

Fire and Feather

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Fire and Feather

by [nianeyna](#)

Summary

In a small village on the western border of Jkatha, a typical village girl discovers that she is less typical than she ever imagined. (PS I only reposted this for archival purposes, PLEASE DON'T READ IT KTHXBAI.)

Notes

This is my first fanfic ever. Judge accordingly. *hides* Faithfully reproduced exactly as it was [on ff.net](#), unfortunately.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: Festival

A/N: Yay! My first fanfic! Please, please review.

I feel I should warn you, though, that I have no idea whether I'm going to finish this. Junior year looks like it's going to be awful even without all the college and SAT stuff, and I don't write very much in the normal run of things. Then again, I quite enjoyed writing this chapter, so perhaps I will continue it. After all, I'll need something to distract myself with at ten o'clock at night when I'm supposed to be writing an essay on Beowulf.

But enough of this chatter! On to the story!

Run.

She ran, blinded by the thoughts than ran in circles behind her eyes. Branches whipped her in the face, half-seen in the twilight. She didn't care. She stumbled, fell – scrambled to her feet and kept running. Her breath came in sobs, and her heart pounded in her ears. Grass and bracken crackled beneath her feet. No one pursued her, but she ran as if the hounds of hell were snapping at her heels. Today, everything had changed. Everything.

xxx

That morning, she peered out her bedroom window, a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. She'd always loved the Harvest Festival, and this day bid fair to be perfect. The sun was rising into a cloudless blue sky, sending long shadows across the autumn landscape. Some of the villagers were already going about their daily chores, and the rest would be up soon. The farmers outside the village would be awake, of course. Work had to get done, Festival or no.

She turned away from the window, smiling at the sight of her sister, younger than her by a little less than a year, sprawled across the bed. The two of them had been bedmates since they were small, and she was all too familiar with her sister's tendency to take her half out of the middle. She leaped onto the bed in her white nightgown. "Wake up, sleepy!" she called. "It's Festival today!" Her sister opened her eyes and gave her a disgusted look, then rolled over and folded the pillow over her head.

"When will you learn," she said, voice muffled by the pillow, "that Festival is an excuse to get up *later* than usual, *not* earlier."

"Nonsense," she retorted. "Everyone else is up, or will be soon." She paused. Her sister didn't move. "Come on, Clara," she begged. "It'll be so much fun..." She regarded her sister with puppy dog eyes, not particularly caring that Clara couldn't see them from underneath the pillow.

Clara shed the pillow and sat up, glaring at her balefully. "You are altogether too cheerful in the morning, Kaia," she muttered darkly, then louder, "Fine. I'm up."

Kaia yipped with glee, and began to get dressed.

The Festival was a daylong celebration of the first fruits of the autumn harvest. The morning was taken up by cheerful bustle as the village worked together to prepare the feast, which took place in the afternoon. Farmers came from miles around to join the party, and the village was packed to bursting.

Kaia's parents ran the inn, and had a certain rank in the village. As such, they were in charge of creating order out of the general chaos. Her mother supervised the making of the feast, while her father worked out on the village green, setting up trestle tables, clearing people's tools and livestock off the grass, and, of course, building the bonfire.

The bonfire was one of the most beloved aspects of the festival. After the feast, when the sun was going down and everyone was feeling mellow and sated, the bonfire was lit with great ceremony in the enormous fire pit in the middle of the green. It burned far into the night, and everyone sat around it, singing songs, telling tales, dancing, talking, and generally having a good time. The villagers' life was hard. They did not belong to any country, and as such could not count on a monarch for protection. Festivals were some of the only times they could simply relax and have fun.

Their guard could never be completely let down, however. Even on Festival day, volunteers took it in shifts to guard the gate in the palisade surrounding the village. They watched particularly a green shadow to the west. This was the Pelagiris Forest, in which most of the danger of their lives had its root. Out of the Pelagiris came foul creatures, strange weather, and, most frightening of all, magic. Everyone Kaia knew spent their lives fighting the Pelagiris, tooth and nail, simply to stay alive. The forest and everything that came from it were hated and distrusted. Perhaps as a counter to the strangeness that was constantly in sight, Kaia's people very traditional, and deviation from the norm was frowned upon – sometimes more than just that. Kaia remembered when a man from the village, more of a boy really, had begun hearing other people's thoughts.

The day after his talent was discovered, the boy was gone, and no one ever talked about him again.

But today, such things were at the back of people's minds. Everything was flooded with sunlight and laughter, and Kaia was right in the middle of it, helping make meat pies for the feast, greeting all her friends who had come in from the country, and taking her turn watching over the littles. Finally, it was time for the feast. Everyone sat down at the trestle tables with their plate, knife, and spoon, and the goodwives brought out hundreds of covered dishes. Before the meal began, everyone joined hands, and silence fell. Kaia's father, as head of the Council, led the prayer to the God and Goddess. After due thanks had been given to the deities, everyone dug in with a will.

After the first edge of hunger had abated, Kaia giggled and leaned over to Clara, who was sitting next to her. "Brian is staring at you," she whispered in her ear.

Clara glanced up quickly at the handsome miller's son, and flushed bright red. "He is not," she said weakly, then added defensively, "and anyway, I couldn't care less what he does with his eyes."

Kaia grinned. "Right. And I'm a Hawkbrother. Why don't you ask him for a dance, later?"

Clara gave her a pained glance, and Kaia looked innocently back. She herself had never had feelings for anyone, and she enjoyed ribbing Clara about her fancy for Brian.

The feast flew past as Kaia joked with her sister and caught up with some of her country friends. When everyone was full, the gathering broke up for a time as people washed plates and dishes, or went to put on something warmer for the evening. By the time the sun was disappearing behind the horizon, everyone had reassembled on the green for the bonfire. Kaia ended up standing in front, with no one between her and the as yet unlit construction. A little ritual had grown up around the lighting of the fire, in which the mayor of the village brought a torch from the hearth fire at the inn and applied it to a small gap in the tangle of wood built in especially for that purpose.

The mayor trundled off to get the torch and Kaia waited eagerly with the rest of the villagers. A buzz of excited conversation filled the air. Kaia smiled. Everything was as it should be, as it had been every year for as long as she could remember. A bubble of contentment rose inside of her. Then, her smile faltered. Something had changed. The bubble of contentment had turned into a bubble of... something else. Something strange.

She experienced the oddest sensation, as though the world were falling away, or narrowing. The sound of people talking around her faded, and the bonfire seemed to grow larger, until all she knew was the towering stack of fuel, kindling, and tinder before her. She could feel every ridge on the bark of every log, every convolution of every fragment of dried moss. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Fascinated by this sudden clarity, she walked forward until she was inches away from the wood. There was something glowing at the heart of each twig and branch, something bright and beautiful that called to her.

Something else was calling, tugging at the edge of her awareness. *Kaia*. She frowned. Didn't they know she had more important things to concentrate on? She ignored the distraction, and focused again on the life, the... potential... that she could feel so strongly. She knew she could bring that potential into life. She reached out, with her hand and with... something else...

And the bonfire roared to life.

The sheer exhilaration of it coursed through her, and she laughed wildly, insanely. Her arm was surrounded by fire up to the elbow. It flickered over her skin like a lover's caress, warm and intoxicating. She had never felt so alive. She wanted this to last forever.

"KAIA!"

Kaia snapped back into the world as her sister yelled her name again. She snatched her arm from the fire and stumbled away from the suddenly intense heat. A heartbeat passed, and Kaia realized that the noise of cheerful conversation and activity was gone. The only sound on the green was the crackling of the fire.

Tremblingly, she looked around. No one was speaking. No one was moving. Everyone was simply staring at her in utter shock. Faces jumped out at her with painful clarity. The mayor,

standing at the edge of the field, the torch burning forgotten in his hand. A little girl she had watched this afternoon, thumb in her mouth and eyes wide. One of her country friends. And Clara. Her sister, standing right next to her, and looking at her as if she were a stranger.

Slowly, she raised her hand in front of her face. The hand that had called fire. The hand that had been immersed in flame for minutes.

It was not burned.

Magic.

Kaia turned, and ran. The villagers parted before her; their faces followed her flight silently, accusingly. She ran through the village gate, and the guards gaped at her as she passed.

Her footsteps faded into the night.

xxx

She had been running for a long time when she tripped and this time did not get up again. She lay facedown on the forest floor, listening to her breathing slow and her heartbeat return to normal; trying not to think. She was not thinking about the fact that she had nothing to live on and nowhere to go, nor about the fact that she had not paid attention to the direction in which she had run and so had no idea where she was. She lay still, and breathed, and listened to the quiet chirpings and rustlings of the wildlife around her. It was very dark. The twilight had given way completely to night, and the massive trees blocked out even the light of the moon and stars.

Wait. *Trees?*

She was in the Pelagiris.

Kaia jumped up, adrenaline giving her a fresh burst of energy. Her wide eyes strained against the darkness. *Why, oh why didn't I run the other way?* she thought desperately. For a moment she stood there, frozen in indecision, every nerve vibrating with tension.

Then a huge, white shape came swooping out of the darkness towards her.

This sudden shock was too much for her already physically and emotionally exhausted body. A huge, shuddering gasp of pure terror ripped through her chest. Her pulse pounded so hard she thought her heart would burst. Black sparkles swarmed over her vision, and she knew no more.

Now. Review!

Chapter 2: Riversong K'Vala

Chapter Notes

Only one more chapter of this, and then I'm done posting my high school fic. THANK YOU RAPTOR JESUS.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Aaaaaaaaand, Chapter Two is up! Finally! I'm so sorry it took so long, mostly that was because NaNoWriMo interrupted me in November. Anyway, now for some reviewer replies:

Neverfall: Could you run me through that Pelagirs/Pelagiris thing again? I am ashamed to say that I have not yet read Vows and Honor *is embarrassed* Until I do, I hope you guys will bear with me if I make any mistakes. And yes, it is a bondbird, although you don't see her in this chapter because she didn't fit. You'll probably meet her next chapter.

vaega: The story takes place just outside the western border of Jkatha. The time period is somewhere between Vows and Honor and Arrows.

To the rest of you lovely reviewer people, I love you and pet you and give you virtual cookies. You will all have good karma for life and go to Heaven, Summerland, Valhalla, or (insert idyllic afterlife of your choice). That goes for anyone who reviews on this chapter, too.

Disclaimer: I realized I neglected to do one of these last chapter. Please don't sue me! Anyway, the characters belong to me; the wonderful world of Velgarth belongs to Mercedes Lackey. I am not making money off of this. If I were, I wouldn't have to get a job. I repeat: please don't sue me.

Okay, story time.

Kaia woke suddenly and completely to the sound of birdsong. She was warm and lying on something soft and comfortable. Not in the forest anymore, then. How had she gotten here, wherever here was? She didn't open her eyes. She didn't *want* to know where she was, not for a few minutes more anyway. After... what had happened... life would be completely different. Her mind shied away from the thought.

For her entire life, she had always known what would happen to her, what was expected of her. She would marry a nice boy, someone like Brian the miller's son. She would cook and clean and raise children. She would gossip and glare mistrustfully at outsiders with the rest of the village women. She might even be on the Village Council like her mother. It was a comfortable sort of life, and Kaia had never wanted anything else.

A tide of self loathing rose within her. *She* had ruined that life, herself. She'd destroyed everything she'd ever wanted when she had reached out to that fire. She shuddered as she

thought of the exultation, the thrill she'd felt last night. It frightened her that there was something like that inside her. A tear slipped down her cheek. It had been there all along, she thought, coiled within her, waiting for its moment. Well, its moment had come. And now she could never go home again.

Kaia sighed. She had to face the world sometime. She pushed her worries to the back of her mind and tried to focus only on practical concerns, like finding out where she was and how she was going to keep herself. Then she took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

The first thing she noticed was the sunlight flooding in from somewhere behind her. It was oddly muted, though, sort of - green. It cast dappled shadows over the bit of wooden floor and corner of rug that were all she could see of the room from her horizontal vantage point. She would find out nothing just lying here.

Kaia sat up slowly, wiping her eyes. A heavy weight fell from her shoulders into her lap. She looked down and saw that it was a thick, soft wool blanket, patterned in different shades of blue. She was sitting in a large, comfortable bed pushed up against one wall of a medium sized room. She was still wearing her Festival dress, she noticed, and took some comfort in that fact. The fabric was rumpled and torn in several places from her headlong flight, but it was still presentable. She smoothed the familiar fabric, indulging in a moment of nostalgia. She felt tears gathering at the backs of her eyes again, and shook them away impatiently. *Don't think about home*, she instructed herself. *Just take one thing at a time*. Then she hopped out of the bed in a quick, decisive motion.

She felt a little shock of cold as her feet touched the floorboards and realized, with very little surprise, that whoever had put her in the bed had removed her shoes first. This led naturally to the thought, *Who did bring me here?* Her hands trembled a little, and the weight of her situation threatened to come crashing down on her. One thing at a time, she reminded herself, taking a shaky breath. There were her shoes, on the floor at the end of the bed. As she put them on, she looked around.

The entire room - walls, floor, and ceiling - was constructed of smooth, honey colored wood. It was saved from monotony by the exotic looking feathered masks hanging on the walls and the rug Kaia had spotted earlier, a large rectangle with a dizzying, maze like design, full of complicated spirals which changed into sharp zig zags with no apparent reason. Fascinated, Kaia tried to follow the pattern with her eyes for a few headachy moments, quickly becoming lost in swirls of blue and green. Then she shook herself and looked around for the door.

She had a moment of panic when she realized that there *was* no door. *There has to be a door*, she thought blankly, eyes scanning the room. *How did I get in here, else?* But it was true. The only opening she could find was the window by the head of the bed, the source of the dappled sunlight.

She stood frozen in confusion for a full minute before she noticed something in the corner. There was a ring set into the floor, and the floorboards lay in the opposite direction in a square around it. *Oh*, she thought, relaxing a little, *a trapdoor. Strange...*

She looked at the trapdoor askance, then shook her head and went over to the window. It was comfortably sized, the sill about level with her waist. It was glazed, she noticed, but - not

with glass. She touched the substance curiously. It was clear like glass, but oddly yielding, somehow. She had no idea what it could be, so she put it to the back of her mind. Then, hesitantly, she rested her hands on either side of the sill and looked out.

At first she could make no sense of what she was seeing. A bewildering mass of color spread out all around her, even below her. It was mostly green, but there were vivid streaks of red, orange, and yellow as well. Her brow furrowed in puzzlement until her brain caught up with her eyes and the sense of what she was seeing clicked into place. Trees. She was surrounded by trees, which were changing color due to the onset of autumn. *I suppose I am still in the Pelagiris then.* She felt a little thrill of fear, but quashed it relentlessly. It would do no good to panic. It was odd, though. She had not expected the Pelagiris to be so... civilized. This room could belong to any of the houses in her village. Well, except for the masks and the trapdoor and the odd carpet. She was musing on this when something struck her.

There were trees below her?

Her hands clenched convulsively around the window ledge and she began to hyperventilate. "Oh," she said faintly. "High up." She was feeling slightly delirious. "*Very* high up."

"I hope you are not afraid of heights," said an amused, faintly accented female voice from behind her. "It is difficult to be so, if one is to be among the Taledras for any length of time."

Kaia spun around, overbalancing in the process and sitting down hard on the floor. She stared, wide eyed, at the person who was climbing through the trapdoor, feeling her heart beating in her throat from surprise. Some detached part of her brain reflected that she had had far too many surprises in the last day or so.

The newcomer, who was half turned away from Kaia, finished climbing out of the trapdoor and let it drop gently down into its place. Then she turned around.

"Oh," she said, upon seeing Kaia's expression of utter shock and her rather awkward position on the floor. "I am sorry," she continued. "I did not mean to startle you." The corner of her mouth was twitching oddly.

Kaia opened her mouth, and then closed it again. She found herself quite incapable of speech. Besides the shock of the stranger's unexpected entrance, Kaia was struck dumb by the fact that this was decidedly the oddest looking person Kaia had ever seen.

She was wearing a fitted tunic and trousers, both a uniform mottled brown and green. Though a shirt and trousers was a shirt and trousers anywhere, their cut was quite different from anything Kaia had ever seen, and Kaia's homemaking eye automatically noted its advantages over the design used in her village. Her hair hung stick-straight to her shoulders, and - Kaia looked closer - was also mottled green and brown. *It must be dyed*, she decided after a moment, though she couldn't imagine why anyone should want to do such a thing to their hair. It wasn't just her clothes that were startling, however. Her physical appearance was strange, too, so strange that Kaia couldn't begin to guess at her age. She was significantly taller than Kaia; indeed, she would have overtopped most men from the village. Her facial structure was sharply defined, and her eyes were a startling blue. Her exotic appearance was

markedly different from the muddy brown eyes and slightly snubbed features Kaia was used to.

And then there was that strange expression on her face. When Kaia finally realized what it was, pure indignation overcame her amazement.

"You're *laughing* at me," she accused in a disbelieving tone.

The stranger froze, trembling with suppressed emotion, and then burst out into peals of merry laughter. Kaia scrambled to her feet, angered and hurt by this display. The stranger leaned against the wall and wiped her eyes, still shaking with laughter. "I am sorry - sorry!" she managed to get out between chuckles. "It's just - you looked so *silly*..."

Kaia felt her face turning red in a combination of ire and embarrassment, and was suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to cry. She had no idea where she was or what was going to happen to her, she was far away from her home and everything she had ever known, and now this - this *person* - was *laughing* at her.

Kaia stood there in indecision, clenching her fists and feeling more miserable by the second. The other woman's chuckles died down, and she stood away from the wall. Then she caught a good look at Kaia's face.

"*Oh*," she said, sobering instantly. She took a small step forward and held out a hand. "I am sorry," she repeated in a completely altered tone.

Kaia folded her arms and glared, trying to hold back the tears pricking her eyes. She would not cry. She would *not* cry.

"I think we - how do you term it? - got off on the wrong foot," the woman continued, smiling at Kaia encouragingly. "Let us begin again. I am Riversong K'Vala." She continued to hold out her hand. She really did look sorry.

Kaia loosened her posture slightly. "Kaia Fletcher," she said shortly.

A rather astonishing smile lit up Riversong's face, making her blue eyes sparkle. It changed her face completely; she looked altogether less forbidding. "Come down and have something to eat then, Kaia" she invited.

Kaia, caught off guard, was unsure how to answer until a loud, sustained rumble from her stomach decided the question for her. "I suppose," she said uncertainly.

"Come, then," Riversong said, turning about and lifting the trapdoor by its ring. She disappeared down it, and after a moment Kaia followed, awkwardly descending the curving stair that followed the wall. They passed through another room, smaller than the bedroom, which appeared to be a study of some sort. Then they came out into another room, larger than the first two. The spiral shape of the dwelling was much more noticeable in this room, which was visibly curved along its length.

There were raised platforms covered with pillows scattered about the room. Riversong seated Kaia on one of them. A cheerful looking wood stove took up one corner, and Riversong went over to this, taking a pan from the top of it. "I made this for my lunch, but you can have it," she said, pouring the contents of the pan into a wooden bowl. "You look famished."

Riversong set the gently steaming bowl before her. Kaia looked at it dubiously. It appeared to be curds of some kind, heavily spiced. The steam drifted to her nose. It did not smell at all unappetizing, and her stomach gave another grumble. She took a tentative bite, and her eyes widened a little. Soon she was digging in with a will, as Riversong watched with a bemused expression. Kaia concentrated on the food. It was good, but so different from the food at home... *Don't think of that*, she scolded herself. *You can never go back. This is your life now.*

"You *aren't* afraid of heights, are you?" Riversong asked anxiously after a moment, breaking the silence.

Kaia swallowed. "No," she answered truthfully. She had climbed trees before, after all, and it had never bothered her. "I have never been up quite this high, though." *Understatement*, she thought, then, "Exactly how high are we?"

Riversong shrugged. "Something over a hundred feet. My *ekele* is high up for a scout's, but it is nowhere near the height of some of those in the Vale."

This had been said in an entirely offhand manner, but Kaia once again found herself struck speechless. Part of her mind was thinking, distantly, *This "isn't very high"?* and another, more immediate part of her was thinking, *Wait a minute...* "How on earth did I get up here?" she exclaimed. She scooped up some more of the porridge, and looked down in surprise when her spoon came up with nothing in it. She put the empty bowl down on the floor and waited for Riversong's answer.

Riversong laughed. "I have a basket," she explained. "For when I need to get large burdens up here. It works by a system of pulleys." She leaned forward, suddenly intent. "How did you end up in the forest, anyway? It's important - the Elders will want to know. And where did you come from? You need to get back - you shouldn't be here in the first place."

Kaia stiffened, and did not meet Riversong's eyes. "I cannot go back," she said flatly, in a hollow, dead voice. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Riversong sit back, startled.

"Well," Riversong said blankly, "I mean - you can't just *stay* here." The atmosphere in the room had gone from cautiously friendly to miserable and tense in the space of a few words.

"Why not?" Kaia asked dully. "If you send me away, I have nowhere else to go." She looked up at Riversong, feeling tears sliding down her cheeks as she finally lost the battle to hold them back. "Do you think I wouldn't rather be home? Do you think I *want* to throw myself on your mercy? Do you think I want to live in the Pelagirs, of all places?" She laughed bitterly, and the sound was half a sob. "But then, maybe this is the best place for me, after all. I'm not - I'm - I'm - *bad!*" She drew in a shuddering breath and put her head down in her hands. Her shoulders shook uncontrollably, and tears of misery leaked from between her fingers. It was too much – she was afraid of everything, afraid of living here, afraid of not being able to live here, afraid of herself. She couldn't take it anymore.

She rocked back and forth, crying harder and harder. She dimly heard Riversong trying to comfort her, but everything seemed very far away. Her pain and fear and self hatred seemed to be spiraling down and down and taking her with them, until finally she felt something snap.

Riversong gave a yell, and Kaia looked up, startled. Her tears dried up in shock as she saw that the wooden bowl she had eaten out of was ablaze, hot flames shooting up three feet and more into the air.

Kaia stood up convulsively, grabbed the pillow she had been sitting on, and began beating at the bowl vigorously to put out the fire. Riversong helped her, bringing water from a barrel by the door, but it seemed forever before they succeeded and the bowl was just a smoldering lump of coal. They stared at each other across it, eyes wide.

"Well," Riversong said finally, looking dumbstruck, "I suppose you could stay for a *little* while longer, anyway."

So, was it good? Awful? Did you have any idea what was going on? Press that little colorless button and let me know! All reviewers get triple chocolate cake, my sister made some today and it smells absolutely delicious. You know you want some, so review.

P.S. Does anyone know how to make those line break thingies? I'm getting really tired of typing all those x's.

Chapter End Notes

oh bb!Nia, why so many italics?

Chapter 3: Conversations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A/N: So, this has actually been sitting around in my notebook for a while, so I decided to finish typing it up and edit it for your consumption. I apologize for the extremely sporadic nature of this story, but it's really more for me than it is for you, which basically means that I update whenever I feel like it. Hey, that's what makes it exciting! Okay, on with the show.

Disclaimer: Me no owney. I sure you all understand.

Riversong had made them both cups of hot, strong tea – *at least tea is the same*, Kaia thought gratefully – and now, it appeared, she wanted to Talk.

Kaia curved her hands around the warm mug and looked studiously into its murky depths, avoiding Riversong's gaze. They were seated across from each other on cushions that had escaped the fire unscathed. Seconds slipped by. Riversong looked at Kaia. Kaia swirled her tea around, blew on it, and took a sip. Then she returned to studying the dark, steaming liquid, as though something vital could be learned from the fine dusting of dark tea leaves floating around at the bottom of the cup.

"So," Riversong said finally. Kaia started. The movement caused concentric ripples to disrupt the surface of her tea. She reluctantly tore her eyes away from this fascinating effect and fixed them on Riversong's face.

"I didn't mean to," she said, in a very small voice.

Riversong stared at her. "Of course you didn't!" she replied, sounding startled. Then, "Wait. You have no idea - do you? You don't know what's happening here." She looked puzzled. "But how can you not - oh. Of course. You're from one of those border villages. The ones that hate magic." While Kaia was still reeling over how this woman could dismiss her entire worldview with a few careless words, Riversong continued in a low voice, speaking more to herself than to Kaia. "So you would never have learned - yes, that explains why you were so upset."

"Upset?" Kaia asked disbelievingly, breaking into Riversong's thoughts. The other woman blinked at her vicious tone. Kaia surged to her feet, furious. "I lit a *bonfire* in the middle of my village. With my *mind*. And - and I enjoyed it." Riversong looked blank, and Kaia wanted to take her shoulders, shake her, make her understand. She held herself in place by an effort of will, fists clenched, trembling. "That was the worst part," she continued desperately, her voice rising, "it felt good. And m-magic is evil; I know that, even if you don't, even if you sit there and dismiss it like there's nothing wrong with it!" She glared at Riversong, who looked taken aback by her outburst. *She doesn't understand at all*, Kaia thought despairingly, and once again she felt very far away from home.

"God and Goddess!" she said bitterly, after a short space during which some of her anger faded to dull resignation. Riversong said nothing, just stared at her with wide, shocked blue eyes. "All I ever wanted was a normal, peaceful life, and now it turns out I'm some sort of freak. So you say you know what's happening to me? Well, you're right, I don't know, and I don't want to. I want it gone. Make it go away, destroy it - burn it out, I don't care. Just get rid of it, and I'll leave your bloody forest and start my life over somewhere else." She refused to think that there might not be anywhere else for her to go. She'd survive. She had so far, hadn't she? And if she didn't, well, then she'd die, and she wasn't entirely sure that that would be such a bad thing.

There was an even longer pause this time. Kaia stared silently at the floor, feeling Riversong's eyes on her. After a time she sensed movement, and she looked up to see Riversong getting slowly to her feet.

"Kaia," she said gently, but quite firmly, "sit down." Kaia sat. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. "Drink your tea," Riversong continued, pushing the forgotten mug into her hands. "Kaia," she said, still in a gentle voice, "what you have is a Firestarting Gift."

"Gift-?" Kaia began to say heatedly, but Riversong held up a hand, her ice-blue eyes boring into Kaia's brown ones. Kaia gulped and shut up. She suddenly felt very young.

"You cannot 'get rid of it'," Riversong said quietly. "Neither can you ignore it." She held Kaia's eyes solemnly. "You must - must - learn to use it."

"What?" Kaia yelped, unable to contain herself. "Learn to - I don't want to use it. I don't want anything to do with it!"

"You do not have a choice!" Riversong snapped. Kaia shrank back onto her cushion, clutching her mug of tea. "If you do not learn to control this, *it will kill you*. And probably anyone else who happens to be near you, as well! Goddess of my mothers! Have you any idea how dangerous an untrained Firestarting Gift is?" She stared at Kaia uncompromisingly, and Kaia looked back, frightened, unable to look away. Riversong's lips thinned and she said in a flat voice, "no, I suppose you don't, at that."

There was a short, ugly silence, while Riversong continued to hold Kaia's eyes with hers. Finally she looked away with a sigh, and Kaia drew a breath of relief, feeling as if she had been released from a spell. "There is nothing wrong with your Gift," Riversong said tiredly. "I know you do not believe me, but it is the truth. Think on it." She climbed to her feet with a sigh. "I have to patrol," she told Kaia. "I'll be back in a few hours. Will you be all right here?"

Kaia nodded, unable to speak.

"Good. I'm sorry to leave you alone, but I have my duties. Feel free to make use of anything you find here."

She hesitated, then placed a hand on Kaia's shoulder. "I am sorry," she said. "The awakening of a Gift can be difficult, even for those accustomed to the notion. I can only imagine what it must be like for you." Then she turned silently and walked away.

She paused at the door, half turning to look over her shoulder. The sparkle of mischief was back in her eyes. "Do try not to burn the house down while I'm away," she said slyly. Then she was gone.

For an immeasurable amount of time Kaia simply sat where she was, her mind curiously blank. She thought of nothing at all; not fires or Festivals or Riversong's words. The light from the window to her right traveled slowly across the floor and up the wall.

Finally she came back to herself, feeling somewhat stiff and cold from having sat still for so long. She stood up, stretched, and walked across to the window. The light that filtered through the trees was dimmer now, heralding the end of the day. *So it's been almost a whole day since - the bonfire.* Kaia shook her head. It seemed impossible that less than a day ago she had been a normal village girl, one who didn't have to worry about this - whatever it was.

Her mind wanted to skitter away again, skirt around the issue. She frowned and forced herself to confront it. She had to decide upon a course of action. *Action?* gibbered a large part of her brain. She didn't want action. She wanted to go somewhere and hide until this was all over and she could go home again. *But Riversong said that I can't ignore it...*

Kaia snorted softly. *She tells me there's nothing wrong with it at the same time she tells me it's going to kill me.*

She leaned her elbows on the window sill and dropped her head into her hands with a sigh. She had to admit that that wasn't entirely fair. *She said it would only kill me if I didn't learn to use it.* Kaia realized, with a little bit of surprise, that despite everything that had happened, she didn't want to die. And that meant the only choice was... *No!* Kaia closed her eyes and knotted her hands in her hair. *There must be... why should I trust Riversong, anyway?*

What?

Why *should* she trust Riversong? After all, Riversong was a Hawkbrother. And Hawkbrothers were, they were - *But Riversong could have left me to die. She could have even killed me herself. The Hawkbrothers don't like trespassers.* But instead, Riversong had expended considerable effort to lodge her safely in her own home. That didn't seem like the action of someone who meant ill. That didn't necessarily mean that Riversong was telling the truth, though. *Didn't it? Why should she lie about something like that?*

Because she wants to use me. Use my... Gift, somehow.

But what could she possibly want to use it for? And Riversong seemed... safe. Kaia liked her.

What? No! Riversong was a Hawkbrother. And Hawkbrothers were evil and immoral and untrustworthy. Weren't they? Well, weren't they?

Kaia struggled. She tried to think of Riversong as evil, and found that she couldn't. Riversong had rescued her, fed her, given her a place. And she knew about this - thing. If the knowledge she had shared was not what Kaia wanted to hear, what of it? Riversong hadn't made the world. It wasn't her fault.

Kaia tried to put her thoughts in some kind of order. The world had always seemed so steady and sure, but now everything she thought she knew, and everything she thought she was, was changed forever. It was too much. She couldn't make sense of it all.

She thought of leaving the forest like she'd told Riversong she would, leaving the first shaky foundations of a new life that she'd found, and going out into the world to find someplace, someday, to live. *I'll die*, she realized with a shudder. It was only sheer lucky chance that she was not dead already. Suddenly the strange tree-house became a haven and the odd Hawkbrother the best friend she'd ever had. There never had been any choice, really.

So I'll stay, she thought, *I'll stay and learn to be a Hawkbrother*. She started to laugh. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. She laughed until tears poured down her cheeks, and she didn't know if she was laughing or crying anymore, and she didn't really care.

After a time she calmed down and wiped her cheeks. The last gleams of light were fading. Her stomach muscles hurt.

There was a faint noise behind her. *I suppose that's Riversong back, then*. She took a deep breath and turned around.

A confusion of movement - a huge white shape - the impression of a wicked hooked beak and glittering eyes -

:*Hello*: said a voice, :*Newfriend?*:

The words seared through her mind, seemingly etched in jagged lines of glowing red. She clapped her hands over her ears and screamed at the pain.

xxx

Riversong sighed as she climbed down the ladder of her *ekele*. *You've really done it this time*, she thought. *See where helping Outlanders gets you*. Now she had an emotionally traumatized Outland girl on her hands, one with an untrained Firestarting Gift. Riversong winced inwardly. Put baldly like that it sounded even worse. She really *was* worried about coming back to find a fire-gutted *ekele*. Unfortunately, she hadn't really had any choice but to leave the girl. She'd seemed a little calmer – or at least too shocked to do much – after Riversong's speech, though, and hopefully with some time to herself to think she would come around.

Yes, this time I think you've gone too far, she chastised herself, landing catlike on the forest floor. Her whims were the stuff of legend in the Vale, but they were usually harmless flights of fancy, like the time she decided that it would be a good idea to decorate the outside of Elder Forestglade's *ekele* as a surprise present for his fiftieth birthday.

A familiar white shape landed on a branch above her, and she looked up. :*Whysad?*: Cori asked. :*Newfriend!*:

Riversong laughed at the owl, feeling a combination between amusement and exasperation. "What is this?" she asked in mock surprise. "Usually you're the one telling me *not* to do

things. Now you're positively egging me on! First you convince me to bring the girl home with us, and now you want to be friends? Your enthusiasm could get us in a lot of trouble, you know."

Cori swiveled her head around and looked innocently into the distance. Riversong snorted. "Well, come on, bird," she said. "We've work to do."

She walked the forest trails in silence for a minute or two. Then a large man in forest camouflage materialized by her side.

He gave her one look. "Out with it," he said. "What have you done this time?"

"Am I that transparent?"

He snorted. "Only to me, my dear. I've known you for far too long."

Indeed, she had been assigned to Summertree as a new scout, and they had been partners ever since. He tended to view her escapades with amusement. She only hoped that he would feel the same about her latest adventure.

"Well – I was on my way home last night, and Cori found someone. An Outlander. Unfortunately she fainted when she saw Cori, so I couldn't ask her any questions, so I – I took her home with me."

Summertree just looked at her.

"She's only a fledgling!" Riversong defended herself. "What was I supposed to do, just leave her in the forest to die?"

"Perhaps not," the big man conceded. "But you know, she can't stay here." When Riversong didn't say anything, he gave her a sideways look. "Riversong," he said suspiciously, "what is it?"

"I – well – she's an untrained Firestarting Gift," Riversong said in a rush. "A strong one, I think. She says she lit a bonfire in her village. By accident. You know how the villagers are – they won't accept her back. They probably *shouldn't*. She's a danger to others until she's trained. Summertree – someone has to train her."

Summertree closed his eyes briefly. "Oh, *ke'chara*," he sighed.

"There was nothing else I could do!" she repeated. It struck her that this was probably going to get her into more trouble than anything else she'd ever done, and it wasn't even really her fault.

"No, I suppose there wasn't, at that." He gave her a considering look. "Very well, I'll argue your case with the Elders. It wouldn't be the first time that an Outlander was accepted into a Vale, though certainly it doesn't happen very often. The Elders will come around. Probably."

:Kaia is good: Cori interrupted unexpectedly, her mind voice serene. *:They will see. Little chick needs help. Give.:*

Riversong shook her head. *:I don't share your faith in the Elders' generosity, featherbrain,:* she said. Not that the K'Vala elders were harsh or inflexible. But Outlanders were Outlanders, and this one represented a particularly knotty problem. A powerful, untrained Firestarter in a forest was no joke.

"They have two choices," she said. "They can either kick her out or agree to give her training."

"And it's the latter that you want," Summertree stated.

"Well – yes. Making her leave is – rather unethical. Both because it's incredibly unfair to Kaia and because it means dumping the problem on someone else. We're best equipped to help her. And, also – she's only a girl, Summertree, and she's so afraid. She doesn't have any idea what's happening to her. Goddess – she thinks her Gift is evil. We can't just leave her on her own.

"Well, at least you're decided," Summertree murmured. "I only hope the Elders share your opinion."

As always, all reviewers are loved and cherished muchly.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, so many italics. Anyways, thank goodness that's done. In case you hadn't already figured it out, the likelihood that this will ever be finished is rapidly approaching zero. Um. Sorry.

End Notes

I think this is my longest published work to date. That's depressing.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!