

# **Mistress of Potions**

By

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The harvest season is the most sacred and important time of the year in the farmlands of Kildarath. If you find yourself in these lands during this time you will be lucky enough to witness, and maybe even take part in some of the oldest rites known to the world. The season is vital for those who live there. If the harvest is good they will be able to survive through the winter. If it is bad they face the prospect of a slow cold death through starvation.

The winters in Kildarath, while mild compared to the perpetual frozen lands in Millinoth, can still be deadly to any who have not properly prepared. The normally lush and fertile grounds lay buried under a white veil of ice and snow for a full four moons before finally passing into the springtime. Getting to the spring, even with a good harvest, can still be difficult. Plagues of diseases and dark parasites from the badlands have claimed more than their share of lives over the years. When a home is subject to such blight they will often employ the aid of the village healer. Unlike the healers in the large, industrialized cities of the south, these practitioners still use the knowledge of the ancients to perform their craft.

A village healer will almost always be female and from a long line of healers, often from the same village. The older the family, the more prestige and wisdom the healer is said to have. Of course it takes more than just reputation and a large family tree to be a truly great healer. It takes practice and patience. Most healers will spend the first 30 years of their lives as apprentices, learning from their mistress, the intricacies and subtleties of the potions and magic they will need.

Sometimes, however, this does not always go according to plan. This became the case in the small village of Shinglemir. Bethany Caldorock was a mere twenty-three when her mother was lost to a pack of night wolves while gathering herbs. Her mother had been a well respected and much loved healer in the area for many years. So when the responsibility fell to Bethany, she found herself drastically unprepared. There was some reluctance from the villagers at first. After all, Bethany was still seven years from being near the end of her initial training. In fact there had never been a healer as young as Bethany in recorded memory. But she was, after all, a healer from the Caldorock family. This fact alone was enough to convince many of the villagers to give her a chance.

This vote of confidence did little to comfort Bethany. She was now completely alone in the world and totally uncertain of her place within it. She had the strong will of the women in her family but lacked the experience to temper it. She was also a dreamer, often gazing across the patchwork fields of Shinglemir and imagining a life beyond the confines of the small village. Her mother would chastise her for spending too much time dreaming and not focusing enough on her studies.

“You are a daughter of Caldorock,” her mother would say “You have responsibilities that must be fulfilled.”

Bethany knew what her future was destined for, but that didn't mean she couldn't dream. Besides, she was still a long way from becoming a healer. There would still be plenty of time for studying. Now she found herself alone in the world with no more time for dreaming.

The first few weeks were fairly uneventful. A few minor injuries and some ongoing treatments for warts. Nothing too important or life threatening. Then came that fateful day.

A farmhand had been working in the fields close to the border with the badlands. While he was busy tilling the soil he failed to notice a spiny Vesikoth stalking up behind him. The Vesikoth is a terrible creature, one of many that inhabits the wastes of the badlands. It resembles a large and terrifying beetle. An enormous segmented tail tipped with a venomous barb is it's preferred way of dispatching its prey. Some people believe the Vesikoth is a creature capable of thought. That it comes from an age before man, when terrible, magical creatures were the masters of Calindraal. They believe that it will attack and kill not just for food but also for pleasure. This insight makes the creature seem all the more terrible. Despite their great size, Vesikoths are extremely fast killers. The first warning the prey will receive is the rattling of it's armored tail as it moves in for the kill. Some have described it as a sound similar to a wind chime made from sticks and hung in the branches of the willowil tree.

Regardless, by the time you hear that dreadful sound it is already too late. The other workers had heard the farmhand screaming as the poison from the Vesikoths sting pumped through his body. They managed to fight the creature off before it could start eating the poor man alive. By the time they reached Bethany's house, he was close to death. The creature had impaled the farmhand through his left leg. The limb had already started to necrotize as the poison worked to break down the flesh.

Everyone looked on anxiously as Bethany tried to remember what mix of ingredients would counteract the effects of the poison. The horrors of the wounds inflicted on that poor wretch were starting to make her feel nauseous. Her head was swimming as she fought to maintain a visage of calm for her own benefit as well as those around her. The farm hand screams of agony as the poison worked further into his system snapped her out of her trance. She suddenly remembered something her mother had told her. She needed to make a poultice from kikomo root, crushed milk beetles and horse urine. But what proportions to use?

Bethany hurriedly went to the shelves at the back room. Each shelf was stocked with jars and boxes containing items as simple as salt to more exotic things such as the beating heart of a Winged Boory from the islands of Solengard. She quickly grabbed the ingredients she needed. She could find them almost instantly having been put in charge of cataloguing the shelves since she was a little girl.

With ingredients in hand she moved over to the workbench and began combining the mixture in the same stone pestle her family had been using for generations. So obsessed had she become with getting the mixture right that had not realized the sudden silence that filled the room. The farmhand has stopped screaming and was lying still, staring straight up with wild eyes.

“Healer, what is happening?” one of the men asked

Bethany rushed over, her worst fears becoming real the second she saw the wild look on the young mans face. She was already too late. The poison was too far into his system now. Forcing herself, she looked

down at the now black and leaking leg. The stench of death was wafting up from the now almost unrecognizable limb.

“It’s too late” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

The men looked at each other quizzically. None of them had ever seen a healer look so lost before. Bethany stood staring at the man dying in front of her, helpless to do anything. Dying because she had not been fast enough to apply the proper treatment in time.

Suddenly she noticed something in the oozing mess on the man’s leg. Someone had applied a tourniquet when he had first been found. The poison had not spread as fast as she had feared. There was still a chance to save him although she would have to be fast. The procedure was drastic and not without considerable risk. She would need everyone to work with her. Bethany knew that what she was about to propose was not going to be easily accepted. She could no longer show signs of fear. It was time for her to embrace who she was. Picturing her mother, she let all traces of fear drain from her, the expression on her face becoming one of strength and certainty. Looking the men straight in the eyes, a look that would have made any daughter of Caldorock proud she proclaimed

“We have to remove his leg!”

They hesitated, each one of the workers understanding what it would mean for their friend. None of them wanted to be the first to speak.

“I want no part of this,” exclaimed one man as he turned away and walked out of the room. Two more men followed close behind. Only one of them, a man known as Tyrell, remained behind. Even though he was a woodcarver by trade, like most others he had been helping in the fields. He looked Bethany straight in the eye and asked her

“Will this save his life?”

She hesitated for a second.

“It will increase his chances. If we do nothing now he will die for certain”

Tyrell looked down at his friend for a moment.

“Okay,” he said, “What do you need me to do?”

Bethany felt a sudden relief. She had not wanted to do this alone. She couldn't do this on her own. Someone would be needed to hold the unfortunate farmhand down.

“I need to prepare him and it's going to hurt. I can give him anything to help with the pain as it would just speed up the poison,” She said as she hurried over to her shelves.

“I need you to hold him still while I...” she quickly looked away, not wanting Tyrell to see the fear and disgust she felt at that moment

“...Do what must be done?” he finished.

She looked over quickly and gave a slight nod before busying herself with mixing a compound to help the wound she was about to inflict.

Bethany knew she was spending too much time mixing. She also knew why she was doing it. She was trying to put off the gruesome task ahead of her. With the compound complete she hesitantly went over

to a heavy wooden chest. She never liked this chest. Not the physical box itself but rather the feeling it gave her. She had only witnessed her mother open it once to use the terrible instruments inside. She had been a child, no more than six years old when she had snuck in to spy on what was going on despite her mother's warnings to not enter. Bethany would never forget the expressions on the face of the young girl in the table. That terrified look as Bethany's mother approached with the saw in hand.

She quickly put the thought out of her mind. This was going to take all of her focus. Bethany had never actually seen how to do an amputation. All she could remember was the terrible sounds coming from this room. Carrying the saw and the cauterizing compound she returned to Tyrell and the patient. The farmhand's skin had started becoming translucent as small amount of the venom started to reach other parts of his body. His eyes were wide like those of a crazed man. His breathing was shallow and came in quick short bursts.

“Is there nothing you can give him to ease the pain?” Tyrell asked.

Bethany leaned over the farmhand and looked deep into his eyes. Being a healer she had a naturally strong empathic sense. She knew almost the second she looked into his eyes that his mind had retreated away from his body. Whatever nightmare he was fighting within himself, it would block out the events of the outside world.

“Anything I administer to him would only make the poison work faster.” She said, “His mind has closed to the world. He is known now between this one and the next. If we are to do this we must do it now”

Tyrell nodded in understanding and held his friend down while Bethany prepared for the first cut. She wished she felt as confident as she had tried to sound. She quickly stole a glance up at Tyrell. She wondered if the quiet strength he was showing was as much a lie as her own outward indomitability.

Swallowing her fear Bethany made the first stroke. The saw made a terrible squelch as it started to eat through the slowly dissolving flesh. She had paused briefly, trying to fight back the sudden urge to vomit. The smell from the decaying leg filled the room, weaving its way into the nostrils of those present. Bethany recomposed herself and continued to slice through the man's leg. Every stroke caused him to lurch.

“Tyrell I need you to hold him,” She said more sternly than intended.

Tyrell complied silently, putting more of his weight into keeping his friend in place. With each stroke of the saw Bethany started to feel more confidence in succeeding. It was a lot easier than she had expected, the soft tissue giving very little resistance to the blade. Then suddenly the saw jerked to a halt as it hit bone. The sudden stop took her by surprise before realizing what had happened. Bethany tried to get it going again but the blade had jammed in solid. Panic started to set in.

She jumped as she felt something on her arm. She looked up and saw Tyrell resting his hand on her and looking her straight in the eye. He had a gentle smile on his face and when he spoke his words were filled with kindness and hope.

“Bethany. You can do this.” He said softly “My father was a carpenter. You need to grasp the saw with both hands and move it up and down”

She looked down at the farmhand, all traces of the earlier confidence gone from her face.

“I don't think he will notice” Tyrell reassured her

She looked up at Tyrell, and found herself drawing some of his strength into herself. Bethany nodded and grasped the tool with both hands. Using all her strength, she jiggled the saw up and down. She

lurched forward as the bone suddenly let go and the blade became free once more.

*No more mistakes* she mentally chastised herself. She began to cut again, this time taking things a little more carefully.

*My father was a carpenter*

She remembered what Tyrell had said. But this wasn't like sawing plank of wood was it? Then it hit her. The leg was essentially dead so the bone she was now cutting through was not that dissimilar. Looking down she tried to picture the leg as nothing more than a fallen tree stump. This new idea gave her a sudden burst of strength to keep going. She concentrated hard, telling herself that she was just cutting dead wood. Before she knew it she was through the bone. A couple more strokes and the gruesome task was complete.

Bethany quickly put the saw aside and reached the compound. The wound was starting to ooze and she had to get it covered before infection set in. Looking around she suddenly realized that she had nothing to apply it with. There was no time to go looking. Putting aside her own revulsion, she scooped up the mixture and smeared it over the remaining stump. Once bandaged she finally stepped back and took what seemed to be the first full breath since she had started.

“Will he be okay?” Tyrell asked finally.

Bethany checked the farmhand's chest and once again stared in his eyes.

She smiled for what seemed to be the first time in an eternity.

“He will be fine now. What little poison got through should not cause him any problems. He will need to stay here a few days while the wound heals.”

Tyrell helped Bethany put the farmhand to bed in the room reserved for patients and assisted her in cleaning up. As he was leaving he turned to her and smiled.

“You are going to be a great healer.” he said, “Your mother would be very proud of you”

Before she could reply he turned and left. Bethany suddenly finding herself alone started to weep uncontrollably. She wasn't ready for this. Every fiber of her being was telling her to run away. But she knew that she couldn't do that. Not anymore. Her days of dreaming were over.