

PEAS, BEES, AND BIRDS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Peas, Bees, and Birds

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In my novella, “Peas, Bees, and Birds,” I will integrate what I have learned in biology with what I have studied in my creative writing classes (including the Aggie Creative Collective), constructing a bridge that connects the boundaries of every subject I have studied. I’d like to tell the story of Gregor Mendel, a man who “feasted on his lessons.” Not only did he feast on them, he found ways to apply what he learned in mathematics and physics to botany. According to Orel, in the book *Mendel: Past Masters*, “Mendel applied the methods of a physicist; but at the same time, he made full use of the empirical findings in plant hybridization and the latest experiments with plant fertilization.” It was a combination of quantitative and qualitative data that allowed for Mendel to make his discovery. For my own work, I won’t be relying so heavily on quantitative information as much as historical information. This historical framework will be presented through a creative lens, along with the scientific findings themselves. It’s also important for me to present this information in a way that can be understood by people as young as twelve years old, since at around this age, students already have a rudimentary basis of biology and the broader sciences. Cheryl Bardoe’s picture book, *Gregor Mendel: the Friar who Grew Peas*, appeals to children around the age of five. While her book is an inspiration for my own, my novella won’t include illustrations and will include chapters. The

narrative aspect of this work is what comes first. While the explanation of genetics will be accurate according to the modern science, the story remains the primary focus because if the science can be made into a story, it may make it easier for students to learn. Also, the story will come first because after researching the history of Gregor Mendel, I found there were plenty of specifics about which university he went to and what day he became a friar, but the specifics necessary to construct a narrative, like the conflicts between characters, are lacking. That requires a bit of necessary embellishment so that while the science stays sound, the history may be imprecise. As stated by J.R.R. Tolkien, “History often resembles myth, because they are both ultimately of the same stuff.”

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

Initially, the motivation for my thesis evaded me. I knew that I wanted to incorporate the most general aspects of scholarship into a cohesive work but that aim was too vague for me to actively produce anything. To combat this, I settled on telling the story of the Father of Genetics, Gregor Mendel. I hoped that I could combine the scientific elements of genetics and the historical elements of 1800s Eastern Europe with the help of a concise narrative. I wanted to examine if traditionally objective knowledge, like the birthplace of Mendel and the nature of simple genetics, could be presented in a subjective (or creative) format while still being educational. Specifically, I wanted to know if combining these elements helped me, as a student, learn along with the readers of my artifact.

Why did this motivate me? According to the book, *How People Learn*, written by John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking, there is a concept that teaching both the left and right hemisphere of the brain separately can “maximize the effectiveness of learning.”. The left side of the brain is responsible for more quantitative and analytical thought processes while the right side of the brain is responsible for the creative and qualitative parts of thought (Shmerling). That means that if teaching can engage both the creative and analytical parts of the mind then the effectiveness of the learning could be “maximized.” Since I’m a student and I’ve been a student for nearly ninety percent of my life, I’m passionate about understanding how to efficiently comprehend and retain information, as well as learning how to convey that information to others. The best way for me to explore concept of left brain/right brain learning was to take a topic I had

been introduced to in one of my classes and distill it into a story. That is the thought process behind “Peas, Bees, and Birds.”

This split between the right brain and left hemispheres of the brain is called lateralization of the brain. The discovery of this concept was made in 1962 by Michael Gazzaniga, Bogen, and Sperry after surgical separation of the two hemispheres resulted in two independent spheres. This phenomenon tends to be incorrectly simplified into “the right brain does this; the left brain does that.” While there is truth to that, and the right brain does lean towards creativity and the left brain towards order, the human brain has a certain plasticity to it that allows it to compensate for specific failings. In fact, in visual spatial capabilities (something that was thought to lie in the domain of the right brain), it’s been shown that the differences between left hemisphere activity and right hemisphere activity are not strong enough to be considered lateralization. Actually, in visual spatial tasks, the left brain may be dominant hemisphere (Kalbfleisch, Gillmarten, Layne). This suggests that there’s nuance in the theory of lateralization. Like most concepts in life, there’s more information than what is initially presented. The paper by Kalbfleisch, Gillmarten, and Layne analyzes the human brain through neuroimaging techniques, specifically an fMRI. Gazzaniga, Bogen, and Sperry wrote their paper while observing patients whose corpus callosum (a bridge of nerves connecting the two hemispheres of the brain) had been physically severed. This difference in patients alone may account for the lateralization in one study and the lack of it in the other. However, Kalbfleisch, Gillmarten, and Layne communicate that, in fully functioning, complete brains, lateralization is not as prominent. This can be assumed to be due to the corpus callosum integrating the two halves into a whole. That being said, for my own work, writing with the intention of educating and entertaining, the nuances of right brain/left brain research is complementary background information for research into how humans learn.

In the second paragraph, I mentioned how to maximize the effectiveness of learning by using both hemispheres of the brain. In the paragraph to follow, I detailed what exactly these hemispheres do and discovered that, like all our organs, the brain works better when the brain is complete. In this paragraph, I want to step away from the physical organ that is the brain and explore the intangible mind; often used synonymously with consciousness. If learning can be maximized by using both hemispheres of the brain, meaningful learning may happen when using multiple parts of the mind. According to Purdue University, meaningful learning happens when an individual fully understands a concept by relating it to other information (Allrich). This form of learning is considered to be more effective than rote learning, where an individual simply memorizes the information without fully understanding it. One way to relate a concept to something else is to pair it with a story. That harkens back to the lateralization of the brain. Pair an analytical fact with a creative story and allow the corpus callosum to transport the information. While this may be an oversimplification of the neurological and psychological process that is human learning, it does lay the framework for the concept I'm attempting to explore through this thesis: can historical fiction that includes scientific principles (such as genetics and biology) deepen our ability to connect with analytical knowledge in ways that go beyond the scope of traditional nonfiction compilations of study, like textbooks?

After researching how humans learn, I had to research genetics and the life of Gregor Mendel. My initial research question brought with it a slew of other inquiries. I needed to understand, not only how people learn, but how Mendelian genetics works, what kind of personality did the Father of genetics have, what was the political and cultural makeup of 19th century Czechia, what makes a good story, what are novellas and how are they constructed and edited? All of these questions, and more, were spurred by my initial interest in grafting science

and storytelling in a way that benefits academia. The creative artifact that follows on page 22 is the result of this initial interest and my journey through the answers.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

When I first began researching for my novella, "Peas, Bees, and Birds," I thought that the only information I'd need was a list of facts on the life of Gregor Mendel. While that information was necessary for my writing, I found that telling a story went beyond facts of the time. I needed to understand how to structure my story. I needed to know what made a story come across as complete and satisfying for the audience and, what surprised me the most about writing, was that I needed to know how to edit. I also needed to be able to look at other historical and scientific fiction to see if there were some commonalities between the way they were written. If there were commonalities, were they something I should implement in my own writing? To answer this question, I reviewed novels in essentially three branches: historical autobiographies, biographies about scientists, and novels that fictionalize real people.

The last branch, the list of novels that fictionalize historical figures appealed the most to me. This was not originally the case, but as my story evolved from a biography on Mendel to more of a tale about those who knew him, I needed to examine how to appropriately write about someone who had been alive in a fictional way. Also, because I approached this project with the intention of it being accessible for children around the age of eleven, many of the books I found were children's and young adult books. One of the most influential young adult books that I used was Markus Zusak's, "The Book Thief," written in 2005. The story in this work surrounds the life of a young girl named Liesel Meminger, but in the background there is the ever-looming eyes of Adolf Hitler. The author incorporates a historical person into his fictional story, but it's done in a way that still allows the central characters to go about their lives. In this story, Hitler

himself never becomes a true three-dimensional person that Liesel and her friends can interact with. Instead, he serves as a symbol of hate and prejudice; he's more of a concept than a character. However, Sharon Dogar's book, "Annexed," written in 2010, does use a real person as main fictional character. Taking place in the same setting as "The Book Thief," Dogar's story stars Peter van Pels, the boy who went into hiding with Anne Frank. Peter struggles with being a teenager in confinement and his perspective is written to be more sullen and pessimistic than Ms. Frank's.

While Dogar's narrative was met with criticism, Zusak's was met with praise. The difference in reactions may stem from the fact that Zusak's work presented the historical figure in more of a behind-the-scenes role, while in Dogar's work, the historical figures were the primary characters. This allowed for creative liberties to be taken as blatant and potentially harmful to historical realities; especially if there's a risk that the fictional work could be mistaken for a nonfictional biography. Another criticism of using historical characters as fictional ones is that it may be dishonorable or offensive to the real people. Buddy Elias, Anne Frank's cousin, commented that she didn't believe Anne and Peter's "terrible destiny should be used to invent some fictitious story" (Roberts).

After seeing how the two stories were received, I decided to combine the two ideas for my work: Gregor Mendel is not the main character of "Peas, Bees, and Birds," but he is one who interacts with the main characters. I actually used Gregor Mendel as the archetypal herald, which author Christopher Vogler describes as the "means of bringing news" (Vogler). He's an extension of the messenger in my story and he serves to bring both genetic revelation to the audience and independence to the characters.

Along with novels that fictionalized historical figures, I read some autobiographies and biographies. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *I am Malala*, *Gregor: the Friar Who Grew Peas*, and *Gregor Mendel: the First Geneticist* are all examples of autobiographies and biographies I read to influence my own work. The first two are autobiographies, detailing the lives of strong females, while the latter two are biographies about the historical figure, Mendel. Since I was telling my story from the perspective of a young woman (and I'm a young woman myself), it was beneficial to read accounts of brave women. The benefit of the biographies was that they provided me with groundwork for the story. Combining both the historical facts and the female perspective allowed me to more fully shape my novella.

I also utilized books on writing, such as *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, *Steal Like An Artist*, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, *Turn Not Pale*, *Beloved Snail: a Book about Writing among Other Things*, *From Where You Dream: the Process of Writing Fiction*, and *The Artful Edit: on the Practice of Editing Yourself*. The information in these writings varied from structural information to ways to edit a finished draft.

Although I searched through several books, journal, and web articles, I kept my goal in mind: I wanted to tell a story that was informative while remaining entertaining. More specifically, I wanted to balance creative writing with scientific knowledge. In the case of *Gregor Mendel*, this had been done by Cheryl Bardoe in her children's book, *Gregor: the Friar Who Grew Peas*. Bardoe approaches the task with more tidbits of information, listed and paired with illustrations. In my work, I hoped to keep the information that Bardoe gives but also provide a youthful central character who can work as an audience surrogate while the information is communicated. This distinction, I hoped, would make the facts more palatable and make them easier to retain. To understand whether or not this pursuit was reached requires a set of tests

beyond the development of a creative work, but there is ample research to support the theory that employing both analytical and creative thought processes can make learning more efficient.

Some of this research is introduced in the Research Question section of this thesis.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

On November 15th 2018, I presented ten pages from the second chapter of my novella, “*Peas, Bees, and Birds.*” This took place in the Liberal Arts and Humanities Building at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas. The purpose of this presentation was not only to reveal the creative piece I’d been working on through Launch Undergraduate Research but also to open for the author and new A&M professor, Dr. Marcela Fuentes.

Before Dr. Fuentes presented, I introduced myself to the audience and mentioned the Aggie Creative Collective, the program that has given me the opportunity to work with a mentor over the past two semesters (three, including the summer of 2018). I began my reading and realized that in a few places the story didn’t flow as well as I hoped it would. Fortunately, I’d had previous experience with presenting my work (the previous time being for the same novella), and I was able to improvise while maintaining the story. Being able to improvise allowed me to feel more comfortable with displaying my work in front of an audience, but it also helped me realize what portions of my thesis I needed to give more attention to and revise. For the most part, there were few grammatical and spelling errors. A large bulk of the flaws came from the choice of diction and confusing sentences. As I read out loud, this became evident to me. I knew at that point that the best way to revise my thesis would be to read it out loud to myself. This technique had been taught to me by my mentor, Dr. Lowell White, and it was beneficial to explore this technique in front of a crowd; primarily because when I’m reading to others I can notice errors that I wouldn’t notice on my own through the crowd’s expressions and the ways they interact with me.

On the topic of audience interaction, presenting my artifact also allowed me to understand how certain parts of my writing were being received. For example, one of the questions I was asked by one of the audience members after my reading was how research influenced the story I was telling. This gave me the chance to explain how for me, and likely for all writers, research is something that is just as essential to the story. In order to tell a story about an Augustinian monk who became the Father of Modern Genetics, I'd need to have information about the Catholic religion and life and science of the 19th century. At the public presentation, I could discuss the importance of research in writing, and I could also listen to Dr. Fuentes (an establish writer) give her perspective on the importance of research and understand the subject before attempted to write on it.

Having Dr. Fuentes there provided me with a lot of needed courage and knowledge. Many of the questions the audience asked me were questions that I had myself, so even though I answered first on many questions, hearing Dr. Fuentes answers helped clarify certain topics for me. Also, after the presentation, I talked with Dr. White who gave me the beneficial critique and praise I can use as I go forward and, hopefully, present more often.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

Initially, when I began writing “Peas, Bees, and Birds,” I wanted to tell the story from the perspective of the great geneticist himself: Gregor Mendel. I outlined the story from beginning to end and began writing. But, once I had written around twenty pages, I realized that there were too many factors I didn’t know. I found myself making up interactions and imagining how certain character’s personalities were instead of knowing what these historical people were actually like. In hindsight, I could’ve kept going with that story. I maybe even should’ve kept going with that story, because from Mendel’s point of view, there was much more drama and risk. There were obstacles that had to be overcome, and biographies provided me with those obstacles, I just didn’t realize that, as the author, it was okay for me to take personal liberties when it came to certain unknowns. I believed that if I didn’t know every single detail of the man’s life (like what color the curtains were in his room and whether or not he prayed before bed), then I had no right to tell his story. I understand now that the only person whose life I can know that fully is myself, and I’d still end up embellishing certain details because memory is fickle.

The story I ended up writing was about Mendel’s younger sister, Theresea and her friend, Wilhelm. I wrote for children ages eleven and twelve and I attempted to keep the story grounded in reality. The places the children visit are real places and the lay out of the monastery, with a leading figure as the father is accurate. I did struggle with combining the scientific and creative aspects, which was my original goal, but I managed to still include facts on simple inheritance.

After I had settled on telling the story from the perspective of a child, instead of Mendel himself, I was able to present my work to an audience. This was extremely beneficial for me. Reading my work out loud made any errors in my writing much more blatant, especially with an audience's scrutiny. While reading, I was able to improvise on parts on the writing that weren't quite right, whether it was to grammatical errors or simply the wrong word choice. I made mental notes on where these problems were and then was able to correct them later. The presentation also helped me see that I had a long way to go before writing anything truly substantial, but that was a good starting place.

In participating in the Aggie Creative Collective, I learned that it's important for me to have a mentor, have a set writing schedule, and to persevere above all things. Having Dr. White as my mentor made writing a much smoother process than it would have been if I'd been on my own. He gave tips on how to keep writing, he showed examples of what other theses look like and he also gave encouragement which was very appreciated. One of the tips he gave for writing was to set a timer and simply write until the alarm rang. I did this every morning, setting a timer for an hour, until I finished up the story. While there were days that I accidentally skipped, I mostly stayed on schedule. If I hadn't had that writing process, there's a strong chance that nothing at all would've been written.

One of my weakness, I discovered, was in editing. After I finished my creative artifact, I found it difficult to go back and critique what I'd just made. This came at my own expense, and while I was able to go through and check for formatting and spelling errors, I couldn't bring myself to correct narrative errors. Because of that, there are places in the story where the narrative feels a bit rushed and doesn't quite flow. This flaw in the narrative could've been avoided had I continued using the original outline, focusing exclusive on Gregor Mendel's life.

But, after I changed my story to be from the perspective of Theresea, I no longer had an outline. I knew where I wanted the story to end, but I knew nothing about the middle. This produced scenes that were fairly erratic. However, writing without a heavy outline did allow me to take more creative liberties than I would have if I had adhered to one. I needed (and still need now) to learn how to balance structuring a story and actually writing a story.

If I had the chance to do this again, I would start with the scientific data. I would draw charts and symbols that I could use in the creative artifact to help me and the audience understand the genetics. I would've also kept telling the story from only Gregor Mendel's perspective, focusing on the year that he makes his discovery in and showing how his findings were received. By telling the story from Gregor's perspective it would've allowed for more of the science to be presented. Also, Gregor's life was extremely well documented. There would've been more material for me to work with. Unfortunately, I realized too late in the process, that the story of Gregor Mendel's life didn't need to be 100% accurate, only the main events needed to be.

If I had to write this again, I would also change how I wrote the story. In the past, when writing, I outline so heavily that telling the story becomes more of a fill-in-the-blank activity. This makes editing and the actual writing much more structured and organized. I would've done this outlining technique and tried to have the first draft finished by the end of the summer. That way, I'd have all of fall semester and most of spring semester to focus on editing and completing the rest of the thesis. What ended up happening was that I didn't have the story complete until around late January. This didn't give me much time to revise what I'd written.

At the end of it all, this was definitely a learning process for me. In the future, I'll be sure to be more proactive when it comes to writing my first draft and I'll keep my original idea, to

prevent losing sight of my original goal, which was to combine science and art in an education and entertaining way.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

I'm told that Johann would hide when I screamed. My pink baby belly would swell and when it collapsed, the scream burst forth and bounced off the walls. Ronnie would smash her hands against her ears. Papa made tiny jumps while cradling me and Johann scurried into the kitchen, where he clung to Mama's apron as she stirred the soup.

"Anton!" Mama howled. "Put her down!"

"I'm helping!" Papa replied, still hopping up and down to steady me.

"Put. Her. Down!" Mama dropped the spoon, and brushing her hands on her apron, marched into the living room. Johann kept hot on her tail.

"Here." Mama ripped me from Papa's arms and Papa gave Johann a smile and a wink. Mama told me later that Papa knew all the tricks to weasel out of responsibilities. He would hop all over the room to calm an already quiet baby. He would sweep the house with the broom upside down. The baby one could be excusable. The broom was one of his more obvious ploys. When Mama told me this, Papa interjected. "I don't do that," he said grinning. He said that when I cried, Ronnie would screech in fury and stomp out of the house (I can believe this: Ronnie has a temper even now). Johann would cry with me (I can also believe this: Johann returned home more than seven times after moving out. Mama used to say he has a soft heart). Papa told me that Mama wouldn't even give him a chance. It wasn't that he avoided responsibilities, it's just that Mama didn't trust him enough to give him any. She'd sweep in like a hawk and whisk me away before anything could be requested of Papa. When Papa talked about Mama whisking me away like a hawk, he'd wink.

I think the truth is closer to the middle of their stories. The truth is, I've never been one to simply cry: I shrieked. Veronica was never patient and always partial to the outdoors so she was never around to hear my cries of murder and Johann - one day to be Gregor - was the only one to successfully calm me. This is by his account and he could be wrong but he's an abbot now so he can't be lying.

Our first letter from Johann in Brno was what birthed the spirit of adventure within me. Well, that's not completely true. I always had an inclination towards adventure, but Johann's letter cultivated it. I used to sneak out at night and try to kidnap Hotzel's lambs. I'd drape one around my neck and wear it like a scarf, holding two hooves per hand. I'd seen Hotzel do it so I knew it was right. I stepped over the fence, it was really only tiny enough to deter sheep, which was relatively easy to do seeing as the fence only came knee-high to me. And I was only fourteen so it was no great barrier. Now that I'm older I wonder how Hotzel never faced predators. The fence, I came to realize, was not for the sheep. The fence is never for the sheep. But it was so small, it couldn't have been for anything else.

The little lamb bleated and kicked. I held its hooves securely and marched on. When I arrived at the orchard that signified "our land," I bent down and slid the lamb off my shoulder. "You get to live here now!" I told it, hands on my hips in pride. The little lamb bleated at me and sat down. He was painfully cute but also painfully boring. Within the hour of my poking and prodding, it had fallen asleep. I rested my head on its tummy, hoping for a sort of pillow. But the thing just kicked its back legs in its sleep and it was bony anyways, so I let my head drop into the grass. The moisture of the dew speckled my face. The purple of the night fell upon us. The little lamb and I were only lit by the waning moon. I slipped off into sleep.

In the morning, I awoke to a slight chill around my face. Interesting temperature change, since most of me had been relatively warm up until that point. I opened one drowsy eye. Hotzel and Papa stood over me, their shadows responsible for the sudden chill. Their faces, grey and grim although haloed by the sunlight, may have also caused the sudden chill.

“Papa!” My other eye shot open so that both eyes were adjusting to the scene. I glanced over my shoulder. The little lamb was still sleeping beside me.

Papa spoke first. “Theresa,” I was only Theresa in troubled times. “What is this?”

I rubbed my eyes. “Wilhelm,” Wilhelm was Hotzel’s son, “said that they were going to kill the baby,” I told Papa.

Hotzel stood like an oak with his arms crossed. “We are killing the baby. But not that one. It’s all skin and bones, we’re killing the fat one.” My eyes widened and I leapt off the ground.

“No, you can’t!”

Papa reached down and picked up the lamb, nestling his arm securely beneath its body.

“Yes, he can,” Papa said. “It’s the same thing as our trees. We do what we will with what we have.” Papa handed Hotzel the lamb. Admittedly, Hotzel was gentle with the creature, moving it gingerly behind his neck. It bleated.

“Don’t worry about it, Anton,” Hotzel told Papa. “If anything goes missing, I know to see your girl.” Papa rubbed the back of his neck.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Hotzel turned away from us, but not before wagging his finger and shaking his head at me, which I thought was a perfectly stupid thing to do considering there were no harsh words to join the gesture. He just looked like Agata, the old woman who sees and never speaks.

When he turned away to walk down the hill I imitated the gesture, which bought me a pop in the back of the head by Papa. “Come on,” he said.

At home, Momma wailed through the kitchen.

“Thief!” she hollered. “My princess is a thief!” Ronnie sat at the table, a book in one and a piece of bread in the other. She didn’t look up once.

Mama stopped hollering and glared at me. She grabbed the spoon. I could’ve ran, but Lord Almighty that would’ve made things so much worse. Ronnie didn’t look up once.

I limped over to Hotzel’s place. I limped mostly because I hoped Papa was looking out the window and feeling guilty for Mama’s wrath. It was Wilhelm I wanted to see. I was one year his senior but Wilhelm knew how to read. I never cared. Wilhelm also knew how to write, which I guess goes hand in hand with reading. I wanted him to send a letter to my brother.

“Don’t make me beat you, girl!” It was Hotzel. He was sitting in a wicker chair on the porch of his little yellow home. I waved.

“Sorry about this morning. Did you kill the lamb?”

“The fat one, yeah. It’ll be dinner.”

“I hope it’s worth it.” He laughed.

“What do you want?” I climbed up onto his porch and sat on the edge.

“Wilhelm.”

Hotzel barely turned his head to face the door. “Wilhelm!” He shouted. “That girl’s here!”

I kicked my legs back and forth against the side of the porch. Muffled footsteps plodded towards us, getting louder and more pronounced as they approached.

“Tessa!” I hopped off the side of the porch and moved to see Wilhelm. Like his father, Wilhelm was goofily thin with his joints jutting out like nobs. He grinned at me. I glared at him. We stayed like this, grinning and glaring until Wilhelm started glaring too. That’s when I broke into laughter.

“Could you do me a favor, Wilhelm?” I asked. Pulling myself up onto the porch again. I’m sure Hotzel noticed but he never asked why I didn’t use the stairs.

“Depends on what it is,” Wilhelm replied, crossing his arms over his chest. I stared at his knobby elbows. They were flushed pink against his pale skin and stupid sharp.

“I need to send a letter to Johann.”

Hotzel’s house had one bedroom upstairs and a kitchen, living room, and bedroom downstairs. Nearly exactly the same as ours. But Hotzel’s wife, Maria, had painted all the interior and exterior walls yellow. Momma left ours brown inside and Papa painted the outside white. Other than a few unique furniture choices and those colors, our homes were identical. I think my great grandfather and Wilhelm’s great grandfather worked together and just copied off of each other when they built the houses.

Wilhelm’s room, like Ronnie and mine’s, was upstairs. It was upstairs, at his desk, beneath the window where we wrote letters. I’d written several to Johann in the past, and to each, when requested he’d send a letter back saying he was coming home.

“Write this,” I told Wilhelm as he pulled up a paper. “Dear Johann, I know you’re living the adventure of a lifetime but Mama misses you so much.”

Wilhelm cut me off. “This is the same thing you said last time.”

“Yeah and it worked, so come on!”

Wilhelm nodded and adjusted his pen, dipped it in the ink. "I'm ready."

"Papa misses you so much. We know you're out there becoming so smart," I continued, "but we'd really love to see you. It's been so long. It's been," I paused. I wasn't entirely sure.

"Wilhelm when was the last time you saw Johann?"

Wilhelm pushed the tip of the quill against his cheek. "I don't know. Maybe a year?"

"No, it wasn't that long." I leaned over him, staring at the letter. It was all scribbles to me. But I liked the way the scribbles moved along an invisible line. They were wobbly. But wobbly together. It was nice.

"Let's say nine months."

Wilhelm nodded and squiggled more black ink along the beige page.

"Please come home. Signed, your loving family."

Wilhelm scratched the last loop then looked up at me.

"Good?"

"Yeah. It's good."

We walked down the steps. I skipped a few, daring myself each time to add one more step to my leap. I managed three. Which is what I always managed. Sometimes I considered going for four but I did that when I was about eight years old. I wasn't trying to leap down four steps, I was trying to leap down them all. I ended up bashing my butt bone on the end of the fourth step down and I decided then that three was my limit.

"Do you know when the mail man comes?" I asked Wilhelm.

He shook his head. "He was here a few weeks ago so he probably won't be back again until next month."

I exited out the front door, Wilhelm still behind me. He held the letter folded in his hand. Outside, Hotzel still sat on the porch, but now Maria Hotzel sat beside him in a wicker chair of her own. Her hair was shielded in a scarf but some of it fell out in golden strands. She smiled at me.

“Hello, Tessa!”

“Is that her name?” Hotzel exclaimed. Mrs. Hotzel nudged her nose against his cheek and laughed.

“Don’t be mean to Tessa!”

Hotzel rested his head against hers.

“She steals my sheep. I should be mean.”

“And she steals our sheets.”

“Sheets and sheep,” Hotzel echoed his wife often. Most of what she said, he wound up saying too, just in a slightly switched up way. My parents did that too, but not quite as plainly as the Hotzels.

“That was one time, Mr. Hotzel,” I informed him. “We were being ghosts. That’s why we needed the sheets.”

“And we put them back,” Wilhelm added.

Mrs. Hotzel sat up, displacing Hotzel’s head. “You did not put them back,” she said. Her tone would always sharpen when Wilhelm spoke. I think that’s why Wilhelm didn’t speak much - at least not to his parents.

I reached for the letter.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the mail guy,” I told him. He relinquished the letter to me and nodded.

“If you don’t see him soon, just give the letter to Agata.” Old lady Agata was last option for everything. She knew everyone and could contact anyone. I don’t know how. Wilhelm and I would joke that she spoke to the birds because she couldn’t talk to people. But she was quite the whistler (and tongue-clicker when furious). I used Agata only twice to send letters and I still don’t know how she managed to get them out. But she did.

“Bye Mrs. Hotzel. Bye!” I slid the letter into my apron pocket, then jumped off the edge of the porch, my ankle nearly gave to the soft ground, but I steadied myself and took off to home.

Fortunately, the mail carriage arrived only days later. Not weeks. I stole away in the early hours of the morning, tiptoed past the kitchen to not alert Mama’s attention and handed the man the letter.

“This to your brother?” He asked in his gruff voice.

“Yes, sir, we’re expecting him home soon.” The warm glow of triumph bloomed in my chest. Yes. I brought Johann home. Me. Papa couldn’t write and Mama couldn’t write. And Ronnie didn’t care. But I cared. And I knew someone who could write so that was pretty solid. I alone had the power to bring Johann home. Well, not alone. I, with Wilhelm, had the power to bring Johann home.

“I’m sure he’ll be happy to be called back home,” the mailman said, placing the letter in his open sack. That pouch, I’ve learned, was for letters a day ride outside of Hyncice. The ones in the smaller pouch, resting on the seat were for letters within Hyncice.

“He’ll be super happy to be back!” I told him. I waved him off as his horse galloped down the lane.

Johann's letter took two months to circulate to us. Wilhelm and I were returning from a failed spear-fishing trip. We failed because Wilhelm's stick was more of a supple shoot and it was more likely to bend against the scale of a fish than to break it. Wilhelm denied this. He said all the other sticks around were too dry and would've snapped. I tried my way and he tried his way and neither of us caught a fish.

It was Wilhelm that spotted the mail carriage. I was busy trying to snap the stick when he slapped his arm against my stomach.

"Tessa," he said.

I dropped the stick and looked at him. "What?"

He sprinted forward and I followed. It was after he started running that I saw the brown horse and the brown carriage. Johann. I knew what his letter would say! He'd be on his way home, only a day's journey really. He missed us all so much and he couldn't wait to see us again. I arrived at the cart after Wilhelm.

"Have any letters from Johann?"

I never explicitly told the mailman who Johann was but I assumed that by that point he'd used enough context clues to know.

"Sure do!" He said, handing me letter. This one was different than the previous ones. This one was sealed with a yellow wax insignia of bees and sweet pea flowers. I patted Wilhelm on the shoulder.

"See you tomorrow!"

"Bye!"

I raced home.

“Mama! Mama!” She marched out of the kitchen with her hands on her hip and a soup spoon jutting out of her hand.

“What is it, Tessa?”

I held up the letter.

“From Johann!”

Mama’s eyes widened. “Anton! Ronnie!” She yelled.

Ronnie’s footsteps hurried down the stairs.

“What is it?” She asked her brown hair falling over her face. She brushed it aside. “What is it?”

Mama held up the letter, smiling. “Where’s Papa?”

“I don’t know,” Ronnie said. Mama pushed the letter into my chest and waddled outside.

“Anton!” She yelled.

“What?” Papa’s voice could be heard rising over the distance.

“From Johann!” She hollered, leaning out the doorway.

“What?” Papa’s voice was closer.

“JO-HANN!” Mama screamed.

Papa approached the door. He had a machete in his hand.

“Johann?”

Mama pointed to me. I held up the letter.

We sat around the dinner table, all staring at Ronnie. Her fingers slid beneath the fold and she ripped the envelope open, the insignia remaining intact. She pulled out the letter.

“Dear Family,” she began. “I love you all dearly and I’ve missed you more than you know.” Mama’s hand rested over her heart. “There’s so much I want to tell you and I’d love to see you again.” I leaned over the table. “I’ve given my life over to God. I’ve chosen a life of asceticism and I don’t intend to be home anytime soon.” Mama’s hand fell. Ronnie’s pace slowed. “I have a new home now, in Brno. Please don’t worry about me. I’m doing more than excellent. There’s a library here. And all the monks speak multiple languages. They know about Fibonacci – new name – and we all help out with the cooking and cleaning. Also, there’s a garden that would bring Papa to envy. Although, envy is a sin. I love you all dearly and I’ll write again soon. But please,” Mama dropped into the chair, “don’t expect me home.” Ronnie finished reading and gazed at every one of us, her mouth drawn into a thin line. “He’s never written to say he won’t come home,” she said. Mama rubbed her cheek.

Papa placed a hand on her shoulder.

“We should celebrate,” he announced. “Johann has finally grown.” I glared at Papa.

“No. This isn’t fair! He always comes home,” I said moving away from the table. “He comes home,” I said. For me. I wanted to add. He comes home for me.

Papa laughed. “At least he’s gone off with God and not some hooligan.”

“Is that a joke?” Ronnie said. “That’s not even remotely funny.”

Papa smiled a sort of grimace. He reached over Mama and grabbed the soup spoon. He moved over to the boiling pot.

“I say we celebrate,” he said plopping the spoon into the pot and giving it a good stir. “We can invite the Hotzels.”

Mama's fists slammed against the table. "Maybe we can convince them to give us a good lamb," she told Papa. There was something a bit bitter in her voice, but I believed she was being sincere.

"So that's it?" Ronnie asked, the letter still in her hand.

"No, it's not!" I told her. Ronnie released the letter onto the table. "We just need to write him back! Tell him to come home. Mama!" Mama stood up from the table and wrapped her fingers around my arm.

"Come on, Tessa, let's go see Hotzel."

She pulled me forward, but I held my ground and actually pulled back. "No! Mama!"

Ronnie coughed. The letter was back in her hands, but the writing was facing out towards us.

"There's something written on the back," she said. Mama let go of me and drifted back to the table.

"It's like an afterthought: 'My Christian name is now Gregor.'" Ronnie looked at Papa first. The steam from the soup waltzed beneath his chin, creating a sort of wispy beard. Her eyes travelled to me and Mama. "Gregor Mendel," she said. "It's not bad."

"It's stupid!" I interjected.

Ronnie tilted her head, so that her brown bangs fell into her face. "Do we have to call him that?"

We all gazed at Mama. Even Papa, more and more cloaked in steam, had eyes wide and expectant.

Mama straightened up, her bulky chest swelling and sinking. Her face reddened. "No. Of course not. He's Johann. He's Hansi! And he always will be. Come on, Tessa."

The sun rested just above the tree line and painted long, thin shadows across the grass. Mama practically ripped my hand from my wrist as she plowed ahead. Her hazel eyes narrowed under her brows and her dusty hair fell out of its bun. The sun painted her as well as the shadows. The sun painted her orange. Or was it pink? A kind of warm pink that comes with the setting sun. It splashed all of her expression. My arms had the pigment too. Orange. Or pink. When we arrived at the Hotzels' yellow home, the sunlight had darkened it into more of a violet color. It made the yellow house look more of a sickly grey. Mama walked the steps and knocked on the door. It was Maria Hotzel who opened it. Her hair was newly tucked beneath the scarf so that only the tip of her hairline was revealed. Her voice drew out like a wave slipping away from the shore.

“Rosine?”

The Hotzels had to carry their chairs from their home in order to eat with us in our home. Wilhelm sat across from me; in between Hotzel and Mrs. Hotzel. I sat between Ronnie and Papa. Mama sat beside Ronnie.

I didn't tell Papa this, or Ronnie, but when Mrs. Hotzel opened the door, Mama cried a little. “The letter,” Mama told Mrs. Hotzel, “is honest. He's never coming back home.” Mrs. Hotzel was a chipper woman but always cold in her chipper-ness. She laughed and told Mama it was about time.

“Boys need to leave,” she told Mama. “They marry girls or they marry God but they've got to go get hitched.”

Mama had no reply to this but to invite the Hotzels for dinner. And so, the Hotzels came.

Dinner was vegetable soup as usual. I used my spoon to rescue potatoes from the depths of the bowl, then tipped it over and watched them slide off the silver and fade into the broth. I felt a thunk on my shin. I didn't need to look up from my bowl to know it was Wilhelm. I returned his kick with one of my own. He kicked me back, harder.

"Tessa?" It was Mama.

I looked up from my bowl. All eyes were on me. Mrs. Hotzel supported her face in her hands. Hotzel had his arms crossed. Wilhelm's eyes searched me and his jaw locked.

I dropped my spoon.

"What?" I asked.

They all returned to their food. Mrs. Hotzel beamed at me and wiggled her spoon in my direction.

"Oh, nothing dear," she placed the spoon back into her bowl and scooped up a bit of broth with lamb. "We were just imagining you married to God. Would you ever be a nun?"

It was only Mrs. Hotzel who watched me, now. Her blue eyes glimmered like the fish pond behind her house.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

Mrs. Hotzel nodded and nudged her husband.

"See. No one wants that life. Not even the baby. You have to have an ultimatum to do that."

"Ultimatum?" Mama asked.

"It means alternative motivation."

"No, it doesn't," I heard Ronnie whisper beside me.

“Something there convinced him,” Mrs. Hotzel continued. “Brno must be a beautiful place!”

“They have gardens,” I mentioned. I hated talking at get-togethers. The Hotzels were close to us, but we had our own homes for a reason and I never knew if it was proper to speak. I never knew if it was right. Wilhelm never said a word when his family came over, but then again Wilhelm hardly spoke around his family at all.

“The garden must be spectacular then,” Mrs. Hotzel said closing her eyes and giving a firm nod. “That must be it. Hans liked plants, didn’t he?”

“Not enough to stay here,” Papa said. “If he liked plants, I have plants. I have an orchard for the Lord’s sake. I’ve been trying to get him to take on the family farm for years. No use in giving it to the girls.”

I also hated when Papa spoke like that. He hid his face by staring into his soup. I didn’t want his farm. Ronnie didn’t want his farm. As much as we both liked the outdoors, neither of us cared for farm work. But if he’d have asked me, I would’ve done it. I could’ve done any amount of hard work for Papa, if he’d asked. But he never asked. And Johann never cared for farm work.

I remember Papa would ask him when he was home. Last time he’d come back from the gymnasium, sickly pale and pudgy. He said study was too hard. He stared in Papa’s eyes as he spoke. “I can’t do this,” he told Papa. “The other day, the instructor called me out to read. I can read, I know how to read Papa. But I couldn’t then. I just mumbled and stuttered. I had the words. I knew the words. And I didn’t have to keep them. They weren’t mine to keep, they belonged to some individual in the distant past. All I had to do was wrap them up and deliver them to the class. But I couldn’t. It was awful. The whole thing sat there in front of me like a

golden apple and I just couldn't grasp it." Papa rubbed his neck. Johann certainly spoke a lot and didn't really say a whole lot of anything.

"Maybe you could spend some time in the orchard?" Papa offered. Johann glared at Papa and took a step away from him.

"No. I don't ever want to do that. I like learning, Papa. I do. It's just a different environment from here. Every few days I meet someone new. We travel to different locations. The monks come in to say prayers for us. Just yesterday, we went out to Brno to listen to the church choir. It was incredible. It's nothing like here."

I watched and listened from the doorway. Papa slid his thumb up and down his palm. "Nothing like here?" he echoed.

Johann walked towards me, to the doorway. He noticed me and paused.

"Hey, Tessa," he said, giving me a smile.

"Hey." He walked through the door, placing his hand on my head as he passed me.

"He wouldn't be around plants," Mama said, a soft smile blooming for Papa. "He's probably got his head in the books like THIS one!" Mama plopped her hand on Ronnie's head and tussled her hair so that it danced in her face.

Ronnie ducked out of this and smoothed her hair to the side.

"If anything," Hotzel said, his arms still stuck across his chest. "Tessa will take the farm, right girl?"

"Yes, sir!" I said. Once again. I had no interest in the family land, but Mrs. Hotzel was beaming at me with her yellow hair and Papa was narrowing his eyes at me.

After dinner, Mrs. Hotzel and Mama worked the kitchen while Hotzel and Papa whispered in the living room. Ronnie had disappeared upstairs and this left me and Wilhelm kicking the grass in the night air.

I stopped him mid-kick, by resting my hands on his shoulder. “Wilhelm,” I started, “I have an idea.”

Hyncice to Brno was about one-day journey. The idea was to make that journey and bring Johann back with us. We walked in the blue night, the air brushing us with layers of coolness and pools of moist heat. The grass collapsed soundlessly beneath us.

Before we left, Wilhelm had climbed the stairs into his yellow room to grab some papers. He scrambled down the steps, leapt off the edge of the edge of the porch and raced towards me, throwing his bag over his shoulders.

“I capped the ink lid,” he said. He walked a head of me. “And I grabbed a map. The ink lid should’ve been capped already. Or it dries out. It gets a weird crispy top.” I stared at the nape of his neck. His hair wasn’t golden like his mother’s but it wasn’t black like Hotzel’s. It was a sort of dusty shine that looked absolutely empty in the blue of night. “We’re lucky the moons out.” He peeked at me over his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I stopped. Maybe we shouldn’t leave. It’s only a day’s journey. That’s what Wilhelm had said when I mentioned it but, the night air cling to the hairs on my arms. It weighed on my face. The stars were scattered above us like the gravel by the pond. The brightest stars overlapped the smaller ones but there were enough up there to make you think there was no sky at all.

“Are you okay?” Wilhelm repeated.

Maybe we should go home. I didn't say it. Because saying it would've ruined the adventure and I had an adventurous spirit.

Wilhelm stared at me, his eyebrows sinking into a look of concentration.

"We should write a letter," I said.

"I can't see enough in this dark," he replied, "and besides, I thought you wanted to surprise him." He stumbled over a stone because he was looking at me instead of where he was walking. But he steadied himself before he fell down.

"I do want to surprise him," I said, picking up my pace so that I led the journey.

Wilhelm quickened to get in front of me. "Then that's what we're doing: surprising him!"

I took to jogging to get in front of Wilhelm. "Still," I said, my breath heavier. "We could send something. It doesn't have to be a warning."

Wilhelm grabbed me by the shoulder and yanked me back so that I almost collapsed. He swung his arms as he marched ahead of me. "What would you say?" I sprinted. He kept my pace for a moment but when I answered, "We'll say 'we love you,'" his sprint became a mad dash and I watched the empty nape of his neck grow smaller as he sped away from me. "Wilhelm!"

He slowed to look at me over his shoulder, then tripped and smacked into the grass. He laid there, hands behind his head looking up at the stars. I kicked him. "Hey. Where are we?"

Surrounding us were petite buildings and houses, stacked into a town. The grass in places faded into dirt with the amount of traffic. Wilhelm sat up and opened his bag. "Also," I said, plopping down next to him. "Did you bring any food?" His chest and my own were still searching for extra breath. He shook his head. "I didn't bring food either," I muttered. He pushed me into the grass.

"You didn't bring anything!"

I laughed. He did too for a moment, then: “We should stay here for the night. In the morning, maybe we can find some food.”

“By hopping into gardens like sneaky little rabbits? We can do that now.”

“I was thinking asking. Or foraging.”

“Oh.” My shoulders slumped. I noticed for the first moment that all of me was a bit slumped. My head dropped forward. My eyelids fell. My legs were entirely out of commission.

“I can’t read the map,” Wilhelm said. “I can almost read it, but” I slid off into the grass.

“You have bony lambs,” I whispered. Wilhelm thrust the map down so that his fist bopped me in the face. “Ow,” I whispered.

He lifted the sheet and peeked down at me. He talked more about the map but my head mostly only heard syllables. No words. “Belotin,” he placed a hand on my head and shook me back and forth. “Belotin!” He repeated. I slapped him. “Stop.”

And sleep came.

I awoke to tap tapping on my forehead. First my lids fluttered up and down, then the world came into view. And the world looked furry.

“Ah!” I screamed and leapt up off the grass. Wilhelm screamed as well and soon we were both screaming at a rabbit that mad dashed into the bushes.

“Wilhelm!” I had to holler to be heard over his screaming. “Wilhelm! Stop, it was a rabbit!”

The screaming stopped but his mouth hung open. He crossed his arms. “I knew that,” he told me, adjusting his expression to one of utter coolness: eyes lazy and lips thinned.

I scanned the area. Dew settled on the greenery and the morning sun was just barely

peeking over the horizon.

“Where are we?” I asked Wilhelm.

He scratched the back of his neck. “Belotin, I think. Yeah,” he glanced over his shoulders at the white houses with red roofs. “Belotin. Brno is about a half day from here.”

A pain nestled in the right edge of my neck. I used my arm to stretch it. “We should’ve slept in the town. I feel bad.” I shook out my legs and watched Wilhelm crouch down to go through his bag. “Here’s the map.” He places it on the wet earth. I winced.

“Wilhelm, don’t put that there.” He glanced over at it, the few drops obscuring the ink a bit.

“Did you still want to write that warning letter?” he asked me.

“It’s not a warning letter. I just wanted to put us in his mind. It’s important that he’s thinking about us.”

He placed a feather quill and ink pot beside the map and kept digging in his pouch.

“Why?”

“Because, we can’t be completely unexpected. We’ll scare him.” Wilhelm laughed.

“Wilhelm, pick the map up.” Little blotches of pink formed where lines once were. I snatched the map. Wilhelm wouldn’t listen to me, he was too deep into this conversation.

“If you want to write a letter you should do it now. But,” Wilhelm began placing everything he’d just taken out of the bag back into it. “I think we’ll make it there before the letter does. Tessa, we need to stop into town.” He stared up at me, his eyes plain and his lips firm.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“There’s no food.”

I stared at him. “You didn’t pack food?”

“Didn’t we have this conversation?”

Wilhelm rubbed his forehead and slung the pouch over his shoulder. “How much money do you have?” He asked, extending an open palm to me.

I checked my pockets. Two coins knocked against each other and cried. “Not a lot.” I dropped the coins into his hand.

“This is all you have? Jeez, you really did bring nothing!”

“Hey! I brought,” I paused. What did I bring? The green grass shivered in the wind. “ENTHUSIASM!” I jumped, whipped out my arms, and shrieked the word for the purpose of sounding extra enthusiastic. It only made Wilhelm frown. His frown didn’t last long though. And a smile slipped onto his face.

“Okay, Tessa. I guess that’s important.”

“It’s very important!” He shook his head a bit, his smile still showing.

“Okay. But food is also important. So, let’s go.”

I enjoyed seeing Wilhelm smile. I skipped ahead of him. I was half expecting him to try to outpace me but he stayed behind. He was looking at the buildings around him, reading signs and taking mental notes. I watched his tongue mouth names and words.

“Do you see any food buildings?”

“Not yet,” Wilhelm told me, keeping his snail’s pace. “A lot of these places aren’t even labeled. That’s odd, isn’t it?”

I shrugged. I didn’t really know about labels and signs and buildings. I didn’t really know anything other than my own family.

“I’ve been to Emauzy. There’s usually more labels into towns like this.”

“Maybe we can just knock on a door and ask?”

Wilhelm's mouth hung open for a second, then he shut it and said "Okay."

We walked up to the nearest white house and knocked on the dark door.

The door creaked open and two eyes peered out of shadows. "Hello?" the person whispered, shooting the word out of their mouth like it was a hornet.

"Hi!" Wilhelm stepped ahead of me, his chest puffed. "We were wondering if there was a place somewhere nearby to get food?" The eyes flashed to the left, then right. They focused on us again but the mouth didn't speak. So, I did.

"My friend and I were walking around and he can read, but he didn't read any signs about food."

"You can read?" The voice quivered.

Wilhelm nodded. "But the signs are written kind of weird. I didn't really understand any of them." He glanced at me. The eyes blinked. The door shut. The sound of footsteps started then faded away from us. A holler erupted from somewhere within the home, then the sound of steps came pounding back. The door whipped wide open and standing in the doorway was the pair of eyes, now able to be seen nestled in a thin long head belonging to a slender man. The grey eyes shimmered and glee drew them narrow as his cheeks rose and his smile widened.

"Do come in! Please do! We haven't had a scribe in a long time. You can read, you say? And that means, I would assume you can write? Do say you can write!"

The man snatched Wilhelm's hand and pulled him inside. "You can come too," he said, waving his free hand at me. "You can write?"

"Yes," Wilhelm said. He looked at me, eyes wide and mouth fixed in the distinct shape of a hill- bottom lip protruding.

The house rested largely empty except for a small bed in the corner beneath the window

and a table with two chairs in the center. The man hobbled over to a chair, one hand still wrapped around Wilhelm's arm.

He released Wilhelm, pulled the chair out from where it was tucked and pat the table twice. "Sit down. Please do. Sit."

Wilhelm obeyed. The man took the other chair for himself, leaving me to stand. "I need a letter written," he said, scratching the scruff on his cheek. "Not a long one, but it's important. And I have food if you can send it. I have food if you can't send it, I won't deprive you of a meal. But I'd rather it be sent."

"Of course! I can write a letter. I write letters all the time for Tessa." Wilhelm gestured back at me. The man's eyes flicked towards my direction then fell back in Wilhelm.

"Good. Good. That'll be good. Thank you."

Wilhelm bent over and began taking the supplies out of his bag. He placed the paper, quill and ink on the table.

"How do you want to start the letter?" He asked looking at the man. I approached them and leaned against the table.

"To Liesel. Liesel is a very important person to me. This letter is important to me."

"Okay." Wilhelm made some swishes and loops on the page. "To Liesel?"

"You're a learned woman now. And you know how to reach me. But I don't know how to reach you." More swirls and squiggles. "You told me once that language was the key to the soul and the distinction between animal and man. I'm trying to communicate with you now and I hope that you reply to me. I hope you come home to me. And when you come home, you can teach me to read. You can show me the world I've been missing and I won't laugh at you."

"Wait," Wilhelm held up his left hand and continued writing with his right. "You're

going too fast. The last thing I have is ‘I’m trying to communicate with you.’” The man’s grey eyes turned away from us and found comfort in the window. Outside, the world was beginning to wake. Sunlight spilled white and bright over shuffling people and carts. A little boy carried a bundle of sticks while his father held an ax and a bundle of logs. One of the sticks was positioned over the boy’s shoulder the way his father positioned his ax.

“I’m trying to communicate with you?” He whispered, still looking out the window. “And maybe I can’t. But if I can, if this reaches you and it really reaches you, please come home.”

Wilhelm dot the end and looked up the man. He stayed staring out the window. “I may never be able to write you again. So, I hope this is enough.” The image of the father and son was replaced by two rabbits chasing each other. “I’m not good with words like you are. I repeat myself too much. But I hope this is enough. Please. Come home.”

“Is that it?”

“With love, Ferdinand.”

Wilhelm offered the quill to Ferdinand. The man flinched.

“Oh no. I can’t read. I can’t write. That’s why I have you.” He spit a shy sound that I think was meant to be a laugh.

“It’s for your signature. On the bottom.”

“I usually just draw pictures,” I piped up. The man drew his lips thin. His cheeks went pink. Taking a look up at me then Wilhelm, he took the pen.

Wilhelm swished the paper in Ferdinand’s direction and Ferdinand began his etchings.

When he finished it was a cat, with no body. Just a head with blank eyes.

“Is it good? Will this do?”

Wilhelm nodded. I nodded with him. “I think it’ll do. You think it’ll do, Tessa?” He looked over his shoulder at me with a grin.

“I do think it’ll do Wilhelm.”

“It’ll do!” Wilhelm said, turning back to Ferdinand.

Ferdinand scratched his cheek.

“Food. Oh. You need food.”

“Yes, please!” I said slinking down onto the floor while he rose out of his seat.

“I don’t have food.”

“What?” I felt tears well up immediately. I didn’t notice how hungry I was until the potential for food was proposed to me. Now it was dashed and my stomach began to groan.

“That’s not fair!”

“Please,” the man thrust up a hand. “I know where you can get food. Across the way there’s a white house, red roof. Black door. Knock on that door and someone will open who can give you food.”

“All the houses look like that,” Wilhelm protested.

“Yeah!” I contributed.

“It’s the one right across the way. Directly across you can’t miss it.” The man shuffled over to the front door and opened it. “Thank you for all your help. I’m really grateful. I am.”

Wilhelm glanced at me. I read his face instantly. He was saying something along the lines of “do you think he wants us to leave?” A smile tugged at the side of his face and his eyes glimmered (the way his mother’s eyes often glimmered). In some way, this had just become a game to him.

“You’re welcome!” Wilhelm rose from his chair and I followed him to the door. “I hope

Liesel comes home.”

“As do I,” the grey man said, his eyes growing misty.

“And it’s the house across the street?” Wilhelm asked.

“Yes, that one, right,” the man pointed, “there.”

“All right.” Wilhelm stepped out the door.

“Thanks, Ferdinand,” I said, walking behind Wilhelm.

“Who’s Ferdinand?” The grey man asked.

“I thought...never mind. Thank you for the directions.”

“Thank you for your friend.”

I thought that was a pretty odd statement. The door slammed and the man was gone.

Wilhelm broke into laughter.

“Why’d you call him Ferdinand?”

“I thought that was his name! He signed the letter Ferdinand.”

“He signed the letter with a cat head.”

“You know what I mean! This place is creepy, Wilhelm. That guy was creepy.”

“I know. But we need food and the next stop is a while away.”

“How long is a while?”

“About an hour.” My stomach hollered.

“Okay. Fine let’s find food but we’re leaving immediately after.”

We were at the door across the street. “That was the plan,” Wilhelm said hold up his fist.

He knocked.

Similar to the grey man, we were greeted with eyes first. But unlike the grey man’s these

eyes were soft and brown. The door opened a bit wider and the shadows fell away to reveal an elderly woman. Her skin was striped with wrinkles but other than that, it had the clear porcelain gleam of someone who saw very little sun. “Oh hello,” she said. “Who are you two cuties?”

“Hi ma’am,” Wilhelm stepped up to speak. “We were talking to the man across the street-”

“Rudy,” the woman corrected him.

“Yes, Rudy. We were talking to Rudy and he said that you might have some food to spare.”

“We have money,” I told her, reaching into my pocket and revealing the two coins. The woman looked from the coins to my face, then to Wilhelm’s. She shook her head.

“Oh, don’t worry about money. Why don’t you come in for a bit?”

“Thank you!” I said, pushing past Wilhelm. The old lady turned aside opening us up to her room. It was strangely familiar to Rudy’s. There was a white bed beneath and window and a table with two chairs.

“Do you think all the houses are like this?” Wilhelm whispered to me, walking into the center of the room.

I whispered back, “I don’t know,” and watched the old woman waddle into the center of the room.

Just like the last house, there was no storage and the place looked completely empty other than the furniture. So, unless it was hiding under the bed, there was no food here. My stomach growled. “Wilhelm, there’s something wrong here,” I whispered.

“What was that lovey?” The old woman asked bending beneath the table.

“Nothing ma’am. I was just telling Wilhelm that we need to remember to pray before we

eat.”

“Oh yes, prayer is important. We have to say our blessings.”

Wilhelm looked at me with his lips pulled in. I shrugged. “Ma’am?” He spoke up.

“Mrs. Haberdasher,” she corrected him.

“Mrs. Haberdasher,” he said annunciating each syllable with biting precision, “Do you need help getting out the food?”

“Oh no sweet dear. I’ve got it.”

She straightened herself out so that we could see her striped milky face again and mimed setting the table. Her hands were entirely empty yet she seemed to have them clasped around an invisible cup.

“Water?” She asked.

Wilhelm and I exchanged glances.

She held up an empty fist towards us and shook it a bit. Her head leaned down and her eyes gazed up at us waiting for a response.

“Um,” there definitely wasn’t water anywhere but I had to say something. “Please. Yes, please.”

“And you, young man?” She turned the imaginary bottle towards Wilhelm. His eyes were wide and fixed on her fist. It was shaped like a crescent and open just enough to hold the missing capsule.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“What was that?”

Wilhelm cleared his throat. “Yes ma’am.”

The woman mimed pouring out water into glasses. She wrapped her hands around the air

and handed the air first to Wilhelm, which he accepted a little too tightly (she didn't say anything about it though) and then to me. I cupped my hand around the air then raised my hand up to my lips.

"Very refreshing," I said, nodding my head and sucking in my stomach to try and null the growing discomfort. "Thank you."

Wilhelm copied me and thanked her as well.

"We're actually not hungry anymore," I told her, stepping back towards the door. "All we needed water it turns out. So, we should leave."

My stomach moaned.

"Oh nonsense! Listen to your stomach whine."

Wilhelm cleared his throat again. "Oh no ma'am that was me. Something stuck in my throat." He brought his fist up to lips and mimicked drinking. "The water helps though. Thank you. We should really be on our way."

Mrs. Haberdasher's bottom lip stuck out. Her eyes wide and gleaming.

"Oh, I'd feel so bad if you left now. Maybe just one meal." She pat the table the way Rudy had when he wanted Wilhelm to write for him. "Sit down."

Wilhelm obeyed her command then she turned to me. She pat the other chair. "You too young lady."

"Oh no ma'am," I protested. "You can sit."

"I won't hear any complaints, sit down."

I walked over to the other side of the table where the chair was then sat.

Mrs. Haberdasher's hands flew to and fro over the table. "Please," she extended a hand to us. "Eat."

Wilhelm looked at me. I widened my eyes and tilted my head towards the table.

“After you,” I told him. He sighed and began miming eating.

“You don’t want any love?” Asked Mrs. Haberdasher, hovering over me.

“I’ll eat,” I assured her. I gripped nothing and shoveled air into my mouth, making exaggerated sounds of ooohhh and hmmm. “Very good,” I told her.

The old woman nodded and thanked me for my praises. Then she broke out into cackling laughter.

“I didn’t really think you kids would go on so long!” She said, hitting me on the arm with one hand and shaking Wilhelm’s shoulder with the other.

“There’s nothing there!” She exclaimed.

Wilhelm exhaled and dropped his hands onto the table.

The old woman continued with her laughter.

“You were just playing us?” Wilhelm asked, a small uneasy smile growing on his own face.

“Of course, I was! People are always tense after talking to Rudy. He’s such a serious thing. People become easy to fool when they take everything so seriously.”

The woman released us from her shaky hold and turned to me. “You’re quite a funny thing, aren’t you? Too serious.” She hit my arm again.

I found myself unable to speak so I simply smiled at her. It was a strained smile though; my cheeks felt stiff and my eyes were tired.

“We are hungry,” I told her. My stomach had given up on growling.

“I know! There’s only one place to get food here.”

“Where is it?” Wilhelm asked, leaning forward. Now I could hear his stomach growling.

“It’s not far,” she told us, standing up straight. “Just go out the door and walk down the street until you see an old grey cart. Inside that cart should be a glass jar and inside the jar is food.”

Wilhelm glanced at me and I stuck out my tongue. Cart food in a glass jar sounded disgusting at best and nonexistent at worst.

“What kind of food is it?” I asked the old woman.

“Bread.”

“In a jar?” Wilhelm asked.

“And jam.”

“I understand jam in a jar but bread?”

The old woman closed her eyes and grinned. “Go see for yourself,” she said.

I pursed my lips and looked at Wilhelm. He was staring at the tabletop like he was arguing in his mind whether or not we should just leave this town altogether.

“Okay,” he said, looking up at the woman. “We’ll go to the cart.” He stood up from his seat and I shook my head. Hunger had been replaced by fasting and I was ready to be done with this place. But Wilhelm’s stomach had just begun growling and there was a certain purple-ness forming beneath his eyes. Actually, I noticed then that his shoulders looked rather small and his head lolled a bit. He looked sick. I rose from my seat.

“Thank you for the directions Mrs. Haberdasher.”

She gave us both a deep nod. “Be sure to go to that cart,” she said in a tone that drew out a bit like an omen.

“We will,” I told her. I sped ahead of Wilhelm and opened the door for him. “Are you okay?” I asked him, shutting the door behind us. “You look really bad.”

“Do I?” I asked rubbing his forehead. He stepped forward and somehow managed to step on his own foot. He stumbled onto the ground.

“Wilhelm!” I cried. I bent down and placed my hand on his back. I ran my hand up and down. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I’m just hungry,” he said, lifting himself up.

“We need to go home, Wilhelm.”

“I thought you were an adventurer,” he told me leaning forward and holding his stomach.

“I am but this isn’t fun.”

He smiled up at me. “Don’t be so serious,” he said. He laughed but remained hunched over and his laugh was broken in coughs. “Can you believe that old woman?”

“Wilhelm. Somethings wrong. Let’s go home.”

Wilhelm stood up straight. “I’m not going home,” he snapped.

“Why? We don’t need to see Johann. We can visit him later. I don’t like this, Wilhelm.”

“This isn’t about Johann!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Can we just go to the cart, Tessa?” He pushed ahead of me and started walking down the street. “Look I can already see it,” he pointed down the road but I kept my eyes on him.

“Wilhelm. What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the cart.”

“That’s not funny. You know what I mean. Why are we doing this?”

Wilhelm kept his pace to the cart. I marched behind him.

“Are you listening to me?” I shrieked it.

“Look!” Wilhelm held up a jar of purple. We were at the cart. “I can’t open it,” he said

trying to twist the thing.

“Why won’t you answer me?”

The lid popped open and a smell of yeast flooded the area. Wilhelm dug a hand in.

“Hey. Don’t eat that!” I snatched the jar. He snatched it back. I slapped it out of his hand and it shattered in the dirt.

“Tessa!” He screamed. “If you want to go home, then just go home!!”

His face glowed red and his nostrils flared.

“What is wrong with you?” I hollered. He grabbed another jar from the cart, twisted it open and dug his hands into the contents. Again, the smell of dusty yeast flooded us.

“Fine, eat it. See if I care.”

“I will eat it,” he told me. “Because I’m hungry.”

“I’m hungry too!”

“If you were really hungry you’d eat this.” He thrust his hand out towards me and the yeasty-smelling black goo dripped onto the street. He looked down at it. “Ah!” He wiggled his hand trying to thrash the goo off.

We gawked at the black ooze on the floor, dripping off of Wilhelm’s hand. He stared laughing. “What is this?”

“That’s the death you were about to eat,” I told him, giving him a strained grin.

“What?” He started laughing harder, holding his sides. “What is wrong with me?”

“You were hungry,” I told him.

“I’m still hungry,” he said followed by a sigh. “I’m really hungry.”

“We can catch a rabbit,” I suggested. He shook his head.

“Let’s just walk to the next town.”

“Or we can go home?”

“No,” Wilhelm turned away from me. “I don’t want to go home.”

“Why not?” I maneuvered around him to make sure I could look him in the eyes. “I thought you were going to pass out earlier.”

He laughed and pushed me aside. “I just tripped.”

“Yeah, and then you lost your mind.”

He walked ahead of me still smiling. “We’ll find food in the next town.”

“Are you sure Wilhelm?”

“Definitely. That or we’ll catch some rabbits.”

I frowned. I didn’t know if we could catch rabbits, but I did know that Wilhelm looked a bit grey. Grey in the eyes and the cheeks and the skin. “And if we don’t catch rabbits we’ll go home,” I assured him.

“Yeah. If we can’t find food in the next town, we’ll go home.”

He walked ahead of me and I placed my hands on his shoulders. I wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to trip again. And I wanted to hold on to him because I needed to feel him. I needed to make sure he was steady and not out of his mind. I needed to make sure he wasn’t going to run off or do something insane. I was starting to feel insane. Why did we go on this trip? I shivered.

“Tessa?” Wilhelm’s voice brought me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Let go of me.”

“No!” I told him, laughing. I hoped my laughter wasn’t nervous. I felt nervous. Wilhelm kept walking silence for a few moments then: “Okay.”

And we walked like that, my hands resting on his shoulder until we reached the next

town.

USHOAUHFIIOHFRESTART

That was an exaggeration. We walked like that until my arms grew tired, which was about three minutes in.

“How far away is the next town?” I asked Wilhelm.

“I’m not sure,” he said, keeping his pace.

I found myself almost needing to jog to match him. “We should look at the map.”

“I know where I’m going,” he replied without even looking at me.

“Wilhelm!” I placed my hands on his shoulders and yanked him back hard.

“Okay, Okay! We’ll look at the map.” Wilhelm slung the bag off his shoulder and onto the grass. The sun grinned down at us from mid-sky. It was around noon and heat flooded the air. Wilhelm ironed out the creases of the map with his hands then pointed, “We just left Belotin,” his finger traced the red line, “And we’re really just a hop, skip, and a jump to Brno.” He glanced up at me. “See, I knew where I was going.”

I crossed my arms. “Yeah.”

The sunlight slid down his yellow hair and turned into shadows on the map.

“And how far away is it?” I asked, my crossed arms evolving into me hugging myself.

“Only an hour, max ,” he said, folding the map up and slipping it back into his pack.

“Are you going to be okay?”

Wilhelm tilted his head towards me and looked up with eyes that said ‘yes dumb girl I’ll be just fine you dumb-y dumb’ but what came out of his mouth was “Yes, Tessa, I’m fine,” which was somehow worse when paired with his tone. Also, he paused after saying my name, the same way Veronika does when she thinks I’m being dense.

My cheeks grew hot. "I'm not trying to baby you, Wilhelm."

"Then don't, Tessa." He slung the bag over his shoulder and started walking. "Let's go."

I released myself from my hug and let my arms simply be crossed.

After walking in silence for a while, I let my arms fall in front of my body and exaggeratedly dangled them back and forth. "Hey Wilhelm!" I said. "Do this!" I hunched my back and ran forward, arms like pendulums in front of me.

Wilhelm laughed, and copied me. Whatever had been eating at him was gone and we chased each other up the street. Occasionally, Wilhelm and I would take to tripping each other or a game of tag. The expected hour it'd take to get to the neighboring town, flew by and before we knew it, we were face-to-face with a red food cart. Wilhelm nearly leapt for joy, but he composed himself and settled for standing on his tiptoes. The vendor was a plump man with a big black mustache.

"What are we having?" He asked us, propping up his elbow on the edge of the cart. Wilhelm and I scanned the options. There were apples and pears and little pies sitting on the shelf of the cart and hanging from the top were bags of potatoes and onions.

"Two pies, please," Wilhelm said digging into his pockets for change.

"All righty, kids that'll be ten charge." Wilhelm's gaze was stuck to the pie but he did hear the man.

"We only have five," he told him, still staring at the cooled pies.

"Well then, you get one pie. Apple or pear?"

"Apple," I said.

"Pear!" Wilhelm said simultaneously.

Wilhelm glanced at me. "I'm paying for two thirds of this," I told him.

“Fine,” Wilhelm turned back the man, “Apple, please.”

“Apple it is.” The man grabbed the pie and slid it into a paper bag.

“Wait, no you only had two coins. I had three. I’m paying for more,” he argued. The man extended his hand to us, it gripped a white bag filled with our apple pie. Wilhelm was right about the number, but I was so hungry I didn’t care. I don’t think Wilhelm cared either because he took the sack and we turned to sit on the side of the road and eat.

Wilhelm broke the pie in two, some of the outside crumbling into the dirt, and some of the inside oozing out onto his hand. The whole thing was barely larger than Wilhelm’s palm and the halved thing, I manage to place it all into my mouth with one bite. Wilhelm did the same and we sat there staring at each other chewing and chewing and barely able to swallow our big bites.

I licked the crumbs from my fingers and saw Wilhelm do the same to his.

We had gotten food, so that mission was accomplished. Now it was time to make a decision: “Wilhelm,” I started. He was licking the crumbs off of his fingers. “Should we just go back home?”

He kept licking his hand and gazed at me.

“No,” he said, resting his hands against the side of the road. He reclined back and used his arms to steady himself. “We’re more than two-thirds there. It’s the next town over and if we leave now, we’ll be hungry again before we can even get back to Belotin. We don’t have any more money for food, so we have to see Johann.”

I puckered out my bottom lip. Even though I didn’t like what he was saying, I knew he was right. Also, maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing. I really did want to see Johann and he would definitely give us lots and lots of food when we got there.

I smiled at Wilhelm. “Okay! Let’s go,” I said with a nod.

We rose up from our positions on the road. “Which way?” I asked him.

“Straight ahead on this road. We’ll be there before the day is done.”

I hummed and skipped ahead. The grass faded into a yellowy green and the temperature wasn’t quite so warm and heavy as the last town. The sun was nearly parallel with the horizon and it’d be dark soon. I told Wilhelm as much.

“Yeah, it will be,” he agreed. “Hey!” I stopped and looked back at him.

“What’s it?”

He slapped me on the back and sped ahead of me. “TAG! You’re it!”

I laughed and chased after him, and we did this, slingshot-ing ahead of one another until our legs grew tired. Wilhelm bent forward so that his elbows rested on his knees and panted. I collapsed onto the grass. The sun had just met the horizon, and the convergence painted the sky bright pink. Wilhelm’s brown hair reflected a pink halo and his normally pale cheeks were reddened from the run. While I laid in the grass watching him, I remembered our conversation from Belotin. It almost seemed like he wanted to see Johann more than me. Or maybe it was that he wanted to go to Brno. I considered asking him way, but he had gotten so weird in the last town. Maybe it wasn’t anything to consider. “Wilhelm,” I started. Still breathing heavy, he glanced over at me and grinned. No, I decided. There was no reason to bother him with questions like that. Maybe I’d ask him when we were back home.

“Are you ready to keep going?” he asked me.

I leapt up from the ground and pushed him. “Are you ready?”

He steadied himself and smiled. “Yeah, I’m are ready! Are you,” he pushed me and I stumbled backwards. “Ready?”

I pushed him again, harder this time so that he had to kick his foot back in order to stop

himself from hitting the ground.

“Tessa!” He placed his palms flat against each side of my collarbone like he was going for a massive shove, then he said, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I am,” I told him. He released his hands then looked towards the sunset.

“Good, because we may still make it before dark.”

I wasn't really sure how that'd be possible because Brno was nowhere in sight and the sun was no longer just kissing the sunset, it was almost swallowed by it. But Wilhelm had started his trek forward and I wasn't interested in correcting him at that moment. I was more interested in what would happen if we had to sleep outside another night. It wasn't anything I'd mention, but I was still hungry. Half of a hand-sized pie wasn't exactly enough to fill my stomach and I was almost positive Wilhelm felt the same. But there was no town in front of us and Wilhelm wouldn't want to turn around, so it looked like we may be going to bed hungry, unless Brno magically appeared in front of us.

“Look!” Wilhelm said, slapping me across the stomach.

“Is it the town?” I followed his pointed finger to see the mailman, his horse clomp-clomping ahead of him. I beamed and ran to him, Wilhelm did the same.

“Oh, look at this!” he said. “Two wayward kids on the cusp of night. Do I know you two?”

“It's us!” I said pointing to my face. “I always ask you if there are letters from Johann.”

“Oh right,” the mailman said, peeking at us from out of his cart. “You're the monk's little sister.”

“Monk?” It was a strange word that conjured up images of wooden crates for some reason.

“That’s what your brother is. He has a little monk outfit and everything.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“Well, sure. I see him every time he hands me a letter.”

“Can you take us to him?” Wilhelm piped up.

The postman glanced over his shoulder at the setting sun. “It’ll put me a bit out of my way, but I’m sure I can help the two kids that always run to me when they see me.”

“That’s us!” I said.

“I know,” he replied, laughing. “All right, get in.”

We piled into the mailman’s cart. Wilhelm sat next to the mailman and I sat next to Wilhelm. My elbow nestled against his ribcage and he wiggled to get me a way, but it didn’t work. He tried again to maneuver himself into a more comfortable position, bopping his shoulder against my jaw. “Wilhelm! I have one leg hanging off this cart, but I’m not being the wiggly mess of annoyance that you are.”

The postman laughed, and whipped the horse into gear. Wilhelm stopped squirming.

“How long will it take to get there?” asked Wilhelm.

“Oh, I’d say no more than fifteen or so minutes.”

“Nice!” Wilhelm said.

“Can your horse see in the dark?” I asked leaning forward.

“Can you see in the dark?” he replied.

“No.”

“Neither can my horse.”

“Oh.” The sun barely showed against the horizon and the brilliant pink sky had become a deep violet. “I think it’ll be dark soon,” I said.

“I think so, too,” the postman agreed.

“What will your horse do?”

“He’ll be okay for a bit, then I’ll find a stable for him in Brno.”

“Oh.” I glanced at Wilhelm. Quickly, he was becoming little more than a silhouette. His head slumped forward.

“Do you think Wilhelm is asleep?” I asked the postman.

He leaned over Wilhelm and whispered, “No more questions, please.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I leaned my head against the back of the cart. The way the horse walked made us sway from side to side. It reminded me of the Hotzels’ rocking chair. Hotzel used to tell me and Wilhelm to stay away from his and Mrs. Hotzel’s chairs but he’d say it with the glimmer in his eye that made me know he was only playing. But Wilhelm would still refuse to get on them.

“My dad said no,” he told me, stepping away from me and the temptation.

“Yeah! But he’s inside, he probably can’t even see us,” I replied, rocking back and forth.

“Tessa! We have two gigantic windows right there.”

“Yeah, but he’s not looking out of them.”

Wilhelm placed his hands against the side of his face and pulled his cheeks down.

“Tessaaaaaah.”

“Wil,” I rocked back hard, “heeeeeeeelm,” I said, swaying towards him. “It’s fun! Just get on really fast.”

“No,” Wilhelm snipped, taking another step away from me. “You get off.”

“Nuh-uh.” I shook my head.

“Tessa!”

“Wilhelm!”

I anchored my feet on the ground to stop the rocking and stared at him dead in the eyes. He stared back at me and for a moment, we were locked in a staring contest. Wilhelm glanced at the window beside us. He must've seen an empty house because he said, “Fine!” and climbed into his mother's rocker. As soon as he did, Hotzel jumped out from around the corner, arms spread wide.

“Whatchu doing?” he barked. Wilhelm leapt off the chair like it was hot metal. Hotzel broke into laughter. “Girl, did you let him climb in that chair?” he asked me. I rocked back in forth.

“Nope!” I told Hotzel. “He climbed up on his own.”

“No, I did not!” Wilhelm said. “Tessa told me to.”

“Do you always do what your friends tell you to?” It was Momma Hotzel standing in the doorway with an apron on and a mixing bowl in hand.

“No,” Wilhelm said with a sigh. Hotzel crawled up onto the porch instead of using the stairs. He plopped his hand down on Wilhelm's head and tussle his hair.

“Come on, let's help Momma make some cake. You want some cake, girl?”

I slid off the chair. “Yes, sir!”

“Then you better help make it.”

“Okay,” I said walking into their house.

I opened my eyes to the brightness of day. I must've fallen asleep.

My eyes hadn't quite adjusted and the world around me seemed mostly a bright brown, with moments of glowing brightness. I rubbed my eyes and sat up. The blurs sharpened into a

room and the brightness crystalized into glass jars reflecting the sunlight. Inside many of the glass jars were snippets of flowers, white and pink. Some jars had various spiraled stems and leaves; others had the remnants of sweet peas. I looked down. A white sheet draped over my legs and a glance behind me revealed a pillow where my head had been.

“Hello?” I said. I slid off the table that had served as my bed and peeked out the window. Outside, a man of rather plump proportions wore a black robe and hunched over rows of flowers. The occasional bee flew over his head. My stomach growled. I pat it. “Wilhelm?” The subtle sound of voices floated up to me from out the door. I hadn’t even noticed the door. I walked over, opened it up and peered out. “Hello?” I said again, this time at a whisper.

“TESSA!” The familiar soft voice flooded me and I shrieked.

“Johann!” My older brother raced down the hall in the same black attire that the flower man had been wearing. He embraced me.

“Gosh, you’re tall!” he said, planting a kiss on my cheek. “Come here! I want to show you something. I want to show you everything! How’s father? He’s not mad. is he? I can never tell in letters. I have to not worry. It’s all I can do because I can never tell. And why did you come here? Silly, Tessa. You were always the adventurous one.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall. “You won’t believe what I’ve been up to,” he said, blue eyes shimmering. “It’s all been so amazing. God has really blessed me. And the blessings keep coming. I love you so much, Tessa. I’m so happy you came. Of course, you can’t stay but you can stay for a while. That doesn’t make any sense does it? Oh yes it does.”

“Johann,” I cut him off.

“Um hm?” He stopped walking and turned to me, beaming.

“Where’s Wilhelm?”

“Well, I don’t know. Isn’t he with the Hotzels?”

“No,” I wrung my hands together. The glee I felt when seeing Johann solidified into shards of anxiety. “He was on the cart with me?”

“What cart, Tessa?”

“We’d taken a cart here, me and Wilhelm.” I whipped around. Maybe he was back in the room? “We took a cart with mailman. He gave us a ride.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Tessa, I don’t know where he is.” Johann’s gaze was fixed on me, his eyebrows drawn in worry. “We’ll find him though, if he came with you. He can’t go far.”

“Johann, when did I get here? I don’t even remember getting here? Where am I?”

“You’re in the Abbey. In Brno.”

“How did I get here?”

“Well, I don’t know. You were at the door this morning, asleep. Pavel picked you up and I recognized you as my little sister.”

“Who’s Pavel? Never mind, it doesn’t matter,” I yanked out of Johann’s hand. “We need to find Wilhelm, he’s been acting weird.”

Johann bit his finger the way I’d seen him do hundreds of times. “We’ll find him. But we need to talk to Father Cyril. Cyril will know what to do.”

“How do I get outside, Johann?”

He popped his finger out of his mouth and waved his hands, “No no no no no, we need to talk to Father. Stay with me, Tessa. Please.” He glared at me with an urgency I’d never seen on his face. It made his eyes burn pink and his jaw flex.

“Okay. But we have to find Wilhelm.”

“We will.”

With Johann's hand in mine, we surged down the hallway. At first, I tried to peer outside the windows we passed, but Johann moved with such speed that it instead of individual leaves and flowers, all I picked up was blurs. So, I stared at Johann's neck instead. The black collar of his robe nearly met his hairline. He swelled up and down in his march down the hall. He'd find Wilhelm. I trusted Johann to do that. I didn't trust him with plants, and I didn't trust him with any form of labor, but I knew my brother. When there was a question that needed to be solved, he could solve it. He'd put all his mind to it until he could barely speak. Wilhelm wasn't like that. Wilhelm mostly floated around. He never seemed too eager to do anything. Except for recently, he seemed very very eager. "Wilhelm," I whispered to myself. Would it have been better if I'd asked him why he was acting so odd before?

Johann stopped and I walked into his side. "Sorry," I said, reflexively.

"Wait right here, okay? Unless he says otherwise, just wait here."

"Okay," I nodded. The door was a light tan color like most of the doors in the building, but unlike the other doors, this one had flowers and bees carved into the edges. Johann held his fist up to the door, it wavered a bit, he glanced over his shoulder to smile at me, but his eyebrows were still curved up in worry when he smiled and his bottom lip quivered a bit. He knocked on the door. A voice grunted from inside. "Wait here," Johann whispered.

I nodded. Johann twisted the knob then leaned into the door. As it opened, a brightness shone across the floor. I noticed I was staring at the ground. Something inside me thought it was best to just keep staring at the ground. Johann stepped into the room and the light started to vanish with the shutting of the door.

Now it was waiting time. I stood at the doorway until worry dissolved into boredom. I

kicked my feet back and forth and accidentally kicked the door. “Oh no!” I whispered. I leapt away from the door like it was a snake. With both hands up beside my face, in a surrender position, I listened. No gruff? No grumble. I was safe from whoever owned the voice. I walked over to the wall slid against it, into a sitting position. Just as I was sitting comfortably, I heard the gruff voice: “Tessa.”

My entire posture immediately stiffened. “Come in here, please.”

Oh no. This was school all over again. I stopped going to school because Papa saw no point in it if I was always getting yelled at. I didn’t like getting yelled at. Unless it was from Hotzel, because he turned funny and red when he yelled, although I would never tell him that, he’d only get angrier. Hotzel’s green irises would swim in pink eyeballs. They’d almost look like they were going to pop out of his head. I stood up. I hoped Wilhelm’s okay. Wilhelm’s eyes never turn red like Hotzel’s. Almost never.

I knocked on the door. “Come in, Tessa.” I opened up.

The flood of white light hit me first, then it focused into a grand desk, stacked with quills and ink and papers. Behind it all sat a rather large man with black hair brushed in a way that stuck it to his scalp. Wilhelm stood in front of the desk to the side.

“Sit down,” the man motioned to the chair. I sent a pleading glance to my brother but he offered only a weak smile and a nod toward the chair. I sat down. The man extended his hand out to me. “My name is Cyril Van Napp, I am the father of this abbey. And a family of a brother is a family of mine. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?” I shook his hand, then placed mine in my lap.

I told Cyril about the weird man who needed a letter sent. I told him about the woman and the invisible food and I told him about how we didn’t quite have enough money when we

finally found food. “We had to split the cake. I’m sure Wilhelm’s hungry,” I said. Cyril didn’t move, he simply stared at me with his face resting on his crossed fingers, elbows on the desk. I told him about Wilhelm’s weird outburst and the mailman who delivered us here. “For some reason, he really wanted to be here. More than I did, and I love my brother very much.”

Cyril gazed at me in silence for a moment, then placed his hands against the edge of the table and leaned back in his chair. “Sounds like you need to go look for him,” he said.

“Well, yes. I know that. That’s why we came to you.”

“What would I know? I’ve been in my room all day.” I frowned at Johann. He’s been in his room all day, Johann, I wanted to say. My face grew hot.

“I don’t know. I guess we thought you’d have some sort of power or something. I don’t know,” I rose up from the chair. “I’m sorry.”

“Tessa,” he said my name so that it ended in a lower pitch, like he was warning me of something. “You’re starting to sound like your brother. You aren’t in trouble. But I’d only end up doing what you two need to do. I’d walk around the abbey and talk to the people I see to ask if they’ve seen him. You can start with me.”

I stared at him. Then I glanced at Johann. He gave a mini shrug (probably hoping it wasn’t large enough for Cyril to see) with his arms crossed. “Go on, ask me.”

“Have you seen Wilhelm?”

“Why yes, I have,” he said with a big cheeky grin that showed both his top and bottom teeth.

“Where is he?” I slapped my hands against his desk, papers flying.

“I don’t know where he is now, but last I saw him, he was in the gardens.”

“Thank you!” I turned and raced out the door. If he was in the gardens that I saw out the

window this morning, then I knew exactly where he was except -I slowed pace- I had seen out the garden this morning. I only saw that one plump man. Doesn't matter. My pace flourished again. Maybe I just couldn't see all of the garden from there.

"Tessa!" I heard my brother call from behind. "Wait for me!"

"Hurry up!" I hollered back. There was no waiting. I found a door at the end of the hallway with a window on it. The window showed that it exited into the outdoors. I whipped it open. "Wilhelm!" I screamed looking to my left where I'd seen the plump man this morning.

"Yeah?" Said a voice from the right.

I turned and there he was: in a straw hat and holding a spade. I ran up and embraced him.

He dropped the spade so he wouldn't stab me.

He laughed. "Why are? What?" He laughed harder. "Tessa, let go."

I listened, kind of. I kept my hands on his shoulders.

"I didn't know where you were. Johann didn't know where you were. He didn't even know you were here. What? Where did you go?"

"I have a school friend here named Franz. We write letters back and forth so I knew where he'd be. I went to see him."

"But why didn't you just tell me? I was over here thinking I was losing my mind. I almost thought you hadn't come with me and I imagined you."

Wilhelm laughed. "I didn't tell you because I know how much you like your adventures. I know you think I don't do much or know many people."

"I don't think that!" I told him. I did think that.

"I don't mind, Tessa. But sometimes when I want to tell you about me, you don't listen. I don't mind. I just don't care to try anymore. It's the same with my parents. You're a lot like my

father.” I frowned. I wasn’t sure if he was being mean or nice but it sure seemed like a mean thing to say. I dropped my hands from Wilhelm’s shoulders.

“Hi, Johann,” he said, waving.

“Hello, Will!”

“Wilhelm, I’ve been trying to listen to you all this time. I’ve been trying to get you to talk to me this entire trip. You don’t get to say that I don’t listen if you won’t speak. That’s not fair. Maybe I’m more active at home. Maybe I’m a bit all over the place. But I wasn’t on this trip. I was good. I tried to ask you about yourself and you gave me nothing, Wilhelm. You’re not being fair to me.” He stared at me, one side of his face scrunched as a sort of apology. “Are you going to say anything?” The other side of his face scrunched up too. “Can I meet Franz?” His shoulders tensed then fell.

“Yeah,” he said after sighing. “You can meet Franz.”

“But before you do,” Johann stepped into our conversation. “I want to show you both something I’ve been working on.”

Inside Johann’s room were glass jars and tiny burlap sacks and pliers and scissors. The sunlight fell in through the window, and landed on his face. His blue eyes glowed behind the speckles of floating dust that became visible as they drifted into the sunbeam, then disappearing as they drifted out.

“I think I’ve made a discovery,” Johann said. He grabbed a leather-bound journal and held it up to show us the titled. “Peas, bees, and birds”. “I know I’ve made a discovery. And if it’s real and it’s right, it should be true for every living thing.”

Wilhelm stepped up to Johann, making sure to give me more than ample amounts of

personal space as he did. He didn't look at me. He didn't move towards me. Everything about him was positioned away from me. "What did you find, Johann?" he asked my brother.

"I found out why I have blue eyes and Tessa has brown."

I looked at Wilhelm. Normally, we'd exchange glances. His face would say something like "what is he talking about?" His eyes would be wide and his smile, sly. I would return his look with one of my own, something more knowledgeable, maybe a "trust my brother" kind of look, with eyebrows raised and eyelids heavy and a sly smile of my own. But we didn't smile at each other. I stared at the nape of Wilhelm's neck, waiting for him to turn. Waiting for that face. But there was nothing.

Johann looked from me to Wilhelm, then placed his journal on the table. "Gather around," he said waving us close. Wilhelm rested his palms against the edge of the table. I tried to join him, but the stiffness of his shoulders made me feel like an intruder, so I moved to the other side of Johann.

"We know that most things have parents. They start from somewhere and a lot of times, things are similar to their parents."

"They're supposed to split characteristics half and half," Wilhelm said.

"Yes, that's what I learned too," continued Johann. "I learned about the homunculus, the little man inside of men that take traits from the mother as it grows. They're supposed to be a mix. Which could be true. Tessa could've had more of mother's brown eyes mixed in than father's blue. But," Johann whipped up a finger.

"If I mix a yellow pea," he rummaged through the drawers then held up a yellow pea between his index finger and thumb. "With a green pea," he held up the green. "I don't get a yellow-green pea and I don't get two yellow and two green. They don't mix and they don't

split.”

“Well, what happens?” I asked. Johann placed down the peas, then waved us over to a glass-door cabinet. He opened it up and pulled down a display case. The case was filled with three rows of peas. The top row having one green and one yellow pea, dried, cut in half and tacked on. The next row had four green peas. The last row had three green and one yellow. Johann pointed to the middle row. “The yellow disappeared.”

“Where did it go?” asked Wilhelm.

“It’s not gone. Not completely,” Johann told us. “It’s just hiding. Because when these ones reproduce, I get this.” Johann pointed to the last row. “Somehow the yellow comes back. And this works with,” Johann bent down and picked up more display cases, “curly stems verses straight ones. White or pink flowers. Wrinkled or smoothed peas. It works. And it doesn’t just split the traits in half or mix them like we thought. For some reason, certain traits are more likely to appear than others. It’s 3:1 ratio, actually. When both parents are mixed, even if they appear not to be, if the yellow trait is hiding in there somewhere for both parents, then one out of four may be yellow. Even though both parents are green. It’s amazing! I’m hoping to go to Vienna to tell the great men what I’ve found. And when I come back I want to try with bees. Then birds. If works with birds then it works with people. Birds are very much like people.”

“But we can’t fly,” I said without thinking.

“Oh no,” Johann said, smiling, “we can’t fly. But we have warm blood and a heart and two eyes and lungs and we’re very much like birds.”

“But,” Wilhelm stepped away from us both, “why is this so important?”

Johann folded his lips in so that his cheeks widened and his mouth simply looked like a line. “It’s a discovery!” He said at last. “It’s the truth. It’s a pattern it’s math it’s life. It’s us

getting closer God's design. We're seeing His brushstrokes. We're seeing how the world around us is constructed from layers and layers and layers of tiny things. And we don't know what anything is, but we do know that to have a person, you need a heart, to have a heart, you need blood, and somethings got to make up blood. And somethings got to make up that something that makes up blood and so on. If you want to have children someday, Wilhelm, you now know that they aren't tiny you's. Even if they look like it, they're not. Some things are hidden. Some things will always be hidden. But isn't it nice to know that there's something there? Somehow, even when all the offspring are green, yellow survives and comes back. Nothing is lost, though it's sometimes hidden. That's why it's important."

Johann turned away from us and began reorganizing his cabinet. I looked at Wilhelm and my chest warmed to see him looking back at me. He smiled.

"Johann," he said. My brother glanced over at us. "Is it okay if we go find Franz?"

"Of course!" Johann said. "Just don't get lost. And come back here to my room when you're done."

"We will!" I said. Wilhelm sped out of the room and I followed him with a skip in my step.

"Do you know where Franz is?" I asked Wilhelm as I sped after him.

"Yup! He's in the old chapel. They'll have music lessons today." Wilhelm opened the door to the outside world. The greenery greeted us first, reclining out like an ocean of plants. The grass rolled forward, occasionally expanding into hills, the bushes flourished, and the smell of the garden off on the other side of the abbey fluttered over to us. Wilhelm had stopped running.

"It's that building over there," he said, pointing at a small white wooded house with a

black roof and several long, thin windows. Wilhelm grabbed my hand and broke into a sprint again, pulling me along.

When we arrived, Wilhelm slowed to a tiptoe and released my hand so he could place his against the red door. He also placed his ear against it. Waving me closer, he said “listen, can you hear them?”

I placed my ear against the door too, so that I was facing Wilhelm. Little voices in Latin rose and sank inside. “They sound good,” I whispered. Wilhelm nodded and pulled away from the door. “We’ll have to wait out here. Until they’re finished.”

“Okay,” I said following him as he sat down on the cobblestone walkway. “When do you think they’ll be done?”

“I’m not sure.” He picked up a stick and started digging at the sand between the stones. I leaned over him and snatched a few blades of grass. I sprinkled them onto his head like they were crushed almonds and powdered sugar and he was a sweet donut. He shook his head and watched the blades fly off. I picked them up again and snagged some fresh blades to add on.

“So, who’s Franz?” I asked, littering another set of grass blades on to Wilhelm’s head. He began gather grass of his own.

“He’s a friend I had in school, back in Hyncice. He used to always have my back when things went wrong and he knew all the answers to everything.” Wilhelm had dusted my head in grass blades, way more than I’d covered him in, and he placed one against my nose. It fell off. “I was really sad when you left school,” Wilhelm said. He grabbed the grass that had fallen and tried again to stick it on to my nose. “I know you hated it, Tessa. But you left me alone.” The blade successfully rested on the bridge of my nose. I sat as still as I could to keep it there. “You remember Mrs. Kolinsky? She was such a mean grump. And she hated you. But she didn’t like

any of the rest of us much each other. Except for Franz. She liked Franz?”

“Why?” I asked crossing my eyes and folding my head back to try to see the grass on my nose better.

“I think it was just because he was so good. He was sweet and polite and the grass is falling off your head.”

“Oh.” I whipped around. There was an assortment of green lines on the ground behind me and the blade had fallen off my nose.

“I don’t know. He made the best grades and he was a sweet kid. Everyone liked him really. I think everyone liked you. You weren’t sweet and smart like him.”

“I’m smart! And sweet!”

“But you were always happy. Even when Mrs. kolinsky was being mean. You should try going back to school, Tess. I know you don’t want to work the land but maybe if you at least went to learn how to read. If you know how to read you can maybe come back here with Johann and read all his journals and books.”

I frowned. Topics about what I should or shouldn’t do were never appreciated. I was fine at home. There was no push for girls to go to school and that was fine, because I didn’t want to. I didn’t care for reading or writing. I didn’t care for learning. But I did care for Wilhelm’s thoughts and his thoughts were etched into his eyes as he stared at me. “I can teach you to read and write. Then you can write Johann letters yourself.”

“But what will you do?”

“Tessa, I might be leaving soon.”

“What? Why?” I leapt up off the ground and the chapel doors open, a herd of choir boys shuffling out.

“Wilhelm!” I small voice carried over to us.

Wilhelm jumped off the ground and ran to the crowd. He embraced a boy that was a bit smaller than him with soft blond hair that more closely resembled the color of milk than honey. He was dressed in the same white robe as the other boys, but he had a grass blade tucked into his belt. It was Franz. Wilhelm released him and pulled him aside.

“Franz, this is my friend Theresa. Tess, this is Franz.”

I waved, “Hi.”

Franz waved back and smiled.

“What are you doing?” Wilhelm asked him.

“I have to change clothes,” Franz said, yanking his robe. “Then after I have tutoring with brother Gregor.”

“Franz.” It was the plump man I had seen in the garden earlier. “To your room, please.”

“Yes, Brother Pavel. Come on,” he said to us. We followed the procession into the abbey. Brother Gregor. It was an oddly familiar name. For some reason, when I heard it Veronika’s face came into my head, with her brown bangs always falling into her eyes. I hoped Veronika wasn’t worried. She would be, of course, but I could hope. I also hoped Momma and Papa weren’t too mad. Wilhelm had left a letter for the Hotzels’ when we left and I’m sure Hotzel would tell Papa where we were, but I just then realized they might be mad. But maybe it’d be the kind of happy mad that Papa gets when I steal sheep. Or maybe it’d be the crazy over-the-top wailing from Momma. I don’t mind any of that. Gregor.

“That’s my brother,” I said just realizing it.

“I’m sorry?” Franz asked.

“Gregor is my older brother. I came to see him.”

“We came to see him,” Wilhelm piped up. “And you.”

We were in a long room with beds aligned in rows. Franz walked us to a bed further to the back, bent down to peer under it and slid out of a crate of clothes. “My books and things are in the other crate. You guys can look at it if you want.” I had nothing better to do and neither did Wilhelm because we went on our knees and pulled out the other crate. I felt a hand on my head. “You’re a girl so you can’t look up okay?”

“Okay,” I told Franz. I went through his things. He had a bunch of journals full of words I couldn’t read.

“That’s a good one,” Wilhelm said, pointing to a red book with a golden spine.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about these two sisters and one is very pretty and the other isn’t. The pretty one is the step daughter so the mom hates her.”

“That sounds sad.”

“It isn’t. Crazy things start to happen.”

Wilhelm plopped the book onto my skirt. “Read it.”

“I can’t. That’s not funny, Wilhelm.” He went back to digging through the rest of Franz’s things.

“Okay,” Franz said. “We’re all changed. You can look up around, Tessa.”

I stayed staring at the book.

“I’ll read it to you when we get home, Tessa.” Wilhelm said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“You have this book?”

“No,” Wilhelm used the bed to help lift himself up off the floor. “But the school has it.”

He extended a hand to me. I placed the book back in the crate, pushed the crate under the bed, then grabbed Wilhelm's hand. He helped me up, then turned to Franz.

"Time for tutoring?" He asked. Franz nodded.

Most of the other students had dispersed to the lunch hall, but I saw some running outside from the window. The room we were in was considerably smaller than most others I had seen. It fit only a desk and a chair that sat below the window. Only three steps in front of the desk was the door.

Wilhelm and Franz talked about things I didn't care for, things like literature and mathematics. "My brother's good at all that," I said.

"He is," Franz agreed. "That's why he's such a good tutor. But he's always late."

I smiled. Johann was always late. He shuffled around with too many thoughts in his head. I remember when I was still little, Papa had told Johann that he was going fishing down in the Hotzels' pond. They went together and Papa realized he had forgotten the bait, so he sent Johann back to the house to grab it. But back at the house, Ronnie was dressing me up in pots and pans and Johann got so distracted by it, he just never got the bait. He didn't go back to the pond at all. That's not really a story of his ability to be late, because he wasn't late, but he was distracted.

"Tessa," Johann opened the door and greeted me. "And Wilhelm and Franz! Hello everyone. Tessa I kept thinking you were going to come back. I told you come back to the room after you got together with Franz."

"I know," I told him. "But we haven't finished getting together with Franz yet."

He folded his lips in, forming that familiar sad line. "Okay. Well. You'll be done after tutoring then. Could you step outside? You too, Wilhelm. Franz needs to be able to focus."

We obeyed and I was shutting the door when I heard, “Leave it open, please.” There I heard it: a quality of authority that I associated with Hotzel, in my brother.

Wilhelm and I walked down the hall. “What do you want to do?” I asked him.

“We can go outside.”

“And do what?” I asked him.

He shook his head a bit. “I don’t know. We could play tag?”

“Okay.”

We didn’t play tag when we went outside. I remembered something Wilhelm had said.

“Wilhelm,” I started as we sauntered off the cobblestones and into the grass. “You said something about not being around? Or something like that I can’t remember exactly.”

“I want to go to school here, with Franz. I want to learn about music and languages and science and God. I want to be here. But I won’t be like Johann, I won’t be here forever. Just for school. I needed to see first though.”

I kicked the earth. “Your parents can’t afford this, Wilhelm.”

“They won’t have to. Franz’s father is paying.”

“What? Why?”

Wilhelm plopped down into the grass. He laid flat so that he was looking up at the sky. Strands of pink clouds drifted by. It was later than we both realized. “He doesn’t have any friends here, Tessa. And I was his best friend in school.”

“But if you leave, I won’t have any friends at home.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I thought you said everyone loved Franz, if everyone loved him, then let someone else go.”

“It’s not only that. Tessa, you’d make so many friends if you go back to school.”

“I’m not going to school!” I marched away from him. “This whole trip, you were trying to decide whether or not to leave me?” I heard Wilhelm shuffle, then his footsteps plodded toward me.

“Mom and Dad already know, Tessa. Franz’s father sent them the letter.”

I stopped, whipped around to face him and placed my hands on his chest. I pushed him.

“Tessa!” he cried, stumbling back. “Are you mad?”

“Are you leaving?”

“I don’t know!”

“If you’re leaving I’m mad, Wilhelm. You said you’d teach me to read.”

Wilhelm sighed. “Tessa, you never said yes to that. But I will if that’s what you want.”

“I want you to stay in Hyncice. I want you to stay my friend.”

“I’ll still be your friend. Johann lives here now, but he’s still your brother. And you know how to get here, you can always visit.”

“So,” I extended my arm so that he couldn’t get too close to me. “This trip was just for you decide whether or not you wanted to leave?”

The darkness was settling in and a moist chill rose from the earth. “I came to see Johann too.”

“Did Johann know that you’re coming here?”

Wilhelm shifted weight, swaying from foot to foot. “I send him letters sometimes.”

“Did he know I was coming to surprise him?” My voice had risen to shrieks.

“No. Tessa. He didn’t know that. I didn’t tell him that.” I let my arm fall to my side.

“I’m going to see Johann. He’s probably done tutoring by now. You should find Franz. Maybe he can tell you what the food’s like and how boring all his classes are.”

“Tessa.”

I went inside and slammed the door behind me, leaving Wilhelm out in the darkness.

I stomped down the hallway. He wants to leave. He wants to live here? There was nothing good here! Johann approached from down the hallway. There was at least one good thing here. Johann waved at me.

“Tessa! Where’s Wilhelm?”

“Did you know we were coming?” I asked Johann.

“Not at all! You took me by surprise.” He had reached me now and we walked together to his room. “Where’s Wilhelm?” He repeated.

“With Franz.” I told him. “Johann, you knew that Wilhelm wanted to live here?”

“Of course! I’m writing one of his recommendation letters.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it wasn’t your letter. It’s Wilhelm’s.”

“But I’m Wilhelm’s Friend!”

Johann stopped. “Tessa, what’s wrong?”

I kept marching forward. “Tessa, this is my room.”

I paused. A warmth rose to my cheeks. I clenched my fists. “I want to go home.”

“Okay, I’ll contact someone tomorrow about getting you a ride. Tessa?”

I couldn’t turn around. My eyes felt swollen and my cheeks were hot. “I want to go to bed.”

Johann stood in silence for a moment, then opened the door. “Okay. I’ll make you up a bed.”

I went inside after Johann and I realized what I had woken up on this morning was a table. Johann piled on layers of pillows and topped them with sheets. He held a quilt up and motioned to the bed. I laid down and he laid the quilt over me. “I’m sorry if something upset you,” he told me. “I don’t know. I don’t know what happened. But I’m sorry you want to leave.”

I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to be home. Wilhelm wanted to leave. I pulled the quilt over my head so that Johann couldn’t see me. “Good night, Tess.” I didn’t say anything.

I awoke to screams. I leapt out of bed to check the window. There was a gentle smoke in the air, but it wasn’t thick enough to really be a threat. No, the cries condensed at the door. They were coming from inside the building. I tiptoed towards the door. What kind of beast lay outside? Should I stay in here? No, I had family and friends out there. Well, one friend. I don’t count Franz. But even if Wilhelm and Johann weren’t there, people needed help. I had almost gotten to the door when it swung open and Wilhelm, Johann, Franz, and the plumper man who I believe was called Brother Pavel sped it. Johann slammed the door shut behind him.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Bees,” Johann told me.

“Bees?” I asked.

Johann nodded, his blue eyes wide with worry.

“We don’t know how they got in but they’re everywhere!” Wilhelm swayed from side to side and Franz held his hands together in front of his chest like he was praying.

“Well, what do we do?” I asked the group.

The plumper man stepped forward. “Bees hate smoke. We tried starting a fire but it’s small.” “And if it gets any bigger, we’ll have a fire problem instead of a bee problem,” Johann added.

I glanced out the window at the smoke. The grey cloud had almost darkened to black. “Where’s the fire?” I asked. I could only see the smoke.

Pavel answered without looking out the window. “Past that garden there,” he told me, “is the bee hive. The fire’s just behind it.”

“But if the fire’s next to the bee hive how can they go home?” it was Franz who asked this. He placed his hands down by his side and stepped forward. Wilhelm began gathering jars and papers.

“I don’t think they want to go back home,” Johann answered. “They left home for a reason.”

“We can shoo them out,” Wilhelm said lifting up his arms full of papers and jars.

“Are you willing to do that?” Pavel asked. “Because I’m certainly not. Those things will sting us into shock before we can shoo them all out.”

“So what do we do?” I asked.

Everyone looked at Pavel. His eyes caught every glance and he held his head high. “We wait.”

I looked to my brother. He sighed. “Okay, well, I guess that’s it.” Johann collapsed into a chair. Franz plopped on the floor and Pavel walked over to the wall to lean against it. I turned to Wilhelm. He still clutched the jars and papers to his chest. I gave him a look. I widened my eyes, crossed my hands over my chest and tilted my head towards him. I gave him one of those “they don’t really expect us to just sit here and wait” looks. And he returned it with a flat smile. I

started digging through the mess that was Johann's workspace.

"Johann, do you use these empty journals?" I asked, picking up leather-bound books.

"At the moment, no, but I will someday."

"How about today?"

His brows furrowed and his lips poked out.

"Here," I dropped the journals onto the edge of the table and began removing the contents of Wilhelm's hands. I placed them on the table then began picking up and laying the journals flat against Wilhelm's chest. "Hold that there," I told him. He listened. I took string and wove it through the holes in the spine of the book. I took the next journal and slid it onto the string. Then the next and the next. Soon it was a garland of journals that I tied around Wilhelm's waist and chest. "Now, we'll make mine," I said, starting on a garland for myself.

"Tessa, what are you doing?" asked Johann.

"I'm making us armor," I answered.

"We're going to shoo out the bees," Wilhelm told him.

Franz leapt up. "I want to help!"

"Watch the smoke," I told Franz. He didn't need to come. And I was out of journals.

"Do you have anything we can use to protect our neck and face?" I asked Johann.

He rose up from the chair and started shifting through papers. "I have burlap but you'll have to pull it tight if you don't want the bees just pushing into it."

"Brother Gregor," Pavel stepped towards us. "Are you actually letting them go out there?"

Johann looked at me, then Wilhelm. "Yes, I think I am."

"I advise against it," Pavel said.

Wilhelm spoke up, "But we'll go anyway. It's time for an adventure." He grabbed the papers and I grabbed some of my own.

"We don't need the jars. We just need to make a big enough wind to shoo them off," he said.

I gave a hum of agreement. "Uh hm!"

He turned to Johann. "Thank you for letting us stay here," he said. "If we die, tell my mother I love her." Wilhelm placed the burlap sack over his head. "And tell my father I love him too."

I placed the bag over my head. "I'm not going to die," I told Johann. He laughed.

"Brother Gregor, this is really not a laughing matter," Pavel snapped.

Johann glanced over at him but his attention had returned to us when he said, "There's only a few really. We were just spooked."

"It was a swarm!" Pavel protested.

"I love you, Tessa," Johann said.

"I love you, too." Wilhelm grabbed my hand and led me to the door.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Always," I told him. We stepped out into the open hallway. No footsteps could be heard; no feet, seen.

"Where is everyone?" I asked Wilhelm.

"Hiding from the bees, I'd imagine," he whispered back. We tiptoed forward.

"I don't even see any bees," I said.

"Maybe they've already left." Wilhelm straighten up. "Let's listen."

We both stood like statues, with our heads leaning out. No footsteps could be heard and

no bees could be heard buzzing. I glanced over at Wilhelm. His lips moved to the side. “I guess they’ve left,” he said, his voice loud enough now to echo against the walls.

I walked forward a bit. Then heard it: the low roar of a swarm. “Wilhelm,” I said, clutching the journals that served as my armor. “Do you hear that?” His eyes widened and he nodded. The roar was rising. “They’re getting closer.”

“Outside! Outside!” Wilhelm pushed past me and scurried down the hall. I followed close on his trail. Doors blurred by as we hurried. When we reached the door to the garden, Wilhelm nearly leapt out of it, collapsing onto the grass outside. I followed, but didn’t dive into the earth the way he did. I whipped around and shut the door.

“How many were there?” Wilhelm asked, scrambling to his feet.

“I don’t know, I didn’t see anything.” Wilhelm brushed himself off. He went to the door and placed his ear against it.

“Do you hear anything?” I whispered. He shook his head “no.” I grabbed the door knob and waved Wilhelm away. The door inched open and I peered inside. There were bees. There were three bees and they were just flying in rather nonsensical routes. Maybe the rest had left. Or maybe these three bees were just very very loud. I shut the door.

“What’d you see?” Wilhelm asked.

“Three bees.” “Three bees? That’s it?”

I nodded. “Uh hum.”

Wilhelm looked to at the floor then back at me. “We should get some jars then.”

Inside, Pavel was muttering to Johann and Franz was watching the window. “Hello!” I said, entering.

“There’s only three bees,” Wilhelm said.

“Where?” asked Pavel, standing to attention.

“Just outside the door, we walked past them,” Wilhelm told him. “We’ll need a few jars to catch them, then we’ll release them outside.”

“Will that be dangerous?” Asked Pavel.

I replied before Wilhelm could. “No, but we have to go before they fly off somewhere.”

The trek that had taken two days for me and Wilhelm was whittled down to half a day with horse and carriage.

After the bee incident, we waited for the mailman to arrive. Johann laughed and placed stamps on both our foreheads. The stamps were little yellow things with wavy edges and pea flowers in the center. “Time to mail you home,” he said as the mailman pulled up in his carriage. The mailman tipped his hat to greet us and for the first time ever, asked us for our names.

“I’m Tessa,” I said, nodding my stamped head towards him.

“Wilhelm,” replied Wilhelm, extending a hand. The mailman shook it, then shook mine.

“The name is Hansel,” he told us. We hopped into Hansel’s cart. The horse started and we rocked back and forth to the sound of his hooves clomp clomping. I rested my eyes for a moment. When they opened, we were passing the town with the expensive tiny pies. The man in the market waved. I rested again and when my eyes fluttered open, I saw rows and rows of white houses with black roofs and red doors. I tapped Wilhelm on the shoulder and he shuddered awake.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Don’t take it all so seriously,” I answered. He raised his eyebrows, then looked around.

“Oh, this is where we met the old lady.”

“And the man who wanted the letter.”

Wilhelm sat back and nestled his hands behind his head. “Do you think the woman ever responded?”

I straightened out my dress.

“Hansel,” I turned to our driver. “Have you ever delivered a letter to that house?” I pointed to the white and black thing at the edge of the street- the one I knew to be the letter man.

“I haven’t. Yet. But I do have a letter in this carriage for there. I’ll have to deliver it right after you two get delivered.”

I smiled at Wilhelm. “Thank you, Hansel. That’s good to know.”

Hansel nodded. “Do you know the man there?”

“Not really,” I said. “Wilhelm wrote a letter for him once.”

“But he was crazy,” Wilhelm added. “Really odd.”

Hansel nodded again. “A lot of people are really odd.”

“I’m not odd,” I announced.

“You,” Hansel bobbed me on the forehead with his open palm. “Have a stamp on your forehead.”

I laughed. “I have to be delivered somehow,” I told him.

“Ah, yes, that makes sense.” I reclined my neck back and closed my eyes.

Back at the abbey, we had removed the bees with the help of Wilhelm. And Franz was right. They didn’t want to go home because of the fire. So, when we walked them out near their hive, we saw a buzzing cloud hovers just outside the smoke. “We have to put the fire out,” I said.

Johann, Wilhelm, and Franz agreed. The man named Pavel had stayed inside. We sauntered to the back of the tree but the fire itself couldn't be seen. It looked to be just a pile of smoking leaves and twigs.

"No one touch anything. I'm going to grab some water," Wilhelm said. He walked away leaving me with Wilhelm and Franz.

"Do you like it here, Franz?" I asked.

The smoke occasionally drifted between us, so it was hard to make out his expressions at times. Also, it sent him coughing.

"I like it all right," Franz said. "There's good things to like about everything and this is a holy place."

He coughed behind a film of grey.

"We should move out of the smoke," Wilhelm said, "it's getting stronger."

I listened. So did Franz. Outside of the range of smoke was where the bees clustered, but they simply buzzed above us, seeming largely uninterested in our presence.

"Wilhelm's thinking about going to school here." I told Franz.

"I know," Franz replied.

"Do you think he'll like it here?" I glanced at Wilhelm out of the corner of my eye. He was standing distinctly away from me, with his arms crossed and his eyes to the ground.

"I think he'll learn a lot. And I think he'll like that. It's a good chance for an education."

"And you can do a lot with an education?" I asked.

"Oh yes! You can teach. you can discover new things, the way your brother has."

"I see." I looked up at the bees. "It's weird that they don't see us."

Franz walked over to Wilhelm and sat down by his feet.

“Maybe they just want to go home, and they don’t have time for noticing strangers,” he said.

“I have the water!” cried Johann, coming from inside. He carried a bucket and the water sloshed out a bit as he waddled over. “Come here,” he called back to the space behind the tree where the smoke started. “It’s a dying burn.”

“Who started the fire?” I asked. Johann dumped the water onto the leaf pile and the smoke cut out almost instantly.

Johann placed his index finger over his lips. “Don’t tell, it was me,” he leaned in and whispered.

“Why?”

“I needed to know if they were easy to handle. I want to know if they have certain hidden traits too. I want to see how information is passed down from one generation to the next.” Johann reached into his pocket and pulled out his jar with the three bees inside. “Thank you for helping me catch these.”

“Will bees work?”

“I’m not sure. But they should. Or, I hope they will. But,” Johann began walking back to the abbey. “I won’t hurt these bees or anything. I just want to see how easy they are to handle. I still haven’t finished writing that paper on my findings. I’ll likely fill up those journals you and Wilhelm were wearing earlier. Then, I’ll go to Venice.”

“What’s in Venice?” I asked. Wilhelm and Franz followed behind us with a conversation of their own.

“University is in Venice,” Johann replied. “And smart men who I can present my findings to.”

“I hope they’ll like it,” I told him.

“I hope so too.”

The carriage plowed onward, rocking us in and out of sleep. Since half the day was gone by the time it arrived, the sun was setting. The carriage stopped in the space between my house and Wilhelm’s. We stepped out.

“Thank you, Hansel,” I said, exiting.

“Yes, thank you,” said Wilhelm.

The man nodded. “I’ll wait here a bit to see you both get home.”

I hugged Wilhelm. “If you go to that school, I think you’ll have a lot of fun,” I told him.

“Thanks, Tessa.” Wilhelm pulled out of the hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, bye!” I ran off towards my house. Wilhelm did the same. Before I went in, I turned and glanced at the Hotzels’ place. I looked over just in time to see Wilhelm shut the door behind himself. I waved at the mailman. He waved back, then I slipped inside. Back home.