

There is dissent on the council. The secret and power of a people thought lost but merely hidden is revealed.

Hope Lost
By Renee W. Peek

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The background of the cover is a vast, arid desert landscape. In the upper portion, there are dark, rugged mountains under a pale, hazy sky. The middle section shows a wide, flat expanse of golden-brown sand. In the center of this flatland, a single, dark, leafy tree stands as a lone figure. The foreground is filled with small, scattered desert shrubs and rocks.

hope lost

BOOK 6

Renee W Peek

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Chapter 1

“You look horrible.”

Nadia sat on the couch trying to get comfortable. “Wow Jimmi, those are always the words a girl loves to hear.” This pregnancy had been a challenge every step of the way for her.

Jimmi tried to apologize but in the style that is Jimmi, “Sorry, but I mean look at you, skinny as a rail, pale as can be, you look older than me.”

Sophia tried to get her to stop talking. “Maddison, why don’t you take Jimmi and Tam and help Noah put away the supplies we brought?”

Maddy smiled as she took Jimmi by the hand and led her from the room so the healer could see to her patient. Once they left the room Sophia could address Nadia’s health. “I hate to add on to Jimmi’s assessment but you’re not looking well. What’s been going on?”

Nadia leaned back on the couch and pulled her feet up. “The morning sickness is unrelenting. I thought this was supposed to last like three months. It’s been seven and counting.”

Sophia continued probing, “Have you been eating at all? It looks like you’ve lost another four or five pounds bringing your total to over 20.”

Nadia confessed, “I have two states, either I am repulsed by the sight smell and even the mention of food, or I am ravenous

and will eat anything I can get my hands on. Unfortunately, that does not stay with me long.”

Sophia was getting concerned, “How about water? Are you able to keep that down?”

Nadia was pleased to share the one good thing, “Yes, water is comforting, and my body always welcomes it.”

Sophia had one more question, “Are you getting sleep?”

Nadia was hesitant, “I sleep a lot, not all at one time, but often.”

Sophia could see the subterfuge, “You didn’t answer my question, so I am going to assume you are not sleeping well.”

Nadia was teary, “No I’m not. I fall asleep for no more than 15 minutes and then I wake. I’m miserable here and I’m terrified. Please Sophia, tell me if the baby is suffering too.”

Sophia hugged her patient, “I could tell from the time I touched your hand, your daughter is healthy and growing, no worries for her. But I have heard enough to be very concerned for you.” Sophia shouted to the other room for Noah. He rushed in looking pale and thinner himself.

Sophia knew she would need to do something about that as well, but Nadia’s needs first. “Noah, I need you to go the hospital right away.”

She could see the panic in his eyes. “Easy, relax I just want you to get some supplies from Ethan. I need to get some nutrients

into your wife as soon as I can. I'll call ahead so he will have everything ready by the time you get there. Now off you go."

Sophia reached into her bag and pulled out an injector and a bottle that looked like it was filled with tea. "I want to give you a vitamin shot, and I put together this herbal mix with some other nutritional supplements. It is almost tasteless, extremely bland to say the least. It may be something you can keep down.

"Now I've sent Noah for some intravenous nourishment. It will get you what you need so you can keep up with what this little girl is taking from you. When he gets back, I can lay you to sleep while I administer it, then I can see to your husband. It looks like your distress is affecting him as well."

Nadia sipped on the beverage Sophia made, "He's fussing over me and worrying himself sick. Then of course I worry about him, and he worries about me worrying about him, and so on and so on. It's not good."

Sophia grinned, "I think we can take care of that pretty easily. But I am not going to trust you to call me if things get worse. You should have told me about this days ago, and not waited for my regular visit. One of us will come every day from here on. Do you understand?" Nadia nodded.

Sophia could see she was exhausted. "Now take a big swig of that and I am going to help you sleep now."

Nadia followed the healer's orders, Sophia laid her hands on the weak shaky woman, she was out in seconds. Sophia

contacted Ethan and told him what supplies she would need before she joined the others.

Maddy was filling the shelves with the food they brought. Jimmi was cleaning, while Tam was pouring tea. They all watched as Sophia took a mug and sat down at the table. “Her condition is concerning. Are you ladies willing to help keep an eye on her and Noah?”

Jimmi was first to respond, “We’ve already set a schedule. Maddison will spend the night tonight and give Noah a chance to catch up on his sleep. Tam has just made several meals for him. No effort for him and there should be no aromas to upset Nadia.”

Maddison continued, “He looks like he has lost nearly 15 pounds. He probably doesn’t want to make his wife miserable, so he goes without too.”

Tam finished, “They’re both going to be so wrung out when that little girl comes, they won’t be able to manage at all.”

Jimmi took on a more serious tone, “Sophia is the baby all right?”

The healer was able to assuage their fears, “Healthy as can be, growing and active right on schedule. No worries on that front at all.”

All three women were visibly relieved. They were able to join Sophia at the table and drink their tea. They sat in silence enjoying each other’s company. The arrival of Oriana and Noah surprised them all.

Oriana rushed inside, “What’s the matter with Nadia? Is it the baby?”

Sophia stood up intercepting her before she flew into Nadia’s room. “Slow down, she’s just having trouble keeping food down and struggles to sleep. I wanted to stop things *before* we have a problem. How did you get involved in this?”

Oriana handed Sophia the supplies from Ethan. “I was visiting Isabella at the hospital and Noah ran in saying you were worried about Nadia. I brought him back here.”

Tam jumped at that, “Why is Isabella at the hospital?”

Oriana explained, “No, no, no, she and Ethan were preparing some herbal remedies, I just had some questions for her.”

Maddy tried to get everyone back to a state of calm. “So Nadia is in good hands, Isabella is fine and well. Can everyone just sit and have some tea, settle, soothe, and quiet. Please Noah and Oriana, join us.”

Sophia took the supplies and saw to Nadia while the rest helped ease Noah’s worries.

Oriana had some information to that end. “Pelayo women all have trouble with pregnancy. I was miserable for all three of my children. It’s fortunate that the pain and agony is erased the moment you hold that warm little bundle and look into those eyes. My youngest swore her entire first pregnancy she would never go through it again. She had four children.”

Noah appeared to relax a bit. Oriana continued, "Maddison it's fortunate I ran into you. Biza is beside herself with excitement about the ricing party. You're still doing that right?"

Maddison's eyes sparkled at the thought. "Without fail, we should be ready in two weeks time. Katie seems to want to be in charge this year so that should make things more interesting.

"She explained to me that she will demonstrate how it's done to any new commers, to make sure they do it right. We're excited to have Biza and Quinn attend."

Jimmi was interested in that couple, "How is Biza doing on Didymo, settling in?" Oriana laughed, "Those two are so enamored I don't think she is even aware she's on a new planet. Right now they only care about each other. I'm so happy for them both."

Sophia came out of Nadia's room. She went straight to Noah. "She's asleep and I have the supplement dripping in. I'm ordering you to eat and go to bed. Maddison and I will stay till the IV is done and Maddy will spend the night, so you have no worries about Nadia.

"You need to be strong for her and you can't do that if you don't take better care of yourself. Do you hear me, Noah Stevens?"

His relief was visible, "Ma'am, yes ma'am."

Jimmi arranged a plate of food for the young man while Tam and Oriana prepared to leave. Tam asked Oriana to give her

best to Isabella, “I haven’t had a chance to see her for a while. Please let her know I miss our talks.”

Oriana was happy to oblige, “I know she’s been very busy with council business of late. She’s close with many members and is often called on to translate on this and other worlds. Actually that’s why I wanted to see her. In some ways she knows the council better than I. Maddison put a bug in my ear about something a while back and I can’t seem to let go of it.”

Tam feigned shock, “A Pelayo woman acting like a dog with a bone, heavens no, that could never be.”

Oriana chided her friend, “Like you are any different.”

Tam stood proudly, “Of course I’m different, I’m much quieter about it.”

Oriana squeezed Tam’s hand, “You look well. I’m pleased.”

Tam smiled, “Thank you for that.”

The council woman waved her hands, and she was gone.



After Jimmi and Tam headed home and Noah was sound asleep, Maddy and Sophia sat with Nadia. Maddison knew the healer well enough to know she had something to say but was hesitant to start. It would be up to her to get things going. “How is Ziv these days, she getting into trouble still?”

Sophia laughed out loud. “She truly has no idea how big and powerful she is. When she gets excited, she dances on her hind

legs and leaps in the air. There is not a day goes by where we don't have things literally flying through the house. She weighs nearly 90 pounds but that doesn't stop her from climbing on to my lap every night."

Maddy smiled, "Okay now that I got things started, spill. You have something you need to say, so say."

Sophia was still hesitant but too excited to hold it in anymore. "I've been invited by healers on Didymo to travel to another planet. The planet is named Chara, or joy. There are no people living there.

"The power is said to emanate from every living thing. I told you how powerful these healers are, and they said it's because of Chara. They want Daniel and me to go with for several days."

Maddy was confused, "You're going right?"

Sophia was reluctant, "After seeing Nadia's condition I don't think I should. My responsibilities are here, the time just isn't right."

Maddison didn't know what to say, she knew how seriously Sophia took her care for her patients.

Fortunately, Nadia knew what to say. "Sophia Bentham, if you turn down this amazing opportunity, I swear I'll tell Jimmi the dangerous things you and Daniel have been doing when you go hiking and climbing."

That knocked the healer back. "Nadia how can I be there the way I should, if I'm worried about you?"

Nadia pulled herself into a sitting position. “There is no need to worry about me. First, whatever you’ve put into me has worked wonders. I actually feel like myself again. Second, I’m going to assume Ethan has more of this magic elixir that I can go in and get. And third, I have a support system in place here that is life giving.

“You’re leaving my daughter and me in the best hands anywhere. You have to do this, not just for you, but for us too. We love you and need you to be the best you, you can be.”

Sophia hugged her, “You are back to yourself. I’ll go, but only if you promise to tell Maddy exactly how you’re feeling. There will be a healer on Didymo that can come if needed.”

Nadia saluted Sophia, “I swear to be truthful and honest as the day is long.”

Maddy smiled, “Go woman, we’ve got this.”

Chapter 2

Sophia, Daniel, and Ziv stood waiting for Grey Bird to transport them to Didymo, where they would join the others going on this pilgrimage. Sophia's excitement was visible in her inability to stand still. That was communicated to the large wolf dog Ziv. Daniel couldn't help but smile at his wife's joy.

Grey Bird appeared. He was his usual staid grouchy self. "Are you prepared, healer?" Ziv sat in front of the council member and barked.

Grey Bird looked at the beast, "Yes there will be others like you there."

Daniel was a bit shocked at that, "You can understand her?"

Grey Bird was unruffled, "Even though she is young, she speaks clearly enough."

He turned to Sophia, "Healer I am pleased you are attending this event. You will appreciate what this world possesses. She is generous and holds nothing back, respect that."

Sophia was nervous, "Is there a special way to address her? I am so nervous, I don't want to make a mistake."

Grey Bird got in to position, "*That*, dear woman, that want to do right, will serve you well on this journey. She will return the respect. It is time to go." He waved his hands, and they were gone.

The moment they arrived on Chara, Sophia was assailed with information. It was overpowering, flooding her mind, it was too much. She couldn't make sense of any of it. She struggled to speak, but was unable to get any words out. She was being besieged with more than she could process.

Daniel too displayed signs of the same distress. The other healers from Didymo just stood and smiled watching as they both collapsed.



Maddy rode up to Nadia and Noah's home. Nadia was outside hanging seaweed to dry as Noah stoked the fire. Maddison was not pleased, "I'm pretty sure this is not considered resting."

Nadia was prepared for the admonishment. "It is if there is a chair and nutritional beverage sitting right there. I hang a few sheets then I sit and drink. I got a full night's sleep last night and I kept a bottle of Sophia's special tea down this morning.

"I'm doing well. The work helps me keep fit enough to at least have a chance of dealing with this little one when she gets here."

Maddy had no choice but to agree, "You look worlds better than you did a couple days ago. But that doesn't mean Ethan won't be expecting us two days from now. He wants to give you more of that IV stuff. If you don't show he'll contact Sophia."

Nadia sat down, "I'm more than happy to go in. I think that's what helped me turn the corner on all this. Can I ask why you're here? I thought Jimmi and Tam were coming today."

Maddy explained, "They were, but Isabella was finally available to come visit with them. Tam was very excited to have some time with her, so I said I would visit you today. Actually, I needed to get away for a bit.

"Getting ready for the ricing gathering has put my house into a perpetual state of chaos. It is peaceful here, at least for another month or so. Then it's going to get loud, fun and wonderful, but loud."

Nadia smiled, "To that end, may I offer you a place on the couch for a nap?"

Maddy followed her into the house, "I would be an ungrateful guest if I didn't accept such a fine offer."



Sophia and Daniel woke to find themselves in a unique structure. It appeared to be something akin to a tent. Several trees had woven their branches into a covering, shading them from the sun and likely offering them protection from wind or rain. There was a large bowl of fruit and nuts and several small empty containers. A pile of blankets was folded neatly in the corner.

One of the Didymo healers walked up from the river and stood before them, "I see you are awake. Chara is very direct

sometimes, that can be more than overwhelming. She sensed your fear and challenged you.”

Sophia was confused, “My fear? What fear?”

The healer smiled, “What thought had you when you arrived?”

Sophia searched her mind, “I was worried. I feared I might miss something, I wanted to be open to it all.”

The healer nodded, “So she gave it all to you.”

Sophia laughed, “She gave it all indeed, every single thing at once.”

The healer looked to Daniel, “And your fear was that you were not worthy of it all.”

Daniel agreed, “So I got disjointed segments that made no sense.”

The healer indicated the structure they were in, “You will be safe here. There is food for you, know the trees will protect you from the weather. The river holds the water you will need. Do you understand?” Both of them nodded.

The healer became very serious, “Chara will not speak to you again till you can purge your greatest fear. That which is holding you both prisoner. You must expel this corruption in your lives, or you will not be able to hear her words.” The healer walked away leaving them both speechless.

Daniel looked to his wife, “Do you know what she was talking about?”

Sophia was hesitant to respond, “I think I do. It’s about us, you and me.”

Daniel stood and started to pace, “I think I know too. You are afraid to tell me you don’t love me anymore.”

Sophia was stunned, “What are you saying? I thought *you* didn’t want to be with *me*. I figured that’s why we’ve been going climbing and canoeing and all those other activities, because you didn’t want to be alone with just me anymore.”

Daniel sat down next to her, “No, no, no. I did all that because I thought you were bored with me, that life stopped being fun for you. You know having to be with me.”

Sophia was choosing her words carefully, “In truth you’re not all wrong. It’s not so much that I’m bored, but I want more Daniel, more for us, together. Being on this adventure and this new world there was always something happening. Something occupying us. We kind of lost our own connection.”

Daniel smiled, “I know exactly what you mean. There are things I want to do but I’ve been afraid to say anything.”

She took his hand, “I guess now is the time to let it out. Tell me, what is it you want to do Daniel Bentham?”

He stood and started his pacing again. He needed to muster the courage to be honest with his wife, “First off, I want to move. I want to build a new house. I actually have plans drawn up.”

Sophia stood and faced him, “Are you thinking by the waterfall?”

He stopped and stared at her, “Yes, exactly. The place we hike to all the time.”

She took his hands, “I have plans for a garden there and a dock out into the river.”

They both said the last words together, “It would be right at the inside bend.”

They fell into each other’s arms. Chara’s gentle voice filled their thoughts, “Well done children, enjoy your new affinity, you are ready. Tomorrow we can begin. Together we can help your new connection grow even stronger.”



Tam poured Isabella more tea, “I’m so happy you finally had some time to see us. What’s been taking up your days?”

Isabella sipped from her mug, “Ethan and I have been working on some medicines. We were able to procure some unique plants from Didymo, giving us a new array of teas and tinctures. But most of my time is spent with the council. Things are kind of unsettled there.”

Jimmi picked that up, “How is that possible? Aren’t they all knowing and all powerful? At least they think they are right?”

Tam could see this was upsetting Isabella, “What’s going on, you look worried?”

Isabella tried to minimize her feelings, “No, no it’s nothing I’m sure. I’m just tired.”

Tam knew her friend better than that. “My dear woman you have to know you can’t get away with lying to me. Isabella what’s so serious that it has *you* undone? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

Isabella turned the tea mug around in circles, “I know you’ve had your issues with the council. But I have nothing but respect for them and the difficult existence they’ve chosen. You have no idea the challenges they face every day. The rules can wear on them, they feel things deeply.”

Jimmi was circumspect, “Isabella I’m so sorry, I apologize for the things I’ve said, and for that matter done, to the council. I respect them and more importantly I respect you. I would never dishonor the esteem and appreciation I have for the person you are. Please forgive my incredible ability to speak or shout before I think.”

That lightened the mood a little as Isabella continued. “I understand your concerns with how you’ve been treated. But you need to know it’s so much better than the alternative. The council, in truth exists on a knives edge.

“These are at their core simply people, as you both have pointed out, they are not without fault, as fallible as you or I. But they don’t have the option to let that show. Because of the work they do and the power they wield, they have to be firm and strong. You see, there are factions within the council that would choose to apply that power very differently.”

That took Tam off guard, “What does that mean?” Isabella was hesitant to disclose the inner workings of the council.

Tam could see her struggle. “You don’t have to tell us. We can’t ask you to betray those you respect. But we’re here for you, whatever you feel the need to either say or not say.”

Isabella held out her mug for more tea. “I’m going to need a refill before I can get this out. I have to tell someone, and there is none I trust more than the two of you. But please understand this is just what I see, not fact by any means.”

Jimmi started rummaging through the kitchen for some food while Tam reheated the water for more tea. She tried to ease her friend’s fears, “Your ability to see the truth of a person or a situation is unequalled. I think I trust your perspective better than my own.”

Jimmi brought some sweets, “Isabella you, and all you say is safe here, you know that.”

She literally relaxed into her chair. “I appreciate that, and the two of you. What I have to tell you is eating me up. In order to understand, you have to know a little history of the council. You know about the places sacred to native, or indigenous peoples on Earth, right?”

Jimmi nodded, “You’ve told us some and Maddison has as well. We know about the places on our beloved islands. But we’re always eager to know more.”

Isabella continued, “These places, places of ceremony are not only sacred but filled with power. In challenging times many

nations would send representatives and gather there to strengthen and empower them. They would perform ceremonies and evoke great energies from mother earth, Gaia, and unbeknownst to them the rest of the planets too.

“They were places of strength, power, life. Those that gathered were imbued with the energies welling up from there. It’s important to remember this was a time that all these many tribes, cultures, and communities were being openly persecuted, slaughtered even.

“Mind, many of the atrocities were never even recorded. After the overt hate and annihilation diminished, then came the civilized mistreatment and exploitation, they started using religion, laws and courts to destroy our people, our language, our culture.

“Turning to the spirits, our ancestors and the powers of our mother became essential. Eventually those that had frequented these sites passed from their first life. They would gather in their spirit form at the sacred places to pass their strength wisdom and guidance to those they once knew. I’m sure it was the same for all people born to Gaia.”

Isabella had to stop and formulate her explanation. “I want to say this without prejudice, so I need to choose my words correctly. The sense of frustration, and pain of persecution, was very recent, still an open wound. For some their guidance was tinged with a feeling of not retribution, but justice for their people. For others they used their new strengths to dominate and control.

“The majority joined to support and guide. As those of like mind coalesced, the council was formed. The differences in beliefs, however, exists still, it is essential to manage and oversee the undercurrent lest the council uses its power to dictate what behaviors and thoughts are allowed.”

That revelation knocked Tam and Jimmi back. They were trying to process the power of the council turned despotic. Isabella could see she had divulged her worry. “That undercurrent is becoming a torrent in the council. For some reason it started to grow when Harper was added.

“Since Aliyah joined, there has been a deep prevailing sense of unrest. It is about power and who possesses it. Instead of the joy typical when the council grows, there was a feeling of --- I’m loath to say this but it felt like jealousy, envy even. Kind of a sickening feeling.”

Tam concurred, “I can see why you are struggling. Just thinking about it has my stomach in knots. Have you spoken to anyone on the council about this?”

Isabella looked down, “I’m not of the council, I’m on the periphery, I have no right to speak.”

Tam smiled, “I do not believe that has ever stopped you before. If it’s something you don’t feel comfortable sharing that’s fine.”

Isabella looked Tam in the eye, “You are a powerful empath, you’re right, I have spoken to a member, Welania. She leads the council and is one of the longest serving representatives,

she can speak directly into your thoughts, and rarely shows herself anymore.

“Strangely we have become quite close. She is the anchor of the council, and she feels the pull of the undercurrent. The last time we spoke there was a fear in her.”

Jimmi had a question, “Have you mentioned any of this to Oriana? She would likely have some thoughts.”

Isabella agreed, “She and I have spoken of this in general terms, but it inadvertently affects Quinn and you know Oriana loves that child like a daughter. I don’t want to light a fire under her that I can’t put out.”

Jimmi understood, “Good thinking, she has Nadia’s explosive temper and Maddison’s stubbornness. Setting that free would be a mistake.”

Tam turned to Isabella, “What are you going to do?”

Isabella was melancholy, “Watch and wait. I have no power here. We must keep alert, all of us. I need to do what I can to protect them. The council is a great value to us all. We don’t even really know how much of an affect they have on our lives.”

Tam was intrigued, “Can you explain?”

Isabella held out her mug for more tea and laughed, “We’ve come this far might as well dive all the way in. So you know how the council began but it is so much more now. The members are from all over.

“You’ve seen with Aliyah how they are chosen and invited. Some are from worlds you can’t even imagine. What you don’t know, for that matter I don’t even know, is how often they intervene.”

That brought Jimmi to life, “Hold on there. They said the rules won’t let them do that.”

Isabella nodded, “That’s true they don’t actually change things that *is* against the rules, but as I understand it, they will offer encouragement when it is needed.”

Tam grinned, “You have been spending far too much time with council. You’re starting to sound like them.”

“Sorry, sorry, let me clarify. They really do watch over us, they care for us. In those moments when someone is at the end of their strength and they feel they can’t go on. Then they hear a voice in their head telling them they can, giving them the hope to continue. That is the council offering encouragement.”

Tam looked at her partner. Jimmi took Tam’s hand, “This seems like an appropriate time to tell her.”

Tam’s voice took on a seriousness. “We are kind of familiar with how the council can offer comfort without changing the course of a life.”

Isabella sensed the gravity of that statement.

Chapter 3

Katie ran to greet her mother. “Mommy you have to come and see all the firewood daddy and I have ready. There are three huge piles.”

Maddison dismounted her horse and walked with the excited child down to the lake. She found her exhausted sweat drenched husband sitting in his chair looking out over the water. “You look like you had a fun day.”

He half opened one eye to look at her. “Your daughter is a slave driver. If this keeps up, I’m going to need a raise.”

Maddy took a seat in her chair, “How about if Katie and I take a swim while daddy takes a nap? Then I’ll make us a huge supper to celebrate all this hard work.” Zon didn’t respond, he had already started on his nap.

By the time Maddy had dinner under way Zon was cleaned up and more alert. “How is Nadia doing?”

Maddison was pleased to report. “Much better, she’s moving around more and looks good. She can keep food down so I think the remainder of this pregnancy will not be so bad. That doesn’t mean we’ll stop our visits. With Sophia away we need to keep on top of things.”

Zon picked at the vegetables Maddy was sauteing, “Have you heard from her?”

“Tam has, she said Sophia’s voice literally shook with excitement. She’s learning so much and can feel the power growing in her. I’m so happy she went. I think she was kind of --- I don’t know, drifting maybe, that’s not the right word, but not settled somehow. Like there was something she should be doing but she couldn’t figure it out. Do you know what I mean?”

Zon was licking his fingers, “I know what you mean. You’re right, it’s hard to put into words. Daniel was talking about it the last time we saw them. His worry is that she’s bored with him. That’s why they’ve been doing all this bouldering and white-water canoeing and all.”

Maddy laughed out loud, “You boys are all the same, trying to fix something you can’t even fathom. Sometimes all we need is an understanding ear. Just listen, or at least ask what’s going on.”

Zon stood to his full height and spoke in a deep voice. “Men fix, men no talk.” He thumped his fist on his chest. “Men protect woman.”

Maddy hugged her husband, “Men sweet but so not smart.”



Oriana appeared as Biza and Quinn were tending their garden. “Do you expect a good harvest this year?” They had both become quite accustomed to the sudden appearance of council members, what with Aliyah and Harper’s frequent visits.

Quinn stood up to toss a handful of weeds onto the pile. “We’ve been more than a bit neglectful, so a good portion of the production has been usurped by the little browns. The weeds give them the cover they need to make off with our food.”

Bizaan Ayaa stood with her own handful of uninvited plant invaders. “Did you talk to Maddison? Are they still going to have the ricing gathering? Do you think she will let me come?”

Oriana was able to allay her fears. “She is excited for you to attend. She did however warn me that Katie will have to approve your skills before you will be allowed to participate.”

Biza returned to her work with a huge smile on her face. Quinn enjoyed her partner’s excitement. “Is that the news that brought you here?”

Oriana returned to her true mission, “I was hoping you might know where Aliyah and Harper have got themselves to. They’re not responding to any of my calls.”

Quinn and Biza shared a mischievous smile. “Those two are still catching up on lost time with each other. You are not the first council member to show up here with the same question.”

That statement shocked Oriana far more than Quinn would have thought. She demanded to know, “Who? Who was here? What did they say? What did they want?”

Quinn tried to assess Oriana’s ire, “Slow down, what’s got you so upset?”

She backed off a bit, “Sorry, sorry just tell me, who was it?”

Quinn slowed her response hoping to give Oriana more time to get herself under control. “I was familiar with one, it was Cygna she introduced the other as Nashoba. Do you know them?”

Oriana’s demeanor altered, “Yes they’re good friends.”

Oriana approached Quinn, took her by the arms and looked her in the eye, “You must tell me of any council members that come here to see you. Can you promise to do that?”

Quinn was shaken, “What’s going on Oriana? You’re frightening me.”

Oriana tried to pull back, “Sorry there are just some issues that I am concerned about on the council. It doesn’t involve you, the more I know the better I’ll feel about things. Does that make sense?”

Quinn tried to seem appeased. “I assure you, I’ll let you know if I hear from any of the council members especially Aliyah and Harper. When I see them, I promise to tell them you were here.”



Finn appeared at the hospital well before Alexis and Caleb. Ethan was able to gather the supplies together for their arrival. Alexis rode in ahead of Caleb. She saw Finn sitting next to Ethan.

She reached down and petted the huge grinning wolf dog. “He’s so much faster than either of us.” She addressed the doctor, “Do you have all the things we discussed?”

Ethan held up the sack, “Do you have what you promised?”

Alexis pulled a soft leather parcel from the horse. “I do, I hope it’s what I think it is. Or more correctly what *you* think it is. The plant was taller than me and the flowers tiny yellow covering the cob like thing on the top.”

Ethan took the bag and looked inside. Emptying the contents on a table, he ran his fingers through the pile of leaves, pulling one of the large green ovals to his face he brushed the soft furry petal on his cheek.

A smile spread across his face, and he hugged the young woman. “This is exactly what I think it is, Mullein, or at least Mullein like. You said there was a field of these, is that true?”

Alexis’s smile grew, “It is, but that’s not all. Sophia told me to be on the lookout for one other plant I might find up in the hills.” She took a small packet from inside her shirt.

Ethan opened it and held it to his nose. “You clever girl. This is a relative of Holy Basil, a wonderful find. How much was there?”

Alexis drew out her response to build the excitement. “I counted 72 plants in the one stand and 24 in the other.”

Ethan picked her up and swung her around as Caleb entered. “Whoa doc, what seems to be going on here with my girl?”

Ethan didn't answer, he just hugged Caleb too. Alexis smiled at Caleb's discomfort, "I think he's happy with the plants we found. So doc you think it's a good trade then?"

Ethan took a more businesslike stance, "Yes, it's a good trade. Now I can train you how best to harvest both of these plants so they can continue to grow, and we can come back for more. We can negotiate for all the items you need for your clinic as you bring in more of this medical magic."

Caleb was happy about that. "Quinn and Biza are coming. We'll likely be up in the hills again. We can do a small harvest for you before the rainy season hits, and the mud is so bad we can't get up there."

Ethan pulled some books out, "Then let me show you how and what to remove from the plants. This is going to really help round out our medicinal herbs store."



Tam and Jimmi made themselves at home in Nadia and Noah's kitchen. Nadia sat at the table sipping her tea as Jimmi prepared a meal. Tam tried to assess Nadia's health. "You went to see Ethan yesterday, how did that go?"

Nadia explained, "Noah and I rode in together, he had some goods to trade with Anna and Ro so he kept going. Maddy met me there and stayed with me while Ethan dripped more of that wonderful juice into me. It really has gotten me over the morning sickness."

“I will admit though the trip in and back wore me out much more than I thought. When we got home, I went straight to bed and didn’t wake till this morning.”

Nadia stood up and gasped, she clutched at her back. “I must have slept wrong my back is telling me about myself today.”

She sat back down and tried to massage the muscles so she could move again. Tam tried to help her up. Nadia stood slowly, walked carefully over and refilled her tea. She spilled a significant amount of water.

Tam took over the task. “You seem to have difficulty with your aim today too.”

Nadia tried to brush it off, “I guess I’m still half asleep, things are a little blurry.”

Jimmi brought a plate of food for each of them and called Noah in. “Well then why don’t you have some lunch and take a nice nap. That should set you to rights. Now eat woman you’re still too skinny.”



Isabella greeted her friend, “Welania I want to thank you for seeing me. You must know why I’ve come.”

Welania was, as always, soft spoken and exuding calm, “I do. Oriana is asking questions, and she’s not letting go.”

Isabella apologized, “I tried to put her off, or get her on another track, but she is not going to stop.”

Welania gently took the Shaman's hands, she held her gaze with her placid grey eyes. "It's time she knew, it's time they all knew."

Isabella was aghast, "All? Wela you're going to tell them all?"

The council leader attempted to assuage her fears, "I'm sorry, I misspoke, it's time Aliyah and Harper knew too. Aponi and her followers must never know. The onus is still mine to keep everyone safe. The wellbeing of those people comes before all else."

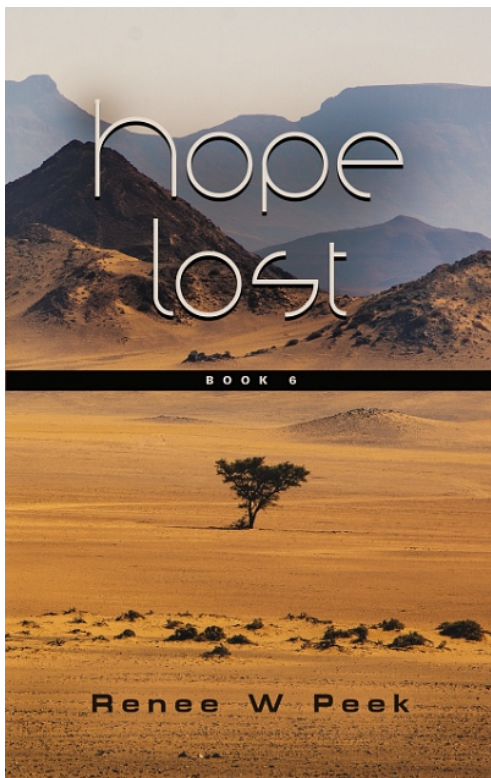
Isabella's concern was not dampened, "Even at the risk of the council itself?"

Welania's fear showed, "If we are to be true to ourselves, we must not allow humans to be harmed even to protect the council."

Isabella's worry was escalating, "What if Aponi were to control the council, then none would be safe or free."

Welania stood and paced, contemplating that thought. "I have served this council for centuries. I've seen members come and go, some who never truly engaged with the work we do, and some that silently sacrificed more than any will ever know.

"Our power and strength come from life, preserving that, freedoms included, is the only way to move forward. If we give into the fear of what *might* happen, we stop being who we are meant to be. That fear can so easily become anger, it is what's driving Aponi. It must never drive the council." Isabella could feel deep in her soul trouble was coming.



There is dissent on the council. The secret and power of a people thought lost but merely hidden is revealed.

Hope Lost

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