

Secret Speakers and the Search for Selador's Gate

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Chapter 1: Released

The hoomin lay completely still inside a closed wooden box, dark, shallow and wide. For all intents and purposes, she had been dead for nine years. Other than that, she'd had a wonderful childhood—except for a certain bitterness that had taken root in a far off reach of her heart.

A loud horn blast sounded in the distance. She opened her eyes. Two round pools of silver blue hovered in the coffin-like space, and she began to hum a little tune to herself. Very quietly.

It was early morning and still dark from a moonless night. Fair O'Nelli was in the back of her mother's wagon and had been there all night, counting her heartbeats to pass the time. She had waited like a butterfly in its cocoon for dawn to come.

She had dreamt of this moment, for she was officially, as of that morning, thirteen. She was headed for Lambs Tavern to receive her apron of maidenhood. After this day, all would know that she was officially of age, a maiden. No more darkness. No more hiding. No more cold.

Fair was sandwiched uncomfortably between a wooden floor beneath her, (which her head found to be particularly hard) and a false, wooden floor above her (which her nose felt to be painfully close.) This was a necessary discomfort. The reason was simple: the space she lay between needed to be as shallow as possible so no one would suspect it wasn't an ordinary old wagon pulled by a horse and driver. To make the journey more tolerable, her mother had spread out a thin, woolen blanket to soften the bumps and prevent Fair from getting too many splinters.

Her dog, Sauveren, lay above her, surrounded by sacks full of old, fragrant apples. He had whimpered all night, inches above Fair's prostrate body, staying close by, just in case. She had felt helpless to reach out, to cradle his head in her hands, to soothe him. The thin, wooden floor was the first barrier she and her dog had known in nine years, and not feeling him wrapped around her like a blanket was almost painful. Even worse, she'd had to keep silent, swallowing the gust of words that flew constantly from her mouth, gulping down the need to share everything with her dog that entered her mind.

His damp muskiness fell through the cracks like loose soil, along with the fragrance of apples and straw. She took a deep breath in. His warmth seeped through the planks and surrounded her in familiar comfort. She knew it would have to be good enough for a while longer. Fair placed both palms against the wood above her and ventured a whisper, "I know you're there, Sauveren."

At the sound of her whisper, her dog desperately whimpered and sniffed at a crack through the floor just above her face. He scratched desperately at the wood with his claws, as though he were trying to dig a hole in it. Just to lick her hand. Fair put her fingers to the spot and whispered, "Won't be long now." Her reassurance seemed to settle him. He stopped scratching and cocked his head to one side. His throat warbled a melody of questions, beginning high in his throat and working its way downward, until it was low and hesitant. Then he was quiet. The wood groaned and creaked as he lay back down and rested his chin on his paws.

In the darkness, her mother approached the wagon like a drifting cloud, outlined by the faint light of the coming morning. Her name was Lariel. Their neighbor sat in the wagon seat. He was called Gibber Will. He held the reins. He had built the false floor for the wagon that lifted up like a door on hinges if you knew where to pull up on which edge.

"This is as good a time as any," said her mother.

Gibber Will said, "The light's changin' and folks are startin' to head for Osden Shorn. Better be off."

Fair realized she could faintly hear the sound of wagon wheels on dirt in the distance. *Good*, she thought. *We'll be lost in the crowd*. She felt a bump, and her nose almost touched the rough wood above. Her head came down, *ouch*, on the thin blanket beneath her. Dust from above filtered down through the cracks of the wagon and swam in the air around Fair. She held her breath until she couldn't hold it any longer. She felt it settle on her face and arms. On her nose. Without warning, she heard the yelp of a sneeze escape from her mouth and nose. Lariel and Gibber Will's eyes both grew round with fright.

Instinctively, Gibber Will tried to cover up the sound with a series of high-pitched coughs and snorts.

Lariel looked straight ahead while she walked alongside the wagon and whispered as loudly as she dared, "Fair. Keep silent. Please. You've come too far to ruin it now."

"I couldn't help it," Fair whispered.

Lariel casually placed her hand on the side of the wagon and continued to look ahead. She said, "I'm sorry I won't be there to see you. You know, in daylight." To anyone who might be watching, it looked as though Lariel were simply muttering to herself.

Fair whispered reassuringly, "I know."

"You'll come back to me, Fair?" She absent-mindedly adjusted a red scarf tied around her long brown hair. It was the only hint of color she wore. Her ankle-length dress was woven from drab, brown cloth. Her apron, a dull, cream color. Her eyes were large and round. To look at her for the first time, the light of knowing told all strangers she was a good, kind hoomin.

"You don't need to worry, mother. I packed a basket." Fair had filled her basket with a few soft apples, a leather flask of water, a pot of salve in case she got slivers during the ride, and a chunk of coarse, brown bread. It sat at Gibber Will's feet, nice and tidy.

Sauveren got up and went to the side of the wagon. He panted and stared at Lariel through a curtain of morning mist. She reached out and dug her fingers around his ears. He bowed his head so she could give him a really good scratch.

"And Fair . . .?" she paused, while she searched for something else, something final, yet hopeful to say. She nodded when it seemed to announce itself. She said simply, "Emerge."

Fair thought that was an odd word for a farewell. *Emerge?*

Gibber Will ignored Lariel's last comment. "She's right Lariel. No need to worry." Lariel shook off a small laugh.

She smiled and said, "You're a fine one, neighbor, the way you're shivering and shaking like a rabbit."

"Can't help it." Gibber Will wiggled his nose and sniffed. His two front teeth poked out over his bottom lip. "She's just like one of my lammies. Precious, like. And now she's grown up. Feel like I'm losin' her." He pulled a wad of cloth that he pulled from a white, fur-covered purse that hung from a belt below his belly, and used it to dab at his forehead. He had known Fair since she was a baby. In recent years he had felt very protective of her.

"I'll be fine!" Fair whispered. She was giddy with the thought that she'd be able to come and go as she pleased now. She reached out to her side for Sauveren. A habit

born from many years of solitude. She startled when her hand felt nothing but air.
That's right. He's just above me.

“Goodbye, mother.”

Lariel looked around nervously, in case there were unseen ears listening nearby. She said a little more loudly, and rather stiffly, “Thank you for taking in my apples, Gibber Will. It's all I have to give this time.”

She swatted the horse on the rump and the horse quickened its pace. Then she whispered a final word to him, “Keep your ears open for me, will you?”

“I can't never say no. Ts'not in my nature,” he said, and tipped his cap with a shaky hand. He felt the tremble and took a deep breath in to steady himself. He whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “I got the ears to hear anything that don't seem right.” He clucked and made his ears wiggle. This brought a faint smile to Lariel's face.

Gibber Will looked at the changing morning sky and blew a gust of air out with billowed cheeks. “Hyap!” he ordered, giving the reins a jiggle.

Fair felt the wagon lurch with life and she knew she was on her way. Darkness would be her friend for just a while longer.

She gently bit the end of her tongue, determined to keep it squished between her teeth for the rest of the bumpy ride, in case she had the urge to speak. She hadn't lived a life of darkness, damp and cold only to ruin her chance to see daylight now.

Gibber Will gave a cough and looked both ways before passing out of O'Nelli Gate onto Cloven Grave Road that followed the curve of the lake. His was one of a long line of wagons, headed for Osden Shorn.

Cloven Grave was laid out in such a way that most cottages were situated in between the road and the lake. Every cottage was surrounded by a stone fence. Every stone fence was surrounded by a field or an an orchard. Every entrance into the property was guarded by a brightly painted gate, and a hoomin's cottage was referred to by its gate. For instance, Gibber Will's home was called Will's Gate. Harrold King's gate was called, of course, King's Gate.

Harrold King, the venomous imposter of Cloven Grave required that every hoomin who stopped to visit a neighbor must pay an entrance fee at the gate. He had spies placed everywhere to ensure that no one got away with selfish hoarding. He told himself that no hoomin under his royal thumb was going to deprive him of his wealth. If it meant they had to use their precious shackles to visit friends, then so be

it. The consequence of non-payment was having your cottage carted away, stone by stone until you were left with the echo of nothing, hovering in front of you.

The hillsides on the up side of the road were dotted with sheep. The road was edged on both sides with old stone walls, waist high, covered on top and in every crack with thick cushions of moss.

As the furry-hoofed horse and wagon bumped along, the blackish light in the space around Fair changed into dim gray fuzz. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a crack of light in between the wooden planks. Daylight. Freedom. Walking the roads as she pleased. She could hardly imagine it.

The smell of grass wafted into the space around her. She fought the urge to hum. *Today is my becoming day*, she smiled to herself. *I am no longer a wee hoomin*. Fair tugged at her dress, her first dress of color. It felt too tight at the waist and shoulders after wearing a loose, woolen smock and pants for so many years. It just didn't feel right.

Contrary to the law, her mother had not turned everything she made over to Harrold King. She kept one length of pale, peach-colored cloth and painstakingly stitched it into a dress for this very day. Fair wondered what her apron would look like. She had never seen one on a girl wee hoomin. She hadn't seen a girl, or boy wee hoomin for that matter, for nine years.

The wagon bumped along Cloven Grave Road for a long while. Fair could hear the thud of a water jug against the side of the wagon. Gibber Will had fashioned it out of leather that had been soaked in water and oak bark. He had pounded it for an entire day then stitched it into the shape of a pot with a handle on top and two spouts at each end. Once it dried, it was as hard as rock.

Fair licked her dry lips and swallowed. *The water's so close I can hear it sloshing*, she thought. She hadn't had a drink since the afternoon before, a precaution against having to empty herself while in her coffin of liberation. This was an enormous sacrifice for she was always thirsty. She wouldn't be able to have a drink until she was safe within the walls of Lamb's Tavern.

The ride seemed to go on forever, bump, bump, bump. *Ouch, ouch, ouch*. Fair was accustomed to darkness and waiting. She began to content herself, as usual, with the thoughts in her head. She bit her tongue and only pretended that she was sharing them with her dog.

Memories of light.

Memories of laughter.

A father.

A brother.

The memory of her mother's face—pale and frozen stiff with fear—the day she moved Fair down into the cellar. The sound of her mother's voice was frantic as she gripped the door with white knuckles. The words replayed in Fair's mind. "Please, trust me. Know that I love you, so very much." At the time, Fair felt frightened and had no idea what her mother was talking about.

"I know you don't understand. But you will, someday. It will all come clear." She kissed Fair with a yelp of apology, and slowly closed the door as lovingly as she could. *Thud.*

Memories of darkness.

Before she learned to gather light.

There were always two words that popped into her mind when the daydreams started, *Little Sparrow*. They always came with a luminous face—her father's face—framed with dark hair, gentle and kind. A wide, toothy smile.

Remembering the shape of his mouth as he said those words, Little Sparrow, and pulled her close.

They always came with a feeling: Warmth and being surrounded, his large warm hand wrapped around her small and slender one as they walked to the barn.

They always came with a smell, a smell she couldn't quite remember, but it was right there, just beyond the end of her nose.

Warm.

Teasing her.

Little Sparrow.

After some time, Gibber Will relaxed and began to talk to his horse. *Click, click*, went his tongue and cheek. "Atta girl. Won't be long now." He looked as though he had good reason to go into town. The wagon was filled with sacks of last seasons' apples and lots of straw to keep them from bruising. Anyone would assume he and his dog were headed for Osden Shorn with the rest of the hoomin folk.

It was the day of rendering, when all the folks in Cloven Grave were required to bring all that they had grown, milked, raised, plucked or weaved to Harrold King. Harrold King: the governing lender of lodging, the lender of the very pillow you saw when you got in bed, and wondered—oh, silly thought—that it might not be there by

the time you lay your head down because some unseen hand had snatched it away. Harrold King: the lender of the spoonful of porridge poised outside your mouth, the lender of life and breath itself. You knew it didn't belong to you until you swallowed it.

Once it all came into his ownership, he then filled his own belly with it or let it go to rot for pig fodder. Osden Shorn used to be a temple before he took over the rule of Cloven Grave. Now it could be smelled long before you got to it. No one knew what he did with anything that wasn't edible.

Fair froze when she heard Gibber Will say, "Woah." The wagon lurched to a stop. She slid forwards like a corpse, head first. She clapped her hand over her mouth and resisted the urge to ask what was happening..

Fair swallowed. Her wide eyes blinked and searched through the muddy air as she tilted her head this way and that, using her ears to hear the slightest hint of an answer. She heard someone swallow, and it wasn't Gibber Will. Her hearing was exceptional, after so many years in darkness. Fair felt a mouse scurry onto her dress and sit on her thigh. She was used to mice, and liked them quite much, as they had kept her company in the cellar through the years.

A voice said, "Have you eaten today, Gibber Will?"

"Yes, thank you. Have you eaten?"

"I don't believe you, hoomin. You look weak. You're shaking."

"It's nothin. . ." Gibber Will coughed.

Inquiring after someone's health in Cloven Grave never consisted of, 'How are you?' but more importantly, whether or not you had eaten that day. The hoomin folk of Cloven Grave were usually hungry. You wouldn't necessarily know it by the look of their slightly rounded, ruddy cheeks.

Fair heard the voice say, "Just wanted to let you know . . ." there was a pause while the voice looked up and down the road and into the woods, ". . .that the Harrold had himself a dream last night. Dreamt someone was sitting on his throne and it weren't him."

Gibber Will whistled through his two front teeth. With his palms, he smoothed back the clouds of whiskers that grew above his cheeks. They popped out instantly like rebellious tufts of sheep's wool that refused to lay flat.

"Again? Ach, his dreams don't mean nothin'. Pray there won't be another whisking."

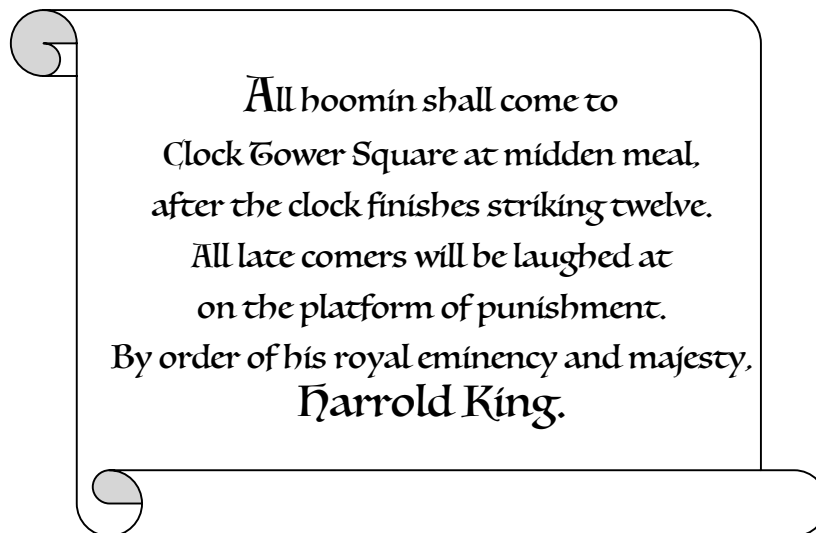
Fair's heart caught in her throat: The whisking. It was a word and a memory she had locked up tightly in a far off place in her heart. But now, there it was again. Spoken: The Whisking. The lock instantly shattered. She bit her bottom lip to keep it from quivering. *Where did Harrold King take my brother?* Her only memory, nine years old and faded, was of a four year-old wee hoomin with a head full of golden curls. She remembered a freckle on his neck beneath his ear, in the shape of a sword, long and dark: A swipe of brown that sometimes frightened her. Her twin brother. The sound of his lisp when he talked.

He was taken because he couldn't reach over his head and touch his ear on the opposite side. She could, so the Protectors assumed she was too old, because—as she heard one of them say—she was growing into her head.

Fair swallowed a lump in her throat and pressed her hand against a rough wooden plank above her. Sauveren pawed and licked the planks as though he knew what she was feeling. *He knows*, Fair thought. *He knows what I'm thinking*. She could smell his furry fragrance and it gave her comfort.

“Nah,” said the voice. “It weren’t a wee hoomin like that other dream. Says this time he’ll know who it is when he sees ‘em. He ain’t telling how. He’s posted a law on the Cries Unia to have everyone come to Clock Tower Square. Have yourself a look-see.”

Gibber Will looked at the trees that lined Cloven Grave Road to find a tree trunk with a Cries Unia, a plaque, hanging from it. He read:



Gibber Will sounded disgusted, “Him an his dreams. Ach. It ain’t even the Harrold’s throne. You and I both know who’s supposed to be sittin on it.”

“Tell *him* that!”

Fair heard the two men laugh. She felt movement on her leg. She felt the mouse’s small claws tickle her skin as it crept along on the fabric of her dress, almost as if it were inspecting it. Then she felt the claws moving in a line along her body towards her head. It crawled onto her neck and sat there for a moment. Its body and tiny feet felt cold on her skin, not warm—a sensation which surprised Fair.

Oh please, she begged silently. *No. Not now*. She didn’t dare raise her arm to brush it away in case she made any noise. She felt a slight, cold pressure as it prepared to move again. *Why is it so cold?* She gulped as she felt it crawl up her chin, across her mouth, and onto her upper lip. Fair could hear the two hoomin talking outside and desperately wished Gibber Will would move along quickly.

Just then, she felt an icy tail tickle the tip of her nose. She moved her lips around frantically, hoping to make it fall off. It dug its claws into her skin and held on. She felt the tip of the tail touch the edge of her nostril, then, to her horror, it slid inside. Then, *no*, she felt it tickle the the edge of her other nostril, almost as though it were daring her not to sneeze. Almost as if it knew.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Payment for passing,” said the voice. “Two blue shackles.”

Fair could feel a sneeze coming. Without thinking she swung her arm up in a sideways arc and grabbed the mouse with a firm grip. But it was too late.

A high-pitched sneeze shot out of her mouth. The force of it slammed her forehead against the ceiling of the wagon, and it made her hand squeeze down on the mouse. She threw it to the side, and heard it splat against the side of the wagon box. It began to make a scratching sound, almost like sandpaper. The only thought in Fair’s mind was why the mouse felt so cold. A shock of realization hit her: it was hairless. The thought made her shudder.

All this happened in an instant. Gibber Will, began a series of high-pitched sneezes in case Fair made any more noise. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that the Protector was watching the dog growl and paw at the wagon floor, sniffing around.

The Protector looked at Gibber Will, “Found himself a mouse, I reckon.”

Gibber Will breathed a silent sigh of relief, snapped open the silver rim of his belly bag and rummaged around for a couple of shackles. Blue ones, about the size of his

small fingernail. He dropped them in the Protector's hand and teased, "My, but you're a mean one!"

The voice laughed, "A Protector's gotta do his job." When Harrold King made himself ruler over Cloven Grave many years earlier, he promptly surrounded himself with 400 hoomin to protect him, giving them the title of Protector. Some of them were local hoomin, others were called in from Low Grave. This one was nice. They all wore burgundy-colored kilts, black caps, and capes that hung over one shoulder.

Fair felt the wagon lurch again. *Ouch*. She knew they'd made it, and she wanted to feel relieved, but a shovelful of fear sat in her stomach. *What was that thing?* She wanted to have a look, so she did something she had done for years: She held her breath until the tip of her first finger began to tingle, then glow.

When the yellow light it cast was bright enough for her to see by, she slid her head to one side, careful not to scrape her ear against the wood above it. She pulled her chin down to her shoulder to see what the creature was. She heard it scuttle down to her feet, where it hid from view. She let her breath out with a frustrated sigh, and her finger stopped glowing. The darkness returned.

Over the years Fair had practiced holding her breath to pass the time, getting to the point where she could hold it for minutes on end. At first, the activity had seemed harmless. But as time went on she felt something begin to change. Soon, she began to feel tiny prickles course through her body. Then, with time, she noticed the prickles direct themselves to her first finger, and not just the finger, but the tip of it. It tingled.

One day (which was really night for the rest of Cloven Grave), Fair was holding her breath and waiting for the tingling to start. To her surprise, she began to see faint shapes: the outline of her blanket, then the glimmer of water dripping down the stones of the cellar wall. At first she didn't believe it. Then, she saw the glint of her dog's eyes staring at her and he licked his chops. She actually saw it happen.

She could see. In the darkness. Without a candle.

Her fingertip tingled so intensely that she looked at it, and discovered with shock, surprise, and fear—all at the same time—that it was glowing like a candle, and vibrating. The skin was a warm, illuminated, yellowish pink, which showed the outline around her fingernail. She shook it quickly, hoping to extinguish it, but wherever her finger passed through the air, it left trails of light.

As the days, months and years went on, Fair occupied herself with drawing intricate landscapes in the air, where they remained for several minutes.

In the wagon, Fair's mind wandered to what Harrold King was going to do about his dream this time. Nine years earlier his first dream had cost her the only brother she had. It had cost her a father. A father she would never see again, she feared. It had cost her friends, sunshine and freedom. But, she consoled herself, he had not been able to steal her light, or stop her from gathering more.

Her mother told everyone Fair was dead. She gave her daughter the protection of death to save her life.

Fair slept in the cold, damp cellar by day. She went out to play with her dog in the death of night when there was no moon to make shadows. Her mother taught her to read from the Scrolls of Truth near a window when the moon was full and gave her enough light to read by.

No candles.

Ever.

Fair understood. Mostly. She was waiting for this day. Mother. Moonlight. Stars. Her mother's voice reading from the Scrolls of Truth while they listened to the tinkling sound of her father's music box, painted with the snow-capped mountains of Mount Rilmorrey,

Knowledge is truth.

Truth is light.

Light is power.

Light invites more light

and banishes that which is dark.

Darkness is another power altogether.

Use your power wisely and well.

Seeing particles of light leap from the sheepskin, parchment pages as she read, feeling them pass through her face, her hands, her arms, her chest—where she felt everything that beat and live within her absorb it thirstily. She was gathering light. She could feel it when it happened. She knew—somehow—it was the same light that tingled and buzzed inside her when she held her breath to see through the darkness.

Neither Fair nor her mother knew when the rays of light would jump from the pages. When they did, her mother quickly closed the curtains and covered Fair with a dark blanket, knowing she'd have enough light to read by, from the pages alone. Fair

sensed her mother's pleasure during those times, knowing that her daughter, if just for a moment, could see. The fact that Fair could use her fingerlight to see by in the cellar, was a secret she kept just for herself, like a treasured belonging that felt more treasured by the very fact it was hers and hers alone.

Fair woke from her daydreams of fingerlit landscapes and reading from the scrolls. The wagon had stopped again.

"Oh no," Gibber Will groaned.

Fair bit her tongue so hard it hurt. She wanted to ask what the matter was, but knew she had to stay silent. Then she heard bleating. *Were those sheep?*

The wagon came to a stop.

Gibber Will whistled through his teeth and muttered, "Ach, we're surrounded front and back by a whole flock of the wee creatures." He was thoughtful for a moment. He craned his neck to look up the road, then looked over his shoulder, at the road behind him.

He reached under his seat and moved Fair's basket aside, then he pulled on a small string that opened a tiny square door into the space beneath him. Fair felt a rush of cool air hit her face. She sucked it in gratefully.

Gibber Will spoke, "It's all clear now, Fair. You alright back there?"

Fair swallowed and quietly said, "I don't think I'd better speak."

"It's alright. It's only sheep in front and behind what don't plan on going nowhere's. So?"

Fair did have something that was bothering her. She began to speak, haltingly, "There's something crawling around me. I don't want it in here."

"Can't help you there, much as I'd like. Hasn't bit you, has it?"

"No. I'm alright." She thought about how it tickled her nose, almost knowingly.

"Fine, then. Anything else?"

Fair knew he liked to hear stories, and better yet, about her dreams. She said, "I had a dream last night, while I slept here in the wagon."

"You did, did you? Good or bad, pray tell?"

"Good. And I remember every part of it, too."

"How about telling ole Gibber Will a story then? I'll warn you when you gotta bite yer tongue. You don't need to worry. Not a bit."