembled. Aurora's shoulders heaved with each labored breath. She tried to smother her high-pitched keening, but it escaped. "Nana, please, I need you!" Nana turned her back on Fallon, and Aurora's eyes bore into hers over Nana's shoulder. Anguish marked her mother's face with tears streaks and lines on her forehead. Another feeling Fallon could not identify shone in Aurora's eyes. Finally, her mother squeezed her eyes shut and allowed Nana to turn her to face the kitchen window.

*They have both turned their backs on me, Fallon thought. I have no one.*

Mairi jerked Fallon through the door. They stumbled across the weathered boards of the porch. The voice of the wind, a whisper of what nature would bring this winter, blotted out the sound of the door slamming shut. The wind tore at the tears that still streamed down

Fallon's face. This loss hurt more than the thought of their deaths. They could have helped her, yet they had turned their back as if they were ashamed of what she had done and what she had become...a murderer. She squinted from beneath her lashes to block the sun's intensity. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust.

Tall horses at least seventeen hands high were tethered to the two fruit trees she had planted eight months earlier when she had learned that her mother was with child. A single leaf clung to the branch. The horses' manes blew behind them as if they were running, yet they stood still. A fine layer of snow blanketed the ground, and they pawed at it to uncover sparse patches of grass. Puffs of air floated from their muzzles.

"You couldn't obey, could you? You caused your mother more grief with your whimpering than if you had just left without a word," Mairi said as they approached the two horses.

"What about me? What about my grief? I'm the one held captive. I'm the one The Council seeks to blame for this crime. And yet they turned their backs like I am guilty."

"Nevertheless, you made her feel helpless, and that is one of the worst feelings in the world."

"Don't you think I know that? Stuck in a room for days with no one! No one!" Fallon choked on the last word. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "She turned her back on me," Fallon whispered. "She turned her back...and Nana? She helped her turn her back." Tears froze to her cheeks. Mairi boosted Fallon onto the dappled horse with the crimson blanket on its flanks. It danced for a moment, and Fallon steadied herself on the horn of the saddle.

Fallon wiped her cheeks. She had wasted enough tears on them. She wouldn't let them see her look back. They were dead. Dead to Fallon as much as Fallon was dead to them. The tightening in her chest intensified until it was difficult to breathe.

Mairi mounted her black horse, gathered the reins of Fallon's horse, and took off in a trot. At the edge of the farm, Fallon stole a last look at her home, sure that those in the house couldn't see her. They didn't deserve to see her. Mairi's and Fallon's tracks led from the house to the horses. In the distance she could make out the silhouette of the barn. A chorus of



blackbirds cawed from the rooftop. The sunlit yard washed out the wood until it blended with the surrounding white hills. Dark shapes bunched together near the left side of the barn and mooed. Beyond the barn, the hills fused with the clouds. Fallon watched the cows dwindle away until the cramp in her neck forced her to face what lay ahead.

The horses followed an earthen path layered with rocks and decaying leaves. It wove a jagged trail up the mountain. Towering trees guarded both sides of the trail, and the dense brush provided sanctuary for many of the forest's creatures. Cennfhain lay a quarter of a day's ride away. With her hands bound, the roughness of the terrain would demand her concentration. But how could she focus knowing that her loved ones had abandoned her? Had they given up on the baby too?

Fallon felt exposed, cut off from the comfort and safety of her home. The fireplace that stood sentry in the living room at home had been constructed from the muted orange and green stones of the upper river bank. The cheery rugs scattered about and the bulky chairs arranged around the fireplace's warmth invited you to curl up. Fallon loved the mixture of comfort and elegance contained in that little space.

She loved it more for the snippets of memories that made it her home. Nana stirring the heavy iron pot over the fire. Father telling her a story, his whiskers tickling her forehead. Mother sitting in the rocking chair, her belly bulging beneath the blanket wrapped about her waist. She had spent the last few days isolated from any emotional comfort. She would just have to comfort and take care of herself. Her father had warned her not to trust someone or something. Apparently he meant their family! No one would have that emotional power over her again. Ever!

Mairi interrupted her thoughts. "The town covenant decrees that anyone accused of murder must be separated from society until The Council rules on the case. This includes separation from family, and no exceptions are made for age. You shouldn't worry, though. The last execution was 75 years ago."

"Public execution, you mean," Fallon mumbled. Her father had mentioned private records that Mairi probably didn't know about. How many children had unofficially died at the hands of The Council?

Mairi was dangerous. She knew Fallon's secret, and that gave her power over Fallon just as much her family's love had. Mairi stared at the road ahead. Fallon wondered what she was trying to hide. It didn't matter. She was beyond trusting anyone, even if it meant living alone in the forest with the deer for the rest of her life.

"Public...private. I could publically slit your throat now with the sun and trees as my witness, or I could have done it when I found you near the midwife's body. Execution means death, no matter where it happens."

"And that would have made you a murderer."

Mairi chuckled. "That is the difference between us, girl. I don't care what people call me, especially when it is true." Mairi's black pupils dominated her sockets like two bottomless caves. Fallon half expected a flurry of bats to fly out of her eyes.

"You're right. I do care that people will see me as a murderer and will shun my family."

"Even though your family shunned you? You are naïve."

"I may be guilty of that, but I am not guilty of murder. It was self-defense!"

"Enough!" Mairi said. "Call it what you will, but I still have the task of burying two bodies."

A screech in the trees sounded like the screams of an infant. She focused on the bugs scurrying within the ruts, willing her mind not to be consumed by her failure. Fallon couldn't deny the worthlessness that filled her heart. She had failed to protect the baby, just as her father had failed to keep Keeley safe...and her.

Pine needles replaced the leaves on the path. The cuffs of the woolen tunic coupled with the leather binds on her wrists buffed her skin until it was raw. The wind beat at Fallon's body until it ached. Her eyelids drooped. The chattering of the birds lulled Fallon into a doze. Her head bobbed in rhythm to the horse's movements.

The horses stopped, and Fallon wondered how much time had passed. The sun had moved from its position on the horizon to a point not quite above their heads. Her surroundings were the same, but subtly different—the leaves were illuminated along their edges and the air felt colder, yet not frigid. They waited in a clearing no bigger than the

living area of her home. To the left, the land plunged into a tangle of foliage and outcroppings of rock that met the river's edge. Fallon's eyes closed once more.

Mairi dismounted and rummaged through a saddle bag. She took out a leather cloth that held dried meat and small withered berries. She also untied the water skin from her pommel. Fallon doze atop the horse as Mairi sat on a gray boulder and ate her lunch. She held the meat with both hands and took quick nibbles like a large gray rodent.

Fallon awoke to find Mairi watching her. She was unsure of what she was to do. Bits of food clung to Mairi's shirt. Fallon's belly protested its emptiness. She ached for some water to soothe her dry throat and at the very least a chance to stretch her legs, yet she refused to ask permission.

Fallon grabbed the saddle horn between her palms, leaned forward, and slid her body down the warmth of the horse. The drop to the ground was a greater distance than she had imagined. The landing jarred her teeth. Her feet slipped on the damp grasses and she clutched at the saddle strap to steady herself. The horse snorted and shuffled its feet. The tail whipped the back of her head.

Fallon couldn't see Mairi around the bulk of the horse. She stretched out her fingertips to stroke behind the horse's ears and then trailed her palm along its cheek. The hair was silken to the touch, not at all like the coarse mane. Fallon breathed in its dusty scent. Her touch skimmed along its jaw line to the horse's nose. A high-pitched whinny burst from the horse's throat, and it tossed its head.

"Shhhhh," she soothed. "I won't hurt you."

Fallon recoiled as a hand touched her shoulder. She hadn't heard Mairi approach. The decaying pine needles must have muffled her steps. She turned to see Mairi clutching her knife. Fallon brought her hands up and stepped backwards. "What are you doing?"

"You—" Hooves pounding toward them from the north interrupted Mairi's command. She stashed her knife in her belt and stood behind Fallon. Three riders halted a short distance from them. Their gold and white banners snapped and settled behind them. Fallon could make out the faint outlines of the shields and quivers strapped to their saddles. They angled their horses toward Mairi and Fallon.

"Do not speak a word," Mairi warned. "Remember what happened last time you disobeyed me!" The soldiers looked down upon them from their horses. Their cloaks could not conceal the bulk of their bodies, and their faces revealed no emotions. One rider urged his horse a step closer until Mairi had to crane her neck to look at him. His trousers emphasized his lean muscles. He removed his helmet and his dark brown hair fell to his shoulders. Fallon had the urge to step back.

"You there, woman! State your name and business." His blue eyes had an unusual lightness to them that allowed you to see all the way into their depths. Fallon stared.

A long moment passed before Mairi answered. Fallon wondered if Mairi was trying to decide whether or not she should ignore him for his rudeness. The gold Council ring, etched with the head of a fox, flashed in the sun and urged Mairi to speak.

"I am called Mairi of the house of Laoidheach. I am charged with the delivery of this girl." Mairi prodded Fallon forward. "If you will pardon—"

"Deliver her to whom?" he asked. Mairi's lip curled. She recognized this soldier. Mairi had seen him in the Hall of Inquiry on many an occasion, and this soldier, no, *boy*, knew exactly who Mairi was and what The Council told her to do. She smoothed out the snarl by lifting the other side of her lip into an expression that resembled a smile.

"To the Cennfhain Council, of course." She performed a curtsy. Her movements reminded Fallon of an elder whose joints were plagued with disease.

He narrowed his eyes. "She is the one accused of murder?" He stared at Fallon. "Look at me, girl." She didn't want to, simply out of spite, but she knew she had better obey. His unreadable gaze fixed on her. Fallon lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes the longer he gazed at her. What right did he have to examine her as if she were a horse?

Fallon couldn't stop the words. "Would you like to check my teeth to see if I'm of good breeding?" she asked. Mairi sucked in her breath and backhanded Fallon. The slap was worth the soldier's reaction. He dismounted and gripped the back of Fallon's neck to force her to look at him. A red mark stained her cheek.

"What does a murderer know of good breeding?" he demanded.

"Only as much as a soldier knows about murderers," Fallon said returning his stare.

The soldier tightened his grip on Fallon's neck, but she refused to cry out. He shoved her away and mounted his horse. "I've been sent to scout your progress. The Council does not smile kindly on tardiness. I will return to Cennfhain to inform The Council of your arrival." He spun his horse around and dug his heels into its side. The horse leapt into a gallop. "See that you are promptly at The Hall of Inquiry when the sun is at its peak!" he called back as the other soldiers gave chase.

A faint coating of dust settled on their clothes. Fallon tried to pick herself up, but Mairi had already grabbed her by the collar. The knife was in Mairi's hand.

"I warned you not to say anything, girl! That mouth of yours needs to be silenced. Maybe a needle and thread will do the trick." She glanced back in the direction of the soldiers. "Do you have any idea who he was?" Mairi asked.

Fallon didn't speak. Instead she moved her gaze between the knife and Mairi.

"Staring at me will not save you." Mairi snagged Fallon's hand and swept her legs from under her. Fallon landed on her shoulder and screamed. Mairi sliced at the leather bindings. The cords snapped and fell to the ground. She tucked her knife back into her belt and turned to her horse. She returned holding a gray woolen cloak lined with fur.

"Take it," Mairi snarled. Fallon took another step backwards still rubbing the rawness from her wrists. "We don't have time for games, girl!" She grabbed Fallon before she could back away any more and yanked the cloak around her.

"I don't understand what you want from me," Fallon replied.

"I owe you in a way that you could never understand."

"But..."

"I don't have time to explain. I will tell The Council that you escaped after we met the soldiers. Go! Once they find out magic is involved, they will put you to death, and then claim that you had a fair, *private* trial." Mairi repacked her saddle bags.

"I don't have anywhere to go. How will I eat or stay warm?" Fallon clutched the cloak tighter. Mairi mounted her horse.

"Your freedom is your responsibility. You can stay here and wait for the soldiers to return or flee. In either case, you don't have much time, and neither does the baby."

“What do you know about the baby? Is she alive?”

Mairi ignored Fallon and urged her horse into a gallop. “The question is,” Mairi thought, “how long will you be?”

## CHAPTER 6: THE INQUIRY

Only about an hour remained before the sun would be at its peak. Mairi beat her horse to make it to the outer wooden gates of the town. The Hall of Inquiry, which sat in the center of town, would take longer to get to. She dug her heels into the flanks of the horse, and it leaped forward, scrambling up the rocky path. Mairi grasped at a branch that hung over the path, and used the forward momentum of the horse to snap it. When the horse's hooves slipped, Mairi slammed her ankles into the indentation in front of its powerful hindquarters and used the branch to slap its rear. This stupid animal wouldn't make her late to meeting with The Council.

Who knew what The Council would do as punishment? All those men staring down at her, thinking they could command her every move. Well, she had always done what The Council had wanted, even if she had disagreed with them. What did it matter if she killed someone's cow or choked a man in the dark alley behind the tavern to reinforce The Council's authority? It was about self-preservation, and Mairi would see to it that she floated to the top like a bloated body. Besides, one day she would pay them back. But today wasn't that day. She would play along and kneel before them with gritted teeth.

The town stood atop a cliff overlooking the Morag River. Over the course of 1,000 years, the river had patiently exposed the gray craggy rocks and multicolored layers of earth. The wooden guard towers on each side of the main gate stood stark against the sky. The stone wall, which was the color of dead fish, stood at least fifteen feet high as a deterrent to invaders. It wasn't outside invaders the townspeople needed to worry about. It was The Council, but they didn't know that. She could barely see the features of the guards whose heads followed her entrance into the town. Their helmets winked in the sunlight. Sheep, she thought, nothing but mindless sheep.

The Council really had no purpose now. After the war, it had settled land and property disputes, assigned punishments for enemy soldiers, and reformulated the defense plan for future attacks. Cennfhain had been safe from attacks for the last 300 years, and people had forgotten what The Council was for. They blindly went about their lives selling goods at the market and drinking on the weekend. Fools! None of them knew what

happened behind The Council's doors. They didn't want to know. Instead they followed blindly dismissing events as coincidence and ignoring conflicts rather than confronting them.

Mairi focused on the spires of The Hall of Inquiry that jutted just above the tops of the two-level buildings surrounding the market. Her gaze moved to the streams of smoke billowing from chimney tops. She tugged her hat down until the wide brim shadowed her forehead and eyes. There would be no witnesses for what she planned. There never were.

The buildings were built from the same stone as the wall. All of the buildings were tall, thin structures with barely enough room for a door and a window side-by-side. Considering a stone wall surrounded the town, there was not much room to expand but up. Candles that resembled long finger bones and sun-dried rodents swung from the second level balconies. A delicacy, indeed. If The Council truly grasped the implications of the latest events, the time was near when people would be swinging from the balconies by their necks.

Flags and clothing hung limp from balconies, despite the open doors of the town gate. The wind that whistled through the canyon walls and up the path had fallen silent. In the summer the dirt from the market ground squeezed into every piece of clothing, no matter how tight a belt or a shoelace was cinched. Now, despite the gathering clouds and chill, hordes of miserable people swarmed the square, haggling over prices of dried produce and butchered meat. They darted about in a rush to get back to the warmth of their homes. And their pitiful lives.

She passed the livestock pens on the left where the pungent odor of animal waste could not be erased even in the open air. Chickens squawking, pigs grunting and pawing at their crates, and goats with ropes looped around their scrawny necks all contributed to the din. Mairi couldn't tell where the animal sounds ended and the people sounds began. They were all animals.

She ignored her growling stomach when she passed the fruits and vegetable stands. Only one man could be entrusted to provide Mairi with what needed. Wooden wheelbarrows brimmed with turnips, potatoes, carrots, and primones, a small, bitter fruit with juice that left purple stains on fingers and chins. Scrawny cats wove in and out of table legs hunting mice. Mairi smiled.



A vendor juggled three golden perlos, a sweet fruit that snapped in the mouth. He had pulled his hat down so that his bushy eyebrows stuck out like the legs of a squashed bug beneath a boot. She had seen him in the taverns drinking his earnings, but she did not know him by name. Lucky him.

“You, my fine lady,” he called after her. “How about a tender fruit for the woman of the house? It makes a fine dessert right after a romantic meal.” He winked, and his eyes were swallowed in the bags beneath his eyes. The stench of mead wafted from his clothes. He must be drunk despite the early hour; otherwise he wouldn’t have addressed her, let alone called her a lady.

She smiled and then yanked the reins. Her horse reared and scored the air with its hooves. The parasite dropped his fruit, and then scrambled to retrieve it before it was squashed. Other market vendors rushed over to help him, sure to pass on the gossip about her. People loved to talk. They hid behind tentative smiles when Mairi stood before them, but she had overheard enough conversations about her job and her family to know what people really thought.

Ahead, she saw Michel, the burly man whose forearms resembled a tanned hide that had been stretched too long in the sun. His habits made him easy to find. The wooden cart was always just to the right of the well in the middle of the market. His ragged tent hovered over his vegetable and fruit stand. It leaned to the left probably because the poles had been mended too many times with rope. All the man needed to do was venture into the woods to cut new ones. Lazy sod!

Michel caught sight of her winding her way through the crowd toward him. She nodded her head in greeting as Michel acknowledged her with a quick bow. Too many people still bustled about. Too many witnesses. They typically conducted their business under the cover of darkness, but today they would just have to carry out business in private. It would cost her precious time, and The Council would not be pleased. The Council always made their demands and acquired an ounce of flesh with it simply because they could. Mairi dismounted, tied the reins to a wooden post, and clutched Michel’s hands in both of hers. Calluses lined his hands where the fingers met the palm.

“Prosperity an’ health to ya, Mairi,” he said pulling away. He slipped the five pyre she had pressed into his grasp into the coin purse he kept secured within the folds of his once black robe. Now, it was a thin, drab fabric held closed with a frayed white rope cinched about his waist. He looked like a pregnant goat, complete with a shaggy beard on his chin. She half expected him to bleat.

“Three sapanas,” she replied pointing to the round, red fruit heaped in the basket at his feet. “Bruised I will eat, but rotten...” He dug around in the damaged fruit and discarded each fruit.

“Nothin’ but the best fer ya. Step into me shop, please,” he said holding the flap of the tent open. “After you.”

“Is Netlea inside?” Mairi asked. Every time she visited, the damn forest cat stared at her without blinking. Not to mention the growl that Michel insisted on calling a purr. The cat wanted Mairi to think it was playful by rolling onto its back and waving its paws in the air. But the fact that its claws were extended sent a clear message.

“Netlea? Aye, she is feelin’ a bit down, so she is stayin’ out of the wind and cold. Come, now. I need to be gettin’ out of the cold meself. Now about those sapanas...” He waved her in and then quickly tied the flap shut behind her.

Mairi needed a moment for her eyes to adjust. The inside of the tent lay in contrast to the bright, winter sun outside. The roof of the tent brushed her head. She rubbed her hands together and blew on them. Michel’s movements could be traced as he knocked over utensils, probably cups, and they clanged together. A growl came from behind Mairi, and she took a hasty step forward.

“Sorry, my dear. Didn’t mean to wake ya,” Michel said. Such gentleness in his voice, thought Mairi. And for a stupid cat! No wonder he didn’t have a wife.

“Come, Mairi.” His voice had become more brisk, all business. “Have a seat and tell me what ya be needin’.” He held a brown metal cup towards her. Tufts of hair whisked out from his scalp. She wrapped her fingers around the warm liquid and lowered herself to a cushion the small fire pit. Mairi made sure she faced the cat. Its eyes never left her as it

flicked its tail in a rhythmic motion and cleaned its face. Michel sat opposite her on a small wooden bench topped with cushions.

He took small slurps from his drink and smacked his lips together waiting for her to begin. Mairi knew he wouldn't prompt her again. The last time he had tried to hurry along their transaction, she had removed a pyre from her offer each time he had sighed or protested. The pile of twenty pyres diminished to ten before the deal was sealed. Had he not taken her offer, she definitely wouldn't have trusted him for future dealings. At least they both understood each other now. She drove a hard bargain, but what other type of bargain was there?

Mairi stared at the flames licking the bottom of his battered kettle. Embers crackled and jumped from the circle of stones. Reds, yellows, oranges, blues, and occasionally whites wove themselves together. How could this beautiful array of colors blend and become such a destructive force?

She moistened her lips and said, "I have a request." It was simple. Netlea purred and twitched her whiskers when Michel stopped stroking her ears. He stared at Mairi as she repeated her request.

"I can't..." he began to protest. She stood and stared at him until the words died on his lips. "Mairi, I won't..." This time she walked closer until she dominated his view. Netlea growled a warning, but Mairi did not have time for debate. Michel drained the contents in his cup and set it down.

Mairi tossed a weighty bag of pyre in his direction. "This is what you will do," she said. He shook his head and his two shaggy brows tangled.

\* \* \*

Mairi staggered out of the tent and groped for the reins of her horse. Points of flashing lights spun through the haze in her vision. They reminded her of the little flashing bugs that flew in drunken patterns along the river. She had tipped the brim of her hat so much that it would be difficult to see. People stared as Mairi hoisted herself onto her horse.

Let them stare and whisper behind their hands. They would be thanking her one day soon. They just didn't know it. Her left temple pounded. God, how her head ached. She gripped the horn of her saddle to keep herself from sliding off the other side.

By now the sun had moved past the midpoint in the sky. The Council had commanded her to be at The Hall by noon. They had sent that little messenger boy, daddy's youngest, who wore the signet ring that he thought gave him power. It did—to a point. She spurred her horse into action and lifted her chin. She had to remain strong for her plan to work. She ignored the throb on the left side of her face. It wasn't her life she was worried about. No, Mairi was too valuable as a henchwoman, so to speak, and she could do The Council much damage. It was Fallon's life that depended on it.

She scowled at the ornately painted swirls on the hall's dome, each carefully outlined in gold. The spires disappeared into the low clouds that hovered above the town. The sky had turned gray hinting that a winter storm was inescapable. People watched the sky before rushing around.

This was reason enough to hurry, she thought. Rarely did people ignore her when she carried out her duties as the gravedigger. How could they as she ripped piles of earth from the ground with her shovel? In polite society, however, she didn't exist. People didn't want to be reminded that their family members were being eaten by worms. Mairi was the phantom who laid loved ones to rest, minus a few valuables. And she had just buried the one person she cared for.

Ahead, two white arches marked the final path to The Hall of Inquiry. Tiles painted in the same bright colors as the dome's swirls, trimmed the arches. During ceremonies, gawkers flocked to line the path. The awestruck idiots! It was best to avoid The Hall of Inquiry at all costs, yet she did not have that luxury. In a town of 500 people, she would be called to perform her duties once or twice a month. Now, however, people died in greater numbers, and not from natural causes.

In this month alone, she had buried six people with four of those dying from suspicious injuries. Of course the town only knew about the two natural deaths. The other four graves disappeared beneath the roots of a crooked pine tree in the forest. Pine needles

covered the area now and kept it looking undisturbed. Perfect. If people knew half of what she did, the foolish rumors and tales they told would pale in comparison. Mairi liked it that way.

She kicked the horse once more. The horse's stride lengthened and Mairi pressed her knees against the horse. They sped past the leafless trees that lined both sides of the street. They were symmetrically placed, all 30 of them. The dead scrawny branches bounced in the breeze. The trees had died in a drought two years ago, but The Council had refused to have them removed. They symbolized each decade of their power. And the fact that their power was dying, she thought.

She pulled back on the reins and slid from her horse. Mairi slapped its rear and it trotted off to the stables. She sucked in her breath, held it, and slowly released it before limping up three flights of marble steps. Her temple still throbbed, but she kept moving. Like hell she would show any sign of weakness to The Council, especially if she wanted them to do her bidding.

Four guards stood rigid outside the entrance door. The golden fox embroidered on the chest of their cream uniforms represented The Council's cunning. And their willingness to scavenge. The soldiers gripped their spears halfway down the shaft, and their eyes followed her as she approached. She ignored them, and moved through the door. They fell in step behind her, herding her toward The Hall where she was expected to bring Fallon.

Did The Council think she would run? Ignorant pigs! Mairi relaxed her facial muscles. Showing The Council any kind of response gave them the power. They used that power any way they could. Her eye twitched. No, breathe nice and easy. It's just like kicking the tree stump from underneath a condemned man. Her heart rate slowed, even though her pace did not.

Stone busts of former Council members lined both sides of the entryway. A petite woman swished a duster over them. How could that servant work while all of those heads followed her every move with those sightless, pale eyes? She amplified her limp as she passed through the arch into the great hall.

At the far end, five men sat on a raised wooden platform. It curved into a semi-circle. The polishers had been at work recently. The rich chestnut color gleamed. Her steps echoed on the stone floor of their chambers. Mairi glanced back to see that the guards had positioned themselves in front of the only escape. That was fine since she intended to walk out that door of her own accord despite any punishments The Council had in mind. And so it begins, Mairi whispered to herself before she stopped in front of the highest platform. She kneeled, placed her hand on her heart, and then stood.

The five men did not tilt their heads to look down at her. Instead, they kept their chins level with the floor and looked down their noses at her. No one spoke. Silence could be a great power when employed in just the right place. Mairi had seen this power play before, so she wasn't impressed. She merely waited for this little show to be over and looked each one directly in their eyes. Let them see that I have nothing to hide. That I am but a humble servant.

Finally, Naylor spoke. "Mairi, thank you for coming...at last." His voice lacked emotion. He leaned forward, scanned the room behind her as if searching, and then sat back. "I see that you are alone?"

"Forgive me, High Councilman, but—"

"Silence." He didn't say it sharply. No, that would mean losing control. Instead he said it as if he finished a prayer. He leaned back in his chair and pressed the tips of his fingers to his mouth before speaking again. "This is an interesting development, and I cannot wait to hear your story. I must say that I am surprised at your tardiness. You have never failed The Council in your tasks before." He paused and drank from a goblet near his right hand. A servant brought him a cloth to wipe his lips before he continued, "And that is quite the nasty bruise on your left eye. It is such a beautiful shade of reds and purples. Almost like a sunset..." He looked at the council members on both sides of him. They all nodded their shaved heads and smiled in agreement.

"Such a terrible injury..."

"What pain..."

“Our sympathies...” they muttered. Nylon held up his hand, and the council members fell silent.

“Now,” he began again, “I want to hear your tale. And Mairi? It had better be entertaining.” He laughed and the others followed suit. Were they at a celebration or a hearing? Nylon settled himself and closed his eyes. A different servant girl dressed in a short belted shift stood behind him and began to rub oil on his scalp. “Please, Mairi, do share with us your adventure.”

Mairi told them how she had to drag Fallon away from the house, and how they had met up with the soldiers not too far from Cennfhain. Nylon interrupted.

“Yes, I was told that you were close and that the girl was with you as well. What I *want* to know is why you are here alone now.” The servant girl flexed her fingers and continued to knead Nylon’s scalp, as she stared down at Mairi. That servant girl would pay for her insolence. Mairi stared back at her and imagined catching the girl alone and scarring her face with the tip of a rusty knife. The servant girl dropped her eyes.

Another council member cleared his throat. She would have to be careful here, specific but vague. She had seen how they could take the truth and make it seem like a lie. What could they do with a lie, then?

“She attacked me. Did the soldier describe the girl? Nothing but a spit of a girl. Scrawny and small like a runt pig. I did not anticipate anything to fear from her. After I had packed the saddle bags, I turned, and that is when she hit me. I fell down. I did not see what she hit me with. All I know is that my eye felt like it had exploded. I couldn’t see anything through the blood. The little rag!”

“So you were attacked and you fell down? It seems to me that being hit in the eye is not such a mortal wound. Explain why you didn’t get up.”

“I did get up. She ran towards the woods, and I caught her by her hair. She fought, that one, with every bit of strength she had. Doesn’t that show her guilt?”

“*We* will determine her guilt,” Nylon said, his voice still emotionless. “You did not kill her, did you?” His eyes were still closed, but he had raised his eyebrows.

“No, High Councilman. It wasn’t in my orders.”

“Well, surely you could subdue a young girl, a spit of a girl, as you so quaintly put it.”

“I tried, sir,” Mairi replied. She stepped closer to the platform. “But...” She needed to sound reluctant. She pressed her eyes shut and waited. She knew she had their attention. The power of silence broken by a whisper. “She used magic!”



## CHAPTER 7: THE CLEANSING

“Once The Council finds out magic is involved, you will have more to worry about than a murder trial.” Mairi’s words pounded through Fallon’s mind as she fled through the brambles and weeds leading away from certain death. Mairi made it sound as if her severed head would be impaled on a stake outside The Hall of Inquiry when The Council got a hold of her. Blaming her for her magic wasn’t fair! Fallon couldn’t control it because her father forbade her to use it. Yet The Council would hold *her* responsible. They might as well accuse her of forcing the sun to set and the moon to rise!

The Council would just have to wait until she had found her sister before they could have her head. Fallon wouldn’t waste the opportunity Mairi had given her on self-pity. Not when more immediate concerns like surviving the night would challenge her. That and avoiding the soldiers and their tracking dogs.

She had to have a plan. Hiding in the forest and weaving clothes out of grass appealed to her about as much as gnawing on roots. Fallon cursed as tree branches tore at her hair. If the density of the forest didn’t let up, the soldiers would find it simple to track her. They only had to follow the broken foliage and look for a lost bald girl in the middle of the forest. Fallon stuffed the loose ends of her hair into the hood of her cloak.

She increased her pace and ignored the blood dripping in her left eye from a gash above her brow. Fallon’s muscles ached. Trying to keep her balance and avoid half rotten logs was impossible. It was like trying to avoid the slippery moss covered boulders in the shallows of the Moraq River. Inevitably she always scraped a shin or twisted an ankle. Life couldn’t get much worse.

Well, she could be standing in front of The Council or wallowing in the keep with bugs as her only nourishment. And she could be dead, which meant her sister would die too. Fallon stumbled and whacked her knee on the remains of a fallen tree.

“Holy—” The rest of the unintelligible words whooshed from between gritted teeth. Fallon massaged the pain with her hands. Screaming wouldn’t solve anything. Cursing, however, cleansed her mind, at least when mother and Nana were not within hearing distance. And since they refused to listen to her now... “Sucking bottom feeder!” she yelled.

Fallon half wished mother and Nana could hear her because she had much to say! The leaves vibrated in the breeze, probably cringing from her language. If she kept this up, the soldiers would find a cursing, bald girl sitting in the middle of the forest, and that *would* give them reason to lock her in the keep.

She bent her knee a few times. The ache had dulled. Fallon lay back with her eyes closed. Her body sank into the cocoon of the forest floor. Birds called to each other. They were probably mocking her. Insects flew about her head teasing her and buzzing their disapproval. She swatted at her face as they landed on her, but that only smeared the blood. She refused to give life to the tears wavering behind her eyes. So much for being tough. It was easy to be strong in front of others, but it was far more difficult to maintain the façade when alone.

*What have I done?* she thought. Fleeing only cast the shadow of guilt on her even more. No one had more power than the men of The Council. But if she couldn't trust The Council to give her a fair hearing, then what option did she have?

Mairi encouraged her to flee. Fallon hadn't any time to weigh her choices. It was hard to think through a decision with a knife waving in her face. If the soldiers found her and pointed their swords at her, Fallon would probably tie her own hands and willingly throw herself over a horse. Especially if it were the horse of the blue-eyed, dark haired devil that had looked at her with such disgust. He was nothing but torture in tight pants and riding boots. Fallon wanted a chance to smother him with her cloak.

Dampness invaded her clothes, and she stood. Too much time had been wasted worrying about The Council and daydreaming of ways to punish that soldier. When the sun dropped below the horizon, wet clothes would emphasize the cold. Fallon straightened her cloak and ran a dirty hand through her frizzy hair. Slender reeds of grass protruded from her hair. If she added a few more and stood really still, she could blend in with the trees. Fallon braided it into its familiar style. The movements allowed her to think.

Soon it would be dark and with it, the cold would seek her out trying to steal the warmth of her body. Snowflakes wafted down from the sky in lazy intervals. How long would The Council wait before sending a search party? A day or two?

In the dream, her father had said to use her wits and her heart. That was difficult when shivers racked her body and fear influenced every choice. Right now she wasted time. Moving would help circulate her blood and encourage more productive thinking.

Fallon pulled her hood back up and gathered her cloak about her before forcing her way through the brush. The pressure of the fabric against her brow would slow the bleeding. Shadows darted in and out of trees and pooled in the indentation her body had left in the weeds.

Fallon set a rigorous pace. The wind had exhausted itself. She stopped periodically to blow on the thin red scratches covering the backs of her hands. The sting didn't lessen, but it did give her a chance to catch her breath. Some of her mother's chamomile salve would have worked miracles. Fallon could always make it herself. She had observed her mother enough to know that she needed lushberry buds, dried chamomile leaves, and beeswax. Nothing like stopping to gather vegetation in her cloak while fleeing for her life. That would be a valuable use of time. The snowflakes melting against her cheeks didn't matter. Neither did the fact that she needed water and shelter to survive the night. At least she could soothe her scratches before dying of exposure.

Fallon glanced back. Broken limbs and bent underbrush shouted the direction she had traveled. The soldiers wouldn't need hunting dogs to track her down. A blind, beggar would be able to follow in her wake.

A twig broke to her right. Fallon stopped to listen. Some little rodent wanted to be her dinner. The shadows had deepened considerably since she had stopped earlier, but she should be able to trap it. Fallon grabbed a short, thick branch to thump it over the head. She held her breath and peered in the direction of the sound. A shimmer caught her attention. It reminded her of the little bird with the golden eyes that had sat on her porch. Or maybe it was the sun reflecting off the Moraq. The gods would find it amusing to watch her wander within a stone's throw of the river. But wouldn't she have heard it?

The muscles in her legs stiffened during the short rest. Fallon shook them before picking her way through the forest. She kept the branch in case any forest rodents decided to

sink their teeth into her ankles. They were twice as big as the town variety, which meant a feast, not a meal.

An earthy smell filled her nostrils—the kind that appeared after the rain had bathed the land and the sunlight could not reach under the decaying leaves to dry the ground. Fallon swung the branch against the vines dangling from trees and poked the dead logs. The thickening snow soaked the hides protecting her face. She wondered if her toes were still attached. Another twig snapped behind her. She stopped and whispered, “Come out, come out you furry little dinner. My stick wants to cuddle with the side of your head!”

Again, another snap, but off to the left and louder. Now that wasn’t a *small* forest animal! Her dream filtered back to her: the circling wolves and the helplessness. If she could get to the river, she might be able to escape. If she couldn’t escape down the river, she would have to defend herself in whatever way possible. But with what? The offer of a nice cup of tea and good conversation? If only Mairi had given her a knife. If only Mairi were here!

Fallon gripped her branch and fled! She couldn’t hear if something pursued her, but stopping to listen would be idiotic. Panic made her fumble through the forest. If she could get to the other side of the dense vines, she was sure she would be at the river. Where else would the forest grow the most if not along a source of water? She stopped to take deep breaths and tried to squeeze through the tangled mess. Her shoulders wouldn’t fit.

She kicked at the vines and tore at them, but they did not budge. “Enough!” she screamed in frustration. Blue sparks cascaded from her fingertips and faded as they fell to the ground. Wings flapped violently in the tree tops, and then settled down as her echoing voice grew faint. Snap!

Maybe she could get through this tangled mess like she got through the door of her mother’s room. Magic had helped her before when the baby’s terrorized soul pulled at their bond. The cacophony of breaking branches all around spurred her to action. She crouched down at the base of the thick pile of interwoven vines and placed her palms on two of the branches. Fallon waited for the magic. A bird sang, its voice a reflection of pure joy. She

squeezed her eyes shut, took two calming breaths, and concentrated on the roughness of the branch. She opened one eye. Nothing happened unless she counted two wet knees.

“Hellfire!” she fumed. What had she done wrong? Maybe the magic only worked when protecting the baby. Perfect! Just perfect! What kind of logic prevented the person who guarded the baby from protecting herself? That made no sense because she had started the fire in the cave before the ceremony and melted the floor in her bedroom. What had she been doing then? Fallon tried to remember, but the past week contained so many overwhelming memories that she couldn’t concentrate.

A growl, the type that emerged from the chest of a very large animal, rumbled behind her. Since when did rodents, even the forest-type, issue warning sounds? Next they would be flossing their teeth with weeds after they ate her. Another growl, not quite as deep, straightened the hair on her arms. *Focus, Fallon, focus*, she chanted to herself.

She wanted her father. He had warned of this in her dream. Even Mairi would be welcome! Another snap in the bush. Whatever growled approached slowly. What was it waiting for? An invitation? A dull ache began in the base of her skull.

Fallon ignored the headache and centered her attention on the branches. The texture grew rougher beneath her palms. She traced the grooved patterns in her mind until the hidden trails became clearer. Perspiration beaded on her forehead as if she were climbing a mountain—the mountain within her mind, complete with valleys, paths, and another side. At least she hoped so. She wove in and out of the patterns pulling at the threads of wood until they gave way. The exertion eliminated all sounds until only the voyage within her mind existed. She squeezed the branch one last time before forcing herself to open her eyes.

The relief of seeing a crawl tunnel leading through the tangled branches did nothing to alleviate her dread. The vibrations of a growl crawled over her neck, and she shivered. Whatever it was, it was right behind her. And it felt large. She could feel the heat radiating off its body. It blew puffs of air on the back of her head, and rumbled again. Short breaths punched the air as it sniffed her. Her father always breathed in the aroma of her mother’s rabbit pie just before he bit into it.

This had to be the choice her father warned her about. She could stay petrified with fear while her mind conjured gruesome images. She could face her fears and fight, or she could flee. Running away had not helped her situation with The Council. And whatever sniffed at her now could easily catch and shred her into tiny pieces. She didn't want her last defiant act to be chunks of her flesh clinging stubbornly to vines.

In front of her, a sharp rock lay exposed where her magic had not only untangled the roots but swept away the ground covering. Fallon's fingers flexed. Her stick was nowhere to be found. If she could get the rock, she could use it to—to what? Gouge its eyes out? Throw it? Play fetch? Oh, brilliant plans. Only a wise woman would throw her only weapon into the shadowy bushes!

It growled again, and a sour smell filled her nostrils. In one movement, she grabbed the rock, pivoted on her knees, and slashed the air. The rock did not strike anything. She scrambled back into the tunnel of the vine patch and watched two halves of a transparent shadow swirl back together into a single undulating mass. The edges of the shadow rippled, and a snout emerged, then a head followed by a body. Cords of muscle rippled, and the wolf's shoulders bulged. Its lips pulled back into a grotesque smile, and she could see trees and plants through its open mouth. The leaves drooped. Fallon's energy drained away as well. She stared where its eyes should have been. The sockets swirled with a desolate black. Fallon reached out to touch it.

Images whirled in her mind; a pair of knitted blue woolen socks balled on the floor with the threads beginning to fray at the toes; a book on her side table with a red beaded string marking her spot; the sounds of a cow bell drifting through the partially opened window; a crack in the window pane wood that resembled Nana's laugh lines. These were the details of that night...the ones that she had noticed, but that had dulled with the vividness of the midwife's death.

Her eyes watered. She closed them as the wolf coiled its misty body around her and lured her deeper into her memories. The sightless eyes of the midwife, her pupils now cloudy; a ruby encrusted dagger; the cool, dark cave where her father had invoked the spirits of ancient creatures; darkness whisking her hair about her face; the baby's cries and its hand

curled under its chin; the golden bond blazing a path through the writhing shadows; the dagger slick with blood—coldness; tearing...a great tearing; the baby's chest not moving, blood making a red scarf around its neck; a patchwork quilt with dark stains; Fallon holding the ruby dagger.

“No!” Over and over the words rang out until they broke the hypnotic connection between the shadow and Fallon. She collapsed. It's not true! It couldn't be. She would know, would feel if she had murdered her baby sister. She shook her head back and forth. The wolf shadow's head mimicked her movements.

Fallon gulped air and tried to rid herself of her dead sister's image. The shadow moved closer until its hypnotic eyes swirled just inches before her face. She backed away, but the vines stopped her. The Shadow pounced and swallowed her. Inhuman screeches filled her ears. Birds, thousands of them swooped and chattered, a flurry of black feathers. A heart pulsed—quick, short beats—an undercurrent to the macabre orchestration. Insects crawled everywhere but fled nowhere.

Fallon took a deep breath to scream, but the mist took advantage of her parted lips. She clamped her mouth shut, but it flowed in through her nose. Her throat burned, and she gasped allowing more mist to pour into her. It writhed in her stomach. Pressure built inside her as it moved from her belly throughout her body.

Fallon wrapped her arms around her midsection. Ripples and bulges traveled beneath the skin of her belly like waves waiting to break. Soon she would split in two, her organs spilling forth onto the tangle of the vines. Fallon tore at her cloak and her vision faded. The darkness frightened her more than the pain coursing throughout her body. Fallon dropped to her knees. Emptiness opened within her, paralyzing her ability to reason and act.

So this was what it felt like to die...to fade away with no witnesses. Such darkness. When soldiers found her, would she be recognizable? Would her family claim her remains in death, even though they shunned her in life? Her head twitched in denial. Who would find her sister, now? Her body toppled backward.

Above her, golden lights flickered among the shadows. These were the visions she wanted before she died, not the loneliness of the dark. Fallon focused on the brilliance

instead of the grotesque dance boiling beneath her skin. The lights flared and whirled in frantic circles. She tried to touch them, but her numb hands refused to obey. A faint humming filled the air—a harmony of rumbles.

A gossamer ribbon tugged gently at Fallon's heart. The heaviness unraveled inside of her and vivid impressions flickered in her mind: wide-blue eyes brimming with innocence; crimson welts on chubby, pale arms; dripping water dampening tufts of dark hair; a cold breeze slipping...under... a burlap blanket. Fallon's heart stopped.

A shaft of light blazed out of the luminous cloud and struck her heart. Her body arched as the shadows were forced from her body. Ebony mist wafted from her pores and evaporated. The hum reached its crescendo and light radiated from her body. Fallon gasped and opened her eyes.

What had just happened? She had almost died, that was what! The shadows from her mother's bedroom had attacked both in her dreams and here. So many unknowns lived in this world, and too many had been revealed within in the last week. Pressure still filled her, but not the kind that could tear her apart. The humming faded to a gentle lullaby that soothed her.

She wiggled her fingers to see if she could move before she gingerly sat up. Her muscles groaned. Fallon rolled onto her hands and knees. Her body tensed, and she wretched. Golden flecks flew from her mouth. As they hit the air, they darkened and turned to dust. She wretched again and more spewed forth. The final stomach contraction ejected the last of the glittering light. The humming had stopped.

The bloody hue of the setting sun filtered through the trees and whispered that night had arrived. She cleared her throat and spit. It trickled onto her chin, and she wiped it with her sleeve. Once she got away from this place and found shelter, she would feel much safer.

Fallon grasped a branch dangling near her head to stand. Her legs shook, so she leaned against the vines. Something moved out of the corner of her eye, and Fallon whipped her head around to look. Nothing was there. She refused to play the victim again. She broke a jagged limb off the vines and pointed it to her right. "I'm warning you! If you've come to



arrest me, you will have to take me alive!” What kind of threat was that? She should have said dead! But that was a statement she wouldn’t speak aloud any time soon.

Fallon tried to march to the thicket of bramsberry where the movement was, but it was more of a hobble. Nothing would make her feel helpless again. She bent down and examined the glossy green leaves, careful to avoid the sap that beaded along the edges. If she touched even the smallest amount, her eyes and throat would swell.

She jumped as a little brown bird poked its beak out of the bush and chirped at her. Fallon gasped. The bird fixed her with its golden eyes and cocked its head. It hopped from one branch to another. “You scared me little one. You’re lucky your tiny head is still attached!”

It looked at the stick and erupted in a stream of sounds. The tone sounded like one of Nana’s lectures. Fallon smiled and turned around, feeling much more confident about her surroundings. She shrieked.

## CHAPTER 8: THE CHALLENGE

“Magic!” Nylon stood and his chair crashed to the floor. So much for a dignified response. His eyes narrowed, and he leaned over the platform. His knuckles bulged underneath the taut skin of his hands as he gripped the edge of podium. The others had remained seated, their smiles absent now. They too leaned forward to inspect Mairi, as if her battered face would confirm what she had just said. How’s *that* for a story, gentlemen? If the old rat Nylon knew what she was thinking, he would have her hung from a balcony like the rodents in the town square—her carcass an example to others. Who would bury the gravedigger’s body?

A servant righted Nylon’s chair, but he did not sit down. Instead, he straightened and tucked his hands into the sleeves of his robe. His gaze scrutinized every wrinkle in her face.

“Magic...” He said it slowly like he was swishing it around on his tongue trying to taste it. She almost expected him to smack his lips together in appreciation of the taste. Instead he pressed them together so tightly that they formed a slit. The other councilmen gave him their attention. Mairi didn’t know if she should speak yet.

“Mairi, I am disappointed in you. I like to think that we understand each other. We respect each other in our own ways. I appreciate your ability to persuade people, however primitive your means. And you, well, you must appreciate my ability to persuade others through whatever means necessary.” His hand traced circles in the air as if he were trying to find just the right words. A noise behind Mairi made her turn.

Two soldiers approached. Their shiny helmets sat askew on their heads. They supported Michel between them. Dragged was more like it. His head hung limp and his muscular arms dangled. He couldn’t die until she gave him permission. Mairi’s twinge of guilt passed quickly.

“In fact, Mairi,” Nylon continued, “I am willing to show you a mercy, a kindness, really... for the truth.” He held his arms out to the side as two servants smoothed his robes when he sat. She turned to look at Michel once more. The soldiers had dropped him at her

feet. Blood clumped the few hairs on his head. It still dripped from the gash above his ear. If he was still breathing, things would continue as planned. If not, well...she would wait and see.

She placed her palm over her heart. “The truth, High Councilman, is what I speak.” Mairi stepped away from Michel, who rolled onto his back. He gazed at her through a swollen purple eye. It was far worse than her wound—the one she had asked him to inflict. What had he told them?

“I see.” Naylor’s eyes were closed when he spoke to the soldiers. “Did you kill that mangy forest creature like I asked?” A groan escaped from Michel. The two soldiers looked at each other and waited for the other to speak. “Do I need to ask again? Hmmm?” Naylor’s voice was musical, soft and light, yet Mairi knew what he was capable of doing, of ordering. She had done so many things for Naylor, and she had hoped he would not question her too much. He hadn’t ever questioned her before, but she had always completed her tasks quickly and efficiently

One of the guards stepped forward and removed his helmet. His blonde hair was matted to his forehead, and he glanced at The Council and then focused on the floor. He knelt in front of Naylor. A grimace crossed his face. Probably from the wound in his calf. Mairi could see four tears in his leggings with long, thin wounds to accompany them. “High Councilman, we managed to wound the animal, but—” he began.

The second guard interrupted as he removed his helmet and knelt in front of The Council too. He looked at the High Councilman who continued to ignore him, but the movement behind his eyelids made Mairi pause. Could Naylor see them even when his eyes were closed? “High Councilman, my name is Aros—”

“I don’t care for names, and I didn’t ask about yours. I asked if the forest cat had been killed.”

“My apologies. What my younger brother is saying is that we mortally wounded the animal, but it fled through the crowded town square.”

“Really? A mortally wounded forest cat running through the market during the busiest time of the day sounds not so mortally wounded.”

“I struck the blow, High Councilman...sir. I’ve hunted these cats since I was a child, and I am confident that the blow to the neck cut the main artery. I know from experience that when that much blood is shed, it is only a matter of time before the animal tires and lies down to die. My brother and I will track down the carcass and bring it back.”

Naylon’s eyes opened and focused on the brother who had just finished speaking. Aros tried to make eye contact, but instead he shifted his focus to stare at the helmet perched on his knee. The younger brother hadn’t said another word. Mairi stood silent, and Michel took shallow breaths. She wondered if a rib or two had been cracked, or if he was mourning his forest cat.

“Go.” It amazed Mairi how one word, spoken not shouted, could hold so much authority in it. The two brothers scrambled to their feet, placed their hands over their hearts and bowed. Their quick footsteps demonstrated just how eager they were to leave.

Mairi wished she were following them. She focused on explaining the situation to the High Councilman, or her plan would not work.

“Now, my dear, Mairi, I hope you haven’t felt neglected. I apologize for interrupting your story. You were saying?”

“I have told you only of my experiences, High Councilman.”

“Are you telling me that your experiences are the truth?”

“I do not have the education to debate if experiences are a form of truth. Nor can I debate whether a non-experience can be called a lie. However, what I have told you is as true as the knot on the side of my head, sir.” Mairi pressed her fingertips to the tender area.

“And this merchant at your feet...do you have nothing to add about why he is here now? Nothing to add to your story? Forgive me.” He pressed his hand over his heart.

“Nothing to add to your *truth*?”

Mairi looked at Michel trying to get a sense of what he had told them, but Michel’s eyes were closed. They had been closed since the discussion about Netlea. She took a deep breath. Had Michel stuck to the story? He had no reason to be loyal to her, except that she had always been fair with him in their dealings. And Netlea? She had never trusted that cat

with its inquisitive eyes. Besides, a dead mountain cat was better than a live one. Mairi felt a second twinge of regret for Michel's sake, but that was all.

Her plan would provide her with the means for revenge. And if others were hurt in the process, well, they would be bonuses. "High Councilman, I am not sure why the merchant is here. We have had dealings in the past when I have completed your orders. He is a vast source of knowledge about the townspeople and their habits. And I briefly stopped at his tent to see if news of the girl had traveled before me."

Naylon leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "I do find it interesting that this is the first time you have ignored my orders to report directly to me. And it was for a task that you were incapable of completing."

"Yes, High Councilman, that is precisely why I stopped. I have never disobeyed your orders or departed from your plans. I have also always completed my tasks. However, because I failed to bring the girl to you, I wanted to bring you the most up-to-date information—information that the merchant might have had."

"And what did you learn?" He rested his chin in his palm and extended the fingers of his other hand to examine his nails. "I do need to take better care of my hands." The servant girl promptly brought a shallow bowl and began massaging a cream into his hands.

"What did I learn? Nothing that you haven't learned for yourself through very persuasive means, I'm sure." She glanced at Michel again, and he continued to take shallow breaths. The soldiers had definitely cracked his ribs. Mairi knew a healer that would be able to bind him, so he would heal more quickly. Unfortunately, the healer would not be able to mend the loss of the cat. Mairi squared her shoulders.

"I have told you everything, and nothing more I say will fix the situation. In fact, given my flawless record in working for The Council and despite my failed task as of late, I have a request."

The councilman to the left of Naylon snorted. It caused the white hairs of his moustache to twitch. He stroked his long beard as he said, "You have disappointed The Council, and yet you ask for a favor? Really...I have not in all my years—"

“Patience, Jherkin,” the High Councilman said. “Think about all the times when Mairi *has* completed the tasks of The Council without ever asking for anything in return.”

“But that is my point, High Councilman,” Jherkin replied. “She has been paid handsomely for the tasks she has done. The woman has not completed this task, and yet it is on *this* task that she makes a request.”

Mairi spoke. “Councilman Jherkin, if I may speak?” He waved his hand in the air at her to speak. “Thank you. I believe that my request supports the ultimate goal of The Council in terms of this girl.”

Before Mairi could continue, a guard appeared at Naylor’s side and whispered something to him. Be careful, Mairi, she thought. The High Councilman was so unpredictable that the only way to proceed was to plod on hoping that her plan would fall into place. “If I may continue?” she asked.

“One moment, Mairi...” Naylor said.

The clink of chain mail and footsteps behind her alerted her to the approach of the soldiers. She turned and then took a step back. Mairi recognized the eyes of the lead soldier and the ring that dominated his pointer finger. The four flanking soldiers stopped behind Michel and Mairi as the lead man addressed The Council.

“High Councilman,” the soldier pressed his palm to his heart. “You requested my presence?” He didn’t even glance at Mairi but gave his full attention to the High Councilman.

The lines around his mouth contradicted the smoothness of his skin. A faint scar marred his forehead. The puckered line was thin, extending from above his right brow to his temple.

“Toryn, thank you for responding so quickly. I do appreciate promptness, right, Mairi?” Mairi nodded her assent without looking at him. “I have a few simple questions for you. Is this the woman you encountered on the road to Cennfhain a few hours ago?”

He barely looked at her before he said, “Yes, this is the *woman*.” *Watch that tone*, Mairi thought. I am not a woman easily dismissed, especially by a soldier. A soldier high in ranking according to the ring, but she suspected she had done much more for The Council

both legally and illegally than he would in his lifetime. She would remember his slight and make him pay, somehow.

“And is there anything different about this woman’s appearance from when you met her on the path?” Naylon asked. They talked as if Mairi weren’t there, the pompous twits. *That was fine, gentlemen.* For now, time gave her a chance to think.

“Her eye is blackened, and I do not see the girl that she was to bring to The Council.”

Naylon smiled. “Could you please describe the missing girl?”

Toryn’s brow furrowed. “She...” he paused. “The girl is slender probably doesn’t weigh any more than a small pig. Her hair is the color of dried berries, dark brown with a hint of red, and long—about to her waist. And her eyes...they are green, but like nothing I can compare it to.”

“I see...” Naylon smiled as Toryn faltered for words to describe Fallon. Toryn’s face reddened. “And is it your opinion that the girl could have overpowered this woman and fled into the forest?”

“I did not witness that.”

“I did not ask you if you saw it happen. I asked if you believed the girl capable of overpowering this woman.” Naylon’s voice grew stiff.

“My apologies. I believe that it is possible for a smaller person to overpower a much larger one.” He touched the scar above his eye. “And the stubborn streak I saw in the girl when I met her on the road, she would be nothing but determined. A determined person can do anything, despite size or strength. If this girl did commit murder, then it is quite possible that she knew escape was her only option.”

Mairi interrupted. “What do you mean *if* she committed murder? What evidence have you gathered to prove otherwise?” Toryn looked at her more closely. Mairi erased all emotion from her face. She had to be careful here, although at this point she was ready to make her request.

“It is not your place to determine the innocence or guilt of those who come before The Council,” Naylon said.

“My regret, High Councilman, and my apologies to The Council,” Mairi replied.

“Thank you, Toryn. I have a task for you. Since Mairi has failed to bring in the girl, you will take charge of the search party and bring her in to stand trial in front of The Council. And Toryn, it is essential that she be found before the scheduled Passing Ceremony in ten days. Dead or alive.”

Before Toryn could accept the task, Mairi interrupted. “But, High Councilman, my request...”

“What does your request have to do with the return of the girl? What is her name?”

Both Mairi and Toryn replied, “Fallon MacBaharin” at the same time.

“MacBaharin?” His fingers stroked the lapels of his robes, and a slight sneer lifted the corner of his mouth. “Such an intriguing turn of events. Mairi, you have more pressing things to worry about than finding the girl. I am fascinated by your accusation of magic. There—“

“Magic!” Toryn scrutinized Mairi. “Do you know what you are accusing that girl of?”

“What? And murder isn’t bad enough? Murder of my—“she replied.

“But magic is forbidden. It damns the soul! Why else would every child go through The Passing?” Toryn replied.

“Damns the soul? You wouldn’t consider murder a stain on the soul? Or has killing become second nature for a soldier that it no longer is a sin?” She had stepped closer to Toryn, forgetting herself in her anger.

“Hold it!” Naylon stood and the other councilmen stood as well. Mairi and Toryn eyed each other as they separated. “While I am sure your definition of sin would be quite entertaining, Mairi, I desire to hear what you had been about to say. Murder of your what?” He was a shrewd man who missed nothing. Mairi hadn’t realized how close she had come to revealing things. It was much better to get things out in the open now. Besides, it would help to deflect questions about what really did happen on the path to Cennfhain.

“Murder of my sister!”

“I see...and—“



Mairi had to continue before she changed her mind. She didn't mean to cut off the High Councilman, but the words just poured out of her. "I want to request that the Retribution Law be enacted on my behalf."

"The Retribution Law? On what authority?" Toryn asked.

"According to the law—" Mairi began.

"That hasn't been used for at least 100 years," Toryn added.

She ignored him and finished her request. "If an accused prisoner flees before the matter can be settled by The Council, then it is the wronged family's right to hunt the escapee and return them. Dead or alive." Mairi smiled and looked Naylon in the eye. "High Councilman, isn't this just what you ordered this *boy* to do? She spilled my sister's blood, and I have a right to seek justice for the only family member I had left."

"Amazing!" Naylon sat in his chair and just stared at Mairi. The room stood silent, except for the rustle of robes as the rest of The Council took their seats. "Mairi, I admire your craft in more ways than one." He laughed. "And to think *you* had family! I thought they met their misfortune long ago." Mairi's eye twitched on the word "misfortune."

"She was an illegitimate half sister, but family nonetheless." The words were spit through clenched teeth.

Naylon's laugh grew louder until tears formed in the corners of his eyes. "Oh, this has been an amusing day, indeed!" A servant handed Naylon a cloth, and he pressed it to his cheeks. "I have not had this much amusement since...well, we will leave it at that." Mairi could only imagine what else he had been thoroughly amused at. Naylon had a cruel sense of humor.

Toryn interrupted, "High Councilman, you have ordered me to retrieve the girl, and it is my duty to do The Council's bidding. Am I to bring the girl to The Hall?" Naylon's smiled thinned.

"Yes..." he tossed the cloth on the table in front of him. "But Mairi is correct in quoting the Retribution Law. And despite the fact that no one has invoked the law in recent years, it does not mean that the law is void. This is an interesting turn of events." Naylon paused and pressed his fingertips to his lips in thought.

“I am going to modify your request, Mairi.” Torny opened his mouth to object. “Torny, think before you speak,” Nylon said, and then paused. “I have already ordered Torny to bring the girl before The Council. However, it might prove interesting to see in what state she will be brought before us. It is the order of The Council that both of you, Mairi and Torny, will search for the girl and bring her to The Hall. Consider it a sort of competition.” *Order of The Council*, thought Mairi? No one else had spoken. Apparently Nylon was The Council, but Mairi had known this all along.

Nylon continued, “Whoever finds her will determine her fate. I suspect that if Mairi has her way, the girl will be returned in pieces.” He laughed again.

Torny looked at Mairi once more, and then addressed The Council. “As you command.” He turned to leave before Nylon stopped him.

“Must I remind you both that she is to be found *before* The Passing Ceremony? No one has missed this austere occasion in 300 years of The Council’s reign.”

“I understand,” Torny replied.

“As you wish, and I thank you, High Councilman.” Mairi said as she placed her hand on her heart and bowed her head.

“Oh, and Torny,” Nylon said, “take this merchant and give him a guest room in the castle’s keep. He is marring the granite floor with his blood, although I do love the design.” Torny gestured to his soldiers who heaved an unconscious Michel to his feet and dragged him out the door. Torny bowed before he turned and followed.

After Torny had gone, Nylon turned to Mairi and said, “Do not make another request of The Council for you will not find us in such good spirits next time. It shall be intriguing to see what will happen to MacBaharin’s girl, magic or not.”

Mairi bowed and took a step back. Her foot slid in the small pool of blood that had leaked from Michel’s wounds. Her body jerked, but she maintained her balance. Relief flooded Mairi as she left the hall. Her plan, despite the unpredictable presence of Michel and Torny, had come to fruition. Part of it at least.

“Was it wise,” Jherkin asked as he watched Mairi pass through the Hall’s archway, “to send your Torny and Mairi on the same task?”

Servants carrying buckets of soap and water began scrubbing at the bloody trail left from Michel's body and Mairi's footsteps.

"One cannot know if a decision is wise until the outcome is known," Naylon replied. "Just as a Councilman cannot know whether it is wise to question the decisions of his superior until it is too late." Naylon patted Jherkin's hand.

Another Councilman spoke, "Who would have thought that MacBaharin would make it so easy? And we only had to wait 14 years."

"Fourteen years of living with the knowledge that he had mocked and rejected The Council and all it has stood for. I am a patient man," Naylon said as he stood. The rest of the council members stood as well. "In the end, The Council always gets what it deserves! And when we drag his daughter to The Hall of Inquiry, if she makes it here alive, I will enjoy his groveling, and then I will enjoy his wife."

## CHAPTER 9: THE CLEARING

A massive creature with tusks stood before Fallon. Reddish shaggy hair covered its body and a long trunk brushed the ground. It gazed at her with large, luminous eyes almost hidden by a matted fringe of hair. The little bird chirped at her and flew away. It landed on the hard, pale covering that spanned the beast's back, neck, and head. The enormous creature closed its eyes and cocked its head while the bird chattered. Fallon inched backwards. When the bird stopped its tirade, the creature opened its eyes and twitched its trunk. The bird flittered into the treetops.

Fallon raised her hands, palms out. The stick hung between her forefinger and thumb. The beast raised its head and squinted at the stick. Was that an accusation? She had no place to go if it charged. The creature extended its trunk towards her. The end of it quivered. Fallon froze. She wasn't edible if that is what it checked. In fact, she smelled awful and would cause a stomachache. It sneezed.

She yelped at the unexpected noise, and stumbled, falling hard on her rear. The stick broke beneath her weight. The creature blew out its own startled noise—a sonorous honk—and fled tail first into the bushes. Only the beast's trunk poked through the leaves like an exotic branch with little golden hairs sprouting from its tip.

Although her legs were still weak from her recent near death experience, Fallon clutched a piece of the broken stick and crouched, ready for its attack. Her weapon was now the size of a long finger. She could always poke out its eye....if she could reach it and if the tusks didn't impale her first.

Fallon deepened her voice and taunted, "You call that a growl? Come on!" She waved the stick in its direction and made small lunges towards it that were still a safe distance away. Branches cracked and it raised its trunk. A soundless whoosh of air emerged.

"Oh! A threat, is it?" She shuffled forward another step. It remained frozen, but the leaves around it trembled. Its eyes were two full moons gleaming out of the shadows of the leaves. Did it fear her? Fallon moved closer. It still didn't move. Why would a creature so large and fierce cower behind scrawny trees for safety?

The creature towered above her, but it behaved like a terrified child. She wouldn't be surprised if it closed its eyes and pretended she wasn't there. Its tusks, although initially frightening, were rounded and stubby. Not the pointy weapons she had imagined. They could do damage, though, since they were the length of her arm.

Fallon slipped and stumbled forward into a large indentation. Only a huge, bulky animal could leave such a footprint. She couldn't see its muscles beneath all that hair, but this creature had to be quite powerful—enough to remind her that she shouldn't pursue it. Fallon kept the stick in front of her like a shield and backed away toward the vine passage. If this creature so much as twitched an ear—did it even have ears? She would what? Jab it in its knee to check its reflexes? Her recent encounter with whatever it had been nearly ended her life. Would she let bravado be the death of her now?

She could always run for it and hope it didn't charge. Death by trampling held about as much appeal as being eaten alive by shadows. If she could lessen its tension, she might be able to slip away. Fallon hid the stick in the folds of her cloak and slid her foot backwards through the flattened leaves and snow.

Her voice was soft and high, almost sing-song. "All right, you big, big, so very big..." What was it? "...thing," she finished. Nothing like being articulate! Fear often struck people dumb, so intelligible sounds were quite the accomplishment. "Just be a good..." What was it? "...boy and stay there for a few...more...seconds." She paused between each word and smiled. The creature would flatten her like Nana's pan bread if it considered teeth aggressive.

Fallon chanced a look behind her to see how close she was to the tunnel. Not near enough for comfort, but at this point, two steps would be too far. "Or minutes..." She sang the last syllable like the end of a melody. A low hum filled the air. She choked off the "u" sound, and the hum ceased. That sound! Fallon paused. She had just told herself that bravery meant pain and that she shouldn't trust anyone. She should have added trust "anything."

She hated when her curiosity couldn't be explored. It killed her, but so could that creature. Fallon backed out of the footprint. It still watched her from its hiding place. "I'm almost there..." Again a resonance filled the air as she held the last sound. "You!" she said.

The beast's eyes widened, and its eyelashes fluttered. She hadn't meant to shout. Fallon stepped towards the creature. "*You* saved me." Its trunk waved a strange pattern in the air. She didn't mean to agitate the creature. How could something ten times her size fear her? And if it was afraid of her, why had it saved her?

Fallon dropped the stick, bowed her head, and lifted her right hand, palm up. She risked a lot by making herself vulnerable. Yet everything she did lately endangered her. Considering recent events, the gods had to be on her side at least once. They owed her. And if this creature rushed her? At least she wouldn't die a puppet...a pancake, maybe, but not a powerless coward. Although her head was still bowed, she peeked from beneath her bangs to see what it was doing.

Absolutely nothing, that's what. A breeze lifted Fallon's cloak, and it billowed around her. Slowly the creature extended its trunk and wiggled the end. Maybe this was a kind of greeting. Fallon raised her head slow enough not to startle the creature. She lifted her nose in the air, flared her nostrils, and made sniffing noises. The tip of her nose twitched like a rabbit's. Gods save her! Next she would hop through the forest looking for wild carrots and green leafy vegetation.

Fallon returned to her soothing voice. "Please." Her arm ached from being extended. "Don't be afraid." If it continued to cower in the bushes, she would go. The sun had set, and the moon barely provided enough light to find shelter. Food would have to wait until morning. Still, she wanted to give the creature a chance to come to her. Scaring it hadn't been her intention, and she wanted to soothe its fear and express her gratitude.

Branches cracked. A few moments later, she felt a warm breath upon her hand. It traced the lines on her palm and then moved from her fingertips to her wrist. The light touch tickled. The slight pressure continued up her arm to her shoulder.

It sneezed again, and a powerful wind knocked her off her feet. A thick liquid covered the right side of her cheek and neck. Her eyes narrowed. "Exchanging nose fluids is

not my idea of a proper thank you!” The creature’s hum started again, and its trunk caressed her cheek. She was surprised that its hair was not coarse. It felt more like the cottony fluffs that floated from the downy trees during spring.

Fallon wiped at her face. A golden liquid shimmered on her sleeve. There was no doubt who had saved her, now. Fallon stood, looked the creature in the eye, and curtsied as deeply as she could manage. She straightened before the urge to rub her rear made her lose more dignity.

“Thank you for my life.” She pressed her hand to her heart, and smiled before adding, “But not for the bath.” The creature bobbed its head.

Fallon pulled her hood up and wrapped her cloak tighter about her body. “Again, thank you, but I must go.” She pointed to the tunnel, and moved towards it, unsure of whether she should turn her back on it even now. It would be comforting to have a companion, but that would also mean another responsibility. She did a bad enough job with herself.

Fallon glanced back when she reached the mouth of the tunnel. The creature had vanished into the darkness without a sound. Golden lights floated where it had last stood. Maybe they would see each other again, but under better circumstances.

Fallon stopped long enough to gather loose debris to block the end of the tunnel. If anything, it would help protect her from the bitter wind. Fallon ducked into the passage and pulled the decaying branches into place. It felt a bit like burying herself. The forest had been dark even with the moonlight, but beneath the dense vines, the darkness blinded her.

Fallon fumbled through dry, crackling leaves. Her eyes watered from sneezing. Occasionally her knee landed on a stone and curse glided from her mouth. She could write a sitting room book about the art of cursing like a lady. It could be titled, “Sweet Damnation,” “Purses and Curses,” or “Maladies-in-Waiting.”

Melted snow dripped on the back of her hand, and she brought it near her face. Her tongue darted out to ease her thirst. She didn’t care if the snow had mixed with bramsberry sap, and her lips would swell to the size of pig sausages. She would just make a mental note

to pack a hollow river weed when fleeing for her life. Sausage lips or not, she wouldn't die from lack of water.

Fallon cupped her hands and waited for the next droplet. What was she trying to do? Pray for water? Impatient, she poked at the vines to find the damp area. Water trickled down her wrist, and she blindly tugged at anything she touched. A steady cascade of water droplets splattered her face, and she pressed her lips to the roof of the tunnel. Some of the water traced the contour of her cheek and soaked her collar. The rest numbed her lips and throat.

If only she had a water pouch or a pot. She choked back a snort at the long list of "if onlys." Her survival and that of her sister depended on reality, not wishes. She rubbed the edge of her hood over her mouth before pressing it to the drip to collect water for later. She could suck on the damp fabric, if it didn't freeze. Her throat ached with satisfaction, and her body sighed with relief.

It was warmer beneath the vines and dry in most spots. She could block the opposite end of the tunnel and burrow beneath the leaves until morning. Morning might be hard to detect, but her stomach would have no trouble waking.

Fallon shook the stiffness out of her muscles and crawled towards the pinprick of light that she hoped meant the end of the tunnel. She hummed a low, melancholy tune her father played on the sanolin. He always closed his eyes, so the creases on his forehead relaxed when he strummed the three strings. The haunting melody traced the path of grief from memory to heart, plucking at sentiments best left buried. If her mother had truly loved her, she would have listened instead of abandoning her to Mairi and The Council. She had done more to save Keeley than her! And so had her father! Fallon shook her head. Thoughts like this invited danger. She might as well throw herself off the first cliff she could find. Or beat her head against a rock!

Something bounced off her head and clattered in the darkness. How ironic! Now the gods were throwing rocks at her in case she couldn't find one. The vines above her shook and scratching filled the tunnel. Fallon looked up, but closed her eyes when dirt and pebbles peppered her face. Her cloak snagged on a protruding limb. She reached to detach herself.



Fallon wrenched her hand away. Something had punctured the thin skin on the back of her hand, and it hadn't been a limb. Growls came from above her, and the tunnel trembled. Fallon pressed herself to the ground. A cloud of dust swirled, and she struggled to stifle the cough tickling the back of her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her mouth into her tunic sleeve to avoid the suffocation of the dirt. Something insisted on entering this sanctuary with claws extended. At least it wasn't smart, or it would have found the other end of the tunnel.

It couldn't be that skitterish creature. She hadn't noticed any claws on its massive feet. Of course, examining its toenails as it cowered among the trees hadn't crossed her mind. Besides, the creature could have demolished the tunnel by now, or flattened her earlier if it had wanted.

The noises above her stopped. Seconds passed before Fallon risked a peek at the tunnel's exit. Move it, she told herself, before that thing sprouted brains and found the opening. Lying on her belly hurling silent threats wouldn't help. The roof shook again, and the hisses and growls grew louder. A cacophony of snapping vines filled the small space. Fallon ignored them and scrambled towards the opening.

Oh, god! How could she gather brush and block the entrance before the sharp-clawed thing found it? What if the animal got inside the tunnel after she had barricaded it? The thought paralyzed her. It would eat her alive. Fallon's head ached. Fear wasn't any gentler on her heart.

Just a little farther. Something thudded into the leaves behind her. She was so close to the opening! Fallon looked behind her, and green eyes glowed within a fog of dust. It blinked once before a guttural sound emerged. A mountain cat! It hunched down.

Fallon burst out of the tunnel and ran. Limbs whipped her face, and her cloak wrapped around her legs. She pulled at the ties near her neck and let her only source of warmth slip from her shoulders. Maybe the cat would be distracted with her cloak long enough to give her time to flee. Hiding wouldn't work because those cats could smell their prey miles away. And they were crafty and patient, sometimes for days, as they stalked their food.

Fallon broke through the dense tree line into a clearing. She scanned the field as she ran. Her breath formed white puffs in the cold night. Hiding definitely wouldn't work! The cursed moon would spotlight her movement across this god forsaken field of snow, and the surrounding mountains would eat her screams. That had been a poor choice of words.

She headed towards the solitary tree standing sentry in the center of the field. Its thick trunk and tangled roots might provide a sturdy shelter from which she could defend herself. Oh, sure! What would she do? Kick it? Or better yet, throw snowballs at it? Why didn't she just holler that its mother was a toothless kitten, and hope it would slink away in shame? Of course, each of these options depended on whether or not she even made it to the tree.

She couldn't hear the pursuit of the animal over her own labored breathing as she plowed through the snow. Some of the drifts came to her knees, and bits of snow condensed on her arms. The sweat cooling on her body caused goose flesh.

Fallon suppressed the urge to look behind her. Seeing the mountain cat leaping towards her with its claws extended and fangs gleaming in the moonlight didn't appeal at all. But her imagination ran rampant. The cat would jump on her back and drag her into the snow. Its breath would warm the back of her neck before its powerful jaws would—stop it! She told herself. Just run and think positive! It has no teeth! It has no teeth! She chanted silently through clenched jaws. She was so close to the tree. She risked a glance behind her.

Nothing was there. Fallon stopped and scanned the field for movement. Blowing snow had begun to fade her tracks, the only ones visible. It was silent except for her chattering teeth. She released her pent up breath and rubbed her arms. Where was it? She had ditched her coat and ran across this freezing field for nothing!

"Damn cat," she screeched. Her frozen fingers didn't want to cup her mouth, but she forced them to bend. "And I thought mountain cats were so smart! You're nothing but a mangy town cat." The last two words echoed. A bitter breeze swept away Fallon's hysterics. God, she was cold.

That cat had to be out there somewhere. Had her cloak actually confused it? If so, this was one of the few times today anything had gone in her favor, if exposure could be considered advantageous. She would stay close to the only shelter available in the clearing

and find a way to stay warm. Snuggling with the bugs was a far better option than going back for her cloak. Only a dimwit would be tempted. And only a fool would remain standing in the middle of a field with snow flurrying about her.

Everything was that damn cat's fault! One last insult would keep her spirits up. "You flea riddled feline! You have no—" The word "teeth" came out as a whisper as she turned and faced the tree. The mountain cat lay across the roots. Its smoldering green eyes stared at her. It cocked its head and opened its mouth. Fallon's cloak fell on the ground. It tilted its head back and yawned. One fang protruded from its mouth. Okay, not toothless, Gods be with her! Fallon crossed herself. Its head was bigger than hers, and it was longer than she was tall. That didn't even count the tail that whipped up and down as it watched her. She couldn't tell what color it was. Like it mattered! It wasn't as if she could only be eaten by black mountain cats!

Gods show her mercy! What had her father told her? They had never hunted mountain cats because they were too cunning. It had been such a long time ago. Fallon didn't want to move and cause the cat to attack. Shudders racked her body. She couldn't tolerate the cold much longer. "Nice, sweet kitten," she soothed. "Your mother wasn't toothless, now was she?" The cat purred.

Her frozen brain couldn't think. What had her father said? Run? No, she would only get a couple of steps before it pounced. Scream voice and flap her arms? If she could even squeak now, let alone move, it would be a miracle. The shaggy creature had intimidated her with its size, although it feared Fallon more. That was it! She doubted it would be scared of a scrawny girl dressed in a belted tunic and leggings. All she had to do was spread her cloak wide, and—.

The cat leapt down and landed on her cloak. It began rubbing its head and neck against the nearest root. The longer she stood here, the chances of becoming its next meal increased. Fallon kept her eyes on it, as she knelt in the snow and began to dig for something... anything. Her hands lost all feeling. Frost gathered on her hair. She had been through too much to give up now. Her sister needed her. She had pledged herself to the

baby, and she wouldn't turn her back! Family meant everything, and the baby was all Fallon had left.

Even though the cat stood a few steps away, Fallon's position made it look even larger. Its fur shone in the moonlight and highlighted its sleek build. The cat stumbled. Dark stains glistened on the roots where it had rubbed against. Blood? It injured itself trying to dig through the vines. It licked its lips and growled. It swayed, but took a step towards Fallon.

A rich familiar baritone filled the air. It sounded close, but the mountains could manipulate sound. Her savior was too far away to help her this time.

Fallon blinked. Her eyes watered, and her eyelashes stuck together. When she pried her eyes open, the cat had crouched and laid back its ears. She blinked again. Only the tip of its tail twitched. Another blink. Fallon covered her head with her arms. A growl emerged, and it attacked.

"No!" a voice boomed.

## CHAPTER 10: THE KEEPER

Mairi's bloody footsteps faded as she reached the room paying tribute to dead councilmen. No trace of the ragged servant remained. A technique Mairi had honed for her work as well. It didn't pay to leave evidence behind...or witnesses. Naylon's little game with Michel suggested he knew about her plan. But only the part she wanted him to know. It was almost too easy.

She stood on the top marble step beneath the vine covered gargoyles. The tusks of the statues were wickedly sharp and the trunks pointed accusingly at her. The winter night concealed many things, but Mairi saw Toryn in the moonlight—a speck at the end of the tree lined road. Where were his guards? Now who would protect him from the town wenches that followed him with their greedy eyes? Take your fill, scavengers, Mairi thought. The only place he would keep warm anytime soon would be his grave.

Mairi hadn't recognized Toryn in The Council's chambers until it was almost too late. While those light blue eyes revealed nothing of Toryn's thoughts, they did reveal his paternity. Too much poison already existed in Cennfhain. She would do the town a favor by getting rid of Naylon's son. Another thankless job to do, but one she relished. Mairi sighed, and descended the five flights of stairs.

Mairi could have followed him, but she soldiers were so predictable. Weapons first and provisions second with a cheap pint of mead at Cadnor Tavern in between. He would be at the weapons arsenal trying to pick out a weapon to capture a skinny girl. A loaf of bread would do the trick, she sneered. Or a gag. The girl wouldn't shut her mouth. Maybe when Mairi found the little rag, she would cut out her tongue. The girl wouldn't need it to serve her purpose.

Finding the chit would be easy enough. She would track the girl's flight through the forest by the broken branches and trampled bushes. Or she would follow the stench of magic—strong magic if it manifested itself before The Passing Ceremony. The smell hung on the girl like cured tobacco weed, or a rotting body—her half-sister's. Mairi would use the girl and her magic for revenge, not just for her sister, but for a far bigger injustice. And then

the girl would die. A broken-tooth smile split Mairi's face. She had always preferred traveling—and hunting—by night. It concealed so many things.

Mairi made her way along streets between the buildings. She avoided the main road leading in and out of town, especially when Toryn's soldiers might follow. She could have taken her horse, but walking was faster. Besides, there wasn't much room on the street for two people, let alone a horse.

A man staggered out the back door of an inn and tripped down the steps. He wore no shoes or socks. A door slammed. From an upstairs window, a woman squawked at him. Her beefy fingers pointed at him. Mairi barely avoided the shoes and clothes that rained down from the sky. The woman disappeared—probably to find the chamber pot to dump on his head.

The smell of mead wafted from him and he mumbled incoherently. Too bad she didn't have a flint. He would make a lovely bonfire with all the alcohol seeping from him. Mairi fingered the blade of her knife. It needed to be sharpened. She pulled her hood over her eyes, and slid past him. He didn't even glance at her as he gathered his meager belongings. The cow upstairs just gave him permission to drink more. Mairi sympathized with the drunkard and showed him some compassion. The knife thudded between his shoulder blades. He grabbed at it before collapsing.

The head always made a satisfying sound when the skull cracked against stone. Mairi felt better—for now. She turned the corner. The closeness of the buildings amplified the raucous music blaring from Cadnor Tavern. Drunken voices joined the chorus of a ballad about lost love. Mairi hummed along. It was off-key, as her singing always was. But a lady didn't need a pleasant singing voice when slitting throats. When you held someone's life in your hands, they never criticized.

The maze of roads ended in dark alleys with toothless beggars, store fronts with dried animal feet and bolts of cloth, and home. Mairi memorized these roads in relation to whom and what she had killed. This particular slush filled alley ended at the keep where she had cornered a town cat and removed its claws one at a time before severing its tail. Faint scars

marred the backs of her hands. The keep supervisor had been amused, but then her father had always been a cruel man. She had loved him despite the slaps and bruises.

Mairi climbed the short flight of steps to the keep. She tugged at the leather thong around her neck until she freed a large metal key. The lock clicked and the thick wooden door scraped stone as it swung open. She slammed it shut with her foot. The bar on the front door squeaked in protest when she lowered it into place. She pressed herself against the wall and peeked out the barred window.

Rivulets of melted snow trickled from between the stones around the sill, and steady drips from the thatched ceiling plopped on the floor. Did the fool across the street really think she hadn't seen him? The torch cast shadows onto his face but caught the gleam of a ring.

So he wasn't in the armory. In fact, Toryn had already packed. A soldier lived on the road with his belongings stuffed in a rucksack. But not the High Councilman's son. Toryn must be part of Naylor's scheme. She could always slit his throat now and stuff his body in a cell. If she maimed his pretty face, she could get away with it. She always did. However, he might prove useful later. Besides the forest already concealed many of her accidents. Toryn's death would simply be another.

Mairi unhooked the lantern hanging on a peg near the door and carried it to the fireplace. The fire provided little warmth in the drafty room. The stumpy candle wouldn't last much longer, but she would only be there a short time. She flexed her fingers before grabbing the cold metal tongs to remove an ember from the fireplace. The flames caressed the tips, and flecks of ash floated past her or burned out on her cloak.

The candle wick flared to life, and Mairi set the lantern on the table. Her pack rested on a chair. It bulged with dried meat and biscuits, a flint, fur-lined gloves, and leather bindings. She slept with her knives.

She rummaged through her desk for the ring bearing The Council's crest. No one ever questioned the crest because that would mean questioning Naylor. The townspeople's passiveness gave Naylor permission to take advantage of them. Like sheep, the lot of them. They would only bleat and shake their wooly heads just before Naylor led them off a cliff. And then it was too late.

Mairi slipped the ring on her finger and pulled on her gloves. She hadn't used the ring in years. Her reputation persuaded people enough. Still, it might prove useful. She slipped the ring on her finger and pulled on her gloves. Slinging her pack over her shoulder, Mairi grabbed the lantern and moved towards her real reason for being here.

A soundproof Iroko wood door concealed a long hallway with five windowless holds. The door stood opposite her private quarters. If listened to the moans and snivels of the prisoners all night, it would put her in a testy mood. A smile spread across her face. At least Naylor ordered the prisoner's release a few days. Release had a different meaning for Naylor. A man behind on his taxes might spend the night in the tavern. No one would question how he had drown in a shallow puddle of water. A woman known for promiscuity might spend the night with a man other than her husband. The townspeople would say that her husband should have beaten her to death long ago. A ragged couple who wandered through towns begging for food would not be missed when they were found eyeless at the bottom of the Moraq.

Mairi's pushed the door open to her quarters. She loved the emptiness of the room. Only a few necessities cluttered her life. Knives, swords, and bows adorned the wall above her bed. A small fireplace stood in the corner. A candle sat on a small wooden stand near the bed. A thin layer of dust coated the woolen blankets stacked in a corner. Ratty animal skins lay on the floor in front of a wooden chest.

She stood on her tiptoes and shuttered the windows against the cold and prying eyes. She couldn't, however, hide her actions from the sea-colored eyes floating in the jar atop the chest. The beggar could keep a secret. Mairi opened the top chest drawer and pressed a small lever attached to the back. Dust whirled, and the fireplace base slid into the wall. Faint torch lights flickered down a steep staircase. A few cobwebs clung to the walls. She convulsed.

Mairi grabbed the torch and waved the flame beneath the webs until they melted away. The damp cool air mixed with a whiff of decomposition reached her nose. The lime quarry supervisor needed another friendly reminder about on-time deliveries. This time it



would be his young son's knee. And next time? Well, generosity was something she had not felt often.

Mairi descended to the sixth step and pushed a smooth triangular stone. The passage door slid shut. The torch lights only revealed half of the hundred or more steps that led to the keep. These stairs had been worn to a smoothness no stone cutter could ever mimic.

No one, not even her beloved father, may the gods rest his soul, had ever seen her real keep. And those that had were in various states of decomposition. Except her newest acquisition. This one would be quite useful over the next few days. Once the prisoner served Mairi's purpose, another body would be added to her human compost pile. When the girl joined the prisoner, watching her reaction to the execution would provide many nights of pleasant dreams.

Mairi descended into the darkness that had been her haven for years. Former prisoners cut recesses into the stone wall. Mairi redecorated the small spaces with her trophies from the last thirty some years: the remains of a cat missing part of its tail; the partial skull of the boy who had left her for her half-sister; her father's finger bones curled into fists; and the complete skeleton of an infant—her baby, a stillborn. It had taken thirteen years to identify who had attacked her and left her for dead when she was seven months pregnant. She had Naylon to thank for that.

Mairi lifted the torch when she neared the little ledge at the bottom of the steps. Large eyeless sockets peeked just above a dirty pink blanket. She smiled and caressed the pale skull. "Mama's here."

A few off-key notes of a lullaby filled the narrow passage. Mairi kissed its smooth forehead. "This is all for you. For us. Just a little longer." She folded the blanket down so the baby could breathe. Mairi trailed her finger down the small fleshless cheekbones. Her injuries caused her to miss the burial, so she had held her own service after she dug the body from its grave and brought it to the keep to be near her. "Mama won't forget," she whispered.

The staircase ended in a small natural cave. Pale gray stones from the rock quarry covered the floor along with a scattering of mice bones. They crunched beneath her boots.

Empty crates and crocks of dried herbs lined the small shelves leaning against the walls. Half a dozen partially used candles lay atop a barrel of cheap mead that stood in the corner. The torch illuminated a wall covered in dozens of holes. A rat's tail dangled from one opening. Mairi's blade severed the tip as it retreated. The little piece curled and uncurled before it lay still.

Mairi faced the wall with its deceptive pockmarked décor. She had painfully discovered its purpose some thirty years ago. Pus-filled blisters had erupted on her fingers and her tongue had swollen after she stuck her hand in a hole to retrieve the rat she had used as target practice. As she lay on the floor gasping for air, fate had whispered the secret of the wall in Mairi's ear; the holes mirrored the constellations. Every rotten child in Cennfhain knew that The Senchen star pattern would guide them home if they were lost.

Learning the secret of the wall hadn't been the only breakthrough. It also helped her to discover her gift—the one Nylon tried to steal from her twenty-eight years ago during The Passing Ceremony. The one he didn't know she still had.

The torch in her hand crackled and flared. She moved towards the wall and traced the star pattern with the torch. Each hole trapped a part of the flame. As the fire caressed the last hole in The Senchen pattern, a gold radiance blazed out of the wall and engulfed her—a stain against the brilliant light. One moment she stood in the storage room, and in the next the light propelled her through the wall to the other side. Her breath came out in a wheeze as the light faded. She gulped air to steady her pulse.

A thin veil of dew dampened her skin and clothes after being sucked through the threshold of the keep. Mairi wiped her blade on the dry portion of her leggings beneath her cloak before following the wide stony passage. Jagged formations hung from the ceiling like fangs. She plowed her way through the loose rocks and human bones strewn about the ground. The dank passage smelled rich and bold like the fresh overturned dirt of a grave.

She had never investigated everything that lurked in the smaller side passages, although forcing prisoners to investigate them without a torch always entertained her. They refused at first just to prove they weren't completely at Mairi's mercy. And when she severed their fingers one at a time, they were quite willing to do anything to make her stop.

She smiled. Death by blood loss or the unknown? The unknown always triumphed because a glimmer of hope existed in that choice. Such optimism could be powerful, at least until death and Mairi intervened.

The light at the end of the passage grew bright enough for her to ditch the torch. It landed by a skull. Strands of dirty blonde hair and decaying flesh clung to it. Mairi grabbed it and tossed it in the air like a ball. She hummed a few bars of a lover's tune, before taunting the prisoner. "I brought you some company. She's quite stubborn and refuses to speak. I can see why she's *your* wife." Her voice echoed through the passage.

Mairi gazed at her prisoner through the bars as big as her wrists that spanned floor to ceiling. The keep opened into a cavernous room large enough to build a town complete with castle. Grass covered small hills and delicate yellow flowers sprouted along a broad path. Red and yellow lichen clung to rocks lining a shallow mountain stream that babbled beneath a swaying cage. It hung suspended from a rusty chain anchored somewhere in the vaulted ceiling.

The prisoner looked like a strange bird with his tangled mass of dark hair and stubbly cheeks and chin. His legs dangled between the bars, and he gripped the cage as he stared at Mairi.

"Oh, what's wrong? You don't want company?" She used the key around her neck to unlock the cell door. It screeched as she slammed it shut. She stood just inside the door, so she wouldn't have to crane her neck to see him from his 30 foot perch. He still didn't speak.

"She begged me to tell her where you are." Mairi whipped the putrefied head from behind her back and plunked it on the rock in front of her. It wobbled and a piece of flesh slithered to the ground. "Until I cut out her tongue." The prisoner's eyes widened, and his body shook. He buried his face in his hands.

She stroked the greasy hair still dangling on the skull. "Almost two weeks you've been here. No food and little water. And still you've kept silent. Living so far from town, MacBaharin, makes your family vulnerable, especially when you are..." She waved her hand and searched for the correct word, "...away. The town folk are already talking about the tragedy on your homestead—the charred remains of your mother-in-law and the headless

body of your wife. And of course, they can't forget the sad fate of your eldest daughter, Keeley."

A rumble from inside of the cage burst into full-blown laughter, and he clapped. "You were such a withdrawn child. I never knew you had aspirations as an entertainer, Mairi. Where did you find the poor soul's head? At the market?" He wiped the tears from his eyes.

The bastard! Mairi backhanded the skull, and it bounced to the edge of the stream. He had called her bluff. A nerve in her cheek ticked. Her hand inched towards her knife. It would be satisfying to embed it in his throat so he couldn't laugh anymore, but she needed the information he had. Besides, he would be persuaded to talk when she returned with his daughter. Her hand relaxed, and she smiled.

"Naylon has ordered Torny to bring your daughter in for interrogation. You know what that means, MacBaharin. It hasn't been long that long since you sat on The Council."

His hands gripped the bars and he glared down at her. "What do you want?"

She smiled. "Now you speak, do you?" Her smile disappeared and she took a step forward. "Then don't try my patience and waste my time. You know what I want."

"I haven't been on The Council in 14 years. You said it yourself. What makes you think I know where the—"

"I grew up in The Council's shadow, a slave to Naylon's whims." She loosened the strings on her cloak and pulled her collar away. Pale, waxy skin stretched from her shoulder to her collar bone. "He doesn't interrogate. He burns and slices until you admit anything he wants." She retied her cloak. "And when he gets a hold of Fallon, what kind of interrogation will she have to bear, simply because she's your daughter? Naylon does not forgive those who have made him look a fool."

Mac leaned forward and the cage swayed. His voice was soft. "And he has groomed you well, Mairi, in the art of interrogation. Although I do not bleed, you have done nothing but torture me for weeks. You won't hear the truth when revenge for the death of your child clouds your judgment," he said.

“Remember those words, Mac, when Naylon has *your* daughter.” Her eyes bulged and the words came out in a flurry of spittle. She jerked and closed her eyes. Her face relaxed into a mask. “He has already taken your baby, and your silence will kill your other child. He knows she has power.”

He jerked at the bars, and his muscles bulged with tension. “You don’t know what you are asking! The stories aren’t just to scare children into behaving. It is Cennfhain’s history! It’s a legacy of magic and destruction!” His nostrils flared. “The spells in that book drain mercy and virtue out of you until only the blackest shade of your humanity remains—until you are like Naylon. And when it is done with you,” Mac pressed his face to the bars and softened his voice, “your child will still be dead, Mairi.” She blinked and turned her back.

“Mairi, please don’t let Toryn find my daughter. You know what it is like lose a loved one on Naylon’s command. He is incapable of compassion. When I married the woman he loved and turned my back on The Council...” His voice faltered. “He will never forgive that. Naylon will torture my family. Help, Fallon, please!” She had already reached the door.

“A woman like me doesn’t have many loved ones, Mac. And I do understand. I will find your daughter.” She slammed the cell door shut and locked it.

“Thank you! I knew you would—“

Mairi interrupted. God, he was pitiful. “And when I do, I’ll bring her in—“she slipped the key around her neck again. “Piece by piece.”

## **PART II: PICTURING THE FUTURE: VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

### **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

*“I don’t care what they write about me...most of the constituents can’t read anyway—but them damned pictures!” (Visual Communication, 179)*

These were the words uttered by corrupt Democratic political machine boss, William Tweed, in response to Thomas Nast’s editorial cartoons that exposed Tweed’s embezzlement of as much as \$200 million from the New York County treasury. Nast used editorial cartoons to visually communicate the corruption of Tweed and his “Democratic cronies” during a time when literacy meant the practicality of an apprenticeship rather than the ability to read (and write) print. Despite the fact that Tweed’s words represent the educational reality of reading in the 1860s, two parallelisms can be made to contemporary literacy issues.

First, although the literacy rate of Americans has increased dramatically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, school districts across the nation are still addressing literacy issues with the goal of narrowing the achievement gap in math, science, reading and English. According to the National Governors Association, the “achievement gap” is a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic achievement persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts. This is one of the most pressing education policy challenges that states currently face (NGA, par. 3).

Changes in federal laws such as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001, and technological advances have redefined the term literacy to include a variety of communication skills. Meltzer makes explicit the characteristics of literacy and the impact literacy has on students:

Literacy—the ability to read, write, speak, listen, and think effectively—enables adolescents to learn and to communicate clearly in and out of school. Being literate enables people to access power through the ability to become informed, inform others, and make informed decisions. Adolescents need to have strong literacy skills, so that they can understand academic content, communicate in a credible way, participate in cultural communities, and negotiate the world. In addition to a cultural component, therefore, building literacy addresses empowerment and equity issues. (3)

Because improving learning means developing literacy skills, one must explore current research to identify teaching practices that can support all learners in acquiring the necessary literacy skills that will allow them to function within a social and political environment beyond the classroom. These practices must also meet the literacy needs of students who live in a technological society within the Information Age.

Second, we live in a world of images that demands visual literacy. Braundy contends that those who are literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be those who learn to read and write the multimedia language of the screen (3). ISUComm asserts “Because of changes in technology, written communication is now virtually inseparable from oral, visual, and electronic modes of communication, not just in the academy, but also in the professions, in business, and in the public sector” (par. 3). Students must develop literacy skills that reflect the world in which they live, so they can “negotiate” the communication demands of society. This includes visual literacy.

Our instruction, however, often ignores visual communication (Andrasick, 90). “If students are taught to analyze visual images in the same critical manner as written text and to use visual images to enhance their communications, they may gain greater power as communicators” (Au and Raphael, 180). In addition, “Greater attention to an integration of the visual arts may allow teachers to create more motivating lessons in which connections can be made to students’ interests in popular culture” (180). Not only does visual literacy empower students to understand how visuals and design can enhance the clarity of their writing, but it also possesses the potential to support and motivate students with different learning styles.

## **Research Questions**

Although a large body of literature explains the need for visual literacy and communication skills, little research annotates the current state of visual communication in teacher preparation programs. This gap is significant because changes in teacher preparation programs at the university level have the power to affect the largest number of students in public schools because each future educator influences the education of thousands of

students. Therefore, examining the visual communication goals of university teacher preparation programs can enhance the existing knowledge base, potentially improve the integration of visual communication in teacher preparation programs, and inform the state Board of Education, which is responsible for accreditation of such teaching programs.

This study will utilize a two-step approach to understand the significance of visual communication in teacher preparation programs and build awareness of current practices at the university level. First, in order to comprehend visual communication and visual literacy more fully, a literature review will be conducted to address the following questions:

- How have literacy needs evolved to include visual communication?
- How can visual communication impact student learning at the secondary level?
- What core visual design principles in relation to learning theories are essential to educators?

Second, revelations from the literature review research questions will be utilized and applied to the main research question that has the power to affect the most change at the secondary level:

- How is the topic of visual communication positioned within the course structure of teacher preparation programs?

Because the position of visual communication in teacher preparation programs is conjoined with the practices at the secondary level, this approach seeks to emphasize the interrelatedness of educational practices at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

### **Definition of Terms**

According to George, “Literacy means more than words, and visual literacy means more than play” (16). The purpose of visual literacy should not merely encompass motivational or attention-getting goals as they have in the past. Instead, visual literacy should relate to cognitive goals that according to R. E. Wileman include “the ability to ‘read,’ interpret, and understand information presented in pictorial or graphic images” (qtd. in Stokes 12). This definition, however, limits the scope of visual literacy to the ability to read and interpret visuals, and disregards the use and creation of visuals—a dynamic force for



knowledge retention. Although researchers question the validity of Edgar's Cone of Experience, where learning through lecture, reading, audio-visual, demonstration, discussion, doing, and teaching others conveniently fall within whole percentage categories (Lalley and Miller 64), learning by creating does require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate—all higher-order thinking skills. John Dewey stated that learning by doing is necessary for understanding (qtd. in Fischer 436).

Sean Williams discusses the criticality of visual literacy in the twenty-first century in terms of:

possessing the skills necessary to effectively construct and comfortably navigate multiplicity, to manipulate and critique information, representations, knowledge, and arguments in multiple media from a wide range of sources, and to use multiple expressive technologies including those offered by print, visual, and digital tools. (22)

This definition expands Wileman's definition of reading, interpreting, and understanding pictorial or graphic images to include construction of, manipulation and critique of, and use of representations (i.e. visuals) from a wide range of sources—print, visual, and digital media.

For the purpose of this study, visual literacy includes two sets of consumers and producers: the students who must learn to construct and navigate a visual world, and the secondary educators who must equip students with these skills. For students, the ability to read, interpret, understand, manipulate, critique, use and construct pictorial or graphic images promotes visual literacy. Furthermore, the meaning of "pictorial or graphic images" refers to illustrations, charts, graphs, and tables in both print-based and multimedia forms. For example, navigating textbooks, understanding the relationship between verbal and textual elements, and critically viewing advertisements are essential in becoming active, rather than passive, consumers of visuals not just in school, but in their personal lives and future occupations as well.

For teachers, the term visual literacy will include the ability to support students in deconstructing and creating pictorial or graphic images within a variety of contexts for a multitude of purposes. For example, teachers must be able to assist students in understanding print-based and multimedia political ads and the purposes behind such constructions. In

addition, the ability to use sound visual design principles to achieve accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity (pathos and ethos) when creating instructional documents for students' use is another key component to a teacher's visual literacy.

Because both students and teachers use and construct visual information for specific purposes, visual communication will be considered a component of visual literacy. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "The field of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media" (qtd. in NATC 1). Therefore, the term visual communication in this study will denote the intentional application of pictorial or graphic images and design principles to visually convey an intended meaning to a target audience for a specific communicative effect (Lentz, Leo, Pander Maat 388-89).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **How has literacy evolved to include visual communication?**

Although literacy skills have primarily centered upon preparing a student to interact and communicate with the world beyond the classroom, the world beyond the classroom has evolved where education is influenced by culture and culture is influenced by education. History has the ability to provide insight into current conditions and make explicit the conditions upon which speculations about the future can be based.

John Miller states that teachers tend to control classroom literacy in ways that are the result of their experiences as students (6). This raises the notion regarding the degree to which education has evolved since the 19<sup>th</sup> century if educators' current practices reflect the trends of their youth. Because literacy has primarily been defined as reading and writing with the privileging of verbal texts or as Sean Williams calls it, "verbal bias," teachers often emphasize these skills (23). Since the foundation of the United States, patterns in reading and writing have emerged that characterize the shifts of education across generations. Although the past and present trends cannot be changed, the future of literacy can at least be explored through a comparison of past definitions and the critical skills students need in present day society.

According to Miles Myers shifting standards have occurred in literacy to denote four distinctive standards of literacy: signature, recitation, comprehension, and application (26). Myers posits that throughout the formation of the United States from 1750-1850, literacy was defined as the ability to write. Later as the focus of literacy centered upon morality and the King James Bible, literacy was expanded to include both the ability to write one's name and the ability to recite Biblical passages or other announced passages of quality literature. Because assessment only included how well the *announced* passages were read aloud or recited, World War I military officials became concerned that students could not comprehend unfamiliar materials. Literacy once again evolved to include not only the ability to sign one's name and recite passages, but to also include the ability to comprehend previously unfamiliar texts.

In a parallel movement, developments in design and visuals included the Deutscher Werkbund philosophy “form without ornamentations” that later provided inspiration for what would become the Bauhaus School of Design (Schrivver 105). During the early 1900s, interest in typography and advertising dominated professional practices. Design critics, architects and industry leaders coalesced in an attempt to produce better-designed and more functional products (106). Walter Gropius, a German designer, launched the Bauhaus movement with an emphasis on asymmetry, grids, and sans serif typeface. With the rise of World War II, the Nazi party closed the Germany-based Bauhaus School, and tenets were re-established in Chicago by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (116). While subsequent growth in technology after World War II spurred the need for technical writers across professional domains, secondary education also underwent a shift.

During the 1950s as multimedia developments grew, studies found that while students could initially comprehend passages, students seemed puzzled at why they should rationalize their points of view. The application stage can best be understood in terms of a functional literacy. Students not only needed to possess the skills from the signature, recitation, and comprehension standards, but they also needed to develop skills to justify and rationalize their understanding of texts by applying their knowledge.

The ability of students to understand texts dominated the technical writing profession during the 1970s and 80s in terms of audience-awareness and document readability (Schrivver 134). Studies involving the composition process employed by professional writers when attending to audience (Berkenkotter 389; Tyler 21), and statistical analysis of a document’s vocabulary, sentence length, word count, letter count, syllables, etc... , significantly raised awareness about textbook design (Klare 64; Cohen and Steinberg 87), the primary instructional tool in secondary classrooms (Duffy, Higgins, Mehlenbacher et al. 436).

Educators also became conscious of the need for “computer literacy” in classrooms and the workplace. Educational practices initially concentrated on providing students and employees with the mechanical skills needed to use computers for word processing or creating spreadsheets. However, social, cognitive, and organizational issues that arose from computers in the classroom and workplace redirected the focus of computers as a tool for

inventing, learning, collaborating, and designing (Schrivers 136). These issues also prompted the move towards the use of “plain language” in business and government documents so that all major regulations were as simple and clear as possible, written in plain English, and understandable to those who must comply with [them]” (27). By the mid-1980’s, however, interest in plain language was abandoned for an emphasis on “readers’ *actual* comprehension and use of documents” (29).

According to Kathryn Au and Taffy Raphael, “While traditional reading instruction may have focused on reading the word on the printed page, in today’s society—with its plethora of media and technologies—such an approach is limiting at best, and detrimental, at worst” (179). “Those of us in the classrooms know that simply teaching reading and writing, even at a more sophisticated level, won’t necessarily ensure that students can utilize the printed word to make complex decisions, evaluate information critically, and function in a literate world” (Marshall, 88).

To prepare students for a literate world infused with multimedia, the national councils for mathematics, science, and English/reading include visual elements in their standards. Although the following standards are a representative and not an exhaustive list of visual components contained within each councils’ standards, it is clear that visual literacy is an essential skill across the core curriculum at the secondary level.

#### **National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)**

- Analyze the characteristics and properties of two- and three-dimensional geometric shapes and develop mathematical arguments about geometric relationships
- Use visualization, spatial reasoning, and geometric modeling to solve problems
- Formulate questions that can be addressed with data and collect, organize, and display relevant data to answer them (par. 1)

#### **National Committee on Science Education (NCES)**

- Focus and support inquiry through observation, data collection, reflection, and analysis of firsthand events and phenomena (33)

- Focus and support inquiry through critical analysis of secondary sources—including media, books, and journals in a library (33)
- Orchestrate discourse among students about scientific ideas through multiple forms of communication (for example, spoken, written, pictorial, graphic, mathematical, and electronic) (36)

### **National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)**

- read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment (Standard 1).
- adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes (Standard 4).
- conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience (Standard 7).
- use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information) (Standard 12).

Although all councils' standards now include or imply the use of visuals, non-print texts, and media as "language skills" critical for students to pursue life's goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society (NCTE par. 1), past practices in educational settings have privileged the verbal over the visual (Brasseur 129). Standards within the educational system have historically reinforced the interrelatedness of traditional literacy skills such as reading and writing, but research and professional organizations are now embracing the visual element as well. Kress and Van Leeuwen have argued that visual literacy should not be seen as an obstacle to written literacy, but instead as a complement

(qtd. in Kong 208). A better understanding of how visual communication impacts learning in secondary classrooms is necessary, so that instructors in teacher preparation programs teachers can identify theoretical and practical strategies to support new teachers who are expected to include visual literacy practices in their classrooms.

### **How can visual communication impact student learning?**

Visual communication pervades society in the form of film, advertisements, web pages, posters, workplace documents, and instructional materials. Being literate in today's Information Age means that students must be analytical of multimedia and an increasing number of documents that includes tables, charts, and graphs. In addition, as students become adults, the use of expository documents containing visuals pervades their lives as they file taxes, vote in elections, apply for credit cards, or shop online. As technology addresses the needs of an increasingly complex society, the number of documents will increase to maintain these needs (qtd. in Kirsch and Mosenthal 8-9).

Intelligence is key to navigating an information economy rich with multimedia (Sibbet 118). According to Gardner, "There is persuasive evidence for the existence of several relatively autonomous human intellectual competencies or 'frames of mind'" (Frames 8). Gardner identified seven (and recently eight with naturalist) frames of mind, or domains of learning as linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Although some researchers reject Gardner's claims as "conceptually indistinguishable" (Klein 378) and "based on highly specific skills developed largely through extended deliberate practice, rather than on broad abilities" (qtd. in Klein 378), Multiple Intelligence Theory has influenced classroom practices since the 1980s as teachers have sought to identify and implement strategies that address a diverse student body with an even greater multitude of learning styles. The classroom, however, is not the sole context for intellectual development according to Howard Gardner:

...intelligences are not things that can be seen or counted, instead they are potentials—presumably neural ones—that will or will not be activated, depending on the values of a particular culture, the opportunities available in that culture, and the personal decisions made by individuals and/or their families, school teachers and *others*. (Reframed 34)

External (cultural) influences on intelligence begin from birth. As a child develops awareness of its surroundings, intelligence begins to develop through assimilation (transference of existing schema—or skills—to new objects) and accommodation (adjusting an old schema for a new schema). For example, an infant often puts objects in its mouth beginning with its fingers and thumb. This skill is a schema. Through the process of assimilation, an infant will transfer this schema to new objects such as a rattle by inserting it in its mouth. When the infant encounters a bigger object such as a stuffed animal that doesn't fit in its mouth, it must make accommodations and adapt its schema to the new object. Intelligence is the adaptation between assimilation and accommodation that matures over four stages (Fischer 431), with each successive stage an internalization of the previous stage(s):

- Sensory motor stage: Occurs between the ages of 0 and 2 years, and primarily focuses on learning through sensory experience and motor skills
- Preoperational stage: Occurs from approximately 2 years to 7 years old, and through the use of language, symbolic play, and deferred imitation, this stage acts as a stepping stone to symbolic understanding in the concrete operations stage
- Concrete operations stage: Occurs between the ages of 7 and 11 where the use of symbols as representations to solve problems logically develops
- Formal operation stage: During this final stage intellectual development from 11-15 years, the use of abstract thinking mirrors the hypothetical thinking of adults (434-36)

“Thinking [for Piaget] is a process or an action, specifically an action that transforms overtly or covertly one reality state into another and in so doing so leads to implicit or explicit knowledge of the state” (Furth 820).

Knowledge is the simplest and most concrete cognitive domain in Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, a hierarchical construct of cognitive abilities such as remembering, recalling knowledge, thinking, problem solving and creating” (Lewis 255). Each succeeding level in *Taxonomy* represents a building of intellectual ability and skill (**Figure 1**).



Cognitive Process Dimension (horizontal axis)		Knowledge Dimension (vertical axis)	
<b>1.0 Remember</b> —Retrieving relevant knowledge from long-term memory	1.1 <i>Recognizing</i>	<b>A. Factual Knowledge</b> —The basic elements that students know to be acquainted with a discipline or solve problems in it.	Aa. Knowledge of terminology
	1.2 <i>Recalling</i>		Ab. Knowledge of specific details and elements
<b>2.0 Understand</b> —Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication	2.1 <i>Interpreting</i>	<b>B. Conceptual Knowledge</b> —The interrelationships among the basic elements within a larger structure that enable them to function together.	Ba. Knowledge of classification and categories
	2.2 <i>Exemplifying</i>		Bb. Knowledge of principles and generalizations
	2.3 <i>Classifying</i>		Bc. Knowledge of theories, models, and structures
	2.4 <i>Summarizing</i>		
	2.5 <i>Inferring</i>		
	2.6 <i>Comparing</i>		
	2.7 <i>Explaining</i>		
<b>3.0 Apply</b> —carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation	3.0 <i>Executing</i>	<b>C. Procedural Knowledge</b> —How to do something; methods of inquiry, and criteria for using skills, algorithms, techniques, and methods.	Figure 1 continued
	3.1 <i>Implementing</i>		
<b>4.0 Analyze</b> —Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose	4.1 <i>Differentiating</i>		Ca. Knowledge of subject-specific skills and algorithms
	4.2 <i>Organizing</i>		Cb. Knowledge of subject-specific techniques and methods
	4.3 <i>Attributing</i>		Cc. Knowledge of criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures
<b>5.0 Evaluate</b> —Making judgments based on criteria and standards	5.1 <i>Checking</i>	<b>D. Metacognitive Knowledge</b> —Knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one's own cognition	Da. Strategic knowledge
	5.2 <i>Critiquing</i>		Db. Knowledge about cognitive tasks, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge
<b>6.0 Create</b> —Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product	6.1 <i>Generating</i>		Dc. Self-knowledge
	6.2 <i>Planning</i>		
	6.3 <i>Producing</i>		

**Figure 1:** Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives that includes a two-dimensional representation where Knowledge Dimension forms the vertical axis and the Cognitive Process Dimension form the horizontal access (Krathwohl 214-215).

Although Bloom originally intended the taxonomy as a “framework to promote agreement among educators [about educational evaluation] with the potential to lead to better practices,” implications arise in relation to learning. According to Richard Mayer, “The revised Taxonomy is based on a broader vision of learning that includes not only acquiring knowledge but also being able to use knowledge in a variety of new situations” (226). As

Bloom views it, such abilities and skills as thinking, problem solving, and creating are all necessary for survival in our “rapidly changing and unpredictable culture” (Lewis 255).

If one interprets a “rapidly changing and unpredictable culture” to be exemplified by the infiltration of multimedia technologies and an increasing number of documents containing visual illustrations into culture (and culture into multimedia as McLuhan would remind us), then thinking about, problem solving with, and creating visuals are all necessary for survival in the Information Age. “With the proliferation of illustrations in instructional materials, it becomes increasingly important to investigate their effects on student learning” (Anglin, Vaez, and Cunningham 865). The ability of a picture to carry and create meaning has provoked a multitude of theories about perception and cognition.

Perception, according to Ulrich Neisser, is the convergence of reality and cognition (54). Reality exists in art when artists approximate “what is seen by viewing the environment” (Anglin, Vaez, and Cunningham 867). Furthermore, “Artists must produce an ‘illusion of reality’ that matches the viewer’s concept (schema) of what a picture of a given kind *should* look like” (867). It is the synergistic effect between the viewer’s attempt “...to get a reliable fix on the world, a world that is, as it were, assumed to be immutable...” and cognition that molds both what and how information is perceived (Bruner 1).

Cognition is “...the psychological events and processes that go into making up what we call ‘thinking,’ ‘perceiving,’ ‘remembering,’ and the rest are in fact completely interwoven with one another in the tapestry of actual, real-time cognitive functioning (Flavell 3). Cognition as a process is also emphasized in Neisser’s definition that cognition is the activity of knowing: the acquisition, organization, and use of knowledge (1). The term process implies a continuous interplay of (not necessarily linear) internal actions out of which knowledge and meaning emerges. Constructivists would privilege these processes, and therefore cognition, over reality by emphasizing meaning as a construct and product *of the learner*. “What we see, or think we see, is filtered through a variety of mental sets and expectations” (Anglin, Vaez, and Cunningham 867). Visuals will be interpreted differently depending on the viewer (867).

One such constructivist, Rudolf Arnheim, asserts that visual structuring occurs through the intuitive and intellectual modes (494). The intuitive mode of cognition refers to the ability to perceive an element only as part of the whole due in part to dependency on each other. “The structure of the whole controls the parts and vice versa” until an “indivisible, highly organized structure” emerges (494). The intellectual mode, however, complements the intuitive mode in which individual elements such as shape, size, and color are established in isolation so various relations between these elements can be explored (495). These macro and micro views of visual perception have “always been embodied in the Gestalt, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Anglin, Vaez, and Cunningham 868).

Julian Hochberg challenges Arnheim’s notion that all elements of a picture can be perceived in a single glance because biologically the eye must make “saccades” (rapid jumps) and “fixations” (brief stops) to scan pictures (192). The whole, therefore, cannot be perceived directly, but is the result of an analysis of the parts that is later synthesized into the whole (868).

Whether one subscribes to Arnheim’s “whole” or Hochberg’s “parts,” both relate to the construction of knowledge through the cognitive processes of:

- analysis—viewing visual elements in isolation to understand their relationships to each other and the whole
- evaluation—making judgments about visuals based upon criteria defined by the viewer’s individualized lens
- creation—putting together visual elements to form a coherent whole (see **Figure 1** for cross-reference)

The correlation of Arnheim’s and Hochberg’s cognitive theories to the more abstract domains of the revised Taxonomy implies that visual perception and thinking require the ability for abstract thought. Because visuals lack the tangibility of concrete experiences and are understood as a learned cultural convention, any visual representation is an abstraction of real experience (Cooper 15). In terms of learning, Cooper suggests that although students are natural visual learners who may understand the literal meaning of a visual, they lack

experience and need instruction to culturally be able to [understand and] construct knowledge and meaning from abstract communication forms (15).

Constructivist theories such as Jerome Bruner's three modes of learning suggest a recursive learning process of experience and instruction where students move through increasingly abstract stages of:

- enactive—direct experience where a person learns by doing
- iconic—pictorial experience where a person learns to do by examining visuals
- symbolic – highly abstract experience where a person learns to examine visuals (i.e. abstract words) and matches the word to a mental image or previous experience (Dale 97)

Bruner's modes of learning coupled with the revised Taxonomy lend themselves to the identification of core visual design principles that teachers can use to structure secondary students experiences in the ability to read, interpret, understand, use and create visual information. In addition both Piaget's four stages and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences influence the identification of visual principles by:

- focusing on secondary students from the ages of 13-18 who would occupy Piaget's formal operation stage in which abstract thought leads to adult-like hypothetical thinking
- corresponding to Bruner's modes of learning enactive (Gardner's bodily-kinesthetic), iconic (Gardner's spatial), and symbolic (Gardner's visual and linguistic intelligences)

Typically, the roles of Bloom's revised Taxonomy and Bruner's modes of learning in secondary classrooms have been limited to instructional assessment and planning.

Educators, however, must broaden the application of these theories to understand that learning is not a series of objectives and units. Learning is a highly individualized process that extends beyond the boundaries of public schools into students' adult lives. Re-envisioning these theories as a means of "perceiving" students' cognitive abilities and capabilities heightens their significance in the classroom and a visual world. "Education, to be effective in our visual culture, must change fundamentally. We must understand the

learning process, perhaps even make bold assumptions about why people perform, learn or process differently, if people are to become effective learners” (Murr and Williams 418).

Not only must educators understand why people, perform, learn or process differently, but they must also critically reflect on their own instructional practices to recognize potential inhibitors to student learning. Teachers are the educational system’s principal resource (Wayne and Youngs 89). Studies on the relationship between teacher effectiveness and student learning do not conclusively reveal how teachers’ educational backgrounds, years of experience, and salaries affect student achievement (Angrist and Lavy 343; Kupermintz 297; Lynch 287). What these studies have not examined is how a *lack of teacher training* in a skill such as visual communication area affects students’ achievement.

Because the focus on visual communication and literacy in the classroom has evolved with technological advancements in multimedia, university teacher preparation programs may be slow to respond to the visual design needs of future teachers. Two studies conducted by Karen Schriver examine how cognition and affect may interact as people use texts and technology. She states:

...the design of documents and products is critical to people’s ability to use texts and technology. We’ve seen that poorly designed documents and products may conspire to negatively influence people’s ability to interpret texts and technology, as well as their interpretations about themselves as readers and users. (246)

Not only can poor design of instructional documents and technology inhibit the ability to comprehend and use these materials, users often blame themselves for the difficulties (247). This may lead to “the real possibility that students of any age may be led to believe that they are too incompetent to understand either the subjects they study in school or the topics and technologies they must learn on the job” (247).

Despite the risk to students’ self efficacy due to a lack of experience in engaging with visual texts, current pedagogical practices in visual literacy are often relegated to journalism, technology, and art courses, perhaps because their histories are less tightly interwoven with verbal education (Williams 25). The humanities and social sciences have been slow to adopt instructional strategies to equip students with the skills needed to interact with visual texts because most academic products in these areas are verbal products (qtd. in Williams 25).

Mary Burns agrees with Williams that “text based proficiency—reading and writing—is still the standard by which academic success is measured” (par. 4). However, Burns also suggests two additional reasons why visual literacy concerns have been slow to influence changes in pedagogy at the secondary level:

- Although state standards advocate “visual literacy,” these standards may offer little guidance in terms of instructional specifics (par. 4).
- Many teachers are more comfortable with text-based instruction and communication and may feel ill-equipped to harness the learning potential of visually based learning (par. 4).

Despite the lack of guidance for a more explicit inclusion of visual literacy practices and instructional techniques at the secondary level, teachers who are comfortable with visual learning have integrated assignments and projects into their required coursework such as deconstructing visual media (print and electronic-based), creating PowerPoint presentations on a topic of their choice to demonstrate effective visual design principles, and building websites to demonstrate effective computer-mediated visual communication (Switzer 93-94). Burns wonders, however, whether teachers leapfrog to technology while ignoring visual literacy as a concept and a prerequisite for critical thinking, and whether they focus on the mechanics rather than the larger cognitive framework of comprehension, analysis, synthesis and creation of the messages of visual images (par. 8).

In order for educators to develop their visual literacy skills, Burns believes that teachers must begin to explore the definition of literacy, learn how to “read” images, create images, and extend visual literacy across all subject areas to support visual learning styles of students, so that they become critical consumers of visual information (par. 9-22). For educators to learn how to deconstruct and construct images, it is necessary to explore current literature to identify core visual design principles essential to educators when teaching visual literacy skills and when creating instructional materials so the effects of poor design on student cognition and efficacy decrease.

## What Core Visual Design Principles Are Essential to Educators?

To decrease the potential for poor design, Rebecca Burnett cites three criteria each document, presentation, or visual must have to ensure effective communication:

1. Be physically accessible, so a reader, listener, or viewer can see or hear it
2. Be comprehensible, so a reader, listener or viewer can understand it
3. Be usable, so a reader, listener or viewer can use it easily and productively (13)

Due to the scope of this study, accessibility, comprehensibility, and usability will be limited to documents and visuals, not oral presentations.

An analysis of these criteria reveals that the user (student or learner in the context of this study) is placed at the core. According to Burnett, accessibility demands awareness of audience in terms of “*the user’s* vision, hearing, dexterity, cognition, and other learning and perception areas as well as limitations to their economic, educational, and physical environments” (331). Although a variety of factors affect comprehensibility such as coherence, readability (vocabulary and sentence construction), and organization, the term generally refers to how easily *the user* can understand the information (14). Usability refers to “the degree to which texts, regardless of their materiality or mode, effectively and easily enable *people [or user]* to accomplish their goals” (308).

Saul Carliner concurs with Burnett’s point. “Good information design focuses on the readers and takes the ‘you’ perspective toward the content. An information designer is only successful when readers can perform the intended tasks associated with the document” (44). He believes designers should take a holistic approach from three perspectives when developing documents:

1. Physical design—can readers find the information they are looking for?
2. Cognitive design—can readers understand the information they are looking for?
3. Affective design—how do readers emotionally respond to the information (46)?

Two commonalities exist between these two sets of criteria. First, the physical design of a document affects whether or not information can be easily accessed by the user. Second, the cognitive design of a document affects a user’s ability to understand the information

presented. However, these criteria diverge with Burnett's focus on usability and Carliner's concentration on the user's emotional response.

Given Schriver's findings that users tend to interpret themselves as incompetent when they encounter difficulties in accessing, understanding, and using a text, Carliner's third criterion adds a much needed emotional dimension that Burnett's criteria lack. In addition, Burnett's use of "usability" offers a "holistic" approach that Carliner claims to have, but doesn't include. The term "usability" encompasses physical, cognitive, and affective design to the degree that a document is able to aid a user in accomplishing an overall goal or purpose within the constraints of the rhetorical context. Condensing these six criteria into four that includes accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity provides the lens through which visual design principles can be identified in terms of their purposeful contributions to effective document design.

**Figure 2** provides an overview of design principles that can offer guidance when including visual communication in teacher preparation programs. These terms offer a common vocabulary that instructors can employ when discussing document design choices and analysis with future teachers. In addition, these principles offer guidelines to future educators by helping to make explicit visual design choices when creating instructional documents for classroom use. Understanding how to construct sound documents to increase accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity can reduce potential barriers to knowledge acquisition.



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## Key Principles in Document Design: A Survey of Literature

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**Charles Kostelnick and**
**Dave Roberts**

*Designing Visual Language*  
p. 14-21

- Arrangement—visual elements that create layers and hierarchies through coherence and contrast
  - Emphasis—visual elements that create prominence of visual intensity
  - Clarity—visual elements that reduce ambivalence
  - Conciseness—visual elements that are appropriately succinct for context
  - Tone—visual elements indicate mood of document
  - Ethos—visual elements that establish credibility and trust
- 

**Karen Schriver**

*Dynamics in Document Design*  
p. 412-430

- Redundant—substantially identical content appearing visually and verbally to repeat key ideas
  - Complementary—different content visually and verbally that synergistically work together to convey key ideas
  - Supplementary—different content in words and visuals, where one mode dominates the other to separate key ideas from elaboration
  - Juxtapositional—different content in words and visuals where key ideas emerge from the contrast
  - Stage-setting—different content in words and visuals where one mode (usually visual) forecasts the content
- 

**William Baker**

*Visual Communication*  
p. 404-405

- Balance—symmetrical or asymmetrical balance
  - Space—grouping information into chunks
  - Contrast—emphasizes and de-emphasizes essential information
  - Repetition—visual schemes
  - Alignment—prevents random placement (404-405)
- 

**Figure 2:** A summary of findings from researchers in the field of visual communication and document design.

These researchers are careful to acknowledge that their visual design principles lists are neither exhaustive nor isolated. Each principle within a researchers' cluster is affiliated with the others, and in fact often work in tandem to achieve a particular purpose. For example, clarity of a document can be achieved through conciseness; juxtaposition can be attained through privileging of visuals over textual (supplemental); balance can be accomplished with space and alignment.

A closer examination also reveals a hierarchical structure to each cluster of terms as well. Kostelnick's and Roberts' "cognates" are goal oriented in that they are intended to facilitate attainment of the overall purpose of the document: accessibility, comprehensibility, affectivity, and usability. The use of arrangement, for example, advances the purpose of

accessibility because organization should allow users to access information within their physical and mental capabilities. While one might consider Schriver's principles goal oriented because they seem to seek a result (forecast the content and repeat, combine and separate key ideas), their intent is better characterized as modal principles.

Visual elements that are modal in nature tend to describe general patterns within the structure of a document. Schriver's use of adjectival terms suggests ways to describe patterns or modes of the visual and verbal elements of a text. For example, the term "redundant" describes a pattern in which repeated visual and verbal elements are used to reinforce key ideas within the structure of a document. The term "complementary" suggests a pattern of collaborative visual and verbal elements that simultaneously convey key concepts within the overall structure of a document. A description of visual design patterns can be useful to beginning designers by providing a conceptual framework for discussing visual design principles and making this knowledge explicit.

Baker's visual principles deepen this explicit knowledge further by offering a means through which to accomplish Schriver's patterns. Instead of suggesting that visual and verbal elements can be complementary to convey key ideas in broad terms, Baker offers a specific way of accomplishing this through the means of space and alignment. The use of space can help group visual and verbal elements together to show their complementary relationship. Likewise, alignment can signify hierarchical structures or degrees of formality that show complementary levels within a document. Baker's principles provide a more explicit means for accomplishing Schriver's patterns and Kostelnick's and Roberts' goals.

Despite the fact that all three researchers use similar terms for understanding visual design principles, it is their differences that provide a much more powerful tool to visual communication instructors because they provide different approaches to achieving accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity. Kostelnick's and Roberts' cognates outline ways a document designer can actualize usability by focusing on distinctive goals. Schriver's modal principles provide a lens through which visual design patterns can be discerned. While Baker's visual principles offer an explicit means in which to create patterns or achieve a goal. Depending on students' degree of experience with document design,

university instructors can introduce document design principles at the macro or micro level and begin building a common design vocabulary for discussion purposes. Instructors can also coach students to explore the synergistic effects of these principles, as well as options to achieve accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity for the user.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Based on the literature review, current research establishes the need for visual literacy and visual communication, describes how visual communication impacts learning, and identifies visual principles for instructional design. However, much of this research is relegated to the areas of technical communication, art and design, and mass communication. Little research examines how education departments at the university level are equipping future educators with the visual design skills they will need to create their own instructional materials and address the visual literacy needs of their students. Because the focus on visual communication and literacy are related to *recent* technological advancements, it is important to explore how university teacher preparation programs are adapting to the visual design needs of future teachers.

The main purpose of this research is to understand how visual communication is positioned within teacher preparation programs through the lens of the literature review findings. Specifically, this study will identify how three of Iowa's universities approach visual communication within their respective teacher preparation programs. First, the three Iowa universities' general education and teacher preparation requirements were examined by exploring the universities' websites. Based on the general education and teacher preparation requirement findings, Internet-based course descriptions were examined further to identify visual communication references that address the following question:

- What required undergraduate courses offer the most potential for integrating visual communication into course objectives?

Once these courses were identified, findings from the literature review were used to provide the framework for interviews conducted with professors of these courses to address the following questions:

- Where do the visual communication goals and objectives fall within the revised Bloom's Taxonomy?
- How do the types of visual communication assignments required of teacher preparation students relate to Bruner's enactive, iconic, and symbolic stages?

- What type of approach is used when teaching specific visual design principles—macro or micro?
- How are accessibility, comprehensibility, usability and affectivity addressed?

The utilization of qualitative data in this study is appropriate because it more fully describes the position of visual communication within teacher preparation programs through the perceptions of professors within the post-secondary environment and by providing a holistic description of current visual communication practices.

### **Procedure for Analyzing Three Universities' Websites**

In order to identify general education and secondary education courses required of all university students in teacher preparation programs, three Iowa universities' websites were explored. Although the focus of this study is on teacher preparation programs, both general education and teacher preparation courses were examined to account for the possibility that while visual communication may not be required specifically of teachers, students could have been exposed to visual communication in their undergraduate general education requirements. Once course requirements for graduation were identified, each course description were examined for key words such as “visual communication, visual, art, visual art(s), film, media.” These key words were selected because of their connections and references to visual communication and literacy. Because a perusal of course offerings on the universities' websites provided limited data regarding specific visual communication goals and objectives, assignments, and specific visual design principles, a qualitative approach in the form of interviews was necessary to gather contextual data that more richly described visual communication practices available to students.

### **Interview and Survey Development**

Interviews were conducted to supplement the online course description findings to ensure a more reliable portrayal of visual communication practices at each university. After courses containing visual communication key words were identified, the departments of English/humanities and technology were recognized as potential sources for participants. Once the Human Subjects Committee at Iowa State University approved the study,

participating professors were discovered in one of two ways: through a website search of faculty in the English/humanities and technology departments or by contacting the appropriate departments at each university for suggestions about faculty representatives.

Each professor identified was sent an informed consent letter by e-mail (Appendix A) that explained the nature of the research. The researcher then contacted each professor by telephone and extended an invitation to participate in a recorded interview. An interview time and date were determined if the professor was able to participate. A confirmation e-mail of the time, date, and interview questions (Appendix B) was sent afterwards to all participants.

The interview included questions about the professors' teaching experience to gather background information about their teaching experiences at the university and secondary levels. University professors were also asked about their years of experience in teaching visual communication. To gather a more detailed description of visual communication practices in teacher preparation programs, questions were primarily based on four areas of interest: visual communication goals and objectives, types of required visual communication assignments, how accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity are addressed, and the approach to teaching visual design principles. These questions stem from the information learned in the literature review. To ensure a reliable account of the professors' responses, a recorded telephone call using SightSpeed (a free online computer-to-telephone conference call program that allows calls to be recorded) was made.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Because the research occurred in two steps, the data were collected and analyzed from the course descriptions of the three universities' websites (step one) before interviews were requested and conducted (step two). More specifically, first the findings from the search of the universities' websites were compiled with regard to course descriptions that explicitly stated or hinted at the potential for visual communication goals and objectives. These findings were used to identify professors who could more richly describe the visual communication practices in their departmental course requirements.

Once professors were identified and interviews were scheduled and completed, the demographics of the participants in the study were compiled first. Next, conversations with university professors were transcribed and analyzed in terms of their visual communication similarities and differences in departmental and course objectives, course assignments, and visual design principles. Last, these similarities and differences were analyzed more in-depth within four frameworks—all critical findings in the literature review—by

1. identifying where departmental and course visual communication objectives fell within Bloom's revised Taxonomy
2. identifying the distribution of course assignments in relation to Bruner's three modes of learning
3. identifying the most common visual design principles and vocabulary terms using Kostelnick's and Roberts', Schriver's, and Baker's visual design principles
4. identifying techniques professors use to create functional documents according to Burnett's and Carliner's purposes of documents

This data collection and analysis process was essential in determining how visual communication is positioned within the course structure of teacher preparation programs.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding how a sample of teacher preparation programs in Iowa are currently addressing the critical need for visual literacy can further the dialogue about the best practices for meeting teacher preparation students' needs, and ultimately secondary students' needs. The purpose of the sample was to identify trends in terms of types of courses, goals and objectives, types of assignments or coursework, and specific visual design principles that are related to visual communication. The results will be presented in the following sections.

### Sample Characteristics of Courses at Three Iowa Universities

#### *Courses that Potentially Include Visual Communication*

To identify all required courses that potentially integrated visual communication into the class, both general undergraduate and teacher preparation courses were analyzed. Because undergraduate courses are a prerequisite to entering the teacher preparation program, the assumption was made that general undergraduate coursework provides additional opportunity for students to acquire visual design skills.

Findings indicate that all undergraduate students are required to take a core set of classes ranging from 33 to 45 semester hours that include core competencies of math, reading and writing, and speaking and listening. Requirements also include coursework from arts and humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. In addition, all universities include foreign language as part of their undergraduate requirements, but this criterion can be met by taking foreign language courses at the high school level. The three universities' course requirements differ with the inclusion of library skills at University A, a capstone experience (project) at University B, and additional coursework in humanities, historical perspectives, or social sciences at University C. **Figure 3** summarizes these requirements and highlights the areas of academics where the potential for visual communication instruction may exist.



### Universities' Course Requirements

	University A		University B		University C	
	CR	Total credits: 34.5	CR	Total credits: 45	CR	Total credits: 33-39
General Education Undergraduate Requirements	3	Mathematics	12	<b>Core competencies</b> (includes reading and writing, speaking and listening, and quantitative techniques and understanding)	4-8	<b>Rhetoric</b>
	2	<b>Verbal Communication</b>			3	Quantitative or Formal Reasoning
	12	<b>Arts</b> and Humanities	9	Civilization and Culture	3	**Humanities
			3	<b>Fine arts</b>	3	Interpretation of Literature
			3	Literature, Philosophy, Religion	3	**Historical Perspectives
	8	Natural science	7	Natural Science and Technology	7	Natural Sciences (one course with lab)
	9	Social Science	9	Social Science	3	**Social Sciences
	.5	Library skills	2	Capstone Experience	6	* Distributed General Education
		Foreign Language		Foreign Language		Foreign Language (a minimum of 3 semester hours taken from two different categories)
Teacher Preparation Requirements	CR	Total credits: 30-34	CR	Total Credits: 32-33	CR	Total Credits: 32
	3	<b>Instructional Technology</b>	2-3	<b>Educational Media/ Classroom Computing</b>	2	<b>Technology in the Classroom</b>
	3	Educational Psychology	3	Dynamics of Human Development	3	Educational Psychology and Measurement
	3	Multicultural Education	3	Human Relations: Awareness and Apps	3	Human Relations for the Classroom Teacher
	3	Principles of Secondary Education	3	Learning and Instruction in Classroom Context	2	Secondary Classroom Management
			2	Classroom Assessment	1	Orientation to Sec. Ed.
	3	Social Foundations of American Education	3	Schools and American Society	3	Foundations of Education
	3	Teaching Students with Exceptionalities	2	Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners	3	Foundations of Special Education
	12-16	Student Teaching	12	Student Teaching	12	Student Teaching
			1	Field Exp: Exploring Tchg	2	Practicum: Content Area
			1	Field Exp. Teachers as Change Agent		

**Figure 3:** Comparison of general course and teacher preparation requirements at three Iowa universities. Red course titles indicate a strong possibility of visual communication requirements according to Williams' findings.

Based on Williams' findings in the literature review, undergraduate and teaching preparation courses listed under arts and technology were selected as potential sources for visual communication. Williams also identified journalism as a potential area of visual communication. Because journalism courses are sometimes dual-listed under the Journalism and English departments and because of the researcher's knowledge about University A's visual communication emphasis in freshman composition foundation courses, any courses involving the development of English skills in reading, writing, and speaking were also identified. This included the core competencies and rhetoric areas at Universities B and C, respectively.

To validate Williams' assertions regarding where visual communication is typically positioned in the undergraduate curriculum, course descriptions were examined from each universities' website. In addition, because Williams identified relatively few areas of required undergraduate coursework that typically include visual communication goals, the researcher made a comprehensive examination of required undergraduate course descriptions to ensure that all potential sources at each university were discovered.

Findings indicate that Williams' assertions were correct in that visual communication is often included in courses within the arts and technology departments. Within the art requirements, the courses containing visual communication goals are optional. Students can select other courses to fulfill their art competency. All three universities' art course options included courses that used key words such as "trends in visual arts and visual communication as related to visual literacy" (University A), "critical responses to the visual arts" (University B), and "greater discrimination of the visual world" (University C).

In education departments, however, the technology courses are required for all secondary teacher preparation students. Descriptions in the technology department included more vague references to visual communication with key phrases such as "use interactive media" (University A), "instructional design framework" (University B), and "application of computer, video, and audio" (University C).

Other findings reveal that only University A requires visual communication in freshman English foundation courses, and the English, journalism, humanities, and historical

perspectives/social science departments of individual universities include course options (not requirements) that address visual communication goals. The latter finding conflicts with Williams' assertion that visual communication is primarily relegated to the arts, journalism, and technology departments. **Figure 4** highlights key course descriptions.

<b>Excerpts from Course Descriptions on Universities' Websites</b>			
	<b>University A</b>	<b>University B</b>	<b>University C</b>
<b>Undergraduate Requirements</b>			
<i>Humanities Required</i>	<p><b>*ENGL 150: Strategies for Communication-</b> "will develop college-level competence in written composition, with additional attention to oral and visual communication"</p> <p><b>* ENGL 250: Communicating in the Disciplines-</b> "rhetorical strategies in written, oral, and visual communication as applied in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities"</p>		
<i>Optional</i>	<p><b>ENGL 205: Popular Culture Analysis-</b> "special attention to verbal and visual devices"</p> <p><b>ENGL 310: Rhetorical Analysis-</b> "focus on theories for analyzing film, technical and scientific documents, websites"</p> <p><b>ENGL 335: Studies in Film-</b> "principles of film art..."</p> <p><b>JL MC 454: Critical Analysis and History of the Moving Image-</b> "evolution of motion picture and television content and other visual technologies..."</p>	<p><b>* *HUM 680:021: Humanities I. The Ancient, Classical, and Medieval Worlds</b></p> <p><b>* *HUM 680:022: Humanities II. Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment</b></p> <p><b>* *HUM 680:023: Humanities III. Age of Revolution to the Present-</b> "literature, philosophy, religion, and the fine arts integrated with the history of Western Civilization..."</p>	<p><b>***01H:001: Art and Visual Culture-</b> "developments in Western Art History from prehistoric to modern times. Key monuments in architecture, painting, and sculpture are discussed in their wider cultural contexts"</p> <p><b>***01H:002: Arts of Africa-</b> "the focus is on arts in a cultural context. Students see many images of African art"</p> <p><b>***01h:066: Introduction to American Art-</b> "no course description"</p>
<i>Fine Arts Optional</i>	<p><b>DSN S 292/ART 494: Introduction to Visual Culture Studies-</b> "examine significant trends in visual arts, mass media, scientific imagery, visual communications, and other areas related to visual literacy..."</p> <p><b>DSN S 221/222: History of Western Architecture I &amp; II-</b> "introductory survey with emphasis on the cultural, visual, natural, and constructed context..."</p>	<p><b>ARTS 600:002- Visual Inventions-</b> "critical responses to the visual arts through active involvement with various creative processes"</p> <p><b>ARTS 600:004: Visual Perceptions-</b> "experiences in critical responses to the visual arts through analyses of artworks and artistic processes"</p>	<p><b>****01H:005: Western Art and Culture Before 1400-</b> "foster critical skills in thinking and writing about visual culture"</p> <p><b>01B:001: Elements of Art-</b> "skills of representation and principles of abstraction as an introduction to form, creativity, and greater discrimination of the visual world"</p>
	<p>* Required freshman and sophomore courses by University A</p>	<p>** All courses at University B contain the same key words and course description as HUM 680:023</p>	<p>*** Courses dual listed under both Humanities and Fine Art</p> <p>**** Course dual listed under both Fine Art and Historical Perspectives</p>

Figure 4 continued...

<p><b>Teacher Preparation Requirements</b></p> <p><i>Educational Technology Required</i></p> <p><b>CI 202: Introduction to Instructional Technology for Grades 7-12-</b> "use tool software, interactive media, webpage development..."</p>	<p><b>INST TECH 240:020: Secondary Educational Technology and Design-</b> "selection and use of various educational technologies within an instructional design framework"</p>	<p><b>INST TECH 07E/S:102: Technology in the Classroom-</b> "operation and application of computer, video and audio equipment in schools; use of Internet and other communication tools are examined"</p>
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**Figure 4:** Specific descriptions of courses from university websites that imply the potential inclusion of visual communication through key words such as visual communication, visual, art, visual arts, and film/media.

Because the scope of this study is only concerned with all required coursework of undergraduate students in teacher preparation programs, not the optional coursework with visual communication offered in the art, journalism, humanities, historical perspectives/social science areas, interviews were requested with representatives of the technology departments at each university. To verify the accuracy of University A's requirement of visual communication in all freshman English foundation courses and the absence of this requirement in University B's and University C's curriculum, interviews with representatives from each universities' English departments were also sought. The purpose of these interviews was to determine the extent to which visual communication has been integrated into the curriculum and to gain a deeper understanding of the specific visual communication goals and objectives, types of assignments, types of design principles, and types of purposes (i.e. accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity) that are taught and addressed.

### Participant Description

Participants in this study included four representatives from the English/humanities and technology departments at three of Iowa's major universities. These public universities were chosen because over 800 students graduate from these secondary teacher preparation programs per year. Because of the flooding in Iowa and the summer session, only a small number of participants from each university were available for interview. All professors required visual communication components as part of their coursework to varying degrees.

Demographic data for the four professors with respect to years of experience teaching in general, teaching at the secondary level, and teaching visual communication are presented in **Table 1**. With respect to the number of years of experience teaching, the professors had a mean of 32.75 years with a combined 131 years of teaching experience. In addition, these professors reflected a mean of 9.25 years in secondary teaching experience with a combined 37 years of experience. In terms of teaching visual communication, these professors had a mean of 17.5 years with a combined 70 years of experience teaching visual communication.

<b>University Professor Demographics</b>				
	<b>M</b>	<b>*N (%)</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Years of Experience in Teaching</b>	32.75 yr	4 (100%)	7.3 yr	131 yr
<b>Years of Experience in Secondary Teaching</b>	9.25 yr	4 (100%)	7.9 yr	37 yr
<b>Years of Experience in Teaching Visual Communication</b>	17.5 yr	4 (100%)	9.7 yr	70 yr

**Table 1:** Professor demographics regarding years of teaching experience in general, at the secondary level, and in visual communication. \*N = 4

## **Data Analysis and Discussion of Interviews**

### *Trends in Visual Communication Goals and Objectives*

To assess the accuracy of the course descriptions on the universities' websites regarding the inclusion of visual communication goals and objectives at the university and course levels, interviews were conducted. The secondary purpose of the interviews was to identify common goals and objectives across the universities' English and technology departments and in the individual professors' own courses. Discussions with university professors indicate that only one out of the three universities maintains explicit visual communication goals in the English department. Within the technology departments, the integration of visual communication in two out of the three universities could be conclusively verified.

**Figure 5** highlights the similarities and differences among the goals and objectives within the universities' English and technology departments. Trends in individual professors' English and technology courses were also cited.

<b>Trends in Department and Course Objectives for Visual Communication</b>		
	<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>
<b>English Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Objectives of Department (ED)</i>	Because two universities' did not have specific English departmental visual communication goals, no similarities could be identified.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify and select the communication strategies (e.g., style, organization, delivery) appropriate for specific audiences, purposes, and media</li> <li>2. Identify and select appropriate supporting evidence from a range of sources, including observation, interviews, graphic data and illustration, and online and print sources</li> <li>3. Edit written, oral, and visual communication</li> </ol>
<i>Sample Objectives of Professors' Courses (EP)</i>	No similarities among the professors' sample objectives regarding visual communication can be identified.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To be able to use visual communication to effectively portray an idea or concept</li> <li>2. To be able to use visual communication to effectively integrate technology into teaching units</li> <li>3. To understand how the visual extends and enhances the verbal</li> <li>4. To critically interpret and comprehend visuals within the context of text</li> <li>5. To explore various kinds of visual imagery used to influence their civic thinking</li> </ol>
<b>Technology Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Objectives of Department (TD)</i>	No specific university objectives were found to be similarities due to the lack of response by professors.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create effective instruction with the understanding that visuals are a component of that</li> </ol>
<i>Sample Objectives of Professors' Courses (TP)</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To transfer visual communication and visual design skills to their lives outside of the classroom</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To develop media literacy with particular attention to the portrayal of race and gender in film and advertisements</li> <li>2. To understand how visuals affect communication in a variety of contexts: classroom, business, ethics</li> <li>3. To define visual literacy, visual learning, visual thinking, visual communication, and visual design</li> <li>4. To apply visual design principles such as aesthetics, repetition, space, shape, color, figure, typeface to presentations and project design</li> <li>5. To explain universal design and accessibility</li> <li>6. Apply design principles such as accessibility and universal design based on research from instructional design to projects</li> <li>7. To understand how to use technology to communicate in a way that is accessible to all learners</li> </ol>

**Figure 5:** Similarities and differences between universities regarding department and course objectives for visual communication. The blue text in the "differences" column indicates a different university professors' response.

Because only one university mandated the inclusion of visual communication into required freshman composition courses, no trends could be identified among the English departments. Despite the absence of a visual communication directive at all universities' departmental levels, professors indicated that visual communication goals and objectives were integrated into their courses. Differences, however, may exist among the goals and objectives because the purpose behind integrating visual communication into the courses differs. In one instance, an English professor cited the ability "*to use* visual communication effectively." The key words "to use" point to a more utilization-oriented result where students are asked to apply their knowledge of visual communication to effectively inform an audience about a concept or technology. Another professor proved to be more comprehension-oriented where students reflected critically about the relationship of visuals to verbal text, a particular context, and their civic thinking. These two focuses reinforced the respective views of the departmental contexts in which the professors taught—communication as an act of creation and utilization and communication as an act of comprehension. Both practices, however, reflect the need for "activity" where students are active users (producers) and readers (consumers) of visuals.

Within the technology departments, only one difference existed, which involved creating effective instruction with the understanding that visuals are a component of that. Although this difference did not indicate a significant difference in these universities' technology departments, a closer look at the individual professors' goals and objectives course objectives reflects more divergent focuses. According to Figure 5, the first four objectives can be attributed to one professor, and objectives five through seven are reflective of another. The first four objectives primarily focus on media literacy with special attention to race and gender in film and advertisements. Defining the terms visual literacy, visual learning, visual thinking, visual communication, and visual design (principles) are methods to promote critical thinking about iconic and symbolic representations in order for students to reflect on the world in which they live.

A discernible theme—accessibility and universal design—is identifiable in the remaining objectives. These goals represent the professor's belief that making information

accessible through the use of universal design principles does not only apply to visuals, but to other modes of communication as well. To gain a better understanding of how these professors' achieve their goals and objectives, trends in coursework and assignments will be examined in the next section.

Using the English and technology departments' and individual professors' goals and objectives outlined in the visual communication goals and objectives section (see Figure 5), **Figure 6** was created to show the distribution of these objectives in relation to the revised Bloom's Taxonomy. The following key for goals and objectives were used for economy of space: ED= the English departments; EP= the English professors; TD= the technology departments; and TP= the technology professors. The number corresponds with the number for the goal and objective listed in Figure 5.

<b>Bloom's Revised Taxonomy</b>						
<b>Cognitive Dimension</b>	<u>1. Remember</u>	2. Understand	<u>3. Apply</u>	4. Analyze	<u>5. Evaluate</u>	6. Create
<b>Knowledge Dimension</b>						
<i>A. Factual Knowledge</i>		TP 3	TP 4			
<i>B. Conceptual Knowledge</i>		EP 3	EP 1,2	EP 4	ED 1,2,3	*TD 1
<i>C. Procedural Knowledge</i>		TP 1,2,5	TP 6			
<i>D. Metacognitive Knowledge</i>		TP 7				
		EP 5 *TD 1				

**Figure 6:** Distribution of goals and objectives of the English departments, English professors, technology departments, and technology professors. The \* means that the technology department objective one is listed in two categories.

Although all of the English departments' goals and objectives were identified as differences due to the lack of visual communication goals at two of the universities, it may be meaningful to explore the distribution of objectives for the only English department to require visual communication goals. The English department's goals and objectives



primarily fell within the conceptual knowledge domain. Key words such as “identify and select” indicated knowledge of principles and theories because identification implies awareness of an interrelated set of visual communication strategies (i.e. principles and theories) and a multitude of options for supporting evidence. The purposeful selection of a particular strategy and specific evidence for a given rhetorical situation not only demonstrates conceptual knowledge, but also the ability to evaluate and choose appropriate visual communication principles and supporting evidence. Therefore, the English Department’s first and second goals fall within the Evaluate/Conceptual category on the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. In addition, the English department’s third goal fell within these same categories. The key word “edit” implies knowledge of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure principles. The evaluation of the degree of correctness of these writing principles involves checking and critiquing a document.

The distribution of the English professors’ individual goals and objectives for their courses, however, spanned a variety of cognitive domains but primarily fell within the conceptual knowledge domain. All of one English professor’s objectives fell within the Apply/Conceptual domains. Key words in sample objectives one and two include the phrase “to be able to use visual communication effectively,” which suggests knowledge of visual communication principles. The ability to use or “execute/implement” this knowledge relegates these objectives to Apply domain.

Objectives three, four, and five within the English professors’ sample objectives fell within the Understand/Conceptual, Analyze/Conceptual, and Understand/Metacognitive domains respectively. Key words such as “to understand” in objective three and “to explore” in objective five indicate abilities in explaining how visuals enhance the verbal and comparing various kinds of visual imagery. The cognitive domains differed, however, because objective three seeks to understand the interrelationship among visual and verbal elements, and objective five explores how visual imagery influences their civic thinking—a metacognitive process. The fourth objective belongs in the Analyze/Conceptual domain because “critically interpret[ing] and comprehend[ing] visuals within a context of text”

requires knowledge of visual design principles (concepts) in order to detect how the parts relate to one another and the overall structure of text.

According to the technology interview findings, no specific university objectives were found to be similar. In fact, one professor acknowledged that the objectives shared were based on the professor's focus for the course, not because of departmental guidelines. Therefore, the analysis of objectives centered upon similarities and differences of the technology professors' courses. Findings reveal that majority of professors' objectives can be classified within the Understand cognitive domain. With key phrases such as "to understand," "to define," and "to explain," the intent of the objectives is to demonstrate meaning from oral, written, and graphic communication. Despite the similarity in cognitive domain, these objectives differed across the knowledge domains.

Objectives one, two, and five fall within the Understand/Conceptual framework because of the phrases "attention to portrayal of race and gender," "communication within a variety of contexts," and "accessibility of information." The use of the words "attention to" and "how" imply knowledge related to principles, generalizations, and theories. One might assign objective seven to the Understand/Conceptual knowledge domain instead of Understand/Procedural because it uses "how." The key difference is that objective seven includes "how" with the infinitive "to use," which means understanding not only stems from knowledge of principles, but also from using the information—a procedural based set of skills. The third objective is Understand/Factual in that defining words relates to knowledge of terminology. Both objectives four and six were relegated to the Apply/Conceptual domain because the both explicitly state the key word "apply" in conjunction with design "principles," which suggests competency in using visual design theory.

The distribution of goals and objectives, regardless of the department and course, indicate that the majority of learning occurs within the Understand cognitive domain and the Conceptual knowledge domain. Few objectives involve the highest levels of abstraction present in the Analyze, Evaluate, and Create cognitive domains and the procedural and metacognitive knowledge domains. The possibility exists that additional goals and objectives

at the unit level, rather than course level, may employ higher-order thinking skills and abstraction.

### *Trends in Visual Communication Coursework and Assignments*

Interviews with professors also revealed departmental and individual similarities and differences regarding types of coursework that may contain visual communication elements. According to the findings, the English departments often focus on the academic or informative essay, which according to Williams perpetuates the verbal bias. Indeed, little information regarding the integration of visual communication into the verbal essay requirements was found. In addition, the vague phrase “analysis of various texts” does not guarantee the existence of assignments containing visual communication components. As a testament to the English departments’ divergent focuses, the identified differences all stem from one university’s goals. This is the same university that requires the consistent integration of visual communication cross the curriculum, not just in its English foundation courses.

Analogous to the findings in the previous section, individual professors often include visual communication components in their courses, despite their departments’ lack of visual requirements. Data analyses reveal that English professors regularly integrate visual assignments in the form of visual analysis and multi-genre papers. One explanation for this similarity may relate to the textbook selection for the course. Because one professor works in an English department that requires the integration of visual communication, the textbook selected for courses will likely include visual assignments. A professor from another university stated, “The reader I use has a kind of ongoing strand of attention to the visual.” Given that textbooks are a primary instructional tool within a classroom, it is possible that the integration of visual communication and literacy into contemporary college composition texts influences the inclusion of visuals into professors’ courses more than departmental mandates.

Differences in the types of visual communication assignments, however, exist among professors. These dissimilar emphases stem from professors’ views regarding the purpose of visual communication: to expose students to a variety of rhetorical uses of visuals in their

reading, writing, oral, and technology skills versus to expose students to a broader more civic-minded orientation involving political commentary. In the first instance, course assignments seem to be designed to equip students with basic visual communication skills that can be applied to the diverse number of majors students will enter. The second instance, however, seems to focus on providing students with the critical skills necessary for navigating the (political) world around them. It is true that the basic visual communication skills students learn can be applied outside of their majors to the world around them, such as to their future occupations. But the phrase “the world around them” still potentially possesses a different meaning depending on the professors’ interpretation: on the job multimodal communication skills for functionality versus political commentary navigation skills for civic-mindedness. Nevertheless, both interpretations include transference of skills to situations outside of the classroom context—a necessity for truly “educating” a student.

As with the lack of similar objectives within the English departments, no technology departmental objectives could be defined as similar either. Instructional techniques using group inquiry/research, group discussions, and group presentations are present in the professors’ courses. However, different emphases identified in Figures 5 and 6 within technology professors’ objectives and goals align with the topical variety in required coursework and assignments. For the professor stressing media literacy, assignments range from critical viewing of films, short presentations about race, marginalization, and stereotypes, to a visually literacy quilt representative of visual design principles. Assignments about accessibility and universal design dominate another professor’s course through presentations, inquiry, exploration of assistive technology, and the creation of a website as the capstone experience.

**Figure 7** on the following page provides fuller highlights of departmental and individual professors’ visual communication course assignments.

## Trends in Department and Course Assignments

	Similarities	Differences
<b>English Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Department Assignments</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focus on academic essay/informative essay</li> <li>2. Analysis of various texts</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Small-group presentations (visual and oral presentations; written handouts)</li> <li>2. Page and PowerPoint slide design (headings, typeface, color, captioning, integration of text and graphics)</li> <li>3. Visual display of quantitative data</li> <li>4. Website critique</li> </ol>
<i>Sample Assignments of Professors' Courses</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Integration of visual communication into coursework</li> <li>2. Multi-genre papers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PowerPoint presentations</li> <li>2. Creation of video</li> <li>3. Analysis of graphic novels</li> <li>4. Focus on civic literacy</li> <li>5. Critical analysis of political commentary that emphasizes the visual to make and convey positions on public issues</li> </ol>
<b>Technology Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Department Assignments</i>	No similarities in departmental assignments were identified because most assignments were individually based according to the professor.	
<i>Sample Assignments of Professors' Courses</i>	No similarities in professors' courses to reflect the different focuses of different universities on visual design/media literacy and visual design/universal design.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Critical viewing of films in terms of the portrayal of race</li> <li>2. Group discussions and short presentations about race, marginalization, stereotypes</li> <li>3. Find three visual representations for a word</li> <li>4. How to design instructions within a particular rhetorical context (audience, purpose, focus/content)</li> <li>5. Identify examples of bad signage</li> <li>6. Create a visual literacy quilt with each square visually representing a visual design principle</li> <li>7. Slide presentation to introduce visual design principles and concepts of universal design and accessibility</li> <li>8. Group inquiry project where students investigate good design of textual and digital materials</li> <li>9. Assistive technology unit where students use assistive technologies to communicate</li> <li>10. Keystone project where students apply all visual design, accessibility, and universal design principles in the creation of a website</li> </ol>

**Figure 7:** Similarities and differences in department and course assignments that include visual communication components.

Bruner's three modes of learning involve the recursive process of moving from the concrete enactive stage (direct experience by doing) to the iconic stage (examination of visuals) to the most abstract stage, the symbolic (examination of visual and match to mental image or previous experience). The delineations between these stages are indistinct because the process involves repeated movement among these increasingly abstract stages.

The distribution of course assignments in relation to Bruner's three modes of learning demonstrate that the privileging of verbal text within the English departments with their similar course assignments in "focus on academic/informative essay" and "analysis" of various texts" corresponds with Bruner's highest level of abstraction—the symbolic stage that uses abstract words to verbally describe a concept. The majority of the English departments' differences, however, were positioned in the transition stage between iconic and symbolic. Course assignment descriptions using key words such as "visual and oral presentations," "visual display of quantitative data" and "website critique" signify the integration of the iconic and symbolic stages with the interplay of visual and textual components. The assumption was made that students would not simply be creating an iconic representation of data, but that this data would be accompanied by a textual or verbal explanation. Likewise, the website critique also implied the examination of visuals at the iconic stage with a critique in the form of a textual or verbal explanation or rationale.

Next, the "page and PowerPoint slide design" in the English departments' different assignments corresponded to the transition stage between enactive and iconic because students were creating presentation with attention to visual design components, as well as using visual representations to convey logos, pathos, and ethos. If this assignment had said PowerPoint "presentation" rather than "slide design," this assignment would have fallen within the transition stage between iconic and symbolic.

Considering that the English departments' course assignments primarily corresponded to the transition stages between enactive and iconic, and iconic and symbolic, it is not surprising that the same holds true for the English professors' assignments in their individual courses. The phrase "creation of video" under the differences column for English professors implies an enactive blend of hands-on direct experience and the integration of video at the

iconic stage. With key phrases such as “multi-genre,” “presentation,” “analysis of graphic,” “critical analysis of political commentary and visuals,” the integration of visual and verbal suggests the permeable boundaries between the iconic and symbolic stages.

Reverberative of the different focuses of the technology professors and the lack of university visual communication guidelines in the technology departments, the majority of technology assignments were identified as differences. It is striking, however, to note the large portion of technology assignments from all professors that are categorized within the transition stage between the iconic and symbolic levels. Specifically, all but two of the nine assignment descriptions occupy the gray area between iconic and symbolic largely because assignments required the use of visual representation accompanied by a verbal description with the most abstract of symbols—words. Sample course assignment descriptions include phrases such as “critical viewing,” “group discussion,” and “visually represent design principles.” The interplay of verbal and visual reinforces a key point many professors raised about the need to integrate communication modes.

**Figure 8** demonstrates the distribution of assignments across Bruner’s three modes of learning.

<b>Course Assignments and Bruner’s Three Modes of Learning</b>		
Bruner’s Three Modes of Learning		
	<i>Enactive</i>	TP 8
<b>ED=</b> English department assignment  <b>EP=</b> English professor assignment	<i>Transition Stage</i>	ED 2 EP 2
	<i>Iconic</i>	TP 3
<b>TD=</b> Technology department assignment  <b>TP=</b> Technology professor assignment	<i>Transition Stage</i>	ED 1,3,4 EP 1,3,5 TP 1,2,4,5,6,7,9
	<i>Symbolic</i>	ED 1,2

**Figure 8:** Comparison of departmental and individual professors’ course assignments to Bruner’s three modes of learning theory. The gray areas and dashed lines represent the permeable boundaries between stages. EP 1 in the similarities column and EP 4 in the differences column were not included due to their vague assignment descriptions.

The main question that arises is whether or not this concentration of assignments within the transition stage between iconic and symbolic reflects the actual stage of students' cognitive capabilities, or the assumptions of university professors about where they believe their students should be. Piaget would contend that university students are capable of abstract thinking given that the formal operation stage develops between the ages of 11 and 15 years. Even if students are capable of abstract thought at the university level, does it mean that they learn best while occupying this stage when learning equally abstract concepts? Or should course assignments involving abstract visual communication and design skills be structured to proceed through all three of Bruner's modes of learning in a recursive process? Additional research regarding the best course of action when teaching abstract concepts within an abstract learning mode needs to be pursued.

#### *Trends in Visual Design Principles*

Identifying departmental similarities proved to be ineffective because only one universities' English undergraduate program required visual communication. Therefore, only the professors' courses were examined for visual design similarities and differences. Despite the English professors' inclusion of multi-genre papers into required coursework, only one professor supplied specific information regarding visual design principles. Hence, all visual design principles were considered differences: figure-ground contrast, chunking, color, directionality, repetition, and typeface.

Within the technology department, two similarities could be identified: color and typeface. However, the majority of visual design principles were cited as differences because both professors did not specifically state these concepts. The large number of differences may be accounted for by the understanding that the principles listed in **Figure 9** are a sampling from professors' courses, as opposed to an exhaustive list.



<b>Trends in Teaching Visual Design Principles</b>		
	<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>
<b>English Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Visual Design Principles in Courses</i>	No similarities among visual design principles can be identified due to minimal focus on visual communication in two of the universities' undergraduate requirements.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Figure-ground contrast</li> <li>2. Chunking: place visual and verbal textual elements together; use of headings</li> <li>3. Color in designating chunking</li> <li>4. Directionality: how visuals are placed on poster</li> <li>5. Repetition to convey a theme</li> <li>6. Font size choices effective according to context of presentation</li> </ol>
<b>Technology Courses</b>		
<i>Sample Visual Design Principles in Courses</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Color (combinations)</li> <li>2. Typeface (size, family)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Repetition</li> <li>2. Space</li> <li>3. Shape</li> <li>4. Gestalt's figure</li> <li>5. Contrast</li> <li>6. Placement of important information</li> <li>7. Consistency</li> </ol>

**Figure 9:** Similarities and differences in English and technology course focuses in terms of visual design principle focuses. Blue text indicates a different professor's visual design principle focus.

Kostelnick and Roberts, Schriver, and Baker's visual design principles offer multiple ways of beginning a dialogue with future educators about the use of visuals in the classroom and document design. To gain a better understanding of where visual design principles fall in terms of a more goal, modal, or means orientation, only the universities' English and technology professors' individual courses were analyzed because of the lack of departmental visual communication requirement, and because the classroom provides the typical context in which a dialogue will occur.

Data analyses reveal that English Course 1 (EC 1), which is Figure-ground contrast under the differences column, serves multiple purposes across all goals, modals, and means. In terms of goals, figure-ground contrast can help to create hierarchies (arrangement), imply prominence of one visual object over another (emphasis), and reduce ambivalence through the creation of hierarchies. Schriver's modals also utilize figure-ground contrast in the supplementary and juxtapositional roles because key ideas are separated through dominance and this very dominance creates contrast from which ideas emerge. Although Baker utilizes

the term “contrast” as a specific means, figure-ground contrast supports the notion that a given principle can embody multiple roles.

The use of EC 2 (chunking) and EC 3 (the use of color for chunking) both involve arrangement and clarity. Grouping similar information helps to create hierarchical structures and clarity by creating patterns of complementary information. The use of color, however, extends the purpose, mode, and means of chunking to create emphasis and tone, juxtaposition, and contrast and repetition. This may suggest that combining visual design elements increases their visual design capabilities.

The term “directionality” (EC 4) refers to how visuals are placed in a text. Directionality demonstrates arrangement, emphasis, and tone because similar directions create coherence and contrast, prominence by potentially focusing the eye, and formal/informal moods. In addition, this visual design principle can help set the stage by forecasting where the reader should move next within a document and directing the flow (alignment) of a document.

Using the visual design element of repetition (EC 5) creates emphasis on a particular point or theme, ethos by reiterating information for credibility purposes, complementary elements that work together to convey an idea, and redundancy. The use of typeface (EC 6), though, has the largest number of purposes, modes, and means in its ability to influence arrangement, clarity, tone, and ethos, to create complementary textual features, and to emphasize contrast and repetition through the use of different and similar typeface families.

Within the technology courses, similarities were identified as color (TP 1) and typeface (TP 2). Just as color and font were representative of multiple goals, modals, and means within the English department, the same is true for the technology department. Findings indicate that color and typeface occupy the broadest scope of categories. Because color has the power to create hierarchies, emphasize information, clarify, and indicate mood, as well as demonstrate synergistic and contrasting ideas, and forecast a change in content, it possesses a diverse array of visual design possibilities. Comparably, typeface can be categorized in almost the same number of categories with a few differences—the ability to

occupy the redundant category, and the inability to function within a juxtapositional and stage-setting mode.

In contrast to the small number of similarities in the visual design principles emphasized in technology professors' courses, a large number of differences exist. One possibility for such an abundance of discrepancies is the vast number of visual design terms that exist. Figure 2 on page 124 demonstrates this possibility with the various terms presented by three visual theorists. Another possibility is that the technology professors interviewed only highlighted a few visual design principles, as opposed to presenting an exhaustive list. Despite these possibilities, findings reinforce the ability of visual design principles to exist within multiple purposes, modes, and means.

**Figure 10** highlights the placement of visual design principles in relation to Kostelnick's and Roberts' goals, Schriver's modals, and Baker's means.

<b>Visual Design Principles and Goals, Modals, and Means</b>				
	<b>Kostelnick/Roberts</b>	<b>Schriver</b>	<b>Baker</b>	
<b>English Courses</b>				
<i>Similarities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None identified</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None identified</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None identified</li> </ul>	
<i>Differences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EC 1,2, 3, 4, 6- Arrangement</li> <li>EC 1,3,4, 5,6- Emphasis</li> <li>EC 1, 2, 3, 6- Clarity</li> <li>EC 3,4, 6- Tone</li> <li>EC 5, 6- Ethos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EC 5- Redundant</li> <li>EC 2,3, 5, 6- Complementary</li> <li>EC 1- Supplementary</li> <li>EC 1,3- Juxtapositional</li> <li>EC 4- Stage-setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EC 2- Space</li> <li>EC 1,3, 6- Contrast</li> <li>EC 3,5, 6- Repetition</li> <li>EC 2,4- Alignment</li> </ul>	
<b>Technology Courses</b>				
<i>Similarities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 1,2- Arrangement</li> <li>TP 1,2- Emphasis</li> <li>TP 1,2- Clarity</li> <li>TP 1,2- Tone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 2- Redundant</li> <li>TP 1,2- Complementary</li> <li>TP 1,- Juxtapositional</li> <li>TP 1- Stage-setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 1,2- Contrast</li> <li>TP 1,2- Repetition</li> <li>TP 1- Alignment</li> </ul>	
<i>Differences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 2,3,4,5,6- Arrangement</li> <li>TP 1,2,4,5,6- Emphasis</li> <li>TP 2,4,5,7- Clarity</li> <li>TP 6-Conciseness</li> <li>TP 3,7- Tone</li> <li>TP 1,3,7- Ethos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 3,6,7- Redundant</li> <li>TP 1- Complementary</li> <li>TP 2,4,5,6- Supplementary</li> <li>TP 4,5- Juxtapositional</li> <li>TP 2,3,7- Stage-setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TP 3- Balance</li> <li>TP 2,6- Space</li> <li>TP 2,3,4,5,6- Contrast</li> <li>TP 2- Alignment</li> <li>TP 1,3,6,7- Repetition</li> <li>TP 6- alignment</li> </ul>	

**Figure 10:** Comparison individual professors' visual design principles in relation to Kostelnick's and Roberts' goals, Schriver's modals, or Baker's means.

One question that arises from this analysis is whether or not it is possible to provide teacher preparation students with a common vocabulary considering the large number of different terms used within the universities and departments. Although the scope of this study was limited due to the small sampling of interviewees, additional research would need to be conducted to provide a more conclusive hypothesis about the effects of these differences. Tangential to this question is if a common vocabulary is even necessary given the close relationship among all principles. A familiar set of terms can help to provide a foundation for discussion purposes. However, vocabulary is a type of factual knowledge that needs to be connected with higher-order thinking and more abstract processing skills for learning to be intuited and meaningful. Further discussion follows regarding visual design principles in relation to accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity in instructional documents.

*Trends in Accessibility, Comprehensibility, Usability, and Affectivity*

According to Burnett and Carliner, the overall intent of a document should be to achieve accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity. Understanding how these purposes are addressed in individual professors' courses can help to ensure that not only are students engaging in a dialogue about visual design principles, but they are thinking of these principles in terms of making the document functional for the intended user. To gain a deeper understanding of how the functionality of documents is addressed in required coursework for future educators, professors were asked to explain how they attend to these broad-based purposes.

To establish trends in accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity (ACUA), professors were asked about how they attend to these document purposes in their courses. Document in the context of the interview referred to both print and electronic texts. Consistent with the inability to identify specific visual design principles in the previous section due to the lack of visual communication requirements in the English and technology departments and individual professors' emphasis on different topics, no similarities could be

discerned in terms of ACUA. Therefore, all examples were deemed differences due to the lack of comparative data.

Within the English professors' courses, ACUA were typically conveyed through formative and summative assessment comments on coursework and assignments. One professor stated the need to consistently remind students about font size and accessibility when presenting to a larger audience. The same professor also cited common comments regarding the number of points on a PowerPoint slide and having visual and textual elements reinforce each other. These visual and verbal presentation skills were required in order to help students gain confidence in their speaking skills and in the use of technology to enhance information.

Professors in the technology departments also cited the need to make presentation slides accessible through the use of the 7x7 design rule that limits textual elements to seven lines and seven words per line. High contrast was also noted, but how to achieve this was not specifically stated. If one associates the visual design principles from this professor in the previous section, high contrast could be achieved through color, typeface, and figure-ground. The emphasis on accessibility by another technology professor implies this purpose acts as the foundation for comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity. More specifically, the professor cited the use of visual design principles and assistive technologies that address the needs of multimodal learners with multiple learning styles as a way of achieving more accessible documents. The objectives, coursework, and visual design principles this professor shared reinforced this course's framework.

Because the data gathered for this section seems to be the most limited in that professors offered few specifics on how to achieve ACUA, conclusions are difficult to identify. One key idea that did emerge was the possibility that accessibility is the foundation upon which comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity are built. If a user (i.e. student) cannot view the text because of poor design, the information within the text will not be comprehensible, the document will not be usable, and negative affective could occur (Schrivver 246-247). **Figure 11** outlines similarities and differences of English and technology courses in reference to accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity.

<b>Trends in Accessibility, Comprehensibility, Usability, and Affectivity</b>		
	<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>
<b>English Courses</b>		
Teaching Examples Related to Purposes	No similarities among accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity can be identified due to minimal focus on visual communication in two of the universities' undergraduate requirements.	
<i>Accessibility</i>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Too many points on one PPT slide</li> <li>2. See it easier and visual conveys idea faster than text</li> </ol>
<i>Comprehensibility</i>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Too many points on one PPT slide</li> <li>2. Preview slide</li> <li>3. Textual reminder to oral presentation</li> </ol>
<i>Usability</i>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Able to apply visual design to technology used in unit plan</li> </ol>
<i>Affectivity</i>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gain confidence during presentation skills and</li> </ol>
<b>Technology Courses</b>		
Teaching Examples Related to Purposes		
<i>Accessibility</i>	No similarities were found in terms of accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 7x7 design rule for PowerPoint presentations</li> <li>2. (7 lines, 7 words per line)</li> <li>3. High contrast for accessibility</li> <li>4. Accessibility as a founding principle that facilitates comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity</li> <li>5. Emphasis on accessibility with visual design principles and assistive technologies for the multimodal learners with a multitude of learning styles and needs</li> </ol>
<i>Comprehensibility</i>		No differences were recognized in comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity since all comments only referred to accessibility.
<i>Usability</i>		
<i>Affectivity</i>		

**Figure 11:** Similarities and differences between English and technology departments in their attention to and focus on accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the position of visual communication within secondary teacher preparation programs. Current literature reveals the need for visual literacy and visual communication given both the technological age in which students exist, and the abundance of texts, documents, pamphlets, and instructions students will encounter in their adult lives. Literature also reveals how visuals impact learning. In fact, visuals are a way through which students can comprehend information and engage in more abstract thought.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study:

- Visual communication is only consistently taught within the required education technology courses of the university teacher preparation programs surveyed, and an emphasis on knowing rather than doing is common in relation to learning classroom multimedia tools and software.
- Visual objectives and goals tend to fall within the Understand cognitive domain and the Conceptual knowledge domain. However, further study must be undertaken to fully understand whether university professors are promoting higher-order and critical thinking skills within these categories.
- The majority of assignments undertaken by secondary teacher preparation students fall within Bruner's transition stage between iconic and symbolic learning modes. Additional information must be gathered to address the questions of whether the assignments are appropriate to students' current learning stage and whether university professors' make assumptions regarding the capabilities of students to engage in abstract thinking about abstract concepts.
- Little conclusive information could be identified regarding visual design principles taught in professors' courses and how professors attend to accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity. A larger sampling of professors in addition to a series of interviews would further the understanding of these two topics.

Despite the fact that additional research is necessary to provide additional depth and understanding of visual communication in teacher preparation programs, one truth is clear: teachers must have knowledge of visual design techniques in order to disseminate this knowledge to students. Including visual communication in teacher preparatory programs can promote an educational practice that stems from the need to ensure that students today are able to critically analyze the vast modes of visual media that perpetuate society. Students can also use visual communication for demonstrating their own understanding of data, as well as for making sense of how the rhetorical choices in the textbooks they read across the curriculum aid comprehension. Visual communication already subversively pervades classrooms in the form of educational theories and national standards. If teacher preparatory programs required students to take visual communication courses, the impact on student achievement would be vast. Just imagine what “them damned pictures” could do to support student learning both in the classroom and beyond.



## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INVESTIGATOR: Angela C. Furtado-Rasmussen

Iowa State University Department of English in Ross Hall, Ames, IA 50011

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research project about the role of visual communication in teacher preparation programs because you are currently teaching undergraduate methods and content courses to future teachers. In this study, visual communication refers to visual design principles used to create print-based instructional materials for students at the secondary level (grades 7-12). The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how visual communication is taught at each of Iowa's three major state universities. This study will potentially provide valuable information to Iowa universities and the Iowa Board of Education about effective instructional practices in teaching visual communication in teacher preparation programs.

You have been sent this e-mail to seek your participation in a recorded computer-to-telephone interview. You will be contacted by telephone regarding your willingness to participate. If you choose to participate, we will schedule an interview at your convenience between June 22, 2008, and July 7, 2008. By participating, you give the researchers your consent to record and transcribe the interview notes. The interview will take no longer than 20 minutes. You will also be sent the questions in advance.

Transcripts of your interview will be secured on a password protected computer and deleted within one year. No paper copies of the interview transcript will be printed. Only the principal researcher will have access to your data. Your personal and university-specific information will not be associated with your responses. Results will be published in summary only.

In addition, there are no foreseeable risks to you by participating in this study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do not feel comfortable completing the telephone interview, you are free to stop at any time. There is no penalty or loss to you for not completing the interview, or if you begin the interview and wish to withdraw. You can skip any questions during the interview that you do not wish to answer.

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, please contact Angela Furtado-Rasmussen at the following e-mail address: [razz1@iastate.edu](mailto:razz1@iastate.edu). Please note that the numeral one follows the "razz" portion of the e-mail address. You may also contact Charles Kostelnick, the supervising English faculty member, at (515) 294-4455, or by e-mail at [chkostel@iastate.edu](mailto:chkostel@iastate.edu). If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB administrator by telephone at (515) 294-4566, or by e-mail at [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu). You may also contact Diane Ament, the Research Compliant Officer by telephone at (515)294-3115, or by e-mail at [dament@iastate.edu](mailto:dament@iastate.edu). Thank you for your participation and attention.

Angela C. Furtado-Rasmussen

M.A. candidate in Rhetoric, Composition and Professional Communication

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INVESTIGATOR: Angela C. Furtado-Rasmussen

Iowa State University Department of English in Ross Hall, Ames, IA 50011

INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND QUESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS TEACHING SUMMER  
TEACHER PREPARATION COURSES:

**Call to university professors at each of Iowa's three state universities:**

*Hello. My name is Angela Furtado-Rasmussen. I am a graduate student at Iowa State, and I am writing my thesis in rhetoric about visual communication in teacher preparation programs. \_\_\_\_\_ recommended your name as a source of information regarding visual communication practices. I have sent an e-mail to you requesting your permission to participate in a short computer-to-telephone recorded interview. Would you be willing to schedule a time at your convenience to participate in this study?*

**Potential responses:**

- *I live in Japan, so time zone differences will have to be taken into account, but what day and time is convenient for you?*
- *Okay, I will send an e-mail reminder of our scheduled interview for \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Do you need another copy of the questions?*
- *I appreciate your time.*

**Interview Questions for university professors:**

**Teaching Background**

- *How many years of teaching experience do you have?*
- *How many of those years have been at the university level instructing future education students?*
- *Do you have any teaching experience other than at the post-secondary level? How many years?*
- *How many years would you estimate that you have taught visual communication?*

**Visual Communication**

- *Please share your opinion about the meaning of visual communication.*
- *What about visual design? How do you view this term in relation to visual communication?*
- *If you were to estimate, how long has the \_\_\_\_\_ included visual communication in its teacher preparation program?*
- *If you were to describe the university's goals in terms of visual communication in teacher preparation programs, what would be their objective(s)?*
- *Can you please describe the type of teacher preparation courses you teach?*
- *What types of visual communication goals and objectives are integral to your course?*
- *What types of activities and projects do you require to assess students' visual communication skills?*
- *Based on my research, accessibility, comprehensibility, usability, and affectivity seem to be at the heart of a well-designed document. How do you teach these purposes?*
- *What visual design principles do you use as a framework for teaching visual communication?*

*Thank you for your time. If I have additional questions, may I contact you?*

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