



Golden (Fairytale Retold)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: All that glitters hides a deadly secret.

Another golden apple has been taken from the King's garden, and he's out for blood.

When an innocent man—the beloved royal gardener who raised him—is falsely accused of the theft, Prince Tabian has only a handful of days to unmask the real thief before the gardener is executed.

The youngest son of a grieving king, Tabian has never fit in with his father or brothers, preferring to spend his time roaming the forest or mingling with common folk rather than play the part of a prince.

Desperate to catch the thief, Tabian spends three nights in the garden, determined to discover the culprit even though all others have failed to do so.

What he uncovers is far more treacherous than stolen fruit. It will test his loyalty and bind his fate to an enemy who could rip everything from him.

This enemies to lovers fairytale retelling will have you swooning at every turn. Get ready for high-stakes adventure, sizzling tension, and an unlikely hero who must do the impossible to save the ones he loves.

Written under her pen name J. L. Youngblood, *Golden* marks Jennifer Youngblood's debut collaboration with a talented new author who goes by Avon Bard. This unique and rewarding partnership is especially meaningful to Jennifer, as Avon Bard is her husband. The duo plans to continue the series and is already working on their next book.

Golden was inspired by the lesser-known fairytale, *The Golden Bird*.

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PROLOGUE

She tore through the dense forest, branches snatching at her cloak.

Her lungs burned, every breath a desperate gasp, as she pumped her legs harder. She had to push past the fear. Push past the pain. It was her only chance of escape. She tripped and fell to the ground.

Despair clutched her in an iron grip. Get up! Do you want to die? She stumbled to her feet and kept going. She heard the persistent shuffle of footsteps behind her. Lilith was getting closer.

Her heart pounded like a war drum in her ears. The darkness was smothering. Her body was giving out, but she had to keep going. Too much was at stake to give up now. She kept running, her mind a blur.

A taunting voice rang through the darkness, “You can’t run forever.”

She would run until she had no strength left. No sooner had the words flitted through her mind when her foot caught on a root. This time, she went down hard, her hand landing on a sharp rock that pierced through her flesh. She gasped, feeling the sticky warmth of her blood flowing over her hand.

She heard the frantic thudding of footsteps and turned to see her tormentor rushing toward her.

“You can never escape me,” Lilith screamed. She looked down at her prey, a peculiar

sadness weighing in her voice. “You and I both know how this is going to end. It didn’t have to be this way. Together, we could’ve been invincible.”

“Nay, for you couldn’t rest until you took possession of my amulet. Your insatiable thirst for power has cankered your soul. If only you had stopped to consider how your actions affect others.”

“Silence,” Lilith screeched. “I’ll hear no more drivel from you. This ends tonight.”

Isolde had known that Lilith would eventually find her. She’d thought she was prepared to die. But now, when the prospect was upon her, the lie unraveled. Trembles rattled through her body. She poured all of her remaining strength into the fury of her words. “You failed. Killing me won’t change anything. I’ve put measures into place—measures that will protect the amulet and ensure that good will ultimately prevail.”

“You think you can stop me from getting what I want? You’re pathetic. So naïve. How exhausting it must be to carry around your heavy cloak of perceived righteousness. You sicken me.” She held out her hand. “Now, hand it over.”

Laughter riddled Isolde’s throat. “You’ve wasted your time hunting me down. I don’t have the amulet.”

“You lie,” Lilith raged.

She lifted her chin. “The amulet is safe from you.”

“Give me the amulet, or I’ll destroy you!”

A bitter chortle bubbled from Isolde’s lips. “I don’t have it.”

“Very well.” Her voice was quiet. Final. “Time to end this.”

Shudders ran through Isolde, knowing what was coming next.

Lilith would use the amulet against her.

A whimper rose in her throat. She clamped down her lips so that it wouldn’t escape. She had to be brave. She had to endure the pain with dignity and grace. A silent prayer went through her mind. Please help this to pass quickly.

A deafening silence pressed against her ears.

Then came the blinding light, searing through her mind and soul.

“Tell me what you did with the amulet,” Lilith shouted.

Even though she knew it was futile to resist, Isolde fought, clinging to her final shreds of willpower.

Then, her sanity was shattered as a ragged cry ripped from her throat.

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THE ACCIDENT

It was his eighteenth birthday, but no one cared.

That wasn't exactly true. Elda had pulled him into a tight hug the moment she saw him. She whispered a heartfelt "Happy birthday, lad" before pressing a round of sweet bread into his hands.

In the castle, the morning routine had been the same as always—hardly a glance from Father, a lofty sniff of disdain from Alistair when they happened to pass in the hall, and a jeering comment from Lucien, who said he hoped Tabian would show up dressed appropriately to the royal ball so he wouldn't bring more shame on the family. "Just because you choose to spend your time amongst peasants doesn't mean you have to dress like one."

Tabian took that opportunity to point out that the royal gardener and his family weren't exactly peasants, but Lucien only smirked and said, "You would do well to remember your place."

His place?

That was the problem. Tabian had no place in the castle. No place amongst those who shared his same blood. No place amongst the ones who should've loved him the most.

He was eighteen years old and was no closer to fitting in with his real family than he'd ever been.

“Come on, let’s go,” Hans urged as he took off running through the meadow.

“Patience, Hans,” he called. “The forest isn’t going anywhere.” Tabian lifted his face to the bright sun overhead, enjoying the warmth mingled with the crisp breeze. He needed this today. Teaching Hans to hunt pheasants was the perfect excuse to break away from the commotion of the castle and his father’s foul mood. Another golden apple had been stolen this morning, and King Roderick was on the warpath. A shiver ran down his spine. Even in the splendor of nature, thoughts of the stolen apples cloaked him in a shadow.

Poor Garrin had gotten the brunt of the King’s vitriol. It cut to see Garrin so distraught after Father’s harsh reprimand. This morning, when Tabian went to the cottage, he found Garrin wringing his hands and trembling all over, muttering that if another apple were to get stolen, he feared the King might take action against him.

Tabian tried to soothe Garrin with calming words. He even offered to talk to Father about the situation. Garrin was appreciative, but Tabian could see in the older man’s eyes what he wouldn’t say aloud ... Tabian had no sway with the King. Father barely acknowledged Tabian’s existence. It was highly doubtful that he would listen to anything his youngest son had to say.

As the royal gardener, Garrin was tasked with the grueling job of going to the King and relaying the bad news—just after dawn, shortly after the apple had fallen to the ground and turned into gold, someone had stolen it. Today marked the fourth apple that had been taken during the past two weeks.

Determined to catch the thief, Father ordered guards to keep watch over the tree. When the guards failed to catch the culprit, Father had enlisted the help of his two older sons—Alistair and Lucien. Father loved and trusted them in a way that Tabian used to envy ... that is, until he came to terms with the hard fact that Father was never going to value him. Even Alistair and Lucien were unable to figure out who

was stealing the apples.

Tabian's gaze followed the blanket of tawny grass swaying gently in the meadow until it reached the border of the forest. Fall was in full swing, and the leaves were ablaze with fiery reds, yellows, and oranges. This was normally Tabian's favorite time of the year, as it was the time when the golden apples started falling from the tree. Even though Tabian had never met his mother—she died giving birth to him—the apples were a reminder of her.

The King rarely spoke of his late wife, even though the grief of losing her was a heavy burden that he carried every day of his life. Mourning the loss of Zyrella had made the King jaded and bitter. While his father had never come out and said it, Tabian suspected that King Roderick blamed him for his mother's death. Perhaps that was why the King had so little to do with Tabian—why he couldn't even look at Tabian without remorse and resentment.

While Tabian was cheerful by nature, he felt the sorrow of having never known his mother. Also, it hurt to be estranged from his father and brothers. He'd often wondered why he was so different from Alistair and Lucien. They were both knights of great repute who fought in the War of the Cliffs that ended four years ago. Tabian, too young to serve, was forced to stay home. Spending four years away from his older brothers during such a formative time in his life made him feel even more disconnected from them.

Tabian learned at a young age that it was better to keep his mouth shut and stay out of his father's and brothers' paths. Tabian loved being outside and would often frequent the royal gardens when he was a lad. He'd found love and acceptance in Garrin and Elda's cottage. Tabian learned from the older couple that his mother had been close to both of them. It made sense as she loved to garden. Garrin took Zyrella under his wing and taught her all that he knew.

With an affectionate smile, Garrin would often remark , “It didn’t take long for Zyrella’s skills to outmatch mine. She was a natural in the garden.”

Tabian got the impression that the reason why Garrin and Elda loved him so much was because they’d dearly loved his mother. Being around the couple made Tabian feel as though he’d gotten a tiny part of her back.

Zyrella had planted the apple tree and spent many years tending it. Some believed that Zyrella was close friends with an enchantress who imbued the tree with magical qualities that caused it to produce golden apples year after year. Others viewed the tree as a sign that providence was smiling down on the kingdom.

When the apples were on the tree, they were of the yellow variety. Starting in the fall during the harvest, one apple would fall from the tree each day at the break of dawn. The moment the apple touched the ground, it turned to gold.

The tree would yield golden apples—only one per day—until the first frost. The tree had come to symbolize the wealth and prosperity of the Kingdom of Verdermere. This tree was a rare treasure appreciated by all.

The tree was revered by the King because it was a tangible reminder of Zyrella.

According to Elda, King Roderick had been very different when Zyrella was by his side. “Your father was once a kind and compassionate man. He loved your mother so much that her death left a huge hole in his heart.” She would look at Tabian with sympathy. “I wish you could’ve known the man he used to be.”

Tabian’s heart twisted. He wished for that, too.

When Hans reached the border of the trees, he turned and yelled back to Tabian, “Are you coming?”

A smile tilted Tabian's mouth. "A little patience goes a long way, lad." Hans was the only son of Garrin and Elda. Well into their middle-age years, the couple had given up on ever having any children. Then Hans surprised them and came along. Tabian was pleased with the new addition. It didn't take long for Tabian to love Hans like a brother.

Tightening his hand on the bow, Tabian quickened his pace to get to Hans. The lad was now pacing back and forth, his cap of golden hair flopping with his every impatient step.

Tabian chuckled under his breath. For days, Hans had been begging him to take him hunting for pheasants.

"Can I go on ahead? I could meet you at the twisted tree by the river." He looked across the meadow, his expression pleading. "Please."

Tabian waved his free hand. "Sure, go ahead."

With that, Hans bolted into the forest.

When he reached the edge of the trees, the sharp tang of fallen leaves and the earthiness of damp soil invaded his senses. He looked up at the canopy of tree branches where pops of sunlight peaked through. As he ventured deeper into the cool shade of the grove, his boots crunched over brittle leaves.

His thoughts turned to tonight's royal ball. His pulse quickened as an image of the Maiden Arabella flashed through his mind—hair the color of freshly fallen chestnuts, brown eyes with a perpetual sparkle, red lips as enticing as a ripe strawberry in the height of summer. Her laugh was infectious, and she had a gift for conversation. Also, Arabella possessed a keen wit and intelligence. Arabella's father was an honored member of the royal council. For that reason, Arabella was given special

permission to attend lessons with Tabian and share his tutors. It was unusual for a maiden to aspire to higher education. At first, Father balked at the idea of Arabella studying alongside one of his sons. It was Tabian who convinced him that the competition from having a fellow student would only serve to sharpen Tabian's skills.

Tabian and Arabella became close friends. However, as the years passed, their relationship deepened into something more. He was looking forward to holding her in his arms as they danced the night away. Perhaps afterward, he could take her to the garden, where they could share a few kisses.

When he heard the sound of flowing water, Tabian knew that he was almost to the river. Somewhere deeper in the woods, a creature rustled through the underbrush.

He reached the clearing and glanced around, looking for Hans. Not spotting him, he called his name. "Hans! Where are you?"

"Up here."

He looked up the length of the tree with the twisted trunk and saw Hans crouched on one of the slender upper branches. Tabian's heart lurched. "What're you doing up there?"

"Trying to spot pheasants," Hans replied, grinning.

The branches at the top were dangerously small. The one Hans was on dipped beneath his weight. Even though Tabian's first impulse was to demand that Hans come down at once, he knew better than to alarm the lad. He kept his voice even. "You're too high up. You need to come down. Be careful." Blood beat against his temples with frantic wings as he swallowed. Holding his breath, he watched as Hans scrambled down to the next branch. "Easy," he warned.

Hans lowered himself onto the next branch, and then it happened. It broke with a loud crack. Hans screamed, and Tabian gasped as Hans fell from the tree and hit the water with a loud splash. The current seized him instantly, pulling him under.

His heart in his throat, Tabian rushed over to the riverbank and yelled Hans' name. He scoured the river—there! A small hand broke the surface, fingers flailing before vanishing.

Tabian didn't hesitate. He dropped his bow, tore off his quiver, and plunged in. The cold shocked the air from his lungs. The current was stronger than he'd anticipated, grasping him with unseen hands. He fought against it, kicking hard. His gaze locked on Hans, whose head bobbed above the water. His mouth opened in a silent scream before the river swallowed him again.

Tabian lunged. His fingertips grazed Hans's tunic. A surge wrenched the boy away. With a final burst of strength, Tabian managed to grasp Hans's wrist. He pulled as he kicked furiously with his feet. He wrapped an arm around Hans's chest and maneuvered them towards the shore.

His limbs burned. Just a little farther.

His boots scraped the riverbed. With one last push, he hauled them both onto the muddy bank and collapsed. His chest heaved as he fought to get a good breath.

Hans lay beside him, unmoving.

Tabian rolled him onto his side. "Come on, Hans. Breathe."

A terrible moment passed. Then Hans coughed violently, spitting out a mouthful of water. He gasped, drawing in ragged, desperate breaths.

Relief crashed over Tabian, draining the remaining strength from his limbs and leaving his breath unsteady. An ache of lingering fear shot through him. "Are you hurt?"

Hans shook his head weakly, but his eyes filled with tears. "You saved me."

Tabian let out a long breath and scrubbed a hand over his face before pulling Hans into a firm embrace. "That's what family does."

Hans clung to him, shoulders shaking. "I—I thought I was going to die."

Tabian tightened his hold. "Not while I'm around, lad. Not while I'm around."

For several long moments, they sat in silence. The murmuring of the river was an unspoken reminder of how close Hans had come to losing his life. Finally, Tabian stood, helping Hans to his feet. "Come on. Let's get back before your mother wrings my neck."

Hans sniffled but nodded.

Together, they made their way back to the cottage.

THE ROYAL BALL

Whenever a royal ball was held, people far and near clamored for an invitation to the noble event. The Great Hall of the castle was lit with candles from the massive chandeliers overhead. Torches lined the stone walls, their orange flames adding to the grandeur of the evening.

A minstrel group was positioned off to one side, playing a merry tune as finely dressed couples danced.

Long banquet tables ran the length of the hall, adorned with gleaming silver platters piled high with pastries, fresh bread, roasted meats, and fruits. Goblets overflowed with ale and spiced wine, filling the air with a heady aroma of revelry. Laughter and conversation wove into the music, creating a festive celebration.

As King, it was Father's duty and privilege to preside over the ball. A long table on a raised platform at the far end of the hall seated the royal family and high-ranking nobles.

Father, his golden crown gleaming in the warm light, sat in the center, his face a mask of unreadable authority. Alistair, his expression stiff, was on Father's left. Beatrice, Alistair's wife, sat beside him. Alistair had married a woman of nobility whose dour personality was the perfect match for Alistair's uptight temperament.

Lucien sat on Father's right. A ladies' man, Lucien's appearance was as polished as the silver candlesticks spotting the tables. He was relaxed and perfectly in his element as he laughed and chatted with the other guests, who seemed to be hanging on his

every word, captivated by his wit and effortless charisma.

Tabian, however, had no place at the royal table. Once, Father had invited him to sit among them, but Tabian's discomfort was obvious. Over time, the invitations had stopped coming. Whether out of pity or shame on Father's part, Tabian didn't know.

No matter.

Tabian was given the blessed freedom to move among the guests, unburdened by formalities. He surveyed the hall, looking for Arabella. His heart jumped when he spotted her near the food table. No surprise, she was surrounded by a cluster of squires who were vying for her attention. A stab of jealousy went through Tabian as he watched Arabella interact with the men.

She was so incredibly beautiful with her lustrous brown hair that curled playfully on her slender shoulders. Her brown eyes were ringed in gold that turned them rich amber when she was amused. Her cheeks were polished apples, and her lips—heat ribboned through him—her lips were soft and succulent. Her ivory skin was smooth as velvet.

A familiar ache twisted his chest. While he and Arabella had shared many kisses, and she promised that she felt the same for him as he did her, at times like this, he feared she would be forever out of his reach.

“Good evening, Squire Tabian,” a man said, drawing his attention.

Tabian turned to find Orrin, an older nobleman with silver hair and a distinguished demeanor. In his younger years, he was a famed knight. He'd spent the last decade serving as a member of Father's royal council.

Tabian inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgment. “Good evening.” He tried to

match the man's regal tone, but the words sounded stilted and wrong in his own ears.

Orrin frowned. "That's a nasty business with the golden apples."

"It is," Tabian agreed.

The man leaned in and lowered his voice. "Is the King any closer to apprehending the thief?"

"Unfortunately, nay."

"A pity." Orrin stroked his angular chin. "I heard that the royal gardener received quite the reprimand from your father."

Tabian's throat tightened. "He did." Where was this going?

"If the thief isn't caught soon," —Orrin lowered his voice, giving Tabian a meaningful look— "your father is looking for someone to blame. He considers the thefts an insult of the highest degree. Someone will have to pay."

An icy shiver ran down Tabian's spine. "What're you saying?"

"Only that you should prepare yourself ... in case the worst happens."

Tabian's pulse quickened. Was Orrin insinuating that Garrin was in danger? "He stepped closer. "What do you know?"

A soft chuckle issued from Orrin's throat. "No need to get riled up, lad. I was just making conversation."

Tabian forced himself to relax. Was Orrin intentionally baiting him? In a tavern, such

a quarrel could quickly escalate. It would then be settled with blows of the fist. Things were much more complex inside the walls of the castle. Tabian had little patience for the endless politics playing out on a constant basis.

Orrin glanced at the royal table. “I thought you would be dining with your family.”

The disapproval in Orrin’s tone tightened Tabian’s spine. Alistair often remarked that the members of the royal council felt as if Tabian spent too much time roaming the forest and keeping company with those who were beneath his station. “You need to grow up and take on responsibilities more fitting for you,” Alistair had said.

If “growing up” meant becoming stuffy like Alistair, then Tabian would pass. He enjoyed going to taverns and interacting with the common folk. Tabian was exceptionally good at playing dice, and he could hold his own when arm wrestling, especially when facing an opponent around his same size and build.

Lucien was a champion of the joust, and Alistair was good with the sword. Tabian, on the other hand, was terrible at the joust. He could wield the sword enough to protect himself, but he probably wouldn’t be winning any competitions anytime soon.

Having no wish to explain himself to Orrin, Tabian gave him a parting nod. “Excuse me, but there’s someplace I need to be.”

Before Orrin could protest, Tabian hurried away. Was Garrin in real trouble? Surely not. Garrin’s father had served as the royal gardener under King Roderick’s father, and then the legacy passed to Garrin, who was as loyal as the day was long. Surely, Father didn’t believe that Garrin had anything to do with the thefts. Orrin was most likely toying with him. He relaxed, determined not to let Orrin’s antics ruin his evening.

When he neared Arabella, she saw him and offered a wide smile. Promptly

dismissing the other squires, she pushed past them to get to Tabian.

“Hello,” she began. “Thanks for saving me.” She cut her eyes in the direction of the squires.

“Always,” he said with meaning as he held her eyes. Relief tumbled over him. Arabella didn’t care anything about those squires. They were nuisances. She’d been waiting for Tabian to rescue her. The thought pleased him immensely. He reached for her gloved hand, lifted it to his lips, and planted a soft kiss. She gave him a dainty curtsy in response. Everything about Arabella was graceful and measured.

His gaze flickered over her, noting the tantalizing hollow of her neck and the way the lace of the bodice fanned her soft skin. The emerald gown complemented her brown curls, which, tonight, had a copper tint under the flicker of the candles.

A smile tilted her lips. “Happy birthday.”

He rocked back, immensely pleased. “You remembered.”

She quirked a face. “Of course.”

He leaned close, wagging his eyebrows, his tone playful. “Well, since it’s my birthday, you owe me a gift.”

She lifted an eyebrow in amusement. “Is that right?”

“It is,” he murmured. “You promised to dance the night away with me.” She smelled of flowers and spicy cloves. The scent was divine. His breath came faster. Everything about Arabella thrilled him.

“So I did.” She gave him a bewitching smile. Before he could take her hand again and

lead her onto the dance floor, she glanced at the royal table. The corners of her mouth dropped. “Why are you not sitting with your family?”

His jaw tightened. “You know why.”

“We talked about this, remember?”

“Aye, I remember.” Arabella had been pestering him about not living up to his privileges. It was starting to sound like she’d taken her script from Alistair.

“You, above anyone, know that I have no use for the pomp and circumstance.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “If you don’t believe in yourself, Tabian, then no one else will.”

Her rebuke stung. “I thought you believed in me,” he pouted.

She swatted his arm. “I do, which is why I’m encouraging you to stop hiding in the shadows. You need to take your rightful place as a prince.”

“I can’t help that my family won’t accept me,” he growled. Arabella already knew his situation. He’d talked to her about it at length many times. “Why are you harping on me about this?”

She looked him in the eye. “Because I care about you.”

That’s all it took for the irritation to melt. A smile stretched over Tabian’s face. “That’s good because I care about you, too.”

He thought—hoped—the conversation was over, but she persisted. “Will you at least consider stepping up and taking your rightful place in your family?”

He had to fight the urge to roll his eyes.

“For me?” She gave him a pleading look.

“For you ... aye,” he finally said.

She looked at the table again. “You should go now.” She smirked. “Look at Lucien, always the center of attention.”

Was that a faint note of admiration in her voice? Lucien had a long list of hopeful maidens who pined away for him. Arabella would often make remarks about it in a joking way. She would then take an assessment of Tabian, eyeing him with a critical gaze, “You’re much more attractive than you realize. In fact, you’re strikingly handsome with your dark-blond hair and stormy-blue eyes. If you would dress and act the part of a prince, more maidens would take notice of you.”

Tabian would then insist that he didn’t care about other maidens. “I only care about you,” he would argue and would then smother her with kisses.

“You should go,” Arabella said again, cutting into his thoughts.

He grimaced. “Nay, I don’t belong there.” Seeing her exasperated expression, he amended, “I don’t feel like I belong there.”

“But you do.” She caught hold of his hand. “Let’s go.”

He stayed rooted to the floor as a grin tugged at his lips. “I’ll go under one condition.”

“So you’re making conditions now?” Amusement sparkled in her eyes.

His grin widened. “Aye.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Dance with me, and then we’ll go.” He longed to pull her into his arms and hold her close.

“Very well,” she conceded. “One dance.”

That’s all the prompting he needed to pull her onto the dance floor. The music shifted to a slower melody. As they moved in rhythm, he lowered his face and playfully grazed her lips with his.

“Not here,” she balked, looking around as if afraid someone was watching.

He was mildly offended by her behavior. “Why do you care if people know that we’re together?”

A breezy laugh floated from her lips. “I’m a proper maiden, and I want everyone to see that.”

“How could they not?” he uttered, caressing her beautiful face with his eyes.

After the song ended, Tabian was forced to keep his promise. Arabella took hold of his arm and led him up to the royal table.

When Father and his brothers saw him, their eyes widened in surprise. Arabella threw Lucien a bright smile. “Mind if we join you?”

Lucien hesitated a fraction of a moment as if he might protest, but then diplomacy took over. “Of course,” he agreed with a magnanimous smile. His eyes flicked over

Arabella with a subtle appreciation that scalded Tabian's blood. Lucien picked up on Tabian's jealousy and threw his younger brother a taunting grin. Then he turned to the man seated next to him and asked him and his wife to scoot down two chairs.

Tabian and Arabella took their seats. Tabian made a point of sitting next to Lucien so that he wouldn't have to share Arabella's attention with his older brother, who was far more charming and handsome than Tabian could ever hope to be.

Servants immediately brought Tabian and Arabella plates loaded with food.

"See, that wasn't so difficult," Arabella whispered in his ear.

Perhaps not difficult for Arabella, but extremely difficult for Tabian. Lucien made no effort to hold a conversation with Tabian. Instead, he shifted away from him and focused on what Father and Alistair were discussing. Once again, Tabian felt alone and disconnected from the family. In that painful moment, his secret was exposed to himself. A part of him wouldn't mind being included in the affairs of the kingdom. It was the act of self-preservation that prompted Tabian to develop his shell of indifference.

Finally, after they'd finished eating, Tabian excused him and Arabella from the table. They went back out to the dance floor and danced a few more songs.

"Would you like to take a walk in the gardens?" Tabian asked, eager to get her alone so he could kiss her until his heart was content.

Arabella touched her forehead. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass." She offered a weak smile. "I'm not feeling like myself. I think I need to go home and get some rest."

Tabian's stomach clutched with concern. "Are you ill?"

“Just tired.” She graced him with one of her beautiful smiles. “I’ll see you on Monday—bright and early—in our Latin class.”

He nodded, reluctant to let her go. “I could accompany you in your carriage,” he offered.

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine. Goodnight, Tabian. Thanks for a wonderful evening.”

He reached for her hand and pressed it between his. “It was my pleasure.” He leaned in and gave her a peck on the lips, but she drew back all too quickly.

He swallowed his disappointment as he watched her walk away.

Taking in a deep breath, Tabian glanced around. Now that Arabella had left, he no longer had any desire to be here. He wove his way over to the food table and grabbed a couple of pastries. Carrying one in each hand, he made his way outside, welcoming the cool breeze that touched his cheeks. He would go for a walk in the gardens even without Arabella at his side.

He strolled along the path as he munched on the pastries. Maybe he should take a turn guarding the apple tree. Tabian didn’t like the idea of a sword hanging over Garrin’s head. If he could apprehend the thief, then all of this unpleasant business could be put to rest.

After polishing off the last pastry, Tabian decided to make his way to the apple tree. He wasn’t sure who had been given the task to guard it tonight.

He rounded a corner and stopped in his tracks when he heard a woman giggle. She was on the other side of a tall hedge. The woman sounded like Arabella, but that was impossible. Arabella had gone home for the evening. A man was with the woman. They spoke in low tones of endearment.

Quickening his pace, Tabian spanned the length of the hedge and rounded the corner. His heart shriveled.

Arabella was wrapped in Lucien's arms. Their lips met, slow and unhurried, as if they'd performed this same dance countless times before.

The sight of them cut through Tabian like a blade.

Lucien was the first to notice him. With a smirk, he drew back from Arabella, although he didn't release her. "Ah, little brother," he drawled, his tone dripping with mockery. "Didn't expect to see you here."

Arabella's eyes widened in horror. "I—this isn't—" She extricated herself from Lucien's grasp and took an uneasy step towards Tabian. "I'm so sorry; I never meant to hurt you."

"Don't," he snapped.

Lucien let out a low chuckle, thoroughly enjoying Tabian's humiliation. "Don't be so dramatic. Surely you didn't think a woman like Arabella would be satisfied with you?"

"Enough," Arabella warned Lucien.

He held up his hands, his voice pitching high. "Just speaking the truth."

Clearly, Arabella wielded a great deal of control over Lucien, just as she had over Tabian. His pulse roared in his ears. He was a fool. A naive, pathetic fool.

"You should've seen the way he looked at you tonight, Arabella," Lucien continued, his grin widening. "He's smitten. It's rather sad, really."

Arabella cast Lucien a glare, her shame deepening, but she said nothing. Her silence cut deeper than any insult Lucien could throw.

Tabian's mind was on fire. He'd spent half of his life loving Arabella, convinced she was different from the other frivolous maidens. Convinced that she saw him for who he really was. That she cared about him.

It had all been a lie.

"Tabian." Arabella's voice cracked. "Please try to understand. I love you like a brother."

"A brother?" he scoffed. "Surely you don't go around kissing a brother like you have me. Enjoy being with Lucien. The two of you deserve each other." Without another word, he spun on his heel and stormed off.

He didn't stop, didn't dare look back.

He refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing him break.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:15 am

THE ACCUSED

S omehow, Tabian managed to stumble back to the castle and up to his chamber, where he threw himself down on the bed and sank into a stupor. Now that Arabella had been ripped away, his life here held no meaning. Maybe he should go to another kingdom where no one knew him. He could make his way on his own without living in the shadow of his brothers. He would never again have to see the sorrow that darkened Father's eyes when he looked upon the son whose birth took away the woman he loved.

There was no way that Tabian could bear to be around Arabella, knowing that she'd betrayed him to be with Lucien. Fleeing the kingdom was his only option.

Of course, that meant leaving Garrin, Elda, and Hans. His stomach knotted. They were his real family. They were the only ones who cared. It would break his heart to leave them. However, they would surely understand.

Around and around his thoughts went until he finally drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning, he awoke to the sound of a trumpet blast. He bolted upright, still in the same clothes from the ball. He barely had time to rub the sleep from his eyes before the frantic bustle of servants outside his door reached his ears. He stepped into the corridor and grabbed the arm of a passing servant. "What's happening?"

"Another apple has been stolen," the servant explained. "The King is making an arrest."

Tabian blinked. “The thief was caught?”

“That’s what it sounds like, but I’m not sure.”

“Thanks.” Tabian released the man’s arm and allowed him to hurry away.

He made his way down to the Throne Room amidst the frantic bustling of servants scurrying past, their day disrupted by an unplanned royal summons.

He stepped into the back of the Throne Room, which was packed with people. The air was thick with murmurs and tension. His gaze swept the hall, taking in the vast stone walls adorned with crimson banners bearing the royal crest.

He looked up the aisle to see Father sitting on his throne, scepter in hand, features set in stone. Alistair and Lucien stood off to the side, their expressions unreadable. A dart of resentment shot through Tabian. Father had obviously taken the time to consult with his favored sons regarding the summons, but once again, he’d given no thought to including Tabian. He’d might as well be invisible.

His gut twisted when his eyes landed on Lucien, standing tall and confident. The events of the previous night slammed into him like a blow. Had Arabella taken her place among the nobles at the front? He didn’t dare look.

Feeling eyes on him, Tabian glanced around and realized that the people surrounding him were watching him with curiosity. He looked down, remembering that he was still wearing his fine clothes from the night before. Instinctively, he fingered the soft velvet fabric of his deep-blue tunic, feeling like an imposter. Perhaps these people wondered why Tabian was in the back with the common folk rather than taking his place near the front. He nodded and smiled briefly at the people before settling into a spot and focusing on the proceedings.

Father's throne was on a high platform so that he could be seen by everyone in the large room. A herald stood at attention at the bottom of the steps. With a formal carriage, the herald strode over to the center of the room and played a fanfare.

Then he began in a loud voice, "Honored Knights and Squires, Lords and Ladies of the Court, we have been summoned here today at the request of our honored King Roderick Warwyk the Second. Please give him your full and undivided attention."

A hush fell over the room.

Having performed his duty, the herald went back to his post.

All eyes were riveted on the King. His dark hair was threaded with silver, and his light eyes held the steely authority of one born to rule. Even Tabian couldn't help but be awed at the confidence that Father wielded. If only Tabian could be bolder and more forthright. Perhaps then he could earn the respect of his family. It irked him that he was thinking along these lines, but there it was.

Father's gaze swept over the crowd. "My honored subjects, it is with deep regret and sadness that I must announce—" He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "Another golden apple was taken this morning."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

The King lifted a hand, silencing them instantly. "This will not stand." His voice shook with fury. "A guard was posted to watch the tree. This morning, he discovered that the apple was gone. However, something was discovered near the scene of the crime." He narrowed his eyes to a glower. "A leather hat belonging to one Garrin Valehurst."

A cry ripped through the crowd. Tabian realized it had come from his own throat.

“Bring the accused forward.”

Tabian’s head spun with the terrible knowledge that Orrin’s prediction the night before at the ball was coming true. Father must’ve been discussing the matter with his council members. This was bad. Very bad.

Guards emerged from a side corridor, leading Garrin between them. His wrists and ankles were shackled in chains, the metal clinking against the stone floor. A hot fury surged through Tabian as he saw Garrin standing before the King, his head bowed, craggy shoulders sagging in defeat. Garrin’s loose-fitting clothes were worn and stained with soil from working in the garden. The skin on the nape of his neck resembled leather from all his time in the sun. Normally, Garrin wore his hat, but today, his head was bare. His silver hair was so thin on top that his scalp showed through—making Garrin look even older than usual.

“How do you answer this charge?” the King demanded.

“Sire, I didn’t steal the apple,” Garrin rasped in a hoarse, wretched tone. His throat clogged with mucus as he coughed. “You, of all people, know how loyal I am to the throne—to you.”

Heat from a thousand fires blazed through Tabian. Of course, Father knew that Garrin was loyal to the core. Why was he treating Garrin like a common thief? Tears burned in Tabian’s eyes, blurring his vision. It slashed his insides to see the man who raised him subjected to this humiliation—brought on by Tabian’s own father, of all people. Wasn’t there any true justice in the world? What about mercy? Love? Qualities which Father knew little of.

Father tapped the tip of his scepter in sync with his words. “Why was your hat found at the scene of the crime?”

It seared Tabian's eyes to witness this atrocity. In that moment, Tabian hated Father with an intensity that surprised him. How easy it was for him to sit on his throne and pronounce judgment on others. With one word, he had the power to wreck lives. But Father wasn't infallible. He was wrong.

So. Terribly. Wrong.

Garrin was a good man—the best of the best. He didn't deserve this. Tabian felt like his insides were being ripped out. Never before had he felt so vulnerable. His heart ached, not only for Garrin but also for Elda, Hans ... himself. Tabian's heart was beating so profusely that he thought it might burst from his chest. Sweat pooled across his forehead. His head swam as darkness crowded the edges of his eyes.

“Sire, I was in the garden last night. I slept by the tree so that I could keep watch over the apple. I must've forgotten my hat.”

That was a perfectly logical explanation. Surely, Father could see that. Garrin practically lived in the garden. Of course, he might leave some of his items behind. Why was Father coming down so hard on Garrin? Did he have a personal grievance against him? The thought sent shudders through Tabian as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

King Roderick looked to the side. As if on cue, a guard strode in and stood before the King. Father homed in on him with piercing eyes that commanded the man to tell the truth. “Dain, you were tasked with watching over the tree.” He pointed at Garrin. “Did you at any time see this man while you were there?”

Dain turned to Garrin. “Aye. As he said, he claimed he was there to keep watch over the tree.”

Father nodded as if satisfied with the report.

A sliver of relief went through Tabian. Maybe Father was just doing his duty. Surely, he could see that Garrin was innocent.

Father continued, “This morning when you realized the apple was taken, was Garrin there with you?”

“Nay. He was nowhere to be found.”

“Do you remember what happened? How the apple came to be taken?”

Dain lowered his head in shame. “I do not, Sire. Unfortunately, I have no recollection of anything that happened—other than when I first got to the garden, I spoke to Garrin, and we settled in to protect the tree for the night.”

Father shifted his focus to Garrin. “You claimed that you went to the garden to guard the tree.”

“Aye,” Garrin concurred.

He rested the scepter across his lap and sat back on his throne. “And yet, you were nowhere to be found in the morning. Where did you go?”

“I—I’m not sure. I can’t remember.”

He pounded his fist on the armrest of his throne, his voice going thunderous. “How can you not remember?”

Garrin began to shake all over. “I don’t know.”

“Dain, do you have any memory of what happened?”

“Nay,” the guard answered in a halting tone.

The accounts were eerily similar to all the rest. No one had any memories of the events that took place on the night leading up to the theft. It had to be some sort of trickery or magic.

Father glowered at Garrin. “I warned you what would happen if one more golden apple got stolen.”

Tabian’s blood ran cold. What was Father talking about? Had he threatened Garrin?”

“Please, Sire, I have a family?—”

“You should’ve thought about that before you committed treason.” Garrin made a noise of feeble protest, but Father talked over him. “You are hereby sentenced to the dungeon, where you will await execution.”

“No,” a woman cried.

Tabian recognized the voice—Elba.

This couldn’t be happening. It was a nightmare. Sweat beaded over his forehead as a roaring started in his ears. His knees went weak as he staggered.

“Are you okay?” the man beside him asked with a note of concern.

The guards began leading Garrin away.

It was time to act. There was no way Tabian could remain silent. And yet, to speak against his father—the King—was unthinkable. Tabian had spent his entire life trying to make himself invisible. He’d grown so accustomed to living off whatever crumbs

Father and his brothers threw his way that he didn't know how to behave any differently.

But he couldn't stand for this.

A guttural sound formed in his throat. "Halt." It was so muffled that only those closest to him heard. He tried again. "Halt!" Before he could fully process what he was doing, he left his place amongst the crowd and rushed down the aisle. A startled hush came over the cavernous room as he stood facing Father on the throne, his feet planted in a battle stance. He would later wonder where he got the courage to be so forthright. Straightening his shoulders, he looked Father in the eye. "This is outrageous."

Both shock and fury streaked through Father's eyes. "You are out of line." He glanced at Lucien. "Take your brother out of here before he does something we'll all regret."

Lucien moved to do Father's bidding, but Tabian held out a hand to stop him. "Do not touch me," he said hotly. He turned back to Father. "'Tis you who are out of line." His accusation was met with a deafening silence. "You and I both know that Garrin had nothing to do with the theft. He's a good man." He steeled his jaw. "The best of men."

Father punched a fist into the air. "As the royal gardener, Garrin has the responsibility to guard the apples. The situation is compounded by the fact that Garrin can't explain why he left the garden or how his hat ended up beside the tree."

Tabian furrowed his brows. "If you're claiming that Garrin's lapse of memory makes him appear guilty, then you would have to say the same about Dain, Alistair, Lucien, and everyone else who guarded the tree."

“Enough,” Father roared.

“It’s okay.” Garrin offered him an appreciative smile—the same comforting smile he’d given Tabian more times than he could count. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but there are things at play here that aren’t apparent on the surface.”

“What does that mean?”

Garrin pressed his lips together and looked away.

“Garrin.” Tabian’s voice broke. “Talk to me. What else is at play?”

“You would do well to remain silent,” Father warned Garrin.

Tabian leveled a glare at Father. “It’s thanks to Garrin that my mother took up gardening and planted the tree in the first place. You should be thanking him for caring for Mother ... and for looking after me when you wouldn’t.”

The King’s face turned crimson as the veins in his neck writhed. He pointed at Garrin. “That man took everything from me,” he hissed.

Confusion rolled over Tabian when he saw the silent exchange that passed between Father and Garrin. “What’s he talking about?” he asked Garrin.

Sadness wrenched Garrin’s face as he shook his head before looking down at the floor.

“Take him away,” Father said to Darian with a weary flick of his hand.

Invisible fingers clawed at Tabian’s skull. “Nay.” His words rushed out. “I’ll catch the thief.”

Lucien pushed out a jeering chuckle. “You? I don’t think so.”

“Give me a chance.” He caught eyes with Father. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly confident. “Give me three days. I’ll guard the tree, and I’ll catch the thief. What have you got to lose?”

Father clutched the scepter in his hands.

“You owe me that much,” Tabian finished, his voice husky with emotion.

Something in Father’s eyes shifted—was it guilt? Remorse?

“Three days,” Tabian stated firmly. “When I catch the thief, you will set Garrin free.”

They locked eyes in a silent battle of wills.

Tabian felt the need to sweeten the deal. “Afterwards, I’ll leave the kingdom and never come back.”

“Sounds like a good deal, Father; I think you should take it,” Lucien smirked.

Father held up his hand to silence Lucien, whose face turned cherry red at having been rebuked.

“Nay,” Garrin murmured, shaking his head. He looked at Tabian. “This is your home. You cannot leave.”

Tabian straightened his shoulders, turning his focus back to Father. “I’ll leave, and you’ll never have to see me again.” He couldn’t stop the slight tremble in his voice. “You’ll never be forced to look upon the face of the one whose very existence took the one you loved.”

Father's eyes widened in surprise, and then he worked his jaw. He balled his fist and placed it over his mouth. One moment passed ... two ... three ... Finally, he pushed out a heavy sigh. "Very well. You have three days."

Triumph swelled through Tabian.

Father held up a finger. "At the end of the three days, if the thief is not caught, then Garrin will be executed, and we'll finally put an end to this sordid ordeal." He looked at Garrin as he spoke. Again, the two shared some sort of exchange.

Father was using the theft of the golden apples as an excuse to target Garrin. The question was: Why?

THE EXTRAORDINARY

Elda's sobs reverberated through the cottage, raw and unrelenting. Each moan, each broken gasp, was a blade to Tabian's heart. He had never seen her like this—so utterly consumed by despair. The small, warm cottage that had always been a place of comfort was now unbearably hollow.

Hans sat rigid in the corner; his small hands clenched into fists at his sides. His red-rimmed eyes were glassy, his face pale with shock. He looked so much smaller than usual as if the weight of his father's absence had shrunk him.

Tabian knelt in front of Elda, reaching for her ice-cold hands. "It will be all right," he said, willing his voice to be steady, to be a pillar of strength for them both. "I will discover the identity of the thief, and Garrin will be set free."

His words, though meant to comfort, only made her weep harder. Her shoulders trembled, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "You—don't—understand," she gulped. "The King will never release Garrin. He will be executed." Her lower lip trembled violently, and fresh tears spilled down her cheeks.

Tabian had never seen Elda in such a state. She was the strongest woman he knew. And yet, here she was—shattered.

"You're right," he admitted, his own throat tightening. "I don't understand all that is going on between Garrin and my father." He searched her grief-stricken face. "I need you to tell me."

She took in a sharp breath, her expression shifting into one of conflict. “Nay, I can’t.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Garrin wouldn’t like it.”

Tabian clenched his jaw. “I need to know what’s happening. ‘Tis the only chance I have of saving him.”

Elda hesitated, her gaze darting to Hans, who was watching her with wide, pleading eyes.

“Whatever it is, tell him, Mother. Please,” Hans whispered. His voice was thick with unshed tears.

A silence stretched between them. Then, with a slow, shuddering breath, Elda nodded. She wiped at her eyes with trembling hands, struggling to compose herself. “Your mother almost died giving birth to Lucien.”

Tabian stiffened. “I didn’t know that.”

Elda’s voice took on the faraway tone of remembering. “Zyrella was a wonderful mother.” A sad, tender smile passed over her lips. “Her children were her entire world.”

Tabian’s heart ached. How different would his life have been had Mother lived? Father wouldn’t have turned cold, and his brothers would’ve treated him as an equal. He would’ve grown up knowing what it was like to be wanted.

“Zyrella was content with her two sons for a while.” Elda hesitated, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “But as time passed, she grew restless. She longed for another child. King Roderick was ardently against it. He’d almost lost her once and didn’t want to risk losing her again.” Elda met Tabian’s gaze. “But Zyrella was determined. She told me that her deceased mother came to her in a dream and told

Zyrella that her next child would be a son and that he would look almost exactly like her.”

Tabian’s breath hitched. He did look like his mother. A painting of her hung over the mantel in the library—a painful and ever-present reminder of what he never had.

“Zyrella’s mother told her that her third son would be different from the others—that he would be kinder, more inclined to consider others’ feelings.” Elda paused as if wondering if she should speak her next words. “And that he was destined for greatness.”

Tabian’s stomach twisted. The part about him being different and kinder rang true. But the part about greatness? That was absurd. He’d spent his entire life being overlooked, dismissed, and unwanted. How could greatness ever be meant for someone like him?

Elda drew in a breath, her voice growing steadier. “Even though the King forbade her from trying for another child, Zyrella did so. But nothing happened. She became desperate. She begged me for help.”

Tabian’s pulse quickened. “Help?”

She nodded, biting down on her lower lip. “I knew of a woman who could assist with such matters.”

Tabian frowned. “Through magic?”

Elda hesitated, then nodded again. “‘Twas the same enchantress who’d helped Zyrella plant the tree. You see, the tree was planted shortly after Zyrella and Roderick were first married and long before even Alistair was born. Over the years, Zyrella and the enchantress had lost touch with one another.” She paused, her jaw working. “I

never would have taken Zyrella to visit the enchantress so they could renew their friendship had I known what would happen.” She twisted the fabric of her frock around her hands. “The enchantress told Zyrella that she could help her conceive.” Elda paused. “But there was a price.” Fresh tears welled in her eyes. “A terrible price.”

Tabian pressed his knuckles into the wooden floor to steady himself. “She willingly gave up her life for me?”

“Aye.” A deep sadness shrouded her eyes in shadows.

The air got sucked from the room. Tabian was struck to the core by the revelation that shattered every belief he’d held about his own existence. His mother had not merely died giving birth to him.

She chose him over herself.

The thought made his heart clench. But beneath the grief, a darker realization took hold. “Is that why my father hates me?”

Elda reached for his arm, her grip warm and steady. “I’m so sorry, Tabian. No child should have to endure what you have. For what it’s worth, I don’t think your father ever meant to hurt you. He was just so lost in his grief that he didn’t know how to find his way out.”

Tabian fought against the tide of emotion rising in him. “If you were the one who helped my mother, then what grievance does my father have with Garrin?”

Guilt simmered in Elda’s eyes. “After Zyrella died, the King launched an investigation. It was discovered that she had sought out the enchantress. The trail eventually led to me.” Her voice broke. “To protect me, Garrin took the blame.”

Tabian's breath caught. "Garrin took the fall for you?"

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks. "This is all my fault."

"Nay." Tabian gripped her hands tightly. "You were trying to help my mother."

"I loved Zyrella like a daughter." She offered Tabian a tender smile. "You are so much like her. Having you in our lives was like getting a part of Zyrella back."

Something was nagging at Tabian. "Why didn't my father try to punish Garrin sooner?"

"We thought he would." She paused. "In fact, we lived in constant fear of retaliation for many years."

"Why didn't you flee the kingdom?"

She jerked like she couldn't believe he asked such a question. "This is our home. Where else would we go? Also, we could never leave you. You are like a son to us."

Tears brimmed in Tabian's eyes and dribbled down his cheeks. "You, Garrin, and Hans are my real family." A few moments later, he wiped his cheeks, thinking of something else. "Why did my father pick now to punish Garrin?"

She looked thoughtful. "I don't know for sure, but I suspect that it might be because you just had your eighteenth birthday. King Roderick knows how close Garrin and I are to you. Maybe he allowed us to give you the nurturing that he couldn't—because of his grief. Perhaps he feels that you are now a man of age and can now manage without Garrin's guidance."

Determination burned inside him. "I won't allow it," he vowed. "I won't let Father

use the excuse of the stolen apples to execute Garrin. I'll discover the identity of the thief, and then Father will be forced to release Garrin. After that, we'll leave the kingdom. We can start a new life—with the four of us."

Cautious hope flickered in Elda's eyes. "Do you really think you can find out who took the apples when no one else has been able to do so?"

"I can certainly try." A humorless smile stole over Tabian's lips. "I'm extraordinary, remember?"

Love shone in her eyes. "You are extraordinary. I just hope that Garrin and I will get the opportunity to live long enough to see you realize it."

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:15 am

THE GARDEN

Nothing like spending the night sleeping on the cold, hard ground. Hugging his arms, Tabian shifted his body, trying to find a comfortable position. He was exhausted, but he couldn't give in to the temptation to fall asleep. He had to stay awake and alert so he could catch any sounds or sights out of the ordinary.

As the dusk of the evening gave way to the deep embrace of night, stars began popping out in the velvety sky. He propped his arms behind his head and stared up at the bright yellow moon, almost full. It cast a pale glow over the royal garden, illuminating the graceful branches of the enchanted tree, shimmering silver in the moonlight. The tree was a quiet marvel, standing tall amidst the towering hedges and creeping ivy that traveled along the garden walls.

His thoughts turned to his conversation with Elda. Tabian still found it hard to comprehend that his mother chose to have him when she knew that giving birth would kill her. A shudder trickled through him. No wonder Father had a hard time even looking at him.

Elda's words about him being extraordinary and destined for greatness kept running through his mind. What great or noble thing was he supposed to do? And how would it take place? He couldn't imagine a scenario where Father or his brothers would ever accept him into their world. Tabian would always be relegated to being an outsider. He would never be able to escape the long, dark shadow of his father's disdain and his brothers' scorn.

A new thought occurred to him. Maybe he would do something great, but what if he

had to leave the kingdom of his birth to do so? It would be liberating to start anew with no constraints.

His chest tightened as he thought about Arabella. In all of the craziness of the day's events, he'd at least not had any time to dwell on her. But now, in the quiet, the hurt of her betrayal returned with a vengeance. Mingled with the hurt was a bitter disappointment. He'd thought that Arabella was too smart to fall for Lucien's charm. So many times, the two of them had laughed together at the foolish maidens who were so smitten by Lucien. Couldn't Arabella see that Lucien was superficial?

Maybe Arabella was setting her sights on Lucien because he was an accepted member of the royal family. Was that why Arabella kept pressing Tabian to ingratiate himself with his father and brothers? Perhaps titles were more important to Arabella than he realized. She preferred to be with a recognized prince rather than the discarded son who lurked in the shadows.

It struck Tabian that he didn't know Arabella as well as he thought he did. His view of her had been tainted by his emotions. Perhaps he'd accepted the version she portrayed—the one she wanted him to see.

He'd brought his bow with him and his quiver containing several arrows. He touched the bow for reassurance, running his fingers along the smooth, polished wood. The weapon was a tangible reminder of his purpose. Never had he shot another person. The idea of doing so now was repulsive. However, he would use it if necessary to catch the thief. No matter what, he wouldn't fail Garrin.

He didn't know how much time had passed before his eyelids grew heavy. He flinched, willing himself to stay awake. There was too much at stake for him to fail. His eyelids were weighted in lead. He pictured Garrin in the dungeon. The tactic helped to push the need to sleep aside.

His gaze went to the trunk of the tree and then traveled upward, taking note of the yellow apples hanging on the branches. They were regular apples. At dawn, the magical transformation of turning one to gold would transpire the instant the apple touched the ground.

And when that happened, Tabian would be on full alert.

He relaxed back against the grass. The night stretched on, slow and merciless.

He awoke with a start, berating himself for falling asleep. A sharp panic raced through him as he glanced around. It was still dark. He let out a relieved breath and got up to walk around. He shivered against the cold air that nipped at his exposed skin. He couldn't trust himself not to nod off again and would spend the rest of the night on his feet, pacing. The rustling leaves the distant hoot of an owl, the swaying of branches—every little sound set his nerves on edge.

Exhaustion gnawed at him as he forced himself to recount his purpose for being out here. Eventually, a peculiar stillness descended over the surroundings. It was now early morning. Dawn would be approaching soon.

A feverish excitement quivered in Tabian as he scoured the area, looking for anything that might be amiss. All seemed normal.

Eventually, the sky took on the muted tones of gray. And then the light from the unseen sun infused the horizon with gradual light. The world began to stir, and he heard the first chirps of birds singing through the trees. Tabian waited by the trunk of the tree for an apple to fall.

He blinked. The thief could be watching him at this very moment. In fact, Tabian might very well scare the person away by appearing too eager to defend the tree. Feigning a loud yawn, he stretched and sat back down on the ground. He waited

several long moments before he reclined back and closed his eyes, pretending to sleep. Every so often, he would crack open his eyes just wide enough to see if anyone was approaching.

He opened his eyes and sat up when he heard a soft thud against the grass. An apple had fallen. It immediately turned to gold, shining its brilliance against the carpet of green grass. He resisted the temptation to go over and pick the apple up.

He waited—watching the apple—until the sun showed the tip of her fiery head in the pink sky.

Not moving a muscle, he sat where he was, hoping the thief would appear.

Finally, after the sun made her climb up into the sky, he rose to his feet and retrieved the apple. It was heavy and smooth in his hands. He looked down at it, thinking of his mother. Oh, how he wished he could've met her.

His body ached from lack of sleep. He picked up his bow and slid the strap of the quiver over his arm. With heavy steps, he trudged towards the castle to deliver the apple to his father.

One night had passed.

He only had two more chances to catch the thief.

After delivering the apple to Father, Tabian planned to get some much-needed sleep. He wanted to be fresh for when he came back tonight and repeated the long process of waiting.

The next night started out much the same as the one before. He returned to the garden, settling into his post beneath the tree. He kept his bow and quiver nearby.

When the stars began popping out of their hiding places, Tabian took to counting them to pass the time.

Eventually, he welcomed the stillness that enveloped him, signaling the approaching dawn. He prayed to the Great Creator. Please let the thief show himself. He couldn't bear the thought of failing and losing Garrin.

The wind picked up, rustling through his clothing and bringing chills over his flesh.

And then he heard the subtle sound of singing ...

Tabian awoke to arms shaking him. He looked up to see a guard standing over him. His heart pounded as he looked around wildly. To his dismay, the sun was already high in the sky.

"The apple," he gasped, his heart slamming against his ribs. He scrambled to his feet, searching the ground.

"It's gone." The guard spoke the words with sympathy.

Tabian pushed his hands through his hair. "Nay! H—how?" he sputtered. He tried to think. One moment, he'd been awake. The wind picked up. It was cold. He tried to remember what happened next, but everything was blank. All he could recall was the guard jostling him awake.

Anguish pressed a hard weight on him as tears rose to his eyes.

Two nights gone.

Only one more chance to save Garrin.

He couldn't fail!

And yet, how was he supposed to do the impossible?

Later that day, a rash broke out on his tongue and inner cheeks. It was probably brought on by nerves. He forced himself to choke down a bit of bread so that he could preserve his strength for the upcoming night.

His stomach churned, making him want to vomit. He couldn't let his frenzied state get the best of him. He had to be strong for Garrin. Taking in a deep breath, he willed himself to calm down. Then, he went to the cottage to seek solace from Elda. He needed to hear her compassionate voice. He needed her to tell him that everything would be okay.

It was selfish, he knew, to try and draw comfort from Elda when she was battling her own grief.

And yet, she was the only mother he'd ever known. He had no one else to go to.

They sat at the wooden table, discussing the matter. Elda had sent Hans on an errand so that she and Tabian could talk in private.

"I don't know what to do." Desperation cloaked Tabian as he looked at Elda, hoping that she might have some sound advice. "I was awake. I was watching. But then" — he shook his head— "but then I wasn't."

She looked him in the eye. "I need you to concentrate. Think back to the night before. What do you remember?"

"I was lying on my back, counting stars. The wind picked up." He paused, a sliver of something coming back to him.

“What?” she asked eagerly.

He tried to grasp whatever knowledge was lingering on the edge of memory, but he couldn't retrieve it. “I can't remember,” he groaned.

“Close your eyes,” she directed.

He did so.

“Try to clear your mind. Think of the smell of the grass, the feel of the wind on your face. Were there any sounds?”

“Nay.” His heart jumped. Wait! “Aye,” he nearly shouted. “I heard a song floating on the wind.” He opened his eyes. “Someone—a woman—was singing.”

“So someone else was there,” she surmised. Her eyes burned with eager light. “Can you remember anything else?”

A dull pain pressed behind his eyes. He pinched his nose with his thumb and index finger. “If only I could remember.” The insides of his mouth started to itch again. “Can I have some water? I have this awful rash on the inside of my mouth. I'm sure it's nerves.”

She squinted her eyes, causing deep folds to form. “You've never had a rash on the inside of your mouth before.”

“I've never been this distraught before.” He balled his fist. “I've only got one more night to catch the thief.” His eyes latched onto hers. “One more chance to save Garrin.” An overwhelming feeling of sorrow overtook him. He expected Elda's expression to reflect the same, but her eyes were flickering with a new light.

Elda grabbed his arm. “Did anyone give you food or drink last night?”

He made a face. “I don’t think so.”

She gave him a meaningful look. “Something to make you forget? Whatever you were given probably caused the rash.”

His eyes popped open wide as he caught the meaning of her words. He spoke faster. “That could be what happened. Whatever I ate or drank could’ve erased my memories.” Hope kindled in his chest. “We could be onto something. Did Garrin get a rash?”

“I don’t think so; he never mentioned it.”

“I don’t believe anyone else who guarded the tree has gotten one either.”

“Maybe you’re more sensitive than the others.”

Or the rash could be just a coincidence. Tabian didn’t want to point that out and dash Elda’s hopes that they could be on the right track to catching the thief. Both of them needed something to hold onto right now.

“Tonight, if anyone offers you something to eat or drink, only pretend to ingest it.” Elda’s gaze cut into his. “You need to make the person believe that you’re eating and drinking.”

“I can do that.” A cheerful smile stretched over his face. He tried to sound more confident than he felt. “I’m going to catch a thief tonight.”

A note of motherly pride rang in Elda’s voice. “If anyone can do it, you can.” Even though her words were encouraging, her eyes held the weight of all that was hanging

over them.

He scooted back his chair and got up to leave, but she caught hold of his arm. “Wait. I have something for you.”

Using the table to push herself up, she shuffled out of the room. She returned a few moments later, holding a necklace.

He frowned. “What is that?”

“When you were a babe in her womb, Zyrella asked me to give it to you on your eighteenth birthday.” Her eyes deepened with sorrow. “I questioned why she couldn’t just give it to you herself when the time was right. Zyrella only smiled and asked me to do as she requested.” Elda pressed her lips together as if to hold back emotion. “I should’ve realized then that something was wrong.” She held out the necklace to him. “I meant to give it to you on the day of your birthday, but then there was all the commotion of Hans falling into the river.” She paused, taking in a heavy breath. “And then everything fell apart after that. The necklace was the farthest thing from my mind.” Tears swam in her eyes. “I’m sorry. This is all just so hard.”

“I understand,” he uttered quietly as he looked down at the necklace. The interlinked chain was made of bronze. Suspended from it was a polished amber stone.

Clutching the necklace in his hand, he lifted his eyes to Elda’s. “Is there a particular reason why my mother wanted me to have this necklace?”

“I believe it might’ve belonged to the same enchantress who helped Zyrella plant the tree.”

Tabian’s blood pumped faster. “Is it magic?”

Elda shook her head. "I'm not sure. I only know that Zyrella wanted you to have it on your eighteenth birthday. Sorry I'm not more help on the matter," she lamented.

He slipped the necklace over his head and tucked it beneath his tunic. The weight of the stone was a surprising comfort next to his skin. It meant the world to know that his mother cared so much for him. He would treasure the necklace, be it ordinary or magical.

The approaching night loomed over Tabian. "I need to go and get ready."

More tears bubbled in her eyes. "Go with God, son."

He nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. "I'll do my best. Let's hope it's enough."

THE ENCOUNTER

Tonight was his last chance to catch the thief and save Garrin. No pressure. The thought was almost laughable. Almost. His heart was too heavy to find any humor in the situation.

A rash still covered his tongue and cheeks, a persistent reminder that he must refuse any food or drink offered to him. He looked around the still garden, shrouded in solitude. Would the thief return tonight? He could only hope and pray that the person would.

He stretched out his legs and rested his back against the trunk of the tree as a long yawn stretched over his mouth. When his eyelids began to droop, he got to his feet and began pacing back and forth across the soft grass in restless strides.

And then it happened.

His heart jerked when he heard the soft, lilting sound of a woman singing. The notes floated on the night breeze like a whisper of forgotten dreams, filling him with indescribable joy. It permeated every empty space inside him and embraced his soul. While he'd sat through many a performance by renowned minstrels, he'd never before heard anything so exquisite.

This had to be the work of magic.

He pressed a hand over the neck of his tunic and felt the comforting outline of the stone. He hoped with all of his heart that the stone was magical. And that it would

somehow help him get through the next several hours.

He jumped to his feet and looked around in all directions. “Who’s there?”

The singing stopped. After hearing such perfection, the silence was deafening. He swallowed hard and winced at the dryness in his throat. Suddenly, he was parched. The need to quench his thirst overshadowed all else. It was a persistent, pressing desire that throbbed through his body, demanding to be satisfied. He pulled the necklace from his tunic and cupped it in his hand. The need for water abated as quickly as it had come.

Exultation swelled through him. He might just have a chance against this wily thief.

He cocked his ears, hoping to catch the slightest sound.

He heard a rustle of movement and looked to the right.

A slender maiden with long, golden hair that flowed over her shoulders in a thick curtain came gliding towards him with such nimble movements that she might’ve been part Fae. She was ethereal—a goddess come to earth. A warm smile of recognition curved her lips. “Good evening, Tabian. It’s nice to see you again.”

He blinked. “Again?”

He glanced at his bow, resting on the ground. Everything in him shouted that this was a trap. And yet, he was so mesmerized that his gaze was drawn to her. To say she was beautiful would’ve been an understatement. Her shimmery hair was a halo of perfection around her heart-shaped face. Even though she was waif thin, she wasn’t too skinny. Her cheekbones were high and taut against her ivory skin. Her slender nose tipped up slightly on the end, giving her an impish quality. Everything about her—right down to the lyrical refinement of her voice was desirable.

Tabian yearned to do everything in his power to please this perfect creature. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. He'd carve out his own heart and hand it to her if she asked. A warning bell went off in his head. This wasn't normal. He placed a hand over the stone and pressed it to his chest. He welcomed the blessed return to sanity, which immediately came. His mind was again his own.

He looked at the maiden through new eyes. She was still stunningly beautiful, but he could now withstand her bewitching charm. She was a maiden of flesh and bones, not an ethereal being. He glanced down at the bow, wondering if he should grab it and shoot her with an arrow. Even as the thought flitted through his mind, he winced. He didn't want to have this maiden's blood on his hands.

Laughter flowed from her throat like the delicate tinkling of bells. "You'll have no use for that," she said smoothly. "I came early so that we would have plenty of time to finish our conversation from last night."

He flinched with the realization that he'd conversed with her the night before. No doubt he'd been a doting fool who played right into her hands.

No chance of that happening tonight. Not while he was wearing the necklace. Gratitude welled in his chest. His mother had given him a great gift of protection. And he'd gotten it just in the nick of time.

The maiden lowered her thick lashes so that they brushed softly against her skin. Then she looked up at him with a shyness that was both endearing and alluring. "Let's sit down. We have several hours before dawn approaches."

He narrowed his eyes. "You mean several hours before you can steal another apple?"

She blinked as if shocked by his harsh response. It only took her a moment to recover, an expression of gentle reproach crossing her face. "I just want to talk." She

offered a demure smile. She patted her side, and he realized she was wearing a leather flask. “After we’re done talking, I’ll give you some water. You must be thirsty.”

His first inclination was to hurl accusations at her, but then he thought better of it. This maiden possessed the ability to enchant men and make them forget anything that happened. There was no telling what other powers she possessed. Even if he managed to shoot her with an arrow, it was doubtful that she would be hurt. The best chance he had of outwitting her was to make her believe he was enchanted by her spell.

He feigned longing, letting his gaze linger on the flask before meeting her eyes. “A drink would be nice.” No doubt there was more than just water in the flask. Whatever it was had put him in a deep sleep the night before and stolen his memories.

A glimmer of satisfaction touched her beautiful face. “Let’s talk first, and then you may drink.”

They sat down on the grass. He angled to face her. “You have the advantage. I have no recollection of speaking with you last night.”

She chuckled. “Well, let me refresh your memory. We talked about your father and brothers. We talked about Arabella and how she betrayed you with Lucien.”

His eyes widened. “I told you all of that?”

She nodded, watching him carefully.

He was appalled that he’d shared intimate details with this thief. He exhaled, forcing his voice to remain steady. “Did you tell me any personal details about yourself?”

“A few.” She gave him a cryptic smile.

He held her eyes, marveling at their depth of blue. “Refresh my memory.”

She dipped her head thoughtfully, her long tresses tumbling over her arm. “I told you that I’m an only child, and my father is a cobbler.”

“Where do you live?”

She rocked back as fear edged into her eyes. “I cannot tell you that. It is forbidden.” She glanced around as if afraid someone would overhear.

He leaned forward. “Forbidden by whom?” What was she afraid of?

She tensed, staring into his eyes. “Don’t ask me that again.”

Tabian understood what was happening. She was working her enchantment and expected him to immediately comply with her command. “Okay,” he said dutifully. “I won’t.”

She immediately relaxed.

An easy smile stole over his lips. “There must be something you can tell me about yourself. You have a lovely voice.”

She grinned with pleasure. “Thank you.”

“When you’re not singing, what do you like to do?”

She thought for a moment. “I enjoy walking on the sand and watching the waves crash into the shore.”

She lived near the sea. He committed that bit of knowledge to memory. “Tell me

about your father—the cobbler. Does he do fine work?”

“Aye,” she grinned. “The best. Many people travel a great distance to hire him.”

He looked down at the fine leather slippers on her feet. They were dyed a rich chestnut hue that had a subtle sheen. Along the edges, in silver thread, was an embroidered intricate pattern of vines. Also, the toes of the shoes were pointed just enough to add a sense of refinement. “Did he make those?”

“He did,” she answered with pride.

Now that she was more relaxed, he took the conversation in another direction. “Last night, did I tell you about Garrin and how he’s in the dungeon?”

Her eyes shadowed with an emotion he couldn’t discern. “You did.” She looked down. “I’m so sorry.”

Fury kindled inside him. It took all the intestinal fortitude he could muster to keep from lashing out at her. “I must catch the thief who has been stealing the apples. Garrin’s life depends on it.”

She lifted her face to his, something flickering behind her mask of serenity. “You love him very much.”

“I do. He’s like a father to me. Tonight is my last chance to save him.”

They locked eyes for several long moments until she looked away.

His next words fell from his lips before he could decide if they should be spoken. “Why are you doing this?”

Her expression grew pinched. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“And yet, an innocent man will die if you take another apple.” He caught hold of her arm. “You must go before my real father—the King—and admit to taking the apples.”

She looked deeply into his eyes as her voice cut through the night air with the force of a dagger. “You need to drop this line of questioning. Now,” she ordered. She looked down at his hand, which was digging into her skin. “Release my arm.”

Reluctantly, he did so.

Silence descended over them.

She assessed him critically. “You’re different tonight.”

He kept his voice light. “Oh? How so?”

“You’re angry, confrontational.” She knitted her brows, her lips forming a petulant frown. “I liked you better last night.” She rubbed the spot on her arm where he’d grabbed her. “That’s why I came early—so we could talk like we did before.”

It was all he could do not to laugh in her face. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“You were charming last night ... funny.”

This time, he couldn’t stop himself from barking out a laugh. “Charming? Funny? Are you sure you’re not mistaking me for my brother Lucien?”

Her answer was immediate. “I’m quite sure. In fact, I thought we had a connection. I was actually disappointed that you wouldn’t remember anything we talked about.”

He'd had a connection with this magnificent maiden? The news boggled his mind almost as much as her magical abilities and the strangeness of this whole situation. She settled down, a pleasant expression coming over her. "Tell me more about Hans and all of your madcap adventures in the forest. I'm glad that you were able to rescue him from the river." She shuddered. "That sounded so scary."

"It was." He'd certainly spoken freely the night before about his life.

Her expression grew dreamy. "I enjoyed hearing about the royal ball. I can't imagine what it must be like to get dressed up in royal finery and dance the night away amidst lively music and the flicker of countless candles."

Her words surprised him. When he first laid eyes on her, he thought her finer dressed than any other maiden he'd ever beheld, including Arabella. It occurred to him now that her frock—although a vivid sapphire fabric that matched her eyes—was a simple design, and she wore no jewelry. Rather than styling her hair in an elaborate braid in keeping with fashion, she wore her hair loose and unencumbered. She was so elusive that she might've originated from the water or the air. He got the feeling she would disappear as quickly as she'd come. He wondered again where she was from.

"You're very fortunate to be a prince," she said with a note of envy.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he scoffed. "I'm ignored by my father and ridiculed by my older brothers." He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. "I might as well be invisible."

She fired back a rebuttal. "At least you have Garrin, Elda, and Hans."

"I won't have Garrin if I can't catch the thief," he growled and was met with a stilted silence.

He took the conversation in another direction. “What happened to your mother?”

Sadness shadowed her eyes. “She left.”

Her haunting expression was a painful reminder of his own loss. “I’m sorry.” His words fell between them, empty and futile.

They settled into the confines of their own thoughts. Tabian looked up at the diamond-studded sky before glancing back at the maiden, noting the gentle curve of her jaw and the softness of her full lips. Without warning, a warm dart of desire shot through him. He touched the spot where his necklace rested against his chest, hoping the stone would squelch her control over him.

Nothing happened.

The pull to her was still there—strong as ever.

Maybe he was actually attracted to her. How could he not be? She was a vision. Much different from Arabella, who was so sophisticated. The blonde maiden beside him was ethereal—fragile and yet strong at the same time. He traveled the length of her long blonde hair and wondered if it would feel as silky as it looked.

He averted his gaze, forcing himself to get a grip. This woman was his enemy. She planned to take another apple and cause Garrin’s death. He couldn’t let her uncannily strong appeal make him forget that crucial fact.

She didn’t speak, seemingly content to sit and soak up the quietude of the early morning.

Dawn would be approaching soon. Urgency tightened Tabian’s gut, filling him with the knowledge that he would do everything in his power to catch this thief. “What

now? It would seem that we've run out of things to talk about."

A playful smile tugged at a corner of her mouth as she turned to him. "You could always kiss me again."

Her words took the breath out of his lungs. "What?" he balked. "I kissed you?"

"Nay," she said with a superior look, "but you wanted to. I couldn't let you do it while you were" — she twirled her hand as she searched for the right words— "while you were ..."

"Caught under your spell?" he finished for her.

Guilt filled her eyes, transforming them into fathomless twin pools so deep that he could dive into them and never make it back out. "Aye," she uttered softly as she clasped her hands.

"Is there anything more that you can tell me about yourself?"

She pressed her lips together, thinking. "Well, I enjoyed talking to you last night ... immensely." She turned to him, her eyes softening.

How easy it would be to pull her into his arms and give in to the temptation to capture his lips with hers. He held her gaze. "What can I do to stop you from stealing the apple?" The time for playing games was over. He grabbed her arm. "You will go before my father and answer for the crimes you committed. That is the only way Garrin will be able to go free."

Authority reined in her voice. "Release my arm."

"Nay." He tightened his grasp.

Shock trembled through her as her tone grew plaintive. “Why aren’t you obeying me?” She was suddenly vulnerable and fragile as glass.

He reminded himself that shards of glass had the power to cut. “This ends tonight,” he vowed.

“I—I don’t understand. No one has ever been able to escape the spell.”

He pushed out a harsh laugh. “Enough of your games. Let’s go.” He rose to his feet and roughly heaved her up.

“P—please. You don’t understand. I have to take the apple or else ...” She pressed her lips together.

“Or else what?” he demanded.

Her words fell from her lips. “I can’t say anything else.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “It’s forbidden.”

He grunted. “You said that already.”

She offered a tiny, sad smile. “For what it’s worth, I do genuinely like you. If we’d met in another time or place.” Her voice grew wistful. “Who knows what we could’ve been to one another.”

For some reason he didn’t understand, a sense of both nostalgia and loss swept over him at the same time. “I don’t even know your name.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her eyes darkened with what looked to be desire. She lunged forward and pressed her mouth to his.

He stiffened in surprise as her mouth moved coaxingly against his. Her lips were so soft, so intoxicating. He drank in her sweetness as his emotions skittered and tumbled. Instinctively releasing her arm, he moved to encircle her waist with his arms and pull her close. However, before he could, she darted away, her long hair flying out like wings behind her.

“Come back,” he yelled as he sprang into action. He reached to get his bow. Hands swift and quick, he reached for an arrow and positioned it into the bow. He drew back the string, his heart pounding profusely. “Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

She kept going, not looking back.

“Stop,” he ordered again. If he let her escape, then Garrin would die. He released the arrow. It flew swift and straight, hitting her in the shoulder. She fell to the ground.

A pang went through Tabian’s heart. “I’m sorry.” Her still form lay on the ground in a crumpled heap. Lowering the bow, he began walking towards her to inspect the damage. Had he killed her? He trembled at the thought.

He froze in place when she transformed into a bird that looked to be made of pure gold. She lifted into the air, flapping her wings in frantic motions, the arrow still lodged in her. Away she flew, vanishing into some secret part of the gray sky.

Tabian rushed over to the spot where she’d fallen.

Resting on the grass was a single golden feather.

THE TRUTH

Tabian took the feather and apple straight to Father so he could relate all that had happened. He was surprised when Father took one look at the golden feather and insisted the two of them meet privately in his chambers. What was it about seeing the feather that had jolted Father so?

Father sat down in the chair behind his desk and bade Tabian to sit down in one of the two chairs facing the desk. Tabian did so, sinking too low for comfort into the cushion. Having Father's chair sit higher than the ones for guests was most likely intentional—a subtle reminder that the King was always on a higher plane than his subjects.

Tabian scooted forward, trying to sit up straight as his gaze swept over the plush furnishings that gave the feel of both opulence and coziness. A large, detailed tapestry took up one wall, and there were bookshelves filled with handsomely bound books on two other walls. Crimson velvet drapes dripping with gold fringe adorned the only window, which had a pristine view of the enchanted tree. This was the first time Tabian had ever been allowed to enter this room. He felt like he was intruding on Father's secret personal space.

“Tell me everything that happened.” Father eyed the golden apple and feather resting on his desk with a restless energy.

“I will.” He looked Father in the eye. “But first, I need your word that you'll release Garrin. After what I relate, it will be very apparent that he's innocent.”

The muscles in Father's jaw tightened. He leaned forward and punched his index finger into the table with his every word. "Need I remind you that I am the King? You do not get to make demands of me."

Tabian's instinct was to cower under Father's steely authority, but the time for that had passed. There was too much at stake. Instead, he held Father's scathing gaze. "Do you want to hear what happened or not? I need your word that you will drop the charges against Garrin and release him."

An edge seeped into Father's voice. "You do not dictate the terms of this discussion."

"You and I both know that Garrin is innocent."

Fury masked Father's features. "Garrin is many things, but innocent is not one of them. His is a heinous crime for which there can be no forgiveness," he said hotly.

"I know about the enchantress who helped my mother get pregnant."

Shock paled Father's features, and then his face turned an ugly red. "Did Garrin tell you this?"

"Nay, 'twas not Garrin."

"Then it was Elda."

Tabian lifted his chin. "You have no right to punish Garrin. He only sought to help my mother."

"Enough," Father fumed, but Tabian continued, his voice unwavering.

"My mother went into the pregnancy knowing the risk. She chose to give her life for

mine, and you hate me for it.”

Tears bubbled in Father’s eyes. “I told her not to get pregnant,” he uttered hoarsely. He balled his fist and placed it over his mouth. His throat bobbed up and down. After he regained control of himself, he lowered his hand. “She wouldn’t listen to me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He meant that to his core. “I’m sorry that my birth caused her death and brought you so much pain. I have to live every day of my life with that terrible knowledge.” The truth was a painful wound bleeding out between them, never to be healed.

Father swallowed noisily. “Me too.”

“Executing Garrin won’t bring Mother back.”

Resentment burned in his eyes. “He must pay.”

“He has paid,” Tabian growled. “Garrin loved my mother like she was his own daughter. Elda loved her, too. Why do you think they took me in? It was because I reminded them of her. If you have a sliver of compassion remaining, you will drop this vendetta.” His voice rose. “Destroying Garrin’s life will never bring you peace. My mother loved Garrin. She would be appalled if she knew the course you were taking. If you truly loved her as you claim, then you would not stain her memory with this cruelty.”

“You didn’t know your mother,” he hissed. “How could you possibly know how she would react in this situation?”

Tabian squared his jaw. “I know she was a good person. She would not have wanted Garrin to suffer on account of her.”

Father opened his mouth and then closed it again. A veil slipped over his eyes as if he were retreating into himself. “Enough of this. Tell me about the gold feather.”

Tabian sat back in his seat and folded his arms over his chest. He and Father eyed one another in a silent challenge.

Sparks shot from Father’s eyes. “Maybe I should sentence you to the dungeon—give you some time to reconsider your insolent behavior.”

Tabian grunted. “Is that what you do to anyone who tries to talk some sense into you?”

Father bunched his brows. “Where is this defiance coming from? Did you just wake up one morning and decide it was time to finally develop a voice?”

Was that a trace of admiration Tabian detected in Father’s tone? All this time, he’d tried to stay out of the way, hoping that Father and his brothers would somehow recognize his value ... when he should’ve been fighting them at every turn. Maybe then they would respect him.

“Someone has to stand up for what’s right,” Tabian fired back, feeling a rush of newfound confidence. It swelled inside him, expanding his possibilities.

Father pushed out a long breath and then flicked his hand like he was brushing away a pesky fly. “Very well. If I’m satisfied with your report, then I’ll consider releasing Garrin.”

“That’s not good enough. I want your word that?—”

“Silence,” Father growled. “That’s the best offer you’re going to get.” His eyes burned with the authority of one holding all the cards. “I’d advise you to take it.”

He'd pushed as hard as he could. "Fine," Tabian acquiesced.

A peculiar eagerness lit Father's eyes as he sat up taller in his seat. "Now, tell me about the feather."

Tabian recounted the events from the night before, starting with the song. Then, he related his conversation with the maiden, leaving out the part where she kissed him. "I tried to grab her, but she broke away and turned to flee. I shot her with an arrow."

Father winced. "You shot her?"

"There was no other way to stop her," Tabian countered, feeling the need to defend himself. Why was Father acting protective of the thief who had stolen his precious apples?

He drummed his fingers on the desk. "What happened next?"

"She transformed into a golden bird and flew away with the arrow lodged in her wing. I went over to where she'd fallen and found the feather."

Father stroked his chin, looking thoughtful. "I wonder if the bird will return." He shook his head in wonderment. "This is ..."

"What?" He leaned forward, wanting to pull the words from Father's mouth.

Father blinked and then focused on Tabian as if just now remembering that he was in the room. Several emotions pinged over his face before it tightened into a rigid mask. "This is not enough to set Garrin free."

Tabian's heart dropped. "Of course it is. The thief is a maiden who uses magic to transform herself into a golden bird. Garrin is innocent. I know it, and so do you."

“The deal was that you were supposed to catch the thief. Then Garrin would be set free.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tabian fumed. “Why’re you being so unreasonable about this? This vendetta is beneath you, Father. You’re known for being just. This is ... well, it’s pure evil.”

Father held up a hand to quiet him. “If you were to catch this golden bird ... well, then I would have no other choice but to release Garrin.”

The full realization of what was happening rattled through Tabian’s brain. “You’re using Garrin as leverage so that I’ll be forced to capture the bird. Was that your plan all along? Did you somehow know about the bird?” He could tell from the guilty look on Father’s face that he was on the right track. It was Tabian’s turn to go into interrogator mode. “What do you know about the bird?” He gave Father a sharp look. “Don’t try to deny it. I noticed your excitement when you first saw the gold feather.” He twirled a hand, encompassing the room. “And then you brought me here, to your personal chamber—a place I’ve never been granted access to before.” He locked eyes with Father. “What do you know?”

Something shifted in Father’s expression. “I suppose it’s time.”

Tabian’s heart lurched. “Time for what?”

“Time to tell you a story.” He looked past Tabian as if getting lost in another time and place. “I loved your mother.” Tears misted his eyes. “She was my everything,” he said hoarsely. “When she almost died giving birth to Lucien, I forbid her from getting pregnant again.” He clipped out a chortle. “Zyrella was headstrong, determined to have her way. When she told me she was pregnant with you ... well, I nearly went out of my mind. She assured me that all would be well. She told me that she’d had a dream so vivid she knew it would one day come true.”

He paused long enough for Tabian to worry that he wouldn't tell the rest.

Finally, he continued, "Zyrella told of a time when her tree would flourish. The golden apples it yielded would give the kingdom notoriety. They would become a symbol of good fortune and wealth. But the apples were merely a precursor for what was to come." He picked up the feather and examined it. "She spoke of a golden bird of rare beauty that would come and nest in the branches. She said that this bird would be a treasure to the kingdom—even more so than the tree. That its presence would help restore equity and balance. That it would usher in a golden age of the kingdom—a time when our family would finally be united and healed."

Tabian made a face. "What does this story have to do with me?"

Father leveled a penetrating gaze. "You are the central figure in this story, for it is you who's supposed to capture the bird and bring it back to the kingdom."

Blood whooshed to his temples, pounding out a fast, hard beat. "Did my mother tell you this?"

He nodded.

He gripped the armrests of the chair, the weight of the words settling into his bones. "And she mentioned me specifically?"

"Aye."

"What if I fail?"

A charge kindled in the room as Father held his eyes. "Then Garrin will die."

THE QUEST

The next day, Tabian set out on his quest. There was no fanfare, no crowd of nobles to see him off, no trumpeter to blast the announcement of his departure. The only people who knew that Tabian was going off in search of the golden bird were his father, brothers, and Elda. While Hans was aware that Tabian was leaving on a trip, he didn't know why. Elba thought it would be wise not to tell Hans the true reason for his journey.

"The poor lad is already so distraught about his father. I don't want to give him false hope," Elda had said.

Her words weren't meant to be cruel. She was merely trying to protect her son. Like Tabian, Elda knew the grim reality of his mission. The chance of him finding the bird, capturing it, and bringing it back was a long shot. Lingered questions gnawed at him: had the maiden transformed into the bird, or had a bird transformed into a maiden? He wasn't sure which one he was searching for—the golden-feathered creature or the enigmatic woman.

When Alistair heard the news about the golden bird and the part that Tabian would supposedly play in capturing it and thereby ushering the kingdom into a golden era, he scrunched up his face like he'd bitten into something rancid. Then he threw Tabian a look of such utter astonishment that it had Tabian doubting himself even more.

"If the fate of the kingdom rests in his hands, then we're in serious trouble," he'd said.

Lucien had thrown back his head and howled with laughter. Mirth rippled out of him in peals that shook his shoulders as tears rose in his eyes. Then, as if to soften the blow, he politely suggested that Father could have a tainted memory of the story their mother had related. He pointed out that it had been many years since she passed. Father could've misunderstood the meaning of her dream.

To his credit, Father silenced Alistair and Lucien with a curt, "Enough." With deep emotion totally uncharacteristic of Father, he turned his attention to Tabian. "You have an important mission to fulfill. Your mother believed you could triumph ... as do I."

Tabian had nearly jerked out of his skin at the last part, unable to believe his ears. Father actually believed that he was capable of doing something worthwhile? Never would Tabian have imagined that he would ever hear such words coming out of Father's mouth.

While Father's vote of confidence was shocking ... and touching to a certain degree, Tabian wasn't foolish enough to fall for a token sentiment of emotion. The harsh reality was that Father had given him two weeks to return with the bird. Otherwise, Garrin would be executed. It irked Tabian that Father was being so stubborn about the situation. Did he believe that if he didn't hold the threat of Garrin's death over Tabian's head, he would refuse to go on the quest? Or maybe Father wanted to raise the stakes so that Tabian would have a crucial reason for wanting to bring the bird back.

Tabian had no idea how he was supposed to track down the bird, much less haul it back to the castle. He might be able to swing carting a bird back, but a maiden? How could he accomplish such a task? They would surely pass other travelers who would raise eyebrows when they realized that the maiden had been kidnapped. The quest seemed impossible. But Tabian somehow had to do it! Garrin, Elda, and Hans were counting on him. He couldn't let them down.

He turned his face to the bright sun, appreciating its warmth and how it made his skin tight and tingly. The one thing Tabian had going for him was that he was accustomed to traveling the countryside and fitting in with common folk. He knew the lay of the land in the villages and the countryside like the back of his hand—at least in most parts of the kingdom. He knew how to take care of his basic needs along the way. He'd packed enough to eat for several days, and he had enough money to procure lodging and to buy more food when he used up all of his provisions.

After leaving the castle and the surrounding township, he traveled through the countryside, where the terrain grew wilder, and the dwellings were sparse. Eventually, he found himself alone on a dusty road. His plan was to travel in the direction of the ocean. The maiden mentioned that she enjoyed walking on the beach, so he could only assume she lived in a coastal village. He would go to the nearest village along the seaside and inquire about a cobbler who possessed the skill to craft uncommonly fine shoes.

It was a two-day journey to The Cliffs, which marked the Northern tip of The Kingdom of Verdermere. Tabian had traveled to The Cliffs once before because he wanted to see the spot of shoreline he'd heard so much about—the area his brothers defended in the War of The Cliffs. The Kingdom of Willamen had been the aggressor in the War, claiming that they should take ownership of the shoreline and cliffs since their kingdom sat on the other side of the sea.

Known as The Strait of Veligara, the sea was more than simply a stretch of water separating the two kingdoms. It was a lifeline—vital to both Verdermere and Willamen as its narrow waters were a critical passage for trade where ships carried cargoes of supplies to neighboring lands.

According to his tutor, Tabian had learned at a very early age that The Cliffs were vital to Verdermere for two reasons—the waters provided a steady diet of fish for several villages that carried them through harsh winters. Also, the bays provided

shelter for merchants and fishermen fleeing fierce storms.

Possession of The Cliffs equated to power.

Thankfully, Verdermere won the war, and Willamen retreated. However, there were always rumblings of another attack from Willamen.

The land to the north of The Cliffs was largely uninhabited due to the harsh weather conditions, not to mention the dragons that resided in the region. It was highly unlikely that the maiden lived there. Tabian planned to start at The Cliffs and work his way down. He would scour every seaside village in Verdermere and then work his way down to the Kingdom of Millcrest next. There was a chance that the maiden lived across the sea in Willamen. If he couldn't find her in either Verdermere or Millcrest, he'd have to cross the waters and go to Willamen next. He hoped he wouldn't have to venture into enemy territory. If anyone were to discover his true identity in Willamen, he would be arrested immediately and used as a political pawn.

A chill ran down his spine. Should he get into trouble, it was doubtful that Father or his brothers would lift a finger to liberate him. He was on his own.

It was just as well. Keeping hold of the reins of the horse with one hand, he touched the stone with his other hand. Even though he'd only been in possession of the necklace for a short period of time, it brought him immense comfort. He felt stronger with it on ... more in control and forthright. The stone had helped him withstand the maiden's powers. He wondered what else the stone could do. Could he use it to compel her to return to the castle with him? If only he knew how it worked. Longing swelled in his chest as he wished his mother were here to guide him in this quest. He had no idea why he was the one who was supposed to capture the golden bird. He was a nobody.

Only stopping to eat, he traveled until nightfall. After finding a place to spend the

night, Tabian awoke early the next morning and started out again.

When he reached the village near The Cliffs, he got down from his horse and decided to go on foot, leading the horse by the reins. He approached the first man he saw with a friendly smile. “Good day, Sir. I’m in need of a cobbler. Can you point me in the right direction?”

The man pointed to a cobbled street lined with rows of tightly clustered structures on both sides. “Third shop on the right.”

Tabian nodded his head. “Much obliged.” He went in the direction of the structures. After tying up his horse, he searched the shops until he found a cobbler. The door creaked as he went inside, where the scent of leather and polish invaded his senses. He found a silver-haired man bent over a counter, his rugged hands deftly shaping a sole.

His heart quickened. Could this be the maiden’s father? Pressing on a congenial smile, Tabian approached the counter. “I’m in need of some shoes.”

The man barely glanced up. “I can take your measurements and get something started for you.”

“The shoes aren’t for me. They’re for my fiancée. I want something special.” He began describing the shoes the maiden wore, making sure to emphasize the fine quality of the stitching and the graceful points on the toes.

When he was finished, the man frowned. “I’m not equipped to make what you request, but I could do a simple design worn by most of the ladies who come into my shop.”

Disappointment coated Tabian’s throat. “Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. Do

you, by chance, know of any other cobbler who could make the shoes I described?"

The man shook his head. "Nay, I don't."

Tabian drummed his fingers on the counter. "Alright. Thanks for your help."

Nodding, the man picked up the shoe and resumed his work.

One cobbler shop down and a countless number to go.

Tabian spent the next three long days traveling southward and repeating the same process. Not having any luck, he traveled down to Millcrest.

Two days later, he came upon a cobbler who'd heard of another cobbler who could make the elaborate shoes. "He's in the Village of Cloverfeld. It's a day's journey from here."

Thanking the man for the information, Tabian set off with a renewed step. Nightfall slowed his progress. He was forced to sleep in an open meadow where the wind howled and chilled him to the bone. Despite the fitful night's sleep and his aching muscles, he started out just after dawn the next morning. As the sun rose higher in the clear blue sky, eagerness quickened his pulse. He worked his brain, trying to figure out the best way to approach the situation. If he walked into the cobbler's shop and started asking the wrong questions, the maiden could be alerted. She might flee, and he would never catch her.

Or she might even be at the cobbler's shop. And then she would flee all the same. Or worse. She might put some type of spell or curse on him. A sense of foreboding churned his gut. Whatever lay ahead wouldn't be easy; he was sure of it.

Dusk was settling in by the time he reached the village. The aroma of roasting meat

titillated his senses and caused his stomach to growl. He'd been in such a hurry to reach his destination that he'd not taken time to stop and eat a midday meal. He heard the merry sounds of a lute being played and saw a large gathering of people milling about the center of the village.

After finding a place to tie up his horse, he wandered into the heart of the celebration, making sure to go at a leisurely pace, keeping his expression pleasant. A hint of apple cider tinged the cool, crisp air, which pulsed with excitement as the flames from the torches flickered against the night air. He heard a squeal of laughter as a young lad darted away from a stand, carrying a long twist of bread.

His mouth watered, looking at the array of pastries displayed at one of the booths. Nearby, a woman was using a long, wooden stick to stir a bubbling cauldron of what smelled like a scrumptious stew.

He chuckled to himself, thinking that now was not the time to be fixated on the demands of his hungry stomach.

He scoured the crowd, hoping to spot the maiden. No such luck.

There were numerous stands. Some held jewelry, wooden carvings, leather goods, and woven items. Another displayed pottery and candles. There were several stands of brightly colored pumpkins, apples, pears, and grapes. A booth displaying dolls, wooden swords, and games was of particular interest to the children who were gathered around it.

A group of performers caught his attention. Dressed in colorful clothes, their faces were painted with exaggerated expressions. One was teetering on a pair of stilts, another was juggling, and one was breathing out plumes of fire amidst oohs and awes from the observers crowded around him.

A long table and chairs sat on a platform off to one side. The area was highlighted by torches, and the table was decorated with an elaborate display of ribbons and garlands made of greenery and wildflowers. Evidently, the grand event of the gathering had yet to take place.

His stomach growled again. He decided to assuage his hunger and thirst by enjoying some of the delicious-smelling food and cider.

After his stomach was satisfied, he meandered through the crowd, searching for the maiden. If he didn't find her tonight, he would go to the cobbler's shop tomorrow and start asking questions. That was the only thing he knew to do. He was on the eighth day of his journey. He estimated that if he headed straight back to the castle from here, it would take him a good three days to make the journey ... and that was assuming he could travel quickly with no impediments along the way.

Time was running out.

Perhaps it would help to strike up a conversation with several folks and casually mention the cobbler. He saw a group of men gathered near a cider stall, their mugs full. Two men sat on a wooden bench. One was on a log, and another lounged on a bale of hay. Tabian strode over and purchased his second mug of cider for the evening before making his way over to the group.

"Greetings," Tabian began with a friendly smile. "Mind if I join you?"

A man motioned to an unoccupied bale of hay. "Suit yourself." He lifted his mug in a salute.

Tabian sat down as the men eyed him with curiosity.

"Where you from?" a man asked before taking a long swig of his cider.

“Verdermere,” Tabian answered, figuring it was best to stick as close to the truth as possible.

“You’re a long way from home,” the stout man reclining on the bale of hay remarked.

“Aye.”

“What brings you to these parts?” another man asked.

“I’m looking for a cobbler to make some shoes for my fiancée. I want something unique and heard that there’s a skilled cobbler in Cloverfeld.” He let his gaze drift casually around the group.

“Aye,” a bald man with a thin mustache said. “We have the best cobbler for miles around.” He raised a hand and looked past them. “Bartholomew,” he called, “your service is requested.”

Tabian’s heart skipped a beat. He turned to see a broad-shouldered man with a full head of snow-white hair standing near one of the booths.

“Bartholomew,” the man said again, even louder, flagging his hand. “Over here.”

Offering a nod of acknowledgement, the white-haired man said something in parting to the man tending the booth. Then he sidled over to the group, his expression open but scrutinizing.

Tabian took a quick assessment of the older man. His face was rounder than angular, but he wasn’t heavy set. His spindly eyebrows were dark instead of white like his hair. A network of wrinkles framed his eyes and mouth. He had large, calloused hands—the kind one would expect from a seasoned cobbler. Even though he was dressed in a simple brown tunic, there was a sense of refinement about him, a quiet

dignity. His expression was kind as he peered out from behind spectacles. Tabian wondered if the cobbler knew that his daughter was a thief. Err ... maybe he should make sure the man in question had a daughter. Then Tabian would know that he was on the right track. He couldn't afford to waste any time scouting out the wrong cobbler.

The man with the mustache motioned at Tabian. "This man wants to order a pair of shoes."

"For my fiancée," Tabian explained, keeping his expression benign.

"Your reputation has spread far and wide," another man grinned. "This lad traveled all the way from Verdermere."

Bartholomew looked impressed. "That's a good three-day journey from here."

"Aye," Tabian nodded. "I heard you were the best ... and that's what I want for my fiancée."

"I'm honored. Come by my shop tomorrow, and I'll take your order." Bartholomew inclined his head in a cordial nod before looking around at the men. "Good to see all of you on this fine evening."

The men gave murmurs of agreement.

When Bartholomew turned to leave, a twinge of panic went through Tabian. He had yet to learn if the man had a daughter. "It was your daughter who told me about the fine quality of your work."

Surprise flicked over Bartholomew's face, and then his expression grew wary. "How did you meet my daughter?"

Sensing the change in Bartholomew, the demeanor of the men immediately shifted from only a mild interest in the conversation to a peaked curiosity.

Feeling all eyes on him, Tabian sought to come up with a satisfactory explanation that would appease not only Bartholomew but also the other men who seemed protective of their fellow countrymen. “The last time I was traveling in these parts, we happened to meet on one of the roads. I noticed your daughter’s shoes and remarked that my fiancée would love a pair. That’s when she told me about you.”

The explanation seemed to suffice Bartholomew. What looked to be relief crossed his features. Perhaps Bartholomew did know about his daughter’s escapades. Was Tabian the first to ever come and seek her out? It was doubtful that the golden apples were her only thefts. She’d probably enchanted scores of men with her rare, ethereal beauty.

“Katerina travels to the neighboring village to get supplies for my shop,” Bartholomew explained. “She was probably either coming or going from the village of Craigsfire when you met.”

Katerina . Tabian committed the name to memory. It fit her. Realizing that Bartholomew was waiting for a response, he roused his tongue into action. “Perhaps. She didn’t mention the name of a village, and I didn’t ask.” He kept his response vague in case Bartholomew was testing him or laying a trap. He shrugged his shoulder in a casual manner. “We met in passing and spoke for only a few moments.” He gave Bartholomew an admiring smile. “But it was long enough for me to remember those fine shoes.”

“It would be my pleasure to make you a pair for your fiancée,” Bartholomew said.

His warm smile was a good sign that he didn’t suspect Tabian of having any motive other than what he claimed. A heady relief swelled through Tabian as he fought to

keep his expression impassive.

Bartholomew glanced toward the platform. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go and check on Katerina. She’s planning to sing at Lady Ravenshire’s birthday celebration.”

The portly man on the bale of hay smiled broadly. “No need to worry about Katerina. She’ll do great, as always.” He looked at Tabian, a breathy adoration in his tone. “Wait until you hear her sing; she has the voice of an angel.”

And insistent, warm lips as soft as velvet. An unexpected wave of desire went through Tabian as he blinked, grateful that he’d only thought the words and not spoken them aloud. “I look forward to the performance,” he said politely as a sharp thrill ran through him.

She was here.

As Bartholomew turned and ambled away, the other men rose to their feet one by one as Tabian did the same.

He thought of something that Bartholomew had said. “Is this festival a birthday celebration?” On Father’s birthday, a large feast was held, but he was a king, so that was to be expected. A great deal of effort had gone into this festival. The person being honored must be important.

“Aye,” the mustached man answered. “We’re celebrating the birthday of the Lady Ravenshire, also known as the Lady of the Hill.”

“Is she nobility?” Tabian asked.

“Nay,” a man answered. “She was born as common as any of us. ‘Tis her kindness to the village that has catapulted her to a high position of respect.”

“That’s impressive. What has she done?”

“What hasn’t she done?” one of the men chuckled.

The mustached man began ticking off items. “She sponsors several feasts, she commissioned the schoolhouse, she had a new well dug so people wouldn’t have to walk long distances to get their water.”

“She donates sacks of grain during the winter to make sure no one goes hungry,” another man chimed in.

“Don’t forget the communal granary or the repairs on the roads.”

“She hired a midwife for my wife last year,” the stout man said.

A short man with hawklike features smiled broadly. “And those are just the things we know about.”

“She sounds like a saint,” Tabian said.

“She’s the closest thing I’ve ever seen to one.” This came from the tall, thin man who’d been sitting on the log.

Tabian filed in with the other villagers as they gathered around the podium. A woman he assumed to be Lady Ravenshire was seated at the center of the table. She was an attractive middle-aged woman with a flawless complexion, rosy cheeks, ruby lips, and dark, intelligent eyes. Her chestnut hair was done up in an elaborate braid, and she was dressed in a crimson flock, which accentuated her striking features. Several other men and women were seated around her. From their fine dress, Tabian thought them to be council members or other notable figures of the village.

A man with curly dark hair stood and gave a touching tribute to Lady Ravenshire, who wore a cultured smile of appreciation. He listed many of the same contributions that the other men had mentioned. When he was finished, a thunderous applause broke out. Tabian couldn't help but be impressed with Lady Ravenshire and her watchful care over the people in her village. It just went to show what a person of influence could do if his or her intentions were pure. Father was a king. There was so much good that he could do for Verdermere. And yet, his sorrow over Mother's death had left him scarred and tainted.

Several more people gave speeches honoring Lady Ravenshire. And then, Katerina stepped from the back and moved up the platform. The sight of her caused Tabian's breath to catch. Her long blonde hair shimmered down her back like liquid sunlight. She wielded her willowy figure with the same ethereal grace he remembered. Nay, not quite. Her right arm was wrapped in a sling, and there was a slight stiffness about her movements that suggested she was trying to hide the pain caused by her wound.

He was unprepared for the pang of guilt that slithered through him. He'd done that to her. As soon as the thought came, he pushed it away, reminding himself that she was the villain, not him. She was the one who'd enchanted him and so many others so she could steal the apples. She was lucky that he'd only gotten her shoulder with the arrow.

After offering Lady Ravenshire a smile of acknowledgment, she turned to face the crowd. Her sapphire eyes shimmered under the torchlight, which also highlighted the soft curve of her jaw.

She took in a long breath as if to get her bearings and then began to sing. Her voice had a haunting, lyrical quality that held the villagers captive. Her voice was so pure and pristine that it was the substance of dreams.

For a few moments, Tabian was so caught up in the rapture of her performance that

he forgot the reason why he'd come.

Then she noticed him.

Her voice faltered, a sharp intake of breath revealing her shock. Fear edged into her large, sapphire eyes before she managed to regain her composure.

Lady Ravenshire noticed the exchange and turned her attention to Tabian. She studied him with a thoughtful expression. Tabian offered her a friendly smile to diffuse any suspicion. I'm no threat, he tried to convey, just a traveler enjoying the festivities before passing on to someplace else. To his relief, she smiled back, settling into her seat.

A swell of victory surged in his chest as he turned his attention back to Katerina.

He'd found her.

Now, he just had to capture her.

THE MANIPULATOR

As the last lyrics of the haunting song died away, Tabian took one look at Katerina's cagey expression and knew that she planned to bolt. He couldn't let that happen. The crowd clapped and cheered their approval as Katerina took a graceful bow.

"Thank you," the curly-haired man said loudly as he rose from his seat. He strode over and stood next to Katerina before slipping his arm around her shoulders with practiced ease. "Isn't she wonderful? Let's give her another round of applause."

Katerina smiled and waved at her admirers, though the smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Meanwhile, Tabian pushed his way through the observers and moved off to the side where he could have a clear view of the platform. He thought Katerina might flee that very instant, but she didn't.

"Thank you for coming out this evening," the curly-haired man said. "This concludes our birthday celebration." He paused dramatically. "Lady Ravenshire," he continued with a tone of importance, "happy birthday from all of us. We're so grateful for you and for all that you do for our village."

The heartfelt accolade brought more clapping, and then the crowd began to disperse. Tabian watched as Katerina spoke to Lady Ravenshire and the others at the table. She wore a smile on her face, but her body was taut with tension. Time was of the essence. He hurried forward, went up the steps of the platform, and strode over to Katerina, whose expression went rigid when she saw him.

He threw her a smug smile. “We meet again.”

She only glared at him.

“What? No word of greeting for your old friend.” He made a point of looking at her lips as he leaned closer and spoke in a low tone. “After all, we shared so much together that enchanted night in the garden.”

The hitch of her breath was barely perceptible, but he caught it.

It evoked something in him—something he wasn’t ready to acknowledge. He noted a faint dusting of freckles across her upturned nose. Her skin was paler than he remembered. Perhaps it was because she was suffering from her wounded shoulder, or perhaps it was the worry of getting caught. Stripped of her enchanting aura, Katerina was still stunningly beautiful. However, she was flesh and blood—fallible and vulnerable like him. Her chest rose and fell rapidly against the bodice of her dress. She was afraid.

“What do you want?” she growled, tightening her hands into fists. “Wasn’t shooting me enough?”

Before Tabian could launch a rebuttal, Lady Ravenshire stepped up and offered a dazzling smile. “Hello,” she began in a cultured tone. “Are you new to Cloverfeld?”

“Just traveling through,” he said pleasantly.

Curiosity lit her dark eyes. “Oh? What brings you to our humble village?”

He looked at Katerina, an easy smile spreading over his lips. This is where he needed to come across as charming and affable. He needed to behave like Lucien. “During one of my many travels, I had the good fortune to cross paths with this lovely maiden.

When I saw Katerina's exquisite shoes, I asked her who made them. She told me about her father. She also described this charming village as not far from the seashore, where she loves to walk. I couldn't resist coming here to see if the notable cobbler—Bartholomew—would agree to make some slippers for my fiancée."

Katerina smirked when she heard the word fiancée.

Lady Ravenshire's brows lifted. "Is there some sort of tension between you two?"

"Nay, mi' lady," Tabian said easily, "Katerina and I are merely acquaintances."

"Where are you from?" the middle-aged woman inquired. "You have a distinct accent."

"The Kingdom of Verdermere."

Lady Ravenshire was amused. "And you came all this way for a pair of shoes?"

"Aye, for my fiancée."

Katerina pursed her lips, exhaling a hum. "How is your fiancée, by the way?" Her voice turned soft and musing. "Arabella, wasn't it?" She tapped a finger against her chin. "She must miss you terribly while you're gone."

His spine stiffened as he locked eyes with her. "Aye, but I'll soon return ... bringing her back something that she'll treasure for many years to come. It's not every day that a person gets the chance to capture something of such rare beauty."

Color brushed her cheeks in a rosy hue, her gaze sharpening with awareness. She lowered her eyes, her thick lashes brushing against her soft skin. Then she lifted her gaze to his, her eyes holding an intensity that quivered warmth through him. "Exactly

what type of treasure are you hoping to capture?”

“One she’ll value more than gold,” he murmured. The connection between them was as bold and powerful as a streak of lightning. He’d never experienced anything like it. It was thrilling. And dangerous.

Realizing they had an audience, he pushed out a throaty chuckle. “In a manner of speaking. We are talking about shoes.” He made a point of looking at Lady Ravenshire. “As impressive as Bartholomew’s shoes are, they are just shoes, after all. No offense.”

“No offense taken by me,” she laughed. “I’m sure Bartholomew would answer the same.”

Katerina cocked her head, a speculative look simmering in her blue eyes.

“Didn’t you say that you have a brother? Lucien?”

Irritation bubbled in Tabian’s throat. She just had to jab a knife in his gut.

“I’m sure he’s taking good care of Arabella while you’re gone,” she said sweetly, her expression carefully schooled into one of innocence.

Now, she was twisting the blade deeper into his flesh. Wicked, wicked woman. Time for him to return the favor. He pointed. “What happened to your shoulder?”

Her eyes charged with heat, but her voice remained conversational. “I climbed up a ladder to pick some ripe yellow apples from off a tree. And wouldn’t you know? I took a fall.” She winced, touching her shoulder. “I slammed down onto the ground so hard that it felt like an arrow went through me.” She threw him a blistering glare.

He grimaced. “That must’ve been painful.”

Her lips curled into a smirk. “You have no idea.”

“How long do you plan to stay in Cloverfeld?” Lady Ravenshire interjected.

“As long as it takes.” He made a point of looking at Katerina and then smiled at Lady Ravenshire. “For Bartholomew to craft the shoes.”

“You must dine with me tomorrow night.”

Tabian cringed inwardly. “I don’t want to impose.”

“Nonsense.” She turned to Katerina. “You and your father should come as well. I insist,” she finished firmly, clearly accustomed to getting her way in all matters.

Katerina nodded. “Tomorrow night.”

“Excellent.” Lady Ravenshire graced Tabian with a noble smile. “I hope you find that treasure you seek.” Her dark eyes sparked with amusement as she looked at Katerina. “Be it a pair of shoes ... or something else.”

A deep blush crept over Katerina’s cheeks.

“Tomorrow night.” She eyed Tabian, waiting for a commitment.

“Tomorrow night,” he repeated with a note of acceptance.

With that, Lady Ravenshire turned her back on them and began talking to the others nearby.

Tabian clenched his jaw. “We need to talk.”

Katerina glanced around at the thinning crowd. “Not here. Let’s go someplace where we can be alone.”

He clipped out a short laugh. “So you can put another spell on me?”

“So we can talk.” She lifted her chin, eyes blazing. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“It is.” He held out his arm in mock gallantry. “Allow me to lead you.”

She thrust her uninjured arm through his. “You should’ve never come here. It was a huge mistake.”

“You’re the one who made the mistake when you decided to steal from my tree.”

She barked out a short laugh. “Oh, so now it’s your tree?” Her voice took on the silky hiss of a snake about to strike. “And here I thought it belonged to the Kingdom of Verdermere.”

“Let’s go,” Tabian growled, tired of her games. “Where to?” He glanced around, looking for a secluded spot.

“This way.” Katerina cast a final glance at the remaining festival goers before leading him toward a quieter, shadowed corner of the village square. The torches cast flicks of unnatural light over her features, accentuating shadows that highlighted the tension in her jaw. Her eyes held a steely determination. Even wounded, she was dangerous.

“Is there someplace more private?”

She jerked her arm away from his grasp. “This will have to do. I’m not about to go

off to some secluded place where you'll take advantage of me," she said savagely.

A hard laugh scratched his throat. "Me take advantage of you?" He stepped closer, lowering his voice to a warning. "You're the one who took advantage of me."

She tilted her head, feigning innocence. "And just how do you figure that?"

"Don't play coy," he scoffed. "You wove your enchantment and made me so thirsty I could've drunk my own sweat. Then you tried to compel me to submit to your will. You would've forced me to drink whatever liquid was in your cursed flask had I not gotten wise to you." He pinned her with accusing eyes. "That concoction gave me an awful rash. My tongue burned for days."

A wicked grin curled her lips. "Well, you're wagging your tongue incessantly, so it would seem that you're no worse for the wear."

He caught a slight hitch in his breath when he stepped closer. "Do you make a practice out of toying with people, or did you reserve that curse for me?"

Something akin to need deepened her eyes to the color of the sea after a storm. "You're ..." She looked at his mouth.

"What?" he demanded.

A wistful sigh escaped her lips. "Never mind." She blinked several times like she'd forgotten herself for a moment. Then her expression masked into something impish as she peered up at him with a lovestruck expression. "We had such a nice time together." She stepped even closer. "Stimulating conversation ... a fair amount of heat ..." She grazed her fingers along his jawline with tantalizing persuasion that caused his breath to come faster. Then he caught the smug flicker in her expression when she thought she had him.

With a swift movement, he grabbed her waist and pulled her flush against him. He expected her to stiffen, but she molded against him as naturally as his bowstring bent to his adept hand. Her warm breath came faster against his throat. She was so incredibly beautiful. So bewitching.

So manipulative.

She used her beauty as a weapon to ensnare gullible half-wits like himself.

He grunted. “Your seduction tactics won’t work this time. He tightened his grip just enough to remind her who had the upper hand.

She parted her lips, her chest rising and falling in quick succession. Her eyes were luminous, vulnerable.

He leaned so close that their lips were almost touching. “We’re not doing this again.”

Irritation snapped in her eyes. “You’re hurting my shoulder,” she pouted.

He released his hold on her. She stepped back and primly adjusted the skirt of her frock. “Why’re you here?” she sniffed. “You stopped me from taking the apple. You injured me.” She tossed him a look of condemnation. “You won. Isn’t that enough?”

His words came rushing out. “I told you that night in the garden. Because of you, an innocent man is scheduled to be executed.” His stomach twisted. “A man who’s like a father to me.” His voice shook with fury. “You’ll go back with me to Verdermere and set things straight—either willingly or as my prisoner.”

She wavered, just for a moment, and then her expression grew hard. She got in his face. “One word from me, and you’ll be arrested here in Cloverfeld. And you’re the one who’ll be executed.”

Disgust rose acid up his throat. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Then, there would be no one to bear witness to your treachery. Does your father know about your secret life?”

Something he couldn’t discern trickled into her expression. “You leave him out of this.”

“He seems like a kind, noble man. I’m sure he’d be devastated to learn that his daughter is nothing more than a common thief.”

“You know nothing about me,” she seethed.

“How about Lady Ravenshire? If a woman of her influence caught wind of your treachery, you wouldn’t be so highly regarded.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me,” he demanded, catching hold of her wrist. “Tell me so I’ll understand how you can stand back and let an innocent man die because of your actions.”

Something shifted in her eyes, and he caught the echo of the same despair he’d detected that night in the garden. “I’m sorry.” Her voice broke. “It was never my intent to hurt you or Garrin.”

He was surprised that she remembered Garrin’s name.

“There you are,” Bartholomew exclaimed. “I’ve been looking all over.” He shuffled towards them, a deep frown forming over his mouth when he saw Tabian’s hand wrapped around Katerina’s wrist.

Quickly, Tabian let her go.

“For two people who only met in passing, you certainly seemed to be engaged in a heated conversation.” Suspicion hung heavy in his voice as his questioning gaze moved over them.

“I have to go.” Katerina stepped away.

Tabian narrowed his eyes. “We’re not finished here.”

“Tomorrow,” she promised. “I’ll talk to you at the shop tomorrow when you place the order for your fiancée’s shoes.”

He smirked at the sting of irony in her tone. Her sharp tongue knew just how to cut.

With a nimble step, she went to her father’s side and slipped her uninjured arm through his. She had the audacity to glance back and throw Tabian a triumphant smirk. Then she turned her attention to Bartholomew, her voice solicitous. “Let’s get you home, Father.” Her hair bounced lightly on her shoulders as she went.

She thought she’d won. He touched the dagger at his waist, his mind racing. He’d follow her home.

He thought of his horse, which was tied to a post. If he went to get it, he would run the risk of losing sight of Katerina. He’d have to leave the horse and his provisions for now. If Katerina and Bartholomew traveled on horseback or in a wagon or carriage, he’d be forced to get his horse in order to catch up. However, if they went on foot, he’d trail behind them and watch the house. A plan began to take shape.

He'd watch Katerina’s home, and when she turned in for the night, he’d sneak in and take her.

THE ATTACK

Katerina and Bartholomew traveled to their home on foot. They lived on the outskirts of the village in a neatly kept cottage with a stable surrounded by towering trees and a tranquil pond. Tabian lingered in the cover of the trees and waited, the musty scent of damp earth clinging to the night air.

Candlelight flickered from the windows, casting long, shifting shadows against the wooden walls. Bartholomew's heavier frame crossed the window and then disappeared deeper into the cottage. A short while later, Katerina's slender silhouette paced near the window. Could she sense his presence lurking in the trees? Did she fear that he was coming for her?

He wanted to make sure that Katerina settled in for the night, and then he planned to go and get his horse. He'd bring it back here, slip into the house, get Katerina, and take her back to Verdermere. He had no idea how he was supposed to restrain her. He had no rope, no shackles. And even if he did, what would stop her from turning into a bird and flying away?

If only he had some of the sleeping potion she'd used on him. If he had a cage, then it might be better if she turned herself into a bird. It would be much easier to contain a bird rather than a person. And it wouldn't arouse any suspicion along the trek back home. However, he would need a fairly large cage. She was the size of a falcon. After retrieving his horse, it might be wise to go into the stable and see if he could find a rope or anything else that could be used to bind her hands ... or wings.

He pulled the amulet out of his tunic and absently fingered the smooth stone. A new

thought occurred to him. The stone had helped him resist Katerina's attempt to compel him to obey her orders. Maybe he could use it to make her follow his commands. Hope swelled inside him. It was worth a try. He wished he knew how to make the stone work.

Closing his eyes, he offered a silent prayer to the Great Creator above. Help me to know what to do. I need to save Garrin, but I don't know how. If this stone can be of benefit, then help me to know how to use it. His eyes grew moist as he squeezed them tighter. Please . He clenched his fists, ending the prayer.

A damp darkness pressed around him, stiffening his body. An owl hooted in the distance, and he heard the soft rustling of forest creatures crawling through the fallen leaves. He was leaning against a tree, hugging his arms to ward off the chill. He would be so glad when this ordeal was over. He longed for his bed at the castle. He let out a yawn, thinking how much he'd like to lie down and get some rest.

More time passed with agonizing slowness. His body ached with the desire to move—to act—but patience was key. When the lights in the cottage finally went out, he stood up straight, all sleepiness dissolving in an instant. He'd watch for a little while longer. If all was quiet, then he'd go get the horse and hurry back.

His breath caught when the front door opened, and Katerina stepped out, wearing a cloak. Her hair gleamed gold in the moonlight as it trailed out behind her. Pulling her cloak tighter around her body, she glanced around as if afraid someone was watching. Where could she possibly be going this time of the night? Was she fleeing? She didn't have any items with her—no bundle of clothing, no provisions—so he guessed she must be planning on coming back to the cottage.

His first inclination was to start out after her immediately. However, he didn't want to alert her to his presence, so he waited for several moments. He'd just left the cover of trees when she transformed into a bird and flew away. He could tell from the

awkward flap of her right wing that she was injured.

A groan of dismay rose in his throat as she lifted into the sky and vanished beyond the trees. There was no way he could catch her. Maybe he'd go get his horse and double back. Hopefully, she would return to the cottage tonight.

His gaze flickered back to the cottage. Bartholomew. As a last resort, Tabian could use him to draw Katerina out. He didn't want to go that route. Bartholomew seemed like a good man, and Tabian didn't want to cause him any harm. However, Tabian was reaching the point of desperation. He couldn't give up and let Garrin die. Hopefully, Katerina would return to the cottage in the next little while, and Garrin wouldn't be forced to take drastic measures.

Tabian followed the deserted road back the same way he'd come, his boots pressing a muffled cadence against the dirt. The world was eerily still, and a mist hung in the air. He knew he was nearing the village when he spotted the tips of the roofs from the clusters of buildings. The road curved into a shady section obscured by the light of the moon.

He heard a noise from behind and whirled around. His instincts screamed a warning, but before he could react, something slammed into his back. A heavy force sent him sprawling onto the dirt.

Tabian fought, trying to get up, but the man was too strong. He wrestled with Tabian before pinning him down. Then the man punched him in the jaw. A sharp pain shot through Tabian as his head was thrust back from the force. The man didn't stop; he pummeled Tabian several more times with such brute force that it rattled his teeth.

Then, the man got off him and stood. Shielding his hands over his face, Tabian looked up. His blood ran cold when the man pulled a dagger from his belt.

Dimly, through the throbbing in his skull, Tabian heard another man. “You know what you have to do,” he said with a grim conviction. “Lilith said he’s not to be left alive.”

Tabian’s fingers wrapped around the stone, desperate and instinctual. Not knowing what else to do, he held it up. To his amazement, the stone began to glow with a white light so bright it was blinding.

The men jumped back in alarm as Tabian stumbled to his feet. He wielded the stone like a shield of protection. A long cylinder of light moved over the man holding the dagger. He yelped and dropped the weapon like he’d been burned. He held up his hands. “P—please,” he trembled.

Tabian turned the stone so that the cylinder grazed the other man’s lower leg. He yelped as he doubled over, clutching his leg. “You burned me,” he cried.

Not wanting to do more damage, Tabian shifted the light away from the man. “Who sent you to attack me?” he demanded. Power from the stone flowed into him, making him stronger than he could imagine. He’d never experienced such clarity of mind, such control.

When neither of the men answered, he held up the amulet. “Do you want another demonstration?”

“Nay,” the man holding his leg whimpered.

“Who sent you?” Tabian yelled.

“Lilith ... the enchantress,” the other man croaked.

A heady relief swept through Tabian. Good to hear it wasn’t Katerina.

The light from the stone dimmed and then vanished as quickly as it had come. The power was once again a quiet slumber inside the stone. A quiver of panic pulsed through Tabian, wondering if the men would attack him again. He adopted a bold, ruthless tone. "Get out of my sight before I finish what I started."

They turned and scampered like vermin into the grove of trees.

Tabian let go of the stone and looked down at it in astonishment. Gratitude swelled inside him. The Great Creator had answered his prayer. The stone had helped him, but he had no idea how he'd managed to summon its power ... or if he'd be able to do so again. Trembles ran through Tabian's hands and continued down to his legs and knees. He took in a halting breath as he gingerly touched his face and then winced. His mouth was bleeding, and his right eye felt swollen. He was lucky to be alive.

An enchantress named Lilith had ordered the attack. She wanted him dead. Why? Was this somehow connected to Katerina? It had to be! How had the enchantress known he was here? Did Katerina tell her? Is that where she went on her late-night errand? The thought of Katerina wanting to harm him was more disturbing than he wanted to admit.

He hurried to get his horse, relieved to find it still tied up at the post. He got on it and headed back to the cottage.

His face was sore and throbbing from pain. Each clop of the horse's hoofs was torturous. He was halfway back to the cottage when he heard something above. He looked up to see a blur of gold glimmering against the moonlight. It was Katerina. His heart lurched. He wondered again if she had anything to do with the attack. Was she coming back to finish the job?

She made a circle around him before descending to the ground a short distance in front of him.

He slowed his horse and touched the stone for reassurance. While he didn't relish the idea of using the stone to hurt her, he might not have a choice. Of course, he was assuming he would be able to summon the stone's powers once again.

She transformed into human form, wearing the same clothing she had on when she left the cottage. "Do you always spend the night roaming the roads?" Before he could answer, she jerked in surprise. "What happened to your face?"

"I was attacked by two men on this very road ... just outside of the village." He watched her carefully for any signs that would indicate she was behind the attack.

Concern tightened her features. "You look awful."

He grunted. "I feel even worse."

"Where are you headed?"

He leveled a glare. "Don't pretend you don't know."

She rocked back, eyes hardening. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why did you leave your cottage and go out in the middle of the night?"

Her voice pitched high. "You were spying on me?"

"Aye. And you sent those men to attack me."

"I most certainly did not," she harrumphed, her hand going to her hip.

"You're in league with the enchantress, Lilith."

She started blinking fast. “How do you know about her?” She brought a hand up and encircled her neck.

“My attackers told me. The enchantress wants me dead.” His eyes burned into hers. “Why is that?”

She clasped her hands together. “I—I don’t know.”

His voice cracked like a whip through the still air. “Is it because you told her I was planning to take you back to Verdermere to answer for your crimes?”

She began shaking her head back and forth. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

“Do I?” he barked. “Because from where I’m standing, you certainly look guilty to me.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” she said softly. Tentatively, she stepped closer. Before he could stop her, she touched the injured corner of his mouth. “I’m sorry.” Her eyes pled with his. “I had nothing to do with the attack, I promise.”

Sincerity brimmed in her eyes, but that didn’t mean she was innocent. She was a pretender. A very convincing one. Her touch was light and feathery against his skin—a bit of heaven. Her golden hair framed her face like an angel. Her delicate features might’ve been the crowning achievement of a renowned sculptor. The fire of life in her sapphire eyes. The adorable tip of her nose. Her full, soft lips, which he’d had the pleasure to taste. Everything about her drew him in, just as it had that night in the garden. However, this time, he couldn’t even blame a spell or enchantment. This was all on him. She was a temptation of epic proportion—his own personal siren.

“‘Tis late. Let’s get you to the cottage, and I’ll tend to your wounds. You need to get some rest.” Tenderly, she cupped his cheek.

As much as he enjoyed—even craved—her touch, he forced himself to remove her hand, his words thrusting out in harsh chunks. “I’m taking you back to Verdermere.” He eyed her, daring her to disagree.

Gentle laughter flowed from her lips. “Let’s revisit this discussion tomorrow—after you’re feeling better.”

“Nay. You’ll go with me ... one way or the other.” He touched the stone, hoping it would do its work, but nothing happened.

Amusement lit her eyes. “What’s that supposed to do?”

He tightened his hold on the stone, forcing himself to concentrate. Work your magic. Now! His effort yielded nothing, not even the slightest hint of warmth. Disappointment fisted him in a tight hold as he released the stone.

“Are you coming with me or not?” she snipped. “‘Tis late, and I need to get some rest.”

“Where did you go tonight ... when you left the cottage?”

Something raw and tortured slipped into her eyes and then disappeared so quickly he wondered if he’d only imagined it. “If you must know, my father sent me on an errand.”

He frowned. “What sort of errand?” The haughty lightness in her voice aroused his suspicion even more. She was trying hard to shut him down, but it wasn’t going to work.

“He thought he left a candle burning in the shop and worried it would start a fire.”

He leaned forward into her personal space. “And he didn’t think to check it before the two of you left the village?”

“Nay, he didn’t,” she answered easily, as if this type of thing happened frequently. She made a point of looking in the direction of the cottage. “I’m going home. Will you join me?”

They weren’t getting anywhere going around and around. Exhaling, he nodded. “Okay, we’ll do this your way.” Seeing her expression of triumph, he threw her a sharp look. “For now.” They started going in that direction.

“We’ll get you cleaned up, and then you can get some rest.” She tossed him a playful grin. “You certainly look like you could use it.”

THE COBBLER

The next morning, Tabian was awoken by bright ribbons of sunlight dancing in through the window. He stirred, trying to clear away the remaining cobwebs of sleep. Hazy recollections drifted back like the comforting notes of a nearly forgotten song. He remembered the flutter of nimble, cool fingers against his skin as Katerina tended to his wounds. She'd been surprisingly gentle and tentative, far too comforting for a woman who'd proven herself to be wily and dangerous. He'd refused her help at first, but she insisted. He was coming to learn that Katerina was fiercely headstrong and didn't like to back down. Their whispered argument had been punctuated by stormy glares and muttered retorts. She'd warned him to keep his voice down so that Bartholomew, asleep in the next room, wouldn't wake up.

When Katerina insisted that he take her four-poster wooden bed and the mattress made of feathers, Tabian balked, arguing that he'd prefer to sleep on the floor. However, she wouldn't have it. She spread a blanket on the floor for herself, where she lay down and sang soft lullabies into the stillness of the room until he drifted off to sleep.

He sifted through his brain to recall what Katerina had sung about. He'd told himself last night that the details were important to remember.

What was the song about? He reached into the corners of his mind, grasping until he finally got it. While he couldn't remember the particular lyrics or tune, the essence of the lullaby came rushing back. A beautiful bird with soft yellow feathers would come and light on a Cobbler's windowsill, where she would regale him with the most beautiful songs the human ear had ever heard. Day after day, the little bird would

come and watch the Cobbler work.

Eventually, she fell in love with him. She went to an enchantress and begged the woman to make her human so she could be with the cobbler. The enchantress agreed—for a price. The little bird was bound to do the bidding of the enchantress for the rest of her life. She was so in love with the Cobbler that she agreed. However, the bird didn't realize that the enchantress was evil. She wielded great power over the bird-turned-maiden and forced her into servitude.

The maiden and the cobbler eventually had a daughter. After her daughter was born, the maiden realized that she couldn't be an example of goodness to her young daughter while remaining in bondage to the enchantress, where she was forced to do things that wavered on the edge of right and wrong. To protect her family, she eventually turned herself back into a bird and flew away.

An understanding settled heavily on his chest. Katerina hadn't merely sung a song; she'd told him her story. He'd wondered which she truly was—a maiden or a bird. It would seem that she was both. A pang of sadness went through him. He and Katerina shared a similar history. Both of them knew the acute loss of growing up without their mothers. Was that why he felt such a strong connection to Katerina? Well, that and the other annoying aspect of him being so intensely attracted to her.

He sat up in the bed and looked around. He was alone, and there was no longer a blanket on the wooden floor. The space was tidy as if Katerina had never been there. His fingers found the stone hidden beneath his tunic. He was relieved to find it still there. While he appreciated Katerina taking care of him, he still didn't fully trust her.

His mouth and eye were painfully sore, and his face felt like it was the size of a pumpkin. His stiff body ached in protest as he swung his legs over to the side of the bed and got up. The floor was cold beneath the soles of his bare feet. He glanced around and spotted his boots and stockings resting against the wall.

“Hello,” he called, “Katerina.”

No response.

Frowning, he padded into the main room. No one was there. A round of bread, an apple, and a pear sat on the wooden table. He went over to inspect the items and spotted a note on the table, written on parchment. When he read the words, he took in a sharp breath.

The food is for you.

For your own sake, please leave this place immediately and never look back.

--K

He crumpled the note in his hand. “Not going to happen,” he muttered. Not without her.

Briefly, he considered not eating the food. Then he decided that if Katerina had wanted to poison or drug him, then she could’ve done so last night when she gave him water to drink.

After eating, he slipped on his stockings and boots before going outside. The morning air was chilly, and a layer of dew covered the ground. He scanned the surroundings. His pulse bumped up a notch when he noticed that his horse was missing. His gaze snapped to the stable, its door partially open. He strode over to it and stepped inside, the pungent scent of hay and animals thick in the air.

His horse lifted his head from where he was tied up next to a trough. Water droplets clung to his whiskers. A bucket of oats was tipped on its side as if the horse had eaten his fill and then grown tired of it.

Katerina had thought to feed and water his horse.

She was such an enigma. She was looking out for him, had nursed his wounds. She acted as though she truly cared. And yet, she'd written that note. Was her intent to protect or threaten him? It certainly seemed like she knew why he'd been attacked.

His thoughts went back to that night in the garden when he tried to press her for information. She claimed she couldn't tell him anything because it was forbidden. By whom? The enchantress—Lilith? Was Katerina somehow involved with the same enchantress that had demanded servitude from her mother? Was it possible that she'd been forced to steal the apples?

His pulse quickened with the hope that perhaps Katerina was inherently good. He wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt because

He jerked as a sudden realization rippled through him. He was starting to feel certain things for her. Things that were taking him completely by surprise. Then again, how could he not be smitten by a woman of such incredible beauty? Perhaps it was merely attraction. Nay, it was more than that, even though it was uncomfortable for him to admit it. She was kind. He'd felt tenderness and a surprising depth of emotion in her touch when she took care of him the night before. He enjoyed the sparks that pinged between them when they sparred—way too much.

Pushing a hand through his hair, he muttered a curse. This was getting way too complicated.

There was really no way for him to force Katerina to go back to Verdermere with him ... unless he could somehow capture her in bird form and keep her contained that way. However, he had no idea how to accomplish such a task. Maybe the best way to go about this was to try and persuade her to go with him. If he could learn more about the enchantress, then he could determine if Katerina was being forced into a life of

thievery. There was a chance he could help her escape the enchantress's clutches.

This situation would be so much easier if he could just learn how to wield the power of the stone. His mother had asked Elda to give it to him for a reason, but he had no idea why. He was nothing special. Why was he the one picked to bring the golden bird back to the kingdom? Alistair and Lucien had proven their valor in the War of the Cliffs. Why didn't their mother instruct Elda to give the necklace to one of them? Why was Elda supposed to wait until his eighteenth birthday to present it?

How could having the golden bird's presence in the kingdom usher in a golden era? There had to be some connection between a golden bird and golden apples.

So many questions and no answers.

Not wanting to waste the day hanging around an empty cottage waiting for Katerina to return, Tabian rode his horse to the village. After tying the animal to the same post he'd used the evening before, he went straight to Bartholomew's shop. Would he find Katerina there? His blood ran faster at the thought.

He entered the shop and found Bartholomew sitting behind the counter, polishing a shoe. When the older man looked up and saw Tabian, a veil of disapproval fell over his eyes. He put down the shoe, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening as Tabian stepped up to the counter.

"I hoped you would take Katerina's note to heart and leave this place," Bartholomew said gruffly.

Tabian's stomach twisted. "So, you're a part of this." Bartholomew had seemed so upstanding ... almost above reproach. It just went to show that Tabian wasn't the greatest judge of character.

Bartholomew sighed, rubbing his temples. “My only wish is to keep my daughter safe.”

“She’s a thief,” Tabian ground out. “She must return to Verdermere with me and answer for her crimes. Otherwise, an innocent man will die. My father desires to have the golden bird in his kingdom. For that reason, Katerina would not be harmed.”

“My daughter is not some prize to be captured,” Bartholomew roared.

Tabian was taken aback by Bartholomew’s wrath. The older man possessed more strength than Tabian realized.

Bartholomew looked him in the eye, his voice hard as flint. “While I can appreciate that you’re worried about your friend, your primary concern at this point should be for yourself.” His gaze went to Tabian’s swollen eye and busted lip. “Katerina is worried about your safety. That’s why she wrote the note.”

“I need to know what is going on,” Tabian growled. “Was Katerina forced to steal the apples?”

His question was met with a stony silence as the muscles in Bartholomew’s jaw flicked.

“I know about her mother—how the bird fell in love with the cobbler and then begged an enchantress to turn her into a maiden so she could be with her true love.”

Shock blitzed through Bartholomew’s eyes. “How?” he uttered hoarsely.

Tabian waved a hand. “That doesn’t matter.” He spoke his next words slowly, deliberately. “I also know that your wife was obligated to do the enchantress’s dark bidding.”

Bartholomew's glasses fogged up. He removed them and used his tunic to clean the lenses. "How do you know these things?" He put his glasses back on with a shaky hand and searched Tabian's face. "How?" he demanded.

"Katerina told me."

He blinked several times. "She must care more about you than I realized," he uttered.

The words were immensely pleasing. Tabian continued, "Is this enchantress Lilith?"

Fear edged into Bartholomew's eyes as his tone grew urgent. "For the sake of all that is good, you must get away from here. You don't understand what's at stake."

Tabian slammed his fist onto the counter. "Then tell me, I want to help."

Bartholomew began shaking his head back and forth. "You can't help, no one can."

The door of the shop opened. Tabian turned to see Lady Ravenshire glide in with her head held erect, commanding the room. "Good morning," she began in a cheerful tone.

"Morning," Bartholomew responded, offering her a polite smile.

The strain in his voice must've been apparent to Lady Ravenshire because she frowned. "Bartholomew, is everything okay?" She looked to Tabian for an explanation and gasped. "What happened to your face?"

Instinctively, Tabian touched his eye and winced at the dart of pain that even a light touch evoked. "I was attacked last night just outside of the village."

Outrage burned in her eyes. She straightened her shoulders as if ready to go on a

rampage. “By whom?”

He shrugged in a casual gesture. “I’m not sure.” He wondered if he should mention that the men were sent by Lilith, the enchantress, to kill him. Nay, if he did so, then he would have to disclose the part about Katerina turning into a golden bird and stealing the golden apples. He didn’t think it wise to involve the members of the village in his personal matters. If Lady Ravenshire realized that Katerina could turn into a golden bird, then she might feel the need to offer Katerina special protection, especially from the man who’d come here to capture her and take her away to a distant kingdom.

“What did they want? To rob you?”

“That’s my assumption,” Tabian answered.

Concern tightened her pretty face. “Well, did they rob you?”

“Nay, something must’ve scared them off. They fled into the forest” —he offered a grim smile— “after doing a fair amount of damage.” He pointed to his face.

“This will not stand,” she fumed, steel threading her voice. “Can you identify the men?”

“‘Twas dark,” Tabian lamented. “The man who beat me was tall and burly. The other one was shorter and thinner.”

Lady Ravenshire let out a long breath and homed in on Bartholomew as she breathed out orders. “Talk to the Village Headman. We’ll need to get the council together first thing tomorrow morning. These thieves must be caught.”

“Yes, mi’ lady,” Bartholomew said with a deferential nod.

Disgust twisted her face. “This type of behavior will not be tolerated.” She turned to Tabian. “I’m so sorry.” Her voice was smooth and conciliatory. “Please know that I will do everything in my power to apprehend your attackers.”

“Thank you,” Tabian nodded.

She took in another breath and turned her attention to Bartholomew. “I trust that you and Katerina are still planning on dining with me this evening?”

“We are,” Bartholomew acknowledged.

She looked at Tabian. “And you also?”

He offered an appreciative smile. “Aye, mi’ lady. I’ll be there.” It might be the only chance he had of ever seeing Katerina again.

“Very good.” After a slight pause, her tone grew brisk. “Bartholomew, I need to speak to you about some village affairs, but I don’t want to interrupt.” She looked from Bartholomew to Tabian. “If the two of you were still in a discussion, I can wait.”

“Nay,” Bartholomew said quickly. “Tabian ordered a pair of slippers for his fiancée. We had just concluded our business when you came in.”

A coy smile spread over Lady Ravenshire’s mouth. “That’s right.” Her eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief as she directed her comments to Tabian. “She must be one lucky girl.”

“Aye, she is.” He caught eyes with Bartholomew, trying to silently convey that this matter wasn’t over. “See you and Katerina this evening.” His voice rang with a note of promise.

Bartholomew nodded.

Tabian's princely manners took hold as he reached for Lady Ravenshire's hand and brought it to his lips in a noble gesture. "Thank you once again for your hospitality," he said with a magnanimous smile. "I look forward to seeing you tonight."

She gave him a regal nod as he released her hand. "See you tonight," she affirmed.

With that, Tabian turned on his heel and left the shop, his mind teeming with all that he and Bartholomew had discussed.

THE LADY OF THE HILL

Not knowing what to do with himself until sunset, Tabian wandered around the village. He visited the apothecary and got a salve for his wounds. Of course, that meant having to answer questions about how he'd gotten injured. He stuck to the story of getting robbed, assuring the store owner and the other villagers present that Lady Ravenshire would do her best to track down his attackers.

Afterward, he found a secluded spot across from Bartholomew's shop where he could watch the door, hoping to catch sight of Katerina coming or going, but she never made an appearance. The day dragged by at an agonizingly slow pace, his frustration mounting. He needed to find a way to get through to Katerina. He needed her to tell him her secrets, which seemed to be as vast as the sea.

As the day wore on, he decided to answer the demands of his rumbling stomach. He went to the baker and selected a crusty loaf of bread and a thick wedge of cheese for his midday meal. He went to check on his horse. After leading it to a public trough and giving it adequate water, he tied it back up and then found a quiet spot under a tree where he could eat. The sun was now high in the sky, casting bright spears through the colorful leaves. A pleasant breeze stirred the air. Where it had been cold this morning, the temperature was now perfect.

He ate the meal and then stretched out on the grass. His eyes grew heavy as he dozed off. He awoke with a start, berating himself for falling asleep. The sun had fallen to a low position in the sky. Evidently, his body was still craving rest after his long days of traveling. It wouldn't be long until it was sunset. He got to his feet and went to get his horse. He could lead it up to Lady Ravenshire's manor and tie it up there.

Just as the last sliver of the golden sun disappeared from the sky in a fiery blaze of pinks and oranges, Tabian spotted Bartholomew and Katerina shuffling up the long and winding road leading to the entrance of the manor. Rather than going inside, Tabian had planted himself by a fence that enclosed a private garden.

His heart quickened as he watched them. Their somber faces and the heavy weight of their steps suggested that they were laden with worry. Tabian surmised that he was the cause of their distress. What sort of persuasion tactic could he use to get Katerina to leave with him to Verdermere? He'd tried appealing to her sense of justice, but that fell flat. While she expressed sorrow for Garrin's plight, it wasn't enough to convince her to take responsibility for the theft.

He could offer to help her escape the clutches of the enchantress. Surely, that notion would appeal to her. He could tell her about the stone and the power that it could wield, if only he could figure out how to use it. Of course, there was a chance that she might try to steal the necklace from him. She was a thief, after all.

His thoughts took another turn. What if he was wrong? What if Katerina had stolen the apples of her own accord? If that were the case, then why would the enchantress Lilith want him dead? Somehow, the enchantress was involved in all of this. He was sure of it.

He stepped out to greet Katerina and Bartholomew as they reached the front steps. When she saw him, Katerina scowled. "You should've heeded my warning." Her eyes darted to his wounds. "You look terrible," she muttered as if she were somehow responsible for his condition.

"As bad as it looks ... well, it feels even worse," he joked. She didn't so much as crack a grin. He nodded at Bartholomew. "Good evening."

"Good evening," the older man said tersely, plodding up the steps.

Katerina moved to follow, but Tabian caught hold of her arm. “We need to talk,” he growled into her ear, catching the aromatic scent of lavender and sandalwood in her golden hair. It wrapped him in an intoxicating hold. This evening, she was wearing a pink frock, which accentuated her slender frame. How could a woman be so beautiful, so strong, and yet vulnerable at the same time? He soaked in the lines of her delicate features, his gaze lingering on the vitality of her wide, luminous eyes. He took in a breath, willing himself to remain focused on the task at hand.

Bartholomew glanced back over his shoulder. “Are you coming?” he asked Katerina with a huff, his disapproving gaze resting on Tabian.

“Go on in, Father,” Katerina said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

When Bartholomew hesitated, she gave him a reassuring smile. “Tabian won’t hurt me.” She cut her eyes at Tabian. “Will you?”

“Nay,” he interjected to Bartholomew. “I would never hurt her.” He glanced at the sling around her shoulder and winced. “Again.”

She grunted softly.

Bartholomew rapped his knuckles against the door. When it opened, he stepped inside. The instant it closed, Katerina launched in. “I tried to warn you,” she seethed.

“Warn me about what?”

“Never mind,” she mumbled. “It’s too late.”

Frustration climbed up his neck. “Too late for what?”

She looked down at his fingers curled around her arm. “Let go of me,” she demanded.

He immediately did so, holding up his hands. “I just want to talk. Please.” He swallowed hard, trying to keep his voice even. “Look, I realize that there’s no way I can force you to go with me to Verdermere.”

A hard amusement flicked in her eyes. “I’m glad you’re finally starting to come to your senses.”

He rushed on. “I think there’s another way.” The faint embers of interest in her eyes gave him hope as he continued. “I want to make you an offer—one you can’t refuse.”

Katerina held his face for a long, unreadable moment.

“Please, just hear me out,” he urged.

“We’ll talk about it later ... after the dinner is over.”

Victory punched through him as a smile spread over his mouth. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t yet agreed to your offer,” she snapped.

“But you agreed to listen, it’s a start.”

“You’re impossible,” she grumbled.

He laughed. “Nay, that honor is reserved for you.”

A short laugh clipped her throat, and then the tiniest of smiles crept over her mouth before she smothered it. “You are tenacious, I’ll give you that.” The admiration in her eyes did strange things to his insides. Something shifted between them, thickening the air. He caught the way her throat moved as she swallowed, taking note of the gentle rhythm of her breath.

It was so tempting to close the space between them and give in to the insatiable need to capture her lips. Instead, he forced himself to step back.

She glanced towards the door. “Let’s just go and get this dinner over with. Lady Ravenshire doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

He held out his arm in proper, noble form. “May I?”

With a resigned sigh, she slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her up the steps.

“Tell me more about yourself,” Lady Ravenshire prompted from across the table.

The reflection of her ruby necklace shimmering against the golden light of the candles reminded Tabian of drops of blood. He put down his fork and sat back in his seat, trying to decide what he should divulge as all eyes watched him expectantly. The food was delectable, some of the finest roasted pheasant he’d ever eaten, which was saying a lot considering that he’d grown up in a castle.

The dining chamber was impressive. Two tall gilded mirrors hanging side by side created an illusion of extended space. An elaborate tapestry adorned one wall, and the vivid purple velvet drapes sweeping over the large window looked out to a well-tended garden that would’ve rivaled the royal garden in which Garrin labored so devoutly. The thought of Garrin made his stomach twist. It tore at Tabian’s insides to know he was chained up in the dungeon. Tabian was doing all he could to free him, but nothing seemed to be working.

He glanced at Katerina, who was seated beside him. She’d been eating her food with the grace of a queen, her every movement as fluid as water. Even in the dim glow of the candles, her hair shimmered like jewels. Her slender neck held up her head in such an elegant stance. How could he not be enamored with her? Feeling his eyes on

her, she gave him a fleeting smile that held a whisper of warmth. It was gone before he had time to take his next breath.

Did she feel the invisible cord pulling them together? For him, the attraction burned bright and hot.

How was he going to persuade her to go back to Verdermere with him? Would she be enticed by a position of status? With wealth? Surely, Father would give her whatever she desired once he realized she was the golden bird.

Lady Ravenshire cleared her throat, and then her gaze sharpened.

Tabian jerked slightly, realizing that she'd asked him a question and was awaiting his response. Bartholomew was sitting to the right of Lady Ravenshire, his expression brooding as if expecting some tragedy to strike at any moment.

"What does your family do?" Lady Ravenshire asked with a trace of impatience.

Tabian took a swig of ale before setting the goblet back down. "My father is a gardener." That was somewhat true. He thought of Garrin as his real father. He didn't dare look at Katerina to see her reaction to the lie.

"I see. That's a worthy occupation." Lady Ravenshire tilted her head, her voice smooth as honey. "Do you share your father's love for plants?"

"Only for apples," Katerina muttered under her breath.

Tabian nearly choked on his own saliva. His heart was a battering ram against his ribs. Was Katerina trying to expose him? He had to resist the urge to give her arm a shove.

Lady Ravenshire leaned forward. “I’m sorry? I didn’t catch that.”

“I was just saying that Tabian is turning out to be much more like his father than I realized.” Katerina threw Tabian a sugary smile, but her eyes held a hard amusement.

The hairs on the back of Tabian’s neck lifted as he turned to her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her expression remained innocent. “Take it how you wish.” She turned her attention back to her plate and commenced eating.

Bartholomew jumped into the conversation, his stern gaze passing over Tabian and Katerina. His eyes settled on Tabian. “From what you told me last night, I was under the impression that you and Katerina had only met in passing.” He gave Tabian a meaningful look, one that urged him to go along with the lie.

Odd. Why was Bartholomew trying to keep up the ruse in front of Lady Ravenshire? There was obviously more going on here than Tabian was seeing. An invisible noose tightened around his neck. “That’s correct,” he said casually.

Lady Ravenshire raised her eyebrows. “And yet, Katerina knows something of your father.”

Tabian waved a hand, forcing a light chuckle. “I must’ve mentioned him during our casual conversation.”

“Nay, I think you’re fibbing,” Lady Ravenshire countered, eyes glimmering with amusement.

“You do?” Tabian croaked, touching the neckline of his tunic. His voice was tight and raspy. Heat pushed through him with the force of a dozen fires. Why was he

suddenly so hot?

A knowing smile curled Lady Ravenshire's lips. "I detect a certain spark between the two of you. Is there something I should know?"

Katrina snapped her head up, eyes flashing with defiance. "Nay. There's nothing between us. We're merely acquaintances. He means nothing to me."

The words slammed into him like a punch to the gut. "Thanks," he sulked. So much for his hope that she might care for him. The next instant, he was rolled in a wave of dizziness. The candles were casting distorted shadows over the faces around the table. He tugged at his tunic, his chest tightening. Something was happening. He looked around. The room was moving in a fast circle. His stomach knotted, making him want to vomit.

Velvety laughter flowed from Lady Ravenshire's throat. "Calm down, dear. It was only an observation." She eyed Katerina in a challenge. "You care about him ... a lot."

Katerina dropped her fork with a plink. "He means nothing to me."

Tabian should've known that Katerina was only playing him. He was surprised by how much her spiteful words cut. How quickly history repeated itself. He'd been taken in by Arabella and then by Katerina. For some strange reason, Katerina's betrayal hurt the most.

Was that why his body was acting so strange? Was he having some sort of severe emotional reaction to Katerina's hateful words? Nay, the symptoms had started before her rant.

"Well, that's good," Lady Ravenshire snipped, "because then you won't be overly

distraught about what will happen next.”

Alarm pulsed through Tabian when his throat began to close. He made a gurgling sound, trying to gulp in more air. He reached for the goblet and took another drink. “Something’s wrong,” he squeaked, clutching his neck.

Lady Ravenshire’s voice tightened with concern. “Tabian, what’s the matter?”

Her words came at him from far away. Everything was muddled and slow, like he was swimming through water.

“What did you do to him?” Katerina demanded.

Tabian’s head wobbled, darkness crowding the edges of his eyes.

“You said you would let him go.” Katerina’s voice cracked. “You promised.”

“I will let him go,” Lady Ravenshire purred. She eyed Tabian with malevolence. “But first, he has something that belongs to me.”

A high-pitched shrill laced Katerina’s voice. “What could he possibly have?”

“Lilith, please,” Bartholomew began, “show the lad some mercy.”

“Lilith?” Tabian’s lips managed to form the word. His mind whirled.

She was the enchantress.

He was going to die.

“I want my amulet back,” Lilith growled.

Tabian lifted his head to look at her and then surrendered to the blackness as he fell forward.

THE TURRET

A sharp pain stabbed through Tabian's head as he groaned. He tried to open his eyes, but they were impossibly heavy. His body ached all over. He shifted against the cold stone floor and heard the clanging of metal. A sour taste coated his tongue and throat. He was thirsty. So. Incredibly. Thirsty.

Memories came rushing back. The dinner. The hatred in Lady Ravenshire's eyes. Lilith, the enchantress. He blinked, forcing his eyes open. His vision swam, and he felt nauseous. It was all he could do to fight against the thick fog pressing around him, threatening to drag him down to oblivion.

He went to move his hands so he could check to make sure he was still wearing the necklace. As he did so, he became aware of something cold and hard digging into his flesh. He looked down, forcing his vision to sharpen. His wrists were shackled. He followed the length of the chain to where it was anchored into the rounded stone wall. His gaze traveled way up the tall walls and to the round ceiling, which seemed impossibly far away. He was in the turret of the manor. In a streak of defiance, he yanked against the chain, but the anchor held fast to the wall.

The room was damp and chill, and there was a faint scent of old wood in the air. Hearing a whistle, he looked up again and spotted a narrow window not far from the ceiling. Bright light streamed in, suggesting that it was daylight outside. He'd been out since last night when Lilith drugged him.

He lowered his gaze, looking around the room. It was sparsely furnished. There was a chamber pot close enough for him to use. A small wooden table and chairs sat off to

one side. Above the table was a faded and moth-eaten tapestry depicting a hunting scene.

He lifted his hand and touched the necklace—amulet—relieved to find it still attached. Why hadn't Lilith just taken it? What else could she want with him?

His heart began to thud with the knowledge that he couldn't remain shackled to the wall. He had to figure out how to escape.

He forced himself to sift back through the haziness of last night's dinner. Lilith said the amulet belonged to her. He made a face. How could that be? His mother wanted to make sure he got the amulet when he turned eighteen. What was the significance of his eighteenth birthday? If Lilith had wanted the amulet, why did she wait so long to try to get it back? Was Lilith the same enchantress who helped his mother plant the tree? If so, then why had she turned evil? When Elda spoke of the enchantress, it was with the highest degree of reverence. Tabian had been brought up to believe that the enchantress was good.

Was Lilith forcing Katerina to work for her just as she'd done her mother? Katerina had been panicked when she realized that something was happening to Tabian. Lilith accused her of caring about Tabian.

And yet, Katerina had adamantly denied having any feelings for him. Perhaps she'd done so to protect him from Lilith.

Was any of this connected to the golden apples? If so, how?

He needed to figure out how to use the amulet. That was his only way out. The chain rattled as he brought his hand up and pulled the amulet from underneath his tunic. He'd been thinking of it as a necklace or stone this entire time; amulet was a more fitting description.

He forced himself to concentrate. Nothing happened. He gritted his teeth in frustration. The amulet had worked when he was attacked. Why was it not working now? Maybe he just needed to try harder. Exerting all of his mental power, he commanded the amulet to work. This time, all he got for the effort was a slight warming of the stone.

Or perhaps it was growing warmer because of his own body heat.

He kept trying until his head throbbed. He'd rest for a few moments and then try again.

Finally, after numerous attempts, he released the stone and sat back, his breath heaving in and out of his chest like a billow. He looked over at the closed wooden door. How long was Lilith planning to keep him here? His heart lurched. It was a three-day journey back to Verdermere. He was now on day ten of his trip. That meant he only had one more day before he would need to leave. One day to get out of this awful situation.

His blood chilled. Would he make it out of this alive? According to what Lilith said the night before, she planned to let him go after he gave her the amulet. He scrunched his face. What was Lilith waiting for? Why didn't she just take the amulet and be done with this sordid mess?

The day passed torturously slow. He knew it was getting late when long shadows fell over the walls.

He was terribly thirsty ... and hungry. Was Lilith planning to starve him to death? A quiet panic trickled down his spine. He would go crazy, chained to the wall like an animal, his thoughts plaguing him.

When dusk settled in, and the room started giving up its light, he heard movement.

His heart leaped with hope when he saw a streak of gold. Katerina.

She swooped down, dropped something onto the floor, hopped back a few steps, and studied him with glassy, amber-colored eyes. He looked at what she'd brought. It was a cloth tied up on the ends.

She flapped her wings. For one awful moment, he thought she was going to leave.

“Wait,” he called out as desperation clutched him in an iron fist. “Stay with me.”

She turned and materialized into human form. Even though she was wearing a simple brown frock, she was as stunning as always, with her glossy hair spilling over her graceful shoulders. Her arm was in a sling, a nagging reminder that he'd caused her injury. “I would've come sooner, but I had to wait until dusk. I didn't want Lilith or any of her spies to see me.” Her expression turned forlorn as she took in his wretched state. She placed her shaky hands to her mouth. “I—I'm so sorry.” She lowered her head in shame.

“I want to know everything.”

She lifted her head, her anguished eyes connecting with his.

“Please,” he uttered. “You owe me that much.”

Nodding, she knelt down and untied the cloth. “I brought you some food and water.”

His stomach growled noisily as he clutched it with a half-laugh. “I think Lilith is trying to starve me to death.”

“That's exactly what she plans to do.”

He blinked. “Why?”

“I’m not sure. After her men took you away, I heard Lilith order them to put you in the turret, where she planned to keep you without food or water.” She went over and sat down beside him. She handed him a flask, bread, cheese, a strip of dried meat, and some grapes. “Eat and drink first, and then we can talk some more.”

He lifted the flask to his mouth and drank greedily. When this thirst was sated, he dug into the food, eating every last morsel. When he was finished, he drank more water and then sat back, grateful to have a full stomach. “Thank you,” he sighed.

“You’re welcome,” she responded with deep emotion.

He pushed out a humorless chuckle. “Now, if you could just help me get out of here ...”

Tears bubbled in her sapphire eyes.

“What?” He searched her face.

Her expression grew tortured. “If only I could.”

An edge seeped into his voice. “Why can’t you? Surely, there must be something you could do. Like, get me a key to open the door.”

“I shouldn’t even be here,” she said hoarsely. “If Lilith knew, she’d kill my father.”

His words rushed out. “What if I helped you both escape? You could go back with me to Verdermere.”

A curtain fell over her eyes. “Nay,” she said softly. “It wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” he pressed.

“She’s too powerful. We could never escape her. She would track us down. Lilith is ruthless.” A harsh laugh fell from her lips. “If there was a way to escape, I would’ve found it already.”

He touched her arm. “There has to be a way.” His eyes latched onto hers. “I need you to help me find it. Otherwise, I’m going to die in here.”

More tears filled her eyes and slipped over her cheeks. “You have no idea how hard this is.”

He grunted. “Oh, I think I have a fairly good idea.”

She rushed on. “To have to choose between saving my father’s life.” Her lower lip trembled. “And the life of the man whom I—” She stopped as if fearing she’d said too much.

“The man whom you what?” His voice went soft and imploring as an understanding settled over him.

“Are you really going to make me say it?” She threw him a glare.

A low chuckle tickled his throat. “I thought I meant nothing to you.” Tenderly, he wiped the tears from her cheeks, the chain jingling with the movement.

“You want to hear the truth?” she muttered. “Alright, here goes. I care about you. In fact, my feelings for you run so deep that you’re all I’ve been able to think about since that first night we met in the garden.”

His eyes rounded. “Really?” A pleased smile stretched over his mouth. He cocked his

head, grinning from ear to ear. “That’s good to know.” He pressed his lips together in mock consternation. “Hmm ... I had no idea.”

“You don’t have to look so smug about it,” she smirked. “I’m sure you have plenty of maidens clamoring for you, including Arabella.”

She spoke the words like they were a statement of fact. He didn’t want to lessen her opinion of him by admitting that she was the only one who’d ever fallen for him. To his credit, he’d gotten the best of the best. It was hard to believe that someone like her wanted him. A wicked grin slid over his lips. “Are you jealous?”

Pink brushed her cheeks. “Absolutely not,” she punched out.

He reached and cupped her jaw. “If it’s any consolation, I care about you, too.”

Hope lit her eyes as a smile curved her lips. “You do?”

“I do,” he acknowledged. A moment later, he lowered his hand from her face and shook his head, harsh laughter scratching his throat.

“What?” Wariness edged into her expression.

“I finally find the maiden of my dreams ... just in time to be killed by some evil enchantress. In another life, I would’ve loved to have courted you properly” —he crooked a droll grin— “so I could make you fall madly in love with me.”

“It wouldn’t have taken much,” she said softly and then took in a sharp breath as more tears gathered in her eyes. “I wish there was something I could do to help you escape. I can’t bear the thought of losing you when I’ve only just found you.”

“Aye.” Emotion thickened his throat. “Life can be so unfair. So cruel.”

She frowned. “Do you really have Lilith’s amulet?”

“I have an amulet, but I didn’t realize it was hers.”

Eagerness fanned over her features. “May I see it?”

He rocked back. “Why?”

She frowned. “Well, it’s the reason why Lilith has you locked away in the turret. I know that Lilith’s amulet is the source of her power, so I assume yours must be powerful, too. I only want to see it.”

“Maybe later,” he said offhandedly.

Her face caved in on itself. “You don’t trust me.” She balled a fist. “All I’ve done since we’ve met is to try and look after you. And still, you don’t trust me.” She gave him a wounded look.

He was surprised by how quickly the anger ignited. “Let’s not forget the part where you drugged me in the garden and then stole the apple. Had I not gotten wise to you, you would’ve done the same the next night.” He ground his teeth. “Need I remind you that an innocent man will die because of you?”

“I had no choice,” she spat. “Lilith forced me to steal the apples.”

“Why?”

She threw him a challenging look. “If you want me to tell you everything that I know, then you’re going to have to be forthcoming with me. Let me see the amulet.”

They eyed one another for several long moments.

He pushed out a long sigh and then removed the amulet from his tunic.

Reverently, she touched the stone. “How does it work?”

“I have no idea. If I knew how to use it, I wouldn’t be chained to the wall.”

“You used it on those men the night they attacked you.”

He went on instant alert. “How did you know that?”

“I didn’t know anything last night,” she said defensively. “It was only after Lilith drugged you that she told my father and me about the attack and how you used the amulet to fight off those men.”

He studied her, trying to decide if she was telling the truth.

“How did you channel the amulet?”

“I don’t know. The men attacked. One of them pulled a dagger. The other said Lilith ordered them to kill me. On instinct, I held up the stone and wielded it like a shield. A blaze of light issued out. It had the power to burn the men.”

Katerina listened with an expression of awe.

“Don’t get too impressed,” he grumbled. “I have no idea what I did.”

She looked thoughtful. “I know an amulet is the source of Lilith’s power, but I have no idea how it works. How did you gain possession of the amulet?”

He told her about his mother and the enchantress. He explained how it was the enchantress who helped his mother plant the tree that yielded the golden apples.

“Elda is Garrin’s wife. My mother instructed her to give me the amulet when I turned eighteen. I only got the amulet a short while ago—right before I left to come in search of you.”

She knitted her brows in concentration. “Why did your mother feel the need to give the amulet to you instead of one of your older brothers?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea; I’ve asked myself that same question numerous times.” He hesitated, wondering if he should divulge the rest. Sensing his reticence, she tugged on his arm. “What else are you not telling me?”

“When you turned into the bird that morning in the garden, you left a golden feather on the ground. I took it to show my father so I could offer proof that you had been there.” He paused, getting lost in the recollection.

She nudged him. “And?”

“My father said that before my mother died, she told him a golden bird would one day come and nest in the tree.”

She blinked in surprise.

He held her gaze. “Mother told my father that I was destined for greatness. That I would be the one to capture this bird and bring it back to Verdermere so that a golden age could be ushered in.”

Fire shot from her eyes as she thrust out her words in angry bursts. “I’m not some prize to be captured and brought back in a cage.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at her vehemence. “I’m learning that the hard way,” he said dryly.

She wasn't finished. "I've spent years as Lilith's slave, and I'll not do the same with you."

"I don't expect that of you," he soothed. "I'm only telling you the full story." He searched her face. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

She let out a long sigh before nodding. A moment later, she gave him a steely look. "How am I supposed to know if it's me you want ... or the bird?"

He gathered her hands in his. "It's you," he said fervently. "Only you."

Her eyes glistened.

"I mean it," he affirmed.

With that, she settled down. They sat in silence for several long moments until he spoke. "Okay, I told you my story. It's time to tell me yours." He squeezed her hands before releasing them.

She dipped her head, her glorious hair slipping lower over her arm. He couldn't resist picking up a strand and running it through his fingers. The weight of the heavy shackle around his wrist was so cumbersome that he released her hair and let his hand rest in his lap.

"Remember the lullaby I sang to you?"

"Aye, the one about the bird who fell in love with the cobbler. You were talking about your mother."

An admiring smile broke over her face. "Aye, no one can accuse you of being a simpleton."

He laughed. "I'm not so sure about that. It didn't take much to connect the dots. Continue," he prompted.

"My mother thought that if she flew away and removed herself from Lilith's clutches, then my father and I would be safe." Pain darkened her eyes. "I can understand my mother's reasoning. She thought I was a normal girl. No one knew at the time that I inherited a very unique quality from my mother." A smile touched her lips. "I've always been able to sing like none other, and I felt a peculiar pull to the open sky. When I was thirteen, I was out twirling in a meadow. Suddenly, my body changed. Before I even realized what was happening, I was soaring upwards, experiencing a freedom I'd never before known." A rapturous glow shone over her face, enhancing her beauty. "I glanced at my arms and realized they were wings made of gold." She laughed softly at the memory. "I circled around to a clear pond so I could see my reflection and was startled to learn that I was a golden bird."

She paused, a shadow passing over her face. "Lilith must've suspected that I inherited the gift of flight from my mother. She set spies about to watch me. They saw me transform into a bird and reported back to her."

"Did you know that Lilith was an enchantress?"

"Nay, my mother never revealed the identity of the enchantress, not even to my father. We, like all the others in the village, thought Lilith to be kind and generous—the first to lend a helping hand to those in need." Bitterness coated her voice. "She'd invested heavily in Father's business, claiming that a cobbler of such skill should have the means to expand his business and thrive." Her face tightened as she caught Tabian's gaze. "It was only when Lilith summoned Father and me to her manor that we realized we were in the clutches of someone evil. Lilith demanded that I step in and fulfill the role that my mother escaped."

The pain in her eyes pricked his heart.

“I can’t stand the thought of losing you ... and yet, I can’t bear to lose another parent.” Her lower lip trembled. “Why does life have to be so cruel?”

He thought of Garrin. “I don’t know.” Melancholy pressed around him as he cupped her hands with his. Maybe these precious moments together were all that they would have. “Why does Lilith want the golden apples?”

“I don’t know. She forbid me from ever asking questions. I’m only to do as I’m told.” Resentment burned hot in her eyes, turning them into liquid blue flames.

“What I can’t figure out is why Lilith is keeping me a prisoner. If she wanted the amulet, why has she not already taken it?”

Regret tightened her features. “I wish I had the answers, but I don’t.” She hiccuped a laugh. “I never imagined that I would fall for a man when I was on one of Lilith’s errands.”

His eyes caressed hers. “So you fell for me right off, huh?” He loved hearing that. He’d most likely fallen for her in the garden also, but it took him longer to realize what was happening.

“I did.” A sentimental smile tugged at her lips. “To hear Father tell the story, it was the same with my mother. She fell in love with him the first time she saw him.”

He threw her a playful grin, his voice taking on a musing taunt. “So the bird fell in love with the cobbler. And the thief fell in love with the prince.”

Her cheeks flamed. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I never said I fell in love ... only that I fell for you.” She threw him a sharp look. “And if I remember correctly, you certainly don’t make a practice of acting like a prince. You’re too busy roaming the forest with Hans.”

He laughed. “I told you all of that?”

“You did, and I’ll never forget it.”

They shared a long, tender look.

Her eyes grew misty. “I’m so sorry I can’t help you escape. I just can’t run the risk of putting my father in danger.”

“I understand,” he uttered, and he meant it. “Your father is a good man.” Emotion clogged his throat. “I don’t blame you for doing all that you can to protect him. I just wish I could’ve done the same for Garrin.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

The tortured expression on her beautiful face wrenched his heart. He couldn’t give up, not when he’d just discovered this amazing, rare prize of a maiden. He wanted to explore a relationship with her. See if they could carve out their very own version of a happily ever after. “What if there was a way for me to learn how to use the amulet? Then, I could protect you and Bartholomew against Lilith.” Courage kindled inside him. His mother wouldn’t have given him the amulet unless she trusted that he could learn how to use it.

A cautious hope lit her eyes. “Do you think you could learn?”

“I can certainly try.” He made a point of looking around. “It’s not like I have anything else commanding my attention at the moment.”

She knitted her brows, a petulant pout forming over her luscious lips. “Hey.”

He laughed. She was so cute when she got irritated. “You always command my

attention.” He brought his hand up to touch her face, ignoring the annoying rattling of the chain. “You took me completely by surprise.” His voice hitched as he continued. “No matter how this turns out, I want you to know that I’m so grateful you came into my life.” His eyes locked with hers. “My rare, precious, beautiful little bird.”

She giggled. “Little? I’m the size of a hawk.”

“You get the point,” he drawled. Before he could utter another word, she lunged forward and pressed her mouth to his. A flame—hot and alive—leaped up between them. He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, giving in to the tumult of emotions she unleashed in him. In that moment, he was no longer in a damp, dark room, chained to a wall. He was soaring high and free, as surely as if he’d been given wings of his own. He responded to the insistence of her lips with an urgency of his own, wanting to live fully in this moment.

Then he felt something. The stone grew warm against his tunic. He kissed her harder, and the stone grew hotter. A surge of elation swelled through him as he pulled back, breathless. “I think I know what triggers the power of the amulet.”

“What?” she questioned, looking at the stone.

“Intense emotion.” He talked faster. “When I was being attacked, I was petrified. Especially when I heard the man say that Lilith had ordered them to kill me.”

Malice streaked through her eyes. “You have no idea how much I detest Lilith,” she seethed. “It makes me physically ill to hear all of the people in the village revering her almost to the point of worship, day in and day out.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m digressing. Tell me more about the emotions.”

He launched back in. “During our kiss, the amulet grew warm.”

A pleased expression overtook her face. “Really?”

“Really,” he chuckled. “You elicit strong emotions in me.”

A flush rose over her high cheekbones as her eyes went to his mouth. “Should we try again?”

“If we must.” He let out a dramatic sigh.

She swatted his chest, eyes sparking. “I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

Laughing, he pulled her in for another long, breathless kiss. Again, the amulet grew warm.

After the kiss, he tried tapping into his emotions. He pictured Garrin in the dungeon. He remembered how fragile and beaten-down Garrin was as he stood before the throne with his head bowed low. He let the anger flow through him—hot and unrestrained.

“It’s working,” Katerina exclaimed. He glanced down to see, but the stone went dim.

“Try again,” she encouraged.

He tried again ... again ... and again.

Until finally, he was exhausted.

He rested his head on Katerina’s shoulder. She stroked his hair and hummed soft lullabies until he gave into exhaustion and fell asleep.

THE ENCHANTRESS

The next morning, Tabian awoke to find Katerina gone. As before, she came at dusk and brought him food and water. He spent his time trying to hone his skills with the amulet. The best he was able to do was to get the bright light to blaze from it, but only momentarily.

When three days had passed, and Tabian was still chained like an animal, he went into a fit of despair and wept, knowing that he'd failed Garrin. There was no way he could get back to Verdermere in time to save him. At this point, it was doubtful that Tabian could even save himself. He could only imagine the awful state he'd be in right now if Katerina hadn't been bringing him food and water. Perhaps Lilith was keeping him here long enough to kill him, and then she'd take the amulet. A dead man couldn't expose her for being an evil enchantress.

On the morning of the fourth day, he was startled by the opening of the door. Lilith stepped in, the hem of her frock sweeping the floor with an elegance that was so out of place in the current surroundings that it made him want to laugh. When she saw him, a deep frown formed over her face. "You're hardly the picture of a man on the brink of starvation." She looked up and cursed when she saw the open window. "I see that a little birdie has been looking after you."

Hatred burned through Tabian. This enchantress had caused so much pain, not only to him but also to Katerina and her family. "What do you want?" he demanded.

She strode over to a chair, dragged it over to where he was, and lowered herself into it. She was the picture of refinement with her handsome frock, chestnut curls, and

comely features. Her curvy frame suggested that she'd settled comfortably into middle age. She had the type of face that a person could trust and everything about her radiated kindness. However, it was all a lie. A dangerous, deceptive lie.

"You want answers?" she chimed. "Let me tell you a story." He caught a flicker of what looked to be a combination of anger and greed in her expression as she looked at his amulet.

He narrowed his eyes. "If you wanted it that badly, then why didn't you just take it? Why chain me to the wall for days on end without food or water?"

"I wanted you to be weak to make the transfer easier."

A chill ran through him. Transfer? He didn't like the sound of that. "You can't just take it?"

She pushed out a short laugh, eyeing him with cruel pity. "If only you knew how to access the amulet's power, no one—not even me—could keep you chained. What do you know of the amulet?"

When he remained silent, she rolled her eyes. "So insolent," she muttered. "Very well, I'll enlighten you."

"Why bother?" He looked her in the eye. "You and I both know how this ends; I'm a dead man."

A hard smile wrapped her lips. "This explanation isn't for you, dear; it's for a little birdie who couldn't resist the temptation to eavesdrop." She made a point of looking up at the window.

Tabian's breath caught. Katerina was here? He expected her to swoop down, but she

didn't.

"I want you to hear every word of this," Lilith continued, "so you'll think twice before you ever disobey my orders again." Malice glittered in her dark eyes. "I want you to know what happened to the last person who betrayed me." She pursed her lips, her expression turning thoughtful. "Let's see ... where to begin?" She looked past Tabian as if forgetting that he was in the room. Her voice took on a wistful lilt. "Once upon a time, there were two sisters who lived with their father, a woodcutter. The girls' mother died when they were both very young. While their father was at work, the sisters would play in the forest. One day, they stumbled over something on the ground. A beautiful stone," she murmured.

She smiled, remembering. "The older sister—Lilith—was the first to discover the stone's powers. She realized that it could be used to compel others to obey her will. She tried it out on her sister and father, and they were none the wiser. Eventually, Lilith shared the news of the stone's powers with her younger sister—Isolde. The sisters spent many years learning more about the stone's powers and how to wield it."

The statement was both a relief and devastating to Tabian. While he was glad he wasn't a complete fool for not being able to figure out how to use the amulet, he didn't have years to learn how to wield it. His life would be over before the sun set on this very day. His stomach twisted at the thought. Pulling himself away from the despondence, he couldn't resist asking, "What type of powers does the amulet have?"

Lilith flinched like he'd pulled her out of her revelry.

A defeated smile spread over his mouth. "What could it hurt to tell me? You're going to kill me soon." A shudder ran through him. He didn't want to die, not when he still had so much to live for. An image of Katerina flashed before his eyes. He didn't want to lose her, not when he'd just found her. Furthermore, he detested the idea of Katerina spending the rest of her life in bondage to this horrible woman.

She lifted an eyebrow in a cold amusement. “You already know it can be used to compel others. Also, it acts as a protection against other magic.”

He already knew about the protection aspect because it had shielded him from Katerina’s enchantment in the garden—err, Lilith’s enchantment, which she’d lent to Katerina to serve her evil purpose.

She flashed an icy smile. “Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“Aye.”

She inclined her head, frowning. “Where was I?” She paused as if collecting her thoughts. “Eventually, the younger sister—Isolde—came to understand the worth of the stone. As the sisters grew up, they both wanted possession of the stone. It became such a source of contention that the woodcutter suggested the stone be taken to a gem cutter so it could be cut in half and fashioned into necklaces. The sisters agreed.”

She smirked. “Isolde had grand illusions of using the stone for the betterment of the wretched scoundrels in our village.” Disgust soured her expression. “My sister always was a na?ve fool.”

“If you think your sister was such a na?ve fool, then why do you go to such great lengths to portray yourself as a benefactor to the villagers?”

A giggle rose in her throat. She touched her lips to stifle it. “That’s my homage to Isolde.” Her eyes hardened. “A fitting tribute, wouldn’t you say?”

Tabian didn’t try to hide the condemnation in his tone. “What happened to Isolde?”

“She should’ve given me her amulet,” she hissed. “I’m the one who first discovered its powers. Had I not shared the revelation with Isolde, she never would’ve known its

true value.”

“Why didn’t you just take it from her?” He wondered how many times he would be forced to ask the same question before getting an answer.

“I tried, but Isolde blocked my attempt.”

Curiosity lilted Tabian’s voice. “How so?” It would seem that Isolde was a lot more intelligent than Lilith wished to admit.

“She put a protective spell over her amulet ... which also filtered to mine since they started out as one stone.” Her face masked into something hard and loathsome. A resentful glimmer flicked her eyes as she looked at Tabian. “Isolde helped your mother plant a tree.”

His breath caught.

“She put a protection spell over the amulet. The only way its power can be transferred to me is if you and I both drink the juice of the golden apples at the same time. Both amulets will glow and can then be transferred.”

Understanding registered. “That’s why you sent Katerina to steal the apples.”

“Even though I’ve known where the amulet was all of these years, it was a worthless piece of jewelry ... until it was given to you on your eighteenth birthday.”

He made a face. “Why?”

“Because that’s the way Isolde planned it,” she barked.

“Did you use Katerina to lure me here?” He’d thought it was so clever of him to pick

up on the clues Katerina had given him about walking on the sand and the mention of her father, a cobbler. But perhaps the whole thing was a setup.

“Nay, you coming here was happenstance.”

He frowned. “But you sent your men to kill me.”

“Because I thought you’d somehow discovered the identity of the thief who took the golden apples and had come here to capture Katerina.”

That was true.

She chuckled. “When I heard your accent and realized you were from Verdermere that evening at my birthday party, I still didn’t realize that you were the third son—the one who’d gained possession of the amulet. My plan all along was to first secure the golden apples, and then I planned to go to Verdermere to find you.” A smug smile curled her lips. “When you displayed the amulet’s powers to my men, I knew that providence had brought you to me.” She grinned. “Isolde thought she was so smart, but she lost in the end.”

“You killed her.” Tabian’s stomach roiled with the sickening knowledge that Lilith was pure evil.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Aye, I killed her,” she snarled. “I hunted her down in the forest like an animal and put an end to her miserable life.” She glared at Tabian. “You’ll soon follow the same path.” She rose to her feet and said loudly. “Katerina, I hope you heard all of that. Now you know how futile it would be to ever betray me again.” She looked at Tabian. “I’m willing to overlook this instance.” Amusement flicked over her face. “Considering that you were taken in by a handsome prince.” She drew herself up to her full height. “However, there will be no more second chances.” A feverish restlessness rustled through her eyes as she looked at the

necklace around Tabian's neck. "When I have possession of both amulets, I'll be unstoppable." She strode over to the open door and spoke to someone in the hall. "We're ready."

A hulking figure filled the entrance. The tall, burly man who'd beaten Tabian lumbered in. His expression was hard, as if ready to do some damage.

Panic fired through Tabian. Was this how it was going to end? He looked up at the open window, wishing he could see Katerina once more. She'd been wise to stay hidden from Lilith's view. Tabian wished that she and Bartholomew could somehow escape this place and Lilith's clutches.

"Is everything ready?" Lilith asked her henchman.

"Aye, mi' lady."

She tossed Tabian a cruel smile. "Normally, I would've just compelled you to obey my orders and follow me up to the top of the turret, but while you're wearing the amulet, you're protected. Hugh will have to take you."

Hugh stepped forward and used a key to release Tabian from his shackles. "If you try anything, I'll smash your pretty face."

"Haven't you already done that?" Tabian quipped, trying to stave off the panic building inside him. Hugh went behind Tabian up the narrow steps winding to the top of the turret. Several times, Tabian didn't climb fast enough to suit Hugh. The burly man shoved him hard in the back, causing Tabian to trip and fall forward, catching himself with his palms before he went down hard.

Lilith walked calmly behind them.

When they reached the top, they were assaulted by the cold bite of the wind that ripped through their hair and clothes. Tabian's heart lurched when he saw the golden liquid shimmering ominously in the cauldron—juice from the apples.

His throat tightened as he glanced off the side of the turret. "Why did you choose to do this up here?" Even as he voiced the question, he saw the answer written in Lilith's savage expression. "You're going to throw me off."

"It'll be much cleaner this way." Her voice took on a recitative quality as if she was explaining to someone what happened after the fact. "You have been my guest in the manor for the past several days. 'Twas the least I could do—to offer you shelter after that vicious attack outside the village." She pursed her lips together in mock sadness. "Pity that you came up here to look out. You slipped and fell." She sighed dramatically. "Such a shame."

His heart beat furiously against his chest. He wished there was something he could do to stop this. Tapping into the fear, he tried to rouse the amulet to life. He managed to make it glow.

Lilith smirked. "Impressive. It's a shame you don't have more time to learn how to use the amulet. Otherwise, you might've been quite powerful."

"Hold him," she ordered Hugh. "We need to both drink the juice from the apples at the same time. Only then can the transfer take place."

Hugh went to grab Tabian.

"Nay," Tabian shouted, holding the amulet out as he'd done on the night of the attack. He felt the rush of sheer power flow through his body as a wand of light blazed from the stone and struck Hugh's arm. The man cursed and jumped back. Just as Tabian was turning the amulet on Lilith, she pulled hers from the bodice of her

frock and wielded it against him. The light from her amulet was bold and blinding, pushing him back with a force he'd never before encountered. He held up his amulet as a shield, trying to fight off the assault, but his strength was quickly waning. The light he'd managed to elicit from his amulet was but a trickle compared to hers.

"Get him," Lilith screeched. "Bind his arms."

Hugh grabbed him, wrenching his arms behind his back.

Lilian lowered her amulet. Her face was crimson with rage as she reached for a wooden ladle and scooped up some juice from the cauldron. She took a long drink and then stepped over to Tabian. He fought against Hugh, but the man was too strong. "Drink the juice," Lilian growled as she forced the ladle into his mouth. It hit against his teeth as she pried his mouth open and poured in the juice. It ran down the sides of his mouth. He coughed as he struggled against the liquid. Despite his best effort to keep from swallowing, he must've done so by reflex.

"It's working," Lilith shouted with a girlish glee. She reached to snatch the amulet from his neck, but before she could, she was startled by the loud squawk of a bird. Tabian saw a blip of gold out of the corner of his eye. He didn't realize what had happened until Lilith let out a cry. "She took my amulet. Your father will pay for that with his life," she growled.

Tabian used the distraction to jab Hugh in the eye with the point of his elbow. The man grunted and released his hold. Tabian whirled around and grabbed his amulet to summon its powers. Before he could do so, he was pushed from behind. Lilith encircled his neck and tried to claw off his amulet. The two wrestled as he tried to get her off him. With a murderous expression on his face, Hugh went to charge at Tabian. In a sheer effort to free his hands to defend himself, Tabian flung Lilith away from him. She let out a shriek as she flailed her arms, face rigid with panic. Their eyes met for one brief moment before she toppled backward over the edge. Her screams were

swallowed by the wind.

Hugh's eyes went wide with shock, and then he unleashed a string of curses. Before he could lunge to do his worst, Tabian lifted the amulet. Light shot out from it and hit Hugh in the face. He fell to his knees, wailing, "My eye."

"You are a loathsome bottom-dweller," Tabian shouted to the cowering man. "I should finish you off here and now."

"Spare me," the man whimpered.

Tabian grunted. "Because I have no desire to become like Lilith ... I will spare you." He pointed his finger at the man's face. "However, you mark my words. If you ever lift a finger to hurt Katerina or her father, I—will—kill—you!" He kicked over the cauldron, sending the liquid spilling over the stones.

It was over.

He should probably feel something—relief, victory, gratitude that Katerina had saved him. Right now, however, he was numb through and through.

Taking in a heavy breath, he turned and went down the steps.

THE RETURN

As Tabian made his way to Bartholomew's shop, he hoped that Katerina might show herself, but she didn't. She'd risked her father's life to save him. His chest swelled with gratitude. More than anything, he wanted to wrap his arms around her and pull her close. A smile wound over his mouth. They could now have a future together.

When he entered the shop, he found Bartholomew waiting for him, a somber expression on his craggy face.

Tabian's heart lurched. "What's wrong? Is Katerina okay?"

"Aye, she's safe."

He let out a relieved sigh and then glanced around. "Where is she?" His voice hitched as he caught eyes with Bartholomew. "Katerina saved me."

He nodded like he already knew. "She asked me to give you these." He reached for a folded sheet of parchment with the amulet resting on top. Then, he placed the items in Tabian's hands. The cool weight of the stone rested against his palm.

"Why didn't she just give me the amulet herself?"

"Just read the letter," Bartholomew encouraged.

Without the help of the juice from the golden apples, the amulet was merely a necklace. Tabian slipped it over his head and tucked it under his tunic, where it rested

against the other amulet. He looked down at the parchment, the edges crinkling beneath his grip.

“Go ahead,” Bartholomew prompted.

Taking in a deep breath, he unfolded it.

My dearest Tabian,

I’m so glad you are well. I watched the entire thing from a nearby tree. Lilith is no more. That means that you and I are finally free.

I want you to know that I lied about something. I told you that while I fell for you the first night in the garden, it wasn’t necessarily love. That’s not true. I do love you—so much so that I was willing to risk my father’s life for you.

I know you’ll be disappointed in me, but I cannot go with you to Verdermere. Please try to understand that I’ve spent so many years in bondage to Lilith, living under her control. Never again will I let myself be a prize to be captured. I don’t want to be loved for my golden inheritance. I want to be loved for me. Completely. The same way that I love you.

I would’ve told you these things in person instead of putting them in a letter. However, I knew that if I did, I would never have the strength to let you go.

My love, I know you said that if you captured the golden bird and brought it back to Verdermere you could usher in a golden age. You don’t need me to be great. You have an uncommon strength of character, and you have the amulet. You have the power within you to accomplish anything. Never forget that.

I will miss you terribly, and I’ll never forget you.

On those days when the sun shines gold against an endless blue sky, look up and think of me, for I will always be thinking of you.

All of my love,

—K

Tabian's vision blurred as he clenched the parchment. "I need her," he uttered hoarsely. "Not because she's the golden bird. I need her for me. I love her." The truth of his words settled into the center of his heart as he choked out a laugh. "I can't believe that I'm losing her after all that we went through together. She saved me in so many ways."

Bartholomew nodded. "That's what people do for the ones they love."

Tabian looked at Bartholomew through pleading eyes. "Will I ever see her again?"

The older man's eyes grew misty. "One day—if you're lucky—a little bird will light on your window, and you'll know that you're the most blessed man to ever walk the earth."

Tears burned in Tabian's eyes. "I hope you're right. Tell her that I'll be waiting."

Gruffly, Bartholomew cleared his throat. "You should go. Hugh will blame you for Lilith's death. People will come looking for you. Your horse is tied near the public trough."

"Thank you." Their gazes held, unspoken understanding passing between them. "I hope to one day see you again."

Bartholomew nodded.

Tabian turned toward the door.

“Go with God,” Bartholomew called after him.

When Tabian got back to Verdermere, the first place he went was to the cottage. With a heavy heart, he knocked once and then opened the door. Elda was sitting at the table, kneading bread.

Her eyes popped open wide when she saw him. She sprang to her feet, rushed to him, and pulled him into a tight hug. “You’re alive,” she cried into his shoulder. “Thank the Great Creator above, you’re alive.”

“I am,” Tabian breathed, releasing a few tears of his own.

Several moments later, Elda motioned for him to sit down with her at the table. He did so, searching her face. “How are you doing?” An all-too-familiar sadness wrapped him in a tight hold. He’d been dreading this moment ever since he left Cloverfeld to come home.

A smile stretched over her lined face. “Much better now that I know you’re alive.” Her features tightened. “When you didn’t come back after two weeks, we all feared the worst.”

His stomach knotted. “I’m so sorry that I wasn’t able to save Garrin.”

The door burst open as Hans rushed in. When he saw Tabian, he bounded to his side and flung his arms around him. “I knew you were still alive,” he exclaimed. “I just knew it!”

Laughter rolled from Tabian’s throat. “Thankfully, I’m alive.” He pulled back and ruffled Hans’s hair.

“That’s very good news,” a man said.

Tabian looked up, thinking his eyes were deceiving him. “Garrin?” he uttered. “H—how?” Tears rolled down his cheeks as he rose to his feet and embraced Garrin in a tight hug. When they pulled apart, Tabian shook his head. “How?” he asked again.

“I think that question is best answered by your father,” Garrin answered as he looked at Elda, silent communication passing between them.

“What’s going on?” Tabian questioned.

Elda was the first to answer. “As I said, when you didn’t return home, we all feared the worst. Your father was so distraught—believing that he’d sent you to your death—that he fell ill. He’s very sick.” Her expression turned grave. “Some have said that he’s on his deathbed.”

Tabian wasn’t sure how to think or feel about the news.

Garrin placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “You should go and see him right away.”

Tabian took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll go now.”

Garrin nodded his approval.

He turned to the older man and grabbed him in another hug. He inhaled his earthy scent, marveling that Garrin was alive.

If only Katerina were here, she would be overjoyed that Garrin hadn’t died because of her. His heart clutched, a dull ache throbbing through his body. He missed her so badly that it hurt.

“Don’t dawdle,” Elda shushed. “Go and talk to your father.” She threw him an encouraging smile. “You can come back later this evening and tell us all about your travels.”

In many ways, it seemed like it was a lifetime ago when he’d struck out in search of the golden bird. He was a different person now. More confident and capable with a greater capacity to love.

And now, there was a gaping hole in his heart that might never be filled.

Tabian was ushered into his father’s chambers by a servant. Tentatively, he approached the bed where Father was sleeping. The air was thick with the scent of herbs and sickness. Tabian fixed his gaze on the frail figure lying in the bed. The paleness of his face was alarming. “Father,” Tabian began, touching his hand. “I’m home.”

Father’s lashes fluttered. He stirred and then opened his eyes with a low moan. When he saw Tabian, his eyes immediately filled with tears. “You’re alive,” he rasped.

“I am,” Tabian chuckled. “Barely.”

A strangled laugh rattled from Father’s throat, but it quickly dissolved into a choked sob. “Praise be to the Great Creator,” he uttered, glancing up at the ceiling. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Tabian blinked. “I didn’t know that you cared what happened to me.”

Tears dribbled down Father’s cheeks as his lower lips trembled. “I’m so sorry.” A sob wrenched his throat. “I was hurting so much when your mother died ...” Regret twisted his face. “I never should’ve blamed you for her death. Can you ever forgive me?” He looked at Tabian with pleading eyes.

“Of course,” Tabian answered, surprised at how easily the words had come. Perhaps facing his own mortality had given him a new perspective on life. Or perhaps having found a love only to lose it made him more tender. Or perhaps he was simply ready to let go of the bitterness.

Relief washed over Father’s expression. “Thank you. Sit down,” he encouraged, “so we can talk.”

Tabian pulled a chair closer to the bedside and settled into it.

“Help me sit up,” Father directed.

Grabbing a pillow, Tabian carefully propped him up, surprised by the color returning to Father’s cheeks. He could almost see the vitality being restored ... or perhaps it was wishful thinking.

His stomach tightened. “Are you going to die?”

Father thrust out his jaw. “Nay, not anytime soon.” His voice took on a renewed strength. “Now that you’re back, I plan to live a long time.”

“That’s good,” Tabian said and meant it with all of his heart. “Tell me what happened to Garrin,” he implored. His throat thickened as he swallowed. “I thought I’d come home to find him dead.”

Regret shadowed Father’s eyes. His chest rose as he took in a deep breath. “When your mother told me that it was your mission to go and retrieve the golden bird, she stipulated that I must give you a valid reason to go—a reason that would test you to the brink so you could find out what you were made of.”

He bunched his brows. “You were never going to execute Garrin?”

Father's eyes held a hint of reproof. "What justice would there have been in that?"

"Exactly," Tabian exclaimed, flinging his hands into the air.

A hint of a smile touched Father's lips. "I released him the morning you left on the quest and explained to him the whole situation."

The weight of Father's words settled in. It was more than a little annoying to know that he'd been fretting over saving Garrin this whole time when there was no real danger. On the other hand, how could he fault Father when he was only trying to honor Mother's request? His mind raced. "Why did I need to be tested?"

Father reached out and patted his hand. "All in good time." Eagerness lit his eyes. "Did you bring back the golden bird?"

"Nay." Disappointment clutched Tabian in a tight fist. Not because he failed to bring home the golden bird but because of the one precious thing that he'd lost—Katerina.

Father swallowed hard as if coming to terms with the situation. "'Tis okay," he said with solemn resignation. "The important thing is that you're alive." He settled back against the pillows. "Now, tell me everything that happened on your trip, sparing no details."

Tabian saw no reason to withhold the truth from Father, so he told him everything, even the part about losing Katerina.

"I'm sorry," Father uttered with a note of sympathy. "You must be hurting."

A lump formed in Tabian's throat as he nodded. "She's the love of my life. I don't know how I'll ever be whole again without her." Would the pain of losing Katerina ever diminish? He certainly hoped so because right now, it was ripping his insides

apart. He forged on, telling Father about the amulet.

Excitement kindled in Father's voice. "Do you have it with you?"

"Aye, both of them. Although only one works at the moment." He explained all that he knew about the juice from the golden apples. "I'm not sure if drinking more juice will help activate the amulet. I guess the only way we'll know is to try it."

"Can I see it?" Father asked eagerly.

Tabian pulled both amulets from his tunic. He leaned forward so that Father could observe and touch the stones.

"I can't believe that Elda had something like this in her possession all of those years—just waiting to give it to you."

An edge slipped into his tone. "Don't be angry with her, Father."

"I won't." His smile was so tender that it had Tabian wondering how Father could've changed so much during the relatively short period of time when he was gone. "I owe Garrin and Elda a great deal for looking after you," Father added.

Tabian wondered if he should voice his next words but decided it was best to get everything out in the open, once and for all. "Why the change of heart? You've hardly given me a second look for most of my life." His insides tightened. "And when you did look at me, all I could see was resentment and pain."

Father took in a long breath. "I know," he admitted. "I've been selfish. I let my grief consume me." His voice caught, and he coughed to clear the emotion. "When you didn't return on schedule, I knew that it was because something terrible had happened. You see, I know how much you love Garrin. I knew you would do

everything in your power—move heaven and earth if necessary—in order to get back here in time to save him.” He hesitated, making a gurgling sound as he tried to contain his emotions. “Because Garrin has been the father to you that I couldn’t. I thought you had died ... that I would never get the chance to tell you how sorry I am.” He worked his throat up and down. “To tell you that I love you.”

It was Tabian’s turn to go teary-eyed. For so long, he’d longed to hear those words. And now? “Thank you, Father,” was all he could manage. With time, he hoped to be able to repair their relationship and develop a love for his father. At least this was a start.

Father’s voice took on the authoritative tone of his royal mantle. “Two weeks from today, I’ll hold a court assembly where I’ll give a proclamation announcing that my youngest son has returned with honor.”

“But I didn’t bring back the golden bird.”

He continued as if Tabian hadn’t voiced a protest. “At that time, I’ll share Zyrella’s final request with you and the members of the royal court.” He locked eyes with Tabian. “A request I fully intend to honor.”

THE GOLDEN BIRD

It had been two long, torturous weeks without Katerina. Tabian tried to keep himself busy by exploring the forest with Hans as often as his busy schedule allowed. Tabian had assumed his life would go back to how it had been before he left. However, it wasn't so. Father announced that since Tabian had come into adulthood, it was no longer necessary for him to have tutors.

Furthermore, ever since he'd gotten back to the castle, Father had taken a special interest in him. Tabian had expected him to remain in bed for at least a few more days, but Father was up and going—as energetic as he'd ever been. It would seem that his malady was purely emotional, brought on by his fear that Tabian had died.

Father spent a great deal of time tutoring Tabian on the history of Verdermere as well as explaining in lengthy detail the daily operations of the kingdom. He'd even asked Tabian to attend a royal council meeting, which didn't sit well with Alistair and Lucien. However, they acted coolly polite toward Tabian in order to pacify Father.

To Tabian's surprise, he actually enjoyed learning about the governing affairs of the kingdom. He had a knack for taking in a large number of facts and then organizing the information in a way that allowed him to make intelligent decisions. In the royal council meeting, he'd worked up the nerve to voice his opinion regarding the border security issue and the ever-present threat of Willamen on the kingdom. Rather than constantly living in fear of an impending attack, Tabian suggested that a diplomat be sent to Willamen with the intent of working out an arrangement where both kingdoms could have ample access to the Strait of Veligara for the purpose of trade.

He was amazed at the positive response to his comment. In fact, for the rest of the council meeting, the members discussed possible candidates who could fill the position of a diplomat. Afterward, Father and Alistair pulled him aside and thanked him for his insight.

Last night, Father had asked Tabian to dine with the family for the evening meal. He'd reluctantly done so. The experience was a bit uncomfortable at first. But as the evening wore on, Tabian actually found himself enjoying the company. Alistair was an expert in the strategy of war. When he spoke of various men who served in the army, it was apparent that he knew them by name and cared for their welfare. Tabian had never seen this side of Alistair. He'd always found his oldest brother to be too austere, but he could see how this quality could be useful, especially when it came to military affairs.

Lucien, always the charmer, told several jokes and had everyone laughing, especially Alistair's young daughter, Rosamund. A month ago, Tabian had been so incensed over Arabella choosing Lucien over him that he could barely see straight. It occurred to him that he no longer cared whom Lucien courted, for his heart lay elsewhere.

Father asked Tabian to share portions of his travels with the family. They sat in rapt attention as he described his harrowing experience when he was chained to a wall and left to perish without food or water for several days. He told them how Katerina—his rare, precious, beautiful little bird—had saved him. As he spoke of Katerina, he couldn't stop his eyes from going moist. He felt his father watching him with a thoughtful expression.

Tabian could hardly believe how drastically life at the castle had improved. Looking back and reflecting on the past, he wondered if perhaps he was partly to blame for his strained relationship with his family. He'd been so frustrated and hurt that they were unfairly casting judgment on him that he'd distanced himself, further compounding the situation. Had he stood up to his brothers sooner and taken his rightful place in

the family, it was quite possible that many of the grievances could've been resolved much earlier.

Of course, it was easy to see all of this from his new and enlightened point of view. He was just grateful that his relationship with his family was improving. Hopefully, with time, he might even be able to grow close to his brothers.

Today, Father would hold the court assembly announcing Tabian's return. Also, Father was going to share Mother's final request. Tabian couldn't imagine what that request could be, but he was anxious to hear it.

Realizing the importance of the event, Tabian did something out of character for him. He allowed a servant to dress him in royal attire. Elda was the one who urged Tabian to make sure that he was dressed appropriately for the announcement. "Your father is making a great effort to include you in his world," she'd said. "You need to also make an effort to fit in."

Taking Elda's advice to heart, Tabian was dressed finer than he'd ever been. He stood with his shoulders erect and head held high as he waited alongside his brothers for Father to make an entrance and take his spot on the throne. Feeling eyes on him, Tabian glanced over to the section where high-ranking members of the court sat with their families. Arabella was studying him. When they caught eyes, she gave him a hopeful smile. For a brief moment, Tabian thought the gesture might've been meant for Lucien, who was beside him. However, Arabella's smile grew wider, and she waved when she realized that he'd noticed her.

He offered her a polite nod in response, grateful that he no longer felt any sort of romantic sentiment toward her. Arabella used him to get to Lucien. She was not the person he thought she was. He realized now that he'd never truly loved Arabella. Rather, he'd been more enthralled with the idea of being in love.

His heart clutched. Now that he'd actually found love, he recognized the stark difference between real love and a fleeting infatuation. An overwhelming longing went through him. Being apart from Katerina was torture. Last night, as he was lying in bed, he wondered if he should just go back to Cloverfeld and beg her to come back to Verdermere with him. Surely, she had to recognize that he loved her as much as she loved him. She wasn't merely a prize to be won or captured.

A trumpet fanfare interrupted his thoughts. Father entered the room from one of the side passageways and took his position on the throne. His gaze briefly flickered over Tabian before he shifted his focus to the crowd.

"Honored members of the Royal Court," Father began, "I called this assembly to make an important announcement."

As if on cue, a servant with a stiff, formal gait carried Father's scepter to the throne and ceremoniously handed it to him. With a nod of thanks, Father rested the scepter across his lap. "Tabian Warwyk, approach the throne."

His stomach tightening, Tabian did so, making sure to keep his posture erect. While things were getting much better with his family, he was still sorely out of place in this type of setting.

The King began in a loud tone, "Several weeks ago, at my request, my youngest son left on a quest to retrieve a golden bird."

Murmurs rustled through the room as people started talking amongst themselves.

Father held up a hand to silence the crowd. When the noise ceased, he looked at Tabian, his eyes holding some crucial meaning that Tabian couldn't discern. "My late wife Zyrella spoke of this bird. She said a golden bird of rare beauty would one day come and nest in the branches of her enchanted tree. That it would be a treasure to

our kingdom, even more so than the tree has been. Zyrella foretold that the bird's presence would help restore equity and balance. That it would usher in a golden age of the kingdom."

Tabian's heart wrenched, wondering where Father was going with this. Never had he felt the sting of failure so acutely as he did in this moment. If only Katerina were here. If only she could understand how valued she would be, not only by the King but also by the citizens of Verdermere ... how valued and loved she would be by him.

"Before she died, Zyrella made one final request of deep significance." Father paused, working his throat to contain his emotion. He sat up taller on the throne, his voice ringing with authority. "As I told Tabian the night he came back to the castle, I fully intend to honor this request." He looked around the room, his eyes resting on Alistair and Lucien. His voice cut through the air with steely authority. "As your King, you will be under the express obligation to honor this decree without question." With a flair of ceremony, he raised his scepter. "I, King Roderick Warwyk the Second, do hereby declare my son Tabian Warwyk to be The Crown Prince. He will one day ascend to the throne."

The words rushed over Tabian in a tidal wave that made him weak in the knees. Him ... the next king? He didn't know whether to break into a fit of tears or peals of hysterical laughter. He was the least of his brothers, and yet their mother, for some strange reason, deemed him to be the greatest. Did he have it in him to be king? The instant the question ran through his mind, a peaceful feeling of calm came over him as sweet and pure as a summer's day. He felt the amulet glow warm against his skin and knew that, somehow, he would be given help to fulfill his destiny. He lifted his eyes to Father, who gave him a regal nod of respectful acknowledgment. Then his gaze moved to Alistair and Lucien, who looked as stunned as Tabian.

"Did he bring back the golden bird?" a nobleman asked from behind, his voice coated with hope.

“Let us see it,” another man requested.

Tabian closed his eyes. This is where things would go awry.

“Tabian?” Father prompted. “Would you like to answer that question?”

Tabian’s eyes snapped open. So, Father expected him to tell everyone that he’d failed? Was that a glimmer of amusement in Father’s eyes? He had no idea what was happening.

He steeled his shoulders, trying to figure out what to say, his heart slamming against his ribs. Before he could utter a single word, he heard the whisper of a song. The voice was at once familiar—a balm for not only his ears but also his heart. Tears rushed to his eyes. The volume increased as the notes swelled through the air and embraced the listeners in a captive bliss of perfection.

Hearing ripples of awe, Tabian turned to see a streak of gold coming in his direction. He smiled through his tears as the bird swooped down with a graceful line and rested on his shoulder. With a trembling hand, Tabian reached up and stroked her silky feathers. “You came back to me,” he uttered, hardly able to believe it.

A proud smile filled Father’s face as he motioned. “As you can see, Zyrella’s words have been fulfilled.” His expression turned joyous. “Long live the golden bird. May she remain here with us for as long as she desires—as our most honored and revered guest.” He lifted his scepter high in the air, his voice loud and clear as he proclaimed, “Let the golden age begin.”

A few moments later, at the King’s request, a guard escorted Tabian and the bird to the Council Chamber—a smaller, more intimate space where they could interact with a few of the King’s most trusted advisors. Alistair and Lucien joined the group, as well as Arabella, who accompanied her father. The bird remained dutifully perched

on Tabian's shoulder as people crowded around to get a closer look.

"How did you manage to track down such a rare, exquisite creature?" a nobleman asked with a trace of awe.

"She likes to walk on the sand, and she has very nice slippers." Tabian laughed at his joke.

The expressions around him reflected bewilderment as they looked at one another.

"So it's a female?" a man asked.

"Indeed," Tabian answered, smiling broadly.

Tabian fielded more questions until Father finally ordered everyone to step back and give Tabian and his bird some space.

"You certainly caused quite the commotion," Tabian quipped under his breath. "I hope this is not indicative of what's to come—you being surrounded by adoring admirers—because I can't wait to get you all to myself." He reached up and stroked her feathers, his throat thickening. "I still can't believe you came back to me. You have no idea how much I missed you."

Arabella stepped up to him. "Hello," she began with a dazzling smile. "I'm so glad you're back."

This was the first time he'd spoken to her since he came home. He wasn't necessarily trying to avoid her but she just didn't rank high on the list of people he wished to see.

Her large, brown eyes darkened with regret. "About what happened with Lucien," she said in a low tone. "It meant nothing. You're the one I want."

It occurred to Tabian that Arabella was still just as beautiful as ever with her rosy cheeks, slim nose, and delicate features. However, she no longer held any allure. In fact, he saw her for what she was—an opportunist. He kept his voice casual and musing. “You only had eyes for Lucien when I left. What changed your mind?”

She blinked her long lashes several times. “It wasn’t the same when you were gone,” she pouted and then stepped closer. “I suppose it took you going away for me to realize what I’d lost.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t my newly appointed position as Crown Prince that helped change your mind?”

He heard her soft gasp as she rocked back, her lower lip trembling like she’d been sorely wounded. “How could you say something so cruel?” Her eyes turned misty.

He watched her antics, feeling curiously detached from the situation.

Her expression faltered like she wasn’t sure how to react since he wasn’t falling for her wounded act. “I’m so proud of you,” she cooed. A crafty smile curved her ruby lips. “I knew you had it in you to become something more. Didn’t I always tell you that?”

He just looked at her.

Her voice turned silky smooth. “Listen, I’d love to have some private time with you so we could clear up any misunderstandings.” She gave him a seductive look as she absently fingered the jeweled clasp on his cloak. “I’m more than willing to fulfill any request you might have, Sire,” she finished with a demure smile.

A loud squawk caused Arabella to jump. Irritation flicked in her eyes. “I can’t believe you brought back a gold bird, of all things.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t hate me

for saying this, but I really don't see what all the commotion is about. It's a bird, after all." She paused, studying it. "But it is made of gold, so that's something. Its feathers are so shiny." She went to touch one and then snatched her hand back. "The creature tried to bite me," she exclaimed in dismay.

The edges of his lips twitched. "She can be a bit temperamental when she wants to be."

The bird squawked again as he laughed. "She definitely has a bite, and she certainly keeps me in line. I suppose that's why I love her so much," he finished fervently.

Arabella creased her brows. "You speak as though it's a person." She looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"She is a person," he countered. "The most important person to me in the world." His voice hitched. "She's my everything. I just want her to know that I'm desperately in love with her, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to prove myself worthy of her."

With that, the bird leaped from his shoulder onto the floor, causing Arabella to jump back with a squeal. All eyes in the room homed in on the bird as she flapped her wings and turned, transforming into her human form. Katerina was wearing a sapphire blue gown that matched her eyes, her golden hair haloed around her exquisite face. She was a vision—the one sight his eyes had been craving ever since he left her side. He noticed that she no longer wore a sling. Good, that meant she was healing.

A large, exuberant smile spread over Tabian's mouth. "There you are." He reached and encircled her waist, pulling her close. "I love you," he murmured, soaking in the details of her face.

"I love you too," she uttered with deep significance as she peered up into his eyes.

“Thanks for coming back to me.”

She turned and glanced at the King. “You can thank your father for that. He sent a messenger to deliver a letter that he wrote, telling me how absolutely miserable you were without me.” Her eyes deepened with emotion. “He also told me that Garrin is alive. I’m so glad.”

“Me too,” he breathed. Happiness bubbled in his chest as a large grin filled his face. “Father’s the one who brought you back to me?”

She nodded.

“I guess I owe him a great deal.” His father was certainly full of surprises. “And in case you’re wondering, my father was so right.” Intensity pressed through him, coming out in a breathy huff. “The past two weeks have been absolutely miserable, and I never want to be without you again.”

Smiling, she continued, “I hope you don’t mind that I brought along a traveling companion. Your father mentioned that he was in dire need of an expert cobbler who promised to make a certain pair of shoes for his youngest son’s fiancée.”

He caressed her cheek, giving her a meaningful look. “Well, now that my fiancée is here—and seeing that she has a close connection to said cobbler—she can design the shoes herself.”

A chuckle sounded in her throat as she lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Prince. You haven’t yet asked for my hand in marriage.”

He laughed. “Not yet, but there’ll be plenty of time for that.” They shared a smile.

Mischief danced in her eyes. “Well, Prince Tabian, it looks like you did the

impossible—you managed to capture the golden bird, after all.”

“Nay, for it was she who captured me.” He pulled her in for a tender kiss as applause broke out around them. The noise quickly got drowned out by the jubilant beating of his grateful heart.

The golden bird had come back to him.

And this time, he would never let her go.

Look for *Clever* , the next book in the *Fairytales Retold Series*. Coming soon!

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Once upon a time, it all started here ...

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Sacrifice is the price we pay for peace in our village. Wisteria couldn't count the number of times she'd heard her mother voice those words. They were especially meaningful because Wisteria and her mother knew firsthand the anguish that had come from Father sacrificing his life to the dragon so that others would live. Even though the event happened a decade ago, it was burned into Wisteria's mind, and she could recall it as clearly as if it had happened only yesterday.

She was a child of only seven years. Their village, Florin, was on the brink of destruction from the vengeance of the dreaded dragon that terrorized the skies and breathed down fire and destruction on all who were in its path. Her father, known for his fair-mindedness and foolhardy courage, traveled to the lair of the dragon and crafted a treaty—he would give his life on the condition that the villagers be spared. The dragon wasn't satisfied with merely taking her father's life. Rather, it wanted to instill fear in the hearts of all with the sound of its terrible screeching.

And so it was.

From that time henceforth, the ritual was set. On the eve of the summer solstice, one villager would be sacrificed to the dragon in the center of the public square for all to witness. Attendance at the ritual was mandatory. Wisteria and her mother had been forced to watch as the dragon ripped her father to pieces with its vicious claws. The deed was so effortless to the dragon that it might've been breaking bread. Wisteria wept frantic tears, but her mother had endured the horror with a stoic countenance that garnered respect from her fellow villagers. Only later, when they were back home, did Eleanor completely fall apart.

Some years, the dragon would repeat this same process, ripping the tribute asunder.

Other times, it took a more lackadaisical approach and breathed down a river of fire that consumed the victim in a fiery flash.

The approaching solstice filled Wisteria with a quiet terror that rattled her insides. It was always the same. Every year around this time, the trauma would start and wouldn't abate until after an unlucky soul was sacrificed. Her father's treaty—though well intended—had bred in Wisteria a fear that grew inside her like a ravenous wolf, threatening to devour her insides.

She lived in dread that she or her beloved mother, her only friend in the world, would be selected by the Village Council as the dragon's next victim. The Council claimed it picked the victims at random. However, the system allowed a place for the dark side of human nature to breed unchecked. Too much power could canker a person's soul, as evidenced by the decisions of the Council. They used the yearly tribute as a way to get revenge on those who'd offered an offense—be it large or small. Or perhaps it was envy or greed that prompted the verdict.

When Father was still alive, his skill as a scribe—drafting legal documents, keeping records for the nobles, compiling manuscripts for the clergy—kept the family comfortable. However, when he died, Eleanor harnessed her extensive knowledge of herbs and became a healer and midwife out of necessity to provide for herself and her only daughter.

Even though Eleanor assured Wisteria that her valuable skills would keep them both safe from the dragon, Wisteria couldn't quiet the rumblings of worry in her gut.

Low moans issuing from the cracked lips of the girl writhing on the bed drew Wisteria's attention.

"Shh," Eleanor soothed, blotting the girl's forehead with a damp cloth.

The girl clutched the linen sheet, winding it around her fists as her thin face contorted

in pain. She'd been in labor ever since the cock crowed. Wisteria peered through the latticed panes of the window, observing the dense ceiling of the gray sky. Even though the steady rain prevented her from observing the setting sun, she knew it would happen soon. And there was still no baby. The stench of desperation and other bodily fluids permeated the stale air of the stone room.

A cry of desperation ripped through the girl's throat. "Why is it not coming?"

Eleanor touched the girl's skinny arm—so fragile that it could be cracked like a twig with the slightest amount of pressure. "Try to relax."

Wisteria marveled at the tenacity of her kind and compassionate mother. The lines around her eyes and mouth spoke of her exhaustion, and a layer of perspiration coated her high forehead and turned the hair close to her skin to ringlets. However, she'd not left the girl's side since they arrived, tirelessly attending to her every need.

This was a commendable stance, considering that the girl and her babe were scorned because of the girl's unwed condition. Wisteria shuddered to think what would happen to them after the babe was born. Would the Headman and his wife allow them to stay here, or would they be cast onto the streets? Wisteria had caught enough whispers of gossip passing amongst the women of the village to know that the girl was an orphan—completely alone.

Around Wisteria's same age, the girl was a housekeeper in the grand home of the Village Headman. He was middle-aged and portly with a wide girth and jowls. His thin mustache twitched when he spoke, and he observed everything through dark, squinty eyes. The Headman was second in command to the Baron who resided in the manor atop the ridge. While Eleanor was outwardly congenial to everyone, Wisteria sensed that her mother didn't much care for the self-important Village Headman or his haughty wife. The couple didn't strike Wisteria as the type who would show mercy to a careless girl who had been foolish enough to get herself in trouble. Maybe the girl could plead her case to the Baron. He had a jovial nature and was known for

showing kindness to the subjects under his care.

Wisteria squinched her face. Nay, that wouldn't work. She'd overheard Mother speaking to the baker about how the Baron's mind was slipping in his old age. He'd been confined to his manor for several months and had turned over the day-to-day management of the village to the Headman—a situation that wasn't boding well for the townsfolk. The Village Headman took a rigid stance on issues, rarely showing compassion to those who erred.

Why had the girl allowed this to happen? She had to have known the consequences that would follow her actions. No one knew the identity of the father, and the girl wasn't talking. It would seem that she was determined to face the condemnation of the village alone. The fact that she resided at the Village Headman's home would surely exacerbate the situation. He and his wife would be humiliated that one of their servants had brought shame to their household.

Eleanor's lips drew into tight lines as she caught eyes with Wisteria. No words were needed to convey the message that her mother was concerned. Even now, with her disheveled dark hair threaded with silver and wearing a simple frock, Eleanor de Avalonia was an attractive woman. When Wisteria was but a child, her mother had been radiantly beautiful. Laughter and smiles came easily. Eleanor's zest for life was infectious as she shared her joy of living with all who knew her.

After Father was killed, everything changed. Mother stopped laughing. Her expression grew somber, her eyes taking on a hollow appearance. Slowly, her beauty began to fade the way an oft-used chair eventually goes threadbare.

"What can I do to help?" Wisteria asked hoarsely. While she didn't want any evil to befall the girl or her unborn child, Wisteria's primary concern was for her mother. For Mother, she would go to the edge of the earth and back.

Arising from her seated position beside the bed, Eleanor stepped up to Wisteria and

caught hold of her hands. She looked her daughter in the eyes. “I need you to go on an errand.”

“Of course,” Wisteria answered readily.

Eleanor glanced around as if fearing the walls had ears. She leaned close and uttered in a low tone, “Go to the forest and pay a visit to the old crone.”

Wisteria stiffened. “Nay, you forbade me from ever going there again.” Many times, Wisteria had been tempted to break her promise and steal away to visit the crone. However, above all else, she wanted to honor her mother’s trust.

Rumors of the old crone practicing magic had been floating around for as long as Wisteria could remember. Of course, Wisteria knew firsthand that the rumors were true, but she would never disclose this to her mother. For if she did so, Wisteria would be forced to admit that she was also guilty of dabbling in magic—a practice that was not only outlawed, but punishable by death.

“These are desperate times.” Eleanor glanced at the girl. “Tell the crone that the babe is turned the wrong way. I need her to give me something that will help Alice relax.”

Alice. The girl now had a name. Strange that Wisteria hadn’t thought to ask earlier. Maybe it was because it was easier to think of her as a random girl rather than a person of merit with feelings and hope for the future. Life could be so cruel. Even in her short lifetime, Wisteria had seen far too many people suffer from violent deaths. Watching the travail of this unfortunate girl—Alice—it was painfully apparent that birth was just as traumatic, especially when everything was going so terribly wrong.

Alice thrashed in the bed, groaning. Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession from her shallow breathing. She shrieked in agony as she clutched her swollen stomach.

“Hurry,” Eleanor admonished, “I don’t know how much longer she can last.”

That's all it took for Wisteria's feet to quicken. She left the room and hurried down the long corridor. While she didn't relish the idea of venturing out into the pouring rain, she couldn't deny that she was excited at the prospect of seeing the old crone again. Her abilities were growing stronger. The crone would be pleased.

Wisteria turned a corner to bolt down the staircase leading to the front door when someone stepped in front of her. She stopped in her tracks to keep from running the person over. Her eyes widened as she lowered her head in deference. "Goodman Webster, pardon me." He loomed over her, his closeness disconcerting. The scent of pork lingered on his breath. She took a step back to distance herself from him, trying not to wince at his unpleasant odor. "My mother sent me on an errand, and I must go at once." She moved to dodge around him, but he caught hold of her arm with his meaty, cleaver-like hand.

"No need to be in a rush," he said pleasantly, his thin mustache wiggling like a worm. "I prithee, what is your name?"

Delicately, so as not to offend, she removed her arm from his grasp. "Wisteria de Avalonia." Why did the master of the house concern himself with her? She thought of Alice and how not only her life but also the life of an unborn child was hanging by a thread. There was no time to waste. But yet, it wouldn't be wise to be terse with the Village Headman.

Recognition flashed in his bovine eyes. "You're the daughter of Cedric de Avalonia," he surmised with a trace of admiration.

She straightened her shoulders with a burst of pride. "Aye."

He looked her over with a brazenness that made her skin crawl. "Long, raven hair thick like a curtain and bewitching violet eyes ablaze with the flame of youth. A work of perfection," he murmured to himself, his gaze lingering on her chest. She was disgusted by the flicker of lust in his eyes. He looked as if he wanted to devour her as

he'd obviously recently done to the pork.

"I may soon find myself in need of a housekeeper," he said in a throaty tone that reeked of innuendo. "I must insist that you fill the position."

Disgust twisted her stomach. As if he could simply speak the words and deem it so. Her assessment of the man had been correct. He was so quick to throw Alice and her babe onto the street. And while the poor girl lay on the brink of death in his house, he was taking undue liberties with a maiden young enough to be his daughter. Wisteria had never known the ways of men, and she certainly didn't intend to succumb to the advances of this repugnant swine, regardless of how powerful he was in the governing matters of Florin.

Rage burned through her with the intensity of the noonday sun. Tingles started in her hands and pulsed to her fingertips, demanding to be released. She'd never used her abilities to hurt another soul, but she considered doing so now. At the very least, she could have this horrible man quaking in his boots. Her indignation demanded swift satisfaction.

Then she thought of her mother and the turmoil it would bring if Wisteria were to be caught using her powers. Their entire world would topple. She balled her hands into fists and pressed them tightly against her sides. It took all the willpower she could muster to squelch the temptation to teach Goodman Webster a lesson he wouldn't soon forget.

"Forgive me, but I must go." Quick as a flash, she darted around him and fled down the staircase, not looking back.

It was only when she stepped outside into the pouring rain that her temper began to cool. She'd not thought to grab a cloak when leaving home at the break of dawn when she and her mother were summoned to attend to Alice. No matter. The rain was calming against her hot cheeks. She took in a deep breath as she crossed the

cobblestone road with nimble steps. This section of the village was normally bustling with peddlers selling their wares, but there wasn't another soul in sight. One benefit of the rain was that Wisteria wouldn't have to worry about being followed to the old crone's dwelling.

So familiar was the trek that her mind wandered as her feet kept a swift pace. Ever since Wisteria was a child, her mother had paid visits to the crone who dwelled in a shack in the forest. The woman was wise and had a knack for developing unique remedies upon which Eleanor had come to rely for the use of her clients over the years. It was the old crone who first noticed that there was something special about Wisteria—something that she'd tried to keep hidden from her parents and especially the villagers.

Stirrings of some unseen power had always existed inside of Wisteria, only she didn't have a name for it. All she knew was that she was different from everyone else. As she matured, the power manifested itself in a tingling that spread through her fingers. The tingling mounted until she was desperate for a release. That release came one day when her mother scolded her for disobedience and took away her favorite cloth doll as a punishment. Eleanor set it high on a shelf where Wisteria couldn't reach it and then went outside to do her chores. On instinct, Wisteria reached out her hand and commanded the doll to come to her. It hadn't come, but it had moved as surely as if Wisteria had touched it.

Something exalted inside of Wisteria, giving her a feeling that she was rediscovering some long-forgotten part of herself. She made a practice of trying to move inanimate objects with the motions of her fingers, but to no avail. Eventually, she wondered if she'd only imagined that the doll moved. Or perhaps it had moved by coincidence.

Around that same time, Wisteria accompanied her mother to visit the old crone in the forest as she'd done many times before. This time, however, the crone took one look at her and somehow knew that Wisteria was different.

The old crone casually mentioned that she would like to tutor Wisteria in the ways of herbal remedies so she could follow in her mother's footsteps. Realizing that the old crone was a master at her craft, Mother readily agreed. This began a pattern of weekly visits that hadn't been broken until six months ago when rumblings from the townsfolk spooked her mother.

"I've heard rumors that the old crone is practicing magic," Mother had said. "It's unwise for you to keep going there. I can teach you everything else you need to know."

While Wisteria wanted to raise a protest, she understood where Mother was coming from. Neither of them wanted to draw undue attention to themselves, especially the closer they drew to the summer solstice. Mother especially didn't want Wisteria to associate with anyone suspected of practicing magic. A shudder ran through Wisteria. Mother would be devastated if she knew that Wisteria was not only practicing magic but was quite good at it.

It was unfair that something so intrinsic to her identity should be outlawed. Singing had always come as easily to Wisteria as breathing. She couldn't imagine not being able to use her voice to release the music that was inside of her. As her powers steadily increased, she was starting to feel the same way about magic.

When she reached the edge of the forest, the rain finally stopped. Hugging her arms, Wisteria peered up at the leaden sky, grateful for a reprieve from the cold rain. As she entered the forest, she was taken aback by the shiver of foreboding that slinked down her spine. She glanced around at the dense foliage and dark, wet trees crowding around her. Where had the unease come from? While others feared to venture into the forest in the evenings, Wisteria was more at home here than when in the midst of the village. There were certainly plenty of dangerous predators lurking about in the shadows, but in Wisteria's experience, it was the two-legged beasts in the village that could cause the greatest harm. An image of Goodman Webster flashed through her mind, stabbing her through the center with a sharp dagger of anger. Oh, how she

wished she could've taught him a lesson. Tingles buzzed through her fingers again.

The air was thick with a danger she couldn't pinpoint. Or maybe her imagination was running wild. She always got anxious in the days leading up to the summer solstice. And it didn't help to see Alice—close to her same age—in such a terrible state.

As she made her way through the forest, Wisteria tuned her senses to the sights, sounds, and smells around her. The wet bark from the trees had a musty, nutty scent. She listened to the cacophony of chirping insects. A moment later, the noise was broken by the intermittent squawk of a bird.

The hair on her arms rose. Something wasn't right.

She paused in her tracks as her heart picked up its pace. Nothing sounded amiss. And yet, she again got the distinct impression of impending danger. It was an awareness that seeped into her bones, filling her with a certainty she didn't fully understand. Some part of her was awakening, and she wasn't ready for the repercussions. Her wet body shivered as she rubbed her arms. Should she turn and go back? Nay, not without the remedy. Mother was counting on her. She couldn't go back empty-handed. Thankfully, she wasn't far from the old crone's dwelling.

She quickened her pace to get to her destination. She spotted the familiar outline of the crone's thatched roof and then caught movement out of the corner of her eye. She whipped around to see a spider the size of a boar crawling towards her. Nay, not one, but several. She looked around wildly, realizing that they had her surrounded. A paralyzing terror overtook her as she stared into the beady eyes of the vicious creature directly in front of her, baring its jagged fangs as it prepared to attack. She'd heard of monster spiders but thought they were a thing of fables. Wisteria was petrified of spiders. It was as if someone had seen inside her mind and crafted the one menace that would surely be her undoing.

She let out a shriek when the spider to her right jumped. Out of self-preservation, she

thrust out her hands. A zap of unseen force shot from her fingertips. To her amazement, it was as if an invisible sword had cut the spider clean down the center, where it split into two parts. A fiery rush of power burned in her core and seared a path to her fingertips. She felt invincible and more alive than she'd ever been, but there was no time to celebrate the victory. The next spider lunged. She immobilized it the same way she'd done the first and then began taking out the savage creatures one by one at a lightning-speed pace she didn't know she possessed. Finally, only one remained. She crumpled her hand into a fist. The spider withered into a decrepit ball and fell harmlessly to the ground.

Wisteria held out her hands, turned her palms facing up, and looked down at them in wonder. She'd not realized she was capable of such astounding power. Her body trembling from the aftermath of both fear and astonishment, she surveyed the corpses of the spiders, taking note of their hairy legs. A shudder ran through her. She despised those wretched things.

Hearing more movement, she readied her body to react to another attack. Were more spiders coming? She was surprised to see the old crone hobbling toward her with labored steps, using her twisted cane for support. "Bravo," the crone rasped.

Wisteria lowered her hands, trying to comprehend what was happening. "The spiders came out of nowhere," she began, and then stopped when she saw the wise light glimmering in the crone's sunken eyes. "You did this," she surmised, anger swelling in her chest.

A crafty smile stretched over the hag's withered face, revealing stubs of rotten teeth. "I had to know if you were ready." The crone was a pathetic sight with her spindly white strands of hair that scarcely covered her baldness, stooped shoulders, and hideous face of mottled, sagging flesh and boils. She gripped the cane with her spindly hand. The skin stretching over the prominent veins resembled the wings of a bat.

The corners of Wisteria's mouth turned down. "Ready for what?"

"To take the next step."

She had no idea what that meant. Maybe she didn't want to know. Frustration boiled inside her. "Those spiders could've killed me." Trembles ran through her. She never wanted to experience anything like that ever again.

"Aye," the old crone responded. She paused, eyeing Wisteria with meaning. "But you prevailed."

The deepening gloom of the evening was a reminder that time was of the essence. She couldn't allow herself to get caught in whatever web the old crone was spinning. "My mother sent me here to collect a remedy for one of her patients—a young maiden in labor. The babe is turned the wrong way, and the girl needs something to help her relax."

The crone eyed her in partial amusement. "You needn't have come here for that. A few well-spoken words of an incantation you know well would've done the trick."

Heat fanned Wisteria's face despite her cold, wet condition. "Aye, but that would mean ..."

"Giving yourself away to your precious mother?"

"Aye," she admitted, not sure what to make of the crone's bitter tone. She clenched her hands. "If you could just give me something to help the maiden ..."

The crone pulled a vial from the side pocket of her muddy-brown frock that dwarfed her skeletal frame several times over. "This is what you seek."

"H—how did you know?" While the crone knew many useful ways to treat ailments,

Wisteria wasn't aware that she was clairvoyant. Quickly, she stepped forward, took it from the crone's hand, and placed it into the pocket of her frock.

A brittle cackle fell from the crone's lips. "There are few things that I don't know." She narrowed her eyes to black, fathomless slits. "Including the reason why you stopped coming to visit."

The need to defend her mother rose fast on Wisteria's lips. "Please don't be angry. My mother was only worried for my safety."

Amusement flitted over the crone's face, making her look even more grisly. "Because of the dragon."

One of the boils on the crone's face was inflamed and oozing puss ... a condition the crone had taught Wisteria how to treat with a simple incantation. Why was the crone not using her knowledge to help herself? She was so hideous. Revulsion welled inside of Wisteria, and it was all she could do to keep her expression masked.

She was accustomed to the crone's awful appearance, but this evening—in light of the spider attack—the crone was more appalling than usual. "Aye." Her words rushed out. "The villagers suspect you of practicing magic. My mother was afraid that my association with you would ..." She worked her jaw. "That it would ..." She didn't know how to finish the sentence. The last thing she wanted was to offend the crone, especially now that Wisteria had caught an inkling of how powerful she was. But it would do little good to deny the truth. The crone knew that Wisteria was coming here to see her. Also, she knew which remedy Mother had sent her to retrieve. Most importantly, the crone had conjured up those dreadful spiders. There was no telling what else she could do. Reason would dictate that the crone already knew everything Wisteria was telling her. "I'm sorry," she said simply, "that it has been so many months since I've come." She lowered her head in deference.

"The villagers are fools," the crone scoffed, "as is anyone who thinks that outlawing

magic will change the scope of the world.” She lifted her hand and made a circling motion with her withered finger. The wind whistled through the trees and ruffled the leaves, along with Wisteria’s hair and frock. When the crone lowered her hand, the commotion instantly died down. “Magic is who you are,” the crone croaked. “Never forget that.”

“I won’t,” she answered fervently. As if she could ever forget the part of her that was growing incrementally each day. She looked down at her hands again, marveling at the power that had issued forth when she needed it most. Her ability was somehow tied to her fear and perhaps her sense of self-preservation. There was still so much she didn’t understand. If only she could continue coming here to learn from the old crone.

“When will you come again?”

Wisteria jerked her head up. Could the crone discern her thoughts? “I cannot go against my mother.” She spoke the words to herself as much as to the crone.

Fury flashed in the crone’s eyes.

“I prithee, don’t be angry,” Wisteria pled. “You have taught me much. I will be forever grateful.” It was true. Wisteria had learned much, but conjuring spiders? That was a whole new level. All this time she’d been coming to visit the crone, Wisteria hadn’t comprehended the tremendous power the woman could wield. She clenched and unclenched her hands, realizing that she was at the mercy of the crone ... here in the thick of this dark, dense forest where all sorts of terrors awaited. She was having to rethink her stance on feeling comfortable here.

“We shall see how deep your gratitude runs.”

She didn’t know how to answer that. A stilted silence descended between them.

“You are finally ready,” the crone observed.

Wisteria made a concentrated effort to keep her voice kind and imploring so as not to come across as insolent. “Ready for what?”

The crone dipped her head, studying Wisteria. “For your first kill.”

Wisteria jerked. “Nay, I will never kill another living soul.” Was the crone wicked? Had she killed before? Wisteria had always viewed the old woman with pity. It occurred to her now, however, that she knew nothing about the crone’s past ... how she’d come to be here in the forest. Had she always been so gruesome? It was as if a curtain were being pulled from Wisteria’s eyes, allowing her to see things she’d never noticed before. Everything was escalating way too quickly, and she wasn’t prepared to deal with the repercussions of what might follow.

“You will, and it will make you stronger. Much stronger than you can imagine.”

Her heart started beating furiously. “Nay.” From the time she was young, her mother had taught her right from wrong. While Wisteria was no saint like her mother, she tried to be good. The power warring inside her often made her feel unworthy of her mother’s love. A part of Wisteria wondered if she would ever fit into the society of the village. Was she doomed to become an outcast like the crone? So loathsome. “Nay,” she protested louder, trying to stave off the cold panic building inside her.

Jeering laughter flowed from the crone’s thin lips. “We shall see.” With that, she turned and hobbled away. Her twisting body was repulsive as she took each feeble step.

“I will never take the life of another,” Wisteria vowed. The crone didn’t give her the courtesy of looking back.

No matter. Wisteria had come to a resolution within herself, and that’s what mattered.

The tension between her shoulder blades eased a fraction.

She touched her pocket, thinking of Alice as she hurried away.

When Wisteria stepped back into the bedroom and saw the look of anguish on her mother's face, she knew she was too late.

"Alice and her babe are gone," Eleanor announced in a somber tone.

A cry escaped Wisteria's throat. "It's my fault." She could've at least helped Alice to relax when she first learned the scope of the issue, but she hadn't. She'd been too afraid to expose herself. Now, she would forever have to live with the guilt that she'd stood by and done nothing while watching another suffer.

Eleanor's expression grew perplexed. "Nay, this is no fault of yours." Sympathy softened her features. "Alice's condition worsened a short time after you left. There was no way you could've gotten to the forest and back in time to help her." She let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging. "It's probably just as well. The world can be especially cruel to an unwed mother and her child."

"Aye," Wisteria agreed solemnly. Her gaze moved to the still form beneath the linen. It spoke to her condemnation. A shiver ran through her. She looked down at her hands, thinking how Mother would take leave of her sanity if she knew about the spider attack—the power that Wisteria could wield—and the old crone's babbling about a first kill.

The world will also be cruel to one who practices magic.

Wisteria would do well to keep her abilities to herself. Nay, more than that, she needed to squelch her budding powers once and for all.

And she would never have any further association with the old crone and her strange,

diabolical ways.

There are three books available to read in The Grimm Laws Series. Book 4 is coming the end of this year.