

Mckenna Bales

Age 15

Wouldn't Change a Thing

My footsteps rustled the brown leaves that covered the bright green summer forest. Next to me, Estren, the wise mage, seemed to glide over them. "Are you ready?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Why?" I was aware of her deep purple eyes looking at me.

I was silent for a while before I sighed and said, "Because I'm scared to go back."

Estren stopped walking forward. When I turned to face her, I found her studying me. The gentle breeze lifting stray strands of her slightly wavy, dark red hair. "What bothers you the most about returning?"

"That I'll go back and find I'm the same person I was when I left. Still scared and desperate enough to steal things from drugstores."

Estren's eyebrow slightly raised and I decided not to waste these precious moments by explaining a drugstore, so Estren moved on, continuing the walk. "I think you will find that anyone who travels another world, survives several raids on villages, a war on the frontlines, capture, and a tumble over a cliff, is never the same again. For better or worse, it is completely up to the person."

I slightly blushed at the mention of the tumble off the cliff. It hadn't been my proudest moment when I decided to retreat right off a high ledge instead of fighting like a true Sage Warden.

"Just remember, anyone can start an adventure, but it takes courage to finish one."

Estren told me as we arrived at our destination, the stone archway that is known as the Gateway between the worlds.

It looked almost the same as when I entered Sage Realm. The only difference was there were now flowers blooming on the engraved stone structure. The doorway gave the illusion of being empty. I still remember the day a weird creature found me and pulled me through the gateway.

All our friends were already gathered. I had taken the long way to the gateway. My heart felt heavy as I went to say my final goodbyes.

"Look who finally decided to show up." Tabitha folded her arms but smirked. She was leaning up against the gateway in her usual relaxed, don't-care-about-the-world way.

"Do you want me to leave that bad?" I joked.

"Well, I could care less, but you are the only one here that is mildly entertaining to talk to."

Suddenly, Calibur moved forward from where he stood next to Tabitha and wrapped his little arms around my waist. I was surprised but returned the hug.

"I don't want you to go," he said as he pulled away.

I kneeled to his level. "I know it's not fun to say goodbye to someone, but I have to go."

"You'll come to visit, right?" he pleaded.

I shook my head. "But I can promise that I will never forget you."

"Super promise?"

"Super promise," I agreed and gave him one more hug.

"You're sure you are okay taking care of him?" I asked Tabitha.

She shrugged and her new brown bird wings with silver speckles shifted. It was odd to see her with them now. She had been deemed a thief and a traitor her whole life, which was partly true, but now her name was cleared, and she received the wings that every one of her species was supposed to have. "I've never been the motherly type, so I'll go more for the older sister/sassy aunt type."

"I expect nothing less. You guys take care of each other, okay?" I told them.

"Okay!" Cal smiled through his tears.

"Yeah." Tabitha nodded.

When first arriving, Tabitha had been ready to steal the clothes off my back and didn't care about anyone. After everything, her attitude didn't change much, but she isn't as closed off and now has all of us. She and Cal seem to have an unlikely bond. Cal deserves to have a proper home after losing his sister. His sweet, caring sister, Zevia.

The night before the final battle, I was on my way back to the camp after going to retrieve the Twilight stone against everyone's advice. We needed the stone to have a chance of winning the war. I had been heavily injured and was being chased by Trenckies, those ugly, bat-ant-rat-like creatures, when I knew, I wasn't going to make it back. Zevia found me and fought them off, buying me time to collect myself. The Trenckies had enough brains to know how to use weapons. Zevia had just started learning to fight with her own weapon when they caught her off guard. She took a spear to the chest. I don't quite have memory of what happened, but the Twilight stone's magic must have defeated the Trenckies, because the next thing I do remember is kneeling next to Zevia.

There was nothing I could do. We were close to the camp, but not close enough to bring her and the Twilight stone back. Knowing this, she told me to go. When I refused, she said, "I've lived, I've loved, and I've lost, and there is only one thing I regret. Take care of my

little brother." I stumbled back to camp at her request and blacked out. Even a month after, and I still have nightmares about it. I think it is one of those things that will never go away. I don't want to leave Cal after he already lost his sister, but I don't belong in this world.

I turned to Sayloren next. He wore the king's outfit that suited him well. I was glad he got a happy ending. He may never have wanted to be king, but I believe that under his guidance, the land will flourish and will have a time of peace. Fernia, his wife and my friend, stood just behind him. She had already said goodbye to me but came to see me off, nonetheless. Sayloren and Fernia's wedding had been beautiful. The baby blue flowers that decorated the old Whitestone ruins were stunning. Fernia's soft, silky dress delicately trailed almost the whole length of the aisle. Watching them exchange rings, tie the white and gold fabric, and dance together for the first time as man and wife with a gorgeous sunset as the backdrop was unforgettable.

"I'll miss you, Birdy." Sayloren said in his stiff but meaningful way.

I shook my head but smiled, "How many times do I have to tell you, Ren, you can call me by my name. Robin."

"But a robin is a type of bird, and you really don't understand how similar you are to one. But I can stop if you'd like?"

I looked into his eyes, and my smile dropped into something more open. "No," my voice cracked as I hugged him. "I like it." He hugged me back and I felt Fernia place her graceful hand on my shoulder as well. I finally pulled back and wiped my damp eyes.

"Well, kid, this is it." Eli said. Gobswine, the crazy but sweet Troblin who first brought me here after finding me in my foster home and saved me from a stray baby troll, crouched next to Eli's feet.

"Gobswine will miss you." Gobswine was already crying and hugging the old locket of mine that I had gifted him, close to his chest.

"I'll miss you too. You were the best friend I ever had," I told him, which made him cry harder. He knelt at my feet and kissed my left boot. He did this the same way he had when he found me.

"Take care of yourself, kid." Eli patted Gobswine's head to indicate that it was time to let me go.

"You too, Eli," I told him. For once, I was generally worried about the grumpy old man.

"Don't worry. I will. Time to go." He pointed to where the magic shifted slightly in the arch of the gateway. He was right, it was time to go. Eli handed me my satchel of things, and I moved toward the doorway. Everyone brought their fingers to their mouths before kissing them and resting them on my shoulder as I passed. One last goodbye.

I stepped through. Looking over my shoulder, I watched as the only real family I had, disappeared in a shimmer of magic. Eli was like a father to me, even in his grumpy manner. Cal and Ren were like brothers. Tabitha, a sister. Gobswine and Fernia were friends. Estren, a mentor. Now I was back in my own realm. Someday, the Sage Realm will need help again, and a new Sage Warden from earth will be picked. That person will go on an adventure that will change them as much as it had me. Now that I was back in my own woods, things would be different. But if someone asked me what I would change if I could go back and redo it all, my answer: I wouldn't change a thing.