

Hard Lessons
By Leslie Gebby

The night was like iron, chilled and dark grey. Thick clouds covered the crescent moon, causing a murky, pearly glow over the earth. On the edge of the village of Deepcairn, the Blackvale Forest was trembling and rustling with the creatures that thrive in such a night – the bats, and spiders, and the occasional Grimheart Faerie, fluttering and skittering about.

But there were also larger creatures about, and one, lean and sure-footed, was silently approaching the coziest little cottage to be found within the boundaries of the forest. Slowly, the figure approached the large window at the eastern end of the cottage. Two gloved hands emerged from under a muffling heavy velvet cloak, and eager fingers deftly pried the window open.

Within moments, the figure slipped inside the cottage and back out again, arms full of plunder, which was carefully tucked away into a satchel at its waist. The window was closed tightly, and the figure went on its way, its black cloak fading seamlessly into the darkness of night.

The sun rose, a dish of pale gold growing hotter and brighter, until Opalynn could ignore it no longer. Her chores would have to wait; this was too beautiful a day to be spend indoors. She tiptoed past her grandfather’s laboratory and out the door of their cottage. A small hill under a looming birch tree provided a place to stretch out in the cool grass and enjoy the summer breeze, away from Grandfather’s notice. Opalynn threw herself down onto the soft green earth and closed her eyes, trying her best to think of nothing in particular.

“Opalynn – there you are!”

She sat up with a start and whirled around toward the deep voice.

“Grandfather, I was only—”

But then she stopped as she realized it was not her grandfather, but young Corbin standing before her. He laughed heartily at his friend as her surprise turned to annoyance.

“And why are you bothering me on such an otherwise lovely day?” she huffed as she straightened her skirts and smoothed her hair.

“Because it’s fun to make you angry,” Corbin replied, his green eyes twinkling. “And my mother needs some Ember root from your grandfather.”

“You could just ask him yourself, you know.”

“Yes, but—”

Opalynn stared up at Corbin, studying his sun-tanned face. “What? Don’t tell me you’re afraid of him!” She laughed a bright laugh as golden as the sunlight.

Corbin’s face flushed. “Well, will you just come with me to get the Ember root? Please?”

He helped Opalynn up and the two went back to the cottage, and to the doorway of the small laboratory of Dr. Erasmus Spoak, who was hunched over a large book, and very deep in thought. Opalynn slowly approached her grandfather, and softly called out to him.

“Good morning, Dr. Spoak!” Corbin called from the doorway.

“What, what? Who’s that?” Dr. Spoak muttered, adjusted his spectacles.

“It’s Corbin, Grandfather. His mother needs some Ember root,” Opalynn explained.

“Ah, Corbin. Well, wait just a moment, and I’ll fetch that for you.”

“I’d be happy to get it, Grandfather,” Opalynn said, “if you’d like?”

“Oh, Opalynn,” Dr. Spoak sighed as he pulled a silver key off his belt. “You know I can’t let you handle these ingredients without the proper training!”

“Then train me, Grandfather! I want to learn!”

“Not until you’re older,” Dr. Spoak replied. He unlocked a tall cabinet in the far corner of the room and began searching through boxes and bottles. He carefully prepared a small pouch, which he held out to Corbin. Then he turned to close the cabinet doors. As he pulled them to, he suddenly stopped, and furrowed his brow.

“Opalynn?” he whispered. “Come here, please.”

Opalynn joined him at the cabinet, and gazed inside, relishing the sight of the gleaming bottles and mysterious boxes.

“What is it, Grandfather? What’s wrong?”

He put a finger to his lips. In a low voice, he replied, “I want you to be absolutely truthful with me. I promise not to be angry.”

Opalynn stared at him, wide-eyed, hardly daring to breathe.

“Did you,” he continued, “take anything out of this cabinet?”

A suffocating silence fell. Finally, Opalynn shook her head.

“No, Grandfather,” she whispered hoarsely. Dr. Spoak stared at her for a long moment.

“Hmm,” he muttered. He quickly closed the cabinet, locked it fast, and returned the key to his belt. The two young people watched, concerned and uncomfortable.

“Now Corbin, you’d best get that back to your mother!” Dr. Spoak suddenly said, as jolly as ever. “And Opalynn—I believe you still have some chores to do, don’t you? See Corbin out, please, and then back to work!”

“I’m sorry he won’t teach you,” Corbin said as they reached the cottage door. “I think you’re ready!”

Opalynn smiled sadly and sighed. “Thank you, Corbin. But I must do as he says. And try to be patient. Please greet your mother for me.”

Night fell, the darkness even darker than the night before. Now no moon shone, and the creatures that loved the shadows ran wild. So too did a figure in a black velvet cloak.

Once again, silent footsteps approached the window of Dr. Spoak’s laboratory. Nimble fingers coaxed it open, and the figure easily slipped inside. It stood for just a moment, studying the heavy door that always remained locked throughout the night. No sounds were heard on either side of the door as the household slumbered and the intruder went to work. A few things were chosen that would not easily be missed. No trace of disturbance was left behind. The figure exited and closed the window, smiled a grim but satisfied smile, and returned to the surrounding darkness.

The following days found Opalynn and Dr. Spoak in their usual routines. Opalynn faithfully attended to her chores about the cottage, occasionally pausing to watch Dr. Spoak as he studied and worked in his laboratory. Dr. Spoak took little notice of her until his laboratory was closed at the end of the day and they sat down to dinner together.

“What did you work on today, Grandfather?” Opalynn asked one night as she poked at the potatoes on her plate.

Dr. Spoak sat silently for a moment. Opalynn—you didn’t—no, but of course you didn’t...”

“What, Grandfather?”

“Well, I—I seem to—have misplaced one of my books. I had it the other day, and marked it for some further research, but when I went to get it this afternoon, I couldn’t find it...”

Opalynn swallowed a lump of potato.

“Well...I’m sure it will turn up,” Dr. Spoak finally said.

They finished their meal in silence.

As the days dragged on, the once-welcoming cottage becoming cold and foreboding. Dr. SpOak seemed to become more and more forgetful, losing track of different items every day. If Opalynne offered to help search for them, he would only look at her with dark eyes. A heaviness settled on the household, the sense that a breaking point was near. It finally came on a gloomy afternoon as thunder rolled across the sky and rain fell in noisy sheets upon the roof.

Opalynn was kneading bread dough for their dinner when her grandfather burst into the kitchen.

“Opalynn!” he shouted, causing her to cry out in surprise. “You know I love you. I always will. Please, tell me the truth!”

She stared at him, wide-eyed.

“My alabaster mortar is gone. It was in the back of the cabinet, in a box. I wear the key on my belt, morning, noon, and night. I haven’t touched that box in months, I know I haven’t. Opalynn—” he paused, and she felt like her heart would explode. “Did you take it?”

Tears filled her eyes. She stared down at the floury dough stuck to her fingers.

“Please don’t make me answer that, Grandfather,” she said softly.

Dr. SpOak drew in a ragged breath, closed his eyes, and rubbed a hand across his furrowed forehead. “You have wanted me to teach you, for so long. And I know it’s hard for you to wait, but there is good reason for that. You are the only one I can rely on to succeed me in this work, and we have to go about it the right way—”

Opalynn could not meet his gaze. She began kneading the dough, punching and pulling it, over and over again, until her grandfather finally left the room.

That night, Opalynn left dinner on the table, and went to bed early. She tried to push their conversation out of her mind, but tossed and turned for hours. Rain pelted the cottage roof and thunder grumbled ceaselessly. In frustration, Opalynn finally threw off her covers and left her room.

As she passed the laboratory door, she stopped. The door was open. Slowly, she stepped just inside the doorway.

“Grandfather?” she whispered. “Grandfather? Are you here?”

Before she could do anything further, the dark room went darker, as something drew in front of the window. Heart pounding, Opalynn silently watched as a figure in a black velvet cloak open the window and slide into the laboratory.

As the figure darted for Dr. Spoak's cabinet, Opalynn grasped the velvet cloak, digging her fingers into the rain-soaked fabric.

Across the room, Dr. Spoak emerged from his hiding place, struck a match, and lit a lamp.

"At last," he said. "We can solve this mystery." He approached the cloaked figure, lamp held high. Any relief Opalynn felt at solving the mystery of her grandfather's missing items vanished as the hood of the cloak was pulled away to reveal—

"Corbin!"

Opalynn stared at her friend in disbelief. "Corbin, what are you doing?!"

Corbin stared back at her. "You're not the only one who wants to learn your grandfather's magick," he finally said. His voice was hard and heartless. He glared at Dr. Spoak. "I knew you'd never teach me—you won't even teach your own granddaughter! So I took matters into my own hands."

Dr. Spoak relaxed his hold on the boy, and shook his head sadly. "And all this time I thought—I thought—"

Corbin shook free of Dr. Spoak and ran back toward the window.

"Corbin, wait!" Dr. Spoak cried. "We can make this right!"

"Yes!" Corbin replied. "Things should be made right!" He reached into his satchel, pulled out a small pouch, and held it up in the air. "This," he cried, "can make things right!"

"Be careful, my boy!" Dr. Spoak said. "You're dealing with powerful things that you don't understand! You could end us all!"

"I understand enough, and I did it all on my own," Corbin sneered.

"Corbin, please stop!" wailed Opalynn.

Corbin shook his head. "This is for you, too, Opalynn." And with that, he hurled the pouch to the ground, where it exploded into a greenish-purple cloud and fizzing sparks. Opalynn dropped the lamp and covered her face. When she opened her eyes again, the room was dark, and her grandfather's arms were surrounding her.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

"Corbin!" She scrambled for the lamp, and rushed to the window. "I don't see him!" she cried.

Dr. Spoak solemnly approached her, then bent down and picked something up from the floor. “Here he is,” he said, and opened his hands to reveal a small raven, unable to fly away thanks to two crooked wings. Dr. Spoak gingerly placed the squawking bird into a cage and fastened the door.

“Can you help him?” Opalynn whispered.

“Does he deserve it?” her grandfather countered.

Opalynn pursed her lips as she thought. She reached into the cage to stroke the raven, but pulled her finger away quickly as it tried to bite her. She looked into her grandfather’s understanding, weary eyes.

“I—don’t know,” she said.

Her grandfather nodded and pulled her close.

“Then,” he said, “this will be your first lesson.”