

## THE SILENT MEADOW

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IF YOU PASS this last test, Kalyr, you'll have all the powers of a master wizard. Fail, and..."

"I know, Master Bokul. You have told me many times that in the final test I risk my very life. But I am ready." Kalyr sat in the testing chair, pulling her black braid out from under her long legs.

"You're the first apprentice I've ever had who has come this far." Master Bokul's paper-white skin crackled as he patted Kalyr's smooth, brown hand. "Remember the lessons you have learned. I'll not help you after the test begins." He stroked his wispy, gray mustache and strode to his desk. He unrolled a scroll, then began to mutter and to stroke his bald head with both hands.

Kalyr closed her eyes, calming herself. After studying with Master Bokul for half of her fourteen years, she knew she had a few minutes to think while he muttered. The final test. What would it be?

Every test so far had surprised her. The easiest had been finding her own mother in a crowd of identical beekeepers that Bokul had conjured up. Not allowed to look beneath their veils, Kalyr had finally noticed that, while the other women smelled of wildflowers, only her mother smelled of honey.

The hardest test yet? When Bokul had taken a fatal, withering poison and had sent Kalyr into his den of potions to find the antidote. She'd been terrified that he would die. First Bokul's skin had turned pale blue with cold, then it dried up like an old wasps' nest. His breath rattled like winter leaves blowing across frozen ground. Kalyr realized that an orange potion, the color of sunshine, would warm him. Shaking the three orange potions, she'd chosen the one that sounded like a cleansing rain to counter the dryness. She'd given the cure to him just in time.

"Ready, Kalyr?"

Kalyr opened her eyes. Master Bokul raised his arms. The room dimmed, and the walls seemed to breathe.

“Ready.”

The room disappeared. Kalyr stood in a meadow surrounded by tall trees. Around her feet, thousands of flowers bloomed. The mingling fragrance of the purple, red, yellow, and orange blossoms made her smile. Kalyr tasted a hint of sea salt in the clear air. The sun stood just above the treetops. Judging from the dampness of the ground, she guessed it was midmorning.

I am standing in a meadow somewhere near the ocean in a quiet forest, Kalyr thought. What’s it to be, Master Bokul? Dragons? Demons? A pack of wolves?

Kalyr heard Master Bokul’s reply in her mind. “Nothing so easy. You must discover the problem and solve it by sundown, or you’ll be stuck there forever.”

Kalyr turned slowly. A slight breeze caressed her face but did not disturb the silence. Eerie silence. Had she gone deaf?

“Is that it?” she asked aloud. No, she could hear herself. Why so quiet, then? She paced around the meadow. A mouse darted across her path, and a swallow fluttered above her into the treetops. Kalyr watched the bird. It left the trees and circled above the meadow, then returned to a branch. Its actions seemed aimless. Kalyr twisted the ring on her finger. The ring was a gift from her mother, and it brought some comfort.

Kalyr followed a narrow path into the trees. Shy, white bellflowers nodded in the shade of the tall pines and rustling birches. The path meandered around boulders and under fallen logs. Kalyr saw no tracks in the dirt, but small piles of scat told her that deer walked the trail.

She stopped when the path ahead of her curved around a giant, dead tree. Halfway up the great pillar of its trunk, a cavernous hole yawned. Such a hole had once housed her mother’s bees. Kalyr froze, every muscle tightening with fear, her skin itching. “If I don’t move, they won’t hurt me,” she whispered. She waited for the bees to fly out of the hole and attack. But after a long time, when nothing moved, Kalyr took a shuddering breath.

She pivoted on the path, walking slowly away from the hole in the tree. She felt

it watching her. Her back prickled. When the path had turned enough to hide her from that threatening black hole, she ran until the meadow opened in front of her. It was well after noon.

The flowers bloomed less brightly now, and their leaves fell back against drooping stems. They looked thirsty. Kalyr dropped to her knees. The ground still held moisture, so something else must be wrong with the plants.

“Master Bokul!” she shouted. “What kind of test is this?” Her words faded into the oppressive silence.

Kalyr twisted her ring again, thinking of her mother. A fierce anger flushed her cheeks. She would not die here, alone in this place that Bokul had magicked. She could not leave her mother alone, struggling to survive by tending her six beehives, selling honey at the market, and taking in mending during the winter. And for the first time in her long apprenticeship, Kalyr began to wonder if she’d made the wrong choice. She had wanted to become a wizard, but what if she failed this final test? Perhaps she should have followed in her mother’s profession and tended bees.

Bees. Kalyr looked more closely at the meadow. No bees flew through the air; none gathered pollen from the thousands of flowers. She parted the flower stems in front of her to examine the ground. No ants, no beetles, no insects of any kind wandered among the plants.

The silence, that was it. Without insects, this world could not survive. But how could she make the insects reappear?

Kalyr looked up. She had a few hours of daylight left. The meadow looked more diseased now. Leaves turned rusty, and petals fell to the ground. Kalyr thought hard about the spells she knew. Never had she learned to create something from nothing, but Bokul had once taught her how to transform a paper flower into a living blossom. Could she change a bee-shaped ball of mud into a life-giving bee?

She gathered a small bit of mud, trying to think of a bee’s most important characteristics. All that came to mind, however, was the terrifying morning from her fourth summer when Mother tended the annual swarm.

Kalyr had stood at the edge of Mother’s meadow, watching. Deep inside the wide, spiraling tower of bees, Mother stood very still, her tall body swathed in her protective covering and veiled hat. The roar of the swarm vibrated in Kalyr’s head.

“Mother!” She bolted into the edge of the swarm, thinking her mother was in danger.

“Stop!” Mother shouted.

Kalyr stopped but could not hold still. Several bees landed on her, and others buzzed around her. The weight of every crawling step of each bee seemed to dent her skin. She clenched all her muscles against her urge to run. She stifled her screams to a whimper. “Mother, help me!” she begged.

Slowly, Mother moved from the center of the swarm toward Kalyr. Bees walked over Kalyr’s head and face, their sticky feet tugging at her hair and skin. Kalyr trembled, instinctively flapping her arms and dancing in panic. One bee stung her under the arm, then another on her leg. Bile rose in Kalyr’s throat. Then Mother lifted her, crushing several bees against Kalyr’s skin, where they stung. Mother carried her to the river and immersed her for a few moments. Then her mother left her, dripping and shivering, to gather the swarm from the tree and guide it into the hive. While Kalyr waited for Mother, she counted her wounds. Fourteen stings.

She’d been sick afterward, despite the poultices Mother had made. Since that day, Kalyr had helped her mother with the honey but always avoided the hives. And now, somehow, she had to make a bee from this mud in her hand. Her skin still twitched with the memory of all those crawling bees.

Why this? Why not something—anything—else?

Even her fear when Master Bokul took the poison hadn’t run as deep as this. Kalyr glanced at the sky. The sun moved ever closer to the trees. She must make the bees return very soon.

With her free hand, Kalyr rubbed salty sweat from her eyes. Saliva rushed into her mouth, and she swallowed hard, trying not to think of how those tiny, sticky feet would feel on her palm. Remembering the way bees collected pollen and traveled unerringly from the flowers to the hive, she wrote the spell in her mind. Then she cleared her throat and whispered:

*Sturdy wings and pollen sacks  
Always follow unseen tracks  
Yellow jacket striped with black,  
Now I conjure all bees back.*

Kalyr blew gently on the mud, but nothing happened. The sun sank more quickly than she thought it should.

“Don’t rush me, Master Bokul,” she muttered. Her heart beat faster. There must be essential qualities about bees that she hadn’t put into the spell. Mother always said that bees were sweet if you knew how to handle them, though Kalyr had never dared to learn. As sweet as honey. As sweet as nectar. Sweet but noisy. For a moment, the roaring of the swarm filled her ears, and she looked up, expecting to see thousands of bees filling the air. The noise faded. It was all in my head, Kalyr thought.

She picked a blade of grass and gathered pollen from the dying flowers. The work tired her back, but she kept adding pollen to the cold sweat on her palm, chiding herself for her fear. After all, Mother never feared the bees. Only a child would shudder so, but the horror of her memories remained. Surely true wizards never felt such terror over insignificant things like this. Perhaps, Kalyr thought, that’s why my spell failed, because I can’t overcome my fear. But she knew she must try again if she hoped to ever leave this withered land and see her mother again.

When at last she had a small ball of pollen in her palm, she inhaled deeply. The sun stood only a finger’s width over the treetops as Kalyr closed her eyes, remembering her mother’s tender care of the bee stings and her equally tender care of the bees. Kalyr knew that Mother would not lie to her; and Mother had told her that bees could be gentle.

*Sturdy wings upon your backs  
Nature’s key in pollen sacks  
Angry buzz protects the hive  
Kalyr breathes the bees alive.*

With new understanding, she released her breath in love, not fear, over the pollen. Slowly the ball shifted, grew wings, legs, antennae, and a stinger. Kalyr flinched, knowing how awful it would feel. The bee crawled sluggishly toward the edge of her palm. But as she watched it walking, instead of menace, she felt each tiny step as a caress. The bee tested its wings and lifted off.

It flew from flower to flower and from each blossom another bee rose up and flew away. The rust faded from the leaves. The flowers straightened and opened new blooms. Every petal on the ground transformed into a beetle, a line of ants, or a grasshopper. The swallow swooped from a tree to gather its meal. The sounds multiplied until the meadow flourished. As she watched and listened, Kalyr laughed with joy.

“I’ve done it, Master Bokul!” she shouted.

“Well done, Master Kalyr.” The walls of Master Bokul’s study grew up around Kalyr as the flowers of the meadow melted into his carpet.

“Master Bokul, I was so afraid. I was ashamed to have you see my fear.”

“And you will fear again, Master Kalyr. But the tests you face will be your own. You’ve passed the last of mine by bringing the meadow alive.”

“Master Bokul, did I really do that, or was it only an illusion that you created for me?”

Master Bokul pointed to her sleeve. A bee crawled along it. “Well done, Master Kalyr. Well done.”