

Death in the Hospital

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Freetown, England

31st year of the declaration, 140 years since the Fall. 2160 or '61 by the old reckoning.

Min woke as someone came into her room. Soft candle-light in the velvet darkness; rain drummed on the roof, as it had in her dreams. Min shifted in her warm bed and her hip stabbed her. She had dreamed that she was young again.

'Dawn,' Squirrel said, her brightest student with the red hair. Time to rise. Patients started to arrive soon after light, and Freetown's hospital was already too crowded.

Squirrel always brought Min's breakfast; she put down the tray. Bitter root-coffee, and porridge mixed with dried fruit. 'Ben says there's a Reaver with a patient at the town gate. A rotting leg-wound, and the guards stopped them coming last night.'

'Unbelievable. I must see them at once.' She swung herself up, pulling on Squirrel's arm at the most painful point. 'Send a message to the Mayor, this is unacceptable. If they die—I'm furious.'

Sometimes Min thought her life was like an ancient fable. There is an old woman on the edge of town who knows healing and who holds dark secrets. They don't say her hip aches and her feet ache and her fingers are losing their skill. That yesterday she twice forgot the name of a medicine, and she called a patient 'the hernia'. Don't label people as their problems, Min told her students, again and again.

That back tooth jabbed as she sipped the hot drink. Squirrel drew breath and said, 'Do we really have medicine to waste on Reavers? So they can come to rape and kill next year?'

Squirrel's husband disappeared in a raid three years ago. A slave, or dead, or possibly a dead slave by now.

Min was a great democrat, but she held no votes on how she ran the hospital. 'If we turn away the needy, we are no better than they are.'

She finished her breakfast, and put on her calling, like a cloak. Each morning the dilemma: enough tincture to deaden the pain made her useless as a doctor. But she wore out more quickly without it. She took a little sip. Washing, she used soothing oil on her red, rough hands. Too much washing at the bedside; her enemy, infection.

The clock ticked, a wind-up device old at the Fall. Each day she faced how little she had to work with, compared with the medicine of Before. It would be worse when she was gone. Yet she was proud of the hospital. How they'd turned the old manor, the half of it that still stood, into a place where people got better and where knowledge was passed on. They knew they did more good than harm.

There's an old woman who heals and teaches the young. They don't say that when she goes into the dark, her special power will die with her. They don't say that her students somehow know it.

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Once Min appeared, she was in charge. Squirrel rattled off updates and things for decision. A baby born safely, the two kids with Little Shakes now breathing well. A family were backsliding on the agreed payment, in chickens and corn. Min wasn't having that; she'd see them personally. The out of townner with the burst appendix would be buried within the hour. She'd have to postpone the argument with Supply about disinfectant: the town needed to research a better process. Delegate, resolve, leave till later.

Tudor Close had been rebuilt many times. The old dining room off the grand entrance hall was used for triage, with a few blankets hung to make cubicles for privacy. She saw Ayesha taking a family somewhere private. Little Ayesha looked almost a girl, frail in that headscarf, yet she had such confidence. Min thought in twenty years she might run this place.

And here he was, the Reaver, his coat dripping rain. A bearded warrior, in Kevlar and cloth and leather, he carried his horse-skull helm in his arms. For them, weapons were status. Somewhere in the town gatehouse he would have a rifle and spear but no outsider brought weapons into the hospital. They had let him keep a belt-knife.

Two other Reavers acted as stretcher bearers; two men of Freetown came as guards. The patient was an adolescent, not full grown into his man's face, half-conscious, and sweating with fever. It looked very poor. How far had they travelled?

There had been no raids at all this year. They must have been to the west, diverted here when the arrow-wound rotted.

Reaver meant a slaver, a rapist and a thief, from the lands where only white men who could fight were free. She despised their faith, there were no words strong enough.

'I am Captain Martel. You are the witch? The guards kept us overnight. My son grew worse.'

'You're only here because I insisted. Put him on the table. What's his name?'

'Victor.'

She lifted the blanket, and the smell rose like a dead rat in the corn-store: rotting flesh, sickening. She covered her mouth, and asked when, how, what had been done. Some accused wild people of poisoning their arrows deliberately.

Min's student Ben stood guard, face stormy. He carried a staff, his fingers tight on it as if the Reaver might attack her. Ben the stolid mountain of a man; he took teasing or jibes, with a half-smile. His nose was broken when he reset a shoulder and the man punched him. Yet in drink she'd seen him lash out like a wounded bear.

Ben, once a Reaver slave. She'd cleaned his wounds, when he'd escaped to Freetown. White scars across his brown back looked like a thorn tree. How many of her students would tend a Reaver if she put it to the vote?

Focus, old woman. 'Your son is very sick. I will treat him, but no promises. I will take your rifle, your best one. Then speak to my people, we will take food or powder or trade goods for the rest.'

Martel glared at her. 'You have old medicine?'

'I do what I can. Sometimes I have it, and sometimes I don't. I give my best for all my patients.'

'I will give two other rifles.'

Min did not haggle.

'You will give me your best rifle and another rifle, or I won't treat him.' Stupid proud old woman, to try to humble him, but she wanted him to feel the loss.

The man held out his hand. She saw fear and hope. She touched it—shaking hard would hurt arthritic fingers—and it was agreed.

'Please save him, witch.'

'Call me doctor or be silent.'

To work. The suppurating wound looked as bad as she feared, full of dark blood and green pus. The delay getting here might be too much. She cleaned it herself, with surgical spirit, guessing that others might not thank her if she asked them to do it. Ben helped look for any fragments of the arrow. Yeast opiate for the pain. And yes, she would give old medicine, in large amounts, when no one could see. Only Joseph the Mayor knew the source of her power.

Later, Martel drank ale; he looked around, like a raider eyeing up loot. She drank tea, tired by the demands that came between the demands. She wanted not to be in charge. The hospital helped everyone they could; she and the midwives took students, wherever they came from. The school brought the children each Wednesday to help in the grounds and to learn: she loved teaching them. Today, this Reaver meant she would miss her teaching time.

Giving family bad news never got easier. 'We might have to remove the leg,' she said. 'I'd like another doctor to look at it. He could be here tomorrow. My colleague over the river is fast and strong with the saw, he might do a better job.'

'The Muslim,' the Reaver said, as if his drink poisoned him. Kahn, from the Citadel, had courage and a talent for cutting. But infection, always infection. Khan and Min made a good team, if he could be spared. Otherwise it would be Ben, his pure strength guided by her words.

'If you want your son to live, you'll need to put prejudice aside.'

'I did, to come here,' he said. 'Well, a Muslim is no worse than a Denier. I want to sleep by my son.'

'You're welcome.' She felt too much rage to argue calmly, so she said no more. Soon she would need to find more supplies. Not tonight.

The two other Reavers, remember Anders was the blond and Sword the dark haired. Get their names straight, old woman. Show a respect they don't show you.

§

The tincture meant a nap in the day. At night, asleep within minutes. Then after a few hours, she drifted in sleep so shallow she was barely under.

Ben shook her awake with a big gentle hand. The world was dark except for his lantern.

'The Reaver is dead,' he said.

She tried to dispel the fog. Sorrow but no shock. No death ever passed without emotion. She tried to find the words. 'Well, he was sick.' Little better after two days.

'No, the Captain. The father. His throat's been cut. The youth lives.'

Once, she had been a leader; once she had ridden with the people of Freetown, holding off the Reavers. She had been a battle doctor and sat in the war council. In desperation, she had killed, and helped others kill. Those days when she leapt from bed alert were gone.

A murder in the place of healing seemed blasphemy.

'Send word, we need more people to watch on the wards. A killer in the hospital. I must see. Keep people away from the body until I am there.'

Hard to read what she saw on Ben's face.

'I must find who did it,' she said. She swore as she forced her aching body upright, clinging to him.

It was a tumult outside Victor's room. Three Freetowners, including a woman with a Before pistol, held the two Reavers. Anders shouted at Sword, who slumped in a chair, holding his dark head.

'Traitor. You slept and that is why our captain was murdered.'

Sword looked drunk, sodden drunk, as even his leader's death could not stir him. Someone else's problem. She had two patients to attend to--one living and one dead.

That first day, she'd moved the Reavers to a side-room away from the main ward, close to the back staircase. A nurse was supposed to come by each hour. Kirsten, Ben's betrothed, had discovered the body, slick with blood. Another nurse now consoled her, and helped her wash the blood from her hands.

See the living first. Victor slept, hot and sick. She did not know if he would live, she doubted he saw the deed. He'd barely stirred the whole of the last two days. Then to the monstrosity. His father slumped in a chair, pints of drying blood down his front. Streaks across the floor. The body was still warm. Maybe Kirsten missed one round, she had surely not missed two.

'Where's the weapon?' Min asked, examining the corpse. The wound was a thin, deep cut severing the artery. Could he have woken and tried to stand? She doubted he would have been conscious long. She plucked the man's dagger from his belt. Simple to see it was clean, and the wrong shape for the wound.

'Search the hospital. We're looking for a sharp, well-made blade. Possibly a scalpel. I will need to interrogate witnesses. Don't let anyone change their clothes, or hide or burn anything. Particularly look at sleeves and the front of clothes.'

Blood, the ancient sign of guilt, might be enough. Blood could be out of place, even here. Throat cut, like some killed their animals.

Who? She started to think.

Sword was slumped back now. Min went over, and raised an eyelid with her thumb. He protested, but weakly.

‘Drugged, not drunk, I think.’ In the next hours she would wish again and again for the tests, the things books told her doctors once could do.

She’d seen war and the fallout from war; she’d smelt rotting flesh and cleaned wounds ripe with maggots. But something about this revolted her—how vicious, how desperate, to slash a throat in a silent hospital. One cry and someone might come.

She mimed for her own understand of how the blade must have gone. Then, helped by two others, she got down on her knees to look for meanings in the scattering of blood, its stickiness. She bit her lip not to gasp at the pain. At least her eyesight was fair.

Kirsten had washed her hands in the basin. So Min could not tell if another had too.

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Min had her privileges, a tiny room where she napped or caught up with records. Joseph came in his Mayor’s gold chain. She kissed him and they sat. Balding and stooped a little, she remembered him as a skinny youth in their roaming gang, a handsome man, then a scarred warrior. They had been comrades, and four years married. Marrying your best friend didn’t always work. Years later, he’d presided, grinning, when she swapped rings with Rabbit, her brown-haired girlfriend. Kingsley was her confidante, her rock.

‘What a mess,’ Joseph said, offering her a breadcake smelling of morning.

‘I offered him protection, by treating his son. By making him hand over his weapons,’ Min said.

‘Suppose I said—one foul Reaver dies, who cares?’ Joseph bit into his roll.

'You'd never be so stupid. I wanted to keep them away from the others – people were angry. People complained that they were even in the building. So they got the side room.'

She drew the scene on a large slate with chalk. Paper was precious.

'You see, I put them out of direct sight of the ward. Anyone who knows the hospital would go around, or use the back stair, easy enough to slip away. The guard Sword was drunk or drugged. It feels like I made it easy.'

'Your cunning plot to kill some random Reaver.' Joseph found humour in the most appalling positions. 'Was Martel drugged too? It might explain the lack of a cry.'

'Maybe. I can't test for it.'

The odd noise in the night might stir someone. Or not. People cried out; animals moved in the west wing; the old building creaked sometimes in the dark.

As ever, her friend saw her fear and understood. He broke off another piece of roll. 'You think it might have been one of your staff. Drugs and perhaps a surgical knife... Would any of them have any reason to kill a Reaver?'

He knew they did. This made her sick in her stomach. Ben endured years of torment. Squirrel lost her husband. In fact, few in Freetown did not have some story or another. Freetown could have fallen to the Reavers twice, those first years she was on the Council. Kirsten and Ben courted. Kirsten had blood on her, and a perfect excuse. Could shy, sleepy Kirsten have killed a sleeping man? People did strange things but Min doubted it. Yet, Kirsten went along with things: could she have handed a man a drugged drink, knowing the bloody consequences?

Family or friends stayed with patients and did much of the caring - the hospital relied on it. The building's layout was no secret. There might be dozens of other suspects.

'Suicide?' Joseph said. She frowned at him.

'Where's the weapon? And a very odd way to cut. I think the killer stood rather behind him. Right handed, which rules me out. Our killer wanted to avoid being bled on.'

'You would have poisoned him, much more efficient. Might they have washed there? If not there, where? We need to look at every adult's clothes,' Joseph said.

'I've ordered a search.' But her students were supposed to roll back their sleeves to work.

Min continued. 'I see from the floor he was killed in the chair. Everyone crowding in, Kirsten walked in the blood. It's a mess. I need a fingerprint or an unexplained footprint.'

It hurt she even doubted her students. And yet. Means, motive, opportunity. Let it be the Reaver, Anders. One of the families from out of town.

§

Patients still had to be seen, families placated. If she wanted Dr Kahn to amputate, she'd need to radio for him soon. Or she could just trust the injections she gave the youth would work. Throw the dice and hope.

Ben and Squirrel found her trying to keep her notes up to date. People might die if she forgot.

'Our stuff was searched. You can't think we did it,' Ben said, hot-faced.

'I've ordered the same for everyone. I can't play favourites,' Min said. 'You both loathe Reavers. How would it look if you weren't searched? It would be like me saying, I know you're guilty but I'm shielding you. Anyway, Joseph and I will need to speak to everyone, one at a time.'

If someone hated Reavers, why not kill Sword, the guard? Why not finish off Victor? She'd heard the argument often: if medicine was scarce, don't waste it on them. She held tight to the idea that the people of Freetown were better than that; she believed that even Reavers could be better.

'You don't believe us,' Squirrel said. She wore muddy trousers, a leather apron. She'd been gathering plants.

'Joseph and I have to gather the facts.' She could see Squirrel in her mind's eye, those deft fingers pouring something unseen into a cup. Squirrel got pills into reluctant children like a magician. Get Ben angry enough and maybe he could slash a throat like a hog. Both, or neither. Could Ben have woken Min knowing he'd just killed a man? Could Squirrel stand there now, indignant, if she was guilty? Min was obsessing, she wanted to rule them out, and yet, somehow, she couldn't.

It nagged away at her, everyone who worked in the hospital even for a day took the ancient oath to do no harm. It was unforgivable. Healing depended on trust.

Oh, for Rabbit, her long dead lover—her humour, her kindness, her sense of justice. She longed to see her bathing in the river, her long hair wet in the summer sun. Min did not believe in the hereafter; she did not have the consolation so many did, of believing they would be reunited after death.

§

Anders raged at them. He tried not to look at Joseph; he must hate to see a black man in authority. The Reaver faith was a bitter sewer of hate.

'You broke the hospitality oath. You broke your promises' Anders said.

'We will find who did this. Whoever it is, they will be punished.'

'Did Captain Martel have any enemies?'

'He was a strong man. Here, he was surrounded by enemies. You must put them to the question.'

'We don't use torture,' Joseph said. Long, long ago, he and Min decided, if Freetown stood for anything, it was that. Hard to fight a bitter war, those years ago, and stick to it. 'And we can't torture half the adults in the building.'

Anders looked astonished. 'How will you find the killer?'

'We'll use our brains,' Min said. 'You need to tell us anything at all that will help.'

'I was asleep. The shouting woke me. Sword was drunk, he should be flogged raw. He betrayed his captain.'

'What did you think of Martel?' Min asked.

Anders met her gaze. 'His father saved my father's life. I was pledged to serve Martel from childhood. He taught me war, he was a great man. He said the debt was discharged but I stayed in his service.'

'Discharged how?'

‘A life for a life. His horse shot from under him by an infidel, a Muslim ambush. We lost good men that day but I got him to safety.’ He looked sour. ‘You cannot think I did it.’

‘Someone did,’ she said, blandly.

‘You let Muslims work their devil’s magic in this place. They touch patients. You treat them in the same rooms. This place is corrupt.’

Joseph scowled. ‘They pray if they want, just as we let you do. I’m proud of our Muslim citizens.’ Martel would not let Ayesha near his son, making a sign of horns against evil.

‘We serve everyone,’ Min had told her furious staff, facing down rebellion.

Min knew Anders held something back. ‘What of Sword?’ Anders visibly tried to control himself. ‘A loyal pledge-man, brave in battle. Given to drink, but not on duty. Can we carry Martel’s body back to our people?’

‘The boy has to stay. We will let you bury your captain, and soon.’ It wasn’t the answer Anders wanted but, to her surprise, he seemed to accept it.

Was Anders lying?

Whoever drugged Sword was determined he should not wake. The man was still barely coherent. Maybe it was a failed attempt to kill him too.

§

Joseph and Min sat over bowls of fresh horse stew. The Reavers had a taboo and wouldn’t eat it. She knew what her oldest friend was going to say.

‘Why don’t you... you know?’ he said.

'It doesn't work like that. Life would be much easier if it did.' 'You follow a need...'

'I find things. I can't choose places or times. I'm old, Joseph, it tires me out, and I need my energy for medicine. I won't be here forever.'

No-one else saw the golden cracks she saw, and anyway, the hospital itself had none. She would have to make her way tonight to the orchard and try there. She'd buried Rabbit there because they loved the trees, and because the grave where the oldest trunks grew gave her an excuse to be there at dusk.

'What's your great plan?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'Search the grounds. Interrogate everyone again. Kirsten was in tears; she hardly seems the type but she clearly knows something. Sword is making sense now. Gloves off with these Reavers, they must have some knowledge. How's the lad doing?'

'His temperature is down. We might save him and the leg. Maybe he will remember something.'

'Maybe he did it,' Joseph said. 'Reavers will do anything.' She didn't laugh.

She thought, there's a wise old woman who lives at the edge of the town, and she can't teach everything she knows. Her students work long hours and read books already falling to pieces, copying them onto hide to save them. One precious device lets them watch instruction discs from Before. She wishes she could teach someone this blessing, this curse.

§

Long before she was born, fire and stones fell from space, At the Fall, the seas rose, cities burned and the plagues raged. People without number died, they said some cities Before held a million people. And Min knew, something else happened. The world itself cracked, and she could use it.

The dark sky spat rain. Her hip was bad and she took two sticks. To the orchard which was also the burial ground. In summer she took laughing children there, to teach them health and hygiene and history under the sky. Childless, yet all Freetown's children were hers.

The crack never changed, the thinnest, jagged line of golden light no-one else saw. She could slip through, finding herself in places just before their destruction. Min took things that could not be missed, she changed nothing. If she spoke to someone, she knew their death was imminent. Only hard need would take her through... curiosity was not enough. When young and starving she took food for her ragged scavenger band, and later, as she learned to heal, medicines and books.

During the Reaver war, she brought back explosives. Thus, she had the bloodiest hands in the town, she who gave weapons, but they won. And yet she could not pass through to see Rabbit by the river, one last time. Perhaps her memory was strong enough.

She was a woman of reason and her power made no sense. Yet it saved lives.

She slipped through. A windowless, low room, brightly lit with tall ranks of free-standing shelves. A storm raged or perhaps more than a storm. Dark water swirled across its floor, and already her boots were wet. As a child, she had sometimes managed an hour, but now much less. It was like being underwater, the

more you did, the more you took, the harder it got. Now, tired, she had only a few minutes before her real time drew her back.

She stuffed medicines into her leather backpack. Antibiotics, disinfectant, drugs for respiratory disease in children. Antimalarials. So soon, her breathing became tight; she made snap decisions and hoped they would do.

Painkillers, sedatives. She held a packet, something not quite right. Freetown grew the GMO opiates. But she could take these as trade goods. She was running out of time...Some of these drugs were stronger than hers. She stuffed them into the bag not even looking.

The water rose and she felt faint, like she might fall. Never had a trip been so curtailed. She could not fail in her mission.

Sobbing, she slipped back to her own time. Paused, holding a damp coarse tree, to get her breath.

Hobbling back to the mansion, she saw a crow perched above a thin window. It tugged at something, hard to see where dark bird stopped and dark cloth started. Which window was that? The window over that back stair, with a gap under the gable... She'd never thought - you could tuck something up there, above the window. Neither inside nor in the grounds.

She hobbled towards the crow, shouting. A little voice still told her she'd missed something important, something about sedatives.

§

They bound Sword to the chair, his eyes full of fury. Min needed her pain and the anger to keep going. She resisted the temptation to take a stimulant. She would discipline anyone as keen on taking the drugs as she was herself.

Joseph, Ben, and Anders in the room. She wanted the other Reaver there.

She spread out her find—a bloodied cloth, a gleaming blade, a scrap of paper like the ones used to measure out the drug. That paper confirmed it.

‘I’ve never seen that stuff. It’s not mine,’ Sword said.

‘I was very stupid,’ Min said. ‘You took the drug just before you killed your leader. You grew more drugged as we watched.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ He met her gaze, a ruthless man under that slouching insolence. She saw in her mind the left hand over Martel’s mouth, right hand with the blade... the gurgle, the cough...

‘Who would find it easier to drug him than the man on watch. Have some of this captain, these slave-loving scum can still brew beer, can’t they?’

‘You’re making this up.’ His face impassive, he had enormous control. Joseph had interrogated him twice before Min’s breakthrough; nothing.

‘We were right to guess a surgical blade. But it’s not one of ours. This is loot from somewhere else. Did you want to throw suspicion on us?’

Nothing. Killing him in the hospital was vicious. Why not kill the man out on the trail?

‘We have the old-science here,’ Min said. ‘I will prove you touched the blade, even if you tried to wipe it clean.’

'You consort with devils. Nothing you say can be trusted,' he said, solid as a tree. Almost mocking her.

'I have a drug which will force the truth from you,' she lied.

'Then use it, witch.'

A Freetown jury would have to convict. She needed something more. Anyone could have tucked the stuff in the odd hiding place... perhaps hoping to retrieve it later. Min needed a confession, something no one could argue with.

Anders stared, at her, at the man.

'Mayor,' said Anders. The first time he had spoken to Joseph with respect. 'Do you hang murderers?'

'We can,' Joseph said. The town leaders preferred exile. You could change your mind.

'The Captain took a woman when his wife died,' Anders said, with reluctance. 'Sword resented... that she did not choose him instead.'

The obscenity rocked the room. Sword shouted and rocked the chair. Ben and Joseph gripped it, and a soldier put his head round the door.

'Silence. Are you in league with these devils? They will kill me,' Sword said.

Anders brought his face close to Sword.

'They will try you, oath-breaker. I saw nothing, heard nothing of the crime. But I will swear you hated him and why.'

Sword lunged again, his mouth open to bite the man's nose.

Anders pulled his head back.

It wasn't evidence, but it helped Min feel more certain.

'You could have mentioned that,' she scolded the Reaver. He actually looked embarrassed.

'I assumed the killer was one of you Godless,' Anders said. 'I was such a fool.'

§

Days busy with everything else. A message from the radio room in the Town Hall; a doctor down near the coast wanted to talk through a case. She couldn't put him off much longer. And they'd found a cheery broadcaster in the fabled land of Ireland, keen for their healers to share their skills. A fragile net, but people talked and kept the light alive.

Victor, her patient, sat up. 'Has the oath-breaker confessed yet?' Min felt his neck and the fever was gone. She could see a little of the man he would be.

She shook her head. 'We'll need Anders for the trial. You'll have to stay a little longer. It will be a while before you can do much with the leg.'

Ayesha did such meticulous work changing the dressing. Victor couldn't keep his eyes off her. Yes, the confident student but also, she was pretty and her kind joke made the lad blush. They were so young.

'Stay forever,' Min said. Some Reavers, even prisoners of war, chose to stay. Anders almost smiled at her that morning, and half saluted.

Victor looked at her for a while. 'My sisters are in the north and I must protect them. I am man of my house and I must go North. But, maybe our people need not fight.'

He waited a moment, and then, 'My father was kind to Sarah, the woman. Don't think that he took her as booty. She chose him.'

Min snorted. 'Women have few choices in your lands. But always honour what your father did that was noble.'

Kirsten, the fool, believed her man Ben did it. She'd showed steel not to say so. Min scolded her, and yet saw in that determination more potential than before. Min had a nose for a wedding; they might even ask her to preside.

Victor looked at her. 'Explain it to me, how your women fight, and speak in your council. Do your men not feel unmanned? Who rules in the house if women are equal to men?' Another eager student, and her hip hurt. Yet this was how Freetown grew, by ideas and by example. Remembering other conversations, other minds changed, she began to explain.

There is an old woman who will one day go into the dark. Yet each day she is glad to see another dawn. There are people to teach and the needy to heal and Freetown's strong wedding ale to drink. She will see sun on the snow again, and blossom burst pink and white on the fruit trees, and more dances in the town square. She vows to use each day, so her people, her family will carry on.

Ends