



ELIXIR BOUND

MUSE
Young Adult

Katie L. Carroll

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*To Kylene
In life you were a sister, friend, and confidant.
In death you are a sister, friend, confidant, and muse.*

Chapter One

Snowflakes swept across the southern tip of the Great Peninsula and covered Faway Forest. The heavy flakes weighed the branches down on their trunks, like limbs of a predator closing in around a victim. A white shroud always blanketed the more northern Blanchardwood, but Faway had escaped the winter weather for hundreds of years. A storm like this usually bore a message, though deciphering it could prove difficult.

On the outskirts of the forest in the small town of Tussar, Katora Kase stood among the essenberry vines growing along neat lines in the field behind her house. She marveled at the strange precipitation. None of the living Tussarians—even the elderlyears—had ever seen snow before. Katora smiled as the flakes tickled her face and melted.

Down the aisle, Katora's younger sister, Kylene, twirled in the swirling snow. With arms straight out, face to the sky, the girl's long blond hair fanned out around her. This weather suited Kylene; Katora identified with the rain, deliberate and relentless. In the snow, Katora almost forgot she was a primeyear woman about to take over her family's farm. She envied the carefree way her sister danced with the flakes.

A snowball flew out of the vines and thumped Kylene in the chest. Bhar, the youngest Kase sibling, laughed as his tall figure squeezed between the rows. Although the oldest of the three, Katora was the shortest, her athletic body somewhere between Bhar's bulky build and Kylene's willowy figure. Kylene's white-blond hair looked bright against the snowy backdrop, while Bhar's golden hair, which matched Katora's, looked dull and wet.

Kylene grabbed her own snowball. Soon a friendly battle consumed Bhar and the younger sister. Confident no one paid her any attention, Katora stuck out her tongue and caught a big flake. A pinprick of ice froze the tip and disappeared in an instant. Katora's smile lasted about as long when she realized what snow meant for the first crop of the year.

Kase Farm had faced hardships in the past, but not since before Katora was born. The Kases used essenberries to make essence, a popular but rare beverage the family fermented to capture the mood of the growing season in a bottle. Over the years, Katora learned how to grow the essenberries and turn them into essence. A bad first

crop meant less essence to sell, which meant less profit, which meant—well, Katora wasn't exactly sure what that meant. She sighed. Given that she didn't know as much about the business end of the farm, it was yet another thing she must learn.

Katora plucked a tiny essenberry from the vines and squeezed. Frozen solid. She tossed it in her mouth and let the warmth release the sour juices of the unripe fruit. If only she could eat all the frozen essenberries so they didn't go to waste. Like any good farmer, Katora hated waste.

A snowball smacked her in the back of the head interrupting her inspection of the vines. She turned to see Bhar's fiendish grin. Bhar's age put him barely in his primeyears, but he often acted like a youngeryear.

"You dirty little—" Katora yelled as she grabbed snow and threw it at him.

She wasn't really annoyed; the distraction brought her some relief. Although it would have been fun to join the fray, Katora knew she must tell Pop about the ruined crop. She sprinted away, snowballs chasing her every step. She slowed to catch her breath when she neared the house and spotted Pop in the window. Deep lines etched his brow. She caught his gaze and smiled. His return grin warmed the wrinkles off his forehead. He met her at the back door.

"Don't worry about the essenberries."

Pop could always read her mind when it came to the farm. "It's early in the season, and we'll be able to make up for what we lose today."

She brushed the snow from her clothes. "How?"

The corner of his eye pinched together. "I said you needn't worry about it."

The casual tone didn't match his pensive face. Kase Farm was the only source of essenberries in the Great Peninsula. Each vintage produced a unique flavor. Memories vanished with even one harvest's failure.

Katora worked every day to capture in a bottle the triumphs and tragedies of the year. To forget a season was to forget her own past. Pop pounded this lesson into her brain over and over, and now he instructed her not to worry.

She tried a different angle. "But won't this create a financial hardship on the farm? I have to know these things if I'm going to run it."

"You'll learn all these things in time. One lost crop won't bankrupt us."

Pop rubbed the stubble on his face. Most of the whiskers were the same dark brown as the hair on his head. For the first time, Katora noticed a few gray ones poking out of his chin. Pop stroked his beard only when he worried. He remained silent.

Never one to let someone brush her off, Katora persisted.

“If that’s true, then why were you frowning?”

“I don’t like this weather.” The next part he muttered to himself so Katora almost missed what he said. “Weather like this means a short sleep before an inevitable disturbance.”

“What did you say?” She heard the words but didn’t know what they meant. Part of her wanted to understand and part of her was afraid to.

“Never mind that for now. Please call in Ky and Bhar. I think it’s time for a family meeting.”

Taken aback by Pop’s abruptness, Katora went outside without question to retrieve her siblings. As they filed into the house, a loud bang on the door resonated through the room. They followed Pop to the front of the house where they found a small man covered in snow.

The man brushed off the flakes to reveal gray hair and a warm, wrinkled face. Katora recognized Anos, one of the town’s elderly members. Leaning on a walking stick for support, Anos stumbled before wobbling over the threshold. His light jacket and well-worn leather boots didn’t suit walking in the storm.

He tried to speak, but only managed to croak a faint, “Ugh!”

Pop strode out of the room. Kylene helped Anos to a chair by the fire. Katora stood on one side of the hearth, and Bhar, hands in his pockets, stood on the other. An uncomfortable silence lingered as Katora drummed her thumbs on her leg in nervous curiosity. She stared at Anos, her gaze shifting back and forth from the elderly member’s bent form to the fire.

Strange visitors sometimes visited regarding what Pop called ‘business matters.’ He often ushered them into the study. Katora assumed the business matters concerned shipments of essence. She never attended the meetings, thinking them of no consequence.

Anos wasn’t a stranger, but Katora recognized the tightness around his tired eyes as worn by many of Pop’s associates. She suspected he visited for a similar reason. She didn’t understand why he had come during a snowstorm; no amount of essence was so important.

Pop finally returned to the living room with Ma, who handed over a steaming mug to Anos. He took a deep draught of the liquid, coughed a few times, took another sip, and leaned back into the chair with a contented look. “Thank you. That hit the spot.”

“Anos,” Pop said. “You must be visiting on dire needs. What in the Good Mother’s name would possess an elderly man to venture out in this weather?”

Ma's green eyes widened and she whacked Pop's shoulder with the back of her hand. "Patience! Patience! He should be allowed to rest after such a hard walk."

Ma's loud voice defied her petite stature. The thunderous sounds often spewing from her mouth held household fame. When Ma discovered something displeasing, she would bellow "Unbelievable!" loud enough for the whole family to hear. It wasn't just her voice. With one pinkie in each corner of her mouth, Ma could belt out ear-piercing whistles.

Katora and her siblings inherited variations of Ma's blond hair, now streaked with gray. Dark-haired Pop looked like an imposter in the family, except for his eyes, which were the same deep blue as his children's.

Anos' voice drew Katora's gaze from the fire to his face.

"No need to fret ma'am. I have plenty of strength now to tell my story." He glanced at Katora, Kylene, and Bhar. "Maybe we should go somewhere more private to discuss it."

Pop studied Katora's face with an old familiar look. It was his lie-detecting face, usually used for homework or chores. The matter at hand was more serious. Did he scrutinize her mental strength? Did he wonder about her ability to handle the pending discussion? Confident she could endure whatever ensued, even as fear prickled in the back of her mind, she held his stare.

Pop studied Kylene in the same way and finally Bhar. He nodded.

"I think my children are ready to hear your story. I hope you don't mind sharing it with all of us."

Anos beamed. "No, of course not. In fact, it would be an honor for me to share this with your children." The smile faded. "I've come here for one thing and one thing only. Your family's famed healing powers. And if I'm not mistaken, I believe I have just sampled it in my tea."

Katora raised her right eyebrow in surprise and looked to Bhar, who narrowed his eyes. He often did that for no other reason than to annoy her, but this look was one of suspicion. She tried to catch her sister's gaze, but Kylene stared at Anos.

"My only great-grandson...you know little Anossar...grows weaker by the day. Five of my thirteen granddaughters are already in their pastyears. They've given me six great-granddaughters, but only one great-grandson. I need your Elixir." Tears shone in the old man's eyes. "I can't lose him. He can't die before his mother and father do—before I do."

"What Elixir?" Bhar asked. "Do you mean essence?"

“Don’t talk out of turn,” Pop said. “I need you to listen now. I’ll explain it to you and your sisters later.” Bhar humphed in response. Pop held up his hand.

“One more word and I’ll send you to your room.”

Katora hadn’t heard the threat since her youngeryears, but Pop was dead serious. She thought the rebuke harsh; Bhar only voiced her own misgivings. If Anos spoke of essence, there were definitely things about it Katora needed to know. If Anos didn’t speak of essence, there were definitely other things going on at the farm Katora must learn. Either way, she objected to the idea of Pop having secrets about the farm she was due to inherit.

Pop pressed his lips together and rubbed his chin for a second time in one day.

“I won’t lie to you. The Elixir is quite remarkable, but it won’t keep those alive who are meant to die. I’m afraid death comes even to those who may not deserve it, and I’ve no way of stopping it.”

“I’m an old man,” said Anos. “I know that death is inevitable. I just want to give my great-grandson a fighting chance. I certainly won’t blame you if it doesn’t work.”

Pop walked over to Anos’ chair and knelt until his eyes were level with the old man’s. Katora’s mouth nearly burst with all the questions she held back. It was not the right time to speak.

“I’m not worried about you placing blame,” Pop said. “I don’t want to give you false hope.”

Katora held her breath to keep from speaking. Pop stood and put his hand on Anos’ shoulder.

“I will give you something that may help.”

He pulled a small blue vial from his pants pocket and handed it to Katora, who exhaled slowly. The vial felt heavy for its size and cooled Katora’s warm hand. She had never seen the vial, never heard of an Elixir. Pop spoke before she could ponder further.

“Please measure one ounce of this for Anos and mix it with two tablespoons of table essence. And then find Palafair and tell him to prepare the horse and wagon. We don’t need Anos falling sick on his way home.”

Katora headed for the kitchen, the vial pressed firmly to her palm and the mystery of the Elixir pressed tightly to her heart.

Palafair stood only as tall as Katora’s knees, but was easy to find because he perched on the kitchen counter reading a large hardcover. His diminutive size forced him to sit in one place to read the left page and moved to another spot to read the right hand page. A common sight in an uncertain moment. Palafair appeared to be a

miniature version of a man, but he was of the demick species. Anni demicks lived among humans, while Tilli demicks roamed the wilds of Faway Forest.

Katora held up the vial. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about this?"

"I may or may not," Palafair said.

The pitch of his voice registered higher than a man's but lower than a child's. Undeterred by his vague answer, Katora persisted.

"You obviously know something. Why don't you tell me what it is?"

Palafair put his hands to his chest in feigned offense.

"You insult my demick honor. As a servant to your father, I am in no position to reveal his secrets to anyone. Not even his nosy daughter."

The servant act was an old joke. Palafair received payment for his work on the farm and had lived with the Kases since before Katora's birth. He was very much a part of the family.

Palafair posed in a mock bow. Determined to cull answers from someone, Katora didn't even crack a smile.

"I have a right to know."

"The truth is that I do know something about what is in that vial, but I also know it is not my place to tell you such things."

Clearly unable to extract information from Palafair, Katora decided Pop should be the one to tell her about the mystery anyhow. She shook her head in annoyance and asked Palafair to prepare the horse and wagon. Though small, he possessed an uncanny ability to handle animals; plus Pop had rigged a system of pulleys to aid Palafair in hitching the horses.

Palafair bowed again. "Whatever you wish, my lady."

He stood and laughed. Katora gave in and chuckled with him. It released some of the pressure building inside of her. The laugh grew until it sounded as loud as her mother's. Palafair's tinkled like small wind chimes.

After Palafair left, Katora pulled the top off the vial, swirled the liquid inside, and sniffed. The scent reminded her of essence, earthy with hints of fruit. She dabbed the liquid onto her pinkie and sampled it. Sweetness tingled where the juice touched her tongue. The sensation quickly faded and revealed nothing more. Katora sighed.

She readied the Elixir exactly as Pop requested, poured it into a small container, and sealed it. She returned to the living room at the same time as Palafair. Katora watched from the doorway when the blustery evening swallowed Palafair, Anos, and the horses. Nearly a foot of snow blanketed the ground.

Katora ducked her head back in the house while Pop made an announcement.

“I have some news. Some of us will be undertaking a journey. It has been many years since a journey of this nature has been attempted, but the extraordinary weather and the burden of Anos and others like him have forced me to turn to drastic measures.”

He paced the living room before continuing.

“I’ve sent Palafair to gather the rest of the family for the meeting. We’ll discuss the matter more when they arrive. In the meantime, Ky and Bhar, please help Ma prepare dinner. Katora, please wait in the study for me.”

Katora smiled with satisfaction. Pop’s announcement raised more questions in Katora’s already full mind, but it seemed this meeting might provide answers.