

# Gawain and the Black Knight

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Everyone knows Princess Loisette is a brat. But somehow, things start to change when she meets the stableboy Clarkent.

Rating Explanation: No language, a lot of violence and action, some blood, some dark themes.

Disclaimer: I don't own *Lois and Clark*.

References and Influences: In writing this story, I used Wikipedia for a lot of research, and I have taken inspiration from a lot of works (mainly fairytales). Some fairytales and specific works which have inspired a bit of dialogue, a name, a plot point, or the way I handled a scene include (but are not limited to): various Arthurian works (including *Le Morte Darthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Once and Future King*), *Beowulf*, "Bluebeard," "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," "Cinderella," *Frasier*, "The Gingerbread Man," "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs," "Hansel and Gretel," *The Hobbit*, "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Little Red Riding Hood," *Mr. Ed*, "The Pied Piper," "Pinocchio," *Pride and Prejudice*, "The Princess and the Pea," "Puss in Boots," *Quest for Camelot*, "Rapunzel," Robin Hood, "Rumpelstiltskin," a few Shakespeare works (*Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*), *Shrek*, "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," "The Three Little Pigs," and "The Ugly Duckling" (mixed with *The Secret Garden* and *The Swan Princess*).

Author's Notes: I am using present-day English for ease of reading. Please forgive this choice and any anachronisms/inaccuracies you may find. I have, however, done quite a bit of research, and I've included a glossary at the end of the story, separated by chapters, to help explain certain terms for any who are interested. The bulk of this story takes place over a period of about half a decade. *Most* characters in this story (except the horses) have direct counterparts in *Lois and Clark*. I have also kept approximately the same age difference found between Lois and Clark in the television series (about a year and a half). And finally--there *will* be some dark spots in this story, *but* our favorite couple gets put back in the box with a happy ending, so have no fear! On a side note, I hope to one day make a few expansions and important changes to this story, but I unfortunately do not have the time at present to do so. In the event that I never actually get to it, I figured it was better to just go ahead and upload it.

Author's Thanks: I would like to thank DW for brainstorming with me, making some great suggestions, and looking over the story! She was a *lot* of help plot-wise and picked up some of my stupid mistakes while beta reading. I would also like to thank Female Hawk for her wonderful job as a beta--she really helps me know when to expand and when to tighten things up! She offered many suggestions to improve scenes and general plot, and they were much appreciated. In short, I was very fortunate when it came to my two beta readers for this story, and I am *really* thankful! I'd also like to thank my GE, GooBoo, for finding some

of those last little errors!

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## Chapter 1: Two Different Worlds

A piercing scream rang throughout the castle. The eleven-year-old princess was unhappy again.

"Quiet, Princess!" her lady-in-waiting ordered, flapping her arms around like an angry swan. To say she was aggravated was to put it lightly.

"I hate you!" proclaimed the princess, who was also flailing about, though she was doing so on the floor. "You're a horrible pig!"

"And *you* are a bratty little girl!" returned Mirandaa. "I am utterly sick of you!" And it was true. In a short time, she had come to hate the girl. Princess Loisette allied a pale complexion and thin, unhealthy arms with a petulance that made her presence completely undesirable. Mirandaa had heard more than one person refer to the girl as "ugly" in hushed tones, and she was inclined to agree--there was absolutely nothing appealing about the princess. If Princess Loisette didn't always have such a sour expression, then she might be more attractive, but Mirandaa did not foresee such a change happening in the near future.

The object of Mirandaa's thoughts halted her temper tantrum for a couple of breaths, apparently astonished anyone would have the audacity to talk to her like that. Then, she took a deep breath and shouted, "*Heeellllpppp!*"

"I would shut my large mouth if I were you, Princess," Mirandaa said in a furious but quiet voice. "You--" She cut off as the King of Metropolita rushed through the doorway. Then, she gave a fumbling curtsy, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Upon seeing that both girls were unharmed, King Samuel stared down at his daughter, obviously trying to rein in his anger. "Princess," he said slowly, "what is it?" Hanging unsaid at the end of his sentence were the words "this time."

Loisette gave what she must have thought was a dignified sniff and looked up at him. Now that she had captured her father's attention, the heat of her temper seemed to have disappeared. "Daddy," she said, her eyes wide and sorrowful, "I do not like having Mirandaa as a companion. She dislikes me so--"

"Princess, I'm sure that's not true," King Samuel said in a voice that spoke volumes for his frustration. He nodded toward Mirandaa, and she thought she caught a sympathetic glint in his eyes. "If you could please excuse us ... ?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," murmured the lady-in-waiting before disappearing out the door, though not before she gave one last angry glare toward the princess.

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"But it *is* true," Loisette insisted after Mirandaa had left, the volume of her voice rising as she stood. "She hates me, Daddy." She stared upward at her father, her lower lip trembling. She knew it was true--and she wanted him to know it, too.

That was the trouble--nobody liked her. None of her ladies-in-waiting had ever wanted to play with her or assist her; they had always wanted to be somewhere else. Her temper came not from a bad disposition, but from a sense of utter desperation. It hurt that no one liked her--and she couldn't help but lash out. She wanted somebody to talk to who would actually care about her. Sometimes, they pretended to care ... but she always knew the truth.

Her father sighed. "Princess--" He was cut off when two stick-thin arms circled his waist and a brown-haired head pressed tightly against his chest. He exhaled again and awkwardly patted his daughter's back. "You must stop this nonsense. If you're not dying, then you shouldn't be yelling as if you are. If you continue doing that, then one day when you *are* in trouble, no one will

come.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” the girl whispered into his gold and red tunic. The silk was cool against her cheek, but it could not comfort her.

King Samuel gave her a gentle squeeze. When he spoke again, his voice was soft but firm. “Princess, we’re running out of Noble companions to give you. Before long, there will be no one left. This can’t continue indefinitely.”

Loisette pulled back. “But Daddy--”

“It can’t, Princess,” he said resolutely. “Soon, you will be stuck with someone whether you like it or not. It isn’t proper for you to be without a companion. Your mother wouldn’t have--” He shook his head. “It just isn’t right.” He gave her a slight nod of farewell and then left.

Princess Loisette stared after him sadly, wishing he had placed a kiss on her hair ... like she always longed for him to do. She hated when he thought about her mother. Queen Ellena had died in childbirth ... as had the sister young Loisette had been looking forward to having. So many years had passed that Loisette could barely remember her mother. But that wasn’t the case with her father--he remembered her mother well. Maybe too well.

It seemed as if he were always in his chamber staring at a painting of Queen Ellena, who many said Loisette took after. He barely saw Loisette herself ... except to admonish her. While he usually gave in to her desires, she had the feeling he was reaching the end of his tether. And when he finally demanded she keep a specific lady-in-waiting, he would become even less of a presence in her life. He would ignore her cries and trust her to the care of a stranger.

Loisette crumpled on the floor in silent tears. She wished her father didn’t hate the sight of her--wished her mother was still alive to speak with her and hold her. She was so lonely.

A tiny squeaking noise reached her ears, and she looked up to find a mouse coming out of a hole in the wall. Her countenance brightened just a fraction.

Robert Bigmouth was her only real friend in the whole world. She had given him that name because he could eat whatever she gave him at remarkable speeds, and watching him eat usually heartened her a little bit. She stood and opened a drawer, unfolding a handkerchief and removing a piece of cheese from the secret stash she kept there specifically for her diminutive friend. Kneeling on the ground, she reached out and placed the cheese in front of him.

Giving a squeak of excitement, he began to nibble at the proffered gift, and she stroked his tiny gray body with a gentle finger. She didn’t know if he actually liked being touched, but as long as there was food in front of him, he didn’t seem to mind too much. The action gave her a modicum of comfort, so she was glad.

“Oh, Robert Bigmouth,” she said softly, tears in her eyes, “I don’t want another lady-in-waiting. I just want to spend time with Daddy.” She looked up suddenly as an older woman came hurrying into her room.

Robert Bigmouth took one last nibble and then--after giving the intruder what appeared to be an annoyed look--disappeared into his hole.

“Aliss,” Loisette said with a sigh, “you scared away poor little Robert.”

Her nanny gave a half-curtsy and shook her head in disapproval. Slightly out of breath, she said, “I heard you were being a naughty girl again, and I rushed to get here. I take it your father smoothed everything over?”

Loisette nodded, looking sadly at the mouse’s hole.

“You really shouldn’t be playing with that thing,” Aliss scolded. “You know your father doesn’t like having animals around.”

The young girl looked down at her hands and began idly playing with a speck of dust on the floor. Yes, she did know that. The only non-human creatures her father tolerated around the castle were horses and the court magician’s animal familiar. She moved her gaze back to Aliss. The older woman had a stern expression on her face, but Loisette could read the kindness behind it. “Aliss--why does he hate it?”

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Loisette’s question made Aliss uncomfortable. She hated to lie to the princess--but she also didn’t want to tell the truth. As a stalling method, she went to tidy something on the princess’s desk. Sitting there was a plate of food that had barely been touched. Aliss’s brow furrowed in worry. The princess hardly ever ate anything. In fact, Aliss suspected that pet mouse of hers ate more than she did.

It seemed as if Loisette were wasting away more with every passing year. Her appetite was almost non-existent, and she rarely went outside the castle walls ... She reminded Aliss of a smothered rose. Loisette was meant to be beautiful, Aliss could tell, but she wasn’t receiving the nurturing she needed. The King was so wrapped up in thoughts of his dead wife that he failed to see the withering flower of his daughter. Aliss had been with the girl since she was born and loved her as if she were her own--but it wasn’t enough. Somehow, Aliss couldn’t provide what the princess needed. And she didn’t know what could.

It didn’t help, of course, that she wasn’t able to be with the princess much anymore. When Loisette had grown old enough to be given a lady-in-waiting as a companion, Aliss’s services as a nurse were no longer needed. She had then been assigned to help children around the castle become more comfortable with their new roles as servants. She helped dry their eyes and lift their chins, but she had never forgotten Loisette and never would. She would always look out for her.

“Aliss?” Loisette prodded. She was obviously still waiting to hear why her father hated having animals around. And Aliss knew she would have to give an answer. She owed Loisette that much.

Turning, Aliss sighed and nervously crossed her arms. “Your mother loved animals, Your Highness ... especially horses. Some say she could even talk to animals--that a fairy gave her such a gift at her birth.” She gave a sad smile. “The older you get, the more you remind me of her. And I think your father feels that way, too.”

In a soft voice full of pain, the princess asked, “Is that why he doesn’t like to see me?”

Aliss knelt beside her and pulled her into a hug. “Oh, Princess--” Her heart was breaking for the child. She didn’t know what to say.

The girl’s head began to shake as she shed tears into her nanny’s bosom. Aliss lightly stroked her hair and held her, whispering quiet assurances to her young charge. But she knew that the girl’s pain went so deep that it could never be uprooted by a few words from an old nurse--no matter how lovingly they were spoken.

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The Stable Master for the Riding Stable, Dwayne, worked in silence as he showed one of the stableboys under his control the proper way to saddle a royal horse. Dwayne knew that Clarkent had seen the action performed a million times before, but they were servants of the ruler of Metropolita, and Dwayne always tried to ensure that those under his control were trained well.

Though he held an important position in the smaller but more important of King Samuel’s two stables, Dwayne was a quiet man who never said a word when one wasn’t needed. He was a lot older than Clarkent, and he was very good at what he did. Nobody at the castle--and perhaps no one in the kingdom--knew as much about horses as Dwayne did. He had been around them

ever since he became a stableboy at seven years of age, and his gift with the creatures had manifested itself even then.

Dwayne finished his demonstration and paused for a moment; then he quickly removed the horse's tack, placing the pieces carefully on the grass. Ordinarily, he wouldn't put any of it on the ground, but it would only be there briefly. The brown and white horse, Agides, lowered his neck and began nibbling at some grass, glad to be freed of his trappings, even if only for a few seconds.

Clarkent stared at the large creature, obviously nervous. Agides's personality was lamblike compared to most of the horses in the royal stables, but Dwayne understood the pressure felt by a boy wanting to prove his worth. It had been quite a while since he was a child himself, but he could still remember those days.

Hiding a smile, Dwayne motioned for Clarkent to try his hand at tacking the horse. They were using a caparison in the royal colors--red and gold--and other decorative trappings, so it was a little more complicated than simply putting on a saddle and bridle. The boy outfitted Agides with skill, however, and soon Dwayne was admiring the royal symbol on the horse's chest, a rearing gold pegasus.

Clarkent grabbed the horse's lead rope and led him around in front of Dwayne, who watched quietly but with a look of approval. A horse would often hold his breath when being saddled up--either out of nerves or to prevent the saddle from being put on tightly--so the gear usually didn't fit snugly when first put on. Walking made Agides relax, which meant Clarkent was then able to make some final adjustments.

Finished, Clarkent looked to Dwayne inquiringly.

"Good," the man said with a grunt, the slightest of smiles on his lips.

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Clarkent smiled as he heard Dwayne's word of praise. Coming from the Stable Master, that one word meant a lot.

When Clarkent had been Assigned to the castle, he had been terrified, to say the least. Though it had been about five years ago, he still remembered the day he left home with great clarity.

He had been helping his father in the fields when his mother had come running toward him. "It's time," she had said, sobbing, and she had fallen to her knees at his feet and embraced him.

"What do you mean?" he had asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"It's the Assigning, son--remember how we talked about that?" his father had said in a soft voice, looking more sorrowful than Clarkent had ever seen him.

Even for someone as young as he had been, the Assigning wasn't hard to forget about. When non-Noble males were seven and females nine, they were taken from their homes and Assigned to serve the king and Nobles as servants. Births were logged carefully in every town's Birth Registry, as families would often attempt methods of bypassing the Assigning. But it was pointless to even try. Somehow, the king's men always found out ... And the fines they levied against offenders were crueler than any physical punishment could have been.

Many commoners whispered about how the Assigning was merely a form of slavery. While basic needs were met, those who were Assigned were not paid, and they were not allowed to leave their posts until they came of age at seventeen. There were exceptional situations, of course, in which a servant could be Recalled, but these exceptions were few and far between. A servant who was Dismissed, however, due to issues such as thievery or pregnancy, left in disgrace. The stigma attached to a Dismissal was so great that few dared make the Nobles unhappy by invoking their anger. A Dismissal was almost as bad as an Exile--but while both Dismissed and Exiled people lived in disgrace, at least Dismissed servants could continue to see their

families, though that was only a small consolation.

On that terrible day, his mother had hugged him tightly, as if it would be the last time she could do so. Then she had led him by the hand from the fields. They had walked toward a grubby wagon filled with other children who were being taken to the Assigning ceremony. His parents had both hugged him one more time, and he'd climbed up into the wagon and sat next to a girl whose body was being wracked by sobs. He had simply sat there in silence, staring helplessly at his parents.

"We love you so much," his mother had cried out when the wagon began to roll away.

"I love you," he had called back, his voice breaking.

"We'll see you on Visiting Days," his father had yelled. "We promise."

Clarkent could still remember the ache of longing in his heart and the broken-hearted look on their faces as he strained to keep them in view as long as he could. The skill-gauging tests before the Assigning ceremony and the ceremony itself had all been a blur. The only thing he could think about for weeks afterward was a question: Why had this happened?

Dwayne had helped him through the shock of leaving his family. The older man could easily have been frustrated with Clarkent's initial listlessness, but he wasn't. He was patient, and the haze that had afflicted the boy finally cleared. Then he had suddenly thrown himself into his stable duties. Though Dwayne made an excellent Stable Master, the stable under his care had never been cleaner since the day Clarkent had first truly begun working as a stableboy.

Clarkent had been fortunate to be assigned to the Riding Stable, as Dwayne made a firm but kind supervisor. In addition, the horses were generally of higher quality. The other royal stable--which was larger and held a hundred horses used primarily to pull carriages and carts--operated under the cruel command of Kile. Dwayne said little--which suited Clarkent's demeanor since he had been wrenched away from his parents--but his scattered words had helped the young stableboy become a fine judge of horseflesh.

When Dwayne was done with his lesson, he told Clarkent, "Groom the first ten horses. And check for stones."

The boy nodded in acknowledgement--the first ten horses were the ones he was usually assigned to work with, so he was familiar with them--and he watched as Dwayne moved to go check on the progress of the others under his supervision. Grooming horses was a step up for Clarkent. Normally, Dwayne's first task for him was to help feed and water the horses and muck out their stalls. But that task appeared to have been relegated to the other stableboys ... at least for the day. GERALPH--the obnoxious boy two years younger than Clarkent--was even now struggling to get inside a stall to feed a horse. The horse kept shaking its head and shifting in place. Clarkent suspected GERALPH would soon be relegated to cleaning carriages, carts, and riding equipment ... like other stableboys who weren't good at handling horses.

But even Clarkent, who was good with horses, had his challenges. And his main challenge was Penelope Grace.

Penelope Grace was a female palfrey, which meant she had a smooth and ambling gait. Once upon a time, she had shown the grace that was her namesake, but now--in her old age--she had become immensely cranky.

Dwayne could handle her easily, perhaps because she was accustomed to his presence, but all the stableboys had difficulty with her. The only reason she was even still around was because she had once been Queen Ellena's beloved horse. As such, she was to be kept at the royal stables for the rest of her life. She even got to keep the same stall she'd once had ... mainly because she refused to go into any other stalls.

It was Clarkent's misfortune that he had the most luck with

Penelope Grace out of all the stableboys. He wasn't good with her, by any means, but she had never bitten him, as she had all the other workers in the stable, except for Dwayne, of course.

Clarkent decided to groom her last, as he always did. Grooming wasn't a quick process. In addition to having to check hooves for stones (a task which frequently Dwayne reserved for himself), the morning grooming entailed using a curry comb, then wipping the horse with horse hair, then brushing, then wipping again, then rubbing the horse down with a clean cloth, and then brushing the horse's mane and tail. After that, a damp sponge was used to clean the horse's face, and oil was used to make the creature's hooves shine. This was a process that was repeated again later in the day.

Because of the extensive number of things involved in grooming horses, it was a while before Clarkent finally got to Penelope Grace. He gritted his teeth as he looked at her. As a white horse, she would have been a pain to clean anyway. But he swore she purposefully rolled around in mud to thwart his cleaning efforts.

He managed to clean her with remarkably little resistance compared to what he usually faced. However, when it came to checking her hooves for stones, he ran into difficulties. Though he pressed and pushed against Penelope Grace, he could not get her to lift any of her hooves.

He grunted as he pushed yet again, trying to make her shift her weight off one of her front feet.

Suddenly, he noticed a man in the stable staring at him, and he stood straight and flushed.

The man's appearance was innocuous enough--he had on a ratty brown cloak which covered the worn robes beneath it, and his gray hair was a little windswept. His eyes were wise and kind, and his right hand clutched the staff at his side. The top of the staff, Clarkent noted, was carved in the shape of a falcon about to take flight.

"Hello," the man greeted.

"Hi," Clarkent murmured in return. He glanced away uncomfortably. He had seen the man around countless times before, but--though the man had smiled or waved--they had never actually spoken. For them to finally exchange a few words now after all this time--well, it was awkward ... Especially since many of the times Clarkent had seen him, the man had appeared to be staring at him. What this stranger wanted with him, he had no idea.

"Are you having, uh, problems?" the man asked, nodding toward Penelope Grace.

Clarkent looked at the mare, who had turned her head to stare at him with what seemed to be suspicion. "Yes," he admitted. The horse let out a snort, and he watched her warily.

"The name's Peri," the older man introduced himself. "Maybe I can help you."

"Clarkent," he mumbled in return, watching as Peri approached.

Peri reached out a hand and gently touched Penelope Grace's nose, causing her to whinny. Then he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. She shook her head and neighed gently. "Try again, son," Peri instructed.

Obliging, Clarkent pushed against the horse's side and successfully managed to lift her leg. He scraped out a stone that had been lodged in her hoof and set it down. Then he quickly set to work and finished checking the rest of her legs. When he was finally done, he noticed the older man was still there, and he told him gratefully, "Thanks." He didn't quite understand what Peri had done, but he knew that it had worked. For that, he was thankful.

"I'm always glad to help, son," Peri offered with a smile. "So, do you, uh, like it here? What I mean to say is--are you glad you were Assigned here rather than ... somewhere else?"

Clarkent frowned, not quite understanding why this stranger would be asking him such a question. But he answered anyway: "Yes. I guess so." It could certainly have been worse.

"The Stable Master still treating you right?"

"Yes," Clarkent said cautiously. "Dwayne is kind."

"Good. Good." The man gave him a brief nod and then left the stable.

Clarkent stared after him. What had *that* been about?

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After Peri left the stable, he went into the castle, and he soon ran across an old friend, Aliss, in the hallway. "I was hoping to see you," he said with a smile.

But she didn't smile back. "I'm worried, Peri."

Peri became serious. "About what, Aliss?"

"About Princess Loisetette. She barely eats, and she never goes outside. I've tried to get her father to spend more time with her, but he just won't. I don't know what to do." Tears of helplessness and sorrow sprang into her eyes.

Peri embraced her and patted her back. "Don't worry, Aliss. Things have a way of working themselves out."

"I hope you're right, Peri," she said with a sniffle.

He smiled at her. "If she's anything like her mother was, she'll help pull herself out of this. You just gotta have a little faith."

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A pink pair of well-worn silk shoes stood in the doorway of the castle's exit. Their owner stood still, anxious. Outside was a large world of uncertainties. Was facing them worth the risk?

Suddenly and determinedly, the pink shoes began to move forward of their owner's volition, taking that owner outside the castle for the first time in a very long time. It was scary, yes, but it was also strangely exhilarating.

After a few more moments of hesitation, the small shoes began to shuffle slowly and unsurely toward the Riding Stable, a place where their owner had never been.

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## Chapter 2: Two Worlds Collide

Clarkent stood beside his favorite horse in the Riding Stable, rubbing the buckskin dun's dark nose with loving gentleness.

Now that he was thirteen, he was discovering more and more that he really *had* gone up in the world. He had told Dwayne he could help the other stableboys complete their tasks since he had finished grooming his ten horses, but Dwayne had told him to simply wait to assist any riders that came in. That was normally a job reserved for the stableboys a few years older than he was, so he felt proud to be entrusted with such a responsibility. And he was excited for another reason as well--when a stableboy had reached the point where he could give riding lessons and help riders, he would also be allowed more free time. As perks went, that was a good one for Assigned servants.

Esroh Repus flicked his dark ears, listening to something.

"Repus," Clarkent murmured to the horse soothingly, moving his hand to glide down the well-defined muscles of the creature's neck. The horse rubbed his head against the stableboy, who smiled.

Suddenly, there was the soft crunching of feet on straw, and Clarkent turned.

Standing in the stable entryway was a brown-haired girl with a pink dress and an anxious expression. It was obvious that the stable was not the place she was meant to be, and Clarkent's eyes widened as he took in the silver coronet on top of her head. Was this the *princess*?

Realizing it had to be her, he gave a fumbling bow. Dwayne had taught him how to bow gracefully in case King Samuel ever entered the stable (which never happened, preferring as he did to have his horse prepared for him ahead of time), but now that there was a good opportunity to use that rehearsed bow, Clarkent

was unable to bring forth any semblance of grace.

Fortunately, the princess was too distracted to notice him making a fool of himself. “This is the stable?” she asked with readily apparent distaste as she gazed around. From the expression on her face, there might as well have been rotting carcasses strewn in the stalls rather than living creatures.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Clarkent murmured, slowly easing up out of his bow. Was he supposed to wait for a signal before rising? He couldn’t remember.

“It smells,” proclaimed the princess. She wrinkled her nose and crossed her arms.

Clarkent frowned. It was a stable. Of *course* it smelled. What had she expected?

He tried to look closer at her without being obvious about it. Apart from her clothes and her haughty expression, she looked more like a waif than a princess. Somehow, he had expected the princess’s cheeks to be pinker and plumper. He hadn’t believed most of the stories told about her--some said she was nothing more than a living corpse, and he’d certainly known *that* couldn’t be the case--but apparently she *was* unhealthily thin. The higher-than-thou attitude he had also heard about also appeared to apply.

He glanced toward the end of the stable, where Dwayne was helping Geralph untangle a set of bridles. He caught Dwayne’s eye questioningly, and the older man nodded. Clarkent knew that meant Dwayne wasn’t going to come and help with the princess. He was going to have to assist her himself.

“You!” the object of his thoughts said, staring straight at him, as if seeing him for the first time. “Do you have a name?”

Clarkent resisted the urge to cross his own arms. He did *not* like this girl. It seemed as if every one of the bad stories he had heard about her were true. Regardless of his personal opinion, however, he wouldn’t be uncivil to her--he wasn’t going to risk a Dismissal because of a petulant princess. So he settled with a nod in response to her inquiry.

The princess continued looking at him. “Well? What is your name?”

He gritted his teeth and forced his tone to stay level. “Clarkent,” he answered. He paused and then added, “Your Highness.”

She gazed at him for a moment, as if trying to ascertain whether his use of “Your Highness” had been sarcastic or not. But he looked back at her unflinchingly, and she at last lowered her head. “I am Princess Loisetette, and I want to go riding,” she proclaimed in a soft but firm voice.

“Yes, Highness,” he murmured. It was just his luck to be saddled with assisting this brat.

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When Loisetette had stepped into the stable, she had been frightened out of her wits. But she had endeavored not to show it, hiding her insecurities under a layer of snootiness.

The stableboy she had first laid eyes on seemed nice. He had been gently petting a horse and talking to it, and suddenly she had wanted to experience his kindness. But the only true kindness she had witnessed being applied to herself had been Aliss’s--and so she didn’t know how to approach him.

As she asked him his name, she noticed he was covered in the dust of the stable. He was surely foul-smelling, and there was no reason why she should want to be in his presence. But though she had come here with the intent to ride a horse, her already shaky resolve was starting to dissolve. She had to get a grip on herself. They were just animals. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Taking in a deep breath, she lifted her head and pointed to a cream-colored horse. “What is that horse’s name?”

The stableboy--Clarkent--glanced at the creature. “High Flyer, Your Highness,” he told her. He was obviously not a boy of many words. She wasn’t sure if she liked that or not.

“I would like to ride him. You must get him ready for me.”

His eyes darkening, the stableboy responded, “Yes, Your Highness.”

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Clarkent asked the princess to wait a moment while he went to speak with Dwayne. She looked annoyed at the delay but nodded in acceptance.

“The princess wants to ride,” Clarkent told the Stable Master softly. “But she doesn’t have a lady-in-waiting with her. Do I--do I go with her? Should I ask Billy to go with her instead?” Giving lessons was part of a stablehand’s duties--but females never came alone for those lessons. They always had someone with them. It was rather unorthodox for the princess to be here by herself. As a result, Clarkent thought maybe Billy should assist her--he was a few years older than Clarkent and had thus been around the stable longer.

Dwayne studied him for a moment, a frown creasing his forehead. “Normally, it would not be appropriate for a stableboy to go out alone with a princess. But I think that it will be all right for you to go with her.”

Clarkent wanted to ask what made him so special--why *he* could go with the princess when Dwayne seemed to be implying the other stableboys (including the more experienced Billy) shouldn’t do so--but it wasn’t his place to question, so he just nodded and walked away from Dwayne.

As Clarkent moved over to the equipment, the princess came up behind him. He began to pick up a saddle, and he saw her pointing at something.

“I want that,” she said.

He shifted to see what she was looking at. She was pointing at a red and gold caparison.

He frowned. “They usually don’t wear those for normal riding, Your Highness.”

“I want him to wear all the pretty horse clothes,” she declared.

Even though the term “horse clothes” almost made him laugh, Clarkent found his mood darkening. “Yes, Your Highness,” he muttered.

As Clarkent saddled the palfrey the princess had picked out, it was hard to keep from grumbling. Putting on a horse’s full regalia was a painstaking process, especially since he had only actually put on all of a horse’s equipment once. He might have seen it done countless times, but it was different to actually do it himself. And since it was for the princess, he had to make sure everything was perfect.

Personally, he thought she wanted the full trappings just to make him do more work. And thinking about that simply annoyed him more.

Still--there was a part of him that was worried. While High Flyer’s gait was one of the smoothest in the stable, he liked speed, and he was occasionally a little stubborn. It had never been bad enough that Clarkent would refuse to allow a beginner to ride him, but the horse would certainly have not been his first choice for someone as slight-looking as the princess. He would simply have to keep an eye on both horse and rider. Besides, the princess might quickly decide this newest pastime was boring--he could be worrying over nothing.

When Clarkent had finally put everything on the horse, he double-checked to make sure all the equipment was secure, and then he walked the Palomino around and fixed the sidesaddle one last time. He took High Flyer’s lead rope, grabbed the whip the princess would need, and said softly, “Follow me, Your Highness.”

He led the horse and the princess outside the stable to a wooden platform. A set of stairs led up to it, and there was a railing on the backside. The platform was there to help children and women mount taller horses, and Clarkent knew they would need it. It would have been too easy for the princess to pick a

pony--which would have been more suitable for someone of her size and experience.

As he moved High Flyer to stand beside the platform, he gestured for the princess to climb the stairs.

She gave him a sour look--why, he wasn't sure--but did as he'd motioned her to. Her pink shoes climbed first one step and then another, and after a few more, she was at the top.

Clarkent dropped the lead rope to the ground. All the horses in the Riding Stable--except, of course, for Penelope Grace, who wouldn't stand in one place for all the salt licks in the world--were ground tied, which meant they had been trained to stand in one place when their lead rope was lying on the ground, so he didn't have to worry about High Flyer running off. He hurried up the stairs behind the princess, ready to help her mount the horse. After a second's thought, he dropped the whip he was holding on to the platform, knowing he would need his hands free.

Though she was only a year or two younger than him, she was small and extremely thin, and Clarkent was confident he could lift her without any difficulty. He told her quietly, "I'm going to help you onto the horse, Highness."

The princess nodded, and he couldn't help but think that she looked terrified. "All right," she said shakily. "If-if you think you must."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes in irritation and instructed curtly, "Hold the pommel ... Highness." When she looked confused, he gestured to the slightly raised area at the front of the saddle. After she had grabbed on to it--for dear life, it looked like--he stepped forward. Carefully, he placed his hands under her arms, lifting her. To say she was as light as a feather would have been an exaggeration, but in the brief time he held her up, Clark could feel how bony and underfed she was. As he set her on the sidesaddle, he thought there was something incredibly sad about her life, though he couldn't quite say what.

The princess instantly leaned forward to put her arms around High Flyer's tan neck, and Clarkent said quickly, "Easy. You'll scare him. Sit up straight."

She took in a deep breath as she rose off the horse's neck, looking more like a frightened little girl than a princess. "I've--I've never ridden a horse before," she told him quietly.

Though he should have expected that admission based on her behavior, Clarkent was nonetheless surprised. He had thought horseback riding lessons were a requirement for royalty. Who had ever heard of a princess who couldn't ride a horse?

"Never?" the word escaped him. He clamped his mouth closed. He really had to be more careful.

But she didn't seem to think him insolent. She simply shook her head. "I--I don't know what to do."

One of the common sayings of the day was "It's just like riding a horse--you never forget." But part of the problem with that saying was that a person actually had to learn *how* to ride a horse before it could apply. And so, mystified at how different this princess was from what he had expected, Clarkent tilted his head and looked at her, truly seeing her for the first time. Though she had come in here ready to spout off orders, he had the feeling it was just to hide her insecurities. But what he didn't understand ... was why she felt insecure in the first place.

She was a princess. She had been born with a golden spoon in her hand, after all! If she wanted boar for dinner, all she would have to do was ask for it. If she wanted a pretty new necklace, all she had to do was send someone to buy one. An entire kingdom was at her fingertips. Surely, she could want for nothing.

But if she had all that, why was she so unhappy? Why was she so thin? Why was she as wretched as everyone had always made her out to be?

Whenever Dwayne heard any of the stableboys share disparaging stories of the princess, he sharply told them not to take stock in idle rumors. Did he know something Clarkent

didn't? Why did nothing about this princess make any sense? She was an enigma to him.

He took in a deep breath, resolving to be more patient with her. "Try talking to him," he suggested. "Horses can sense nervousness."

The princess looked at him unsurely and then glanced at her horse. "High Flyer," she said in a soft voice, tentatively reaching forward to stroke his neck. "It's okay. I won't hurt you. I just want to ride you. You'll let me do that, won't you?"

The horse's cream-colored ears twisted to hear her better, and she continued talking, "Please--be good for me."

"I'm moving your foot," Clarkent told her. She nodded, and he looked down at her dress with a frown.

The long skirt of dress was covering her foot, which could be potentially problematic, but there was nothing that could be done about it--unless he told the princess to go to the castle and change, and he certainly wasn't going to do that. So, biting his lip, he lifted her dress up enough so he could see her shoe.

She was wearing a pink slipper, which again wasn't the best choice for riding. He looked up at her. "The next time you ride, you should wear boots, Your Highness."

"Why?" she asked defensively.

"The heel will help keep your shoe in the stirrup," he explained.

"Oh," she said and then fell silent.

Since that had gone over better than he thought, Clarkent ventured, "You should also wear a slightly shorter dress."

She peered down over the side of the horse. "So it won't cover my foot?" she guessed.

He nodded. Then, satisfied that he had at least warned her a little about proper riding clothing, he placed a hand under the heel of her left foot. He guided her pink shoe into the stirrup, marveling at how small her foot was. Then he stepped back and gave her a few pointers on how to ride the horse--speaking in short sentences and never saying much more than ten words at a time. Finally, he handed her the whip, which she took uneasily. "You'll need that to cue High Flyer, Your Highness," he told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked warily.

"It's part of riding sidesaddle instead of astride," he answered, as if that explained everything.

"What?"

"You use the whip and your left foot as cues," he told her.

"Oh," she said, still looking unsure.

Clarkent got off the platform and took High Flyer's lead rope, guiding the horse around to get the princess used to its movements.

The princess soon got over her initial fright, which was good. But her fright appeared to turn into annoyance, which was *bad*.

"Why must I ride sidesaddle?" she asked him in a raised voice that was almost a growl.

Clarkent tilted his head and stared at her, not understanding why she was putting up a fight about this. "Because you're a girl."

Her brow narrowed. "What?"

Clarkent swallowed, fearing he had upset her. "Ladies ride sidesaddle, Your Highness," he told her quickly. Maybe putting a more positive spin on it would help.

"But it seems more dangerous," she pointed out.

Or not.

"It's not proper," he returned firmly.

"And why not?" she demanded.

He flushed. A comment GERALPH had once made--"Women should be straddling men, not horses"--came to his mind, but it wasn't something that could be spoken to a woman, much less a princess. And he was ashamed of even thinking of it himself. So he simply answered, "It just isn't--ladies wear dresses ..." He couldn't bring himself to say much more than that.

She stared at him, and he wondered if she was going to challenge him and get him in a whole world of trouble. But then she looked away from him and asked, “Are you going to ride with me?”

“What?” he asked, not certain he had heard her right.

She turned back toward him. “I wish to ride in the field, and I command you to ride with me.” She lifted her chin, her eyes flashing like those of a mother bear just daring someone to move closer to her cubs.

“Are you sure you’re ready to ride in the field?” he asked her unsurely.

She pressed her heel into High Flyer’s side and swished the whip with her right hand. The horse moved forward, and Clarkent had to act quickly so that the lead rope was not pulled out of his hands.

There was an expression of annoyance on her face. “Why? You don’t want me to ride because you’re scared you’ll get in trouble if I get hurt?”

Her sudden attack startled him. “No. I ... I don’t want you to get hurt,” he said softly. He really didn’t--princess or not, she was a human being, and he didn’t want anything bad to happen to her.

“Oh ...” she trailed off. “Well, I’m ready for the field.”

He nodded. “All right.”

Clarkent led the princess and her horse to the stable. He moved to go saddle up Agides, who was usually reserved for the stableboys to use, but the princess’s voice caused him to turn.

“Why are you not saddling that one?” she asked, pointing at Esroh Repus.

Clarkent shifted his feet uneasily. She must have remembered him petting the horse. “He is only for use by Nobles.” Clarkent was allowed to ride Repus when exercising him--otherwise, only Nobles were supposed to ride him. That was just the way of things. Nobles had certain privileges which lowly stableboys did not.

“I am the princess,” she stated with royal firmness, “and I want you to ride him.”

“Y-yes, Your Highness,” Clarkent replied, a bit puzzled. But he nonetheless turned away from Agides and walked toward Repus. Maybe the princess’s presence wasn’t so bad after all.

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Loisette found that the infernal stableboy insisted on riding right beside her. He was obviously worried that she would fall off, and his overprotective nature irked her. “Go ride ahead,” she told him, waving in front of her.

He shook his head. “No, Your Highness.”

She stared at him for a moment, wanting suddenly to get under that ever-so-calm skin of his. “Fine,” she gritted. “Then I will race you!”

She dug into High Flyer’s side with her heel and cued him with her whip, and he broke out into a trot. She was sitting there wondering how to make him go even faster when the stableboy suddenly flashed up beside her and took away her horse’s reins. He made a clicking noise and said, “Whoa,” pulling back on High Flyer’s reins and forcing him back into a walk.

Still holding the reins, the stableboy twisted his head to look at that. “Don’t ever do that again, Your Highness,” he growled.

Loisette was taken aback and could only manage meekly, “What?”

“You aren’t experienced enough for races. You could’ve been hurt!” His voice was filled with steel, and his eyes were serious and stern.

But Loisette suddenly rediscovered her own mettle, and she shot back, “What’s the point of riding these stupid things if you can’t have fun?”

“Dying isn’t fun, Your Highness!”

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t have been close to dying if you hadn’t made me ride sidesaddle!” she spat.

“That’s how it’s done!” he returned. “I didn’t make the rules, Princess!”

“But you love upholding them, don’t you?”

He shook his head, not understanding. “*What?*”

She slapped her hands on her lap, furious at this boy. “I want to race!”

“No!”

Loisette grabbed her coronet off her head and flung it to the ground. “I want to race *now!*” she shrieked.

He looked down at the small crown and then back up at her. There was a stubborn jut to his jaw. “No, Princess.”

She took in a deep breath, about to start yelling. Throwing a temper tantrum on top of a horse was going to be hard, but not impossible, and she was prepared to do it--but then she looked at him again.

Unlike with the countless ladies-in-waiting she had had, he showed no desire to yell back at her or hate her. Instead, he was simply firmly standing by something he believed in. True, the thing that he believed in--that he had to keep her safe--was frustrating her, but at least he actually seemed sincere ... like he cared about her well-being.

Still--she was mad. And she didn’t want to be around him anymore. All she wanted to do was go back to her room and feed Robert Bigmouth cheese. She’d had enough of the outside world for today. “I want to go back to the stables,” she told him in a level tone as she picked up her coronet and put it back on. Her sentence was part demand and part request.

The stableboy--Clarkent, she reminded herself again, though she wasn’t sure why it mattered--nodded grimly and handed her back her reins. He watched with his dark eyes as she turned High Flyer around to guide him back to the stable. Then he pulled up beside her, and they walked their horses back to the stable quietly.

She went to the platform and jumped off her horse before he could move to help her. Then she walked down the stairs with a dignified air and began moving toward the castle. She could feel his eyes on her the whole way, and for some reason it made her flush.

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### Chapter 3: The Second Collision

The next day, Princess Loisette sat in her room, fidgeting.

She wanted to go back to the stable. She liked being around all the horses, even if they *did* smell.

The reason she wanted to go had *nothing* to do with that impertinent stableboy. In fact, he was the reason why she *wasn’t* going--she simply couldn’t stand seeing him again!

After eating a piece of an orange, she placed another slice on the floor in front of Robert Bigmouth’s mouse hole. He poked his head out, grabbed the slice, and went back inside.

The princess sighed. She should have placed it further away--at least then she could have managed to pet him once.

She began pacing around her room, feeling restless but unsure why. She suddenly stopped in front of her bed. Lying there was her small doll.

She picked it up and looked at it. She had never really liked dolls, but this one had belonged to her mother, and so she slept with it every night. The toy had a white dress on that was slightly yellowed with age, and her blonde hair was ratted due to infrequent brushings. Loisette had never brushed her own hair, let alone a doll’s, and none of her ladies-in-waiting had cared enough to offer to assist with the maintenance of Loisette’s toy.

As Loisette stared down at the glossy eyes and frozen smile of the doll, she thought back to her experience in the stable the day before. Too often, she felt like this doll--frozen in time and place ... watching as everything around her changed but herself ... cared for and cherished by no one, not even the one person who was supposed to love her above all else ... But when she had

ridden alongside that stubborn stableboy ... it had made her feel alive.

Determined to break out of the porcelain shell of her life within the castle walls, Loisetette placed the doll on her dresser and turned her eyes to her chamber door. She was going to go to the stable again.

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As Loisetette walked through the large entrance of the stable, she faltered when she realized the person she had wanted to see was nowhere in sight. Instead, a slightly older boy--perhaps fifteen--was standing near the entryway and pounding away at something. It looked like he was working on fixing a stall.

Seeing her, he bowed and then stepped toward her, his hammer in hand. "The name's William," he told her in a level tone. "Did you lose something, Your Highness?"

Loisetette frowned at the implication that she was not meant to be in a stable, but she sensed the amusement behind his question, so she didn't get as angry with him as she might have otherwise. Which was not to say she wasn't angry.

"No," she bit out with a glare. "I came here to ride."

"That usually is what people want when they come into a stable," William commented dryly.

She glared at him. "Well, I do not want *your* assistance. I wish to be helped by Clarkent." The words had come out of their own volition. But on examining her feelings, she realized it was true--she *did* want to be helped by Clarkent. She didn't know why, but it did seem like he truly cared for her safety. The only person she'd ever felt that with was Aliss.

A man--likely the Stable Master--walked up to her, having heard what she said. After bowing, he told her, "Clarkent is looking for an escaped horse, Your Highness. The mare splintered the bars of her stall. It will probably be ten more minutes before he returns. But Billy and I can help you now."

Loisetette turned to look at the dry-humored "Billy." There was a hint of a smirk touching the corners of his mouth.

"I will wait," she said firmly. It was hard to keep from sticking her tongue out at the stableboy.

"Suit yourself, Your Highness," Billy told her. He stepped away and resumed fixing the stall--which had to belong to the horse the man had mentioned, Loisetette realized.

Though Billy moved away, the man stayed with Loisetette. He stood there quietly for a minute before commenting, "It's good to see you in the stable, Your Highness. Your mother loved horses."

Loisetette gave a brittle smile. "So I have heard."

He gave her a discerning look, and she wondered how much he knew about her. He noted casually, "The horse Clarkent's looking for used to be hers." He must have seen the light in her eyes, as he quickly added, "But I don't recommend riding her. That horse really gives new meaning to the word 'petulance,' Your Highness."

Loisetette smiled at him. He seemed like a nice man.

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Penelope Grace walked right up to the stable door and stopped.

Clarkent made a clicking noise. "Come on," he encouraged. He tugged at her lead rope, but she wouldn't budge.

He tried giving her a light pat on the rump, and she looked at him with disinterest. Then she snorted.

Clarkent resisted the urge to growl. He had finally tracked down the blasted horse and brought her within yards of their destination, and now he couldn't finish the job because she had suddenly decided it was more enjoyable to stand motionlessly out of a stall than in one.

He was contemplating giving her an even harder smack on the rump when he heard a piercing whistle. He turned and saw Dwayne a few yards away. Penelope Grace, who had heard the Stable Master's call, trotted forward obediently, nearly yanking

Clarkent's arm out of its socket in her attempt to oblige Dwayne. Clarkent made an annoyed face, but he rushed forward and finished putting the horse in her stall before she could change her mind. As he turned away from the stall, his eyes widened as he realized the princess was standing in the stable and looking at him.

He made an awkward bow, not sure why his heart was suddenly galloping in his chest like a spooked courser. "Your Highness."

"Princess Loisetette just arrived," Dwayne told him. The princess threw a grateful look at him, though Clarkent wasn't sure why. "Since you're here now, you might as well help her saddle up."

"All right," Clarkent mumbled. He moved to get out the equipment, resigning himself to putting on the horse's full royal regalia.

But the princess stepped up to him. "I don't need everything this time," she told him. "Just--you know--the saddle and stuff." She shifted uncomfortably, and it was obvious she felt as awkward as he did, especially considering how they had last left each other.

"Yes, Your Highness," Clark said softly, not wanting to question her motives.

Perhaps a second later, she proclaimed, "I wish to ride High Flyer again."

Clarkent nearly groaned. He had been hoping he could convince her to ride a different horse. It worried him when she rode High Flyer, even though she had only done it once. But when the princess had brought the horse into a trot, there had been a glint in the horse's eyes ... And that didn't bode well. Given a little more time, Clarkent suspected the horse would have *really* been flying high, and Clarkent would have been hard-pressed to keep the princess from falling off and breaking her neck. Still, he couldn't help but make one attempt to change her mind: "Perhaps a different horse--"

"No," the princess said sharply. "I like High Flyer."

"Yes, Princess," he muttered. He looked over at High Flyer, who was munching contentedly on a mouthful of hay. Maybe things would turn out all right. He would simply have to make sure they kept the pace to a walk.

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After the horses were saddled up, the princess requested Clarkent ride with her again. He did as she wished, knowing a royal request might as well have been a royal mandate for all the free will that a requestee had in deciding whether or not to oblige.

As they left the stable, he found himself again mentally listing all the things that could go wrong if he was going to have to train the princess to ride. However, the sun was warm on his back, and the air was fresh, and his spirits soon lifted, and his mood brightened. The princess did seem perfectly capable of taking care of herself--and besides, everyone had to start learning somewhere. He was simply fortunate that she had proved such a good student. Already, she looked as if she had been riding horses for months. And before long, it would look like she had ridden them for years.

"It's really nice out here," the princess commented as she looked around at the field. A playful breeze was tickling the blades of grass, causing them to ripple in silent laughter. A bird flew overhead and let out a fragment of a song which another bird happily responded to. Then, as if wanting to complete the picture, a white cloud passed lazily overhead.

Observing all this, Clarkent smiled. "You're right."

Neither of them had exactly apologized, but what had just passed between them was close enough. And as long as the princess didn't suggest racing again, Clarkent thought he would get along well with her.

But then she had to go and burst his bubble. "Would you let

me trot at least?"

"What?" he blurted out accidentally. "Your Highness, that isn't a good idea."

"I didn't fall off last time," she pouted.

"That doesn't mean you won't fall off this time."

"Oh, fine," she grumbled. He was relieved she didn't press the issue any further.

A few minutes later, she patted High Flyer's neck gently. "You're a good horse," she told him, her voice pleasant. Then she looked at Clarkent. "Do you like working in the stable?"

For some reason, the question took Clarkent aback. Did he *like* working in the stable? It had never really been a question of whether he liked it or not. It had been what he was Assigned to do, and so he did it. It wasn't like he could really change his lot in life.

But on considering the princess's inquiry, he found his answer quickly, and he told her, "Yes, Your Highness."

She frowned. "You don't have to keep calling me 'Your Highness,' you know."

Clarkent's bottom lip quirked upward into a smile. "Yes, Your Highness."

The princess rolled her eyes and spread her arms out, the reins resting on the front of her saddle. Clarkent was barely able to restrain himself from ordering her to stop. They were going at a slow pace--if she fell, all she would hurt was her dignity.

"Ah! I want to go on an adventure! I feel like Gareth!" the princess proclaimed, sounding a bit frustrated.

Puzzled, Clarkent tilted his head. "Who is that, Your Highness?"

The princess brought her hands back down to grab the reins, and she turned to look at him as if he had just asked what food was. "You've never heard of Gareth? What about Gawain?"

"I do not know them, Your Highness."

She shook her head, looking disappointed. "It's sad you haven't heard of them. Gawain was a great knight who went on many adventures."

"What kind of adventures?" he asked in interest.

She smiled at him. "All kinds. But I'll tell you my favorite story. One day, Gawain's youngest brother, Gareth, heard that Gawain was fighting a chimera. He'd been at it for two days. Though Gareth hadn't ever quested before, he took his horse and looked for his brother, hoping to reach him in time." She punctuated her story with a bouncing motion meant to mimic horseback riding. High Flyer snorted in discomfort, and she continued her story with a gentle pat on his mane. The silly motion served as a subtle reminder that this princess--though she often spoke like an adult--was very young. "But Gareth ran into trouble and came across a dangerous black knight who felt loyalty to no man. They were in a brutal battle, and at last, Gareth won. But he was mortally wounded. Still--that didn't stop him from riding to his brother. Gareth finally reached Gawain, who was standing at the body of the dead chimera. Gareth was relieved that Gawain didn't need saving, but he had lost too much blood from his injuries, and he slumped and fell off his horse."

Clarkent stared at the princess as she told her story. There was such a fire in her eyes and her movements, and he was entranced. The energy put into telling this story was much different from that put into her anger, and there was something mesmerizing about it. The thinness of her face faded into the periphery in the light of her passion. It made her look almost ... pretty.

Oblivious to how intrigued her audience was, the princess went on. "Gawain ran over and took his brother in his arms. Gareth told him how happy he was that Gawain was alive--and that it was all he could have wished for." Her voice became quiet and sad. "Gawain cried as his brother died in his arms. After that, Gawain became fiercely protective of his remaining brothers--

Gaheris, Mordred, and Agravaine--and also of his king and friend, Arthur ... It was said no man could hope to defeat Gawain after that day if they threatened the ones he loved."

Clarkent looked down at Esroh Repus and leaned down to stroke his neck. "That's a sad story, Your Highness," he commented.

"But it spurred Gawain on to even greater things," she pointed out. "King Arthur never had a better knight."

"What about Lancelot?" Clarkent asked. In truth, Lancelot was the only one of the legendary King Arthur's knights whose name Clarkent knew.

The princess shrugged. "Lancelot is overrated--and he took his best friend's wife away." She shook her head adamantly. "No, Gawain is a greater hero."

Clarkent looked at her as she turned High Flyer toward an apple tree. She had led them to the royal orchards. "Do you think they--Gawain, Arthur, Gareth--are real?" Belatedly, he added, "Your Highness." It was getting harder to remember to be formal with her. He had to be careful.

As she reached up and got an apple, the princess smiled at him, and he blushed, though he wasn't sure why. "Does it matter?" she asked.

The princess gestured him over, and he moved Repus closer. She handed him the apple, which he took hesitantly. He looked down at it, twisting it in his hands. "I guess not," he conceded.

She reached up and got another apple. She tossed the fruit into the air and caught it with both hands, though she almost lost her whip in the process. "We should go on an adventure," she declared.

Clarkent had just taken a bite of his apple, and he paused to chew. After swallowing, he told her with careful slowness, "It's dangerous for a princess to go on an adventure."

A shadow fell over her face. She looked down at her untouched apple--squeezing it briefly--and then threw it to the ground. "Yes. It is."

Clarkent felt terrible for his words--he hadn't meant to upset her--but what he had said was the truth. If Princess Loiset was to succeed her father to the throne, then she couldn't simply go gallivanting about the country seeking adventures. She had duties to her kingdom and to her father.

"I'm sorry, Princess," he said in a soft voice.

She shook her head. "Why should you be sorry? After all, you're right," she told him bitterly. "I'm not allowed to have adventures." She kicked her heel and flicked her whip, and High Flyer began walking away from the tree.

As Clarkent pulled on his reins to signal Repus to follow her, he found himself pitying the princess again. Perhaps she was just as trapped in her life as he was in his. Maybe that was the reason for her misery.

They walked a little while longer before the princess led them back to the stable. She brought High Flyer to the platform and actually waited for Clarkent to come assist her. As he gently helped her down, she gave him a look that was equal parts sorrow and gratitude. Struck by her expression, he kept his hands at her waist for a few more seconds. Then he slowly removed them, his cheeks growing warm.

She descended the steps in a slow and methodical fashion, and at the bottom of them, she turned her head to look up at him. "Thank you for the ride," she said. And then she walked away.

Clarkent mumbled, "You're welcome, Princess," but he didn't think she heard him. He continued to watch her as she disappeared into the distance. He felt sad for the princess--she was very smart, but it was obvious she had had to grow up too quickly. Due to the Assigning, Clarkent had seen that far too much, though he hadn't really expected it among royalty. He also got the feeling that the princess hadn't been around other children her age very often. But still ... he had hope for her. Though she

was bowing under the weight of some heavy burden he couldn't fully comprehend, he had the feeling that she was a fighter. She simply needed someone to help her lift her chin ... and then she could take on the world.

Thinking he would much rather see her temper than her sadness, Clarkent gave a slight smile as he led the horses back to the stable. He hoped he would see the princess again soon.

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#### Chapter 4: Getting Back Up

A few weeks later, Aliss was combing the castle, trying to find Princess Loisetette.

The girl had always disappeared frequently. That alone was not out of the ordinary. Normally, however, Aliss was able to find her without too much effort. She would usually find Loisetette under a table in the library reading a book ... or in an abandoned part of the dungeon practicing her penmanship ... or in one of half a dozen other nooks and crannies in the castle trying to decipher a map or befriend some downtrodden rat or catch a nap. Sometimes, the girl would even merely wander around, as if looking for a part of the castle she had somehow left unexplored. Aliss was only thankful that Loisetette didn't know the location of any of the castle's secret passageways.

Aliss suspected the princess was searching for adventure (and perhaps answers) within the castle walls. But the adventures she read about in her storybooks were not likely in such a closeted world as the princess endured. Though Aliss hated the thought of her being in danger, she found herself wishing Loisetette could have one--very small--adventure before becoming queen. Her mother, after all, had had many in her youth, and an adventure could perhaps serve to connect Loisetette with the wisp of a figure she could barely remember but yearned so deeply to know.

But maybe Loisetette's world was finally expanding. As of late, Aliss had found her only infrequently in the castle, and she thought maybe the princess was finally exploring the outside world. But she did wish Loisetette would take her latest lady-in-waiting with her (though how long this lady-in-waiting would last was probably measured in days rather than months). Aliss worried about the princess being alone. There was no telling how many gray hairs Aliss had received from dealing with the girl--after all, if there was one thing Loisetette was good at, it was creating trouble when she couldn't find it.

Still--the princess always came back unharmed. Aliss was probably worrying about nothing. Perhaps Peri knew what Loisetette was doing in the great world outside the castle ...

Well, whatever it was, maybe it would help increase Loisetette's appetite and take the pallor from her skin. All that mattered to Aliss was that the princess was happy and healthy.

She decided to quit her search, telling herself she was worrying without cause. The princess was simply out having fun--there was no need for Aliss to give herself another gray hair over that. But she smiled to herself at the thought. She wouldn't trade any of those gray hairs--or her time with Loisetette--for all the magic in the world.

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Loisetette walked into the stable and smiled when she saw Clarkent. She stood there watching him as he groomed Esroh Repus, and then she stepped forward.

"Hi," she said, suddenly feeling shy.

He turned and looked at her. "Hi," he returned with a smile.

That smile filled Loisetette with warmth. "Do you need some help?" she asked him hopefully.

He shook his head, watching as he stroked the brush across Esroh Repus. "That's all right."

She looked down at her hands. "I'd ... like to."

The stableboy turned toward her and tilted his head, searching her face for something. "If you really want to." He made a gesture with his head.

Grabbing some grooming tools, he led her to a brown and white horse. "This is Agides," he told her.

"Hi, Agides," she greeted, reaching a hand out and petting his nose. The horse twisted his neck slightly and looked at her with a big brown eye, and she smiled.

The stableboy handed her a comb, and she looked at it. "What's this called?"

"It's a curry comb," he told her. "It loosens dirt. You move it in circles all over Agides's body."

She reached out, slowly and gently rubbing the comb in a circle.

Clarkent put his hand over hers. "You're being too gentle--you won't get any dirt out." He then guided her hand with his in a more vigorous fashion. "You just have to be careful about shoulders, hips, legs, and the stomach. You brush lighter there." He released his hand from hers and let her continue.

Loisetette smiled as she continued with her task. The horse, Agides, simply stood in place, occasionally swishing his tail. Excited about doing something new, she determined to get the stableboy to teach her the other steps of grooming.

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After learning about grooming, the princess seemed eager to be taught other tasks, so Clarkent taught her how to put on a saddle.

Her face turned red as she lifted the saddle and saddle blanket--which together probably amounted to about a quarter of her weight--and she hoisted it on to High Flyer.

"You put it on the wrong way," Clarkent said, trying to hide his smile.

She turned to him, looking utterly disheartened. "I did?"

He suddenly felt bad about teasing her. "No--I'm sorry. I was just ... never mind." He swallowed and walked toward the saddle. "Now, you're supposed to put this higher than it's going to be, as it will shift into the right place and all the hairs will lie flat. That makes it more comfortable for the horse. There ... that's right. Well done."

She smiled at his praise.

"Now, you put the stirrup back up here so it won't get in your way. Then you fasten the girth straps."

A few minutes later, High Flyer was properly saddled, his girth straps having been tightened sufficiently.

"Good job," Clarkent told her.

She practically beamed at him. "Thank you!" She turned and rubbed High Flyer's nose. "And thank you for being so patient with me, High Flyer."

Clarkent smiled, remembering the haughty waif who had first appeared in the stable. Who would've thought she would want to learn more than just riding? Maybe the princess wasn't so bad.

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Several minutes later, High Flyer walked onto the open field, and Loisetette admired his smooth strides. "You're a good horse," she told him.

The horse flicked his ears, and Loisetette frowned. "His ears are twitching," she commented.

The stableboy looked over High Flyer. "It's because you're talking," he told her. "Horses automatically move their ears in the direction where sound is coming from. To listen to different sounds with different ears, they can even move their ears independently."

Loisetette frowned and then stuck one hand on the left side of High Flyer and leaned her head to the right side. Simultaneously, she snapped her fingers and said the horse's name. She smiled as his ears twitched in opposite directions, and she glanced over at Clarkent. "You know a lot about horses, don't you?"

He gave her a half smile. "It's my job."

Nodding, she turned her eyes back to High Flyer, and she patted his neck. She was growing to really love the horse.

Guiding him gave her a sense of control, yet it was also almost like a partnership. She relied on him just as much as he relied on her.

She had been avoiding the outside world for so long that she had forgotten how wonderful it was. Being outside of the castle was freeing--she wasn't confined or constantly watched, and she was able to look up at the sky and imagine what it would be like to fly.

She also had to admit that it was nice to be around someone her age. The stableboy Clarkent made her feel less like royalty and more like a human being. Though she spent most of her time outside exploring the region surrounding the castle--and only spent an hour or two a day with the stableboy (knowing he had work to do)--being around Clarkent for even that long was enough to lift her spirits. She was able to take comfort from the simple act of napping beneath a tree or watching a family of rabbits play cautiously in the grass. A life of books alone was no life at all--it had to be balanced with physical activity and an appreciative view of the outside world. And it felt good to be around someone who seemed to like her--someone who wasn't just helping her because he had to.

She turned her eyes down to High Flyer's neck, realizing with some surprise that she had even grown to love the smell of the stable. It was refreshing to someone more accustomed to the perfumes of ladies at court. After riding in quiet contemplation for a few more minutes, Loisetette turned to her human companion. "How am I doing now?" The stableboy didn't know it, but the question was an important one--and not because she valued his opinion (which, she realized, she oddly enough *did* value).

Clarkent, oblivious to her thoughts, smiled at her. "I am impressed, Your Highness."

She laughed. "I am an expert now, you mean!"

"Something like that, Your Highness," he murmured, his dark eyes dancing with amusement.

She smiled sweetly. "You know what that means, don't you?"

He gave her a questioning look, suddenly wary.

"It means I should finally be allowed to race!" she exclaimed. She had been looking forward to racing ever since had gotten up on High Flyer ... Well, after she had gotten over her initial fright, that was.

The stableboy's uneasiness was almost palpable. "Princess, I don't think--"

"Come on! You said you were impressed with me." She had to resist from slicing the air with her whip in frustration. If she couldn't race, then she would certainly burst!

"Yes, but--"

"Please," she begged, staring at him pleadingly. She *had* to feel the wind through her hair and the heavy beats of the horse beneath her. She had to feel alive.

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It was her wide brown eyes that did him in. She looked so sad and pitiful, and Clarkent melted. "All right," he conceded with a sigh.

He had been around the princess far too much if she was able to break his defenses so easily. She had been coming to the stable almost every day, and he had really looked forward to their rides together. As one of the older stableboys, it was his job to help give lessons to prospective riders. However, since the princess was such a quick study, the lessons had quickly dissolved into outings.

Billy had commented that he had much prefer Clarkent be the one to ride with the princess, as she was feisty enough that he wanted no part in it. The other stableboys had heard many stories about the princess's petulance, and they had agreed with Billy's sentiments. Only GERALPH seemed unhappy that Clarkent was hobnobbing with royalty, and he'd made a nasty comment about Clarkent shirking off work to lick the princess's boots.

As an older stableboy, Clarkent was allotted some time off during the week. Since his outings with the princess typically didn't occur during that time, he came in during those hours to work. Even during his regular hours, he worked harder than ever before, not wanting there to be any truth to GERALPH's belief that he was getting less work done. Dwayne made no comments one way or the other, perhaps realizing that a happy princess made for a happier stable. In any case, the stable's upkeep did not suffer in the slightest.

The princess perked up at Clarkent's concession that they race, and she exclaimed, "Wonderful!" She looked around for a second and then pointed. "I will race you to that tree!"

And then, without even saying "go," she was off. Her horse broke into a trot and then a spirited canter, and Clarkent was staring after them for a second before he spurred Esroh Repus on.

High Flyer loved speed, but perhaps he understood the novice nature of his rider, as he wasn't giving it his all. Such meant that Clarkent was able to bring Repus up beside her, and for that, he was glad. What they were doing was making him nervous.

The princess glanced over at him in surprise, obviously upset to have lost her advantage. "You are a good horse-handler," she commented breathlessly.

Clarkent simply smiled. Repus stretched out his neck and pulled ahead of High Flyer by a nose. Clarkent, pleased with his horse, smirked.

"You are not winning that easily," Loisetette muttered under her breath as she urged her horse to break into a full gallop.

He laughed, only to smile a little harder when he saw that the princess was fighting a grin of her own. And then Esroh Repus was right beside High Flyer again, his hooves making gouges in the ground beneath him.

"It's almost like flying," Clarkent called out to her.

"You think *this* is flying? I'll show you flying!" Loisetette exclaimed.

And then High Flyer began moving even faster, his mane whipping back with the wind as he did what he loved best: run.

But Clarkent's mood abruptly darkened as High Flyer put on another burst of speed. A large rock loomed ahead, almost entirely covered by tall grass, and Clarkent realized that High Flyer intended to jump it. The princess, who was too busy laughing, didn't see it. "Pull to the right!" he shouted.

But she simply turned to look at him in confusion, and then it was too late.

The horse leapt over the rock, clearing it easily. But his rider, unprepared for the jolting motion, was flung through the air and landed in a heap on the ground.

Clarkent choked out a noise that only vaguely resembled the word "no," and he jerked back on Esroh Repus's reins and leapt off him.

The realization roared through his mind--he'd killed the princess!

He rushed toward her body and dropped down beside her, the story of Gareth flashing briefly into his head. "Princess," he whispered, his voice breaking.

When a groan was emitted by the crumpled princess, he nearly cried in relief. And then, as he helped the girl sit up, he realized that she *was* crying.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" he asked her, afraid to touch her anymore lest he cause her more pain.

Princess Loisetette nodded, but her eyes were still tearing up, and she didn't speak.

"I'll help you get back to the castle," he told her. "Then I'll worry about the horses."

The princess wiped her eyes on her sleeve and then looked at him. "No," she whispered with a strange firmness.

Clarkent furrowed his brow. "Princess--"

"I'm not going back to the castle right now." Her voice was

as hard as the rock that had almost killed her. “I have been afraid of everything for too long. I’m getting back on the horse.”

“I don’t--” he began, but a glare from the princess caused him to cut off.

Clarkent watched as she got shakily to her feet. He tried to reach an arm out to help her, but she pushed it away. She turned to look at High Flyer, who had stopped running and was now grazing several yards away.

Clarkent gave a loud whistle, and the horse came trotting over obediently. Rather than appearing sheepish, High Flyer just seemed bored. Clarkent narrowed his eyes ... but reminded himself it was a horse. He couldn’t expect High Flyer to react like a human. The horse didn’t know he had done anything wrong.

Hobbling, the princess managed to walk over to her mount. Once there, however, she ran into a problem. She turned to Clarkent and bit her lip. She obviously didn’t want to ask for the help she needed.

Clarkent quietly walked up behind her and held his arms out. She turned around with a nod, and he put his hands around her slender waist and lifted her up sideways. She managed to scramble up onto the horse with a quick intake of breath, and he brought his arms back down.

Refraining from commenting on her pain, Clarkent cast his eyes about in hunt of her whip. After a little searching, he found where it had been tossed into the tall grass, and he walked with it to the princess. He held it up to her, and she took it with a mumbled expression of gratitude.

There was a strange sort of pressure in his chest. He didn’t like this. For reasons he couldn’t comprehend, he felt an overwhelming urge to protect the princess. She seemed so frail and so detached from the world ... But he could also remember that fire he had seen in her when she told the story of Gareth and Gawain. She was a bundle of contradictions, an utter enigma.

Clarkent mounted Esroh Repus, who hadn’t moved since Clarkent had jumped off him. Taking in a deep breath, Clarkent looked at the princess with worry. “Maybe ...” he began hesitantly, “... umm, maybe you should ride a different horse.”

She stared at him, and it was obvious she knew what he was thinking. She knew he was trying to protect her from being hurt. Pointedly, she looked down at her horse and--with a kick and a flick--brought him first to a walk, then to a trot, then to a canter, and finally to a gallop. She raced off, calling back after him, “Catch me if you can, Clark!”

He sat there in bewilderment for a handful of moments. She had called him “Clark” rather than “Clarkent.” He’d never had any sort of nickname before, and while “Clark” was simply a shortened form of his name, he liked it.

Kicking his horse, Clarkent brought Repus after her. He noticed she clutched the front of her saddle with one hand this time, wary about falling off again. He suddenly felt awful about insisting she ride sidesaddle. Maybe she wouldn’t have fallen off High Flyer if she had been riding astride like a man.

“Hyah!” he said with a grunt, urging Repus to go faster. The horse obeyed, stretching his neck forward.

The princess twisted to look at him, and as she realized how far behind he was, she smiled, and her laughter floated back to Clarkent. Something inside him loved the sound.

But it wasn’t long before the princess brought her horse to a halt, and in puzzlement he pulled up beside her. Standing in front of her was Peri. But what was interesting to Clarkent was the black-headed bird perched on Peri’s shoulder.

It was a Peregrine Falcon, that much was clear, but it had neither jesses on its legs nor a hood on its head. Instead, it seemed perfectly content to sit where it was.

“Good day,” Peri greeted them. “Your Highness--please ... call me ‘Peri.’”

The princess gave him a weird look but nodded.

Seeing Clarkent staring at the bird, Peri noted, “This here is James. He’s a good friend of mine.”

The bird opened his mouth and made a small chattering noise, and Clarkent frowned. It had almost seemed like the bird had understood him.

Peri turned to the princess. “Are you all right, Your Highness? We saw you fall.”

“I’m fine,” she answered, her face tight.

Peri tilted his head, obviously not believing her. He lifted a hand and beckoned for her to come down off her horse.

There was a stubborn look on her face, but Peri met it with a look just as stubborn, and she sighed, giving up. She glanced tentatively at Clarkent for assistance. He dropped down off his horse and moved to help her. He reached up to get her, and she fell forward into his arms. His knees bent a little at the suddenness of her weight, but he was able to set her on the ground gently.

Peri stared at her expectantly, and she walked with reluctance over to him. She was still shaky on her feet, and it was obvious she was under some pain.

His brow furrowed, Peri pulled a palm-sized pouch out from underneath his cloak. He opened the pouch and brought out a small white flower. “Here,” he told the princess, handing it to her after squeezing it gently in his fist. “Eat this. It’ll help with any injuries.”

Clarkent was a bit uneasy that Peri was feeding strange things to the princess, but--for some odd reason--he trusted the man.

The princess looked down at the flower with an uncertain expression and then quickly thrust it into her mouth. She made a face as she chewed and then swallowed. “It’s bitter,” she complained.

Peri laughed. “Often, what’s good for us isn’t something we want. Medicine seems to especially suffer from that problem. They say the more foul-tasting the medicine, the more beneficial for you it is.”

James opened his beak and let out a sort of “rep rep” noise, and the princess smiled at him. “Did you think that was funny?” she asked him.

He made a different noise, and the princess frowned this time. “It almost sounded like you said ‘yes.’ But that’s silly ...”

Clarkent didn’t miss the look Peri gave her, though he didn’t know what it meant. Clarkent felt like there was something going on he didn’t understand, but he didn’t even know how to begin going about understanding it.

The princess turned to the gray-headed man. “I feel better already,” she admitted.

“Good,” he replied with a smile. “Then I’ll, uh, say goodbye to you both here. Try to be more careful.”

As he turned, the falcon lifted up off his shoulder and flew several feet above his head, once again making the “rep rep” sound.

Clarkent and the princess watched the two leave. Frowning in contemplation, Clarkent reflected that he was almost certain he had seen that bird before. There were a lot of birds out there, so it was possible he was imagining it, but James really did seem familiar ...

He shrugged the mystery away and then turned to the princess. “Would you like to get back on High Flyer, Your Highness?”

She nodded. “Yes. I would.”

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### Chapter 5: A Villain and a Villanelle

The next day, Alexander was walking through a castle hallway after discussing a missive with the king. He was nineteen now, having turned of age two years before, but he was feeling every bit of his adulthood today. The king was but putty in his hands, and Alexander was making more contacts in the castle all

the time. When his father had died several months ago, Alexander had taken his place as the highest-ranking Noble in Metropolita. For some, that would have been a great honor. But for him, it wasn't good enough. *He* intended to climb to the top--and as King Samuel's cousin and nearest male relation, his claim to the throne came just after Princess Loiset's ... which meant he was very close to the top indeed.

Though he'd had nothing to do with the death of his father, it had been one part of his plan to rise. He hadn't felt the loss of his sire any more than he had felt the loss of his mother a decade previously. His younger brother had been just as unaffected both times. Their entire family had always been emotionally detached from each other.

Alexander was walking through the castle in an attempt to find one of his castle spies when he ran across the princess. She was a little less than eight years younger than him, which meant he practically loomed over her. Still, he put on a kind smile and gave an elegant bow. "Your Highness," he greeted.

"Duke," she returned with a slight nod. Her hands were holding on to two small simnel cakes, and she was presumably trying to go outside with them.

As he studied her, a thoughtful frown touched his face. Before, her health had been such that he had marveled that she continued to last even a day. Now, however, something seemed to be breathing life into her. Her cheeks--once pale as newly fallen snow--were beginning to get some color in them. There was also a happiness in her bearing that had been lacking before. He had thought--and perhaps hoped--that she wouldn't even make it to thirteen. Now, however, he had to withdraw that judgment and render a new one. If this improvement was real, then it was possible she was truly a valid candidate for the throne.

He gave her another warm smile, trying to inject all the pleasantness he could muster into his face. "How is the day treating you, Your Highness?"

She smiled back at him. "It is treating me well, Alexander."

"Indulging your sweet tooth?" he asked her, gesturing toward the cakes in her hand.

She looked down at the simnel cakes, and her cheeks flushed. "Y-yes. I am."

Based on the girl's thinness, he suspected she was carrying one--if not both--of the cakes for someone else, but he didn't press the issue. He had better things to do than interrogate a child about baked goods. "Please, don't let me keep you from enjoying them, Your Highness." He bowed again, and she smiled one last time before continuing on her way.

He watched as she left. Once she was out of sight, a villainous smile crossed his face. Perhaps it would not be too difficult to fit her into his plans.

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As Clarkent brushed the constantly shifting Penelope Grace, he found himself anxious rather than annoyed. Though the horse was obviously trying to make the grooming process as difficult as possible for him, his thoughts were not on her ... but on the princess.

She had normally already arrived at the stable by this time, and he was beginning to think that perhaps she wasn't going to come at all. And that worried him.

Had she told her father about falling off her horse and been forbidden to return? Had she been hurt worse than he thought? What if something else had happened to her?

At last, however, she walked through the stable entrance, a smile on her face and no discernible limp in her step. His relief was such that he actually exhaled audibly. "Your Highness," he greeted. Then, unable to help himself, he ventured, "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "I am."

"I'm glad," he murmured shyly. He studied her for a few

seconds, wanting to ensure that she really *was* better, and he realized something. She seemed happier--and even ... healthier. Or was he just imagining it? It was getting harder and harder to remember the petulant little girl that had first come into the stable. Now, she had been replaced by someone he enjoyed spending time with--someone who treated him as a person and not just a stableboy.

Despite that, he often felt awkward around her and occasionally found himself tongue tied. But he was still genuinely glad to see her every time she came to the stable--even if she was a spoiled brat of a princess. <All right,> he amended. <Maybe she's not a complete brat.>

She had two small cakes in her hands, and he found his eyes drawn to them. Upon seeing him look at them, she smiled and told him, "I brought these for us--one for me and one for you." She held one out toward him.

He stepped forward hesitantly. The *princess* had brought him something?

As he took the cake from her, he felt a warmth spread in his cheeks, and he mumbled, "Th-thank you, Princess."

She smiled. "What is your favorite kind of cake? Simnel cakes are my favorite."

He stared down at his cake for a moment. "My mother makes really good Bryndons."

"Does she make them for you a lot?"

Clarkent's face hardened. "I only get them once a year, Your Highness."

She tilted her head. "Do you get them on a holiday?"

He felt a heavy pressure in his chest, and he closed his eyes briefly and then opened them. "Visiting Day," he said softly. Those two words were all he needed to express himself. That was the only day of the year where he could see his parents.

She looked down at her cake, her face a little sad. "I see."

"I don't get cake any other time. The castle has better things to do than make cakes for stableboys, Princess." He gave her a smile, but it was forced. He missed his parents terribly.

"That's nice that your mother makes you cake," she commented, still looking sorrowful. "She must--she must love you very much."

"She does," he said firmly. "Both my parents do. They mean the world to me--and I to them, Your Highness."

"What is it like?" she asked him. Seeing his look of confusion, she quickly added, "Having a mother?"

He stared at her, tracing the lines of grief in her face. It had to be hard--being a princess without a mother. Her father was probably busy all the time, so who did she talk to? Did she have many friends?

"It's nice," he told her softly. "I don't get to see her often, but ... She gives me things and worries about me. She asks about my life ... and my dreams. I think a lot about the day when I'll leave the castle and get to see her and my father whenever I want."

She took a bite of her simnel cake, looking lost in thought, and he stared down at his own cake for a few moments before finally biting it. The flavors of the cake were so different from his usual fare, and he relished every bite. It was only rare that he got to have any kind of dessert, and to have one sprung upon him like this was a very pleasant surprise. In fact, it--along with the conversation he had just had--made him feel guilty for all his negative thoughts about the princess. Maybe he'd been judging her too harshly. Maybe he hadn't been seeing the whole her. He had been looking at a false image that had been constructed of her--the princess, not the person.

He ate the cake slowly, but it didn't last long. The princess's had been eaten much faster, and she was already standing by High Flyer's stall and rubbing his nose, her earlier sorrowful mood either gone or masked. Clarkent moved to stand beside her, and she turned and started as she realized how close he was.

“Are you ready to go, Your Highness?” he asked her. He might have been amused at her reaction if he was not still feeling a little morose.

“Yes,” she said, moving to pat High Flyer once more. “I am.”  
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As they rode through the field, Loisette stared upward. A falcon--was it James?--soared overhead in the clear blue sky. She longed to be up there with the bird, rising above the concerns of everyone on the ground, but she was stuck where she was.

With a heavy sigh, she dropped her eyes to the grass. A pretty red flower caught her eye, and on impulse she brought High Flyer to a stop. She looked down at the ground with a wary eye and then slid off the horse.

“Princess,” the stableboy called out nervously. He brought his horse beside her and then dropped to the ground. “Is something wrong?” His concern for her might have been charming if it weren’t so annoying.

“Nothing is wrong,” she told him as she knelt on the grass. She reached a hand out and picked the flower, lifting it to her nose and inhaling its aroma. She clutched it to her chest and then looked back up at the sky with a sigh.

“Your Highness,” Clarkent asked hesitantly, “do you want help back on your horse?”

Loisette turned to look at High Flyer, who was simply standing and awaiting guidance. On his bridle gleamed a small golden medallion with the royal seal on it--a rearing pegasus.

“I wish I had a pegasus,” she said softly.  
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When the princess expressed her wish for a pegasus, Clarkent immediately frowned, not understanding her. “A pegasus, Your Highness?” Where had *that* come from?

She swiveled to look at him. “A pegasus. A winged horse.”

“I know what a pegasus is, Your Highness,” he said, annoyed. “It’s on the royal seal.”

“They’re wonderful creatures,” the princess said with a dreamy sigh. “Peregrine the White once told me a story about how my mother was able to ride one.”

Clarkent raised his brow. “You know Peregrine the White?”

She gave him a funny look. “Of course. He’s my father’s court magician.”

<Oh, right.> Clarkent thought, feeling a bit embarrassed. Of course she associated with such an important man. She probably knew all of the Nobles as well. Out loud, he said, “You want a pegasus, Your Highness?”

“Think how exciting it would be to fly through the air on one!” she exclaimed.

“And how painful it would be to fall from one,” he countered. He hadn’t meant to sound so grouchy, so he softened his voice and asked, “Would you like help back on High Flyer, Your Highness?”

She sighed again, presumably sad since she lacked a pegasus to ride, and then she suddenly perked up. “No. I do not.”

“No?” he echoed.

“I want to dance!” she exclaimed.

From the way she looked at him, Clarkent could tell immediately that she didn’t mean a solo dance. And he also knew immediately that he was going to have to disappoint her. “I’m--I’m sorry, Your Highness, but I can’t dance.”

“I can teach you!” she proclaimed. “After all, you taught me how to ride horses.”

He shook his head adamantly. “I can’t dance with a princess--”

“That is just silly. There is no reason why you can’t dance with me.”

“Your Highness--”

“Clark,” she returned firmly, “I order you to dance with me.”

He sighed, knowing he couldn’t win this argument--

especially not after she had made it an order. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Perhaps he seemed too downtrodden, for her excitement level dropped a little. “You don’t *really* mind, do you?”

“I guess not,” he mumbled. Mostly, he didn’t want to make a fool out of himself.

She dropped the red flower to the ground and commanded, “Now, put your hand on my waist.” When he didn’t move, she grabbed his hand and placed it there. Then she grabbed his other hand and held it in the air with hers. “I’m going to sing a song. There are four beats to this, so it shouldn’t be too hard. I will lead you--do what I do.”

“Okay,” he murmured, uncomfortable at being this close to the princess.

“Take my hand and dance with me,” she began to sing, not missing his ironic smile at her song choice. He awkwardly tried to step with her but only managed to step on her toes. As a result, her next words came out with a bit of a hitch: “D-dawn is coming, end of day.” She shook her head at him and said, “Stop staring at your feet. Look at my face. *Feel* the music.” Then she sang, “Life could end so happily.”

“S-sorry,” he told her, flushing as he once again mashed her toes.

“All right,” she said, looking perturbed. “Think about the beat--one ... two ... three ... four ... “ And then she sang the next verse:

“Staring at me quietly,

You can take my breath away.

Take my hand and dance with me.”

This time, he managed to avoid her toes, but he was very much *not* in time with the beat. She simply laughed away her frustrations this time--“You really aren’t a good dancer, are you?”

“Maybe you’re not a good teacher,” he shot back, a bit surprised at his audacity.

But she simply rolled her eyes and continued:

“Stars are staring at our glee.

Envy our life, sigh they,

‘Life could end so happily.’”

“It’s daylight,” he murmured contrarily, finally feeling himself fall into the natural rhythm of the song.

Ignoring him again and pasting a solemn expression on her face, she sang:

“Know they not we cannot be.

Know they not how hard I pray,

‘Take my hand and dance with me.’”

“I thought that’s what I was doing,” he said with a smirk.

There was a crack in her solemn façade, but she kept on:

“Parting takes the breath in me.

Imagining you’re here to stay--

*Life could end so happily.*”

He didn’t make a snarky comment this time, instead allowing himself to listen to her voice as she sang the villanelle. She had a beautiful singing voice--there was something sweet and innocent about it, something that tugged at his heartstrings. He had heard the song before, but it had been sung faster and less respectfully. She actually managed to inject feeling into the villanelle, and he found he enjoyed both listening to her and dancing with her.

As she finished the song, he found himself growing sad:

“Tears are falling as you flee.

All we had was just a day--

... Take my hand and dance with me.

Life could end so happily.”

With her guidance, he spun her into a suitable ending position. She held the position for a few seconds and then relaxed. Beaming at him, she said, “See--you can dance!”

He smiled. “I guess my teacher wasn’t so bad after all.”

“Well, I had good teachers myself,” she admitted. “But I still

am surprised you didn't know this dance."

Clarkent released the hand he hadn't realized he'd still been holding, and he stepped away from the princess. "There isn't much time in the stable to practice dancing," he told her gruffly.

"I guess not," she said softly.

"I should--I should probably be getting back." It was one thing to be riding horses with the princess--and quite another to be dancing with her.

"All--all right," she stammered. "Thank you for dancing with me."

He nodded as he went to stand by High Flyer. She came up to him and placed her hands on his shoulders, looking like she wanted to say something to him. But before she could, he lifted her into the air, and she had to struggle to get seated properly on her mount.

Clarkent went over to Esroh Repus and got up on his back. As the princess guided High Flyer into a walk, he stared at her grimly. He was a stableboy. And the princess couldn't be friends with a stableboy. That wasn't how it worked.

Before long, she would find some new pastime, and he wouldn't see her anymore. As much as he wanted to think of her as a friend--well, it just couldn't be.

He was a lowly stableboy. And that was all he would ever be.

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### Chapter 6: Gawain and the Barbarian Kingdom

Weeks later, Alexander, the Duke of Lutheria, was sitting at the dinner table with his brother. He was bringing a leg of mutton to his mouth when his brother made a comment:

"You're thinking about the princess again, aren't you?"

Alexander's eyes flicked to meet his brother's. It was true. He had come to the conclusion that the princess could be called weak and sickly no more, so she was occupying his thoughts. There was no doubting the color in her cheeks or the bounce in her steps. She was even slowly beginning to fill out--it would be a while before she had her womanly curves, but she was certainly on her way. For someone who was still a child, she was becoming remarkably attractive. Before long, she would be properly termed a "beauty."

Instead of responding to his younger brother, Alexander took a bite of his food. But he couldn't concentrate on its taste. There was too much on his mind.

"You wish to have her for yourself," persisted Tempos after taking a sip of wine.

Alexander looked calmly at his brother. His voice was level as he said, "That's absurd."

As the younger son, Tempos was doomed to stand in Alexander's shadow. Their father's title and most of his property had gone to Alexander, and Tempos had been forced to pursue the path of knighthood to attain a name for himself. But his jealousy toward his older brother always simmered beneath the surface, and Alexander knew to tread carefully. Such was why he was denying that he wished to take the princess for himself.

But Tempos's heart was just as black as Alexander's, and they knew each other well. "Don't lie to me brother," Tempos said dryly, plopping a grape into his mouth. "You'll poke my eye out with your nose."

Alexander pursed his lips. "I assure you--I have better things to think about than a child."

Tempos gave him an obviously fake smile. "Not when that child happens to be royalty."

Alexander fell into silence, his thoughts indeed wholly settled on the princess. He had recently received news that the princess had been spending an inordinate amount of time with a stableboy, and that news had disturbed him greatly.

"I doubt she will be able to hold a candle to your mistresses," Tempos said lazily. "But give her a few years."

Alexander refused to rise to the bait. Tempos was certainly

not one to talk when it came to women. Though a little less than a year younger than Alexander, Tempos had already had three wives, all of whom had disappeared under mysterious circumstances--mysterious, that was, to everyone but Tempos and Alexander, the latter of whom had worked diligently to cover up the "accidents." Had Tempos been stupid, Alexander probably wouldn't have bothered, even if it did tarnish the family name, but Tempos knew enough of Alexander's heart to be a threat, and Alexander always wanted him nearby--no dungeon could hold Tempos for long ... He was sure of it.

"You must be careful, though," warned Tempos. "I hear the princess has quite a temper."

Alexander scoffed, "Women with tempers are easily dealt with."

Tempos let loose a villainous laugh. "You're quite right about that, brother."

"And besides," Alexander commented as he brought his goblet up to his lips, "a little temper is a small price to pay for a kingdom."

"I suppose that's true as well."

As he took a sip of wine, Alexander reflected that he would have to speak with the king about that stableboy. Though the relationship between the boy and the princess might have been innocent enough for the time being, it could soon escalate into something much more.

And he would not have his future wife deflowered by some *peasant*. What was Alexander's ... was Alexander's alone.

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Loisette was chattering to Robert Bigmouth as he ate a sliver of cheese. "And then High Flier began nibbling at Clark's livery!" she finished with a laugh. "You should have seen the look on Clark's face!"

A knock on the door caused her to turn her head and Robert Bigmouth to scurry away. She stood and called out, "Come in."

Her father swept into the room like an angry storm cloud, and her cheerful mood immediately fled. "I just received some disturbing news, Princess," the king said, his voice dangerously low. "It seems you have been associating daily with a mere *stableboy*?"

She crossed her arms, putting on a calm front but feeling secretly frightened. She had never seen her father this furious before. "He has been teaching me how to ride horses, Daddy."

"I should think you would have learned all you needed to know by now."

"Daddy--"

"Princess, you should not be freely associating with stableboys and their ilk. If you wish to ride a horse, then you must take your lady-in-waiting with you."

"But I don't have--"

Her father cut her off again: "I have now found you the last lady-in-waiting you shall be given. Her name is Catherine, and she is the daughter of an earl who is very loyal to me. I expect you to treat her with the respect due to her." He glared down at her. "You had better not lose this one, Loisette, or you will regret it."

"Daddy--" she began one last time in desperation, but he would have none of her pleas.

"She will arrive tomorrow night," he said firmly. "I had better not hear anything else about you being alone with that boy again. He is a servant, not a friend, and you would do well to remember that." And then he stalked out of the room, the door slamming loudly behind him.

Loisette collapsed on the ground and burst out into tears. She pounded the floor with a feeble fist, feeling utterly helpless. She had finally been enjoying her life and opening her eyes to the outside world, and then her father had to spring this on her. So *what* if she was becoming friends with a stableboy? He was a

human being, too! What her father was doing to her wasn't fair! She had done nothing wrong!

A small squeak came to her ears, and she turned her tear-filled eyes to see Robert Bigmouth poking his head out of his hole. She made a little motion with a smidgen of cheese still held between her fingers, and he hurried over. She picked him up and began crying into his fur. "I don't know what to do, Robert," she sobbed. "I just don't know what to do."

\*\*\*

Clarkent was mucking out Agides's stall when a stranger came into the stable.

It was a boy smaller and younger than Clarkent. He had on a hat and rugged clothes, and he stood in the entryway staring awkwardly around, almost as if frightened someone would jump out and yell at him to leave.

Clarkent finished what he was doing and then walked over to the boy. "Can I help you?" he asked, leaning on his pitchfork.

"I--I want to h-help you," stuttered the boy. "Umm. In the stable ... with ... the horses."

Frowning, Clarkent queried, "Why would you want to do that?"

"I like horses," the boy said, his voice almost a whimper. "You'll let me stay, won't you?"

Clarkent sighed. They *were* a little short staffed--Dwayne was gone for the day, and one of the stableboys was sick. Assistance, while unexpected, would certainly be welcome. "You can help," Clarkent conceded, "but it isn't very fun. We're mucking out stalls right now."

"A-all right," the boy said with some hesitance. "Whatever you want."

Clarkent got out another pitchfork and handed it to the stranger. "I'm Clarkent," he said, realizing he hadn't introduced himself. "What's your name?"

The boy made a short intake of breath and looked down at the long tool in his hand while biting his lip. "My name--my name is Gawain."

Clarkent raised an eyebrow, remembering the princess's story about what had happened to Gareth. "Like the famous knight," he commented, picking his own pitchfork back up. He wondered if the princess was going to come to the stable that day. It would probably be easier if he would simply start asking her when she was going to come, but for some reason, he didn't want to do that.

"Y-yeah," Gawain acknowledged. "My father ... loved knights."

Clarkent tilted his head and studied the boy for a few seconds. "You're not running from someone, are you? If you need somewhere to hide--"

"No!" the boy insisted. Looking a little sheepish at his sharpness, he added, "That's not it."

Clarkent squinted, feeling dubious as to whether that was the truth or not, but it wasn't his place to question Gawain. And besides, if the other boy was hiding from someone, there was probably a good reason for it.

"You ever mucked out stalls before?" Clarkent asked.

"No," admitted Gawain.

"It's easy. The manure and the wet straw go in the wheelbarrow--don't fill it up all the way, or it'll get too heavy to move. Then, we go dump it. Next, we put fresh straw in. It's as easy as that."

"All--all right."

Gawain waited until Clarkent had put a few pitchforkfuls in the wheelbarrow before beginning. His movements were awkward, and he was obviously not used to manual labor.

Clarkent watched him inconspicuously for a few minutes before finally asking in as casual a voice as he could manage, "Who are you Assigned to?"

"Assigned to?" the boy echoed. He looked down at his hands, and Clarkent couldn't make out his expression. "Umm, I work in the castle."

"For who?"

"I--I run errands for the cook." Gawain slowly dipped his pitchfork back into the dirty bedding. "But the cook doesn't like me, so I only ... only run errands in the morning. The cook doesn't have to see me then in the afternoons." He looked up at Clarkent and gave him a slight smile. "It's sometimes hard to find things to do, though. That's why I'm here."

Clarkent continued mucking out the stall, reflecting that Gawain must be fairly fortunate to not be required to work all the time. Then again--Clarkent was pretty fortunate himself. For one thing, he was allotted some time off now that he was thirteen. And for another--it was far better that he be under the control of Dwayne rather than Stable Master Kile. Kile was someone who would just as soon torment those under his command as direct them--and that included his horse-smart but world-dumb brother, Viktor. It could always be worse.

As they worked, Clarkent fell into silence, but Gawain started to become obviously antsy.

Finally, Gawain asked, "Have you ever met the princess? I heard--I heard she started riding horses recently. Have you seen her?"

"Yes," Clarkent answered, feeling awkward. "I--I taught her how to ride."

"What do you think about her?"

Clarkent hesitated. He hated sharing something like this with a complete stranger, but it felt nice to be able to talk to someone about it. "I think--I think she needs a friend."

"Why do you think that?"

"I think maybe it's hard to be royalty--everyone treats royalty differently." Clark gave a lopsided grin. "Guess you can't blame them. The king and the princess *are* our superiors ..."

"Not everyone treats royalty respectfully," Gawain said casually. "Do you know much about the Barbarian Kingdom?"

Clarkent shook his head. "I know they're our enemies," he offered.

"Well, it wasn't always that way," Gawain noted. "Maybe a century ago, the Barbarian Kingdom was once united with Metropolita. They made up a kingdom called Solaria. They broke apart, but eventually they reached a truce and stopped warring. In the past decade or so, though, the Barbarian Kingdom started the war with Metropolita again."

Clarkent frowned. "Why did they start the war again?"

"Well, I don't know for sure," Gawain admitted, "but I think it's because of the past two kings. The father of the present Barbarian King killed and deposed the rightful king. His son took over when he died, but they have both seemed to like war."

"Does King Samuel like the war?" Clarkent asked out of curiosity.

Gawain shook his head. "I don't think so."

Though fascinated by this political tale he had known nothing about, Clarkent ventured, "Is this all really true?"

Gawain stabbed his pitchfork into the ground. "Of course it is!" He peered at Clarkent for a few seconds. "I'll even tell you more about the Barbarian Kingdom tomorrow. How about that?"

Clarkent considered it and then smiled. "I think I'd like that."

They worked a while longer, and then Gawain left.

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Clarkent was busy the rest of the day with his stableboy duties, but at one point, Peri came in to see him.

"Clarkent," greeted the older man, "I hope you're having a good day?" There was an almost furtive look about him, though Clarkent wasn't sure why that would be.

Dismissing the notion, Clarkent acknowledged with a smile, "I am. I even made a new friend."

“You did?” Peri said, his level of interest higher than Clarkent would have expected. “And, uh, what was this friend’s name?”

“Gawain,” Clarkent answered slowly.

The older man frowned. “I don’t know anyone by that name at the castle ...”

“There are a lot of people at the castle,” Clarkent pointed out.

“You’re right,” Peri murmured. “Still--a name like that ...”

Well, just be careful around him, son.”

“All right,” the stableboy said, puzzled as to why it would matter.

The older man told him farewell, and Clarkent watched him go. With a shrug, he went back to work, brushing off the encounter.

That night, he was rather sad the princess never showed up.

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### Chapter 7: An Impish Plan

The next day, Clarkent had to help a rather rude knight saddle his horse, and then he returned to grooming Penelope Grace, who was extremely dirty *again*. After about two blissful and problem-free minutes, she stepped on his foot. It was all he could do to keep from kicking her to make her move.

“Get off,” he gritted, pushing her with his shoulder.

He successfully managed to unbalance her, and the blasted horse finally moved, giving his foot back. He lifted his leg with a wince, glad he was wearing such thick boots. If not for them, he might be missing a toe or two.

Resuming his grooming grudgingly, he reflected with some sadness that he still hadn’t seen the princess since the day before last. Maybe she was done with riding forever--perhaps it had just been a phase. He wished he knew the reason for certain. However, she was a princess, and he couldn’t exactly go track her down, so it was going to remain a mystery.

At least that boy, Gawain, would be coming to visit. Gawain seemed like a bit of an odd one, and Clarkent couldn’t easily forget Peri’s words of warning, but the other boy probably just wanted a friend. And if Gawain really *did* work in the kitchen, Clarkent couldn’t blame him for wanting to get away. The cook wasn’t known for acts of kindness.

He looked up and saw the object of his thoughts walking through the stable entrance. Gawain was almost frolicking about as he came in. He appeared more comfortable in the stable than he had the day before, and when he saw Clarkent, he grinned widely.

“Hello!” Gawain said cheerfully.

“Hello,” Clarkent returned, wondering what had caused such a change in mood.

Gawain tilted his head, looking at the curry comb in Clarkent’s hand. “Grooming, huh?”

“Yeah. This cranky thing here is Penelope Grace.” Clarkent gestured at the horse with his free hand, and the horse snorted, almost as if it understood him and disapproved of his insult.

“That’s ... Queen Ellena’s horse, isn’t it?”

“Uh huh. You can tell she used to belong to royalty--she’s more spoiled than a barrel of rotten apples.”

Gawain smiled. “She must have been nice at *some* point if the queen liked her.”

Clarkent shrugged. “I guess so.”

Gawain shifted in place, his hesitancy obvious as he tried to formulate his next sentence. “Would you ... uh ... like to go out into the field?”

Clarkent glanced beside him at Penelope Grace. “I have to finish grooming some horses. But Billy’s around and can help with riders, so I might have some free time in a little while ...” Clarkent had done a lot of work before he started grooming Penelope Grace, and Geralph had made a surprising amount of progress on mucking out stalls, so it was likely there would be

time.

“What if I help you?” suggested Gawain. “With an extra hand grooming, you’ll be done faster.”

Frowning, Clarkent asked, “Have you groomed horses before?”

Gawain’s eyes dropped down to his sleeve, and he picked an invisible piece of dust off it. “My ... my father had a horse. He--he used to let me help groom it.”

“He must have really trusted you, as young as you would have been,” Clarkent commented. Gawain would have been seven years old or younger when he was still with his parents.

“Yeah ...” trailed off Gawain. He seemed uncomfortable.

Clarkent considered Gawain’s offer for a few seconds, and then he smiled. “Well, I guess if you’re willing to help me, then I accept.”

Beaming, Gawain exclaimed, “Great! This will be fun!”

And then Clarkent got out some more grooming supplies, and they set to work.

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“Oh, come on! It’s not that bad! I volunteered to be the girl!”

“This is silly!”

Gawain put his hands on his hips. “It’s not silly--it’s fun!”

Clarkent sighed. “Fine. I just wish I didn’t have to be the bad guys.” Not that he wanted to be the girl either. He was surprised Gawain had taken the role.

“I can’t be the girl *and* the bad guys,” Gawain noted in aggravation.

“What bad guy am I going to be first?” Clarkent asked, resigned to his fate as a player in this strange game of Gawain’s.

“You’re going to be one of the soldiers of the first Barbarian King. The first Barbarian King is the father of North.”

“North?” echoed Clarkent, not completely understanding.

Gawain narrowed his eyes at Clarkent. “Don’t you remember the things I was telling you? The first Barbarian King died recently, so his son took over. People say North’s just as bad as his father was--if not worse.”

“Uh, right,” Clarkent mumbled.

“Now, the first Barbarian King killed the rightful king, as you should remember, and the queen ran away with their baby. He sent soldiers after the queen, and they captured her and killed her child. Then, the Barbarian King forced her to marry him--”

“That sounds depressing,” Clarkent interrupted. It didn’t sound like a very glorious story.

“Well, it is,” Gawain said matter-of-factly. “But it’s romantic--the queen wasted away after that, pining after her dead husband and child, and she only lived a few more years. She was killed when she tried to escape to Metropolita.”

“And you know all this ... how?”

“I read about it in a book,” Gawain said firmly.

“A book?” Clarkent echoed. Books were expensive, so how did Gawain have access to them? “From who?”

“From--from an old man, that’s who! It doesn’t matter. Look, are you going to act this out with me or not?”

Clarkent sighed. Gawain was a boy with a vivid imagination, but he was also a bit bossy. “All right,” Clarkent conceded. “Fine--I’m a soldier.” He picked up one of the sticks he and Gawain had gathered a few minutes before, and he held it out like a sword. “Stop, queen,” he said in a voice that was suspiciously close to a monotone.

“No, that’s wrong!” Gawain exclaimed. “You have to put feeling into it! You’re a soldier who is going to be killed if he doesn’t do what his master wants. You have to *feel* the role!”

Once again, Clarkent exhaled. It was going to be a long couple of hours.

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Sometime later, a figure scurried down the castle hallway, suddenly ducking behind an ancient suit of armor upon hearing

the light padding of footsteps.

The person causing the noise passed, and the hidden figure cautiously stepped out from behind the armor, pausing to listen only for a second before continuing on.

A few minutes later, the figure was rushing into a room.

Dirty fingers removed a blue dress and a pair of shoes from a trunk at the foot of the bed, and—holding the items with a little hesitance—the figure began turning in circles. The figure’s spinning abruptly turned into a blur of color as the speed of the rotations became faster than the eye could follow. When the movement stopped, a princess with a blue dress and a very smug expression was staring down at a set of boy’s clothing. Pushing her long brown hair behind her back, she stuffed the clothes into the trunk under a blanket, where they would be hidden from immediate view. She felt immensely proud of herself and pleased with how her day had gone.

She heard a small noise that indicated Robert Bigmouth was coming out and wanting food, so she looked into a drawer and found some cheese for her small friend.

Princess Loisetette knelt on the floor and held out the food, and Robert Bigmouth came rushing over in excitement. He climbed into her hands to nibble at the cheese, and she stroked his back absentmindedly, her thoughts wholly focused on something that had happened a few days before ...

~~~~~  
Flashback  
~~~~~

“I don’t know what to do, Robert,” she sobbed. “I just don’t know what to do.”

The little mouse stared up at her, but it was obvious he didn’t know what to do either.

“I want to run away,” she told him, her chin trembling. “But I don’t know where to go.” She set the mouse down on the ground and buried her face in her hands. “I wanted Clark to be my friend. But I guess that can’t ever be.”

Robert Bigmouth seemed to realize he wasn’t going to be fed, and he returned to his hole. Loisetette stood up suddenly, wiping her red eyes with her hands. She was going to go outside at least. Her father couldn’t deny her that.

She almost ran through the castle in her effort to get outside, sick of the dark walls of the place, sick of the cold hard stone, sick of her confined world ... sick of being a princess.

And then she burst out into the sunlight, glad that at least it could warm her skin, if not her heart. She broke out into a true run, only to halt abruptly as she almost ran into someone.

“S-sorry,” she stuttered, certain the man had not been there a moment ago.

He was wearing a strange black robe with white ruffles on the sleeves and useless brass buttons down the front of it. His hair was black and curly, and his mustache extended downward to his chin. There was a slightly manic yet gleeful look in his eyes that immediately set Loisetette on edge, and the staff he held in his right hand didn’t make her feel any better.

“That’s all right, Your Highness!” he said, holding his hands up. “I must say—it is so nice to see you.”

She frowned. “Who are you?”

He held up a finger and gave her a slight smile. “Ah! No, no. You see, bad things happen when people say my name. I’m afraid I must simply ask you to call me something else—perhaps ‘Imp’ would be best. I think I like that.”

“All right, Imp,” she said hesitantly.

His smile grew. “Great! Now, I can see from your face that you’ve been crying. Would you like to tell me what’s wrong?”

She averted her gaze to the ground and mumbled, “It was something my father said.”

Imp stepped lightly toward her with a knowing gleam in his eyes. “Hmm ... let me think ... He doesn’t want you hanging out

with the stableboy anymore, does he?”

She looked at him sharply. “How did you know that?”

“The walls have ears,” he told her. “Well—not literally. But if you have the power, you can spy on all sorts of things. And I happen to have that power.”

“Why are you spying on people in the castle?” she asked him, wary.

He waved his hands in the air. “No matter. What matters is that I can help you. I have something you want.”

“And what is that?”

His dark eyes danced. “Well, you want to be with the stableboy without your father finding out, don’t you?”

She hesitated and then nodded.

“Well, I can give you that!” He moved his arms in a big twirling motion in the air and then bowed, extending his hand downward. There was a flash of light, and then something appeared on the ground where his hand was pointing.

Loisetette gasped. He was a magician.

Oblivious to her surprise, Imp crouched and picked up the items, holding them out for her to look at.

It was a boy’s outfit. There were brown breeches and boots, a brown hat, and a brown and white tunic with a rearing golden pegasus sewn into the corner.

“It’s a disguise,” Imp told her excitedly as he straightened up. “The hat to cover your hair—the royal symbol to indicate you work for the castle ... Dressed as a boy, no one will ever give you a second glance! You’ll be practically invisible!”

Loisetette frowned. “I could find boy clothes myself—I don’t have to take yours.”

“Ah, yes,” he acknowledged, “but they wouldn’t be like these. My clothes are magic. You see, whenever you wear these, no human will be able to recognize you as anything other than a boy. Animals are too reliant on all their senses to be fooled, of course, but that’s a small and irrelevant detail! And what’s more—the clothes will grow as you do, so you don’t even have to worry about that! They are loose on your body, which will be enough to hide your feminine curves ... “ His eyebrows lifted, “That is—it will whenever you actually get them.” He gave a small smile. “But even then, it won’t matter, as the magic will force everyone to recognize you as male regardless.” He leaned forward, as if about to tell her a secret. “The only catch is ... you can’t let anybody know about the disguise.”

She stared down at the clothes. Secrecy didn’t seem like a big concession to make, but she didn’t like it. She wanted to interact with Clarkent—and maybe others—in the outfit, and the thought of never being able to reveal her identity didn’t sit well with her. What if she really liked the freedom it gave her? What if she needed to be able to tell someone her identity for some reason?

“That means you can’t tell anyone about it or take it off while anyone else is around who can see you,” Imp clarified. “You can’t try to trick the magic. The clothes can come off, but not when anyone else is in the room with you.”

She thought about it some more. It still didn’t feel right ...

“I don’t know,” Loisetette said, concerns fluttering around in her head like disturbed bats.

“Fine, fine,” he said with a sigh. “I didn’t actually think you would take them that easily—but you can’t blame me for trying!” He clutched the clothes to his chest with one hand and tilted his head. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. Much as it makes me roll my eyes to admit it, magic has one weakness.”

Loisetette looked at him in interest. “And what’s that?”

As he’d noted, Imp was rolling his eyes as he told her the answer: “Love.”

“Love?” she echoed.

“Yes,” he said, twirling his free hand in the air. “It may sound a bit sappy, but love can break all sorts of spells in all sorts of ways.”

*“And what would love do with this ... disguise?”*

*“When--and only when--your true love proves himself willing to give up everything for you, then he will see you as you truly are, and the magic surrounding the clothes will disappear completely.” Imp jiggled the clothes in his hand. “And if you put these on, that will make you a princess and a cross-dresser all wrapped up in one.” He seemed to find something very amusing about that.*

*Loisette squinted at him in suspicion, a little annoyed. “I don’t love anyone. Why should this make me feel better about accepting this?”*

*Imp exhaled loudly. Then he spoke in exasperation: “Surely the only person who it would ever be important for you to know your identity is your true love!”*

*She considered what he had told her. Would there really be a reason to tell someone about her disguise? A disguise would allow her freedom. Would she ever need to let anyone know the truth about it?*

*Imp did make a valid point--if there ever was someone who would need to know the truth, it would be her one true love. And she could always stop using the disguise at any time.*

*“What’s in it for you?” she asked him, the thought suddenly occurring to her.*

*He smiled. “I’m a mischief-maker. And the king’s daughter running around disguised as a boy sounds like the greatest kind of mischief, don’t you think?”*

*She looked at him warily. He did seem like the type of person who liked mischief, but she didn’t feel that was all to the story. “Is there anything else about these clothes that you aren’t telling me?”*

*“Well--there is one really cool part that I left out.” Imp showed gleaming white teeth. “To get into the clothes, you have to spin into them!”*

*“Spin into them?” she echoed, skepticism coloring her voice.*

*He nodded with glee. “You just hold them in your hands and make one spin, and then the magic will exchange the clothes you are wearing with these. It’ll be so fast that no one can see it!” He looked smug with himself. “To make the exchange back into your original clothes, just hold your original clothes and spin twice.”*

*She crossed her arms. “And that’s all I need to know about these?”*

*“Yep. All the cards that concern you are now on the table.” He held the clothes out and shook them lightly. “Now, do you want these or not?”*

*Loisette stared at the clothes for a few seconds and then suddenly snatched them. “I do.”*

*“Great!” he said with a laugh that was almost a cackle. “I’ll be watching out for you. Try to do as many dangerous things as possible! The riskier, the better!”*

*Letting out a gleeful chuckle, he threw some powder on the ground and vanished in a puff of smoke.*

*Startled, Loisette looked at the spot he had vacated. Then she turned her eyes back down to the clothes. Though she didn’t quite like the man who had just left her, these clothes had suddenly become very important to her. They were her key to freedom.*

*Hugging them to her chest, she hurried back inside the castle. She was going to put them on and go see Clarkent. And that thought made her very happy.*

*Nobody would be able to say that the princess had been hanging out with a stableboy--because it wouldn’t be the princess. To everyone else, it would a boy no one had ever seen or heard from ... a boy no one cared about.*

*But she cared. She cared because that boy she was going to become was her ticket to freedom. Even if it was just for an hour or two a day--and she knew it couldn’t be much more than that--it would give her a second life.*

*End Flashback*

Loisette had almost fallen to pieces when Clarkent had asked her boy self for a name. But then--like a ray of light illuminating the proper path to take--the story of Gawain had come back to her, and she had latched on to it. She felt it had served her well. It made her feel more adventurous, more daring, more ... willing to take risks. Suddenly, she could do more than just ride horses with the stableboy. A whole new world had opened to her. There was nothing she couldn’t do.

She was smiling and recalling the adventure she and Clarkent had played out in the field earlier when there was a knock on the door. She hurried over to the door and opened it, only for her spirits to abruptly plummet as she realized something she had forgotten.

Aliss was standing there, and with her was the Noblewoman that was going to be Loisette’s new lady-in-waiting.

The Noblewoman was wearing a dress that showed a lot more of her chest than was strictly proper, and her confidence level was high if the way she held her head up high despite the newness of her surroundings was any indication. She looked to be perhaps a few years older than Loisette.

“Princess,” Aliss began slowly after curtsying, “this is Lady Catherine. She will be your new lady-in-waiting.”

The princess stared at the other girl, her heart suddenly heavy.

“Your Highness,” Catherine greeted coolly with a small curtsy.

“Lady Catherine,” Loisette returned, her voice just as flat. She could already tell that she wasn’t going to get along very well with Catherine. And judging by the haughty expression on her new lady-in-waiting’s face, Catherine’s thoughts were in sync with her own.

What a rotten ending to what had been a great day.

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### **Chapter 8: Girls will be Girls**

Loisette was sitting on her bed and glaring at Catherine.

Catherine was also sitting on the bed and glaring back.

Loisette hadn’t thrown any temper tantrums since Catherine’s arrival--mindful of how much trouble she was in with her father and not wanting to be locked in her room for all eternity--but she didn’t have to be nice to this new lady-in-waiting. Especially not when Catherine showed absolutely no desire to be nice to her.

Finally sick of their contest to see who could stare the most venomously, Loisette exhaled and stated, “I want to go horseback riding.”

Catherine snorted and looked idly down at her fingernails. “You probably don’t even know the difference between a stallion and a bull, *Your Highness*.”

Loisette narrowed her eyes. “You probably don’t know the difference between a curry comb and a hairbrush,” she shot back, pleased to see her lady-in-waiting’s brow crinkle ever-so-slightly.

Catherine stood up abruptly and smoothed down the wrinkles in her skirt. “At least this will give me a chance to wear my new riding outfit.”

“Your new riding outfit?” Loisette echoed as she stared upward at the older girl. On Clarkent’s prompting, Loisette had started wearing shorter dresses and boots when going out to ride--but she hadn’t realized there were outfits made *specifically* for riding.

Catherine raised an eyebrow. “Princess, if I’m going to be your lady-in-waiting, we have got to start working on your clothes. Fashion has to be your number one priority if you want to attract boys.”

“Boys?” asked Loisette in confusion.

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Loisette walked into the Riding Stable with Catherine, dodging GERALPH as he shuffled past. Clarkent turned and saw her, and the smile he flashed her made her heart jump a little. He

seemed glad to see her, and that made her feel really good. After a quick bow, he began to move forward, but then his eyes went to Catherine, and he faltered.

“This is my new lady-in-waiting, Lady Catherine,” Loisetette said with a gesture. “Lady Catherine, this is Clarkent.”

Catherine glanced at Loisetette with a sour expression. “So, this isn’t the first time you’ve been here, I take it?”

“It’s not,” Loisetette confirmed, looking and feeling surly. Her new lady-in-waiting was ruining what should have been an enjoyable time. “I’ve become quite good at riding horses.”

“Then you won’t mind a race?” Catherine asked, her eyes flashing in challenge.

“I would welcome a race,” Loisetette retorted as she gritted her teeth. “But you had better not cry when you lose.”

“Ladies!” Clarkent spoke up. When the two girls swiveled to look at him, he flushed and told Loisetette, “I--I don’t think a race is a good idea, Your Highness.”

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The glares the two females pinned him with made Clarkent swallow audibly. But he was remembering when he and the princess had raced ... and how she had fallen. He didn’t want that to happen again. It had terrified him. He didn’t want her to get hurt. After all, she was supposed to rule the kingdom someday.

Perhaps the princess understood the direction of his thoughts, as she hissed in a low voice, “I have improved a lot since I first started riding, and I want to show *Catherine* that I am the better horsewoman.”

Clarkent shook his head adamantly. “These horses aren’t meant--”

“Peasant, I command you to let us race!” the princess said sharply.

A pang in his chest, Clarkent turned away, feeling hurt. It had become so easy to forget his place in life around Princess Loisetette, but now she had reminded him of it once more. He had to tell himself once again: a princess couldn’t be friends with a stableboy.

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Loisetette felt every bit the snobbish jerk when she saw the pained expression on Clarkent’s face after she called him a “peasant.” She had only been thinking about asserting her dominance around Catherine and proving to the other girl that she had no interest in Clarkent as a friend. But now that she had hurt the stableboy, pretending aloofness in front of Catherine suddenly didn’t matter. Loisetette didn’t care what the other girl thought.

She stepped up beside him and gently touched his arm, causing him to jump. He turned to look at her, and she stared at him with an apologetic look in her eyes. Softly, she told him, “I’m sorry, Clark.” And she really was. She hadn’t meant to hurt him.

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Clarkent turned away from the princess, the use of her nickname for him a stab to the heart. They couldn’t be friends. She needed to stop making him *care* about her so much.

She grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around to face her. “Please forgive me, Clark. I just want to race with Catherine. I promise I’ll be careful and hold on tightly.”

He stared into her brown eyes, trying to dredge up the resolve to deny the princess’s request. But she seemed so hopeful--and so sincerely sorry--that he at last bowed his head and said, “All right, Princess.”

She smiled and turned to Lady Catherine, who was obviously trying to pretend disinterest in the conversation that had been taking place. “We can race,” Princess Loisetette proclaimed happily.

Clarkent’s thoughts were suddenly racing frantically in the effort to come up with a plan to alleviate some of the danger from the upcoming ride. But he was only able to come up with one

idea. Still, anything was better than nothing.

“Lady Catherine,” he said, catching the girl’s attention, “I think you should take Agides.”

“Agides?” the lady-in-waiting echoed.

He moved to stand by the horse’s stall. “This is Agides,” he explained, reaching a hand out to touch the white star on the horse’s forehead. The brown and white horse was a gentle rouncey who had never showed an especial love of speed. If he could get Lady Catherine to ride Agides, then it was possible the princess would win the race more easily--thereby keeping her from pushing High Flyer to go so fast. And if the two horses weren’t going too fast ... then maybe neither girl would get hurt.

But he still couldn’t help but be worried. Lady Catherine was a bit of a wild card. He had no idea how good she was with horses, but he hoped her riding outfit was a true indicator that she had at least ridden horses often enough to make paying for such a dress worthwhile.

The object of his thoughts came over and looked at Agides, standing closer to Clarkent than he was comfortable with.

“He seems like a nice horse,” Catherine commented as she looked over Agides. She turned to Clarkent and gave him a strange-looking smile. A few seconds later, she placed a finger on his chest and then brought it to rest on his chin. “I’ll take him.”

Clarkent stared at her, unable to shake the sense that she was a wolf stalking a helpless lamb. “All--all right,” he stammered.

“Let’s go,” the princess said loudly from behind them, and Clarkent and Lady Catherine both turned to look at her.

Clarkent slipped away from the lady-in-waiting, glad for the diversion, as he’d been feeling as if he were about to be eaten alive by her. “I’ll prepare the horses for you,” he said. As he turned his back to them, he wiped a bit of sweat off his brow.

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Clarkent refused to be involved in any part of their race. While Esroh Repus had been trained well and would obediently respond to commands, Clarkent didn’t want to encourage any more competition among the horses ... or the girls, for that matter.

He watched as High Flyer and Agides lunged forward, and he waited a few seconds before he encouraged Esroh Repus to start walking. If something happened, he wanted to be close by, so that meant he had to follow them.

Despite Agides’s being a lesser quality horse than High Flyer, Lady Catherine handled him well, and she and the princess were almost neck-and-neck until the very end, when High Flyer practically leapt forward at the princess’s prompting and raced past the designated “finish” area.

As the two girls slowed their mounts to a stop, Clarkent urged his into a gallop. Esroh Repus ran ahead happily, and Clarkent finally made him decrease his speed as they approached Princess Loisetette and Lady Catherine.

Both girls were laughing and congratulating themselves on a job well done, having somehow apparently earned a grudging respect for each other out there amidst the wind and horseflesh and flying dirt. Clarkent was just glad they were laughing rather than crying. If one of them had gotten hurt, he would have refused to help riders out ever again, no matter what Dwayne told him.

As much as he liked seeing the princess--yes, he had to admit that much to himself--he couldn’t help but think maybe it would be better if she didn’t keep putting herself into harm’s way. Princesses were supposed to be kept away from danger ... or, at the very least, saved from it. They weren’t supposed to go charging into it!

“I thought for certain you were going to win!” exclaimed the princess, throwing her hands in the air for emphasis.

Lady Catherine twirled her whip with a smile. “And I would have, too, if stableboy here had given me a better horse.”

Clarkent had the grace to look abashed. “Agides is a good

horse,” he said weakly. He hadn’t realized Catherine would know the difference between a mediocre horse and a good one.

“Yeah, good for old men!” Lady Catherine proclaimed with a laugh. “But I don’t mind--there’s something I like about this fellow here.” She patted the horse’s neck.

Clarkent shook his head. There had seemed to be a little tension between the two girls when they had first entered the stable, but now they acted like old friends. He wasn’t sure whether to be happy about that or sad. He wanted the princess to have friends, of course, but ... if she made a new friend, then it was possible he would hardly see her anymore. And that thought made him suddenly depressed.

But when the princess looked over at him and smiled, he couldn’t help but smile back. If the princess stopped coming, well, Clarkent could always start spending a little more time with Billy. Once Clarkent had turned thirteen and risen up in the stable hierarchy, the other stableboy had seemed to better appreciate him ...

But Billy was no Princess Loisetete.

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The next day, Loisetete--dressed as Gawain after having sneaked away from Catherine--managed to drag Clarkent away from the stable and out into the open field again, where she proceeded to force him to reenact the scene from the previous day.

Loisetete had brought an old saddle blanket from the stable, and she was cradling it in her arms like a protective mother. “I have to keep you safe,” she whispered to the bundle, kissing it. “No matter what happens, I’ll figure out a way to protect you.” She rocked the blanket back and forth, waiting for Clarkent to jump in and say something. When he didn’t, she coughed slightly.

Clarkent, apparently recognizing a cue when he saw one, leapt forward with his stick sword, the noise drawing her eyes to him. “The king wants to see you,” he said, trying to inject some authority into his voice, “... *and* your baby.”

“Never!” Loisetete proclaimed, spitting at his feet. He took a step back in surprise and made a disgusted face that didn’t seem to be an act. “I won’t let you have my child!” she told him with extreme vehemence. And then, clutching the blanket to her chest, she darted past him.

“Stop!” Clarkent yelled after her. He came charging forward, stick at the ready.

They ran through the field, the grass swishing against their pants. She swerved around a rock, leapt off a small hill, and tried her best to lose her pursuer. But she could hear him panting behind her, hot on her trail.

Finally, satisfied with the show they were putting on, Loisetete faked a fall, landing forward with the “baby” held out.

Clarkent dodged her sprawled legs and went straight for the blanket, snatching it from her and holding it up in the air. “I have your child!” he cried out triumphantly. Then he lowered the blanket and brought his stick sword up, pointing it at the invisible baby’s throat.

“No!” shouted Loisetete, crawling toward him, reaching up once she was at his feet, trying desperately on bended knees to get her child back from him.

“I--” he said savagely, his stick still hovering over the blanket, “I ... I can’t do this.” The hand with the stick dropped to his side.

\*\*\*

Clarkent had finally felt himself getting into his Gawain-imposed role when they dashed across the field. The thud of his feet against the ground as they moved had felt very *real*. And when he had laid hands on the fake child, it had been like he had just caught a prize.

But when he began to point his fake weapon at the invisible child, he found he couldn’t go through with it. What kind of

monster would kill a helpless baby? How could even a Barbarian King do that, much less one of his soldiers?

He didn’t want the story to end like that. He didn’t want the queen’s child to disappear into oblivion.

Clarkent turned to see Gawain getting to his feet. “What are you doing?” Gawain asked grumpily. “We were going along just fine--”

“I couldn’t do it.”

“Couldn’t do what?” Gawain asked in confusion.

Clarkent swallowed. “I couldn’t kill the baby.”

Gawain stared at him for a few seconds and then exclaimed in exasperation, “But there *is* no baby!”

“But there *was*,” Clarkent pointed out sadly yet firmly.

Gawain rolled his eyes. “Oh, whatever! We’ll do a different story next time.” He crossed his arms and began muttering something about sensitive stableboys.

Clarkent, trying to ignore his friend’s words, stared down at the blanket in his arms. He couldn’t hurt another human being, even in his imagination. Not without good cause.

And there could never be a good cause for killing a baby.

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Peri waited until the two boys were done playing to confront Gawain alone. The boy’s steps faltered upon seeing him, and he crossed his arms and put on his most imposing expression. “So ... Gawain, isn’t it?” Peri ventured. “I don’t recall seeing you around the castle.”

The boy squirmed under his gaze and averted his eyes. “I don’t actually work at the castle,” he admitted, looking abashed and a little fearful. “I just--I just want a friend ...”

Peri softened. The boy seemed sincere. It hadn’t been nice of Peri to try to scare him. “I’m sorry if I frightened you. My name is Peri.”

“It’s okay, Peri,” Gawain said, finally lifting his head. He still looked a little afraid.

“Perhaps I will see you around?” Peri said with intentional warmth.

The boy nodded. “Probably.”

Peri smiled at him and then began to walk away. Clarkent could use a good friend. Peri was just jumping at shadows. The boy was probably just a runaway.

\*\*\*

Weeks later, Catherine was brushing the princess’s hair. Loisetete protested against the act every time, but Catherine persisted in declaring the princess’s hair looked like a bird’s nest when Loisetete did it herself--and so the demanding offer of assistance was always grudgingly accepted.

Loisetete had come to secretly enjoy having her hair brushed by Catherine. The older girl did it gently and (usually) quietly, so it gave Loisetete some time to think.

She found her thoughts drifting to the Riding Stable. On occasion, she went to the stable with Catherine to ride horses. There was something about the way Clarkent’s face lit up when he saw her which ... well, which made her want to cause it to happen again. But whenever she was with Catherine, she couldn’t spend much time talking to Clarkent, so it took a little joy out of the experience. Not to mention that he had appeared to clam up even more since Catherine’s first appearance at the Riding Stable.

As Gawain, Loisetete visited him more frequently, though it meant she constantly had to give Catherine the slip (which was sometimes easier to do than others). When Loisetete went as the princess, she had to be very careful to limit her time with Clarkent so as not to draw attention to herself--especially since Aliss seemed to be keeping a close eye on her. But as Gawain, Loisetete experienced more freedom. She even took cakes from the kitchen to give to Clarkent, figuring it would be okay for her to do so since Gawain *was* supposed to be working for the cook. And Clarkent had enjoyed those cakes so much that she never

regretted doing it.

It was strange to see how the stableboy treated her different personas. He was quieter and more awkward around her when she was around him in a dress than when she was wearing pants. Whenever she was in her magic clothing, he would more frequently joke with her or disagree with her or tell her his honest opinion, and it was refreshing. She thought they had been moving toward such a relationship with her before she got the magic clothes, but then her father had delivered his command for her not to spend any more time alone with the stableboy. When she'd had to decrease the frequency of her visits as princess, the intimacy they had been building up had also decreased.

Loisette sighed to herself. It was so complicated being royalty.

As Catherine finished her task of brushing--muttering to herself about not being able to understand how a *burr* had ended up in the princess's hair--Aliss came into Loisette's chambers.

Loisette smiled upon seeing her, and she nearly stood up, but Catherine pushed her back down with a sharp order to be still.

"I see you two girls are getting along, Princess," Aliss commented warmly.

"That's just what we *want* you to think," Catherine jested. She put down the hairbrush and smiled at Aliss.

"Yes," Loisette agreed solemnly. "Secretly, we despise each other."

The nanny shook her head. "I just don't understand children these days."

"You mean my mother was nothing like me?" Loisette asked innocently.

Aliss laughed. "I guess I didn't understand children during your mother's day either, Princess. *She* was certainly always getting into trouble. One time, she put a mouse down the back of a Duchess's dress. I started to think that woman would never stop screaming." She shook her head, chuckling.

"My mother did that?" Loisette asked, her mouth gaping open.

Aliss nodded. "Yes. She did. Of course, her adventures weren't always that amusing afterward. She almost died once when she ventured into the woods alone."

"Really?" Loisette prodded in interest.

"Yes. If it weren't for your father, she *would* have died. He was worried that she was out so late, and he went searching for her ... When he at last found her, she was unconscious. She'd fallen into a large hole a hunter had dug. She broke both arms and could easily have broken her neck." Aliss's mood had descended into sadness. "Your father became very protective after that." She abruptly shook herself out of her sorrow. "But enough about the past. I just wanted to check on you two. I have some work to do, so I'll leave you both alone. But feel free to come find me if you need me."

As Aliss left them, Loisette gazed after her. Despite the troublesome story Aliss had just told her, Loisette found herself suddenly craving adventure. If her mother had had adventures, then Loisette wanted to have adventures, too.

She waited a minute before standing up and saying innocently, "I'll be right back." Then she walked toward the door.

Catherine had become distracted by a cracked fingernail, and she muttered, "All right, Your Highness."

Loisette ducked out into the hall, where she looked both ways to ensure there was no one in sight. Then she sneaked to her secret alcove. In the wall of the alcove, there were some loose bricks. Behind those bricks was where Loisette hid her Gawain outfit in an old blanket. She only had to spin quickly into the clothes, and then she was scurrying down the hall.

In one of the corridors, she passed Herbie, who was the castle librarian and her occasional tutor, but he didn't look up from the book he was engrossed in, and she continued on eagerly.

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"I'm sorry," the Stable Master apologized. "Clarkent is busy with the farrier."

The Stable Master--Dwayne, if Loisette remembered correctly--had never really questioned the presence of Gawain in the stable, though Loisette wasn't quite sure why. She figured it was probably because he saw her Gawain persona helping out with some of the stable work. She wasn't very good at it--she didn't exactly have bulging muscles, and she was highly averse to getting any manure on her at all--but she often *did* help make a dent in the work there was to be done. Sometimes, she thought she could do more in one hour than that incompetent GERALPH could do in three.

"That's all right," she said with a sigh. "Thank you." She turned and left the stable, feeling a bit put out. Well, now what was she going to do?

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"I'm back," Loisette said in a grumpy voice as she entered her bedroom after having changed out of her Gawain clothes.

"Ring the bells," Catherine said dryly. She was filing her fingernails.

Loisette sat on her bed and fell backward, spreading her arms out like birds' wings. "I'm bored."

Catherine snorted. "You certainly are high maintenance, aren't you?"

Loisette sat up a little to look at her lady-in-waiting's face, but there was an amused smirk on it.

"This coming from someone who has more outfits than my father has soldiers," Loisette shot back.

"A girl has to look her best!"

Loisette fell back onto her bed once more. Then she sighed loudly.

"Oh, all right!" Catherine exclaimed. "If you're bored, then let's do something. What do you want to do? Horseback riding? Archery? Go to court and look at all the handsome knights?"

"Archery?" queried Loisette with a frown.

"I should've known you wouldn't choose to look at the knights," Catherine muttered (just loud enough that Loisette could hear it). Louder, she said, "Yes, archery. You know--bows and arrows?"

"I've never used a bow and arrow before," Loisette admitted.

Catherine gaped at her. "Archery is a staple for every young Noblewoman--and princess. Come on--get up. Let's find Aliss. Maybe she'll know someone who can give you some lessons." And then she was pulling at Loisette's arm and practically yanking her off the bed.

"All right, all right," Loisette muttered.

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After they found Aliss, she led them to an area outside the castle with several targets set up. A young man with brown hair and a stubble-covered face was standing with a bow in his hand. He swiftly nocked an arrow, drew back, and let it fly. The head of the arrow buried itself in the exact middle of the target. Reaching back into his quiver, the man pulled out another arrow, and seconds later an arrow was whizzing through the air again. It split the first arrow, going right down the middle of it. He turned to them with a smile; it was obvious he had known someone was watching.

Upon seeing the coronet on Loisette's head, he bowed. "Your Highness. It is a pleasure to finally meet you." He had a strange accent--his voice was musical, and he spoke with soft vowels but hard consonants. As he straightened from his graceful bow, he smiled at Aliss.

"Hello, Patrik," Aliss said.

"Hello," he returned warmly.

"It seems our princess wishes to learn the art of archery," Aliss told him. "I was wondering if perhaps you could instruct

her?”

Patrik bowed again. “I would be honored to teach such a beautiful young woman my lowly craft.”

“Well, I see you two ladies are in good hands,” Aliss said with a nod, failing to hide her smile. “I’ll be going now.”

Loisette watched her leave and then turned back to Patrik, only to find him talking to her lady-in-waiting.

“Now,” said the archer, looking at Catherine, “who might this lovely young lady be?”

Catherine offered her hand for him to kiss and purred, “Catherine.”

He obliged her, gently placing a kiss on the back of her hand. “Well, Lady Catherine, have you ever shot a bow and arrow before?”

“I have ... but I am afraid I am a little out of practice,” she said, a slight pout to her lip.

“Well,” Patrik said slyly, “then I suppose I must help you get back in shape.”

As Loisette watched them flirt back and forth, she reflected that she would rather die a virgin queen than marry if *this* was what courtship entailed. The two were quite sickening, and she was beginning to regret having agreed to come in the first place.

But she might as well do it and get it over with. Maybe she would even learn something.

\*\*\*

As it turned out, Loisette learned a lot at her archery lesson. Despite the doe eyes Catherine made at him, Patrik proved himself to be a skilled archer. By the end of the lesson, Loisette had even hit the target with an arrow. The feeling of triumph that came over her when that happened was enough to make her resolve to come back for more lessons. She might talk to Aliss to see if she could find a different teacher, but she was learning a new skill, and it made her feel good. And this was a skill that would be great for adventures.

“He was kind of cute,” Catherine commented as they walked away. “He seemed to like you. Maybe you’ll have a few beaux after all when you’re finally of age to marry.”

Loisette rolled her eyes. “I’m a princess,” she said firmly and loudly, “and I’m meant to marry a prince--or, at the very least, a Noble. I am *not* marrying some poor archer, and I don’t know why you were so tender with him yourself.”

“Oh, you’re no fun,” Catherine pouted. “A little flirting never hurt anyone.”

“Well, it never *helped* them either,” Loisette returned, staring down at her feet in annoyance.

\*\*\*

Clarkent had been sorry to miss Gawain, but Penelope Grace had needed shoeing, and he knew that the horse would be far too much for the farrier to handle alone. After the cranky beast had been properly shod, he finally went out to look for Gawain. He wanted to apologize for being unavailable and see if perhaps Gawain wished to chase fireflies. He was hopeful that he would be able to find his friend.

He saw Princess Loisette and Lady Catherine walking away from the archery area, deep in conversation, and he began moving toward them without really thinking about it. But then something Loisette said made him stop in his tracks:

“I’m a princess, and I’m meant to marry a prince--or, at the very least, a Noble. I am *not* marrying some poor archer, and I don’t know why you were so tender with him yourself.”

Upon hearing that, Clarkent colored. Then he immediately admonished himself. Why would he care that the princess wanted to marry a prince? Of course she did! That’s what princesses were supposed to do. It was no concern of his!

Still, he suddenly changed his path, no longer desiring to talk to the two girls. He might as well just go back to the stable. Gawain was obviously nowhere to be found.

He told himself that the reason for his sudden rotten mood was the fact that he couldn’t find his friend. But no logic could dispel the cloud that had settled down on him. Not even the thought of Visiting Day’s being next week was enough to cheer him up.

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### Chapter 9: Visiting Day

Her eyes and hands were lifted up in laughter, frozen in perpetual happiness. Her lips were as red as they had been when she was alive, and her blonde hair looked soft to the touch. Her cheeks were pink with the constant exertion of loving life.

Her red dress cascaded down her body, waves of silk shimmering in the light of the sunbeam falling upon her face. Behind her stood a great elder tree. On its branches, a small bird had been placed at the whim of the painter, perhaps due to a knowledge of the woman’s great love of animals.

He walked up and gently touched the picture, his hands gliding across the painted cheek of his wife. She had been such a lovely woman, so spirited ... so caring. She had been a great wife--and a wonderful friend.

He missed her so much.

Sometimes, he would jolt awake at night and roll over to reach out for her. But of course, she wasn’t there. She hadn’t been there for a long time.

A part of him had died with her, but just as bad was what had been born in its place. His self-loathing and guilt had risen up inside him like ravenous beasts and were slowly eating him alive.

On the night his second daughter had been born and had died with his wife, Samuel had been in bed with another woman.

It had been the first and last time that had happened, and he couldn’t explain his slip into depravity back then any more than he could now. The ache of shame beat perpetually in his breast. With every thump of his heart, a piece of it fell off and shattered into jagged slivers that pierced his soul and stayed there, unextractable, eternal, painful.

His only consolation was that she had died before she found out. Had she known, he felt the end result would have still been the same. She had lived in a world of such innocence that to have found out something so wretched would have destroyed her.

He closed his eyes, bleeding from a hundred thousand mental wounds, wrapped up in a million regrets. Today was Visiting Day.

Visiting Day was the one day a year when Assigned servants had the entire day off work to visit their families. The day was important to parents, who were finally able to give their children gifts and see how they were doing away from home.

His wife had hated the Assigning.

She had said that it was a form of slavery, and he had gradually come to understand her perspective and agree with it. There was something inherently wrong about taking children away from their homes merely to force them into servitude.

She had argued so vehemently for him to abolish the Assigning, but her pleas had not swayed him. The Nobles--particularly ones belonging to the camp that Alexander and Tempos’s father had led--were vocal in their support of it, and he dared not go against them.

Ellena had called him a dozen names--coward, slaver, child-stealer ... But he had stood firm. He would not destroy the hierarchy their kingdom was founded on. He feared the consequences too much.

But to placate his wife and his own conscience, he had taken a few measures in regard to servants at the castle. He had given a few people the duty of making children’s adjustments to their new lives more bearable, and he had tried to encourage those overseeing the Assigned to be kind taskmasters, allowing the children some free time where they could simply be children. He had even gone to the kitchen and informed the cook to improve the food being served to castle servants.

His wife had suggested they increase the number of festivals celebrated by the people. On festival days, servants got off half a day and were allowed to feast at the crown's expense, so she felt it would bring a little more joy into the children's lives. He had been resistant to the idea at first, but he had finally given in, believing it had merit. Now, there were festival days such as May Day and Children's Day. They also celebrated Twelfth Night. Now, he associated every holiday with his wife--and with pain.

After she had died, he had stopped checking into the situations of servants. The structures were in place, but whether they were being held up or crumbling, he didn't know. He wanted to bring himself to care, as he knew he should, but he could not. He was only a shell of a man, holding on to life only until his daughter was old enough to take the throne. He wanted to protect Loisetete, to keep her safe. But he wasn't safe himself. He was poison. And he didn't want to subject her to that.

He wished Ellena could have raised Loisetete instead of him. He didn't know how to be a father. All he knew ... was how to be a failure.

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Loisetete went rushing into the stable--Catherine following behind her at a more reasonable pace--only to falter at the sight of the Stable Master, Dwayne, mucking out stalls. There were absolutely no stableboys in sight.

"Your Highness," he greeted with a bow, pausing from his physical labor.

"Where--where is everyone?" she asked in confusion. Where was Clarkent?

He smiled at her obliviousness. "It's Visiting Day, Your Highness."

"Oh," Loisetete said, suddenly very disappointed. She sighed to herself in frustration. She hated Visiting Day. Everything always took so much longer to get done, and her father would absolutely refuse to leave his room the entire day--not that she saw him much anyway.

With a frown, she asked the Stable Master, "Why are you here?"

"I'm a Requested servant, Your Highness," he told her patiently. "Requested servants have three Leave Days a year, but they never fall on Visiting Day. It was designed so someone is always working, but I'm sure you knew that."

Loisetete felt her face grow warm. How could she have forgotten all that? When Assigned servants came of age at seventeen, they typically vacated their positions to go be with their families, but they could be Requested to stay, as Dwayne had. Requested servants were even given privileges that Assigned servants didn't. They could marry, and they would also be paid for their work. The position was one of great honor, so many Requested servants never left. But they always had a choice in the matter--they could leave whenever they wanted, provided they gave a few days' notice. She should have stopped to think about the fact that Dwayne had to be a Requested servant by sheer virtue of his age.

"I'm sorry--I wasn't thinking," Loisetete said in a strained voice. "Of course it's Visiting Day."

"Everyone wants to see their families sometime," the Stable Master pointed out gently. "You can't begrudge them that."

"You're right," Loisetete agreed, feeling bad for her insensitivity. "I can't."

Catherine gave Loisetete a light touch on the arm, and the princess turned to her.

"Come on, Your Highness," Catherine said with strange gentleness. "We'll come back another time to ride."

Loisetete nodded. "All right."

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Clarkent had felt so excited when he first saw his parents. He had rushed to embrace them, and they had hugged him back

tightly. Words hadn't been needed to express their joy.

On pulling away from them, however, his initial happiness had turned to worry. They appeared so much ... older than his memories of them. And they seemed tired.

At first, he thought the trip had simply taken a lot out of them. It was a long way to travel, and the old cart they had ridden on was hardly the most comfortable of transports. But as the day had progressed, his concern had lingered ... deepened, even. Were they working too hard? They were older than most parents of children his age. If only he could be released from his current duties and be allowed to leave with them! His strong and fit young body would make such a big difference to his parents. It was less than five years until he could return home, but he was beginning to wonder--would they be able to survive long enough for him to finally go back to them?

His mother had been kind as ever, giving him some clothes she had sewn for him. "These are to play in," she had said, her tone saying clear as words, "You had *better* be having some playtime." He had put the clothes away, as he had most of the desserts his mother had baked for him. The desserts wouldn't last him long, but when his mother brought him baked goods, he preferred not to eat them all in one day. Visiting Day lasted for only a few hours--he wanted the last reminders of their visit to last so much longer.

After the preliminary greetings were over, he had suggested--as he munched on one of the cakes he had received--they go to the stable to tour it, but his father had said, "I'd rather walk in the fields first, son," and he had given Clarkent's mother a look.

Clarkent wasn't sure why they wanted to get away from everyone else, and it had done nothing to alleviate his fears. Were they trying to summon up the courage to tell him that one of them was dying?

Though his mother had exclaimed over how much he had grown since they had last seen him--and his father had commented on how much stronger he looked--there was a strange nervousness in both of them which went beyond excitement at seeing him. What did they want to tell him?

As they walked slowly through the field, Clarkent nibbled at one of his cakes. His mother was telling stories about what was going on with people back home.

"Opaline's daughter is shooting up so fast that you'd think her father was a giant," his mother was saying. "I wish we could have brought them with us, but the journey's a bit tiring." Her face turned sad. "And I don't think Opaline wants to start considering the fact that soon her daughter will have to leave her."

Clarkent pulled her into a sudden hug, holding the remains of his cake out of the way so it wouldn't get smashed. "Mom," he told her, "don't worry. As Dad always says, 'Worrying doesn't help the cows get home.'" But in reality, he couldn't take his own advice. He was very worried about his parents--what was wrong? And why weren't they telling him what it was?

His father chuckled. "We only see you once a year, and you can remember me saying *that*?"

Clarkent lifted an eyebrow. "You say it a *lot*."

His dad threw an arm around his shoulders. "Can I help it if I'm full of wisdom?"

Clarkent's mother laughed. "If by 'wisdom,' you mean 'cake,' then yes!"

Winking, his father said, "I did have to try a few of her cakes. I had to make sure they weren't poisoned."

"Uh huh," Clarkent said, rolling his eyes as he took another bite. "If I didn't know any better, I would think you were trying to eat all of my present."

His dad chuckled. "You might be right."

They continued walking for a while, and Clarkent finished his cake. The sweets Gawain had been bringing him were good,

but they weren't quite *this* good. Still, it was hard to really enjoy it, his thoughts being as dismal as they were.

"How are you doing, Clarkent?" his mother asked finally, her tone suddenly serious.

He paused and toed the grass with one of his shoes, wondering if the conversation was about to turn toward the serious. "I'm doing all right."

"Are you making friends?"

He nodded. "I am. And you know, being a stableboy isn't too bad," he said with a halfhearted smile. "I get a little bit of time off, especially now that I'm older."

"We worry about you, son," his dad said quietly. "We wish we could be here for you all the time."

"Well, *don't* worry. I'm doing fine. Before you know it, I'll be seventeen and leaving this place, and you won't be able to get rid of me!" He tried to grin at them, but he noticed them exchanging a solemn look, and he had to drop the happy façade. His brow wrinkled, he asked, "Mom? Dad? What is it?"

His mother sighed. "We wanted to wait a little longer before having this conversation, but I guess now is as good a time as any."

He stared at her unblinkingly. "What conversation is that?"

"Clarkent," his father said with a sigh, "there's no easy way to say this, so I'll just spit it out: we're not your real parents."

"What?" Clarkent whispered, his whole world suddenly turned upside down. Whatever he had expected them to say ... it wasn't this.

His mother threw an annoyed look at his father. "We may not be your real parents, Clarkent, but we love you just as much as if you really had been our own."

"But you can't tell anyone about this," his father noted.

"That's very important. As far as the world knows, we're your real parents rather than your foster parents."

Clarkent shook his head, wanting to deny this sudden and unwelcome information. He knew they wouldn't lie to him, but he still couldn't help but feel a little doubtful about the whole thing. "Aren't you listed as my parents in the Birth Registry?" he asked them. "How did the king's men know to come get me for the Assigning?"

His foster parents--foster parents? Clarkent couldn't believe it!--exchanged a look. "We had help forging your name in the Registry," his mother admitted. "We knew you had to leave us when you were seven. If not, too many questions would have been asked about why we had a child past Assigning age. We couldn't hide you away forever."

He turned away from them, his mind awhirl. If they weren't his real parents, then who was?

"Clarkent, please don't be upset with us," his mother pleaded.

He glanced over his shoulder at her and said softly, "I'm not." Secretly, he was shocked and puzzled--but he had to admit to himself that he was also a little hurt. Why hadn't they told him before now?

Clarkent leaned down and plucked a piece of grass to roll between his fingers. "How did you find me?" As he straightened, he saw the uncomfortable look they were sharing.

"You were given to us," his father said at last.

"By who?"

"Please don't ask us anything else, Clarkent," his mother asked in a quiet voice.

"All right," he mumbled, dropping the piece of grass to the ground. He was burning with questions, but it was obvious they weren't going to answer them. "Then let's just go to the stable."

Every year, he would show them around the stable. His job had become so much a part of them that they were always interested in seeing where he worked, and usually he was glad to talk about his life working as a royal servant.

But this time, he didn't feel like going anywhere with them

right then. He wanted to withdraw to think.

"Is that cranky horse still around?" his father asked lightly.

"Yes," he answered. But he didn't offer forth any more information.

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After walking around the Riding Stable and seeing Clarkent's constant equine companions, they went to the town market. It was another tradition of theirs.

They wove through the busy stalls, looking at shiny fruit and bright baubles and lavish cloths and gleaming jewelry. Everything screamed, "Buy me! Pick me!"

"Jon," his mother called out, waving over her husband, "look at this necklace."

She pointed down at the necklace. It had a pendant on which gold strips were woven together, holding in place several expensive gems. Clarkent's father made an admiring comment, and his mother reached out to touch it.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" the stall owner said with a smile.

"It's one of a kind."

A shutter fell down over Clarkent's face. It was another tradition of theirs that they look at items in the market ... but not buy them.

For the first time, Clarkent truly felt their extreme poverty. And it hit him like a punch to the gut.

His mother didn't own any jewelry--that was precious money to be spent elsewhere. There were clothes to buy and meals to make and equipment to fix. She didn't even own a wedding ring. Only the wealthy could afford those.

He felt a sudden flare of anger toward the rich. They sat in their castles and on their estates, sipping from expensive bottles of wine and throwing unwanted table scraps to the pampered dogs at their feet. They could eat whatever and whenever they wanted. They could send someone out to buy necklaces and rings and silk clothes, never even giving a second thought to the children starving in the streets. Sure, maybe boys didn't starve after the age of six and girls after the age of eight because of the enslavement enforced upon them--but if at seventeen they weren't Requested to stay with their masters, then what exactly lay ahead for them in their adulthoods? Only the harsh world.

Perhaps, if they were lucky, they would find solace in the arms of a spouse. But having children with that spouse meant coming up with enough food to survive until those children were sent away. It was no way to live. The horses in the king's two stables were treated better than that. Something needed to be done. Things needed to be changed somehow.

He was so wrapped up in these thoughts that it was hard for him to enjoy the rest of his time with his parents. All too soon, they had to leave, needing to travel home so they could return to work early the next morning.

His mother gave him a tight hug. "I love you so much, Clarkent," she whispered to him. "Don't forget that."

"I won't, Mom," he told her. "I love you, too." As he looked at her, she seemed so tiny and fragile. He had been having growth spurts recently, and he was already taller than her. She was so small--should he have already realized that she couldn't be his real mother?

He felt another pair of arms wrap around him, and then his father said, "I love you, son."

"And I love you, Dad," he returned. There was a tightness in his chest, and his mouth felt very dry. It would be another year before he saw them.

They finally broke apart, and Clarkent's father reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pouch.

Clarkent stared at the pouch, knowing the bottom of its belly contained a few dear coins. "Dad--"

"Please take it, son."

Clarkent reached out reluctantly and put his fingers around it.

He wanted them to have it--he knew they needed it dearly. But he also knew they wouldn't take it.

Still, as he clutched the pouch to his chest, he couldn't help but say, "Dad, this isn't necessary--"

"We wanted to do it, son," his father said with a smile. "We'll see you next year."

His mother came and gave him one more hug, her eyes glistening with tears. "Be strong, Clarkent. Remember we love you very much."

He nodded and watched as they left. He knew he should probably go to the Riding Stable to see if Dwayne had been able to take care of everything, but his mind was too crowded with thoughts and troubles, so he resolved to take a walk to clear his head.

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### Chapter 10: A Seed is Planted

As an evening breeze blew gently across the field, Clarkent walked for a while, utterly lost in thought. His head was full almost to bursting, and he just wanted to give a primal scream and let everything out.

Finally, he stood in one place beneath a tree and looked up at the moon and the stars with a furrowed brow. A cloud was passing slowly over them, dimming their brightness. But his mind was not on the sky. He simply stared upward at it unseeingly.

He felt so much at that moment, but it was a bundle of feelings that were hard to fully pin down. He felt angry, confused, sad, hurt ... Why were his foster parents doomed to such a miserable life of poverty? Why were some people born with everything--and others with nothing? It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

His mind turned back once again to his recent revelation. They weren't his real parents! How could he have never realized that? And why had they waited so long to tell him?

And what about his real parents? Why had they given him away? Had they simply not wanted him? Had he been born out of wedlock? Was he born out of the shame of others?

He had so many important questions, and his parents hadn't wanted to answer any of them. One look at their faces, and he had known he would be getting nothing more out of them. He was stuck in a quagmire of confusion which no one could help remove him from. And it made him feel so very alone.

He fell to his knees on the ground and sat back on his legs. Tucking his chin into his chest, he fought to withhold a sob. He felt so helpless ... and in a world where he never had much choice, that was devastating.

The whisper of grass on fabric reached his ears, and he looked up in surprise to see a black form coming forward in the darkness. The dark cloud above finished passing over the moon, and he was able to see by the white orb's light that it was Peri moving toward him.

"Hello," Clarkent greeted in a depressed tone, not bothering to stand. He wasn't sure he could conjure up the energy to do so. He felt too drained for that.

"It is a pretty night," the older man commented as he slowed to a stop and leaned his head back to look at the night sky. He held his staff in his right hand, leaning on it slightly, and there was a slight wistfulness in his look.

"Yes," Clarkent agreed distractedly. In truth, he could care less about the sky's beauty or lack thereof at that moment. He was too busy looking inward to be able to start looking outward.

"A lot of secrets are formed during the night," Peri noted in a voice filled with mystery, "and a lot of secrets are revealed. There is something about the night which revels in secrecy."

Clarkent stared down at the grass, plucking out a few blades. "I guess so."

Peri came and sat on the ground across from him, drawing his

attention toward him. "What is wrong, young Clarkent?"

Clarkent flushed. He hadn't realized he was so transparent, and it was embarrassing that the older man had to sit on the ground in order to attract Clarkent's notice. His chest tightening, Clarkent muttered, still picking at the grass, "Nothing is wrong."

Peri tilted his head to the side, those wizened eyes of his searching Clarkent's and making him extremely uncomfortable. Finally, the older man said, "You know, son, I once knew the king of Metropolita's sister kingdom."

Clarkent looked up sharply in surprise. Peri had to be talking about the Barbarian Kingdom. "You did?" Clarkent asked hesitantly. He was mystified that Peri had actually *known* someone from that place. In some ways, it seemed like the Barbarian Kingdom was simply a bundle of made-up tales. But in reality, things like what he and Gawain had acted out ... well, they had really happened.

"Well," Peri amended, "I'm talking about the *rightful* king--not that despot who overthrew him and who everyone began calling the 'Barbarian King.'" He shook his head, looking disgusted. "Now, one day, the King--the *rightful* one--was looking a little down, and I asked him what was troubling him. But he just refused to talk about it, so I didn't pry further. The weeks went by, and the King just got surlier and surlier. And then, finally, he blew up and yelled at the woman he loved."

"Why did he do that?" Clarkent asked with a frown. It didn't seem like the smartest thing to do.

Peri smiled. "You see--she didn't know that he loved her. He had been burying all of his feelings deep down inside. And as a result, he almost lost her that day for good. Now, had he been honest and let his feelings out instead of keeping them inside, he wouldn't have jeopardized the very relationship that was causing him so much turmoil." He gave a short bob of his head for emphasis. "It's bad to bottle things up, son. You have to let them out, or they're just as liable to hurt you as help you."

Clarkent swallowed, mulling over the older man's wisdom. Maybe it really was bad to bottle things up--it could be nice to talk about things sometimes ...

He glanced over at Peri, who was staring at him, reading his face like a book. After Clarkent looked away in embarrassment, Peri commented, "You must have seen your parents today."

Clarkent nodded, feeling a little resistant to this line of questioning. He said curtly, "Yes, I did."

"How did that go?"

Clarkent hesitated. He wasn't sure why, but he really liked this mysterious man. He even trusted him wholeheartedly. There was just something about Peri that screamed sincerity to him. And would it hurt to talk to him a little bit ... as long as he didn't give all the details?

Deciding to go for it, Clarkent told him quietly, "I learned something my parents have been keeping from me for a long time. And it ... well, it hurts. And they're not telling me everything." In frustration, he flung the blades of grass into the air and watched as they fell to the ground.

"And why do you think they might have hidden that from you?" Peri asked, his voice gentle.

Clarkent thought about it. Finally, he ventured, "Maybe they were scared of how I would react." And maybe it had been hard figuring out the right time to tell him--after all, after he had been Assigned, he had only seen them once a year ... and that day was so fleeting and so precious that he could understand them not wanting to taint the day.

Peri nodded. "Could be. And maybe they were protecting you as well. And, you know, it could be that--by not telling you everything--they were trying to protect someone else. Or maybe it wasn't their secret to tell."

Clarkent frowned. "What would they be protecting us from?" Were they scared the person who had forged his name in the Birth

Registry would find out?

“Does it really matter?” Peri asked him, pulling his staff across his lap. “Isn’t the important thing that they care enough to want to protect you?”

Clarkent stared down at his hands, considering what Peri had said. The fact that they had waited so long let him know that they believed telling him was important. And the fact that they had told him at all showed they had deemed him worthy of being entrusted with the secret. They had said he couldn’t tell anyone--so obviously it wouldn’t have been good for them to tell him when he was just a little kid. And how would he have ever mustered up the courage to tell someone something this big, only to also have to say that it had to be kept a secret from everybody else? Telling secrets wasn’t as easy as it seemed.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “What matters is that they care.”

It didn’t matter who his real parents were--not in the way that counted. He was truly lucky to have had the two parents he was given to. He could have ended up in the hands of a different set of foster parents--and if he had, he probably wouldn’t be the person he was today. No matter what happened to him while he was working in the Riding Stable, he could always take comfort in the fact that there were two people out there who loved him unconditionally.

Clarkent gave a crooked smile. “Even though they’re poor, my parents are happy with each other ... and with me.” But then he sighed, his heart heavy once again. “The only change they would want in their lives would be to have me with them all the time--to be able to see me more than once a year ... “ It was a change he wanted, too. He wanted to be able to help them out--he wanted to take some of the burden from them. It would be so easy to walk away from work at the castle and never return. But they wouldn’t want that. They wanted him to see this through.

Peri gave him a sad smile. “Such is the wish of many parents in this day and time. But unfortunately, change is slow.” He rose to his feet, using his staff to help him up. “Still--never lose hope, Clarkent. What the people need right now is a beacon which will shine hope upon them and spread it throughout the kingdom. Maybe then, change will finally happen.”

Clarkent stood up himself, thinking about what the older man had said. There must have been countless other people who felt the way he did. Surely the Nobles were the only ones who supported the Assigning--what parent would wish for their children to be taken away just as soon as they were getting old enough to work and help with daily chores? And what child would wish to be wrenched from home and placed in unfamiliar surroundings, to work for unfamiliar people with no pay and no nearby family?

Maybe one day he could bring hope to the people himself. He wasn’t sure how--and he wasn’t sure when--but maybe in time all of that would come to him. For now, he was just a boy with big dreams. But maybe one day soon ... he would be a man with big plans.

A fluttering noise caught Clarkent’s attention, and he looked upward to see a great Peregrine Falcon flying down from the sky. James landed on Peri’s outstretched arm, gently latching on with his talons. The bird looked at Clarkent intently for a few seconds, and Clarkent couldn’t help but think there was something very human-looking about that gaze.

“Good evening, James,” Peri greeted. “The moon is shining brightly tonight, isn’t she?”

The bird made the small “rep rep” noise Clarkent had come to associate with him, and Peri nodded, as if acknowledging what the falcon had said.

“I’m afraid I must be heading off,” the older man said with a smile. “But it was nice talking with you, Clarkent. I hope you think about what I said. Remember to keep your chin up. And I wouldn’t worry too much about whatever your parents told you.

I’m sure you will learn the rest of the story one day. These things have a way of coming out eventually.” He lifted his arm into the air, and James flew upward, circling above his head. As Peri walked away, the bird continued using circles to keep close to him.

Clarkent watched them leave. With those two, there was a bond between bird and man which seemed to go beyond that of falcon and falconer, but Peri was a special and mysterious person, and his relationship with James was simply one natural part of his mystery. Maybe Clarkent would learn more about the bird at some point, but if he didn’t, then it really didn’t matter. He enjoyed talking to Peri. Peri might have had his quirks, but he was a kind old man. The fact that he hadn’t tried to learn the exact nature of Clarkent’s secret spoke volumes for his integrity.

As he began to walk to the stable to make one last check on the horses--knowing Dwayne probably had taken care of everything, but wanting to be certain--he felt the burden of worry settle once more on his shoulders.

Next year, if his parents looked more tired than they did now, he would leave his post. No matter the shame that came upon him, no matter the punishment the crown decided to bring on his head ... he would find a way to help his parents. And maybe, somehow, he would find a way to help the common people. Maybe he could figure out how to give them hope.

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## Chapter 11: A Stone, a Sword, and an Adventure

“Clarkent, I want to go on an adventure!” Gawain proclaimed.

In just a few short months, Clarkent and Gawain had become great friends. At Gawain’s persistent prompting, the pair continued acting out adventures, some of them made up and some of them based on tales Gawain had heard.

But for Gawain, it wasn’t enough to act out adventures. No, Gawain began insisting adamantly that they have a real adventure ... and Clarkent was just as adamant on insisting they not willingly place themselves in danger.

Still, a few months after Clarkent turned fourteen, as the two boys sat on the grass and tried to think of something new to do during the short amount of time they had together before Clarkent had to go back to work, Gawain returned once more to what sometimes seemed like a constant mantra.

Clarkent groaned. “You always want to go on adventures.” He would much rather act out one of Gawain’s crazy stories than go try to make their own. What was the point in putting one’s life at risk *on purpose*?

“I mean it this time,” Gawain insisted, ever the pushy one. “And you can’t tell me you’re not hoping to have adventures one day.” There was an impish gleam in his eye. “I saw you jumping on the back of Agides--”

Clarkent flushed in embarrassment. He had been practicing leaping onto horses from behind. It was a move he had seen Dwayne--who was surprisingly agile--do once, and he had wanted to duplicate it. He wasn’t quite tall enough to make it every time, but he usually was able to do it about half the time. He had *thought*, however, that he’d been practicing unnoticed.

“It’s too dangerous to go pursuing adventures,” Clarkent said, trying to distract Gawain. “We should just stay here--”

“No,” Gawain said as he narrowed his eyes. “I’ve heard reports of something that we have to investigate!”

“And what is that?” Clarkent asked with an exaggerated sigh. “They say that running loose ... is a walking cookie!” Gawain proclaimed.

Clarkent groaned. “That’s ridiculous.”

Gawain narrowed his eyes. “I’m telling you--it’s *not* ridiculous!”

“Yes, it is!”

“No, it’s not,” Gawain said firmly. “We live in a magical

place, and I think a wizard has cast a spell on this cookie!”

“And I think you’ve been eating one too many of the cook’s desserts,” Clarkent returned. “I am *not* going to go pursue something so obviously fake. A walking cookie? Come on, Gawain!”

With a huff, Gawain crossed his arms. “Fine. We’ll do something else if magical desserts aren’t good enough for you!”

As Gawain began pacing, Clarkent lay back on the grass and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes a few minutes later, Gawain was peering down at him.

“I have it!” Gawain exclaimed, backing away now that he had Clarkent’s attention.

Clarkent sat up, wary of his friend’s excitement. “You have ... what?”

“I know what we’re going to do! We ... are going to go to the border!”

“No,” Clarkent said immediately, not even needing to think about it twice. To even *consider* going to the border between Metropolita and the Barbarian Kingdom was utter foolishness.

“Come on,” Gawain whined. “I’ve never been there before, and you know what’s there ...”

Clarkent’s heart beat just a little bit faster at the mere reference to the famous--or was that *infamous*--landmark. But he tried to calm himself--there was absolutely no reason to go to see it--and he said in a you-should-know-better-than-this kind of tone, “A border patrol would catch us. Or they could be in the middle of a battle right now.”

“That’s why we go at night!” Gawain said, obviously proud at his foresight. “If we go at night, we can sneak to the border under the cover of darkness. If there’s a battle going on, then we just run away. If there’s a border patrol around, well, we’ll just make sure we’re quiet enough that they don’t notice us.”

It wouldn’t work, would it? Clarkent shook his head. “This is a bad idea--”

“It’s a *fun* idea, you mean!”

No, not *fun* exactly. But to know for sure ... to actually have seen ... Clarkent tried to shake himself out of his interest, saying, “No, that’s not--”

“Please,” Gawain pleaded. “I doubt anything bad will happen to us!”

“Famous last words,” Clarkent muttered. But he couldn’t help being tempted despite himself. What if Gawain was right? What if Clarkent was worrying over nothing? They didn’t even have to stay for long--they could just sneak onto the border and then sneak back ... Right? Just long enough to see it ...

Releasing a soft sigh, he said, “Fine. But if something *does* happen to us, it’s on *your* head.”

“Yes!” Gawain said triumphantly, only focused on the fact that Clarkent had agreed to go. “You won’t regret it.”

Clarkent shook his head. “You’d better hope not.”

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They managed to enlist some help from Billy for their plan. They couldn’t ride horses directly to the border, lest a border patrol hear them. So, that night, after Clarkent and Billy were done with their chores, Gawain and Clarkent rode together on Agides to a spot about a mile from the border with Billy riding on a horse behind them and muttering about how crazy they were for even thinking of doing something so dangerous. The plan was for Billy to look after Agides--protecting him from horse thieves--and await their return. Later, Billy would be compensated with a large supply of sweets from Gawain. It was a solid plan in theory, but Clarkent disliked every bit of it.

As Gawain and Clarkent slipped off Agides, Billy told them one last time, “You’re both insane.”

Gawain stuck his tongue out and began walking away. Clarkent gave a helpless look to Billy, who simply shook his head.

Clarkent sighed, and he and Gawain began their trek toward the border. Every step they took made Clarkent more nervous.

“It’s not too late to turn back,” he told Gawain after they had been walking for a few minutes. “We don’t have to put ourselves in danger, you know.”

But Gawain refused to see reason. “Don’t be a coward. It’s not like we’re going to the Barbarian King’s castle! We’re just going to go look at the stone, and then we’ll go back.”

Clarkent sighed. He didn’t want to admit even to himself that there was a small part of himself--a very, very *tiny* part of himself--that was a little excited at the thought of seeing what he had only heard stories of.

As they got closer to the border, they began moving slower, conscious of the need to be quiet. And finally, they had arrived ... and there *it* was.

The stone wasn’t as massive as Clarkent had heard it was, but it was still big. It stood right on the border of the two kingdoms, marking where one began and the other ended. But more important than the presence of the stone was what was *in* it.

Jammed into the top of the stone was a sword, its blade just barely able to be seen gleaming silver in the night. The grip of the sword was jet black, but the circular pommel and the long cross-guard were plated in gold which was woven in intricate patterns. It was utterly magnificent.

Clarkent and Gawain crept closer toward it, awed into silence. There were many mysterious stories surrounding the sword. Most people said it was enchanted. But whether that was true or not, the sword was beautiful.

As they moved up to the sword, Clarkent’s eyes dropped to the part of the stone directly beneath it. Below the sword was some kind of writing. He only knew how to read the little bit that his parents had taught him before he’d been Assigned, but he knew that the writing wasn’t in a Metropolitan script.

Gawain noticed Clarkent staring at the writing. “That’s the script of the Barbarian Kingdom,” Gawain noted in a whisper. “We may speak the same language, but we don’t write the same way.” He reached out and touched the script, following it with his fingers. “I don’t know what the words say. Some people claim it’s a nasty spell. Others say it warns Metropolitans to stay away.”

“What do you think it says?” Clarkent asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Gawain said with a frown. “The sword appeared several years ago, so you would think someone would have figured it out by now, but no one in Metropolita knows ... Or if they do, they aren’t saying anything. People are too scared of this place.”

An owl hooted in the darkness, and Clarkent shivered. “I don’t blame them.” He was really beginning to regret having come here--not that he had been happy to do so in the first place.

“Let’s try to get it out,” Gawain said eagerly, climbing up the stone.

“I don’t think that’s a good i--”

“Oh, come on!” Gawain said, his voice slightly louder than it should have been. “Let’s each try it, and then we can go back.”

“All right,” Clarkent agreed nervously. “Let’s hurry.”

Gawain stood up on top of the stone, a big grin on his face. He leaned down and placed his small hands around the hilt of the sword, bending his knees to prepare for the effort of pulling at it. He was about to both straighten up and pull at it when the light clapping of horse hooves sounded nearby, and he froze.

Clarkent turned sharply in a panic and then hissed at Gawain, “Get down!”

But it was too late. A border patrolman from the Barbarian Kingdom was guiding his bay horse their way, and the light from his torch splashed onto the two boys, revealing their frightened faces.

“Hey!” the man shouted in surprise.

“Run!” Clarkent yelled to Gawain before taking off. He heard

Gawain leap off the rock and come sprinting after him.

The sound of another horse galloping reached Clarkent's ears, and he realized that the man on horseback had been patrolling with someone else.

It didn't take long for the first patrolman to react, and Clarkent heard him clicking to his horse, whose hooves soon pounded the ground.

"Let go of me!" Gawain shouted from behind Clarkent.

Turning his head as he ran, Clarkent saw that the man had scooped up a struggling Gawain and was trying to keep him from jumping off the front of the horse--something which was made more difficult by the fact that he was wearing armor.

Clarkent hesitated only for a second before running toward them. The man was having a hard time controlling both his horse and Gawain (who he held sideways over his lap), and that gave Clarkent hope that what he was about to try would work.

He raced to the back side of the horse and leapt into the air as he'd been practicing, fumbling and holding tightly on to the horse's hind quarters and saddle as he scrambled upward into a seated position. The man holding Gawain twisted in confusion, and Clarkent, praying he wasn't being an utter fool, leaned to the side and pulled Gawain toward him by the back of his shirt with one hand while pushing at the man with his other hand. Despite the fact that Gawain wasn't heavy, Clarkent almost lost him over the side of the horse anyway as the boy's legs swung downward, but Gawain fortunately had enough presence of mind to latch on to Clarkent's midsection as he was pulled, even if his legs *were* dangling precariously over the edge of the horse. But--as was Clarkent's goal--the patrolman did fall off the horse with a thud and a curse.

Clarkent helped pull Gawain all the way up on the horse and in front of him on the saddle, and he put his arms around the younger boy, taking the reins and using his feet and a clicking noise to encourage the horse to gallop away.

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When Loisetete was yanked by the stableboy, she had known for certain she was going to fall off the horse and be trampled to death by it. Somehow, however, she bypassed that gruesome fate by throwing her arms around Clarkent. Her legs weren't on the horse, and she was certain she was still going to hit the ground, but then Clarkent was helping her up and putting his arms around her to grab at the reins.

Their stolen horse jumped forward, and Loisetete's heart leapt with it. She was suddenly very conscious of her closeness with Clarkent, and her pulse--which was already beating madly because of the danger they were in--quickened for some inexplicable reason.

Behind them, Loisetete could hear the other patrolman hot on their trail, and she closed her eyes and leaned back into Clarkent. *<Please let us get out of this alive,>* she prayed.

The minutes passed as they raced in the darkness, not aiming to reach Billy, just heading for somewhere *away* from the man chasing them. They were in Metropolitan territory, but he was persistent in his pursuit. Finally, however, they could no longer hear him following.

Loisetete allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief, though her heart was still pounding. The man's armor had probably hindered his speed. Thank goodness for that!

Clarkent slowed the horse down and told her, "I think ... I think we're safe now."

"Yeah," she returned slowly.

They were both quiet for a minute, wrapped up in thoughts of their close encounter with someone from the Barbarian Kingdom.

And then, strangely, Loisetete's mind returned to her physical proximity to Clarkent. It felt so strange to be in his arms like this, and she just didn't know why. Was there a reason for the hitch in her breath?

"We're alive ... " Clarkent said, as if uncertain whether they really *were* alive.

Loisetete nodded slowly. "What--what do we do with the horse?"

Clarkent paused, shifting his arms around her to get a better grip on the reins. "Uh--point it in the direction of home?"

Loisetete frowned to herself. "If we did that, we would be giving the enemy more resources. Shouldn't we keep it? You know, for the good side?"

"Umm ... how would we explain how we got it?" he asked her.

She sighed. "Fine. What if we just let it roam free? Someone will see its brand and realize it isn't from Metropolita. Then *they* can decide what to do with it."

"All right." He hesitated. "Maybe we should let it free here so it isn't too close to the border--maybe it'll be less likely to run back home."

"Good idea," Loisetete agreed.

"You want to dismount first?" he asked her.

"Uh, yeah," she said, trying to cover her nervousness. As Gawain, she and Clarkent usually didn't ride horses that often, so she still wasn't completely comfortable with riding astride, much less dismounting by herself. But she wasn't going to let it look like she was afraid. And besides--she had done it earlier in front of Billy.

Clarkent removed his left foot from the stirrup, and she placed hers in its place. Then she awkwardly brought her right foot underneath her, trying not to hit Clarkent. She leaned over the saddle on her stomach, removed her foot from the stirrup, and slid to the ground.

He smiled down at her and then dismounted himself, though he did so much more gracefully. He gently hit the horse's hind quarters and said, "Hyah!"

The horse obediently began running off, and they watched it for a few seconds.

Loisetete turned to Clarkent, feeling suddenly shy. "Thank--thank you for rescuing me."

He narrowed his eyes. "This is why adventures were a bad idea."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "You didn't have fun?"

"No," he said firmly.

She was certain she was lying, but she didn't call him on it. Instead, she said, "Let's go back to Billy. I think we've had enough excitement for one night."

"You're telling me," Clarkent muttered.

She simply ignored him. She had had her adventure. And that meant she had won.

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## Chapter 12: Enlightening Visits

Months passed.

The taste of one adventure had left Gawain hungering for more, but Clarkent kept digging in his heels. They were kids, he had argued, and kids weren't supposed to be out having adventures. Gawain disagreed ... but appeared not to have any desire to go adventuring *alone*, so Clarkent felt they were probably safe.

When Gawain got his hands on a treasure map covered in cryptic clues, Clarkent had very reluctantly agreed to pursue finding the treasure. But it had turned out to be a wild goose chase, much to Clarkent's relief, and there was no danger in it.

One byproduct of what Clarkent referred to sarcastically as the Great Treasure Map Hunt was that Gawain discovered Clarkent didn't really know how to read. Since Clarkent hadn't really had the opportunity to practice what little his parents had taught him, he wasn't very good at it.

Gawain, however, had volunteered to give reading lessons to Clarkent, who had gratefully accepted the offer.

During one of those reading lessons, Clarkent threw down in frustration the letter he had been attempting to read. “It doesn’t make sense!” he exclaimed. “Why is the word spelled like that? One, two, honest, who--none of them make any sense!”

“I don’t make the rules,” Gawain said matter-of-factly. He picked the letter up and pointed at the offending word. “But I’m telling you ... that is how you spell it.”

Clarkent grabbed Gawain’s wrist and looked at his palm. It was smooth and had no calluses at all. It was like the words “I do not do manual labor” were written all over it. “Errand boys,” Clarkent murmured in annoyance as he shook his head.

Gawain snatched his hand away. “Do you want help or not?”

Clarkent sighed. “I guess,” he muttered. He squinted down at the letter, decided he didn’t want to read any more that day, and then looked up at Gawain, hoping to distract him. “Are you going to see your family on Visiting Day?” The holiday was next week, and Clarkent was looking forward to it with some trepidation. What would his parents look like this year? Would they appear even more haggard than they had the last time he saw them?

“No,” Gawain said uncomfortably. “My ... my parents aren’t alive.”

Clarkent looked at Gawain with an expression of sincere sorrow. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Gawain had mentioned a father before, and Clarkent had just assumed ... well, that he was alive.

Gawain just shrugged and looked down at the letter, one of his fingers twitching against it.

“Hey,” Clarkent said brightly, “I have an idea. Why don’t you come with me and meet my parents?”

Gawain frowned. “I don’t know,” he said with some hesitation. “I don’t think--”

“Come on,” Clarkent pressed. “I bet you’ll enjoy meeting them. I’m sure they’d like to meet you.” He tried to give Gawain an encouraging smile.

“Oh, all right,” Gawain agreed reluctantly. “If you insist.”

Clarkent smiled. “Well, I do.”

“I’m sure you do,” Gawain muttered.

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When Visiting Day came, Loisetette was immensely nervous, though she wasn’t sure why. It was harder than normal to slip away from Catherine, who the previous year had come to realize the princess’s dislike of the holiday, and Loisetette knew she couldn’t stay away from her lady-in-waiting for too long without completely arousing her suspicions. But she had promised to come visit the stableboy’s parents, and she was going to keep that promise.

Still, when she met Clarkent, she told him, “I can’t stay for long--I have some things I need to do.”

He nodded. “All right. We normally start by walking around the stable, but maybe it would be better if we went to the market first.” He made a jerking gesture with his head for her to follow him, and he quickly took her to where his parents were waiting.

They were a kind-looking older couple with graying hair. Their clothes were worn and their faces weather-beaten, but they looked happy. Staring at them, Loisetette thought she realized why Clarkent was (usually) so nice. Their smiles were warm and genuine--and she knew immediately that these were good people.

“Mom, Dad,” Clarkent said, “this is Gawain. Gawain, these are my parents, Jon and Marta.”

Loisetette almost curtsied before she caught herself and gave an awkward sort of half-bow. “It’s good to meet you,” she said.

“It’s good to meet you, too,” Marta returned warmly. “Clarkent has told us you two are great friends, and we’re glad you could spend some time with us.”

Loisetette smiled and nodded, but she felt a pang of sorrow shoot through her chest. Clarkent’s mother seemed so nice, and it made her wonder--was this what her mother would have been

like? Everyone had always told her how wonderful Queen Ellena was, but all Loisetette had of her mother was a wisp of a memory. If Loisetette’s mother and baby sister had lived, would they have made a happy family like this? Would the dark nights Loisetette had spent have been wiped away by a mother’s love or a sister’s laugh?

Once, she had felt so friendless. Now, however, she wasn’t feeling that. As Gawain, she had Clarkent, and as Loisetette, she had Catherine. She was no longer that lonely little girl throwing tantrums on the floor.

But in spite of all that, there was a hole in her heart she suspected would always be there--a hole for a mother who had passed away and was gone forever. She tried to fill that hole with snippets of others’ memories of her mother, as if one day she would have a complete picture that would soothe her sorrow and bring her mother back to life. But nothing could do that. Some holes could not be filled ... and some wounds would always remain open. The pain could dim to a dull throb, but it would never completely disappear.

Clarkent didn’t realize how lucky he was to have both his parents alive, she reflected. He had their love and support and caring--and he could talk to them about anything. They just seemed like that kind of people. She at least had friends now, but they were ones she couldn’t tell everything to. She was slowly beginning to see how the magic clothes were in some ways as much a curse as a blessing. If she could just tell her two friends everything about her--tell them how she wanted to be respected as a person and go on great adventures and not be treated as if she were a fragile vase in danger of toppling to the floor--but she couldn’t. She was a princess, and she had her duties. No one could know that she had done something as dangerous as going to the border or as scandalous as riding a horse astride. She could share her full self with no one.

She finally turned her attention back to her company. Clarkent was saying, “He can’t stay the whole time, so I think we should go to the market first. I can show you the stable later.” He flashed a smile at Loisetette which she feebly returned. “Gawain’s already really familiar with the stable.”

“Then the market it is,” Jon said with a smile.

As Loisetette followed them toward town, she couldn’t help but wonder if her father would travel a great distance just to spend a few hours with her. But he couldn’t find time to be with her even though they lived in the same castle.

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Clarkent was glad to be able to bring his good friend to meet his parents. He saw Gawain nearly every day, and he looked forward to their visits, even though Gawain almost always had some ridiculous idea up his sleeve. He had noticed the princess coming to the stable with her lady-in-waiting to ride less often, and he had been saddened by it, but he knew it was the way of things. She was growing up, and she had better things to do with her time than spend it riding horses. But though it was seldom and never for long, he still relished every second he was able to see her--and whenever she flashed a smile at him, it was enough to make him float on air for days. Why exactly that was ... well, it wasn’t something he wanted to examine too closely. He told himself she was simply a friend he did not want to lose--though he knew that one day he would indeed lose her.

He threw a glance over at his parents as they walked toward town to go to the market. Though his parents looked no worse than last year, they still seemed ... worn.

They smiled more than they had when he last saw them, and they lacked that nervous energy they had had when they prepared to tell him the secret they had harbored, but their hard work was obviously still taking its toll. Their appearance wasn’t enough to make him completely abandon his Assigned job at the stable, but it was enough to worry him.

His mother had taken a real shine to Gawain and was telling him some silly story about a chicken that used to follow Clarkent around when he was little. He had named the chicken “Hawthorn” after a flowering tree and even sometimes ate at the table with the bird at his feet. At night, he even sang to the chicken.

“Mom,” Clarkent said, his cheeks red, “that’s not that great of a story--”

“I think it is!” Gawain said mirthfully, obviously relishing in Clarkent’s embarrassment.

“I bet you do,” Clarkent muttered, but Gawain just laughed at him.

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They went to the market to look around, and Loisetete found the experience quite enjoyable. She never needed to go to the market herself, as she had plenty of servants to send out to buy what she wanted or needed, but the sights and smells and sounds of the market were really something! It was such a busy world there, filled with countless diversions.

She dodged a rooster, smiling as she thought of the chicken Marta had been talking about and a very young Clarkent singing lullabies to it, and paused to look at some pretty fabrics. Marta was looking at some jewelry with Jon standing behind her, and Clarkent came up to Gawain.

“These are nice,” she said, reaching out to touch a red and gold one.

“Yeah,” Clarkent agreed distractedly. Loisetete looked up and saw him staring at his parents with a sad expression on his face.

“Your mother should buy one of those necklaces,” she said, noticing Marta touching a particularly pretty one. “They would look really good on her.”

Clarkent’s face clouded over. “We never buy anything here,” he mumbled. “We ... we can’t afford it.” He shook his head in sudden fury. “All my parents can buy is ... is *food* and *clothes* and things they have to have around the house.” His face tightened. “And some people can’t even afford that.”

Loisetete frowned. “You must be exaggerating a little--”

“I’m not,” Clarkent stated flatly, frowning back. “You aren’t a Noble--how did *your* family come up with money for things? It’s not like you’re paid for what you do. The rich are breaking the back of the poor, and they don’t even care!”

Loisetete bit back a response, knowing it would just worsen Clarkent’s mood. But as she followed him and his parents around the marketplace, looking at the stalls filled with pretty trinkets and delicious-smelling desserts, she began to feel very troubled. Certainly, Assigned servants didn’t get a monetary compensation for their services to send to their families. But they were fed and clothed and housed. That was all that mattered, wasn’t it?

But she just couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something off about the whole process.

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Gawain left after they were done with the market, and Clarkent walked with his parents to the Riding Stable.

“Your friend seems very nice,” his mother commented. “I’m glad you have someone to play with.”

Clarkent gave a weak smile, his thoughts in darker places. “Yeah. I am, too.”

He pulled his mind away from the Assigning briefly to concentrate on his mother and father. They hadn’t mentioned their not being his real parents this time, and he hadn’t either. But he felt the air should be cleared a little before another year went by, and he coughed nervously, drawing his parents’ attention toward him. “I want you both to know,” he said, a lump clinging to the inside of his throat, “that even if you aren’t my real parents, it doesn’t matter. I love you both just as much as I would if we were related by blood.”

His mother suddenly engulfed him in a hug that was full of

love. “Oh, we feel the same way, honey.”

His father clapped him on the shoulder as he pulled away from his mother feeling just the slightest bit misty-eyed. “We’re very proud of you,” Clarkent’s father said. “And you’ve always been our son where it counted.” He patted his heart twice with his hand and held it there, and Clarkent smiled at him, his own heart full to bursting.

He was so fortunate to have been raised by them--and he was also fortunate that they came to see him every year so that he could spend time with them. Not every family did--or could--visit their Assigned children. Those who did visit were giving their children a priceless gift. When Clarkent had first left his family, one of the only reasons he made it through the day was the thought that his situation wasn’t for forever--he would see his parents again ... and eventually leave his work at the castle.

They walked in silence after that, but it was a companionable silence, and at last they reached their destination. They found Dwayne in the stable working with the horses, and Clarkent’s parents, who had met him before, struck up a conversation with him.

Clarkent stood apart from them, petting Esroh Repus’s nose. His thoughts were back on what he had talked about with Gawain at the market. Clarkent hated the Assigning so much--and he wanted to hate Metropolita’s king for not abolishing it.

Was it so hard to pay servants? Was it so hard to give people a choice about whether or not they wanted to leave their families and start up in utterly new surroundings?

King Samuel was just a figurehead who sat around all day and did nothing! Why didn’t he listen to the people’s cries for help?

Clarkent stared at his parents, who were smiling and laughing as they talked with Dwayne. His mother and father deserved a better life. It wasn’t fair that they were working themselves to the bone while he was unable to do a single thing to help them! Every year, they gave him a few precious coins, and every year he hid those coins, too ashamed to spend them like his parents wanted him to, not wanting to pay for some frivolity when they were working so hard just to get their bread and butter. They were such good people--why had life been so cruel to them?

He stepped away from the horse and went to his parents’ sides, where he hugged his mother fiercely against him. She gave him a startled look but then smiled and hugged him back.

“I love you, Mom,” he whispered. “I love you so much.”

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When his parents left, Clarkent felt a shadow of fear settle over his heart. Would they still be alive the next year? Would they have worked themselves to death? If they did, he would never forgive himself.

In less than three years, he could leave to help them. Could they wait that long?

Clarkent grimly turned to Esroh Repus, touching his forehead to the horse’s nose.

“Something wrong?” Dwayne asked from behind him.

Clarkent turned to look at the older man. Dwayne was standing there and leaning on a shovel, an expression of concern on his face.

“I hate the Assigning,” Clarkent muttered, unable to help himself. “King Samuel just sits there in his castle, doing *nothing*. He doesn’t deserve to be king.” The words were borderline treasonous, but Clarkent didn’t care. He was too upset.

“It may seem that way sometimes,” Dwayne said calmly, “but there’s more to being a king than just sitting on a throne. Tomorrow, you should take some time off work and go see a little of what King Samuel actually does. Every day, His Majesty has a time set aside for settling disputes. He has his court magician, Peregrine the White, with him to offer counsel, but ultimately the decisions of what to do to help the people rest in his hands.

Maybe you'll see it's not so easy to be a king after all."

Clarkent looked away, a little ashamed at his petulance. "All right. I'll do that."

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The next day, Clarkent went to the castle--admittedly, with some reluctance--to see King Samuel address conflict among his people. Metropolita's king was seated on his magnificent throne and robed in red and gold majesty. Beside him was the great Peregrine the White, who was wearing his own impressive deep blue robes and holding his magician's staff. But Clarkent froze in utter shock when he saw and recognized the bird perched on the magician's shoulder. It was the falcon, James, and that meant ... Peregrine the White was actually *Peri*.

He nearly stumbled backward at the realization. *Peri* was a *magician*? Why hadn't he told Clarkent that?

Suddenly, he felt very dumb. He'd known that Peregrine the White had a bird as an animal familiar--both the presence of James and his weird connection with *Peri* should have tipped Clarkent off. But he had thought *Peri* was just a kind old man who simply worked somewhere near the castle. He hadn't realized the man was one of the kingdom's most important political advisors. It felt like a betrayal--like a good friend had just revealed something crucial he had been holding back.

The stunning realization was almost enough to cause Clarkent to leave right then, but he forced himself to calm down and stay. A magician had been mentoring him and helping look out for him. So what?

But his heart was still thumping as he cast his eyes on the monarch sitting at the back of the large room.

King Samuel seemed very sad. Clarkent saw that very quickly. But there was a certain nobility in the king's mien. King Samuel may not have wanted to be in that great room, but he took the petitions of his supplicants seriously at least.

Clarkent watched as complainants came forward one at a time. This man was accusing another of stealing an important piece of equipment; that man was claiming someone had cheated him by selling him a lame mule. The number of complaints seemed immeasurable, but King Samuel listened patiently to each and then submitted judgment after having a quiet conversation with his court magician. Clarkent didn't agree with all of the monarch's decisions, but it was obvious King Samuel was doing what he believed best, and none of the supplicants argued with what he told them. Once a decision was made, the next complainant came forward.

When Clarkent had seen enough to realize that King Samuel did *not* simply sit around all day, he prepared to leave. Across the room, *Peri*--no, *Peregrine the White*--caught his eyes, and Clarkent's mouth became a grim line, and he gave a curt nod of farewell.

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Later that day, Peregrine the White came to the Riding Stable with his falcon. Clarkent was saddling a horse for someone, but when he was done, the magician stepped forward and asked if he could talk to Clarkent outside.

Clarkent wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of talking to the older man, as he was still reeling from the news that he had been associating with such an important figure, but he agreed and followed him out of the stable.

"Why didn't you tell me you were Peregrine the White?" Clarkent blurted out. "Why did you lead me to believe you were just some--some strange old man?" It was deception by omission. After they had seen each other so often, shouldn't *Peri* have told him what exactly it was that he did for a career?

The left corner of the magician's mouth lifted at the "strange old man" comment, and he said calmly, "You never asked."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Clarkent asked with a frown.

Peregrine the White gave him a "look," and Clarkent realized he was in for another of the older man's stories. "Now, son," began Peregrine the White, "that has everything to do with it. You know, one day, the King heard of a rare flower that grew in the middle of the forest, and he wanted to get it for his true love for her birthday. So, determined to get that flower no matter what, he went to the forest alone ... and was attacked by a bear whose cub was playing nearby. He *did* end up getting the flower without dying, but when he returned with his prize in hand, he learned that his true love didn't actually like flowers.

"Now, had he *asked* her what she wanted for her birthday, she would have told him she wanted a fluffy white cat. But he didn't ask her, and so he had to find it out the hard way. You're going to have to learn, son, that sometimes it's important to seek information. If it was handed to you on a silver platter, well, you wouldn't be getting much out of the experience, would you?"

Clarkent squinted, trying to follow the logic of Peregrine the White's story. He wasn't sure he understood what the lesson was--or even if there *was* one--but it was enough to make him realize that he didn't want to stay upset with the magician. Just talking with him was always enough to make him feel better.

"I guess it is," Clarkent acknowledged with a sigh. "But I do have one question ... What do I call you now?"

"The same thing you always have," the magic user said with a smile. "*Peri*."

"All right ... *Peri*." Now that Clarkent knew the older man was King Samuel's court magician, it was hard to think of addressing him so informally, but Clarkent had been doing so for a while now, so he might as well stick with it.

*Peri* slapped a hand on Clarkent's shoulder. "That's a good boy!"

Clarkent rolled his eyes. The man certainly didn't *act* like an all-powerful magician.

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### Chapter 13: Presents of Mind and Body

The fifteen-year-old Clarkent was outside the stable assisting a knight with his horse--a new stallion called Monsieur Edward which the knight had bought on a whim and which was apparently terrified of entering stables--when he saw her.

It had been more than a month since Clarkent had rested his eyes on Princess Loisetete, and he had been close to despairing that he would never see her again. But there she was with Lady Catherine, the two of them taking a leisurely stroll, talking and laughing. Her hair had been curled and looked soft to the touch, and her eyes were sparkling with amusement. There was something in her smile that pulled him, and in his distraction, he was almost knocked over by the horse as it swung its head. Ducking, he shook himself out of his reverie and went back to concentrating on getting Monsieur Edward to stop gnashing his teeth and start walking into the stable.

But his heart was still pounding. The princess was so beautiful.

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After he finally finished helping the knight--who determined that his best recourse was to take Monsieur Edward back to where he had gotten him--Clarkent returned to inside of the Riding Stable and did his chores. When he was done, he went and stood in front of Esroh Repus, holding out a handful of oats.

As the horse nibbled at the proffered food, his big and velvety lips causing a tickling sensation as they brushed gently across the stableboy's fingers, Clarkent was navigating the churning sea of his thoughts.

Another Visiting Day had passed a few weeks ago. It had been great to see his parents again, and Gawain had even accompanied them for a little while. After Gawain had left, Clarkent had told his parents of his discovery shortly after the last Visiting Day: that the old man who had been so friendly to him

was actually the great Peregrine the White. They had smiled and told him how glad they were that someone was looking out for him, but they hadn't said much more.

The passing of another Visiting Day had meant a visual confirmation of the fact that his parents had survived another year, and he was glad for that. They looked a little less fatigued than they had the last few years--they said their work was going better than ever--and he was able to rest a little easier, though he still was counting down the days until he could return home to help them.

Esroh Repus finished off the oats and stared at him, as if wondering where the rest was.

"I miss the princess," Clarkent whispered softly to the horse, surprising himself. It was true.

He had loved watching her ride or gently pet High Flyer. She was so spirited and full of life, and he wished he could talk to her alone--even for just a few minutes. But he couldn't go to her. He had to wait until she came with her lady-in-waiting to ride horses ... or until he chanced to see her passing by, as he had today. And to be so much in the hands of fate ... was maddening. But there was nothing he could do. He was only a stableboy.

He thought back to a few years ago when they had danced together out in the field. It was something that had only happened once, but he still carried the memory of it in his heart. There had been a moment there where he'd forgotten he was a stableboy and simply gotten lost in her voice and the rhythm of the song.

Petting the horse, Clarkent continued talking in a low voice. "I don't know why. I knew she had to--to start growing up sometime. She couldn't dance with stableboys for long." He chuckled to himself. "It's not like I was even a very good dancer."

Esroh Repus just looked at him out of one eye and then shook his head with a snort.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Clarkent asked loudly, his eyes narrowed at the horse. Then he shook his head and grinned at his own ridiculousness. He was standing in a stable talking to a horse. "Maybe I am," he admitted.

"Oh, somehow, I doubt that," said a voice from behind him, and Clarkent turned.

Peri stood there, one arm holding his staff and the other holding against his chest something long and shrouded in an old brown blanket. "After all, only sane people suspect they might be insane."

Clarkent squinted at him, giving him a doubtful look. "Uh ... right."

"I would like to talk to you outside," Peri said shortly, gesturing toward the stable entrance.

Clarkent glanced at the others working in the stable and then nodded. He followed the magician outside to behind the stable, where there was nobody around.

Peri smiled at him. "I have a gift for you, Clarkent."

"A--a gift?" Clarkent stammered. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't this.

Peri nodded affirmatively. Setting his staff on the ground, he maneuvered the covered object so that it was resting across both his hands and held it out to Clarkent.

Hesitantly, Clarkent slipped the blanket off the item, revealing a long object that was unmistakable. A sword.

With a gasp, Clarkent reached out to touch the sword's black scabbard. A golden dragon breathed flames up the length of the metal encasing the weapon. Clarkent ran his finger down the flames, almost afraid. He had never touched a sword before. He had been close when he and Gawain had been at the border, but they had been discovered before he could touch the sword himself.

"This was the King's first sword," Peri noted quietly. Somehow, Clarkent knew he wasn't talking about King Samuel.

Gawain had told him that the symbol of the Barbarian Kingdom was the dragon, and here was more evidence of that.

Clarkent's mind and fingers finally reconnected, and he withdrew his hand and took a few steps backward. "I can't take this," he said heavily, speaking with a slight hint of regret. "This is too precious a gift."

"Nonsense," the magician said, pushing the sword toward him. "I wish for you to have it. A magician has no use for a sword."

"But it was your friend's--"

"And now it is yours," Peri stated flatly. He was beginning to look a little irked, like a cat that was trying to sleep with a child pulling at its tail.

Holding his breath, Clarkent stumbled forward and put one hand on the end of the scabbard and the other on the sword's hilt. He gently lowered the scabbard and unsheathed the sword, which glinted in the sunlight. With his right hand, he shifted it left and right, feeling the weight of it. "Thank you," he whispered suddenly, touched by the gift. His parents had given him what small presents they could afford, and Gawain and the princess had given him cake, but he had never been given something like this before, and it touched him deeply.

"We'll start sword-fighting lessons tomorrow after your work is done."

"What?" Clarkent squeaked. Looking embarrassed, he cleared his throat and said in a more normal tone, "What do you mean?" He hadn't really thought beyond the fact that he had been given something he had never in his wildest dreams been able to hold much less own.

"What's the point of a sword if you don't know how to use it?" Peri asked with a smile.

"I guess you're right," Clarkent mumbled. He looked down at the sword in his right hand, at the black and gold hilt and the sharp edges of the blade. His heart was beating with excitement. To be able to use a sword--

But then the practical side of him caught up with the boyish part, and he asked in confusion, "Why are you doing all this?" Why put a sword in the hands of a stableboy and teach him how to use it?

The older man's expression became serious, and he exhaled slowly. "One day, Clarkent, you will have to fight."

Clarkent pulled his eyebrows inward. "But what will I be fighting for?"

The magician gave him a smile that seemed almost sad. "You'll find out soon enough. Let's just take this one day at a time."

"All right," Clarkent agreed, his eyes drawn once more to the sword. It was the most valuable possession he had ever had.

\*\*\*

The evening of the next day, Clarkent collapsed onto the ground in exhaustion. By "sword-fighting lessons," Peri had meant doing a series of drills over and over out in the middle of the woods where no one would see them. Clarkent hadn't even gotten the opportunity to stab a straw man or slash a stick in two.

But Peri had insisted that it was important to become comfortable with his sword--and for it to become part of himself--before he could start thinking of truly using it.

Peri had also taught Clarkent how to clean his weapon using animal fat. Apparently, there were different things to think about in regard to a sword's upkeep--cleaning blood off it, keeping it sharp, removing rust ... It was a bit like a horse in that way--it needed some care to keep working properly for its master. And Clarkent was good at that sort of thing.

"I guess that's enough for one day," Peri commented wryly as he stared down at Clarkent.

James, who was on the magician's shoulder, appeared to agree: "Rep rep rep rep."

Clarkent looked up at them. “Thanks,” he said, feeling a bit sheepish for having just flung himself to the ground. He was glad he worked in the stables rather than the kitchen. At least his stable work had kept his muscles in shape--though they obviously weren’t in good enough shape if the way they were aching now was any indication of his fitness. “I appreciate the help.”

Peri smiled. “I will see you tomorrow around the same time.” “Great!” Clarkent returned happily. It felt like he was working toward something, and that made him feel good. What he was working toward, he wasn’t exactly sure, but for now ... it didn’t matter.

He touched the dragon on the sword’s scabbard, smiling.

\*\*\*

A week later, Loisetette was in her room with her lady-in-waiting when there was a knock on the door. Upon opening the door, she saw it was Peregrine the White, and she smiled. “Peri,” she said warmly. She used to call him by his full name, but ever since he had insisted in front of Clarkent that she call him “Peri,” the name had stuck with her. In addition, since Gawain had been expected to call him by that name--she had been in her boy persona and seen Peri more than once since their first frightening meeting--it was a good habit to get into.

“Your Highness,” he returned with a bow. His eyes flicked toward Catherine, and he nodded at her in greeting. “I wonder if I might have a word with you alone?”

Catherine muttered, “Sure. Just dismiss the hired help.” But she didn’t seem angry, and she left the room without any further comments.

After closing the door, Loisetette invited the magician to have a seat, but he insisted on standing.

“How are you doing, Your Highness?” he asked her after glancing around the room.

Loisetette couldn’t help but gaze around quickly herself to see if something was amiss, but everything looked like it was in order. “I’m doing fine,” she answered.

He turned his eyes to her and smiled. “You certainly look healthier than you did a few years ago. There was a while there where everyone was really worried about you, Your Highness.”

Loisetette looked down at her feet, examining a dirty smudge on one of her shoes as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world. “Well, I’m fine now.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Your Highness.” He turned his eyes to a spot in the wall, and she wondered if he realized that it was home to her mouse friend. “Did you know that a fairy godmother gave you and your mother the power to speak to animals at your births?” he said suddenly.

Loisetette blinked. Skepticism warred with surprise in her head, and confusion reared up and clobbered both of them. “I had a fairy godmother?” was all she could bring herself to ask.

He looked at her with obvious amusement. “Every girl does. Fairies like to look out for young girls, Your Highness. They know how tough it can be for them to live in a man’s world such as this.”

A wistful smile came to her face. When she was younger, she had dreamed of a beautiful fairy with sparkling wings coming to her and whisking her away to fairyland. But she had never actually thought she could have a fairy godmother looking out for her, no matter what everyone had said. A thought occurred to her, and she asked, “Peri, who is my fairy godmother?”

He gave her a look that was almost scolding. “Fairy godmothers don’t like to reveal their identities until they’re really needed--if they ever even do reveal themselves. I wouldn’t worry about the specifics, Your Highness.”

Realizing he wasn’t going to give her some clues, she ventured, “What is this about talking to animals? I’ve never been able to do that--not with us understanding each other.”

“It’s something you must be taught. To communicate, you

have to learn to open up your mind. It’s not an isolated experience; it’s a sharing process. Animals, as you know, are frequently quiet. Most of them do not speak much, and when they do, it is often with body languages. They rely on their senses--on images, smells, and textures--to get a sense of the world around them. This is information they don’t have to talk about with others of their species--the others are receiving that information as well, so there is no need. Humans rely too much on imparting information through verbal communication ... and often forget about the world around us.”

Loisetette frowned. “How do you get past something like that?”

“That’s part of the magic. It can take what an animal is feeling and put it into understandable words in a human’s head. Sometimes, however, even the magic can’t verbally express something, so it simply gives an image--usually, however, that is enough to get a point across.”

“But how do you talk to them? I’ve talked to animals before and never had a response ... “

Peri tapped his staff gently on the ground, looking toward Robert Bigmouth’s hole. “Is there someone there?” he asked gently, speaking in the direction of the mouse’s home.

A small gray head popped out. His nose twitching furiously, Robert Bigmouth took a few tentative steps forward.

“Sit by him,” Peri said. “Look into his eyes. Think a little bit more like a mouse.”

Beginning to doubt the magician’s sanity, Loisetette nonetheless did as he said. If her mother really *did* have the ability to talk to animals, then maybe she did, too. It wasn’t *that* farfetched, was it?

She stared at Robert’s dark eyes, lowering her hand for him to crawl into and trying to think about what went on in mice’s heads. “Come here, Robert,” she said in a soft voice.

He moved forward in bursts before finally setting his front feet on her hand. With a little encouragement, he was coaxed up fully into Loisetette’s hand. She brought him up toward her face and stared at him. Then, thinking, wishing, believing, hoping, pushing, *feeling*, she managed to say with a remarkable amount of effort, “\*\*Hello, Robert.\*\*”

“\*\*Hiya,\*\*” came the reply, and she nearly jumped.

The mouse hadn’t spoken out loud--certainly, his mouth hadn’t moved--but the word had formed in her head. Startled, she looked up at Peregrine the White, who was smiling down at her.

“Very good,” the magician told her.

Proud of herself, Loisetette turned back to the mouse. “\*\*My name is Princess Loisetette,\*\*” she told him, glad he could understand her at last. “\*\*I named you ‘Robert Bigmouth.’ Is that okay?\*\*\*”

“\*\*Sure,\*\*” he responded, bringing his hands up to smooth down his whiskers.

She grinned at him. “\*\*You’re a cute mouse.\*\*”

But all that came back to her was a mental picture of a large chunk of cheese, and she laughed. There was no need to transform *that* image into words.

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#### Chapter 14: The Runaway

As the weeks went by, Clarkent became more skilled at handling his sword. Though they were usually careful to try to practice where they would be unseen, as fighting was something generally believed to belong to the Nobility, Peri would encourage Gawain to practice with Clarkent from time to time. Peri would guide the two boys through self-defense moves or make them sword-fight with wooden facsimiles of swords (which could really hurt when they were shoved into a stomach or sent a splinter into an uncovered arm). Clarkent, who suffered occasionally from masculine pride, had assumed at first--erroneously--that he would do ten times better than the short and

scrawny Gawain, but Gawain's small stature gave him one advantage: speed. That advantage had quickly taken Clarkent down a few notches.

They were practicing sword-fighting this time without Peri's guidance. Gawain was fiercely competitive, and Clarkent, though not as competitive, felt it was crucial he become the best he could at sword-fighting, especially considering that he was the one who actually *owned* a sword.

Clarkent narrowed his eyes as Gawain practically danced around their "battlefield." The smaller boy's wooden sword was raised, but his feet were carrying him all over the grass in front of Clarkent as he waited for a strike. Gawain definitely lacked strength, but strength was next to useless to Clarkent if he couldn't land a blow on his opponent.

"Are you scared?" Gawain called out teasingly.

"Yeah," Clarkent said in a half-growl, frustrated by the way Gawain was acting like a prancing pony, "I'm scared that I'll get close enough to embarrass you and show that you hit like a *girl!*"

There was a flicker of something across Gawain's face, and then the boy shot forward like lightning, shoving his wooden sword into Clarkent's stomach and knocking him backward to the ground with the wind knocked out of him.

"Ow," Clarkent said weakly, staring upward at the clouds, his back hurting from where he'd fallen on a rock, his sword resting on the grass beside him.

Gawain's face appeared above him. He placed his wooden sword on one of Clarkent's shoulders and then the other and said, "I dub thee 'Sir Fallsalot.'"

One of Clarkent's hands flashed forward and hit Gawain behind his knees, sending him crumpling to the ground, his head and one of his arms landing on Clarkent's stomach.

This time, it was both of them that said "ow."

But Clarkent quickly recovered, not wanting his friend to have the last word. He reached a hand out to grab the wooden sword beside him and awkwardly touch Gawain's shoulders with it. "And I dub you," Clarkent said with a smirk, "'Sir Fallsalot.'"

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Loisette stared at Clarkent from her position on his stomach, her annoyance fighting with her amusement.

They'd been practicing intensely for a while, and Clarkent's hair was coated in a thin layer of sweat. It was plastered against his forehead, and he moved his left hand up to wipe away some of the perspiration.

There was a strange part of Loisette that wanted to reach out and run her fingers through his hair, making it less clumpy. He often had bits of hay or dirt in the dark strands, and though it was charming in a way, she often found herself wanting to touch it--to fix the mess, she told herself.

"You gonna get off me yet?" he asked her, his voice slightly amused.

Her breath caught in her throat--she wasn't sure why--and she pressed her hand against his chest to help push herself up, trying not to think about the musculature there. Catherine was especially attracted to sweaty males, and Loisette suspected that she would have been ogling the stableboy if she'd been there. But there was nothing to ogle, Loisette told herself. It was just Clarkent.

They both got to their feet and picked up their wooden weapons.

"I think I'm done for today," Clarkent told her, stretching. "Are you going to the Children's Day Festival tomorrow?"

She wiped her perspiring palms on her breeches. "I haven't really thought about it."

"You should go with me," he said. "It's one of the best festivals." His smile was warm and hopeful, and she suddenly didn't want to disappoint him.

"All right," she said. "I'll go."

"Great!" he said. "You'll enjoy the festival. I'm sure of it."

\*\*\*

The next day, Loisette sat in her room with Catherine for a little while, waiting for the right time to slip away. The lady-in-waiting was talking about--and this came as no surprise--the opposite sex.

"Didn't Patrik look nice the other day?" Catherine asked, the expression on her face obviously indicating that she was daydreaming about the archer.

Loisette raised an eyebrow. "I don't know what it is with you and sweaty men."

Catherine grinned. "Come on, Your Highness. You can't tell me the thought of a man working hard and sweating up a storm doesn't make you the least bit excited?"

Loisette turned away as her cheeks became a slight shade of pink. The image of a sweaty Clarkent had come to her mind--the sheen on his face, the clumping of his dark hair, the bulging of his glistening arm muscles as he made a thrust with his sword ...

She cleared her throat, pulling her thoughts away from that unbidden picture and the sudden racing of her heart, and declared, "No."

"Fine," Catherine said, the tone of her voice causing Loisette to look at her in suspicion. "I guess you're more attracted to Nobles, then. They don't sweat--that would be too undignified for them." She leaned closer to Loisette. "Maybe the Duke of Lutheria is more your style. He's pretty cute with those curls of his."

"Alexander?" Loisette said with a frown. "He's my cousin."

"Plenty of Nobles marry their cousins," returned Catherine.

"And with a cousin like that, who could blame you? Now, *that* would be a family line I wouldn't mind carrying on."

Loisette shook her head. "He's not really my type."

"Ha! Then your type *is* the sweaty male!" Catherine crowed in triumph.

"I didn't say that!"

Her lady-in-waiting grinned. "You didn't have to. Honestly, Your Highness, you need to learn to lie a little better."

Loisette just sighed and decided to ignore her for a little bit.

\*\*\*

Loisette finally slipped away from Catherine and spun into her Gawain clothes. It had gotten easier to sneak out. Catherine no longer attempted to find her when she disappeared (probably chalking it up to Loisette wanting to meet with *boys*), so Loisette only had to worry about changing without being noticed.

As she walked through the halls of the castle to go outside, she thought about her improvements in communicating with animals. She was getting really good at it--it didn't cost her much effort at all now. She practiced a lot with Robert Bigmouth, but he usually just thought images of food at her, so she tried to talk with other animals when she could. She also practiced some with High Flyer, but she only did that while in her princess clothes ... and while Catherine wasn't paying very much attention. But her most interesting conversations happened with James.

For a bird, James was a great conversationalist. He would ask her questions and listen intently to her answers. Sometimes, he seemed a little bit like an eager puppy, but that was fine--it was even kind of cute. But though James talked with her when he could, he was always needing to leave to do something or other for Peri. Loisette wasn't sure if James was spying or sending messages to people, but whatever it was, neither he nor Peri seemed inclined to tell her. Still, it didn't really matter.

Loisette was happy.

It was strange to realize it, but it was true. Things seemed to be going right. Catherine was a friend she could be ... well, a *girl* with, and Clarkent was someone she could trust to treat her as a playmate and equal (at least, when she was in her Gawain outfit). Her life wasn't perfect by any means--especially not when she thought about her father or began considering the scary prospect

of one day being queen--but she was happier than she had thought she could be.

And Clarkent had been right when he had said she would enjoy the festival. She walked around the town with him, dodging merry passersby and giggling children. There were streamers and games and free snacks everywhere, and she was glad that this was something the crown did for the people. The day seemed glorious.

Clarkent grabbed a small cake and handed it to her before getting one for himself. "There," he said with a smile.

"Considering how many times you brought me sweets, we may not be even, but it's a small step toward paying you back." He grinned at her, happy as a lark.

The mood of Children's Day seemed to be infectious, and she smiled right back at him before taking a big bite out of her cake. It was delicious ... and flaky.

He laughed as she got bits of the sweet all over her chin. "Where'd you learn how to eat? A barn?"

She tried to hold back her laughter and simply give him a glare, but she failed on both accounts. If he only knew where exactly she had learned to eat! Then he would really have been surprised!

He stopped at a game area and asked her, "Want to play?"

She looked and saw that the game involved throwing horseshoes and trying to get them to land around a stake. "You play," she told him. "I'll watch." She had never played the game before, and she didn't want to lose, so she preferred to sit it out. She wouldn't admit that reason to him, however.

Clarkent soon began the game, playing against a few other children--all of them younger than him but still determined to win. Loisetete joined the other children in heckling Clarkent whenever it was his turn to throw, and he must have rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue a dozen times by the time the game was halfway through.

"You call that a throw?" Loisetete teased. "You'd think you were trying to toss a horse rather than one of its shoes!"

"I'd like to see you do any better, Gawain," he muttered, his aim thrown off as one of the children made a rude noise. But he laughed good-naturedly as his horseshoe missed the stake yet again. He was barely getting any points from having a horseshoe touch the stake, much less getting a ringer from encircling it.

When at last Clarkent had lost miserably, Loisetete grinned at him and said, "Awww. Did Clarkent get beaten by a bunch of little kids?"

"Oh, shut up," he muttered.

One of the children grinned up at him. "Better luck next time!" Then she ran off shrieking.

\*\*\*

Clarkent hadn't expected to be beaten so horribly, but he wasn't too upset about it. Still, he couldn't help but tell Gawain in a mock-annoyed tone, "It would have been a lot easier to concentrate without you badgering me."

"Easier, yes," Gawain admitted. "But not as much fun!"

"Bah," grumbled Clarkent. As they passed by a tavern, he was pleased to see that he could read the words on its sign--*The Golden Chimera*. Gawain had been continuing the reading lessons, and while they tended to make Clarkent feel like an idiot, he was able to read better than he once had. And he was glad for it.

When they were finally finished with the Children's Day activities, they decided to return to the stable, but something drew their attention before they had completely left the town proper.

In front of them was a large bush ... There was nothing unusual in that ... but this one was shaking slightly.

Clarkent made a motion for Gawain to stay where he was, and then he crept forward. "Is someone there?" he asked cautiously.

There was a gasp inside the bush, but no one said anything. Taking in a deep breath and praying this wasn't the lair of some hideous beast, Clarkent stepped forward and parted some of the branches.

A girl about nine or ten years of age was hiding inside the bush. Her face was streaked with tears, and her wide eyes spoke volumes for her terror. "Please, don't make me go," she begged.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in confusion.

Gawain came up beside him and peered in. "Who are you?"

"My n-name's Ayma," she said with a sniffle. "I work as--as a clothes washer."

"For a Noble?" Clarkent asked gently.

"Y-yes," she said.

"You should go back," Gawain told her, obviously not understanding the situation well. "Why are you hiding in this bush?"

"No!" the runaway exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears.

"You can't make me go back. *Please.*"

"Why don't you want to go back?" Gawain queried.

"The wife of the--the Noble I was Assigned to, she ... she whips me whenever I mess up."

Clarkent's expression became grim. This girl--who had apparently already been in a precarious situation--had put herself in more trouble by running away. Assigned children who ran away were punished, with the intensity of the punishment according to the number of times it had happened. Some Nobles were understanding the first few times children ran away and encouraged leniency, but if the Nobles this girl was supposed to serve were already beating her, then the chance was slim that everything would be okay when she returned.

"Hold on just a second," he told the runaway, letting the branches fall back into their natural position. He turned to Gawain. "She can't go back," he said firmly.

The other boy seemed surprised. "What do you mean? She has to. She was Assigned to--"

"It doesn't matter that she was Assigned to them--"

"Clarkent, it's the *Law*--"

"I don't care!" Clarkent said, almost shouting. He wanted to calm down, but he couldn't. "The Assigning is wrong. Don't you realize that? Don't you see how awful it is? How is it fair to allow a child to see family only once a year? How is it fair to leave a girl with someone who treats her like an animal? She will have no say in her own life if she goes back to those Nobles--she will be taught the skills that she was *Assigned*. And when she's an adult, that's all she'll know. She'll be trapped in something that brings back bad memories, and she will be covered in emotional scars--and probably physical ones, too--that--"

Gawain cut in, "That Assigning helps the people--"

"Oh, yes, it *helps* the people," Clarkent said sarcastically. "It helps to keep them poor--it traps them in lives they didn't choose."

Gawain bit his lip. "It keeps older children from starving--"

"Would you rather starve with family or be beaten without them?" Clarkent was practically looming over his friend in his anger. "It's not right to let a child feel so alone. *Nobles* get to see their families as often as they like--"

"Just because Nobles *can* see their families doesn't mean they *do*," Gawain returned. "They have responsibilities--"

"Oh, yes, they're *so* busy drinking their wine and eating their expensive food," Clarkent growled. "How do they ever find time to--"

"They have to run estates," Gawain jumped in furiously, "and they have to help keep the peace--"

"Isn't it royalty that helps start wars in the first place? Do you think the *people* care about *war*?"

"War means putting people to work--"

"Making swords and armor and taking care of horses, yes, I

know. But what about all the death?"

Gawain looked away. "I'm not saying war is right--"

"If you cared about people, then you would agree that the *Assigning* is *wrong*," Clarkent stated vehemently.

Gawain seemed hurt. "I *do* care about people--"

"Then prove it!" Clarkent spat. "Question the lies you've been fed! Think about how maybe *tradition* and the *Law* aren't always right!"

Gawain shook his head with a glare. "You're impossible."

"No," he said, seething. "I'm right."

His breathing heavy due to anger, Clarkent watched as Gawain walked away. Then he turned his attention back to the bush. Gently, he peeled back the branches once more, knowing the girl must have been terrified by what she had heard. "We're going to find Peregrine the White," he told her softly. "He'll help us."

\*\*\*

What Loisetette hated most about her argument with Clarkent was the nagging feeling that he *was* right, just as he had said. She had felt the need to defend the *Assigning* because it was a part of their society and was supported by her father, and she had gotten caught up in the heat of the argument without truly thinking about what Clarkent was telling her.

When she reached the castle, she spun out of her Gawain clothes. But she didn't go to her room. She kept thinking of that terrified girl who had been so desperate she had hidden herself away in a bush on what was supposed to be a merry holiday.

In the hallway, she came across Herbie, who smiled at her. "Why, hello, Your Highness."

"Hi," she murmured back. He had always been nice to her, and she liked him--even if his tutoring lessons *were* sometimes boring--but his presence couldn't make her feel better today.

"We've got a new book about the Barbarian Kingdom in the library," he told her eagerly. "I think you might like it."

She gave the librarian a small smile, though she wasn't feeling it. "That's good." She hesitated for a second and then asked, "What do you think of the *Assigning*?"

"I think it's a bit barbaric myself," he said. Then his eyes widened. "Which is not to say that there are not some benefits to it," he said hurriedly. "I just believe there might be better ways to handle staffing the castle, Your Highness."

Loisetette nodded. "Thanks, Herbie," she told him. And then she began walking away, her thoughts still on that girl.

The structure of their society had been built around the *Assigning* ... but that didn't mean it couldn't be changed. Her father was the *king* of *Metropolita*, for crying out loud! He could do something, couldn't he?

She knew in her heart it was pointless to go, but she found her feet carrying her to her father's chamber. Taking in a deep breath to calm herself, she stood up straight and knocked.

He opened the door, looking weary and sorrowful, and she knew he had been staring at her mother's picture again, and it made her really pity him.

"What is it, Princess?" he asked her, speaking without much energy.

She didn't waste any time cutting to the chase. "I want to talk about the *Assigning*, Daddy."

His eyebrows curved inward slightly. "What about it, Princess?"

She faltered a little but then pushed ahead. "It's wrong, Daddy. It hurts a lot of people, and it puts a lot of people in bad situations. It isn't fair for them to be away from their families or have their lives completely decided for them." Her heart ached as she thought of Clarkent passionately making these points, and she felt guilt flare up for the way she had argued with him. But her automatic response had been to make a heated defense--she rarely looked before she leapt--and she simply hadn't been able to stop

herself.

"I know it's wrong," her father said in a soft voice, and she sharply lifted her eyes up to meet his. "It isn't fair to the people at all. But I can't do anything about it, Princess. The Nobles support it, and I can't go against them. I'm sorry."

Loisetette shook her head, a sudden wave of disgust coming over her for the man in front of her. "You know it's wrong but won't do anything?" Her lips became thin. "You're a coward." Years ago, she wouldn't have dreamed of telling him something like that, and it surprised her a little.

But what surprised her even more was his sad reply: "Maybe I am."

\*\*\*

When Gawain entered the stable, Clarkent was grooming Penelope Grace. He was so upset that it was taking all his effort not to brush so hard that it hurt the horse. Clarkent's eyes lifted briefly and then fell back to his task. He heard the younger boy move closer.

Gruffly, Clarkent said, "Peri found a new home for her." Clarkent had wondered where a place was that she could go which wouldn't raise suspicions, but Peri had said it was best not to ask where, so Clarkent hadn't pried for more details.

Clarkent thought maybe Gawain was turning to leave when he heard a soft voice say, "I'm sorry, Clarkent. I was wrong."

He looked up in surprise and saw the saddest and most repentant expression on his friend's face. His frustrations suddenly melted away.

"That's all right," Clarkent mumbled thickly.

Gawain's voice was almost mouselike in its volume when he asked, "Friends still?"

Clarkent gave him a gentle smile and then stepped forward and hugged him tightly. "Friends," he said.

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### Chapter 15: With This Cup, the Kingdom Comes

A light rapping at the door caused Samuel to turn his head. He was sitting in his room and gazing at the painting of his wife. The candle beside him flickered, moving light and shadow across the kind face that was frozen in time. For a second, his heart stopped--had her chin just moved?--but then he shook himself from his reverie.

It was with great effort that Samuel got to his feet. It was late, and he had not been expecting any interruptions. He hadn't gotten much sleep the past few years, and it was wearing on him, draining his energy and slowing his steps. The burden of regret and sorrow was growing heavier every minute of every day, and part of him was beginning to wonder how he continued to draw breath.

He opened the door with a creak and gave a slight smile to the man standing there. A part of him registered that the guards normally stationed outside his door were nowhere in sight, but he didn't pause to think about it, not caring about their absence. "Alexander," he said with as much warmth as he could muster considering the time of night and the depressed thoughts weighing down on him. "Please come in."

The younger man was wearing white gloves and carrying a goblet much like that used for communion, and he did as he was asked after giving a slight bow.

Samuel shut the door and turned to his cousin. "What do you need, Alexander?" The other man normally did not pay him late visits. They saw each other frequently, and Alexander had served as a counselor of sorts to him for years. Samuel had been immensely grateful for the younger man's assistance--through Alexander, Samuel learned most of what he needed to know about what was happening in the castle. Not having several different sources made it so much easier for Samuel, who was less inclined than ever to talk with people.

Alexander's eyes rose to take in the painting, and Samuel's

gaze followed his. “Queen Ellena was a lovely woman,” commented the younger man softly. “Her daughter is beginning to take after her ...” “With a small smile, Alexander turned back toward Samuel. “I thought you would like a glass of wine, Your Majesty.”

Samuel gave the barest of smiles. “Thank you, Alexander.” He took the cup from his cousin and held it up to his lips. “It was kind of you to think of me. I am afraid I have been brooding too much these days.” He tilted the cup and felt the dark liquid slide coolly into his mouth and down his throat. “Ellena always did like a good glass of--” He cut off, making a choking sound. “Alexander?” he coughed in confusion. “What--” And then he collapsed to his knees, the goblet falling to the ground beside him. Wine spilled out and darkened the floor, spreading like blood leaking from a wound.

As Samuel turned his eyes upward to stare at Alexander’s cold face, he wondered if he would finally get to see his wife again--or if his sins were such that he would never even be able to look upon her likeness again. As the darkness of death claimed him, he threw one last prayer heavenward.

\*\*\*

Alexander scrubbed the floor meticulously, removing all traces of wine. He also cleaned off the dead king and placed him in his bed with the covers over him. The poison Alexander had used was odorless and untraceable--no one would ever find proof that the king, whose health had deteriorated since the death of his wife, had not died naturally.

When he finally slipped out of the room and into the hall, knowing the guards that had been called away would be back soon, he allowed himself a slight smile. He glided through the halls like a ghost, cautious to make no noise, only to stop suddenly at the appearance of a man in unusual black robes with ruffles and buttons.

The dark-haired stranger’s eyes were gleaming with something much like glee. “I know what you did,” the man said, wasting no time.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alexander said shortly. His breath caught in his chest, but he betrayed no outward signs of guilt as he tried to pass around this stranger.

“I won’t tell anyone,” the man assured him with a smile. He held up a hand in a weird sign. “Wizard’s honor.”

“Leave me alone,” Alexander gritted. He needed to leave the castle. He couldn’t be caught there.

But the man refused to budge, even going so far as to spread out his arms. “All I ask is one teensy little favor. I want to be your court magician.”

“I refuse to be blackmailed,” Alexander hissed, knowing there was no further point in denying what had happened. This man knew what had happened, but he would never be able to prove it. “I shall choose my own councilors, and *you* will never be one of them.” Finally, he managed to push past the insufferable man, feeling the hands of time chasing after him.

“Don’t you think it unwise to upset a magician?” the man called quietly after him. “One day, you *will* regret this.”

“Magicians cannot kill directly with magic, lest they lose their powers,” returned Alexander. “I think I’m safe.” And then he was gone, hurrying away to get out of the castle before the king’s death was discovered.

\*\*\*

When Loisetette woke to someone’s hands shaking her shoulders, she glanced upward in a fog, having been caught in the midst of a dream. “Mom?” she whispered.

But then the haze cleared, and she realized who it was looking down at her, and she corrected herself as she sat up: “Aliss? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Loisetette,” the older woman said, her voice shaky. Her eyes were filling with tears. “Your father--he’s ... he’s dead.”

“Wh-what?” Loisetette gasped. Her chest was constricting, and she couldn’t breathe. “What?” she repeated in shock, horror, disbelief. This was all just part of her dream. It had to be.

“Loisetette, I’m so sorry,” Aliss whispered, her lips bunched up together in sorrow.

Loisetette was like a bridge shivering under the onslaught of a storm as she stared at Aliss. And then the foundations collapsed inward, and she fell forward into her nanny’s bosom, wailing like a banshee lost in a turbulent sea. Loisetette’s sobs rose and fell like crashing waves, and Aliss hugged her so tightly against herself that the princess would probably have bruises later from the pressure of her fingers.

But all that mattered to Loisetette in that dark moment was that her father was gone--and she would never be able to hear him say, “I love you, Loisetette.”

Her heart had cracked in two.

\*\*\*

When the young girl finally cried herself to sleep, Aliss slipped out of the room. It was still dark out, and not even the early-rising caretakers of the stable had risen. Muttering calming words, she saddled Penelope Grace--wanting a connection of sorts with the deceased Queen Ellena--and rode out to a cottage in the middle of the woods. Dismounting, she hurried over to the door and knocked loudly.

It was a sleepy Peregrine the White who opened the door, though he snapped awake on seeing her face. “What is it?” he asked her.

“I have terrible news,” she said grimly.

He swallowed, worry splashed all over his face. “It’s not Clarkent, is it?” The fear and dread in his voice were almost tangible.

She shook her head. “No. It’s the king.”

Peri turned away from her, knowing what she meant immediately. “He’s dead.” He brought his eyes back to hers, his face darkening. “That means the next in line to the throne after the princess is--”

Aliss nodded. “Yes. Alexander.”

\*\*\*

The next day, Alexander sat on the throne, pleased as a cat sipping cream.

Nobody had been able to come up with any proof as to what had caused the king’s death ... and Tempos had been kind enough to supply Alexander with an alibi. As a result, Alexander was now the Regent of Metropolita. The King’s Council had panicked during the night and given him the position almost immediately. The pleasure he felt was so great as to be indescribable.

When the princess came of age, she would become queen, of course, thereby taking the position of power away from him. But that would be a while yet, as she was only fourteen. And besides--he intended to make her ascension work to his advantage. When she turned seventeen, it would be something to celebrate rather than curse ... for then he would be able to marry her and solidify his grip on the throne.

He had considered killing her as well, of course, but her death coupled with her father’s would put him directly under suspicion, and he didn’t want that. It didn’t matter anyway. He could be patient enough to wait a few years to marry her while he reigned alone. She was certainly growing up to be as beautiful as her mother had been, and a having a pretty little thing to hang on his arm would suit him just fine.

Alexander had a slight smile on his face when his brother walked in to the throne room. The room was empty apart from them, the guards having been instructed to wait just outside the two great doors.

As the armor-wearing Tempos came closer and got a good look at Alexander’s Regent garb, he commented, “You look as ridiculous as a cat wearing shoes.”

But Alexander didn't allow his brother's comment to irk him. Instead, he told him, "You had better change your tune if you wish to be my tilting champion."

With obvious sarcasm, Tempos said, "You are too kind, brother. That's just what I always wanted."

Alexander gave him a fragile smile. Their relationship was one of constant balance. While they were consistently helping one another out in precarious situations, each was always watching for the fatal chink in the other's armor. It would not be enough to simply hurt a reputation. No. When one of the brothers struck, it would be to utterly destroy his kinsman.

Seeing Alexander lost in thought, Tempos asked, "Planning your wedding to the princess already? Aren't you supposed to be friends first before you can be lovers?"

Alexander narrowed his eyes. Sometimes, they thought too much alike.

"Come, brother," Tempos said. "You can't fool me. I know your plan--remember?" He smirked. "We *are* brothers, after all. Our hearts will beat in time until one of them finally stops."

The two brothers stared at each other, unhidden menace behind their gazes. Each intended to be the one to stop the other's heart. But only time would tell who the winner would be.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Loisetette went to the stable after throwing on a dress with help from Catherine. The lady-in-waiting had attempted to come after her, but Loisetette had told her to stay. She wanted to go to the stable, and she didn't need Catherine with her. Her father was dead--what did it matter if she went to the stable alone? He couldn't ... couldn't yell at her.

She walked into the stable, and there was Clarkent, and he turned to look at her, and she trembled in place. And then, after she gave him a mere look, he was rushing toward her, and he took her in his arms, and she was pressed up against him, crying, crying so hard, "My father's dead; my father's dead."

He squeezed her against him, his cheek against her hair as she sobbed. He gently kissed the top of her head, and she shook like a tender sapling in the wind.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he whispered into her hair. His unexpected use of a truncated version of her name filled her with a strange warmth amid all the coldness of reality, and she wished he would repeat it. "I'm so sorry."

In his arms, she felt like maybe everything would be all right someday, like maybe her father wasn't dead. But he was dead, she knew he was dead, and he wouldn't come back. But maybe her father would be with her mother; maybe he would be happy. Maybe the world wasn't ending; maybe there was still hope for happiness. But her father was *gone*, gone forever, and all her hopes had been dashed into nothings. There would be no redemption for her father; he would never hug her against him and tell her how proud he was of her. Dead; dead. Gone. *Forever*.

She let out another harsh sob. It hurt so much when hope had to die.

\*\*\*

Alexander finally learned from his sources at the castle where the princess was, and the knowledge filled him with rage. He wanted to comfort the princess himself. For someone to get there before him ...

He walked through the entrance of the Riding Stable, his eyes hard as they fell upon the princess embracing a stableboy. The girl's lady-in-waiting was nowhere in sight, and Alexander had to take a second to calm his temper.

The stableboy happened to glance up and see him, and then the boy stiffened, though he didn't remove his arms from around the princess. But Princess Loisetette must have felt the change in his bearing, as she turned and finally looked at Alexander.

The Regent consciously softened his expression and approached her after bowing. "Someone told me you were here,

Your Highness," he said softly, trying to inject sympathy into his voice. "I am so sorry to hear about your father." He dropped his eyes to the ground. "I only hope that I--as Regent--can be as good a ruler as he was."

The princess gave a slight nod, her bottom lip trembling. Wanting to escort her away from this place, Alexander reached out an arm for her to hook hers into. "Please, Your Highness, let me take you back to your room. You must be tired." He could practically feel the stableboy's glare, but he gave the peasant no attention.

She hesitantly took his arm and began walking forward with him. But then she paused with startling abruptness and turned. "I want to see my horse, Alexander," she said in a quiet but firm voice, and she pulled away from him.

\*\*\*

As the princess walked away from the man who must have been the new Regent, Clarkent watched her. She moved up to High Flyer and began petting him, murmuring quiet words to him and soon pressing her forehead against his velvety nose.

Clarkent refocused his attention on the Regent, who was obviously enraged by the princess's choice to stay. Clarkent locked eyes with him, meeting the black fury there unflinchingly.

And then Regent Alexander turned on his heel and left the stable, his displeasure as obvious as if he had shouted it.

Clarkent watched as Princess Loisetette whispered to High Flyer. He wanted to talk to her--to hold her and comfort her again--but she had obviously shut herself off from him, and it was best that he give her the space she appeared to be needing. And so, he got back to work.

But he continued to watch her carefully, ready to run to her if she gave him the slightest indication that what she needed was him.

\*\*\*

The funeral was a bleak occasion.

Black permeated the area, suffocating those who grieved. At one point, Loisetette, desperate for something to comfort her, caught herself looking for Clarkent. But then she remembered that only Nobles were allowed at the funeral, and it saddened her. She could only console herself by remembering that at least she had Catherine at her side.

After Alexander gave his words for the passing of the monarch--her eyes were blurry, and there was a dull pounding in her ears, and she couldn't focus on what he had said--he came to stand beside her. He attempted to comfort her, but she simply felt like running away from him. There was something about him that she didn't care for, though she was conflicted about him, as she was grateful for his kindness even while she wanted to reject him whenever he reached out to her.

As she watched her father's funeral pyre go up in flames, she found herself wishing that she could be back in Clarkent's arms, sobbing into his chest ... not watching as her father's body burned in front a group of people who could care less about what Loisetette was feeling. Clarkent could truly sympathize with her--no one at the funeral could.

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### Chapter 16: How to Don a Knight in the Day

A few days after the funeral, Loisetette went back to the stable with Catherine. Gawain hadn't been to visit Clarkent since her father died, and the stableboy was probably wondering where his friend was, but Loisetette wanted to visit him as herself first.

He was removing stones from a horse's foot when she went inside. Catherine gave her some space. If it hadn't been for her father's death, Loisetette might have worried about what her lady-in-waiting thought, but it just didn't seem important. She walked up to the stableboy, and he nearly dropped his horse hoof in surprise when he saw her. He bowed quickly and stuttered, "Y-Your Highness."

She gave him a slight smile. There was a small part of her that was sad at the formality that existed between them when she was in a dress, but she pushed the thought away. He had been there for her when she needed him, and she wanted to let him know she appreciated it. “Thank you for--” She swallowed. “For--for you know ...”

He nodded in understanding, averting his eyes from her. “Anytime, Your Highness.”

As she looked at him, she realized that the feelings of distance between them were in part her fault. She had been so busy visiting him as Gawain that she had rarely visited him as herself. But it was for the best. She didn’t want gossip around the castle to clutter any of their time together.

“We would like to ride,” she said softly, hating that she had to create a visible excuse for her and Catherine to be at the stable.

He gave a small nod and prepared their horses.

And then Loiset and Catherine were riding the horses away from the stable. The pain of her father’s death was still fresh in Loiset’s mind, and she wished she could turn back and bury herself once more in Clarkent’s arms. But nothing could erase the fact that her father was dead. It would take time for the painful throbbing of the loss to go away. She suspected her time with Clarkent as Gawain would go a long way toward making the hurt go away, and she resolved to make some time the next day to resume her play schedule with Clarkent. After all, she occasionally won their mock sword-fights or their occasional sparring matches. Maybe all she needed to do was kick a boy’s butt to feel better.

But she was simply trying to fool herself. Grief would not be dismissed so easily.

\*\*\*

Loiset did go visit Clarkent as Gawain the next day. He brightened up upon seeing her, and it made her feel a tiny bit better. It had taken some effort to convince herself to go, but now that she had, she was glad for it.

“Gawain,” he said, “where have you been?”

“Worried about me?” she teased, though the effort was half-hearted.

“A little,” he admitted.

“I’ve been ... busy with the funeral, you know?”

Clarkent nodded. “The kitchen staff probably had a lot of funeral preparations to deal with, huh?”

“Yeah,” Loiset whispered. She could barely remember the food herself, but she knew it had been there. “It’s ... it’s sad that the king died.” She fought to keep herself from crying. She couldn’t fall apart. Not as Gawain.

“I know,” Clarkent agreed. “I ... feel sorry for the princess.”

She looked down at her hands. “You do?”

“She’s all alone in the world now,” he said softly. “Do you ... do you think she has many friends?”

She managed a smile. “I’m sure she has great friends.”

“I hope so,” he said sincerely.

She gave a hint of a nod to show she’d heard him. Though being with him did improve her mood a little, she didn’t think she could conjure up the energy to have a mock sword-fight with him. She would leave the butt-kicking for another day.

\*\*\*

As time went by, the reign of Regent Alexander proved itself to be a cruel one. Though he always spoke to his subjects with a kind smile on his face, injustices flourished under his rule as the months passed by.

Of special interest to Alexander was the rampant corruption spreading throughout the Nobility at his encouragement. Nobles had learned quickly that a gesture of “allegiance” here or a blind eye there could lead to reaping royal rewards. But there was one fly in the ointment.

“My overtures of friendship toward her have been carefully

crafted, but I seem to be making no progress,” Alexander growled. “The princess treats me as distantly as ever.” Ever since her father had died, she had been especially withdrawn. He had told his spies to keep a careful eye on the stable, but she rarely went back there. And when she did, it was with her lady-in-waiting. He could see no reason why she was keeping herself detached from him like this.

Tempos gave a dry chuckle. “Ah, brother. People are too impatient nowadays. Their birds just don’t lay eggs fast enough. And when they cut them open, they find out all the gold’s gone. You have to learn to wait until your eggs have been laid to count them.” His eyes glinted. “Just make sure you don’t carry them all in one basket.” Then he gave a cold laugh with no real mirth in it.

Alexander gave his brother a dour look. “Leave me, Tempos.”

“Gladly,” Tempos returned, giving a mock bow. “You’re boring when you’re angry anyway.”

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The sixteen-year-old Clarkent was pacing outside in front of Peri and James. He was upset, and he couldn’t stand still. “Peri, the crime and the high taxes and the corrupt Nobles--all this has to stop. The Regent is poisoning our country. We have to do something about this!” Princess Loiset’s father had never been active in fighting evil--but at least he hadn’t been active in promoting it either. Regent Alexander had gone too far. Something needed to be done before the kingdom completely fell apart.

“And what exactly would you like to do?” the magician asked him. The bird on his shoulder made a small noise.

Clarkent faltered. He hadn’t really thought that far ahead ... But suddenly, an idea sprang to mind. “Remember ... remember how I thought you were two different people? Well, what if I was two different people?”

Peri frowned. “What do you mean, son?”

“Remember when you told me the people needed a beacon of hope?” Clarkent said slowly. “Well, now ... they need it more than ever. What if--what if I were to disguise myself as a knight and go around giving the people hope ... protecting them from those who are hurting them?”

A big smile broke out across Peri’s face. “I think that’s a great idea, Clarkent. To show my support, I’ll even get you some armor and a horse.”

Clarkent’s cheeks turned red. He hadn’t really thought about those details either. But he shook his head. “Peri, I couldn’t accept such expensive gifts--”

“I insist,” Peri told him with a smile. “A knight has to have armor and a good horse and a good weapon. You’ve already got the sword, so at least you’re partway there already.” But he quickly became more serious. “You know this is going to be dangerous, son, don’t you?”

Clarkent swallowed and nodded resolutely. “Yes, I do. But I’ve been training for this--it’s something I have to do.”

“All right,” Peri said softly. “There’s one last thing that I can do for you.” Clarkent looked at him inquisitively, and he explained, “You’ll need a way to know when someone’s in trouble. That’s where James will come in.”

“Rep rep,” the bird said cheerfully.

“You’ll never see a faster animal than a Peregrine Falcon,” Peri told him. “You can work out a system of cues with James, and he can come find you and guide you when there’s trouble.”

Clarkent looked at James and smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Repreprep,” the bird chattered back.

\*\*\*

A few days later, Clarkent’s head was absolutely buzzing with thoughts of finally being able to *do* something. When Peri came to him in the evening, Clarkent was feeling something akin to impatience.

“Follow me,” Peri instructed him, and Clarkent willingly obliged the older man.

Peri took him to the nearby royal forest. Not far into the forest, Peri stopped beside a giant rock with a few trees in front of it. “Reveal,” he said softly.

The trees and rock shimmered, revealing in their midst the entrance of a cave. Clarkent stepped forward in amazement. “Was that--”

“Magic,” Peri confirmed with a smile. “The code word is ‘Reveal.’ The spell isn’t very strong, and it might not fool someone who is truly dedicated to searching for hiding spots, but I don’t think you’ll have any problems. When you are inside or when you leave, make sure to say, ‘Conceal.’ That will re-seal the spell.”

Clarkent nodded, following Peri forward into the cave, but not able to really see around him. The older man muttered, “Conceal,” and then they were cut off from what little light was coming in from the forest. There was a bright flash, and Clarkent saw that Peri had lit a torch which he’d grabbed from the wall. The magician stepped aside, and finally Clarkent was able to see more of the cave.

Standing by the right cavern wall was a great black destrier. The majestic beast stared at him with dark and intelligent eyes, and Clarkent found himself stepping forward, mesmerized.

“Meet your new mount,” Peri said behind him. “He is from Metropolita’s sister kingdom.”

The words were enough to jolt Clarkent back to awareness, and he stopped just short of touching the horse. Turning, he shook his head. “I can’t accept this, Peri,” he said in a small voice. “This is--this is too much.” Destriers were only owned by wealthy knights. He wasn’t even a real knight--he wasn’t worthy of such a creature.

“Nonsense,” the older man said in a gruff voice. “You need a good horse if you’re going to save anyone. And besides--I’m doing this for the good of Metropolita just as you are.”

Clarkent trembled in indecision. He moved even closer to the horse, running his hands down the muscles of the beast’s neck. “What’s his name?” he asked quietly.

“You can name him whatever you’d like,” Peri told him.

Clarkent’s eyes widened. He’d never been allowed to name a horse before. But if he named the horse, then it would be as good as accepting him. He glanced back to Peri with a pained expression. “This was too much, Peri ...”

“If anything, it wasn’t enough,” the man said, causing Clarkent to frown in confusion. “He’s yours, Clarkent. He knows it himself.”

Clarkent started as the horse nudged him with a jet-black nose. Smiling, he began to pet the animal’s forehead. In the dim light of the torch, the horse looked almost like a ghost, and Clarkent’s expression broke out into a grin as he realized what name he wanted. “I’m going to call you Phantom,” he said softly.

The horse jerked his head a little, as if acknowledging what Clarkent had said, and the boy chuckled to himself.

“I’ve told him to only respond to your signals--in case the two of you are ever separated. But I don’t expect you to have any problems with him. He is reliable and fearless--but he must be respected if you are to command his respect.”

Clarkent nodded and stared calmly at the horse. “Phantom, my name is Clarkent. I promise to take care of you as best as I can.”

It was like a veil of solemnity had come down over the horse, and Clarkent almost shivered at Phantom’s unflinching gaze. And then, the horse slowly lowered his head ... and began nibbling at Clarkent’s hair.

Clarkent laughed and swatted gently at the horse. “Get out of my hair,” he told him with a chuckle.

“I guess Phantom likes you already,” Peri commented dryly.

But Clarkent was too busy trying to keep the horse’s lips away from his hair to respond. Finally, the boy ducked away from the horse, and his eyes fell on something on the other side of the cave. There was a well-crafted saddle and blanket for Phantom, but beside it was something even more interesting--a full suit of black armor and a plain silver shield.

Clarkent turned to Peri, who told him, “The armor and shield are yours, son.”

Clarkent looked at the armor with a sense of unease. “Black armor?” he asked, wrinkling his brow. He noticed there was even black mail with the armor.

“It sends a necessary message,” Peri told him. “A black knight holds allegiance to no lord--just as you will swear fealty to no Noble.”

Clarkent nodded, but he couldn’t help but remember the princess’s story about a black knight. The black knight she had told about had been the cause of Gareth’s death. Was this a good idea?

He glanced at Phantom, whose nose was now deep in a bucket of oats. With the horse and the sword and the armor and James’s guidance, he could help the people. He knew he could. But what if they feared him? Could he still help them then?

He took in a deep breath. He had to try. That was all there was to it. “All right,” he said quietly. “I’m going to do this.”

“Great,” Peri said warmly, as if he had understood Clarkent’s mental battle. “Now, you need to practice putting the armor on and wearing it around. It’s not exactly easy ...”

But Clarkent had heard stories about how heavy the armor was and how difficult it was to learn to move in it, and he was ready. “Just teach me how to put it on, and I’ll figure out the rest.”

Peri smiled. “Very well.”

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Clarkent stood there in his fifty pounds of armor, wondering how in the world he was going to walk, much less get on the horse. “Umm, this isn’t as easy as I thought ...”

Peri let out a bark of laughter. “I thought you would figure out the rest once you finally got it on?”

“Well, I might have been a little optimistic,” Clarkent admitted. He took a step forward, the metal boots clinking against the ground. “I feel like a metal monster.”

Chuckling, Peri told him, “Well, you look impressive, son, even if it feels a little awkward. Just walk around for a while to become accustomed to the weight. We can work on the logistics of getting you on a horse and sword-fighting later.”

Clarkent groaned. “I forgot all about swinging a sword around. How do knights *do* this?”

“With a lot of practice,” Peri told him. “I just hope you aren’t expecting to get a lot of sleep these next few weeks.”

Clarkent brought a metal head up to his visor and lifted it. “I guess I’ve been exercising for a reason.”

“That’s right,” Peri said with a smile. “Keep it positive.”

“Well, I’m *positive* this armor is more trouble than it’s worth,” the boy grumbled.

“And I’m *positive* it will keep you from dying when you’re out there trying to save lives. Just be glad I didn’t get you a sixty-pound set of armor.”

“I guess Phantom’s getting the worst end of this deal, huh?”

Clarkent said, glancing at the horse.

“Just make sure you exercise him regularly to keep him used to carrying you.”

“Don’t you worry about him,” Clarkent said confidently.

“You should instead be worrying about *me* ... falling *off* of him.”

“Just wait until we practice with a quintain,” Peri muttered.

“A quintain?”

“Just you wait, son,” Peri said with a mischievous smile.

Clarkent groaned and hit his helmet against the wall.

\*\*\*

Peri made sure Clarkent continued his training, and so it wasn't long at all before the boy was shown a quintain, though he ended up wishing he hadn't been. When Peri finally took him to a quintain used by squires and knights to practice tilting, he took Clarkent at night, so as to ensure the training tool was vacant.

Clarkent stared at the object. The upper half of a set of armor was hung on a wooden post that was about eight feet tall. A crossbar attached to the pole held a shield at one end and a heavy leather pack at the other. It somehow seemed strangely menacing.

"That's a quintain?" Clarkent queried, still looking at it.

"Sure is, son," confirmed Peri. "If you hit the middle of the shield, the whole thing will spin around--and with any luck, you'll get away without getting knocked off your horse. Now, if you strike it off center, that leather pack there will likely unseat you. But regardless, you gotta make sure you maintain your pace. Take it slow, and you'll get hit."

"And apprentice knights use this to train?" Clarkent couldn't help but ask skeptically.

"Well, pages usually start with wooden horses, but you're skilled enough that I think you can handle it more like a squire would."

"I'm not sure about this," murmured Clarkent.

"You'll do fine," insisted Peri, who was holding his magician's staff in one hand and a lance in the other. "Now, get up on your horse."

With a sigh, Clarkent mounted Esroh Repus. He took the lance offered to him by Peri, and Esroh Repus shifted uneasily. "It's all right, boy," he murmured, moving the long rod around a bit to get the horse more accustomed to it.

When he finally felt ready, he moved Esroh Repus to the distance from the quintain indicated by Peri. "Ready, Repus?" he asked.

The horse's ears flicked, so he took that as a "yes."

He kicked Esroh Repus forward, charging at the quintain with his lance at the ready, aiming for the shield--

The dummy loomed closer--

The shield was right in his sights--

The lance connected--

... but he hit the side of the shield, and in his disappointment, he didn't realize that Esroh Repus had slowed down.

A heavy *thwack* sounded on his back. He fell to the ground.

"Ow ... " That noise was about all he had the mental cognition for. He was pretty sure he had crushed his lance. And his face was presently buried in the ground.

He heard a soft noise in the grass and expected to find Peri approaching. Instead, he heard a gentle nickering, and Esroh Repus leaned down to nibble at his hair.

Clarkent swatted away the horse's nose and glared up at him. "Oh, like you could do any better!"

Peri's laugh rang out. Clarkent put his face back into the ground. He probably shouldn't have gotten out of bed today. Training to be a knight was no fun.

\*\*\*

### Chapter 17: Beauty and the Beast

Jacques rushed through the royal forest.

His lungs were heaving for breath as he moved, his hands clutching a dead pair of rabbits like all his hopes and dreams were wrapped up in them.

Tree branches and underbrush tore at his clothing, catching and ripping away pieces of it in his mad dash to escape the two men behind him. But as the clapping of horse hooves pounded in his ears and his legs began to burn with the exertion of running so fast for so long, he knew he wasn't going to make it. They were closing in on him, and nothing would be able to protect him from them. Doom was closing in on him.

He cast his eyes around, looking for a big log or rock to hide

behind. But there was nothing nearby that he could use. He was terrible at climbing trees, and his pursuers would probably see him even if he did.

As he twisted his neck to look over his shoulders while he ran, the severity of his plight weighed heavily on him, and he returned his eyes forward, only to stumble to a stop as the two forest guards were suddenly circling around to the front of him on their snorting horses.

The brief hope for escape flew into his head--maybe he could still get away if he turned around and ran in the opposite direction--only to flutter back out immediately. He was too tired. He would never make it.

He threw himself to his knees, still holding the ears of those two conies with clenched white fingers as he desperately prayed he would be able to keep them. "Please," he pleaded, "don't imprison me. I need these rabbits--"

"You were committing a crime," one of the horsemen said flatly. His brown eyes were hard, and it was obvious he felt no pity for the man in front of him. "You were poaching in the royal forest."

"I was just trying to get food for my family," Jacques told him in a hoarse voice. "My two-year-old son and my wife--they're hungry. I can't just let them starve--"

"There is no excuse for your crime--" the same horseman started to say, only to cut off abruptly at the sound of approaching hoof beats. Someone was coming.

The accused criminal lifted his eyes in hope as a great black horse charged toward them. Seated on the majestic creature was a knight in glistening black armor. He bore no crest of allegiance, just a sharp sword and a silver shield.

The destrier trotted up beside the king's men, its nostrils flaring, and the knight swung his sword and shield. A few slashes later of the knight's sword, and the two forest guards were disarmed.

The two guards--surprised, to say the least--stared down briefly at the ground and the swords lying there, close, but just out of reach. One of them then muttered, "I'm not paid enough for this," and he kicked his horse and guided him away through the trees. Jacques stared after him, scarcely able to believe his luck.

The other guard glanced at the knight, who was staring at him with sword ready, obviously waiting for him to make his move. And then the second guard was galloping away after his partner, cursing under his breath.

The black knight dismounted after sheathing his sword, and Jacques, his heart pumping wildly, watched him in trepidation.

The knight bent down and picked up the two swords from the ground, holding one in each hand. Jacques knew for certain that the knight was going to plunge them deep into Jacques's own heart and then take the two hard-earned rabbits away from him, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, the knight walked over to a nearby tree and thrust first one sword and then the other deep into the bark. He turned to Jacques, who had the distinct impression that the man beneath the armor was smiling.

"Thank you," Jacques told him, rising slowly and unsteadily to his feet. He had never *wanted* to be a poacher--but he *had* wanted to feed his family. He hadn't been left with a choice. This knight somehow seemed to understand that.

The black knight nodded, not speaking, and walked over to his horse, which looked at him calmly. After mounting, he lifted his hand in farewell and then rode away without looking back.

"Thank you," Jacques called after him, feeling he couldn't say that enough. He hugged the conies against himself. His family would be able to eat something that night. And for that, he was immensely grateful.

\*\*\*

Stories of the mysterious doings of a man the common people

dubbed “The Black Knight” spread like wildfire.

Some said he was a ghost; others said he was an angel. Alexander believed he was a demon.

The Regent of Metropoli had tried to spread stories speaking against the Black Knight’s doings. He encouraged Nobles to call him the Lawless One, as the knight—who probably wasn’t even a *real* knight—was acting with a total disregard to the law. But the “Lawless One” didn’t catch on the way that the “Black Knight” had, and it was just one more thorn in Alexander’s side.

The Regent worried this vigilante was threatening his grip on power. It didn’t help to soothe his worries that this “Black Knight” plunged the swords of those he bested into the ground or nearby trees as a sort of trademark, like this was a game in which he had to leave a stamp of victory. Other times, he left a scribbled note detailing the crimes of someone he left tied up.

The Black Knight’s actions were skewed toward helping the poor at the expense of the rich, and that utterly infuriated Alexander. While the common people saw the Black Knight as a godsend, Alexander and the other Nobles saw him as a menace. His elusive nature and refusal to speak to anybody created an air of mystery surrounding him which intrigued even those who hated his actions.

When Tempos walked into Alexander’s study, anger must have been written all over the Regent’s face, as the knight commented, “Well, brother, this Black Knight’s a regular Robin Hood, isn’t he?”

It was the wrong thing to say. “He’s a criminal!” growled Alexander, hitting his fist against his desk emphatically as he stood up.

Tempos smirked, reading his brother like an open book. “Still don’t know where he is, huh? Well, he can’t be *that* hard to find. Don’t goody two-shoes like him leave trails of bread crumbs or something?”

“He has managed to elude the grip of my men,” Alexander said darkly. “Not even the assassin I hired has had any luck. But I will get him yet! You can be sure of that!”

His younger brother gave him a patronizing smile. “Well, since the royal coffers don’t seem to be standing up too well to this vigilante, I have something that might make you a little more pleasant to be around. One of my dumb lackeys--*pardon me*, how my tongue does slip—one of my *fellow knights* found a dragon’s lair.”

“What?” Alexander hissed. The lairs of dragons were notorious for two things--mounds of riches and scads of fire. Everyone knew that.

“But the dragon had gone out for food,” continued Tempos, “so most of the treasure is now in our much more appreciative hands. It’s not like a dragon can count gold coins anyway.”

Alexander rubbed his chin, unsure whether he should be uneasy or appeased. The decision to be the former was made for him a few moments later when a messenger rushed into his study.

“What is it?” snapped Alexander.

“I have news, Y-Your Majesty,” the messenger stuttered. “An angry dragon has started wreaking havoc on the kingdom. Buildings are going up in flames. We--we aren’t quite sure what to do.”

Alexander whipped his head around to glare at his brother. “Oops,” said Tempos with a shrug.

\*\*\*

Clarkent was working in the stable when James came in, squawking up a storm.

“Be quiet!” he hissed at the bird, who immediately perched on the edge of a stall and began trying to talk to him in a much quieter fashion, as if the stableboy would be able to understand anything he said.

But though Clarkent could not understand the Peregrine

Falcon, he knew it had to be bad, so he nervously went up to Dwayne, who was feeling a horse’s swollen leg with a frown on his face.

“I, uh, need to go do something,” Clarkent said quietly. “But I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Dwayne gave him a long and perceptive look. It made Clarkent shift nervously, as he wasn’t sure what the man was about to say, but then Dwayne grunted and conceded, “All right. Take as long as you need.” He turned his attention back to the horse’s leg, only to comment softly, “I think you need to take Esroh Repus out for a bit of exercise anyway.”

Clarkent stayed in place, hesitant. Did Dwayne realize why he needed to go? Or did the Stable Master just think he needed to get somewhere in a hurry? Surely Dwayne hadn’t simply said that in hopes that he would “exercise” Esroh Repus.

But he had no more time to wait, not if the bird’s frantic wing flapping was any indication. So he jumped on the horse--bareback, no less--and rode off.

He went immediately to the cave, James flying with him. Once there, he got into his armor and leapt on Phantom, saying to Esroh Repus, “Sorry, buddy. I’d ride you, but you would give me away!”

And then he was galloping off, the Peregrine Falcon guiding him where he needed to go, flying above him but remaining in easy sight.

They went to the outskirts of town, where Clarkent found a plethora of archers sending nearly useless arrows flying through the air. But it wasn’t the arrows that concerned him. It was the giant creature they were bouncing off of.

A massive green beast stood planted on the ground, its giant wings beating vicious gusts toward the men attacking it. Flames spewed forth from the creature’s gullet, which seemed to have been made as one giant killing machine. It had razor-sharp claws and teeth, and its spine was covered in spikes all the way to the tip of its lashing tail. It was an honest to goodness dragon. And it was steaming mad.

Terror shot through Clarkent’s limbs at the sight of it, throttling his heart mercilessly and causing his blood to gush through his veins as if a dam had just been broken. He wasn’t ready to defeat a dragon.

It was all good and well to beat back bandits and town guards ... but a dragon? He had studied under Peri for the weak spots in a knight’s armor--but not in a dragon’s hide! For him to try to slay a dragon at this point was like asking him to empty out the ocean with a bucket! It was ridiculous! It couldn’t be done.

But as his eyes gazed around and saw the fire let out by the dragon begin to spread, he realized he didn’t have a choice. He was scared, but he had to help. If his career as the Black Knight was meant to end in flames, then so be it.

He kicked Phantom, trying to urge him closer, but the horse was being understandably reticent about approaching the giant flying thing with massive teeth and a mouthful of fiery doom. “Please, Phantom,” he muttered, and the horse finally took a few steps forward. James flew above them, making some pathetic call like he knew their endeavor was doomed.

Clarkent tried not to think about the fact that one blast of fire from the dragon would probably cook him alive in his suit of armor; he thought only about stabbing his sword either into the dragon’s belly or mouth. Where another possible weak spot would be, he didn’t know, but those two spots were his best guesses.

But before he could finally force Phantom to charge at the creature, he saw another form on a horse go riding quickly at it. His expression of grim determination beneath his helmet became one of confusion as he stared at the Palomino and its rider. They both looked so familiar ...

And as he continued to stare, he realized that the horse was

High Flyer ...

... and the rider was Princess Loisetette.  
The dragon turned its head toward her.  
Clarkent's heart stopped in his chest.

\*\*\*

### Chapter 18: The Heart of the Dragon

Loisetette was about to go outside with Catherine for archery practice when a man came rushing into the castle. He ran past her, but she called after him, "What's wrong?"

Surprised to see her, he paused long enough to tell her, "There's a dragon at the east edge of the city, and it's flaming mad, Your Highness," and then he sprinted away, presumably to go and discuss how to handle this colossal problem with the Regent. One day, such news would come directly to Loisetette, but for now, she was treated like a child and kept out of the loop.

Loisetette looked at her lady-in-waiting with a frown, the gears in her head slowly turning as she considered the situation.

"What is it?" Catherine asked in concern.

"It doesn't make sense," mumbled Loisetette to herself, taking a few idle steps as she continued to think. Though there had been many stories written about dragons which portrayed them in an evil light, she had read one book which approached them from a more positive perspective. One of the things the book had said was that dragons usually avoided towns, which were too loud and busy for a creature that preferred the dark solitude of a cave. It was much easier for a dragon to feed on deer or sheep than on human flesh, and four-legged creatures thus tended to make up most of a dragon's meals. The giant flying reptiles were intelligent, the book noted, and preferred to keep a low profile. Though they were stronger than humans, they knew that humans lived in groups and could reign supreme by sheer virtue of numbers, so they stayed away.

There must have been something that upset the dragon if it was willing to start attacking the city. Loisetette knew a dragon would be easily upset if it or its offspring were threatened. Having their treasure stolen also riled them. Neither of those two things were the dragon's fault.

"I have to do something," she told Catherine, making a decision. Then she began to sprint away.

"Princess, what are you doing?" the other girl called after her. But Loisetette didn't listen. She didn't have time to explain. She had to get to the dragon before more damage was done. She had to help save the kingdom.

\*\*\*

When Loisetette rushed into the stable, she saw the Stable Master working at the front with a preoccupied expression on his face. "Your Highness," he said with a bow as he noticed her. "Clarkent just left--"

"I need you to saddle High Flyer," she told him breathlessly, trying not to think about the fact that he had assumed she was here to see the stableboy.

Seeming to realize her urgency, Dwayne got to work without any questions, putting the sidesaddle on High Flyer as she murmured to the horse, "\*\*\*We're going to go do something scary, all right?\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*What?\*\*\*" High Flyer asked her, his suspicion evident.

"\*\*\*There's a dragon attacking the city,\*\*\*" she admitted. "\*\*\*I need to talk to it--calm it down. That means we have to get close to it.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*That doesn't sound like a good idea,\*\*\*" the horse noted, shifting in place nervously as Dwayne tightened the saddle around him.

"\*\*\*Please--we have to do this. I think I can get it to stop if I just find out what it wants. It's really important.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*All right,\*\*\*" the horse said at last. "\*\*\*I trust you.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*Thank you,\*\*\*" she replied softly, stroking his nose. She just hoped she could trust herself.

\*\*\*

A few minutes later, Loisetette was racing on High Flyer toward the dragon--and possibly death. She almost lost her nerve, not having realized the creature would be so big in spite of all the books she'd read and pictures she'd seen. Between its teeth and its fiery breath, she feared she would not survive this encounter. She suddenly started to feel a little sick to her stomach at the thought of being roasted alive. Would it hurt? Or would it be over so fast that she wouldn't even notice?

A glint in the light caught her eye, and she abruptly noticed there was someone else on horseback nearby staring at the dragon. Her countenance darkened as she realized who it must be. That black armor could only mean one thing--it was the Black Knight.

She'd heard stories about him from some Nobles at court. They said he was terrorizing the countryside, attacking and robbing anyone who got into his way. *He* must have been the one who had upset the dragon, and that infuriated her. Others shouldn't have to pay the price for one man's foolishness.

Emboldened by her anger, she pushed High Flyer forward. There was little time to give attention to her fear as the dragon turned to look at her.

And then High Flyer was braying, "\*\*\*I can't go any closer. I can't go any closer. I'm sorry. I'm sorry,\*\*\*" and she slid off the side of him, praying her dress wouldn't catch on the saddle and ruin everything right then and there.

But her feet met the ground without any difficulty, and after impulsively taking the golden coronet off her head, she ran toward the dragon as High Flyer raced away from it. "\*\*\*Don't hurt me!\*\*\*" she yelled at the dragon, waving the small crown in the air. "\*\*\*I'm here in peace! I don't have any weapons! I just want to know what is wrong!\*\*\*"

Loisetette's breath caught in her throat as the dragon stared at her with its wide yellow eyes. The rage in its expression was unmistakable. But then those two yellow orbs lifted to stare at the coronet she was holding up, and something in that face shifted.

Praying that dragons really were as noble as the book she had read had made them out to be, she prostrated herself on the ground.

"\*\*\*I want to help you,\*\*\*" she told the dragon, coughing a little because of the smoke that hung thickly in the air. "\*\*\*I promise it's true. Take my coronet as a peace offering--please, just listen to what I have to say.\*\*\*"

There were a few seconds of silence as Loisetette closed her eyes and waited for the flames of death to wash over her. But rather than the roar of fiery breath, she heard a crunching noise in the grass as the dragon stepped toward her.

\*\*\*

Clarkent's eyes almost blurred in horror and fear as he saw Princess Loisetette putting herself on the ground before the dragon, as if offering herself up as a sacrifice. What was she doing? Was she suicidal? Was she under a spell?

He wanted to charge forward immediately, and he kicked Phantom's sides, *hard*. But the horse backed up rather than moving forward. He continued kicking, but Phantom still refused to obey his commands.

He was on the verge of tears as he begged, "Phantom, *please* go. We *have* to help her!" In fury, Clarkent dug his heels in further, but the horse wouldn't budge.

Finally, he dropped to the ground, ready to run to the princess even though it was probably too late. He had taken several steps forward--Loisetette still seemed so far away--when he saw the dragon reach out toward her.

"No," he whispered, about to charge ahead, only to pause as he realized something crucial about what the dragon had done. The dragon wasn't bringing her up to its mouth. Instead, the dragon was taking something from her.

\*\*\*

Loisette slowly lifted her eyes, raising the coronet a little higher as the winged serpent approached. It reached forward with a giant arm and hooked the small crown on a claw. It stared down at the item, as if trying to ascertain its value, and then it looked down at her. She had other coronets at home, so giving up this one would be no big loss, but it was her favorite. Still, she would relinquish any of her crowns in a heartbeat to save lives.

“*I am listening, tiny one,*” the dragon told her, his voice booming in her head. Though he sounded somewhat appeased by her gift, she could somehow sense a hint of anger bubbling beneath the surface. She had to be careful.

Biting back a protest that she was *not* that small, Loisette said to him as calmly as she could, “*I would like to know what has upset you. Tell me what happened, and maybe I can help you.*”

His golden eyes stared unblinkingly at her. Then, he lowered his head a few degrees, his countenance almost human in its sadness. “*I left my home to hunt some food. When I returned, I found most of my treasure gone. I flew over the city ... and I saw a knight with one of my silver cups. But I lost him in a crowd of people. The smells and noises were too much, and I could not find him again. I did not wish to attack the city, but treasure is a matter of honor with dragons. An adult dragon without treasure is no more respected than one newly hatched.*”

Loisette looked down at the ground, her forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. She hadn't realized dragons had any sort of society. But they were ancient creatures, so perhaps she should have expected it. Their society must be especially important to them now that their numbers had dwindled so much.

She lifted her head and stared at the dragon in front of her. “*We will either find the treasure that was taken from you or replace it with new treasure equivalent to the amount you lost,*” she promised him. “*I am the princess of Metropolita. I will talk to the Regent about it. I am sure he will agree with me. We will make this right.*”

The dragon seemed uneasy and a little surprised. “*You could do that for me?*”

\*\*\*

Clarkent waited nearby on Phantom, both of them as antsy as colts tied up near a sleeping viper. Somehow, in his haze of fear and worry, Clarkent had realized that Princess Loisette and the dragon were *communicating* with each other. There was something in the way they were looking at each other which made that obvious. The dragon had taken the crown from her not with force ... but with a strange gentleness.

Clarkent had slowed his steps to a stop. He had known suddenly that if he went charging in, then whatever negotiations of peace the princess was somehow making would be all for naught. And it was possible the dragon might kill Princess Loisette in the confusion of trying to attack its sudden opponent.

And so he had gotten back up on Phantom, where he was unhappily waiting to see what the dragon would do. He wanted to be at the princess's side, protecting her. But though he was ill at ease with the situation, he couldn't help but feel something akin to admiration as he watched the princess communicate with the great beast.

Clarkent didn't know if the dragon was telepathic--or if there were some other explanation for why the two could talk with each other--but he was impressed by Princess Loisette's courage. He hadn't realized she was this brave. It took a lot of guts to walk up to a fully grown dragon without any kind of weapon.

But even while Clarkent was admiring her, he was a little upset with and terrified for her. The princess's life could be ended by the dragon in a second, and he would be powerless to stop it. She shouldn't be facing it alone.

He ached to go to her, to meet the maw of doom at her side,

but if he tried anything, the winged creature might hurt her. And--he admitted grudgingly to himself--she *did* seem to have it under control, even if that seemed almost impossible, given the situation.

All he could do was watch in trepidation, his heart jumping wildly at the dragon's every movement.

\*\*\*

Loisette's fear had quickly turned to pity for the creature in front of her. He was a victim of mankind's greed, and she wanted to fix the problem by restoring what was taken from him.

They came to an uneasy truce of sorts. The treasure would be returned or replaced within three days, or the assault on the city would begin anew. The dragon gave her directions to his lair, and she promised him she would ensure their bargain was upheld.

She watched as the dragon's great green wings beat and lifted him into the air, carrying him away as easily as if he had merely the weight of a leaf. She turned in relief and called High Flyer to her.

As the horse came trotting forward obediently, she saw that the Black Knight was watching her.

Her mood darkened. *He* must have been the one who stole the dragon's treasure. It hadn't been enough for him to take wealth from the rich, had it? He had to go and endanger an entire kingdom by invoking a dragon's wrath!

As he saw her looking at him, he lowered his head--guiltily, she thought with annoyance--and kicked his horse, spurring him into action.

She watched the black horse gallop away and shook her head, aggravated that she had put her life at risk to fix the Black Knight's mess. Alexander was right. The Black Knight *was* a menace.

\*\*\*

“Of course I will replace the dragon's treasure, Your Highness,” Alexander told Loisette, throwing a look at his brother, who would have understood that it was meant to be a veiled glare. “The kingdom's safety is of the utmost importance to me. I am only sorry that you had to put yourself at risk.” He was beginning to grow attached to the idea of having her as his bride, and he would have been absolutely furious if she had been killed. No one took away from Alexander what was his.

She gave him a very grateful look. “Thank you so much.” She curtsied slightly. “Thank you, Your Majesty, Sir Tempos.”

Both brothers smiled at her as she left, though the younger brother's expression was more properly labeled a “smirk.”

“At least you got lemonade out of your lemons,” Tempos commented when the princess was gone. “She was very thankful for your immense ‘kindness,’ O Generous Brother.”

“Well, we wouldn't be in this situation if not for you,” Alexander growled. “Now, I want you to track down every piece of that treasure and put it back. There had better not be a single gold *ring* missing, or it will be your head!”

“Calm down, brother,” Tempos said, rolling his eyes. “I'll put my toys back where they belong. I guess next time we'll just have to find an *abandoned* dragon cave ... Unless you happen to know any dragon slayers?”

Alexander shook his head in barely contained rage, his lips mashed together and his brows pulling his eyelids down over his eyes so that they were mere slits.

Tempos laughed. “It's just too bad the dragon didn't kill the Black Knight. At least the princess thinks it was him who stole the little lizard's playthings rather than me.”

“You are going to be the death of us all,” muttered Alexander. “Oh, I'd just settle for one or two special people,” Tempos commented vaguely.

Alexander just glared at him. People like his brother were the reason he always insisted on someone else tasting his food before he did.

\*\*\*

**Chapter 19: Hating Heroes**

Visiting Day was a week after the dragon's appearance.

Clarkent was excited--part of him had thought the next Visiting Day would never come. He had a lot to tell his parents ... though of course he had to wait until Gawain left. Clarkent persisted in inviting his good friend to come with him on Visiting Days. It seemed like the right thing to do since Gawain didn't have any family, and Clarkent liked having him there. But it was a little bit frustrating at times to have to wait a while before he could finally talk to his parents in private.

"Look at you two boys!" Clarkent's mother exclaimed. "You have both grown!" She embraced first Clarkent and then the red-faced Gawain, who apparently hadn't expected the sudden movement.

Next, it was Clarkent's father's turn, and he pulled his son into a tight hug and then clapped Gawain on the shoulder. "It is good to see you both again!"

Clarkent had to resist the urge to embrace both his parents at once. Though they looked happy to see him, they were obviously very tired, and it reminded him that he was sixteen. When he was seventeen, he would be leaving the stable behind him and returning to his parents. *Then* he would be able to give them the assistance they so obviously needed. He had worried they might not last this long, but they had--and they only had to wait a little longer. He wasn't sure why there was a tightness in his chest as he thought about it, but he told himself that it must just be that he was glad he would soon be able to go back home.

"Did you hear about the dragon?" Gawain asked them, a slight smile tugging at his lips.

"We did," Clarkent's mother confirmed. "News like that travels fast."

"I hear the princess helped calm the dragon," Gawain told them, almost sounding proud, though it wasn't clear why.

Clarkent flushed. It was true. He had been utterly useless. The princess was the one who had saved the day. He had waited nearby, gaping, as she singlehandedly made a truce with the dragon.

"She must be very brave," commented his mother.

"Yeah," Clarkent muttered, feeling like his mouth was full of cotton. She had been magnificent.

"Unlike the Black Knight," Gawain said in a derogatory voice.

It was all Clarkent could do to refrain from sputtering an exclamatory "*What?*" Fortunately, no one seemed to notice the look of shock on his face.

His mother ventured, "What do you mean?"

Gawain shifted a bit in place. "I heard the Black Knight was the one who made the dragon angry in the first place."

This time, Clarkent couldn't keep his mouth shut. "What? Why would you say that?" He swallowed. "He--he wouldn't do that."

Gawain gave him a weird look. "He's been terrorizing people. It makes sense--"

"He has not been terrorizing people," Clarkent said weakly. He dropped his eyes. "He's been--a--a hero to ... the people," he finished lamely. He was beginning to feel utterly disheartened. Was this what everyone thought of him?

"He doesn't abide by the law," countered Gawain, crossing his arms stubbornly.

Clarkent's mother finally stepped in. "Well, I don't know the details about his methods," she said gently, "but I have heard he has done some good things. Now, was there anything special you wanted to look at in the market, Gawain? I hear there is a new type of shoe that is all the rage ..."

As his mother and Gawain chatted about the market--with his father occasionally chiming in--Clarkent brooded. Did the people

hate him? He had meant to be a beacon of hope. He hadn't meant to bring fear to anyone but the bad guys. Was that too simplistic to wish for?

Exhaling softly, he determined to put these thoughts behind him until Gawain left.

\*\*\*

When Gawain was finally gone, Clarkent felt a sense of relief. Though he had tried not to think about his activities as the Black Knight for a while, he could not help but find his mind drawn back to the subject. He wanted to talk to his parents about it. They didn't know that he was the Black Knight, and he needed to know their thoughts about what he was doing.

He looked at them and asked quietly, "What do you two think about the Black Knight?" He grimaced a little at the name, though he tried not to show it. Since a black knight claimed allegiance to no lord, did the people think he didn't claim allegiance to them either? Was he seen merely as an outlaw?

"I think he's trying to help people," Clarkent's father said. "But that's a difficult task to take under way."

His mother spoke up. "But I think it's helping the people just to know that there is someone out there trying to fight battles for them--trying to keep them from being crushed under the weight of the law that is supposed to help them."

Clarkent stared at them, still heavy-hearted but glad at least that they did not hate his alter ego. As they gazed back at him, he wondered for a handful of seconds whether they knew his secret--whether that glint in their eyes was knowledge or just appreciation--but then the feeling passed, and he said in a voice so quiet they almost couldn't hear it, "I'm the Black Knight."

And then they were crushing him into a hug, murmuring to him about their love for him and about how glad they were that he was trying to do something so great for others. Though no one was around, they spoke in frantic whispers, asking him about what gave him the idea, what exactly he did, where he hid his armor and horse, if he got hurt very often, how it felt to save people, and countless other questions only proud parents would ask. And he told them everything--about how Peri had given him so much help, about how saving people made him feel fearful yet exhilarated, about how his typical day had changed ...

At last, his mother asked in a quiet voice, "Is there anything you need from us, Clarkent? Anything at all?"

"Your love and support," he replied jokingly.

His father clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You already have that, son. You always have. And you always will."

His heart felt lighter than it had--if his parents thought he was on the right path, then surely he was.

"So, Clarkent," his mother said abruptly, leaning in as if to discuss the secret further, "have you met any pretty girls?"

"W-what?" he stammered, his cheeks suddenly hot. An image of the princess had flashed into his mind and was stubbornly refusing to go away.

"So you have!" she exclaimed, pleased. "Who is she?"

"I--I--" Clarkent looked at his dad helplessly, but the older man just shrugged and gave him a "leave me out of this" look. Finally, Clarkent said cautiously, "I may know someone who is--okay-looking ... " He swallowed. "But it wouldn't ever work between us."

"Why not?" persisted his mother.

"It just wouldn't."

She stared at him thoughtfully and then frowned. "Is it because you'll have to leave the castle soon?"

"What do you mean?" he asked her.

"This is the last Visiting Day before you're seventeen," she pointed out. "Will it not work between the two of you because you'll be gone before long? Is that what you're worried about?"

Clarkent grimaced. "That's not exactly--"

"Clarkent, your father and I talked about this. We want you to

know that if you get Requested to stay, you can.”

“What?” Clarkent asked, blinking stupidly at her, as if he hadn’t heard her right.

“If you want to stay, you can. You’ve spent a lot of time here, and I’m sure you have friends--”

“But I want to help you and Dad,” he protested. “You’ve been struggling just to put food on the table--”

“Requested servants get paid for their work,” his father noted. “And they get paid pretty well. If you insisted on helping us, you could send us a little of that money.”

Clarkent shook his head, turning away from them. “We don’t even know if I *will* get Requested.”

“But if you *are*,” his mother said, “and you want to stay, you can. You don’t have to make that decision right now. But we want you to know that the option is there.”

Clarkent sighed. He had been trying to avoid the idea of staying at the stable, not liking the appeal it held for him. He guessed it was good he knew where his parents stood, but to think about staying for even a second felt like a betrayal of them.

Still, he murmured to them, “All right. I’ll think about it.”

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After Loisetette left Clarkent and his parents, she changed into her princess clothes and spent some time with Catherine. But being with Clarkent’s parents had made her think about her mother, and she found herself aching to learn more about the queen.

For a while now, Loisetette’s thoughts had returned periodically to consider the horse called Penelope Grace. The mare had belonged to her mother ... and Loisetette could not help but wonder if the horse remembered Queen Ellena and could say what she was like. It would take only a few words for Loisetette to find out--but a big part of her was scared the horse would remember nothing.

But she would never know unless she went, so at last she told Catherine she wanted to go spend time with the horses. Catherine had given her a funny look, realizing that the princess hadn’t mentioned riding, but she went along obediently.

Dwayne and Billy--who had been Requested years before and apparently liked spreading his dour sarcasm around--were alone in the stables, all the other stableboys presumably away for reasons relating to Visiting Day. Knowing how much Loisetette and Billy clashed, Dwayne stepped forward and said with a bow, “Your Highness. May I help you?”

She shook her head. “I just want to spend a little time ... talking to the horses.” She looked down in embarrassment. “I know it’s silly, but--”

“Nonsense, Your Highness. I like to talk to them myself.” He gave her an understanding smile before returning to her work.

Catherine seemed to sense the pensive mood Loisetette was in, as she didn’t hover. Instead, she went over to talk to Billy, which made Loisetette grateful even though it also made her roll her eyes.

Loisetette stepped up to Penelope Grace. She had come to know many of the horses in the stable, but she had been avoiding the white palfrey as if contact between them would make her contract the plague. Now, however, she was ready to face the horse.

“*Hello*,” she said quietly, staring at Penelope Grace. “*I am Queen Ellena’s daughter, Loisetette.*”

“*I have seen you in here*,” acknowledged the horse with wary slowness. “*You are good friends with the quiet human.*”

It took Loisetette a minute to realize Penelope Grace was talking about Clarkent. “*Yes, I am*,” she said. “*You seem to give him and the others a lot of trouble. Why is that? Do you hate them?*”

The palfrey seemed amused. “*Sometimes humans must be put in their place. I do not hate any of them. I tolerate the quiet*

*one more than most of the others. He is kind, but I do not wish to follow his orders like a trained mule.*”

Loisetette gave a lopsided smile. “*Were you this much trouble with my mother?*”

“*Your dam was very kind. I think perhaps we got along so well because we were both interested in mischief. She could talk to me--as you can talk to me--and we would share secrets out in the field. Sometimes, she would walk beside me rather than ride me. We even went out and had adventures.*”

“*What kind of adventures?*” Loisetette asked eagerly.

The horse dipped her head. “*One time, we went to an ogre cave.*”

An image flashed into the princess’s head of great riches, and she frowned. “*What is with all the gold?*” she asked.

“*Ogres are hoarders*,” Penelope Grace told her. “*They do not always collect treasure, but these ogres did.*”

“*Do you think they’re still around?*” Loisetette asked.

“*I do not know*,” the horse answered. “*But I do not recommend trying to meet them. We barely escaped with our lives.*”

The princess closed her eyes, thinking sadly of the woman who had brought her into the world. “*Do you miss her?*”

“*Horses do not live in the past so much as the present ...*

*But ... yes. I miss her*,” Penelope Grace admitted. Her ears flickered, and she said, “*The quiet one is here.*”

Loisetette turned and saw Clarkent walking into the stable. He looked tired and perhaps even a bit worried. Upon seeing her, he gave a hasty bow. “Your Highness.”

She nodded at him, biting back a query about whether he enjoyed the time he had spent with his parents. It was best that she not seem to know too much about him.

He hesitated, obviously wanting to say something, and she looked at him until he did. “I heard what you did with the dragon, Your Highness,” he said nervously. “That was ... very brave of you.”

A small smile tugged at her mouth. “Thank you.” Her mood suddenly darkened. “I had to do something to fix what that *Black Knight* messed up.”

\*\*\*

Clarkent practically squirmed in place, his spirits dropping even lower, though he hadn’t thought it possible. Now the *princess* was speaking ill of his secret identity? Two of his closest friend--not that he should really think of the princess as a friend--disliked the Black Knight. What had he done to deserve this?

Forcing himself to seem nonchalant, he asked, “You think he had something to do with the dragon’s appearance?”

“A knight stole the dragon’s treasure,” she told him. “It had to be him. Real knights swear an oath to protect people--not to go get more wealth.”

“I guess you’re right,” he mumbled. He couldn’t believe the princess hated him. How could something he had intended to be so good go so wrong? He felt almost like yelling in frustration, but he didn’t have the energy. And besides, knowing the princess disapproved of the Black Knight made him feel depressed. Maybe he just wasn’t cut out to be a hero. Maybe he needed to quit before he made anyone else upset.

The princess turned to Penelope Grace and whispered something. Then, she patted the horse’s nose--without being bitten for her presumption, Clarkent noticed--and went up to Catherine. The two girls gave a stilted farewell before leaving, but Clarkent barely heard them.

\*\*\*

After helping Dwayne and Billy for a little while, Clarkent went outside. He intended to go to his secret hideout to see Phantom. Though Peri’s magic dealt easily with the practicalities of horse ownership (and the magician even assisted with ensuring Phantom got enough exercise), Clarkent still liked to help with

the horse when he could. Sometimes, he would be too busy to do much--particularly when there was a tilt--but he tried to see Phantom at least once every day. There was an eternal flame from Peri in a wall sconce so that the horse would always have light, but Clarkent still felt bad that the horse had to be in the cave as often as he did.

Clarkent had barely taken five steps when he noticed Peri walking toward him.

"Good evening, Clarkent," the magician said to him. The falcon on his shoulder also gave Clarkent a greeting.

"Good evening, Peri, James," Clarkent returned.

His unhappiness must have showed on his face, as Peri asked him, "What's wrong?"

Clarkent looked away. "Am I doing the right thing, Peri?"

"What do you mean?"

"Being ... the Black Knight," he said quietly. "It's just--my friend Gawain and the princess both complained about him--about me--like he's ... like I'm ... some kind of criminal." The words were hard to get out--it hurt to know that those two people thought so lowly of him.

"You are doing the right thing," Peri told him, the gruffness of his voice causing Clarkent's eyes to shoot up to meet his. "And justice is its own reward. You aren't trying to help people so that you'll be praised, are you?"

"N-no," Clarkent admitted.

"Exactly. Nobody can make everybody happy all the time. What's important is that you know you're doing what you should in here," Peri noted, touching his chest above his heart. "You will make some people unhappy--but you are also giving some people hope. And that's a powerful thing."

Clarkent gave him a searching look. "Do you really think I'm giving people hope?"

Peri smiled. "I know so, son." He set a hand on Clarkent's shoulder. "I know I'm proud of you."

James made a noise of his own, as if to second what the magician had said.

Clarkent broke out into a grin, finally letting himself push through his despair. At least his parents and Peri supported what he was doing. He wondered idly in the back of his mind if his biological parents would have been proud, too.

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### Chapter 20: A Noble's Request

As Clarkent's seventeenth birthday approached, he began to get nervous. He finally expressed as much to Gawain.

"You're nervous about your seventeenth birthday?" his friend said. Clarkent could hear the frown in his voice. "Why?"

"I'll be going home," Clarkent replied softly. He and Gawain were standing in stalls right next to each other, both of them grooming horses.

"What do you mean?" Gawain asked.

Clarkent turned so that he could look over at his friend and shook his head with an affectionate smile. "You can remember all those grand stories, but you can't remember something as important as this?" But then his smile died. "At seventeen, someone who's been Assigned isn't required any longer. At least--unless they're Requested. So ... they have to leave."

"Do ... do you hope you're Requested?" Gawain asked in a small voice.

Clarkent swallowed and looked back at Agides. "I'm ... torn about it," he admitted. "I ... I like it here. I have friends." He threw a smile at Gawain. "And I know what I'm supposed to do here." He felt comfortable with the horses--they had become companions of sorts for him. He would miss them. Furthermore, if he went to be with his parents, then he would have to consider giving up his stint as the Black Knight. His parents lived in a very small village far from the castle where very little ever happened, so keeping the secret identity wouldn't be feasible. And besides,

he couldn't maintain Phantom without Peri nearby, even if he was able to find somewhere to hide him.

And if he left, he would have to say goodbye to Gawain and Dwayne and Billy and the others ... He would probably never see them again. He would be losing people that had become a major part of his life.

And ... in the back of his mind ... he kept thinking about the princess.

It hurt to think she might not even miss him if he left. But was that true? Would ... would she really not miss him? Was he just a stableboy to her? Or could she see him as ... as something more?

And why did he keep thinking about her?

"I've been dreaming of leaving for so long," he told Gawain, "but now I'm not so sure. I--I do want to see my parents more and ... and help them. But if I got Requested ... maybe that wouldn't be so bad. I could send some of the money to help my parents out, and I could still stay here, you know?"

\*\*\*

Loisette stared at Clarkent, her chest tightening for reasons she wasn't sure of. He would be leaving soon? She had--she had forgotten. How could she have forgotten about such an important aspect of the Assigning?

"I wish you could stay," she whispered. She despised the Assigning at that moment. It had given her a best friend, only to take him away. If Clarkent had simply been hired as a servant, then he would have been paid already and would have had no reason to leave--he could have been able to help his parents all along. Even she had noticed how worn his parents seemed--and she had felt a tiny stab of guilt about it. "Who am I going to act out adventures with?"

The stableboy smiled at her. "You're a great person, Gawain. I'm sure there will be someone for you to act out adventures with."

Loisette looked down at her hands. She had Catherine, but ... it just wasn't the same. Catherine wasn't Clarkent. Loisette and Catherine had fun together--but it was a different kind of fun. Catherine treated her like a friend--but like a friend that was a princess.

Unable to put what her heart was feeling into words, she simply told Clarkent, "I guess you're right."

She didn't know why her eyes were getting so blurry.

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"So, who's your favorite?"

"Huh?" Loisette turned to Catherine in confusion. They were at a party being hosted by Alexander. Famous knights and important Nobles were spread throughout the hall, eating and socializing. The great room was filled with the smells of food and the noise of merriment.

Loisette and Catherine had just ceased talking to a knight, and Loisette had let her gaze wander across the room. Her preoccupation meant she had no idea what Catherine had been asking.

"Who is your *favorite knight*, Your Highness?" Catherine asked her, speaking in a tone that sounded as if she thought Loisette dense. "I like Sir Klaud myself."

Loisette brought her eyes up to look at the knight mentioned. She *had* admired Sir Klaud's appearance on occasion. With his melodious accent and chiseled looks, Sir Klaud was pleasing to both the ear and the eye. It was kind of strange how Loisette had only recently begun to notice it.

The object of their thoughts glanced up at them and shot them a shining smile. Loisette and Catherine both blushed.

"He's just as charming in private as he is in public,"

Catherine said slyly.

Loisette raised an eyebrow. "You've spent time alone with him?"

Rather than answer the question, Catherine said, “What’s surprising about that? You’re always slipping off to visit boys.”

“I’m not always--” Loisetette began to protest, only to falter as she realized what Catherine had said was true ... in a way. Her thoughts flicked to Clarkent, and she felt a stab of pain at the thought of his oncoming departure.

Catherine must have seen the look on her face, for she said gently, “What’s wrong?”

Loisetette considered denying that something was wrong, but then she steeled herself, deciding to tell the truth. This was her best friend. She could trust her not to say anything to anyone. “I’m going to miss Clarkent--the ... the stableboy who always helps us,” she said quietly. “He’ll be turning seventeen soon. I--I wish he didn’t have to leave.”

Catherine stared at her with an expression that said she knew more than Loisetette was saying. “He wouldn’t have to leave if he got Requested,” the lady-in-waiting remarked casually. “If you talked to the Regent, he would probably Request that the stableboy stay. After all, the stableboy is really good with horses. It would be a shame to lose him.”

Loisetette’s eyes widened. Catherine was right. It was a great idea. Why hadn’t Loisetette thought of it herself?

“And he’s cute,” commented the lady-in-waiting with a grin. “Though I don’t know if he’s quite as handsome as Sir Klaud.”

Loisetette’s cheeks were warm. “Y-yeah,” she said with a cough. “Sir Klaud *is* very handsome.” But it wasn’t Sir Klaud who was filling her mind’s eye.

\*\*\*

When Loisetette went to see Alexander the next day, she was nervous. She didn’t want it seem as if she had an improper interest in Clarkent. She simply wanted her friend to continue on at the stable as he always had--she enjoyed their time together, and she didn’t want it to end. But what if Alexander refused to Request the stableboy? What would she do then?

The Regent smiled warmly when he noticed her. He always seemed to enjoy talking to her, though she rarely sought him out herself. There was something about him that seemed slightly creepy, though she wasn’t quite sure what.

“Princess Loisetette,” he greeted, bowing as she curtsied. “To what do I owe the honor of your presence?”

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Alexander was pleased that the princess was coming to see him. And when she began shyly, “I have something I wish to ask of you,” his pleasure began to grow. But his happiness dissipated as he heard what she desired:

“I was wanting to know if you would Request that the stableboy Clarkent remain at the castle.”

His eyes narrowed before he quickly forced them to resume their normal appearance. His suspicions were immediately aroused--why did she want the boy to stay? “May I ask what your interest is in the stableboy?” he asked with agonizing calmness.

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Alexander’s question caused Loisetette’s heart to jump in fright, but she forced herself to speak normally: “My--my mother’s horse likes him, and he is best at controlling her.” It was a slight lie--the Stable Master was likely better at controlling Penelope Grace--but she didn’t feel too bad for uttering the falsehood, as Penelope Grace *did* let Clarkent guide her more than any of the other stableboys. “My horse, High Flyer, also appears to like him.” And here she delved deeper into untruths: “I am very particular about the handling of my horse. Some of the stableboys are not as skilled with horses as he is. I wish for my horse to remain in good hands.”

Alexander stared at her, and Loisetette felt like squirming. She hated to act as if she were denigrating the other stableboys, but now that she was here, she felt as if she were under the Regent’s scrutiny, and she didn’t want to seem as if her interest stretched

any further than the welfare of the horses.

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Alexander gazed at the princess as he thought carefully of her request. He was not a fool--even as he realized there was danger in this, so did he also realize that obliging the princess in this instance would increase her estimation of him. And if he were going to woo her to be his queen, he knew she would need to think highly of him. There was a slight stubbornness in her that he had come across a few times, and it was important for him to build up her image of him.

Besides, if the stableboy did prove himself a threat, Alexander could always have him killed. No one would ever miss a lowly stableboy.

He dipped his head. “I shall Request the boy to stay. What was his name again?”

“Clarkent,” she repeated. “But please--do not tell him that I asked for him to stay. I merely wish him to remain for ... for the care of my horse.”

Alexander nodded sharply. “I shall be sure to leave your name out of it.” That was what he had intended to do anyway. He did not want the *peasant* to believe the princess had any interest in him.

As he watched the princess leave, he vowed to keep a closer eye on the stableboy called Clarkent.

\*\*\*

The day before his seventeenth birthday, Clarkent was requested to appear before the Regent. Upon receiving the summons, Clarkent felt his stomach twist. There were only two reasons he could think of for being asked to see the Regent--either he had been found out as the Black Knight, or he was going to be Requested to stay at the stable. If it was the former, then he was as good as dead. If it was the latter ... then he wasn’t sure what his answer would be.

He entered the throne room slowly, gulping as he took in the Regent in all his elegant finery. He forced his feet to move forward, and at last he was standing right in front of the man. He took a careful bow--one of his better ones, thankfully--and waited until the Regent gestured for him to rise. The last time they had met, the Regent had looked on him none too kindly.

“Your Majesty,” Clarkent said quietly, his mouth dry.

“I understand you are good with horses,” the Regent commented.

Clarkent felt an inner sense of relief. This wasn’t about the Black Knight. “Y-yes, Your Majesty,” he said fumblingly, keeping his eyes averted.

“It is hard to find good *stableboys* these days, so I would like to Request that you stay at the royal stables.”

Clarkent nearly lifted his head. There was an insult veiled within the Regent’s sentence. He obviously considered himself above stableboys, and Clarkent knew it was with good reason. Clarkent lacked the Noble blood that the Regent had.

Clarkent allowed himself a few seconds to think. He wanted to be by his parents’ side, helping them--but he ached to be with Loisetette.

He wasn’t sure why, but the thought of being away from her tore at his heart. To never be able to see her again was more than he could bear.

And so, with a mental apology to his parents, he said in a low voice, “I would be honored to stay.”

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As Alexander watched the stableboy leave, he narrowed his eyes. He would definitely keep a careful watch on the peasant. While the princess would surely never marry a stableboy, it couldn’t hurt to be careful.

\*\*\*

When Clarkent returned to the stable, he found Gawain waiting for him and petting Penelope Grace. Frowning a bit at the

horse's lack of retaliation, Clarkent walked toward his friend.

Gawain heard his approach and turned. He brightened upon seeing Clarkent. "Hello!" he greeted.

"Hello," Clarkent mumbled. "I-I thought you should know-- I've been Requested to stay."

Gawain stared at him, his face cautious. "And ... ?"

"And I decided to accept."

Gawain leapt forward and embraced Clarkent, who stumbled back a few steps. "I'm so glad to hear that!" Gawain exclaimed.

Clarkent smiled at his friend's happiness. At least he wasn't losing this good friend--at least, not until Gawain turned seventeen. That thought darkened his mood. He hated how the Assigning controlled everyone's lives.

And he hated how he felt like he had betrayed his parents--even if they had told him he could stay. But at least his earnings would bring a little relief to them. He was glad that he would still be helping them, though it would be in a different way than he had intended years before.

And he could still continue to be the Black Knight. He would be helping others. That was important.

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### Chapter 21: Cold Reality

A few months later, a young woman was on a dirt road walking home from the market. In one hand, she held a basket of food and in the other a small coin-purse containing a few leftover coins from her trip. Thus, when a pair of men stepped in front of her, she paled in terror. She knew their intentions immediately.

"We'll take your food and your money," the taller man told her in a low voice, a sleazy smile on his face.

"No," she said quietly, her eyes jumping around as she plotted an escape route.

"If you want to, we'll do this the hard way," the other man growled, leaping at her.

She jumped to the side and began to run away. Her hope was so great that she started to think she might actually escape, but then one of the men caught up to her and yanked her dress backward. With a cry, she jolted to a halt, the basket of food flying out of her arms and landing nearby. She turned and kicked the man in the groin and began to run again, but the second man caught up to her and pinned her arms behind her. She gasped as she saw the glint of a knife. "No--"

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Clarkent guided the galloping Phantom forward as he looked back and forth between his surroundings and the flying James. And then they were *there*, at the part of the path where James had been leading him, and he saw a woman struggling with two men. Without hesitating, he leapt off the horse beside them and rammed his shield into the head of one of the men, knocking him unconscious. The other man turned toward him, eyes widening, and then, having had more time to react than his companion, he stabbed at the vulnerable spot under Clarkent's arm.

Clarkent jumped backward, the movement a little awkward in the plate armor, but he effectively dodged the knife. Then he drew his arm back and punched the man in the face with a metal gauntlet.

The man stumbled backward, throwing his hand up to his nose as blood seeped out from behind his dirty fingers. Clarkent threw his gaze briefly to the ground, where the woman sat holding her side. Seeing her pain, his indignation surged again, and he stepped forward and hit the man in the head with his shield, causing him to crumple to the ground as his accomplice had.

Clarkent retrieved some rope from Phantom's saddle--he always made sure to have some with him--and tied up the two men, not wanting them to regain consciousness and cause more problems. When that was done, he rushed over to the woman, his breath catching in his chest as he saw the growing red stain on

her dress.

He knelt beside her--she was lying down now--and stared at her with a feeling of helplessness. The blood was spreading quickly, attesting to the serious nature of the wound, and he pressed his hand against her side, trying to staunch the liquid's flow, knowing even as he did it that there was no point. By the time he found someone to help, she would be dead.

She stared up at him with pain-filled eyes and whispered in amazement, "The Black Knight."

He stared down at her, hating that he hadn't reached her sooner. And then, though he always avoided talking to others while in his armor for fear of being recognized, he asked her in a choked voice, "What is your name?"

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She gave a gentle smile as she heard her savior speak. He sounded so kind.

"Maison," she told him, knowing as she said her name that it would be the last time she did. The pain in her side grew, and she closed her eyes. "Please, take the food and my purse to my family. My--my little girl needs it especially."

"Where ... " he started to ask, sounding as if it were an effort to talk, " ... where do they live?"

As she slowly gave the Black Knight directions to her home, she thought of her little girl's beautiful face. What the child would look like as a woman, she would never know ... And she wished that knowledge didn't hurt so much.

"I'll take it to them," he told her in a whisper. "I promise."

She smiled at him, and then she surrendered to the painlessness of Death's arms.

\*\*\*

Trembling, Clarkent took a quill, a bottle of ink, two small pieces of paper, and another piece of rope from the bag attached to Phantom's saddle. Laboriously--for he was still not that skilled at reading, much less exercising his penmanship--he wrote "Murderers of Maison" on each piece of paper. Pulling the two men together and putting more rope around them to bind them together, he glanced down at the two men, his teeth pressing down into his lip so hard it bled. Then, taking in a shallow breath, he attached the notes to them.

After replacing the quill and ink to his bag, he attached the basket to the saddle. He detached the coin purse from Maison and placed it inside the basket. Then he gently lifted her.

\*\*\*

Daniel was inside his house laughing at his little girl's antics when he heard a quiet but insistent knocking. He set the child down and went to open the door, a smile ready on his face.

His eyes fell to the ground. Maison was lying there, her dress soaked with blood. Somehow, he knew immediately she was dead.

His breath caught in his throat, and his gaze went to the basket sitting beside her as he stood there, trembling.

The noise of hoof beats caught his attention, and he looked up to see a knight in black armor riding away. He fell to his knees by Maison, noticing for the first time a note that had been placed beside her. With shaky hands, he picked it up. The note had just one sentence on it: "I am sorry I could not save her."

Daniel dropped his head down into his hands and began to cry.

\*\*\*

Numb, Clarkent rode away from the home of Maison's family; James had left him at some point, but he wasn't sure when. His head was too full to concentrate on the world around him. All he could think about was death.

Death had always seemed so far away, but now ... he had seen it up close. It had filled his eyes, clawed at his heart, whispered in his ears, and shaken his limbs like leaves in the wind. Death was one enemy he could never defeat.

He couldn't help but feel responsible for the young woman's death. If only he had gotten there a little sooner ...

Phantom abruptly stopped as someone stepped into their path. It was Peri, and James was perched on his shoulder. The bird must have gone to get him.

"Clarkent," the magician said softly. "James told me what happened."

"I was too late, Peri," Clarkent rasped, tightly clenching the reins in his hands as his eyes began to blur. "I wasn't able to save her. I don't--I don't know if I can keep doing this."

The wizard gave him a hard stare. "When I was first learning magic," he said casually, "I did something my master told me not to do. I enchanted a bunch of broomsticks--and I lost control over them. When my master finally came and set everything right, I was so embarrassed I never wanted to cast a spell again." He sighed. "But when my master finally got over his anger and heard that I intended to quit, he told me that once you set your mind to something, you have to stick with it, no matter what."

Clarkent shook his head vehemently. "This is different, Peri," he said in a low voice. "I wasn't able to save someone from dying. My failure was a matter of life and death."

"Clarkent," Peri said firmly, "you are giving the people hope. Don't lose sight of that. You will never be able to save everyone--and you have to accept that. No matter how many times you help, you're going to fail every now and then."

"I can't live like that," Clarkent whispered. "I can't live this life knowing that--knowing ... " Knowing there would be people he couldn't save. That was too pessimistic--it was like giving up.

"But you have to," Peri returned in a quiet voice. "If you aren't the people's protector, then who do they have? They need your help--no matter how much it hurts. If you give them everything you have, then that's enough."

Closing his eyes, Clarkent gave a short bob of his head. Perhaps Peri was speaking words of wisdom ... but it was so hard for his heart to listen.

Still, he had to keep helping people--even if some of them ... died. Even if a part of him would die with them.

Peri was right. The people needed someone to give them hope. Even if he wasn't the ideal person for the job, he was all they had.

\*\*\*

A few months later, Princess Loisetette and her lady-in-waiting came into the stable to ride. Clarkent stared as the princess stepped in. There was a glow in her cheeks and a confidence in her steps that had not been there when he had first met her all those years ago. She was really growing up. Soon, she would be a woman--and there was something frightening in that thought, though he knew not what.

"Your Highness," he said with a bow. "And Lady Catherine."

The princess nodded at him and smiled. "Clarkent." She glanced over at the horses. "We would like to ride High Flyer and Agides, please."

Clarkent dipped his head. "All right." He got out the horses' tack and began readying them. As he prepared High Flyer, Princess Loisetette stood beside him and watched.

She sighed, and he looked to her. She had lifted a hand and was touching the royal logo on the horse's bridle. "I still wish I had a pegasus. If I had one ... I could fly wherever I wanted." She smiled at herself, shaking her head. "That's silly, I guess."

"No, it's not," Clarkent murmured. He felt sadness bubble up in his chest--he wished he could get her a pegasus. He wished suddenly and fervently that he could make all her dreams come true. But he couldn't. He was just a stableboy. He had nothing to give her. Nothing she wanted.

As he finished up High Flyer and moved to work on Agides, he tried not to think about how the princess smelled of wildflowers.

\*\*\*

Loisetette encouraged High Flyer to go faster, and she laughed as she looked over at her lady-in-waiting. "Come on, Catherine! Where's your competitive streak?" She frowned as she caught the expression on the other girl's face. Catherine had been brooding all day, though Loisetette wasn't sure why.

The lady-in-waiting quickly masked her somber mood with a smile and said, "Oh, I just wanted to ensure you had a good enough head start, Your Highness. You have that whole disadvantage of being royalty to weigh you down, so I knew you needed it!"

Sticking her tongue out, Loisetette flicked her whip and kicked with her foot, causing High Flyer to surge forward. "I'll show you disadvantaged!"

Catherine just laughed and guided Agides after her.

\*\*\*

The two girls had a lot of fun that day. They skipped meeting with their tutors and simply spent the afternoon doing whatever they wanted. Every now and then, however, Loisetette would look over to her friend and see a troubled look on her face. When asked what was wrong, Catherine never gave a straight answer. Finally, night was upon them, and they were forced to change to indoor endeavors. When they at last went to Loisetette's room, she was exhausted, and she collapsed on her bed in an exaggerated fashion, sprawling out her arms.

When Catherine didn't make any comment, Loisetette sat up with a frown. "Catherine ... are you going to tell me what is wrong?"

Her friend's back was to her, but at last the lady-in-waiting turned with tears in her eyes. "I ... I have to leave tomorrow."

"What?" Loisetette asked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Catherine wrung her hands. "It's my own fault. I have no one to blame but myself."

Loisetette stood up, her hands clenched at her sides. "Are you in trouble?" If her friend *was* in trouble, she would fight to help her!

Catherine gave her a sad smile. "This isn't the kind of trouble you can save me from, Princess." She closed her eyes and whispered, "I just wish my heart wasn't broken."

"What do you mean, Catherine?" Loisetette asked quietly, moving closer to her friend.

"I--I did something with Sir Klaud that ... that I shouldn't have."

"What did you do, Catherine?" Loisetette asked slowly. She felt she already knew the answer--but she hoped she was wrong.

Catherine broke out into sobs, and Loisetette embraced her tightly. "Princess," the lady-in-waiting said in between her tears, "I have to be sent away. I have to hide from everyone. I--I'm going to ... to ... " She choked on the words, her body wracked by emotion, yet she finally managed, "I'm going to have a baby."

Loisetette's grip on her friend tightened as she felt her own eyes becoming misty. "It's ... it's Sir Klaud's?"

"Yes," Catherine confirmed shakily. "But he won't--he won't ... he won't m-marry me. He ... he says the baby isn't ... isn't his."

Two very different emotions surged within Loisetette at that moment. One of those emotions was sorrow--she mourned the fact that something like this had happened to her friend ... and that she would never see Catherine again.

But the other emotion was white-hot anger. She was mad--utterly furious.

Catherine would be forced to leave behind all that she knew and loved. She would be shrouded in shame ... just because she was the woman.

But as the man, Sir Klaud would remain unaffected.

It was a double standard--the mark of woman's shame was easily seen and readily denounced. But a man had simply to deny

his involvement in a scandal, and he would be absolved of all blame. A knight's vows of honor and chivalry could be smashed to pieces--but if it was his word against a "weak" woman's, then his would be believed. The laws of government and rules of propriety were made by men, and Loisetette hated it.

What had begun with frustration years ago at society's need for her to ride sidesaddle rather than astride had now transformed to anger and resolve. She suddenly wanted to be queen--she wanted to have the power to enact changes in society.

Loisetette felt tears stream down her face. She was going to lose someone else who was important to her. But Catherine was going to lose *everything*.

\*\*\*

The next morning, the two girls shared a tear-filled goodbye. Loisetette never saw Catherine again. But she never forgot her.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 22: Bare Hips Sink (Friend)Ships

About a year later, the sixteen-year old Loisetette was strolling around outside the castle. Despite all the time they had spent together, she still hadn't grown to like her new lady-in-waiting. Mishal was utterly smitten by a knight at court named Arnel, and he was all she talked about. As a result, Loisetette--who didn't feel too kindly toward knights based on the examples of Sir Klaud and the Black Knight--avoided the lady-in-waiting as much as possible.

As she walked the grounds alone, she found her thoughts wandering to her friend. She wondered how Catherine was doing. Did she have any friends where she was? Was it scary to be a mother? Did she think about Loisetette very often? Would she be able to find happiness? Was her baby a boy or a girl?

Loisetette wished she could go visit Catherine as Gawain. But the magic of the clothes meant Loisetette couldn't tell anyone about them. And besides, she didn't actually know where Catherine was. For all Loisetette knew, the older girl could have been in the Barbarian Kingdom. Loisetette had no way to find her. They had been torn apart forever.

Knowing the great loss Loisetette felt, Aliss had come to see her a lot following Catherine's departure. But though her old nanny was able to provide her some comfort, Loisetette still wished Catherine was around even after all this time had passed.

She had begun thinking a lot about friendship. Now that she could no longer talk to Catherine, Loisetette wished desperately that she had been able to share her doings as Gawain. Catherine had entrusted her with the secret of her shame--and Loisetette wished she had been able to reciprocate. She was certain Catherine would be amused that a set of clothes had been able to fool people for so long.

Thinking about the magic clothing turned her thoughts to Clarkent. She wanted to tell him her secret identity as well--she wanted him to know that the friend he had played with for years was actually female. It was a big thing to hide from him, and she was beginning to feel guilty in having persisted with it for so long. But even if she *could* tell him, would it end well? Would he start to treat her differently? Maybe it was best that she could never find out.

She heard a familiar noise and looked up to the sky. James was flying down toward her. Smiling, she stretched out an arm for him to land on. With a normal falcon, it would be impossible to trust that its talons wouldn't puncture a bare arm. But James was no normal falcon, as she had known for a long time.

He gently landed on her arm and tilted his head. *"\*\*Good day, Your Highness.\*\*"*

*"\*\*Good day, James,\*\*"* she returned warmly, reaching a finger out to stroke the feathers under his beak. *"\*\*It's a nice day to be outside.\*\*"*

*"\*\*Yeah, it is,\*\*"* he agreed, tilting his head back to enable her to scratch him more effectively. *"\*\*I noticed you seemed lost*

*in your own little world there.\*\*"*

Her smile faded, and she lowered her hand back down. *"\*\*I was just thinking ... \*\*"*

*"\*\*About what? \*\*"*

She hesitated. She hated to bare her soul to a bird--particularly when she wasn't sure if the bird understood that some things had to be kept secret--so she opted to be a little vague in her answer. *"\*\*Well,\*\*"* she said slowly, *"\*\*I want to tell someone something ... but I can't.\*\*"*

*"\*\*Ah,\*\*"* he said, opening his beak slightly. *"\*\*I know how you feel better than you think. I used to be a human.\*\*"*

*"\*\*What? \*\*"* she asked in surprise. *"\*\*You were human? \*\*"*

The bird lowered his head. *"\*\*Yeah. A sorcerer transformed me.\*\*"*

Loisetette frowned. *"\*\*Why would he do that? \*\*"*

*"\*\*Because of my parents,\*\*"* he said sadly. *"\*\*They were Nobles, and they lived next to the Mystical Sorcerer's home--he used to be the court magician, you know. When my mother was pregnant with me, she had a lot of weird cravings. For days, she stared at the Mystical Sorcerer's large pumpkin patch, and finally she insisted on having one of the pumpkins. No other pumpkin would do but one of the Mystical Sorcerer's. She--she made my father steal one.\*\*"*

*"\*\*And he got caught,\*\*"* Loisetette guessed with a wince.

*"\*\*Yeah. But the Mystical Sorcerer agreed not to harm him on one condition. They had to give him their firstborn child--me--whenever he asked. They were scared, so they agreed.\*\*"* He let out a faint noise that was perhaps his equivalent of a sigh. *"\*\*You can't really blame them.\*\*"*

*"\*\*And then? \*\*"* Loisetette prodded.

*"\*\*When I was six, the Mystical Sorcerer finally asked for me. But my mother loved me so much, and she refused to let me go ... So he turned me into a falcon.\*\*"*

She felt pity wash over her. *"\*\*Oh, James ... \*\*"*

*"\*\*I was so scared,\*\*"* he admitted. *"\*\*I just ran away--well, flew away. I was eventually found by Peri. He could talk to me--like it seemed no other human could. I told him what had happened, and that's when he put himself forward to be the new court magician, replacing the Mystical Sorcerer. It was a good day for the kingdom when that happened. Even if it was too late for me.\*\*"*

*"\*\*Did you go back to see your parents? \*\*"* she asked gently.

*"\*\*No,\*\*"* James said, turning his feathered head away from her. *"\*\*Peri tried to get me to return, but I didn't want my mother to see me like this. It's been a very long time since I have looked at either of my parents. I don't think I will ever again.\*\*"*

*"\*\*James,\*\*"* Loisetette said slowly, *"\*\*you should go visit them. I'm sure they would love to see you--\*\*"*

*"\*\*No,\*\*"* the bird said sharply, staring at her with intense eyes. *"\*\*It has been too long. They probably do not even remember me.\*\*"*

Loisetette protested, *"\*\*I'm sure that isn't true--\*\*"*

*"\*\*It doesn't matter if it is. There is no need for me to see them when I cannot even speak one word to them. They would not understand me as you can. They have not been given your gift.\*\*"*

Loisetette brought the bird on her arm up to her chest, giving him an awkward but gentle hug. *"\*\*Well, if you ever want to see them, I can go with you and translate.\*\*"*

*"\*\*I have a new life now,\*\*"* James told her. *"\*\*Don't worry about me.\*\*"* But she couldn't help but notice that he still seemed very sad.

\*\*\*

Leaning forward on Esroh Repus (whom Dwayne had said Clarkent could ride whenever he wanted), Clarkent raced after Gawain. The younger boy was standing up in his saddle on

Agides and whooping.

“Sit down!” Clarkent yelled at him, laughing. “You’re going to get hurt!”

Gawain sat down obediently ... but only to spur the horse on to greater speeds. “Catch me if you can!” he called.

Clarkent rolled his eyes as he continued to follow Agides and Gawain. Reckless though Gawain was, Clarkent was fortunate to have him as a friend. When Clarkent had asked months ago for help in sending his parents a letter, Gawain had readily agreed. Since then, Gawain had assisted Clarkent in sending several letters to his parents. Clarkent was indebted to his friend, and he wouldn’t forget it.

Clarkent felt happier than he had in a long time. It felt good to be able to send his parents money. He knew that it would help them greatly. His only worry was that Gawain might be turning seventeen soon. He wasn’t sure of the other boy’s exact age, but surely that day would be coming in a few years, if not sooner than that. It saddened him to think about it. At eighteen, Clarkent was past that hurdle, but Gawain certainly wasn’t.

Pushing aside those depressing thoughts, Clarkent kicked Esroh Repus and brought the horse out ahead of Agides. He swerved to take a path different from the one Gawain had been following, and he smiled at the noise of Agides hot on his trail. He pulled at his shirt, which was sticking to him with perspiration. It was a hot day, and he was ready for some relief. And he knew just where to go get some.

\*\*\*

Clarkent finally stopped Esroh Repus beside a great lake. The lake was fairly close to the border, though not so close that Clarkent would avoid it. The water of lake was cool and crystal clear. There was something very serene about it.

Clarkent dismounted and walked up to the lake’s edge, smiling as he dipped a few fingers in the water. A bird flew overhead and trilled a fragment of a song before passing on its way.

Agides’s hooves had stilled, and Gawain approached behind Clarkent, asking, “Is this ... Avalon Lake?”

Clarkent smiled. “Yes.” He began tugging at his shirt, his mind already on the cool relief of the water. “It makes a great place to swim.”

\*\*\*

Loisette watched wide-eyed as the stableboy took off his shirt. And then when he began to slide his pants down, she yelped, “S-stop!” She wasn’t sure whether she was protesting because she shouldn’t be seeing him half-naked--he wouldn’t have gotten *completely* naked, would he have?--or because she couldn’t go swimming with him since she *wasn’t actually a boy*, but she did know that she felt highly uncomfortable with the situation.

But she was finding quickly that her eyes were glued to his chest. It was impossible not to notice the muscles there--she had seen (and admired) his strong arms many a time, but she hadn’t laid eyes on his stomach or his abs or--

She wrenched her eyes away and turned her head, flushing. It was inappropriate for her to notice how well-built a commoner was. She shouldn’t be thinking about reaching out to wipe off the sweat trickling down his chest or running her hands down his arms to feel the bulge of muscles. The thought of Catherine’s obsession with sweaty boys returned to her, and she gulped to herself. She was really beginning to understand that obsession.

But Clarkent didn’t know where her thoughts were--could *never* know that her thoughts had gone there--so she scrambled to think of something plausible to say. Finally, something came to her. “There are bad stories about the lake,” she said nonchalantly, moving to pet Agides. As she stroked his neck, she tried not to think of Clarkent’s bare neck ... or the bareness beneath it.

“What kinds of stories?” Clarkent asked her.

“There’s supposed to be a mysterious Lady of the Lake who punishes any evil people who come into her waters,” she told him. “So we should stay out of the lake.”

“We’re not evil,” the stableboy noted skeptically. “And besides, those are just stories.”

She turned to him, irked that he was resisting her on this. “You shouldn’t swim in there.” She swallowed as she saw that his shirt was still off.

“I’ve been in there before and not gotten hurt. I’m hot, and I’m going in. *You* should come, too.”

“No, you’re not going in there!” she snapped, her voice coming close to a yell. “It’s dangerous in Avalon Lake. You could die.”

“You *like* danger!” he pointed out. “Just because you’re scared of swimming--”

“I am *not* scared of swimming!” she protested.

He crossed his arms across that still-bare chest. “Then why won’t you come in the water?”

“I told you,” she hissed. “The Lady of the Lake will punish--”

“*Oh!* Stop using your stupid stories as an excuse--”

She narrowed her eyes. “My stories are not stupid--”

“You shouldn’t base your life around stories. And if you’re scared, you should just admit it--”

“I do *not* base my life around stories, and I am *not* scared of the water! You don’t know anything about my life--”

“That’s because you never tell me anything when I ask!” he returned, throwing his arms up in the air. “Anytime I try to ask about your parents, you clam up--”

“Well, they’re *dead*, all right!?” She was almost in tears.

“Forgive me if I don’t want to talk about them!”

“You can’t keep everything all bottled up inside! You have to let it out sometime--”

“You wouldn’t understand!” she shouted. “You have the perfect set of loving parents who would do anything for you! I have nothing! Do you know how hard it is for me to look at them and see what I can’t have?”

“Gawain--”

“Just forget it! Swim in your stupid lake! I’m taking Agides back to the stable!”

Clarkent watched as Gawain mounted the brown horse and then galloped away. The heat of the day suddenly didn’t matter anymore. Had he lost his friend forever?

He nearly cried out after Gawain, but he didn’t think the other boy would listen even if he did. With clumsy fingers, he put his shirt back on, staring mournfully in the direction that his friend had disappeared.

\*\*\*

### Chapter 23: Gifted

Clarkent felt strangely detached from his body as put Esroh Repus back into his stall. His horrible fight with Gawain was all he could think about.

How could he have been so cruel to the younger boy? If Gawain had no desire to swim--whether due to fear or inability or lack of interest--Clarkent shouldn’t have pushed ... and he certainly shouldn’t have brought up Gawain’s parents. He’d known for a long time *that* was a sensitive subject.

“You seem troubled, Clarkent,” commented Dwayne.

Clarkent looked at the Stable Master sadly. “I guess that’s because I am.”

“Want to talk about what happened?”

Clarkent’s fingers twitched at his side. “I got in a fight with Gawain. I ... I pushed. And I said some things I shouldn’t have.”

Dwayne gave him a small smile. “One fight will not end a friendship.”

“I don’t know,” Clarkent said in a soft voice. “This one was really bad.” He clenched his eyes shut. He wished he could go find Gawain to apologize--but he never could find him even

when he tried.

\*\*\*

After Loisetette returned Agides to the stable, she went into the castle, spun out of her Gawain clothes, and then went into her room. Mishal was there and immediately started talking about what wondrous thing Arneld had done that day, but Loisetette just climbed into her bed and hid her face in her pillow. She tried to hold back the tears, but a few leaked out to make dark spots on her pillow.

She couldn't believe what had just happened. She had been trying to avoid swimming and seeing Clarkent like ... like *that*, and then he had said she was scared and had brought up her parents, and it had all been one giant explosion.

She envied what Clarkent had--it was true. He had two loving parents who would have obviously traveled hundreds of thousands of miles for him if he needed them to. They would have given their lives for him ... would have done anything to make sure he was happy. It hadn't taken long for her to realize that about them.

She could barely remember her mother. Maybe her mother would have been just as wonderful as Marta, but all Loisetette had of her was a fragmented memory of her laughing ... and the stories told about her by others. Her mother was like a ghost constantly hovering at the edge of her consciousness--but one she could never completely see, much less touch.

While her father had been alive, he had been too caught up with that ghost to give Loisetette the love she needed. Catherine had left her, too, and now Loisetette had ruined one of her last close relationships. She lifted her pillow to look up at Mishal, who seemed to have finally caught on that something was wrong.

"Are you all right, Your Highness?" the lady-in-waiting asked.

Loisetette slowly sat up and put her feet on the floor. "I need to--to go do something."

She had to try to make it right.

\*\*\*

When Gawain walked into the stable, Clarkent dropped the hoof pick he'd been rather ineffectually using, and he took a step. "Gawain--"

"Clarkent," Gawain said, taking a deep breath, "I'm sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry," Clarkent replied, moving out of the stall and toward his friend. "I was in the wrong. I shouldn't have tried to make you swim or said that about your parents--"

"It's all right," Gawain said with a small smile. "It was a ... stupid fight."

Clarkent felt so relieved he could have hugged Gawain--but he refrained and asked instead, almost shyly, "Friends again?"

Gawain grinned and nodded. "Friends!"

And then Gawain hugged *him*.

\*\*\*

A few weeks later, Clarkent and Gawain's friendship was firmly reestablished. Nevertheless, Clarkent found himself feeling glum, though it had nothing to do with Gawain.

Peri noticed his mood and commented on it: "Is there something on your mind, Clarkent? You look a little down."

Clarkent's cheeks felt a little warm. "Is it ... is it true that the princess's seventeenth birthday is in a few months?" He'd heard rumors ...

Peri smiled and dipped his head. "It is. And then she will be made queen. I have been waiting for this day--the Regent's reign has been too long as it is. They are planning a ball for the princess's birthday. It's supposed to be extravagant."

"Yeah, that's what I heard," Clarkent said in a small voice.

The magician frowned at him. "You're not depressed that she's going to become queen, are you?"

"No!" Clarkent said adamantly. "I just ... I just want to get her something for her birthday, but I don't know what."

Peri shook his head, looking a little bit irked. "You don't know what sadness is if you think that's it. Why, the King was killed by one of his loyal followers," he said, referring to the man from the Barbarian Kingdom whom he liked to talk about, "who married his wife and took his throne. When *you* have to make the decision to send away your--well, when you're in a situation like that, maybe you'll know true sadness."

Clarkent cowered a little, feeling guilty yet also a little curious. What had Peri been about to say?

"At least you can *do* something, son," Peri pointed out.

"What can I do?" Clarkent asked him, holding his hands up in the air in frustration. "I don't have enough money to buy her anything. My parents insist I keep some of my wages, but I refuse to hold on to anything beyond that--"

"You could save up a little money by doing odd jobs," suggested Peri.

Clarkent's face fell. "I don't really have much time for that ... Not if he wanted to be the Black Knight, too.

The magician softened. "You're right, Clarkent. I'm sorry. I'm just ... a little nervous about something. The winds of change are blowing. I've tried using divination spells, and it's been draining my energy, but I haven't been able to learn much about what is going to happen."

"What is ... going to happen?" Clarkent echoed as apprehension flooded his mind.

"Never you mind that," Peri told him, though he looked nervous. "What if I helped you out a little--I could pick out a book for you to give to the princess. I know she likes books."

"Would you?" Clarkent asked hopefully. "I just--I just want to give her something, you know?"

Peri smiled. "I'll give it to you tomorrow."

"Thanks," Clarkent told him. But he stared at the magician, a puzzled look on his face. What was Peri worrying about? What was going to happen?

\*\*\*

True to his word, Peri gave Clarkent the book the next day. The stableboy took it gratefully. There was still a part of him that wanted to give her something grand--something she could truly be proud of--but he was simply glad that he would have *something* to give her. That would have to be good enough.

"Thank you, Peri," he said softly.

The magician clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Anything to support young love."

Clarkent's cheeks were suddenly flaming hot, and he coughed, "I don't *love*--"

But the magician was already walking away and laughing. Narrowing his eyes, Clarkent went back into the stable.

He softened as he stared down at the item in his hand. Looking at a few pages, he quickly determined that the book was written about Queen Laural, who was from the Barbarian Kingdom. He knew the subject was something the princess would probably enjoy--and that was likely why Peri had chosen it. The magician was smart.

As Clarkent looked at a few more pages, he noticed there was a strange word repeated in the book that began with "K," though he wasn't sure how to pronounce it. Still--all that mattered was that the princess would like it. He flipped to the end and saw a picture of a woman crying and waving goodbye to someone. He touched the picture with a gentle finger. *<Why is she so sad?>* he wondered. *<Who is she saying goodbye to?>*

The noise of footsteps reached his ears, and he looked up to see Gawain coming in to the stable. Clarkent quickly hid the book. He trusted his friend, but he wanted this present to be something between himself and the princess. Gawain would ask questions--and possibly even demand to read it.

He nodded at his friend in greeting, and Gawain came trotting over.

But even as he began to talk to Gawain, Clarkent found his mind kept drifting back to the book. Would it be a good enough present? Was it ... special? Would she like it?

He just wasn't sure.

\*\*\*

A little over a month later, Loisetette--as Gawain--decided to convince Clarkent to go with her to the ogre cave Penelope Grace had mentioned.

She had gotten the location from the reluctant horse, and she was excited at the thought of what might be there. But the tricky part was getting Clarkent to agree.

"So, I think we need to go on a small adventure," she said casually.

Clarkent was grooming a horse, and he looked up sharply. "What?"

"It's been a while since we've done anything fun. We should go and--"

"Go where?" he interrupted suspiciously.

"Oh, just an old ogre cave--"

"An ogre cave?" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, an ogre cave," she confirmed. "But I don't know if the ogres are still there," she added hastily. "In fact, they probably won't be." In actuality, she had no idea whether they would be there or not. It had been a long time since Penelope Grace had been to the cave, so there was no way to know if they were still there. But Clarkent didn't have to know that.

"But you don't know that for sure," he pointed out, his eyes narrowed.

"The cave is supposed to be *filled* with treasure," she told him eagerly. Surely *that* had to interest him.

\*\*\*

When Gawain said there would be treasure at the ogre cave, Clarkent's interest was immediately piqued. Was this his chance to obtain a present for the princess? Something perfect? Something she could ... well, treasure? The book made a nice backup gift, but it just didn't say what he wanted it to. What exactly he *did* want his gift say, well, he wasn't sure, but he knew that the book didn't send the message he was hoping for.

"Filled with treasure," he echoed thoughtfully. If he could find something in the cave for the princess ... But a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Where did you hear about this cave?"

"You know how people talk," Gawain said vaguely. "Come on, Clarkent, we have to go to this cave! Just think about what is inside it!"

A protest flew to Clarkent's lips, but then he recalled the big fight between him and Gawain. He didn't want to risk something like that happening again, and so he sighed and conceded, "All right. I'll go."

Gawain grinned. "Great! We'll go tomorrow and take Agides and Esroh Repus!"

"Maybe we should just take Agides," Clarkent said uneasily. "We shouldn't endanger more horses than we have to."

Gawain crossed his arms with a stubborn look. "We'll need two horses if we're going to go home with a lot of treasure."

Again, Clarkent's mind flicked to their spat, and again, he conceded, "All right." He just hoped the ogres were long gone from the cave.

\*\*\*

As they approached the cave on Agides and Esroh Repus, Loisetette thought to herself how glad she was that they were going to the cave. Her birthday was in less than three weeks--and then she would have her coronation and become queen ... and a lot of important duties would finally fall to her. She wouldn't have much time for adventures, so it was important she have a few more before then. She wanted to have something she could look back on with fondness.

Clarkent suddenly asked, "Do ogres eat horses?"

Loisetette frowned. "I ... I guess they might. Maybe we should hide the horses?"

"I think that's a good idea," Clarkent said tightly. It was obvious he was nervous about what they were doing.

\*\*\*

They hid the horses and then walked cautiously toward the cave. Clarkent was wishing he had at least brought his sword. They were going into an *ogre cave* without any weapons! Were they completely *insane*?

He swallowed. He knew why *he* was coming. He wanted a gift for the princess. But why was Gawain so focused on adventure? In some ways, the younger boy acted like he had been locked up all his life.

Gawain had had the presence of mind to bring torches, so they weren't in complete darkness when they stepped into the cave. Gawain moved forward eagerly, and Clarkent hurried up and tugged on the younger boy's sleeve, causing him to stop and turn.

"Gawain," Clarkent said uneasily, "maybe we should go back." Though he wanted to get something for the princess, it was stupid for them to put themselves at risk. They didn't have any weapons. They wouldn't be ready to face whatever was inside.

Gawain rolled his eyes. "I'm sure we'll be fine. We just got here!" He started walking again.

Clarkent gasped as he saw something. "Gawain, I think those are bones ..."

"We're in an old ogre cave," Gawain scoffed. "Of course there'll be bones." But Clarkent noticed Gawain didn't exactly appear eager to look at them.

As they went deeper into the cave, Clarkent bit back his misgivings. They had come this far; they might as well continue. Just a little longer in the cave, and then they would find some treasure and leave, right?

But then a faint noise came to his ears, and he asked, "Do you hear that?"

Gawain nodded. "It sounds like ... music."

The music grew louder as they continued. Then, they turned a corner, and the torchlight made the chamber before them gleam. There was treasure everywhere.

Golden coins shone on the floor; gems were scattered everywhere; boxes filled with further opulence were pushed up against the wall. The room was a hoard of valuables. There was even a magical harp that played itself--it was apparently the source of the noise they had heard.

"Wow," Gawain breathed.

"Yeah," Clarkent seconded.

The room was spectacular. That much was clear.

Gawain rushed forward to the back side of the chamber where the harp was. Clarkent went up to a box near the front. He sifted through it, wide-eyed. He'd never seen this much wealth in one place before.

He moved on to the next chest, which was filled with jewelry. He thumbed through it in interest. A necklace would be perfect for the princess.

He pushed one aside as too large and gaudy. Another he moved to the side as being too tiny and unimpressive. And then suddenly, his hand stilled. He closed his fingers on a necklace and held it up next to his torch so he could see it better. It had a delicate golden chain that was pretty but not especially noteworthy. What had caught his eye was the necklace's pendant.

A golden square was inlaid with a blood-red ruby, and on top of the gem was a magnificent flying horse. The creature's wings were stretched out, its legs lifted in perpetual flight as its tail swayed in an invisible wind. As Clarkent stared down at it, he remembered how much the princess had wanted a pegasus. He could never give her a real pegasus--but he could give her this.

This was perfect.

With a small smile to himself, he took the necklace and--after making sure Gawain wasn't watching--put it in his pocket. He moved on to a different chest, looking more out of curiosity than desire.

A minute later, Gawain rushed over to him. "Clarkent! You have to see this! There's this hen over there laying eggs that are--"

They both froze as they heard an approaching noise. Something was coming.

They glanced at each other and then dove behind a particularly large box of treasure.

As the sound of talking voices grew louder, a vile odor seeped into the chamber, and Clarkent and Gawain wrinkled their faces up in disgust. It smelled like rotten meat.

"One ring all we got!" a deep voice said in disappointment. There was a clanging noise as the owner of the voice threw something--presumably the aforementioned ring--on the ground.

"Got food," a second voice mumbled. "That good."

"Could have tasted better," the first speaker said.

"No complain, fool," a third voice growled, speaking with the authority of a leader. "We fill bellies. That good enough--" He cut off. "Nose smell something foul. There tasty nibblies in here?"

Clarkent and Gawain stared at each other, wide-eyed. What were they going to do?

"Oh, niiiibbles," the third speaker continued. Suddenly, a massive form appeared in front of them. "Ha!"

"Run!" Gawain squeaked as he and Clarkent sprinted for the entrance.

But the other two ogres were ready for them, grasping them by the backs of their shirts.

"Let us go!" Gawain demanded, struggling to get free.

The three ogres were hideous. Their skin was gray-green, and their heads were hairless. Massive and misshapen teeth jutted out behind their lips, and their fingers were like dirty sausages. They wore clothes, but it hung off them in tatters.

"Me got yum-yums," the second ogre said happily. He seemed to be the tallest and stupidest of the bunch. "Yum-yums!" He pressed his face up against Clarkent, who nearly gagged at the smell coming from the ogre's mouth.

"Let us go, or you'll be sorry!" Clarkent managed. He had tried to punch and kick the ogre holding him, but it was no use. Its hide was too thick.

"Me think nibblies want to play," the leader said with a grin. "Me think we should let them."

"Want food, not play," the shortest ogre grumbled.

"Play!" insisted the leader. "Put down."

Obediently, the other ogres dropped their human captives. Clarkent and Gawain would have raced to leave the chamber, but the two ogres blocked their exit with surprising speed.

"We each give riddle," the leader told them. "Get riddles right, you leave. Get riddle wrong, tasty nibblies go in our bellies."

Clarkent looked to Gawain, who gave a short nod. It wasn't like they had a choice anyway. "All right," Clarkent agreed. He was beginning to feel a sliver of hope--there was something by the wall that looked like it might be the hilt of a sword. If he could get to it without their noticing ...

"I give first riddle," the shortest ogre proclaimed. "My riddle: I have mouth but cannot eat. I always run, though I have no feet."

Clarkent couldn't help but exchange a look with Gawain.

Maybe these ogres were smarter than they acted. They could certainly sound civilized if they tried. But Clarkent was terrible with riddles, and he gave Gawain a hopeful look.

"A river," Gawain said at last. "A running river has a mouth, but it has no feet and can't eat."

"Good!" the leader said, sounding pleased. "Me riddle next."

He gave them a toothy grin.

"You can try to race against me

And may like me when I'm ripe.

Just make sure you never waste me--

Hands of mine aren't easily wiped.

I can demolish a large town,

And you can try to bide or kill me.

Whenever I'm up, there's someone down.

I will tell you all eventually."

Clarkent inched closer to the sword, having barely listened to what the ogre said. If Gawain didn't get this riddle ...

"Time," Gawain said proudly, moving the torch in his hand a little. "Our time isn't up yet." He gave a small smile, but his eyes flicked toward the entrance. Clarkent knew he was ready to run if there was an opening, but they needed a distraction to get the ogres to move.

"Me turn," the dumbest ogre said. "Me riddle: You'll never want to go into me, but when you do, you'll no longer care."

"That doesn't rhyme," Gawain mumbled.

The dumb ogre looked annoyed. "Me riddle good. You no get."

Gawain exhaled heavily. "I don't--I don't know--"

"Grave!" the dumb ogre said triumphantly, leering in anticipation of sending the two boys to an early one.

Clarkent's free hand struck in a flash, grabbing the sword and pulling it up. "Back away!" he yelled.

The ogres shifted nervously. They obviously hadn't expected their prey to fight back.

Clarkent leapt at the dumb ogre with the intention to startle rather than harm, and he was rewarded when the ogre moved back several steps.

"Move, Gawain!" Clarkent commanded.

The younger boy ran through the opening, and Clarkent swung his sword in the air before following. The ogres came charging after him, but he flung the sword back at them with all of his might and was rewarded when one of them gave a howl. "Nibbly hurt!" the ogre said.

But Gawain and Clarkent were too busy running to look back. When they finally reached the cave entrance, they were huffing and puffing for air, and they threw their torches back into the cave and continued to rush away. They found their horses were they had left them and galloped away without looking back.

When at last they had put enough distance between them and the three ogres, they slowed their horses.

"We almost died," Clarkent panted, his heart still racing a million miles a minute.

"I know," Gawain said with a wide grin. "Wasn't it fun?"

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#### Chapter 24: At Full Tilt

Clarkent was outside exercising Penelope Grace--who refused to be ridden that day but allowed herself to be taken around on a lead rope--when Peri came up to him.

"Clarkent," the magician said, "there's something you need to know."

"What is it?" Clarkent asked, frowning.

"Have you seen the signs?"

Clarkent's frown deepened. "What signs?"

Peri sighed. "The Black Knight has been challenged to a tilt."

"What?" Clarkent exclaimed loudly. He winced a little and then looked around to make sure no one was watching them.

"What do you mean?"

"The Regent has been stewing over the Black Knight for a while, and he's finally decided that a public humiliation is the best method to get what he wants. His brother and tilting champion, Sir Tempos, will be waiting to joust with you three days before the princess's seventeenth birthday."

Clarkent's face darkened. Under Peri's guidance, he had

practiced tilting with a quintain before, but Sir Tempos was legendary for both ruthlessness and horsemanship. How could Clarkent hope to hold a candle to his skills? ... Especially when Clarkent had never jousting with a live opponent before.

"I'm not going," he said flatly. "I'm not at his beck and call. I refuse to come running at his command like a ... a trained lapdog!" Clarkent the stableboy may have owed something to the Regent due to the man's Requesting him to stay, but the Black Knight owed him nothing.

"Clarkent, I can try to get you some jousting armor--" Peri began.

"No. That won't be necessary. I don't intend to go." If he were unhorsed at the joust, he would be expected to give up both his armor and his horse, and he intended to part with neither.

The magician lowered his head. "All right."

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The day before the tilt Clarkent had determined he would not attend, Princess Loisetete came into the stable with her lady-in-waiting, Mishal. Clarkent had seen the young woman several times, but he actually missed seeing Catherine and wondered what had happened to her. But he could not presume to discuss the change with the princess, so he was left to wonder about it in silence.

Upon seeing the princess, he felt a strong sense of relief. He had been worried he wouldn't see her again before her birthday, and he had something he wanted to ask her.

"Your Highness," he said, bowing. "Shall I prepare High Flyer and Agides?"

"Yes, please," she returned with a smile.

Mishal was waiting near the entrance, Clarkent noted gratefully. As he tacked High Flyer, the princess came up beside him to pet the horse. Blushing furiously, he said in a low voice, "Your Highness, I wonder if you might ... consent to--to meet with me after your birthday ball." He swallowed and inhaled deeply, amazed that his nerve had gotten him this far. "I wish to see you in ... in private." What he wanted to do was give her the birthday present he had for her. And he wanted to do it before she was queen. Her birthday ball was scheduled the night before she turned seventeen. When she finally ascended to the throne the next day ... he didn't know what would happen. Would he no longer see her? Or would she simply not talk to him? Was it a requirement for royalty to ignore their servants?

She gave him a strange look as she thought over his request, but then she nodded. "All right," she agreed softly. "I will see you then."

He smiled at her, his heart leaping for joy. He finished with High Flyer and moved on to work on Agides. Mishal finally moved toward him, though she directed her conversation toward the princess: "Your Highness, do you think the Black Knight will show up at the tilt tomorrow?"

Clarkent grimaced but said nothing, merely listening to the two ladies.

"I doubt it," the princess scoffed, causing a pang of sadness to shoot through Clarkent. "The coward won't even show his face to anyone. I doubt he will come to a true test of courage."

Clarkent chewed on his lip but still remained quiet.

"Do you think he's scared?" Mishal asked.

"Probably. Sir Tempos is a great jouster. I doubt the Black Knight has any such skill."

The princess's scorn cut Clarkent to the core. Did she really think so little of his alter ego?

He finished helping the two ladies and then watched as their horses walked away. Was he really a coward? The reason he didn't want to go had nothing to do with fear, did it?

\*\*\*

Later that day, Gawain came into the stable. Clarkent was mucking out a stall because one of the younger stableboys had

fallen sick after eating. He nodded and smiled at Gawain. "Hey, Gawain."

"Hey, Clarkent," the other boy returned. He frowned at Clarkent's work and then looked around. "I guess you're pretty busy if you have to muck out stalls, huh?"

"Yeah," Clarkent acknowledged. He didn't even bother asking Gawain for help--he knew the other boy to be a bit squeamish when it came to horse dung.

"Are you going to try to sneak to the tournament tomorrow?" Gawain asked, pushing some straw around on the ground with his foot.

Clarkent looked away. "N-no," he murmured.

"I don't blame you," Gawain commented, moving to pet Agides. "It's not like the Black Knight is going to come."

Clarkent winced. "What makes you say that?"

"I bet he's too scared to come. Now, if he killed a Garm, *then* I might be impressed with his courage. But I doubt that would ever happen."

Clarkent narrowed his eyes. "Everyone knows that Garms only exist in fairy tales." Adults would tell stories of Garms to scare children into obedience--they were supposed to look like mutated black wolves, with hunched eyes, matted fur, and red eyes that glowed in the dark. Unlike wolves, they weren't supposed to show any fear of humans.

"I think they're real," proclaimed Gawain. "And besides, it's not like the Black Knight is an honorable man--he probably doesn't care what anyone thinks of him."

Clarkent turned away, squeezing his eyes shut. But he *did* care how people saw him. And now that he knew both the princess and Gawain thought so ill of him ... he didn't know if he could stand it. His pride certainly couldn't take much more of a battering. He had to prove that he was an admirable person.

"I think he'll show up," Clarkent said suddenly. "I think he'll go--and he might even beat Sir Tempos."

Gawain shook his head. "I doubt he's that good."

"Well," Clarkent said sourly, "I guess we'll find out tomorrow."

"Yeah--I guess so."

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Clarkent was in his hideout putting on his armor when Peri entered.

"I thought you weren't going to fight," the magician said, sounding concerned.

"I changed my mind," Clarkent said gruffly.

"You should've told me--I could have tried to get you some proper armor." Peri sighed. He walked over to the cave wall, which Clarkent's lance was set up against. Examining the blunt pole, he remarked, "At least your lance appears to be in proper shape." Clarkent had broken more than one when training with the quintain.

"Yeah," Clarkent said with a nod. "Thank you for ... for all of your help." Peri had helped him so much, providing him equipment and advice. He would always remember it.

"You should know the rules for the match, Clarkent. You're allowed three passes of your horses. If one of you falls off, then you will sword-fight until one of you wins. No other weapons are allowed."

Clarkent inhaled and told him, "Thanks, Peri."

The older man smiled. "I think it's probably time you headed out of here."

"I guess so," Clarkent conceded, his mind already speculating about what would happen when he attempted to meet the Regent's challenge. "Wish me luck?"

"What I'll hope for is that you put the skills you've learned to good use," Peri said with a chuckle. "And I don't doubt that you will, son."

"Thanks, Peri," Clarkent said softly. He hoped he could

emerge victorious from his tilt with Sir Tempos. If he didn't, there was no telling what would happen to him.

"Remember, when you sword-fight, do not aim to kill. Killing would turn the crowd against you. Your blade isn't properly blunted, so you'll have to be careful."

"Don't worry," Clarkent told him. "I don't intend to kill anyone." He just hoped his opponent didn't intend to kill *him*.

\*\*\*

As Clarkent rode Phantom up to the area where his joust against Sir Tempos was to be held, his nervousness level immediately increased. There were people everywhere.

Fortunately, Clarkent's mount seemed unfazed by the large numbers of people. Phantom marched ahead without the slightest hint of trepidation, moving among the parting members of the crowd as Clarkent guided him forward. They passed into the list field, where Sir Tempos was waiting for them.

Sir Tempos was decked out in the royal colors, as was his great black mount. The horse even had two metal spikes on its head, which gave it a surprisingly sinister appearance.

Clarkent tore his eyes away from the formidable pair and brought Phantom around to face the Regent.

"So, the illustrious Black Knight has chosen to show his helmet here after all," the Regent commented in a voice oily with authority. His voice carried easily to Sir Tempos and Clarkent, making the latter more nervous than he already was.

As Regent Alexander began speaking to the crowd, Clarkent was too caught up in his own worries to pay him any attention. Jousting could be dangerous. What if he was killed and his identity revealed? What if he lost and Gawain had come to the tournament? Would the younger boy be ashamed to learn his friend was the Black Knight? And worse--what would the princess think of him?

And then Sir Tempos was moving his horse to one side of the list field, and Clarkent hastily, if a bit belatedly, cued Phantom to take him to the opposite end from his opponent.

"I shall look forward to knocking you to the ground," Sir Tempos called to him, a sneer evident in his voice, muffled though it was by his helmet.

Clarkent refused to rise to the bait, knowing he needed all his wits about him if he was going to get out of this intact.

"I hope you're ready, Phantom," he murmured to his horse, lightly patting his neck.

The horse shook his head in response, his eyes focused straight ahead on the list field.

And then the signal was given, and Clarkent was charging forward at full speed, his lance pointed straight ahead unwaveringly. He shifted the lance to hit the center of Sir Tempos's chest, bracing himself in preparation for a blow from his opponent.

And then both lances struck. The crack of splintering wood filled the air, and Clarkent gasped at the pressure in his chest as the plate armor pushed up against him, nearly knocking him off. He found himself wishing he *had* asked Peri to get him jousting armor--his armor was almost too heavy for him to balance properly.

A thudding noise came to his ears as Phantom continued rushing by, and he twisted to see that Sir Tempos had fallen off his horse. A feeling of triumph came over him, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Come fight me like a man!" Sir Tempos growled as he got to his feet. He pulled out a sword and readied his stance for battle.

Clarkent took in a deep breath and brought Phantom to a stop. He dismounted and unsheathed his sword. He didn't want to fight, but this was part of it.

Their weapons crashed together in a flash of light.

"Your sword is impressive," Sir Tempos told him a low voice, "but we'll see if your arms can match it."

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Loisette watched the sword-fight from her seat beside Alexander. The two knights moved nimbly across the field, parrying and slashing and never faltering. Their feet seemed to glide across the ground as they moved, and their swords gleamed in the bright sun. Though she had believed the Black Knight a coward, he seemed to be holding his own. Maybe he was more impressive than she had realized.

And then she saw a glint in the sunlight and squinted with a frown.

\*\*\*

Clarkent gasped as a sudden pain flared in his left side.

"Aww, can the Black Knight not take a measly little dagger?" Sir Tempos sneered.

It took a second for Clarkent to recover from the realization that the other knight had used a weapon that wasn't supposed to be allowed in this fight. But then he pushed the other knight backward with his sword, causing him to withdraw the thin dagger in the process. The weapon had been thrust up beneath the tassets hanging by Clarkent's legs, and it had slipped through a hole in his mail and embedded itself pretty deeply. But now that the dagger was out of him, the blood was free to flow, and he had no way to stop it, as the wound was beneath his armor.

He threw a quick glance over at the umpires, who appeared not to have noticed the dagger, which had quickly been hidden. Tempos had waited for a moment where his illegal action would be hidden by the positioning of their bodies, so Clarkent would be getting no help from that quarter. Of course, there was always the possibility that the ones who were supposed to watch for foul play had been told to turn a blind eye to whatever Tempos did. Regardless, Clarkent knew he was on his own.

Favoring his left side, he guided their sword-fight toward Phantom. Every move he made caused him to wince, but he nonetheless continued, looking for an opening. Finally, with a flurry of movement, he forced Tempos back several steps, and then he leapt up onto Phantom.

The horse sprang forward at his prodding, and they raced out of the list field amid the gasps of the crowd. The armor and mail that was meant to protect him pushed and pinched at his wound, and he stifled a groan as Phantom galloped forward. He put a hand up between his tassets and under his armor, and his armored fingers came away wet with blood.

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### Chapter 25: The Winds of Change

When Peri finally found Clarkent, he was slumped forward on Phantom, who was wandering the forest without direction from his master. Clarkent gave him a weak greeting, but he seemed too enveloped in his own pain to truly guide Phantom, so the magician took both horse and rider to the cave hidden nearby. Peri couldn't help but think Clarkent fortunate that he hadn't been harmed more than he was by the conniving knight Tempos. This jousting match had been even more dangerous than a normal one.

Inside the cave, Peri helped Clarkent take off his heavy armor, and then he laid the boy on the ground. Clarkent groaned a little but was otherwise quiet. As Peri tended to the young man, he kept up a quiet one-sided conversation.

"You've lost more blood than I would like, but you'll be okay. You're lucky, son, that you have old Peri to help you. Did you know I'm called Peregrine the White because I can only do white magic? That means I can't do magic that hurts people. The stories that have built up about my power have mostly been spread to scare enemies of the crown. In fact, most magicians aren't as powerful as they like to think they are. Ours is a dying art, I'm afraid. But maybe it's for the best."

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Clarkent found the magician's talk soothing. It gave him something to drift along with as Peri worked to heal his side and

ease his pain. He stared upward, watching as light from the eternal flame danced on the ceiling of the cave. If he listened carefully, he could hear Phantom eating something, no doubt utterly unaffected by the events of the day.

But Clarkent's head was full of what had happened. And finally, he said softly, "I was stupid to go."

Peri smiled down at him. He seemed to be glad that Clarkent was now talking. "If you think that, why did you go?" the magician asked.

Clarkent closed his eyes. Maybe he would have been fast enough to dodge Sir Tempos's dagger if he had been wearing jousting armor--maybe things would have ended differently if he had made the decision to participate in time that he could be properly prepared. "I couldn't stand the thought that everyone would think so badly of the Black Knight," he admitted. "I didn't want anyone to think the Black Knight a coward." He had felt that perhaps it could destroy all he'd been fighting for--but maybe he'd just done that himself.

"What you did out there will be talked about for a while," Peri told him kindly, though Clarkent couldn't take comfort in his words. "You managed to knock him off while also splintering your lance--it was a good hit."

Clarkent gave a bitter laugh and shook his head, opening his eyes. "I ran away, Peri." He really was a coward like his friends had said, wasn't he? "He stabbed me, and I ran away."

"People will remember the full match," Peri told him. "Surely a few people were able to see what he did to you. And besides, Sir Tempos has not often been unhorsed. You did well for your first joust, so don't try to convince yourself otherwise. Now, try sitting up."

Clarkent slowly did as Peri had suggested. He touched his side in wonder--it wasn't bleeding any longer. He still felt sore, but he was obviously a whole lot better than he had been when he left the list fields. "I need to go back to the stable before I'm really missed."

"They'll think you snuck away to the joust," Peri pointed out, "but you're right--it won't be good for you to be gone for too long. Can you walk?"

Clarkent nodded and got to his feet without too much trouble. "I should be all right. Thanks for your help, Peri. I think I'll probably give the Black Knight a rest for a few days until I get completely better."

"That's a good idea," Peri agreed. "There is only so much I can do with herbs and magic. You have to let your body take care of the rest. Now, let me look at your side once more before you leave."

\*\*\*

When Clarkent returned to the stable, he immediately set to work. He had lost some time with the tilt, and he didn't want to seem as if he were shirking his duties. Seeing as there was still a lot of activity around the castle due to the joust with Sir Tempos, it was best to look busy. Most Nobles disliked idleness in servants.

As he worked, it was all he could do to keep a blank expression. Though the magic had healed him, he felt a sort of tightness in his side. Peri had told him that part of the reason was because the body still remembered the wound. Clarkent wasn't sure if he believed that, but he wasn't dying, so that was all he cared about.

But as he worked, he found himself thinking not about the tilt anymore ... but about the princess. He still couldn't believe she had agreed to meet with him on her big night--and he couldn't wait to give her his gifts. At least ... he thought he wanted to give her both the book and the necklace. He wasn't entirely sure, though. Would it be strange for him to give her two presents? And was the necklace too intimate a gift?

Both the necklace and book were personal, catering to the

princess specifically. But there was just something different about giving royalty a piece of jewelry. But as he thought of it around her neck, he knew he really wanted to do this for her.

When she was queen, he probably wouldn't ever be able to do anything like this again.

\*\*\*

When Loisetete entered the stable in her Gawain clothes, she was brimming with news about the tilt. "Clarkent!" she exclaimed. "Did you see it? Did you see the tilt?"

"N-no," he denied, not looking away from the horse he was wisping with straw.

"The Black Knight actually knocked Sir Tempos off his horse!" she told him. "And then they fought with their swords on the ground!"

Clarkent turned to look at her, and she frowned as she noticed him wince. It looked like he was favoring his left side. "Are you all right?" she asked him in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said dismissively. "I guess the Black Knight wasn't as scared to come as you thought, huh?"

"I guess not," she agreed with some reluctance. She stared at her friend for a few seconds, thinking there was something a little odd about how he was acting, but then she dismissed the notion. "You should have seen when their lances struck--it was *amazing*. Both of them split!"

He turned back to continue grooming the horse, as if he wasn't interested, but she was just able to see a small smile tugging at his face.

\*\*\*

Clarkent, trying to hide a smile, realized this might be the best time to ask Gawain about his opinion of the Black Knight. "Why do you hate him so much?"

"Who?" Gawain asked with a frown.

"The Black Knight." He turned to look at his friend. "Is it because you thought he was a coward?"

Gawain shook his head. "That's not it. It's the stories I've heard about him."

"What stories?" Clarkent asked earnestly. "What have you heard about him?"

"For instance, he has attacked the guards of the forest more than once," Gawain pointed out. "Those men are just doing their duty."

Clarkent resisted the urge to say that he hadn't *attacked* the forest guards per se. He had just kept them from hurting desperate people who went to the forest to find food for their families. "What else have you heard?" he forced himself to ask calmly.

Gawain crossed his arms. "He's kidnapped Assigned servants."

Clarkent's face darkened. He had with James's help found a few Assigned servants who were being treated abusively--much like the girl Ayma whom he and Gawain had discovered in a bush--and he had helped them escape. Peri had taken care of the rest. "And?" Clarkent asked, his frustration mounting at Gawain's one-sided view of the Black Knight.

"He stole a ring from Sir Naigel."

It was all Clarkent could do to keep his face blank. That *man* had taken away a gold ring from a poor girl whom he'd found sobbing underneath a tree. That ring had been all she had left of her mother. Its value to the girl had rested not in its expensive nature but in its sentimental value. Clarkent had restored it to its proper owner without a hint of remorse.

"By this reckoning, the Black Knight's sins *are* heavy," Clarkent murmured to himself. He wanted to counter Gawain's claims--wanted to tell him the truth of what had happened--but it was dangerous for him to claim knowledge he should not have, and so he remained silent.

But though he now knew Gawain disliked the Black Knight

for false reasons, it still hurt to think about the boy's opinion of him.

\*\*\*

The next day was the day before the ball.

Servants scurried around frantically all over the castle, preparing for the big event--cleaning, decorating, planning.

Alexander sat on the throne, mired in thought. The day after the ball would be the princess's coronation. But he was feeling strangely displeased about it.

The princess was in a bad mood. He had gone to talk to her, to ascertain how she was feeling about the fact that she would be queen in two days ...

"I do not know why she snapped at me," Alexander murmured. The princess mystified him--he could not always predict what mood she would be in, and sometimes she spoke with a fiery passion that initially surprised him but now intrigued him. Yet her mood of late had been different--tinged more with grouchiness rather than the respect she usually gave him.

Tempos, who was standing beside him, heard what he had said and correctly guessed the object of his thoughts. "Oh, you know how princesses are," the knight commented. "The smallest vegetable under their mattresses make them cranky."

"I suppose you are right," Alexander admitted. But he was unable to shake the sense that something was off. Why would Princess Loisette be anything but thrilled that she was about to be handed the reins of the kingdom? She was about to become queen. Did that not please her? Was she not attracted by power?

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Loisette sat in her room alone, having asked Mishal to give her a little time to herself. There was too much for her to think about, and she couldn't stand hearing about Arnel's exploits anymore that day. Not when she had so much on her mind.

She couldn't believe she was about to be queen. Her whole life was going to change--and she hated it.

She wouldn't be able to sneak out as Gawain to be with Clarkent anymore--she would be too busy with her royal duties. She would be a woman, and she would have to put all childish cares behind her. It wasn't fair! She had never desired this. No one had ever asked her what she wanted.

A rapping at her shutters caught her attention, and she moved to open them. In flew James, who went to perch carefully on a chair.

"Hi, James," Loisette greeted, surprised but pleased that he had come.

"Greetings, Your Highness," he returned. "Peri told me to check on you. How are you doing?"

"I'm glad to see you," she admitted with a small smile. "I'm beginning to feel so ... closed in."

"Wishing this wasn't your birthright?" he guessed.

"Overwhelmed by the thought that you're going to be queen soon?"

"Yeah. It's ... strange how everything is going to change. I guess it's finally all sinking in."

"You do not have to give up everything," James told her. "Even a queen gets to have a life."

"But not the life I want," she said sadly. As if the shackles of womanhood weren't tight enough ...

"Maybe you'll be happier than you think," the falcon said, trying to be positive.

She tilted her head and looked at him wistfully. "Are you sad that you are no longer human? There are so many troublesome things about being human ... but I guess there are a lot of good things, too. At least--as long as you aren't royalty."

The bird lifted his wings a little before setting them back down. "I used to be sad, Your Highness ... But I'm not anymore. I'm accustomed to my fate now--flying is certainly a perk of this body. And besides, there's no point in being sad--

*Peri's magic cannot help me. There is no sense in wishing for something I cannot have.*"

A pang of sorrow shot through Loisette at that. Was it really pointless to make wishes for the impossible? Or if someone hoped hard enough, could the impossible sometimes spring into being?

She gave the bird a small smile as an idea occurred to her. "Will a kiss from a princess bring you back?" she asked hopefully.

James made a sound that was almost like laughter. "While I would like that, no, I don't think it would. It isn't as if I am a prince hunting for my one true love." He lowered his head. "But don't worry, Your Highness. Things have a way of working out."

Loisette found her thoughts drawn to Clarkent. An idle thought flitted across her consciousness--would it be possible for things to work out between a stableboy and a princess? Could that ever happen?

But she quickly dismissed the idea. It was silly. And besides, she wasn't interested in him in that way. So ... why was she even wondering about it? She didn't know.

But one thing that she did know ... was that she wanted to have one more adventure with him before she became queen.

She associated Avalon Lake with memories of that awful fight between her and Clarkent. But what if they went and explored the forest behind it? Maybe she could make those memories metamorphose into ones that were more positive. Maybe they could have one last triumph together.

She walked over to the Peregrine Falcon and placed her hands on the sides of his head. Then she bent down and kissed his feathered crown. "Thanks for talking to me, James. I feel a little better now."

The bird--for he hadn't transformed, though she had secretly hoped he would--craned his neck back to look at her.

"Anytime, Your Highness."

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## Chapter 26: Into the Woods

After talking to James, Loisette spun into her Gawain outfit. Then she hurried to the stable.

Her mind was already buzzing with thoughts of Avalon Lake and the forest behind it. She had never been behind the lake before, and suddenly she wanted desperately to go. If the kingdom was to be hers, she should know the land more, shouldn't she? What if there were hidden caves in the woods or even a secret river? People were always warned away from the forest, so how did they know what was to be found inside it?

The lake was very large, and the left side of it was supposed to be heavily forested, whereas the right side of it extended beyond the border between Metropolita and the Barbarian Kingdom. She knew going to the woods would be dangerous, but she wanted to see it for herself. There was no telling what they would find! What if there were even people living there? How different would it be from the royal forest?

Inside the stable, Loisette found Clarkent was--as always--working. "Clarkent!" she greeted eagerly.

And he turned and smiled. "Hey, Gawain." He was oblivious to what she was about to ask him.

Grimacing widely, she inquired casually, "Are you ready for another adventure?"

The other boy's expression soured. "Gawain, maybe we should leave the adventures alone for a while--"

"Please," she begged. "This'll be the ... the last one." Those last few words were hard to get out. But it was true--she would have to leave their times together behind her when she became queen. When she met him as the princess after her birthday ball, she needed to tell him he couldn't see Gawain anymore. She could tell him that Gawain was turning seventeen and was too

sad to say goodbye. At least there would be a kernel of truth in it. *She* was turning seventeen, and she would be sad to say goodbye. The thought of it was still enough to make her sick. She wasn't ready to be queen.

"What do you want to do?" he asked with a sigh.

Pulling her thoughts back to her current mission and away from the misery that loomed before her, Loisetette told him, "I want to go to Avalon Lake and explore the other side of it."

Clarkent grimaced, and Loisetette suspected he was remembering the last time they were at the lake. The fight had hurt them both. "It's too far," he told her. "Besides, what if we ran into trouble? Remember what happened with the ogres?"

"We'll take horses," she told him, having already thought about such a protest to her plan. "Most monsters are slow."

"But not all of them," he returned with narrowed eyes.

"Clarkent, I really want to do this," she said softly. What would she do if he actually denied her this time? "I told you--this will be the last one. Can't we go on an adventure one more time? Please."

He stared at her, indecision evident in his gaze. Her breath caught in her throat, and she began to fear that this time he would not agree to her plan. Then he lowered his head, and she knew she had won, and a sense of relief washed over her.

"All right," he conceded, looking none too happy about his choice to placate her. "Just give me a little while to work on stuff here. Then I'll ask Dwayne if I can leave early and make it up later tonight and early tomorrow. And I also need to--to go get something."

"Great!" she exclaimed, hugging him and ignoring the weird look he gave her. She was curious as to what he was going to retrieve, but she wouldn't push for the answer. Not when he had given her what she wanted.

Instead, she turned to look at the horses, pleased with what had just transpired, and her eyes fell on Penelope Grace. Smiling to herself as something occurred to her, Loisetette walked over to the horse.

"\*\*Hey,\*\*" she told the horse softly. "*\*\*I want to ask you something.\*\**"

"\*\*What is it?\*\*\*"

"\*\*Would you ... be willing to go on an adventure with me?\*\*\*"

Loisetette asked. She knew she might as well be direct about it.

"\*\*You wish to be like your dam,\*\*" the horse commented with a foresight that was surprising.

"\*\*Yes,\*\*" Loisetette admitted, clasping her hands together.

"\*\*I feel like maybe this will ... will help me feel closer to her somehow. I don't want her to be lost to me.\*\*"

"\*\*You can't bring her back,\*\*" Penelope Grace pointed out gently.

"\*\*I know,\*\*" Loisetette said, drawing in a ragged breath.

Nothing could do that. Not even magic. "*\*\*But she can live on in me, can't she?\*\*\**"

The palfrey lowered her head. "*\*\*She already lives on in you. You do not have to do this to know that. But I will go with you. Perhaps these old bones have an adventure left in them after all.\*\**"

Loisetette grinned, rubbing the horse's neck. "*\*\*Thank you.\*\**"

But Penelope Grace didn't reply. She simply took in a mouthful of hay and began to chew.

\*\*\*

When Clarkent was finally ready to go--the object he had gone to retrieve was the sword he used as the Black Knight, for he had regretted its absence at the ogre cave and didn't want to feel quite so helpless again--they began arguing again.

"It's not a good idea," he said firmly. If he were a horse, he might have stomped a foot; as it was, he crossed his arms and gave his friend an imperious look.

"But I *want* to take Penelope Grace!" Gawain exclaimed,

throwing his hands up in the air.

"She used to belong to Queen Ellena," Clarkent pointed out in irritation. Didn't the boy realize servants shouldn't go around taking the personal horses of royalty into danger? "It's not a good idea. Besides, you know how cranky that horse gets. She'd just as soon bite you as carry you."

Gawain trailed his fingers down the palfrey's neck. "You don't get cranky, do you?" he said, as if speaking to the horse, though the slight smirk on his face showed that his words were meant for Clarkent's ears.

"She won't let you ride her," Clarkent said, his voice matter-of-fact.

"And I say she will," Gawain returned stubbornly. "Look, if there are any problems, then I'll stop riding her. How's that?"

Clarkent stared intensely at him. It was true that the horse--for reasons Clarkent couldn't comprehend--appeared to act congenial enough (if "congenial" could be applied to any horse, much less *that* one) with Gawain. And it wasn't like anyone else would ever come in wanting to ride her. As far as Clarkent knew, only Queen Ellena had been interested, and she wasn't around anymore.

Grumbling, Clarkent conceded with great reluctance, "Fine. You can ride her. But the second anything goes wrong with her, we're coming straight back, and we aren't going to try this adventure again. It'll be over completely. Deal?"

Gawain nodded, his expression glad. "Deal."

"But we have to ask Dwayne first," Clarkent told him.

"All right," agreed Gawain.

\*\*\*

They got permission from Dwayne--who wasn't told specifically where they were going--and Clarkent even was allowed to take Esroh Repus. They left the Riding Stable on their mounts and began their trek to Avalon Lake, Gawain racing ahead like an excited kid while Clarkent trailed behind, trying to dismiss his misgivings.

Gawain halted Penelope Grace--who had, to Clarkent's astonishment, not given her young rider any problems at all--and twisted in the saddle to look at Clarkent. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah," Clarkent confirmed, bringing Esroh Repus up. He stared out at the lake for a few seconds, watching as a breeze caused ripples to break out on the water. He gently touched the sheath at his side, feeling a small comfort in its weight. When Gawain had asked him where he got the sword, he had claimed to have found it on a dead man. Though the two boys had practiced sword-fighting with sticks countless times, they had never used real weapons, but Clarkent felt there was no fear in letting his friend see the sword now. Since the Black Knight had been around for a while, it wouldn't be too suspicious for him to have a new sword. And the "dead man" excuse was enough to divert Gawain's interest.

But though Clarkent knew he needed the sword for safety's sake, he didn't understand what it was about danger that appealed to Gawain. Why exactly did Gawain want to go do this?

Aloud, he asked his friend, "Why do you like to adventure so much?"

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The stableboy's question caused Loisetette to look away for a moment. She couldn't tell him the truth ... She couldn't tell him she felt she was locked into a life where she had to always do what was expected of her and never what she wanted to do. She couldn't explain how doing something like this--even in disguise--made her feel alive. Made her feel free, even if just for a brief time. Made her feel like she wasn't someone's puppet, moving her arms and legs in time with their wishes for her.

Instead, she just told him, "It's fun. Don't be such a spoilsport. Now, come on!" And she lightly kicked Penelope Grace into a trot--riding astride was so much easier than riding

sidesaddle and having to deal with that darn whip!--and began the journey around the lake.

When they finally reached the forest, she felt a shiver of anticipation creep down her spine. “We’re here, Clarkent!”

“It’s just a forest,” he said, sounding almost irked with her enthusiasm. He obviously didn’t want to be there. For some reason, that just made her smile.

As Penelope Grace moved forward, Loisetette looked around them, feeling a sense of awe overtake her as the wind--stronger now than it had been earlier--shook the leaves and branches on the trees. “No, it’s different,” she told him as they moved deeper into the woods. “These trees are larger than any I’ve ever seen. Don’t you feel that sense of power surrounding us? It’s almost like the trees are magic ...”

“Maybe they are,” he murmured, speaking just loud enough that she could hear him.

That thought was almost enough for her to suggest they turn around, but she strengthened her resolve and continued onward. It was silly to be frightened of something as mundane as a tree.

As they journeyed, Loisetette kept hoping they would happen upon a cave or an abandoned cottage or the remnants of a centuries-old fight or something else exciting, but all they came across were more trees. The wind began to pick up, and the branches above them seemed to thicken and press inward as their horses walked on. Penelope Grace started getting jumpy, pulling on her bit and shaking her head.

“\*\*Are you all right?\*\*” Loisetette whispered.

“\*\*Something isn’t right,\*\*” the horse told her. She was obviously afraid.

And then, an eerie noise drifted to them on the air, causing Loisetette’s spine to tingle. Penelope Grace’s ears twitched, and her body seemed to tense.

“What was that?” Loisetette asked, glancing at Clarkent, her throat tightening.

“It sounded like a howl,” he said grimly, the fear she felt reflected in his eyes as well. “We should go. It’s not safe here.”

“I think you’re right,” she agreed, tugging at Penelope Grace’s reins to turn her around. The horse obliged readily, eager to leave that place.

Esroh Repus also reversed direction at Clarkent’s prodding, and he broke out into a trot.

“Come on,” Clarkent called back to her.

Penelope Grace trotted after the other horse, and Loisetette’s pulse sped up. Then she heard a slight panting noise and twisted to look behind her. Four panting Garms were coming straight toward them, their eyes glowing red in the darkness.

Garms looked like mutated black wolves, their backs hunched, their eyes red and glowing, and their fur matted together. They were brutal beasts who, unlike wolves, never showed any fear of humans. She’d read about them and seen pictures of them, but she had never been even close to a real one. They were terrifying.

Penelope Grace surged forward, throwing Loisetette backward. As she reestablished her balance on the horse, she yelled ahead to Clarkent, “Faster!” The brutal beasts obviously had blood on their minds.

But Esroh Repus seemed to have realized the danger, as he was already going faster than he was before. His rider threw a look backward and widened his eyes at the sight of the vicious creatures behind them. “They’re real?” his voice flew back to Loisetette.

The horses practically flew through the forest as they attempted to escape their pursuers. But then as Loisetette threw a gaze down, she saw a Garm prepare to leap up at Penelope Grace’s flank. Without thinking, Loisetette turned in the saddle and kicked, hitting the wolflike creature and knocking it to the ground as it yelped.

Penelope Grace lunged forward, an image of desperation flashing into Loisetette’s head from the horse.

“\*\*I’m so sorry,\*\*” Loisetette whispered, her eyes resting on the back of her mount’s head before returning to the Garms. And then another was jumping up, its fangs slick with saliva and its eyes rolling in hunger. It latched onto her shoe, and she shrieked, shaking her foot and causing the beast to hit Penelope Grace’s side and release its hold.

And then it happened. Penelope Grace, who was by no means a young horse, stumbled. The Garms behind her pressed their advantage, biting at her legs. The horse collapsed.

The momentum flung Loisetette forward and off the horse, and as she closed her eyes and prepared to hit the ground, she distantly thought she could hear Clarkent shout at her.

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### Chapter 27: Something Lost, Something Gained

Clarkent wasted no time in turning Esroh Repus around and rushing to where Gawain lay on the ground. The horse was hard to control, as his animal instincts were telling him to flee, but Clarkent managed to guide him nonetheless, drawing on his years of experience.

His left hand holding on to the saddle tightly, Clarkent leaned over the horse and swiped at one of the snarling wolflike creatures with his sword. It jumped back and growled at him, and he slashed at it one more time to make it retreat further. Then he sheathed the weapon and grabbed with one hand at the dazed Gawain, who was shakily standing up.

His blood froze as a scream pierced the air.

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“\*\*Save me!\*\*” shrieked Penelope Grace as the Garms jumped on her in a frenzy. Her shrill cry was nothing less than heart-wrenching.

Loisetette, determined to save her equine friend, struggled to free herself from Clarkent’s grip. The young man was pulling her up onto the saddle, but she squirmed and tried to push his hands away from her. “Let me go!” she shouted adamantly. “I have to save her!”

“You can’t save her,” he told her in a low but sympathetic voice. He had succeeded in placing her on the saddle despite her efforts, but he was finding it difficult to keep her there.

“Use your sword to help her,” she sobbed. “You have to go to her!”

“\*\*Help, Princess!\*\*” cried the dying horse again.

“\*\*Please!\*\*”

Images from Penelope Grace of bloodthirsty Garms filled Loisetette’s head, and she nearly blacked out in horror. The pain--the blood--the cruel eyes--

“Save her!” Loisetette demanded desperately, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I can’t,” the stableboy whispered, his voice full of pain as he stared down at the horse. “Look at her legs--at least one is broken, Gawain. She can’t leave this place. We have to leave without her. I can’t--I can’t do anything to help her. I don’t--I don’t know how.”

“Then give her a quick death,” she begged, tears streaming down her face. “I can’t take her s-screams. She’s in so much pain.”

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Esroh Repus was getting more difficult to handle, but Gawain had stopped struggling, so Clarkent was nonetheless able to maintain a small shred of control.

His head filled with Gawain’s plea and his own heart’s desires, Clarkent took in a deep breath. The horse’s screams stabbed his soul just as much as his friend’s.

“All right,” he said. “Make sure Esroh Repus doesn’t leave or get hurt.” They would need the horse to escape this place alive.

After transferring the reins to Gawain, Clarkent dismounted

and unsheathed his sword. His face was grim, and his heart was heavy.

One of the beasts looked at him, its mouth red with blood, and then it leapt at him.

Clarkent dodged the attack--wincing at the discomfort it caused him in the area where Tempos had hurt him--and rushed over to Penelope Grace. He waved his sword in the air, swiping at a few of the creatures and making them back off. They stared at him warily for a few seconds, uncertain what to do, and that was all he needed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the horse as he drew his sword across the jugular vein in her throat. Her death cry filled the air as he rose to his feet, and he couldn't bear to look at her again.

A pair of the massive Garms, seeing him as a threat, jumped at him, and he slashed his sword downward--wounding at least one of them, perhaps fatally, if its loud yelp was any indication--before running to Esroh Repus. One of the Garms leapt at the horse, which kicked out with a powerful leg. Clarkent jumped on the mount from behind. Gawain was on Esroh Repus still, sobbing as he tried to control him, but once Clarkent was in place, Gawain finally let Esroh Repus flee.

As they galloped away from the now-feasting monsters, Gawain mumbled in a broken fashion, "You can--can take the--the reins now."

With a nod that Gawain couldn't see, Clarkent reached his arms around the younger boy and grabbed hold of the reins. Then Gawain did something that was both surprising and confusing. He twisted and buried his head in Clarkent's shirt.

Clarkent frowned down at him but said nothing. He just continued to ensure Esroh Repus was taking the same path they had used to enter the forest. The Garms had no interest in them now. Not since they had a horse to devour.

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When they finally left the forest, Clarkent slowed Esroh Repus down, mumbling that the horse didn't need to overexert himself.

Loisette sat quietly on the saddle, the side of her face still resting on Clarkent's chest as she let the tears flow. What she had just experienced was one of the worst things that had ever happened to her.

She could still hear Penelope Grace's screams echoing in her mind as the horse begged her for help. She hadn't been able to offer any assistance. She hadn't been able to fight off the Garms.

What would her mother have thought of her?

How could Loisette have brought Penelope Grace into danger? She had gone about this all wrong. She shouldn't have been actively seeking danger. It was stupid and childish, and it had cost Penelope Grace her life. She had been an *idiot*.

She wiped a little at her face, sorry she was getting Clarkent's shirt wet, but she couldn't help her tears. Why would anyone go *looking* for adventures? Why had she been so stupid?

Though she had been terribly sad when her father had died, this was her first true brush with Death--this was the first time she saw its evil grin and cold black eyes. This was the first time it had taken her heart in a cold fist and squeezed, wrenching out precious drops of her soul. She could never be the same again. No one ever could--not when they had seen Death staring back at them.

She had heard some say that it took a man to transform a girl into a woman. But on that day, she realized it wasn't true. It could just as easily be the sight of a friend thrashing in the throes of agony and being taken away forever. She knew she had become a woman that day. She had put childish adventures behind her. That part of her was gone.

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Gawain had refused to talk anymore about what happened. After they reached the castle, he had merely muttered a goodbye

and left, his face streaked with tears. Clarkent had watched him go, aching to reach out and comfort his friend, but knowing that he was being pushed away. Sometimes, people just needed to be left alone. If Gawain didn't want to talk, then Clarkent wouldn't bother him.

He went into the Riding Stable, numb. He would need to clean his blood-stained sword after seeing to the scratches on Esroh Repus. He wished he'd only had the blood of those Garms on his sword--not the blood of his horse friend. But without his Black Knight armor, he was too vulnerable. He couldn't have done anything. And knowing the depth of his helplessness hurt so much. He was supposed to be able to save others. He knew Peri had told him he couldn't save everyone, but it was hard to look at it that way.

At least Esroh Repus was all right, he reflected as he tended to horse's minor wounds. The horse's ears flicked as someone approached, and Clarkent turned.

Dwayne stood there, his experienced eyes looking at Esroh Repus and then the stall belonging to Penelope Grace.

Though he felt punishment was hovering over him--perhaps he would be told he could no longer be a stablehand because of what had happened--Clarkent broke down and told Dwayne everything. He told him about the forest and the Garms and what had happened to Penelope Grace and how he and Gawain had fled. He didn't leave anything out.

"I had to slit her throat," he whispered in a choked voice, unable to forget that awful feeling that had come over him as he took his friend's life. He had almost always been annoyed with the horse--but he had liked her, despite all her stubbornness. She had been a challenge of sorts; she had made his life at the stable more interesting. And now she was gone.

Dwayne stared at him with a perceptive expression. Finally, he said slowly, "Penelope Grace always did escape her stall frequently. It was only a matter of time until she was killed or stolen. Besides, with King Samuel dead, she has few mourners."

Clarkent gazed back at him in confusion. Then he realized what the Stable Master was doing. He was giving Clarkent an out--absolving him of responsibility. Clarkent wouldn't be losing his job. That, at least, was safe.

Clarkent couldn't help it. He hugged the man. Perhaps Gawain was rubbing off on him.

Dwayne grunted at the sudden pressure but then chuckled. "All right."

Clarkent pulled back and smiled slightly at the older man's expression. "Thank you."

"Just tend those wounds well," Dwayne told him before walking away.

As Clarkent turned back to Esroh Repus, he wondered if perhaps he could have done more for Penelope Grace. But the logical part of him pointed out that she had been as good as dead anyway once she broke her leg. Still--he could've insisted they take a different horse. But then ... maybe that horse would have broken its leg. There was no way of knowing. But that didn't mean he missed her any less.

At least she had lived a long and spoiled life. She might have been cranky and high maintenance, but he would miss her deeply. It was hard to believe she was gone.

He rested his forehead briefly against Esroh Repus. Every second was precious. Maybe sometimes it was worth taking a risk--though there had been nothing wise about what he and Gawain had done today.

But he might not even be breathing tomorrow, so he needed to get everything out of today that he could. And one thing he wanted was to give the princess a gift before she became queen. That was something he wanted deeply, though he wasn't completely sure why.

But as he thought about his gift again, he felt troubled. He

still didn't know which item to give her--the pegasus necklace ... or the book about Queen Laural? Or both?

Was the necklace inappropriate? He wished he knew more about court customs. He could ask Peri, but ... this was private. He didn't want to talk to either Peri or Gawain about it.

He rubbed his side. He was still sore from his tilt wound, and he thought the events earlier that day might have set him back a bit with his healing. The wound wasn't going to reopen any time soon--at least, not as far as he knew--but it still didn't feel good. How long would a body remember a wound, anyway?

The next day was the ball. Was the princess hoping she would find some handsome prince to marry there? Would she forget about their scheduled rendezvous?

If he saw her and told her that Penelope Grace was gone, would she cry? Would she regret the passing of her mother's horse? Would it be best for him not to say anything until she noticed?

After tending to Esroh Repus's scrapes, Clarkent went over to stand in front of Penelope Grace's stall. There was no telling how many times that stall had to be rebuilt. The horse had hated being confined, and in hindsight, Clarkent couldn't blame her. Maybe some horses weren't meant for the closed-in life that other horses took to so easily. Maybe he should have sympathized with the horse instead of being annoyed with her. Maybe she had changed after Queen Ellena's death. Of course, he hadn't been at the stable long enough to know whether that was true or not.

But he did know he would miss her.

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### Chapter 28: Regaled with Regalia

It was the day of Princess Loisetette's birthday ball.

She had spent the morning in misery, tormenting herself over what had happened to Penelope Grace. Horrible though it had been, she was glad that Clarkent had been able to end the horse's suffering quickly--she wasn't sure she could have done it. And as she thought of the stable, she regretted that she hadn't told him goodbye as Gawain. After what had happened, it felt too cold to give him a goodbye through the princess rather than through her guise of errand boy. She would need to go see him one last time as Gawain. She wanted him to remember his friend just as fondly as she would remember him; she couldn't make their last meeting together end on such a sad note. She had hoped that this adventure with him would give them both some wonderful final memories of their friendship--instead, it had turned into a tragedy. If she hadn't been so stupid, Penelope Grace would have still been alive.

She went to the library, hoping to bury her nose in a book for an hour, but Herbie was there, and he picked up on her melancholy without any difficulty.

"Your Highness," he said gently, "is something wrong?"

She simply shrugged. She didn't feel like talking to the librarian about what had happened, even if she could. She didn't feel like talking to anyone about it.

"I do hate when you look so sad, Your Highness," Herbie said, a worried look in his eyes. He really was a kind man. He was Loisetette's favorite tutor, and he shared her love of reading. She knew she would trust him with her life.

Loisetette looked away for a moment and brought her eyes back to him. He had a chain pinned to the front of his tunic, the other end of which disappeared into a pocket. She nodded at the chain, wanting to distract him from his current line of questioning. "Have you had any luck with your time-teller?"

Herbie glanced down at the chain and pulled out from his pocket the large flat circle at the end of it. The circle had numbers on it and a pair of long sticks. "Not yet, I'm afraid," he told her. "But I am hopeful that I shall succeed soon."

Herbie was somewhat of an inventor, and he liked to tinker with things. Most people knew the time by listening to the

ringing of bells or the shouting of town criers or even looking at sundials, but he had determined that he would make a time-teller that wouldn't require the assistance of the sun. Loisetette believed that if such a thing was possible without magic, Herbie would be the one to figure it out.

"I hope you do," she told him sincerely. With a heavy sigh, she went and picked out a gruesome book about a battle waged centuries before. Then she told Herbie goodbye and disappeared to her room with it.

She didn't read much of the book, though. She was still too sad about what happened with Penelope Grace.

Her mood might have remained dismal for the rest of the day, but Aliss had been flitting around the castle so cheerfully that Loisetette couldn't remain drenched in sorrow any longer. So she just said a small prayer for the horse and began to concentrate on what lay immediately before her, knowing there would be plenty of time in the future to mourn her friend. She would need all her wits about her today. They were celebrating her birthday in the form of a masquerade ball, and everyone would be wearing masks ... except Loisetette, the guest of honor, so to speak. But she hated the idea that she would have to guess at everyone's identities, and she was determined to prove herself as discerning as possible. She wouldn't allow the ball to cripple her senses. She would have to use them to her utmost.

Despite her resolve to make sure the day went as well as she could make it, her mood was quickly spoiled when Mishal brought a dress to her.

"What ... is this?" Loisetette asked her lady-in-waiting, confused. She stared down at the red and gold clothing, trying not to recoil from it. This was not what she had asked for.

"It's your dress, Your Highness," Mishal said patiently, as if she were talking to a child that refused to eat something deemed "healthy."

Loisetette shook her head in denial. "My dress is supposed to be white." She vividly remembered picking out the material, going through bolt after bolt of fabric, feeling utterly disheartened until finally she had rested on a beautiful white she knew would be perfect for her dress. She had been so pleased when talking over what she had wanted with the seamstress, who had even appeared to share in her excitement. To know that all of that had been for nothing ...

"The seamstress said the Regent requested the change," Mishal told her. "He believed the *royal colors* more appropriate."

Loisetette stared at the offending garment, the stress of the previous day returning suddenly to her despite her decision to push it away. When she was younger, she would have indulged in a long and brutal temper tantrum about such a change as this. But those childish days were behind her. She would have to wear the red and gold dress without throwing a fit about it. But that didn't mean she had to be happy about it.

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When Aliss entered the princess's room, she found Loisetette standing alone in front of a mirror. The girl--soon to become a woman--was staring at the ill-fitting fabric on her body, picking at the material at her waistline and ruffling her skirt as if to make it fuller. Her discontent was obvious to Aliss. After all, she had known the princess her whole life.

"Your Highness?" ventured Aliss quietly.

The princess turned, her eyes suddenly filling with tears, and then she ran to embrace Aliss.

"What's wrong, Princess?" Aliss asked, stroking Loisetette's back soothingly.

"Everything," Loisetette whispered. "My life is changing, Aliss. This is the role I'm supposed to play." She pulled at the skirt of her dress. "But I wanted one night to feel ... magical. I thought a white dress would make me feel like ... like a fairy." She lowered her head. "I guess that was stupid."

“Do you not like the dress you’re wearing?” Aliss asked softly, though she already knew the answer.

“It’s *Alexander’s* dress,” the girl returned bitterly. “*He* picked it out. Not me.”

Aliss stared at the dress. The Regent must have been trying to exert control over the princess through his selection. While Loisetette would never look unattractive in anything, the dress was not flattering on her. Of course, the sour expression she was wearing wasn’t helping with her overall appearance.

“I was ... meeting someone after the ball,” the princess said sadly, her voice so low Aliss wasn’t certain she was supposed to hear it.

But the words made something click for Aliss. The princess could never have been called vain, and her unhappiness with the dress wasn’t solely related to the Regent’s meddling. Loisetette was wanting to impress someone specifically, and it wasn’t helping that her last night as a princess had gotten off to such a bad start.

Fortunately for Loisetette, however, Aliss was the perfect person to fix that.

“You know,” Aliss said suddenly, “I don’t think that dress suits you.” She closed her eyes, fluttering her fingers in the air. Mumbling to herself, she smiled as the air swelled with power around her. The power rose and built, centering itself, and then, suddenly, there was a release.

Aliss opened her eyes and gazed at what was weighing down her hands.

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Loisetette gasped, staring wide-eyed at her old nanny. Aliss was holding a beautiful dress made of both white and sparkling silver material. It seemed ... almost magical. On top of the dress were a pair of matching shoes and a glistening silver coronet which was a hundred times prettier than any Loisetette owned. All she managed was an unintelligible noise as she stared at the items.

“This is my birthday gift to you,” Aliss told her with a smile, resting the objects on the nearby table.

“How ... how did you do that?” Loisetette stammered. She had never seen Aliss use magic before.

“I would think that was obvious,” Aliss said, not bothering to hide her amusement. “I’m your fairy godmother.”

Loisetette stared. “You’re ... you’re my fairy godmother?” Blinking, she said, “All this time ...”

“I’ve been trying to look out for you your whole life, Your Highness,” Aliss told her. “But it hasn’t been easy, especially the past five years or so. There has been ... some other magic surrounding you, though I haven’t figured out what exactly.”

Loisetette swallowed. Aliss was probably referring to her Gawain outfit. Imp must have been powerful indeed if he had been able to make clothes that couldn’t be traced by a fairy godmother.

As Loisetette gazed at her nanny, she felt a prick of annoyance. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I didn’t need to before,” Aliss told her. “Fairy godmothers often work best when their true identities are kept secret. Now, I won’t be transforming your little mouse friend into a footman, as you don’t need one, but this dress should help you feel like a fairy princess.”

Loisetette let herself relax; she didn’t want to be upset with Aliss. So she just gave her a big smile and told her, “Thank you.”

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After Loisetette switched dresses, she stood in front of the mirror with Aliss at her side. The new ballgown was strapless, with the form-fitting bodice sparkling brilliantly and a full white skirt attached to it. The shoes had fit perfectly, and Aliss had used surprisingly nimble fingers to put Loisetette’s hair up with the coronet. A brilliant diamond necklace shined at the princess’s neck.

“You look beautiful,” Aliss told her, smiling at the rising blush on the princess’s cheeks. “You remind me of your mother when she was your age.”

“Really?” Loisetette asked, looking at her with wide eyes.

“Really,” Aliss told her warmly. “I was her fairy godmother, too. I gave you both the gift of speaking with animals.”

“You--you knew all this time that I could speak to animals?” The girl looked down sheepishly. “I didn’t realize anyone but Peri knew about it.”

“I knew the gift was well bestowed when I saw your friendship with that mouse,” Aliss told her. “But I hated to support your ability in case it brought your father’s displeasure down on you. When Peri told me he was teaching you, I wasn’t certain whether I should be pleased or angry--but I finally decided to be glad.”

“Well, thank you,” Loisetette said, sounding a bit shy. “It was a wonderful gift.”

“It was my pleasure,” Aliss replied. “Your mother seemed to appreciate my present as well.” She stared at the princess, recalling the wonderful woman that had been Queen Ellena. “Your mother lives on in you, you know. I just wish she could be here today to see you. She would be so proud.”

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Loisetette smiled, a tear gleaming in the corner of her eye. What Aliss had said meant a lot to her.

She only wished she had known her mother--*really* known her. But at least she could talk to someone about her. After all, Aliss would always be able to tell her stories. Fairies could live a long time.

She stared at herself in the mirror, marveling at the change that had come over her. In *Alexander’s* dress, she had looked awkward and unappealing. But now ... she felt she could take the whole ballroom on. Perhaps it would be a night to remember.

Yet though her confidence was growing ... her nervousness was growing as well. But her attack of nerves had nothing to do with the masquerade. Instead, it had everything to do with the secret meeting she would have with Clarkent afterward. But why she should be nervous about that, she didn’t know. After all, she saw him almost every day.

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“I’m nervous,” Clarkent said to Esroh Repus, stroking the horse’s neck. “I’m going to be giving the princess her presents tonight, you know.” Figuring that more was ... well, *more*, he had decided to give her both the book and the necklace. He had hidden the former nearby in a pile of fresh hay, as it was too big to carry around, but he had the latter in his pocket. He kept touching the piece of jewelry, wanting to assure himself it was still there. Though he was grateful to Peri for giving him the book, he was more excited about her reaction to the necklace. Would she be glad to finally have a Pegasus?

He continued talking to Esroh Repus--if there was one thing a horse was good at, it was giving the appearance of listening. Sometimes, that was really nice. “Soon, the ball is going to start,” Clarkent said. “I have to admit ... I’m sad I can’t be there.” He would have liked to dance with the princess one last time. That would have really made his night special.

“Perhaps I can help with that,” a voice said.

Clarkent twisted and saw that Peri had entered the stable. “Peri,” he greeted, getting out of the stall. “What do you mean--you ‘can help’ me?” He glanced away for a second, nervous that the older man had been listening to him. He was fine with having a horse listen to his private thoughts--but it was a bit different to have a magician do so.

“It must be hard for a young man such as yourself to know there is such a big event going on that you cannot attend,” Peri remarked. “So, I think you should go.”

Clarkent frowned. It wasn’t that easy. “I don’t exactly have

the clothes for something like that.”

Peri waved a hand dismissively. “Every magic user worth his salt knows how to conjure up a set of clothes, son. You’ll have a costume fit for a prince if this sorcerer has anything to say about it.” Lifting his magician’s staff, he whipped it through the air, murmuring something to himself, and then, with a puff of smoke, an outfit materialized in his hands. He draped the individual items--save the blue boots lined with golden thread, which he kept in his hands--over Esroh Repus’s stall for Clarkent to look at.

Many of the items were golden--the breeches, the cape, the mask, and the cap, the last item of which Clarkent touched in interest. Peri pointed out helpfully, “The hat will cover your hair and help disguise you even more.”

Clarkent nodded in understanding and then turned his attention to the tunic. It was blue and lined with golden thread to match the rest of the outfit. It had a rearing golden dragon in the center of it, and small flames protruded from its mouth. The beast’s strength was obvious due to its bulging muscles and fierce expression. As Clarkent stared at it, he commented, “For some reason, it reminds me a little of the royal symbol.” That was strange, as the royal symbol was a pegasus, not a dragon.

“Indeed,” Peri said with a grunt. “Now, you’d best get dressed.”

Clarkent twisted away from the clothes, wincing as he stretched his sore side. “I can’t accept this from you--I’ve ... I’ve never worn clothes this nice.”

“You can, and you will,” Peri told him in a no-nonsense tone, a frown etched into his face. “Is your wound still hurting you? Would you like me to look at it again?”

“No,” Clarkent told him. “You’ve already done enough for me. I’ll be fine.” He moved back to look at the outfit, torn about what to do.

“Just go to the masquerade, son. If you don’t, you’ll regret it.”

Clarkent smiled as Esroh Repus came over to investigate the outfit, and he gently pushed the horse’s head away. He couldn’t fight the desire anymore. “All right,” he conceded. “I’ll go.”

If he wore clothes like these, then would the princess want to dance with him? Would she see him as someone worthy of attention? He was eager to find out.

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### Chapter 29: Having a Ball

When Clarkent stepped into the castle great hall, he let out a low gasp. He had been there before--occasionally, even servants were allowed to go to royal parties--but the place wasn’t like he had known it. It had been utterly transformed into a ballroom.

Though the room was always decorated, now red and gold banners were hung up everywhere. But more impressive than that was the assortment of people in the great hall.

Every color in the rainbow found some sort of representation there that night. Outfits ranged from beautiful to hideous to downright bizarre. Both plain and ornate masks could be seen covering people’s faces, some of them decorated with feathers or stripes or patches or intricate designs, whereas others were plain and solid in color. But the face of every person in the room was covered. Every person, that was, except the princess.

It took a few seconds for him to find her, but when he did, his breath caught in his throat. She was absolutely stunning.

He had believed she was beautiful for a long time. There had been no question in his mind that she was a rare treasure. But now, seeing her here, wearing that white dress that made her almost glow, he thought she looked just like an angel.

But she was more than that. He realized almost immediately that she was a woman now. It wasn’t just her curves, though he felt his face turning warm when he noticed those. But there was something about the way she held herself--something in the

sobriety of her expression--that communicated the change to him. She would be a wonderful queen; he was sure of that. He only wished her stepping into her destiny didn’t mean he would lose her. Of course, he reminded himself, she had never truly been his. His hand, shaking a little, made its way into his pocket, where it wrapped fingers around the necklace hidden there, drawing strength from its presence.

The first dance began, and he watched as a man in red and gold glided across the floor with Loiset. Watching them gave him an almost physical pain--he did not like how her partner held her in an almost possessive manner--but he forced himself to ignore the man and keep his eyes on Loiset.

She was graceful and elegant, her movements fluid and assured. This was *her* event, and that was very obvious as the other dancing couples flowed around her and the man in red and gold. Clarkent was glad she wasn’t wearing a mask--glad he could see frequent glimpses of her face. In case she forgot to come to him after the ball, he wanted to remember her as she was here, like a fairy flitting among fantastic monsters in a magical world where almost anything could happen--a world where maybe, just maybe, a stableboy could dance with a princess.

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Though a part of her enjoyed the mix of grotesquerie and elegance that made up a masquerade, Loiset found the ball somewhat frustrating. She might not have had her vision obscured by a mask, but she was nonetheless finding it hard to guess at the identities of those who spoke with her.

Her first dancing partner had very obviously been Alexander. His red and gold clothing gave him away almost instantly, but the true confirmation of his identity had been a soft and almost dangerous-sounding utterance he had made: “Did you not like your other dress, Your Highness?”

She had told him tightly that she had wanted a white dress, and they hadn’t spoken much more after that, both of them seething with displeasure. Alexander’s mouth had formed into a grim line, and it was all she could do to resist the urge to break away from him. After that unfortunate dance, partner after partner had come wanting her hand, bringing her more and more frustration as she either failed to guess their identities or did guess and wished they were someone else. Sir Klaud had been one of the easily recognizable ones--his accent made him stick out like a sore thumb, and she had felt completely disgusted by the fact that she had to dance with him rather than be allowed to stomp his foot or push him over as she wanted to do. But though the bonds of propriety prohibited that, she vowed she would never forgive him for what he had done to Catherine.

She hated not having all the answers at the ball, but she soon found her interest piqued in the mystique of one thing. As she was whirled around the room by one partner after another, she had noticed a tall and well-built man in gold and blue standing against the wall and staring at her. He hadn’t moved the whole time; he had simply watched her.

She had attempted to ignore him at first. If he wanted to gaze at her all night, then that was his business. But something about the air of mystery surrounding him caught her attention and made it impossible to ignore him. Why wasn’t he dancing with other women? With a build like that, he certainly wouldn’t have been turned down by most of the young ladies in the room.

Eventually, she manipulated one of her partners so that her dance was ended near the stranger. She thanked her partner--she believed he was probably one of Sir Tempos’s close followers, though her uncertainty didn’t actually irk her for once--and turned her gaze toward the stranger. If he wanted to dance with her, here was his one opportunity. Soon, she would be facing another supplicant, and he would lose his chance. She wouldn’t try to give him another one.

As if sensing her thoughts, the man stepped forward, and she

swallowed, suddenly nervous. Though she didn't know who he was, his outfit was handsome, as if he were the only person in the world meant to wear it. The golden cape had fluttered behind him as he moved, lending him an air of majesty.

He gave her a deep, graceful bow, and he asked her in a low voice, "May I have the next dance, Your Highness?"

Loisette curtsayed, not sure why a chill was traveling down her spine. "Yes, you may," she told him.

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Clarkent wasn't certain how he managed to summon enough courage to ask the princess to dance, but he had suddenly realized this was his only shot, and he had seized it. He didn't want his only memories of the ball to be her dancing with other men.

He took her hand in his and led her to the middle of the dance floor, his skin tingling at the feel of her fingers on his. Her hand was so soft, and it fit so perfectly in his that he never wanted to let it go. What was coming over him? Why was his heart pounding so?

He forced himself to take in a calming breath, not wanting to make a fool of himself. And as they stopped and moved into position for the beginning of the dance, his eyes met with hers.

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When Loisette's gaze locked with the stranger, it was almost like a bolt of lightning passed through them both. His brown eyes were dark and intense, and there was something almost familiar about them as they bore into hers.

And then the music began to play, and the force that bound them broke, and he began to lead her around the dance floor. His form was not perfect, but he treated her with such gentleness that she would rather dance twenty times with him than once with a dancing master.

But as they moved, she found that silence was not what she desired, and she began desperately casting about for a conversation topic as they danced. She wanted to somehow learn who this man was. It had become urgent and important to her for some inexplicable reason.

"You are not a bad dancer," she managed at last, unsure of what else to say.

The stranger's golden mask didn't cover his mouth, so she was able to see his lips lift in a smile. "You're too kind, Princess," he told her, still speaking in a soft voice. "I'm not a good dancer at all."

She normally wouldn't like for a strange man to call her "Princess" instead of "Your Highness," but for some reason, she didn't mind it when he did it. She tilted her head slightly and asked him, "If you are not good at dancing, then what are you good at?"

He was quiet for a minute, considering her question. At last, he said, "I am not a bad rider."

"Are you a knight?" Loisette asked him, fishing for an answer. Horsemanship was certainly important for knights.

The stranger gave her a lopsided smile that was oddly charming and made her feel a little weak-kneed. "I won't tell you who I am, Your Highness."

"And why not?" she asked, feeling a little put out. It would have been a lot easier if he had just told her.

But his answer wasn't what she expected: "You'll be queen soon, and I won't matter, Princess."

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It hurt Clarkent to admit this dance they were sharing would soon mean nothing to the princess, but he knew it was true. He wasn't supposed to be at the ball, so he couldn't admit his identity--as if that would change things--and he knew she wouldn't be likely to fall in love with a stranger. That thought almost caused him to stumble--since when did he want the princess to fall in love with him? Why was he even *thinking* about love?

He moved to spin her--surprised at how much he remembered from the dancing lessons she had given him--and he winced as the movement caused him pain in his still-healing wound. He brought his hand up to his side without thinking.

"Are you all right?" Princess Loisette asked him softly, looking puzzled. "Is your side hurt?"

"I'm fine," he said quickly, making sure to keep his voice at the same low pitch he'd been using in hopes that it would help disguise his identity. "You are a great dancer, Your Highness, and you ... " He swallowed, a bit surprised by his own forwardness. "You look lovely this evening." That was an understatement if ever there was one. She outshone the sun.

A maidenly blush touched her cheeks, which merely increased her appeal, but her steps didn't falter. "Thank you, kind sir. Are you ... from this part of the kingdom?"

"I did not have to travel far to get here," he replied, dodging the question by providing a vague answer. He didn't want to lie if it could be avoided. Though this dance would be forgotten by her, he knew he would cherish it for years to come. The places where their bodies were touching as they danced almost seemed to burn his flesh. The sensation was powerful--he wanted to pull her against him, to bury his face in her hair. Where were these strong impulses coming from?

"And exactly how far was that?" Loisette asked him as he pulled his mind back to what she was saying. She was challenging his lack of details regarding where he lived.

Clarkent couldn't help but smile to himself. If there was one thing that getting older hadn't taken away from Princess Loisette, it was her pushiness. "Far enough that a princess would be unimpressed," he returned.

"I hate this masquerade," she said, pouting. "It isn't fair that everyone knows who I am while I have to guess at who they are."

He chuckled. "Sometimes, mystery is fun."

"Never!" she proclaimed with a grin. "I would rather know everything."

"I know, Princess," he acknowledged. But his mood was saddening as he heard the song draw to a close. If only it had been longer!

They finished the dance, and he bowed to her as she curtsayed to him. Then there was a short silence before he broke it.

"Thank you for this dance, Your Highness," he told her. He wished it could have lasted forever, but he wasn't that fortunate.

"Thank *you*," she returned softly, staring at him with a strange expression.

Clarkent turned and began to walk away, but her voice called back to him: "Will I ever see you again?"

He smiled at that. Twisting to look at her, he said sincerely, "I hope so." And then he left her, retreating to the position he had been maintaining earlier by the wall.

Clarkent saw another partner go up to the princess to ask for a dance with her, but he kept his gaze fixed on her face, his heart still flying up in the clouds after what he had just experienced. She really was an angel. A stubborn, bossy, nosy angel, but an angel nonetheless.

He sighed in contentment and continued to watch her. But finally, he noticed the hour was growing late. He needed to leave. He would be meeting with the princess soon, and he needed time to change and compose himself. He hoped she would come, but if she didn't, at least he had the memories of their dance together.

He put his hand in his pocket, and it closed on the necklace hidden inside. But as he walked toward the exit, he slowed as he overheard a pair of men speaking about the princess.

"A kingdom's a pretty fantastic dowry for Princess Loisette, isn't it?" the first man said.

"Why do you say that? You getting ideas?" the other man said, chuckling. "Even with a dowry like that, she can't marry

just anyone. It'll be someone with a title and wealth of his own-- someone who'll help make the crown stronger. That's how these things always work."

"Do you think it will be the Regent?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," the second man remarked. "He's certainly dressed the part in those royal colors. And all the women are swooning over him."

"Wish we stood a chance," grumbled the first man.

"Landless knights like us can't hold a candle to someone like him. We have to be content with what we have. It'd be nice if it was otherwise, but it isn't, so there's no use talking about it."

The conversation made Clarkent freeze in place. His happiness had vanished like smoke in the wind. Why had he come to this stupid ball anyway? He didn't belong in this beautiful world of Nobles. He had only been fooling himself when he tried to think otherwise. A princess might have danced with a stableboy, but what happened in the ballroom wouldn't carry over to life. He was meant for the stable--not for a dance. Clothes *did not* make the man. A duck could be dressed up in a tunic and pants, but it would only look ridiculous; ducks weren't supposed to wear clothing.

Clenching his teeth together, Clarkent touched the necklace he had retrieved from the ogre cave, and he pulled it out of his pocket. He had meant for the pegasus necklace to be a personalized gift for the princess--the piece of jewelry had been the closest he could get to giving her the flying horse she desired. But he was not supposed to be with her. There could be no future between a stableboy and a queen. And that was what she was about to become. A queen couldn't wear a paltry gift bestowed by someone who took care of horses. A queen couldn't have *him* for a friend.

He flung the necklace to the floor, ignoring the burning in his eyes. It had been stupid to get her jewelry. The book would suffice. She seemed to like stories, so it would be something she could read once and then toss aside. There was no need to give her anything more. There was no need to hope she would care about what he gave her.

He walked out of the great hall, his chest feeling like a leaden weight was pushed up against it.

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Loisette's dance with the stranger in blue and gold had not served to assuage her curiosity but to increase it. Who was he? Why had he wanted to dance with her? Why wouldn't he reveal who he was? There was so much she wanted to know!

She danced with other men, as was her obligation, but she kept an eye on the stranger as she did so. And when he finally moved to leave, she felt a strong sense of loss. Why was he affecting her like this?

He pulled something out of his pocket that gleamed in the light. She could just barely see it due to all the people dancing and milling around, so she maneuvered her partner closer to him, nearly sighing in relief as the dance ended. She curtsied and gave a quick thank-you to the man she had been dancing with, and then she pressed through the crowd to where the stranger had been standing. On the floor, she saw the item he must have dropped. Bending over quickly, she picked the object up.

It was a ruby necklace with a carefully designed pegasus on it. She smiled as she looked at the creature, thinking of her fondness for flying horses, and she slid a finger across the gold, marveling at the fine craftsmanship. Had the stranger lost it? Or had he thrown it down? Somehow, she didn't feel he would have simply dropped a precious item like this. Had he wanted her to have it for some reason?

He was a complete enigma to her, which wasn't surprising considering she had just met him. But she wished he hadn't left. There was so much she wanted to know about him. Her thoughts turned to his strange wince. Why did she feel as if the way he

acted about his side was significant? And why had his eyes seemed so familiar? It was like there was something crucial she was missing ...

She clutched the necklace to her chest. Unless he came back for the necklace, then--no matter what his intentions had been--she would have the piece of jewelry as a memento. It made her smile. If she hadn't already been wearing a necklace, she would have put this new one around her neck. Jewelry was an intimate gift ... but the night had been one filled with mystery and intrigue. On a night like this, the rules concerning what was proper could be bent a little.

She just wished she could place where she had seen those eyes before ...

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### Chapter 30: Kidnapped

Clarkent changed out of his ballroom outfit and into his suit of livery and went to the Riding Stable. But he did so very slowly, the night still resting unhappily with him.

Once at the place where he spent most of his time, he stood morosely by High Flyer, staring at the horse as if the creature was his last connection to the princess. But Princess Loisette's favorite horse simply ignored him, closing his eyes and trying to sleep. The only indication of the horse's awareness of his surroundings was the way his ears flicked whenever Clarkent let out a heavy sigh.

*<I shouldn't have gone,>* Clarkent reflected. Attending the ball had been an idiotic thing to do. He couldn't reprimand himself enough. Dancing with the princess--yes, *that* had certainly been a good idea. *Not*.

Grabbing the necklace from that ogre cave had been yet another stupid move. Why had he thought he could get all chummy with royalty? Why had he tried to rise to a friendship above his station? It was like reaching for the stars--the only way for a normal man to come close was for one of them to fall ... and he didn't want that. He didn't want to bring the princess down to his level. She deserved to remain aloft. Even if it meant she was untouchable to him. And why had he asked her to meet with him, anyway? Why was he standing around and expecting that she would remember? Expecting that she would take time from her night of majesty to visit a humble stableboy? Why was just thinking about her muddling his head so much?

He was mired in these dark thoughts when the twitch of High Flyer's ears made him turn, and he saw Peri entering the stable hastily. Clarkent pursed his lips and stared at him, certain the magician was going to interrogate him on what had occurred at the ball.

But that wasn't what happened at all. Instead, Peri said to him in a voice that was soft and low, "I have news from the castle."

Clarkent frowned in confusion, the older man's statement throwing him for a loop. Having just come from the castle not long before, Clarkent wasn't certain what the older man could mean. "What kind of news?" he asked cautiously. "How do you know this?"

Peri stepped closer, still speaking very quietly. "Peregrine Falcons have great hearing, so James has been a very helpful source of information for me, though I also have other sources in the castle. But that doesn't matter. What matters is this: the Regent intends to force Princess Loisette to marry him tomorrow after her coronation so he can continue to rule Metropolita."

"Wh-what?" Clarkent gasped, his hands clenching at his sides. "He can't *do* that!" His heart was protesting so loudly he could barely hear himself think.

"He plans to and will," Peri said firmly, "unless we do something about it." He stared at Clarkent, his face grim. Then he turned his head away, his bearing almost sad. "And I worry for her life. I have long suspected that he killed King Samuel."

"You--you think he ... murdered the king?" Clarkent

whispered. How could someone have done such a terrible thing?

The magician nodded, swiveling back to look at him. “But he covered his tracks well, I’m afraid. There was no trace of evidence linking King Samuel’s death to him. If anyone suspected Duke Alexander’s involvement, fear must have kept them quiet.”

Clarkent placed a hand on Peri’s arm and gazed at him pleadingly. “We can’t let him hurt L--the princess.” Her name sat like a lump in his throat. But speaking it would take his thoughts back to somewhere that they just couldn’t be at the moment. There were other more important things to think about right now.

“I agree, son. What we need is time to prepare and learn more. And for now, we must get the princess to safety.”

“You’re right,” Clarkent said, bobbing his head once. “What do you want me to do?”

“I live in a cottage deep in the royal forest which no one knows about. It is hidden by the same kind of concealment spell as the cave where Phantom is. I will find James and send him to lead you to it. You must take Princess Loisetette with you. She should be safe there, and you will be able to talk freely without worrying about being overheard. Right now, it is an hour until midnight--she should be finishing with the ball about an hour after that. Allow her to enjoy herself--but after the masquerade ends, you must find her. Alexander won’t make his move tonight, but we must. We have to act first.”

“How long do we stay there?” Clarkent asked him, his thoughts jumping ahead. How long would he be alone with Princess Loisetette?

“I will come and get you both when I find out more information and believe that the princess can return without fear,” Peri told him. “I need to put up some safeguards and learn more about Alexander’s plans and who his accomplices are. There is always the chance this is an idle rumor, though I fear it is not. He has been waiting for this day. I am sure of it.”

Clarkent nodded, staring seriously at the older man. A question was burning on his tongue. “Why are you doing this for the princess? The Regent ... he ... he is one of her kind.” They were both upper class. The Regent was the highest-ranking man in the kingdom. Wasn’t he the sort of man she was supposed to be with? Why was Peri fighting against this? Clarkent was glad for it, but he didn’t completely understand.

“No,” Peri said, his eyes flashing, “he is not one of her kind. He is selfish and thirsty for power. If he continues to rule, then the kingdom will suffer more. And it won’t be too long before even the Black Knight finds it hard to take away the people’s despair.” He stared at Clarkent, a sympathetic look in his eyes. “And besides ... she deserves to be happy.”

“I want her to be,” Clarkent whispered in a choked voice, not sure if he was speaking to himself or Peri--all he knew was that he would do anything to help the princess be happy.

But despite the quiet nature of Clarkent’s utterance, the magician heard him and answered, “I know.” And then, with a slight nod, he disappeared out the stable door.

Clarkent gazed out into the night. The Regent could never make Princess Loisetette happy. Clarkent didn’t know who would, but that man certainly was not the one. Clarkent knew that deep within his heart.

But though Peri’s plan had seemed so straightforward, Clarkent was now realizing there was a flaw with it. The princess would never believe such an outrageous story from a peasant like him. He could just imagine himself walking up to her and saying, “The Regent is going to make you marry him whether you want to or not.” Like she would put any stock into the truthfulness of that. She would simply dismiss him as crazy and waltz right back out of the stable--that was, if she even *intended* to come to their meeting in the first place. If she didn’t, he would have to sneak up to her room ... and that thought scared him. If a stableboy was

discovered sneaking into the princess’s room at night, then--

He took in a deep breath, not wanting to finish that thought. There was only one way around this. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t have any other choice.

\*\*\*

When Loisetette finally left the ballroom, she discovered she was walking with millions of butterflies flapping around in her stomach. As if dancing with the man in blue and gold hadn’t been enough to addle her, now she was going to meet with a stableboy on the night before she was supposed to become ruler of the kingdom. Midnight had already come and gone, so she was technically seventeen. All that was left was her coronation to complete the transition. And then everything would be different.

She nearly went straight to meet with Clarkent, suddenly wanting so much to be able to see him one more time, but she decided to first change out of her ballroom dress into a different one. She felt the dress Aliss had given her would draw too much attention when she tried to sneak out to the Riding Stable. Then, on a whim, she put on the necklace the stranger had dropped. It gave her a sort of comfort and made her feel just the tiniest bit less anxious about the upcoming rendezvous. It was as if the pegasus there was available to fly her away on a moment’s notice if she needed it. But she knew she wouldn’t. If there was anyone who could make her feel safe, it was Clarkent.

She left the castle and crept out into the night, narrowly avoiding the attention of a trio of rambunctious partygoers who hadn’t quite brought themselves to leave the castle yet. As the Riding Stable loomed before her, she felt her heartbeat begin to quicken a little. She stepped into the large building with an air of anticipation, a smile ready to leap onto her face as she searched the area nearby for Clarkent. But the only light in the stable was that which leaked in from the stars and full moon, so it was hard to see much. She opened her mouth, ready to call out Clarkent’s name--

--only to let out a muffled scream as she felt the pressure of an arm around her chest and a cold hand on her mouth.

She immediately thrust her right arm backward, only to let out a whimper as her elbow collided with something metal. Her assailant loosened his grip for a second, only to tighten it as she struggled to get free.

In the dim light coming in from outside, she was just able to see the armored arm at her chest lift to give something to the hand by her mouth. And then she was gagged as she fought harder against the person holding her. But the metal coating his body made all her gestures useless, and before long, her hands had been bound in front of her and her legs beneath her. With her feet pressed together, it was hard to maintain balance, but she somehow managed to remain nearly still, only moving her head to glare at the stranger as he moved into the light pouring in from the entrance. After seeing that armor, there was no doubt in her mind as to who he was.

The Black Knight.

He had come to kidnap her--probably to ask for some sort of ransom.

The only question was ... what had he done to Clarkent?

\*\*\*

It pained Clarkent so much to be the source of such anxiety for the princess, but he was doing this to save her. Maybe she would never thank him for this, but he had to do it. He couldn’t take the chance that she wouldn’t believe him. And it was much easier to see her angry with the Black Knight than it was to see her deriding Clarkent for being taken in too easily by rumors. With the latter, he would have been helpless to save her.

Through the slits in his helmet, he was able to see the glare she threw at him, and it nearly made him flinch and rethink his plan. But he made himself move confidently toward Phantom, whom he had placed in the empty stall that once belonged to

Penelope Grace. He brought the horse out, feeling a streak of dark amusement as the princess tried to scoot across the floor in what was probably one of the slowest escape attempts ever made. Then, after only a second's hesitation, he placed his hands on both sides of the princess, tightening his fingers around her. She squirmed to free herself, but he lifted her and placed her sideways on the front of the saddle, feeling the uncomfortable stretch in his side as he did so. The princess immediately stopped moving ... realizing, as he had, that if she tried to struggle while on the saddle, then she would fall face-first onto the ground. She glared at him again.

Ignoring the pang of regret that she was justified in giving him such a look, he mounted the horse. He placed his arms around her and reached for the reins, kicking Phantom and bringing him out into the night. Clarkent had to admit to himself that he relished having the princess in his arms, though he hated the reason it had to happen ... just as he hated the armor blocking him from being able to better feel her pressed against him.

But he shoved those thoughts away with a sense of shame and concentrated on guiding his horse. All he needed to think about now was keeping the princess safe. James was flying overhead, leading him to his destination as Peri had said he would.

Clarkent tried not to think about the young woman in his arms. Since he had resolved not to speak to her--so she wouldn't guess his real identity--it was hard to bite back all the apologies hovering in his mouth. He didn't want her to think ill of the Black Knight, but he had practically ensured that she would with this stunt. If only Gawain could see the Black Knight now, what would he think of him? His opinion would have probably turned just as horrible as the princess's had. Any points the Black Knight might have earned by showing up at the tilting match would have utterly dissipated.

Clarkent really hated that he had to be a bad guy to be a good guy.

\*\*\*

### Chapter 31: How to Break a Bond

When the Black Knight absconded with the princess, the deed did not go unnoticed.

A man with black curly hair and a mischievous expression watched for a few seconds as the pair disappeared and then gloated, "I told you something was going to happen tonight."

Tempos glanced at him briefly before lifting his eyes once more in interest. "Well, what d'you know--you were right, my magic-using friend. I think that means we're due to make a little celebratory visit to someone, though somehow I don't think he will feel there's much to celebrate." His mirthless laugh sounded almost inhuman.

The other man smirked.

\*\*\*

Tempos found Alexander in the royal bedchamber, which was no surprise, as he had specifically expected him to be there. Tempos had even ensured there was a diversion of sorts that had led to the need for assistance from the Regent's guards, which meant no one was watching the room. Well, there had been *one* man who remained on guard--and he was quickly disposed of.

Inside the room, Alexander was staring down at a handheld mirror, studying his face, and he seemed less than happy that his brother was interrupting him. "What do you want?" he said irritably, not looking up.

"Was the princess displeased with your features at the ball?" Tempos asked him, standing in the doorway. The man who called himself "Imp" was behind him.

Alexander finally glanced at his brother in quiet fury. "Leave me."

Tempos moved closer. "Or are you depressed that you'll have to say goodbye to your little throne?"

Alexander looked upon him coldly. "I intend for it to become mine once again. I shall only be relinquishing it temporarily."

"There's just one little problem with your plan, brother," Tempos told him in a casual tone. "It appears the Black Knight has taken off with your future wife."

"What?" Alexander growled, lowering the mirror.

"Actually, I lied--there are *two* problems with your plan." Tempos looked pointedly at his brother's chest.

The color drained from Alexander's face as he lowered his chin to stare down at the dagger now embedded in his heart. "You wretch," he whispered, dropping the mirror to the floor, where it cracked.

"I intend to be the one to marry your bride and become king," Tempos informed him matter-of-factly. "It's such a shame that the Black Knight snuck in here to kill you while everyone was busy. You'd think he would have better manners than to crash a party."

Alexander pulled the dagger out of his chest and lunged at his brother, who sidestepped him. Imp came in from the hallway and smashed him on the head with his magician's staff, sending him sprawling to the floor.

Tempos knelt and pried the dagger from his brother's hand.

"Monster," Alexander whispered, jamming his eyes shut with the pain, blood leaking from his chest.

With an air of boredom, Tempos used the dagger to slit the Regent's throat. "You really shouldn't bleed so much, brother. It's unseemly." He laughed and then pulled out a handkerchief, wiping the dagger clean of blood before hiding it on his person. Then he instructed, "Burn that," and he handed the now-scarlet handkerchief to Imp.

While the magician did as requested, Tempos picked up his brother's mirror and stared down at it. Then he spoke: "Mirror, mirror, in my hand, who's the most villainous in the land?" The mirror didn't change; it simply continued to show his image. He smiled to himself. "Well ... duh!" Then he let out a dry laugh.

After giving himself a moment to appreciate his burst of humor, Tempos turned to look at Imp, who was putting the ashy remains of the handkerchief in the Regent's fireplace. "Come on," the knight ordered. "We need to go find some guards and gossipy servants."

"What will you be telling them?" the magician asked in interest, gleefully bringing his hands together.

"Simple. I'll be telling them a sob story about the Black Knight. It really was nasty of him to murder my brother and then kidnap the princess with the intent to marry her himself." He smiled and then tilted his head, thinking. "I'll tell them we need to band with the Barbarian Kingdom to destroy him. My brother has let this disgusting do-gooder roam free for far too long. I don't mind lowering myself to work with some *Barbarians* if it'll rid us of that vigilante. People like him make me sick."

"And what about me?" Imp asked, crossing his arms.

"You're right, Imp," Tempos said as they left the room. "There's one other thing we need to do. We need to send someone to find Peregrine the White ... and tell him he's fired. The Mystical Sorcerer's back in town."

\*\*\*

Clarkent followed the dark form that was James through the woods, remaining hyper conscious of his captive's movements. Every now and then, the princess would shift in place a little, as if she were supposed to struggle some just on principle. But these movements made Clarkent nervous--he didn't want her to accidentally fall off Phantom and get hurt. He would never forgive himself if that happened.

As they went through the forest, the trees seemed to close in on them, and Clarkent couldn't help but uneasily recall the Garms he and Gawain had seen. Was another monster going to rear its head and attack?

Finally, however, James flew down and landed on a branch,

and Clarkent knew that was the cue that they had arrived. Halting Phantom, Clarkent muttered--in a low voice, so the princess wouldn't hear him speak--the word "reveal." He saw the telltale shimmer, and then the cottage appeared. It was a simple wooden building--perhaps just the tiniest bit weather-beaten--but it was built to last and looked as if it kept the elements at bay.

He dismounted, and after tending to Phantom and ground tying him, he brought the princess down from the horse. Because her legs were bound, she couldn't walk, so he had to carry her in his arms into the cabin. Peri's eternal flames could be found burning in each room, so Clarkent had no problems seeing what he was doing. After closing the front door with a foot, he went into the cottage's small bedroom and set the princess upright on the bed. He hated that it had to be this way--she must have been so uncomfortable--but he had no choice. He couldn't let her escape.

He heard a flapping noise as James came into the room. The bird perched on one of the bedposts and let out a "rep rep."

Clarkent allowed himself a moment to breathe and stare at the princess, and he froze as he saw something at her neck gleam in the flickering light. She was wearing the pegasus necklace.

How had she found it? The room had been filled with people, and she had been inundated with partners. Under what circumstance could she have retrieved it from the floor where he had dropped it? Could she ... have been watching him?

A feeling of warmth flooded his body at the thought that she might have been interested in him at the ball--but that warmth quickly turned to guilt as he saw the look of fear on her face.

How he hated that it had to come to this!

\*\*\*

Loisette was frightened. Right now, the unknown was looming before her. What did the Black Knight intend to do with her? She was alone in a bedroom with him--whatever he wanted couldn't be good. She knew that much at least.

But there was one thing that was confusing her--the bird with the Black Knight ... was he *James*? And if so, what was *he* doing with the Black Knight? There were so many things that didn't make sense to her. She wanted answers, but she couldn't even speak to ask them thanks to the cloth stuffed in her mouth.

When the Black Knight started moving toward her, she flinched, scooting backward on the bed to press up against the wall. He hesitated for a second before continuing. She tried to lean to the side away from him, only to relax just a fraction as she realized all he was doing was removing her gag. The thought of having her voice was enough to make her feel a little bit better--after all, as a princess, her voice had enabled her to control people for years. She probably wouldn't be so fortunate as to have real control in this case, but even if she was simply given the *illusion* of control, she would not feel so helpless. At this point, she was willing to take anything she could get.

When the cloth was out of her mouth, she immediately blurted out, "What do you want with me?"

Rather than reply, the Black Knight just stared at her.

Loisette narrowed her eyes. Was he mute? Deaf? Or was he just refusing to talk to her?

"Are you going to hurt me?" she tried again.

This time, she received a negative gesture from him. So, he wasn't deaf. Maybe he didn't want her to hear his voice. But why would that be? Nothing was making any sense. If he wasn't going to talk to her, why had he removed the gag?

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked, but he just looked at her, his helmet pointed in her direction. She sighed. Obviously, she would only meet with success by asking questions that could be answered with gestures. She modified her question: "Did you kidnap me for a ransom?"

He shook his head.

She frowned. He didn't want to hurt her, and he didn't want

money. Either he was lying, or there was something strange going on that she didn't know about.

After thinking some more, she asked, "Did you kidnap me to ... do something bad to me?"

Again, a negative.

Loisette sighed. It was obviously going to take a while for her to get any answers.

\*\*\*

Clarkent wasn't sure whether to be amused at or abashed by the princess's queries. He hadn't even considered bringing writing supplies so he could communicate with her--he had just taken her away in desperation without really thinking it through. There was still the option of speech, of course, but he didn't want to go that route, so he just let her ask more questions. It wasn't like she could force him to answer them if he didn't want to.

"Did you kidnap me to save someone else?" she inquired.

Clarkent almost snorted at that one. Her questions were getting slightly ridiculous, but he couldn't exactly blame her, so he shook his head.

She hesitated. "Are you wanting to ... marry me?"

Clarkent froze, the question causing a spike of *something* to shoot through him. Then he slowly shook his head. He hadn't brought her here for that purpose. He was trying to keep her from marrying Alexander against her will. That was all.

She began spouting off several questions at once: "Do you want someone else to marry me? Or to make someone mad? Are you trying to keep me from becoming queen? Is someone making you do this?"

He shook his head adamantly. Despite the wide range of things she was asking, the truth wasn't going to be revealed this way, and he doubted she would believe him even if he did let her know what was happening.

But it was late in the evening--before long, it would be morning--and he was tired. He was certain she was, too. They could play the question game after they got some sleep.

He walked over to the bed and indicated that she needed to lie down. She gave him a confused look, and he gently lifted her legs up from the floor and sat them on the bed. He touched the pillow behind her, and she twisted to look at it what he was doing.

Confident she would figure out what he meant soon enough, Clarkent moved to the other side of the room and placed his sheathed sword on the ground. Then he sank down, fatigued after all the day's events. It wouldn't be easy--or comfortable--to sleep in his armor, but he wasn't about to reveal his identity to the princess. He could sleep in a different room, but he felt his absence might make the princess worry. A foe in sight was better than one out of sight ... Not that he liked thinking of himself as her enemy. However, she had no choice but to see him as such since he'd kidnapped her, so he would have to deal with that annoying truth.

He leaned against the wall, intending to sleep upright. Before his eyes closed, he saw the princess lower her head to the pillow, and he let out a contented sigh.

\*\*\*

Though Loisette was lying down on the bed, she had no intention of going to sleep yet. She lifted her hands to scratch her nose--at least her bonds weren't tight enough to hurt her, though she certainly wasn't going to be squirming out of them anytime soon--and then glanced across the room at the Black Knight. Whether he was asleep already or not, she wasn't sure, but he wouldn't be able to understand the words she was about to speak, much less hear them, so she ventured quietly, "\*\*\**James, is that you?*\*\*"

The sharp-eared bird, who was still perched on the bedpost, hopped down and walked toward her head. "\*\*\**Good evening, Your Highness,*\*\*" he chirped.

She narrowed her eyes. *“\*\*It is you.\*\*”*

*“\*\*Yeah,\*\*”* he replied sheepishly.

*“\*\*Why are you with him, James? He’s one of the bad guys-- have you been one of the bad guys all along, too?\*\*”*

*“\*\*No,\*\*”* the Peregrine Falcon answered firmly. *“He’s not one of the bad guys. Neither am I.”*

*“\*\*Then who is he?\*\*”* she asked in frustration. *“\*\*Do I know him?\*\*”*

*“\*\*I’m not telling you anything, Your Highness. I’m sorry. I can’t.\*\*”*

Loisette growled beneath her breath. *“\*\*Why are you helping him? Can you tell me that?\*\*”*

James tilted his head. *“\*\*Sometimes, Your Highness, you have to do what is right--even if it doesn’t always make sense to everyone.\*\*”*

*“\*\*Like you’re one to talk about what’s right,\*\*”* Loisette said grumpily. *“\*\*Was it ‘right’ for you to leave your parents and never talk to them again?\*\*”*

*“\*\*Why are you bringing them into this?\*\*”* James asked, seeming irritated and a bit confused.

*“\*\*I don’t think you can understand anything about what’s right,\*\*”* she told him. *“\*\*It’s not right for you not to see your parents again--just as it’s not right for you to withhold important information from me when my life’s in danger.\*\*”*

*“\*\*Your life isn’t in danger,\*\*”* he told her. Then, he amended, *“\*\*Well--not exactly. Not right now, anyway.\*\*”*

*“\*\*What’s that supposed to mean?\*\*”* she huffed.

*“\*\*You’re not in danger from the Black Knight. I can tell you that much.\*\*”*

*“\*\*And you’re not in danger from your parents,\*\*”* she returned, her eyes flashing.

*“\*\*Would you stop talking about them?\*\*”* he asked in exasperation.

*“\*\*I will if you’ll tell me more about the Black Knight,\*\*”* she told him.

The bird paused and then fixed his beady eyes on her. *“\*\*If I promise to go see my parents sometime, will you stop asking me about the Black Knight?\*\*”*

She stared at him. She had intended to annoy him into telling her something--but it was obvious his beak was shut on this issue. She might as well get something out of it--even if it wasn’t for her. *“\*\*Fine,\*\*”* she agreed. She would just have to get her answers another way.

James turned his head. He seemed upset. *“\*\*I’m going to go hunt now. I haven’t had much time to myself lately.\*\*”* Then, he raised his wings and flew from the room.

She gazed after him, wondering how he was going to get outside since he lacked opposable thumbs. But that was his problem, not hers. She had other things to worry about.

She looked at the Black Knight. The steady rise and fall of his armored chest seemed to indicate he was asleep. After watching him for a moment, she turned her eyes to his sword, which was in its sheath on the floor beside him. Her forehead crinkled in a frown. And then she smiled to herself. Maybe things weren’t so bad after all.

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### Chapter 32: Do Not Go Gentle with That Good Knight

Clarkent felt as if he had barely shut his eyes for two minutes when he felt something shift around his neck. He opened bleary eyes, confused and startled and utterly unsure of what was happening. His sleep-fogged brain finally caught up with him, and he lifted his arms in a panic, but it was too late. His helmet had been removed.

His gaze fell on the floor first, where he saw the frayed rope that had once been around the princess’s hands. Then he lifted his head with fearful reluctance and stared up at the princess herself ... and saw the expression of shock and pain on her face.

“Clarkent?” she gasped, dropping the helmet to the floor with a clang.

\*\*\*

It had been a long and agonizing process, but the princess had managed to wriggle off the bed and sink to the floor without making much noise. Then she had scooted on her hind end to move toward the Black Knight. After that, she had used her hands to ever-so-quietly remove the knight’s sword from its sheath. Finally, she had softly and slowly sawed off the ropes on her hand with the sharp blade.

After that, she had untied her legs, which were relived to be freed of her bonds. James hadn’t returned from hunting yet, thankfully, and she had nearly snuck out then and there. But then she had gazed intently at the Black Knight. Though he *had* kidnapped her, he hadn’t done anything to hurt her. Scare her, yes. Hurt her, no.

And what was more ... Peri’s animal familiar trusted the knight. Why was that? Was James a traitor to Peri? Or was something going on here that she didn’t know about? She didn’t think there was anything evil about the bird--in some ways, despite all his years, James had seemed like a spunky kid.

Who *was* the Black Knight? And why hadn’t James been willing to tell her?

For some reason, her mind had flashed back to the masquerade ball. Something important had happened there. But what was it?

She had crept closer to the Black Knight, knowing this was her one chance to learn his identity. But she had also known that the cost of such knowledge could be death. She was so close to escape--the Black Knight was sleeping and wouldn’t realize she was missing until she was long gone.

But in staring at the Black Knight, she had also been staring her curiosity in the eye. And she hadn’t been able to back down from that.

Her heart beating out a merciless rhythm in her chest, she had reached forward, taken a deep breath, and pulled up on the Black Knight’s helmet.

And then she had reeled upon seeing the sleepy face of her stableboy friend.

As she felt his helmet slip from her fingers, she somehow managed his name: “Clarkent?” She felt hurt, shocked, confused, overwhelmed ...

Pieces were falling together too easily. That sword on the ground--when she had used it to remove her bonds, she had felt there was something vaguely familiar about it. Of course she recognized it--the sword was the one he’d used to fight off the Garms and end Penelope Grace’s life. And when she’d seen Clarkent in the stable after the tilt, he had been favoring his side--at the jousting match, she had seen a gleam in the light and had wondered if Sir Tempos had stabbed the Black Knight. It seemed he had. And now she knew why Clarkent had appeared to support the Black Knight. It only made sense for him to support himself.

“Princess--Your ... Your Highness,” the stableboy whispered, obviously unsure what to say.

She stared at him unflinchingly. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She thought she knew him better than anyone else in the world, but she was wrong. She hadn’t known him at all. He had kidnapped her--humiliated her. Deceived her.

He winced at her words, avoiding her gaze. “You hated the Black Knight. How could I tell you? You’d never talk to me again.”

She crossed her arms, not wanting to admit that he had a point. As her mind continued to whirl, something else occurred to her, and she asked abruptly, “Was that you at the ball?”

His abashed expression was all she needed to see. The mysterious stranger *had* been him.

Her mind flashed back to when they had danced out in the

field so long ago. They had both been so innocent then. That had been before the Black Knight was in existence--and also before she had started dressing up as Gawain. A small part of her told her that she shouldn't be angry at Clarkent for keeping this secret when she was concealing something just as big, but she dismissed it. The magic surrounding her outfit wouldn't let her tell anyone--so her circumstance was completely different. She couldn't tell him even if she *wanted* to. At least he'd *had* the choice. That was a luxury she had not been given.

She pierced him with her gaze and demanded suddenly, "Why did you take me away from the castle?" No matter how angry she was, she would never believe he wanted to hurt her. If she did, her whole life would fall apart. Her best friend couldn't truly be evil, could he? Maybe she didn't know him as well as she thought, but she did know that much. Didn't she?

He looked down sadly at the gauntlets covering his hands. "You won't believe me, Prin--Your Highness. That's why I didn't tell you before."

"Clarkent," she said dangerously. She would get answers from him even if she had to pry them out. "Why am I here?"

He sighed. "You're in trouble, Your Highness."

Her eyes became narrow slits. "What do you mean?"

He slowly got to his feet, and she backed away, trying not to think about the pained expression that came over his face as she did so.

"The Regent intends to force you to marry him," he explained.

"That's ridiculous," she told him immediately. "Alexander has always been kind to me." Her mind flashed to his attempt to control her outfit at the ball, but she pushed that away. That was an isolated incident. He didn't usually do things like that. "He even Requested you to stay when I asked him." She bit down on her lip, mentally kicking herself. She hadn't meant to tell him that.

"What?" Clarkent asked, his mouth hanging open slightly. "You ... you were the one who wanted to Request me?"

She flushed. "Well, don't ask me if I'd do it again--not after you've hidden your real identity from me all this time."

"The Black Knight isn't my real identity," he told her, his eyebrows pulled inward. "That's just something I do to help people."

"Help people?" she scoffed. "You haven't been *helping* people!"

"I have, too!" he insisted. "The stories you've been hearing--they're all skewed toward the rich! You don't know the truth behind them. You don't know how the Regent has been sucking the lifeblood from people--"

"In spite of what you think, Alexander is not a bad man!" she growled at him before leaving the room in fury. She hated that there was a part of her that didn't believe that.

He followed after her. "He *is* a bad man, Princess! He intends to make you his wife whether you want that or not. Peri and I--"

She swiveled toward him, her right hand on the knob to the door that led outside. "*Peregrine the White* is involved in this?" Suddenly, things made even more sense--James was helping Clarkent because Peri was also tangled up in this mess. Peri must have told James to keep Clarkent's identity a secret from her. Was there anyone *else* she needed to know about?

"Peri is the one that told me about Alexander's plans!" Clarkent told her. "This is his cottage. I was bringing you here to keep you safe while Peri--"

She jerked open the door. "I don't need anyone to keep me safe. I'll be perfectly fine on my own." She stomped outside and brought herself to stand beside the big black horse nearby. She had thought he belonged to the Black Knight, but now she knew he belonged to Clarkent--and she didn't even want to think about how a poor stableboy would have come across such a creature.

"Take me home," she gritted, staring at the horse rather than the young man she had *thought* was her friend.

"No," Clarkent said firmly.

She turned toward him, enraged. "Take me home *now*."

"I told you before," he said, crossing his arms stubbornly as he stepped up beside her. "It's too dangerous, Your Highness."

Loisette narrowed her eyes. "And I told you--*I ... don't ... care!*" She shoved him, and he stumbled backward and tottered a bit before regaining his balance. A part of her felt guilty for being so rough, but she pushed that part away. *He* was the one who should feel guilty.

"*James!*" she yelled. She knew the bird had to be nearby--and he would hear her.

"What are you doing?" Clarkent asked her as she mounted the black horse. Despite the fact that she was wearing a dress, she put her legs on both sides of Phantom, as he was not wearing a sidesaddle.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she snapped back, her hands shuffling her skirt to make it rest easier on the horse. "I'm going home."

"Phantom only responds to my commands," he told her, sounding irritatingly smug as she tried and failed to get the horse to move. "Peri taught him that."

Rolling her eyes, she leaned down toward the ebony horse's head. "\*\*\*Phantom, my name is Princess Loisette, and I really need to go home. Do you think you could do that for me?\*\*\*"

The horse twisted his neck a little, as if to look at her, and then said, "\*\*\*I'm only supposed to follow the instructions of the stableboy who wears the black armor.\*\*\*" He seemed a little surprised that she could communicate with him.

"\*\*\*I know that's what Peri told you, but can you please make an exception this once?\*\*\*" she pleaded.

"What are you *doing*?" Clarkent asked, but she ignored him.

"\*\*\*Please, Phantom,\*\*\*" she tried again.

"\*\*\*Your Highness?\*\*\*" a voice called, and Loisette looked up into the sky. James had arrived. She smiled. At least something was going right.

"\*\*\*The bird--James--will lead us,\*\*\*" she told Phantom.

"\*\*\*Please help me. I really need to go home.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*All right,\*\*\*" the horse said reluctantly. "\*\*\*I will take you this one time.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*James,\*\*\*" she called upward. "\*\*\*Lead me home.\*\*\*"

The Peregrine Falcon circled in the air above her. "\*\*\*You need to stay here, Your Highness.\*\*\*" he told her. He sounded uncomfortable, likely because he had realized she now knew the helmetless Clarkent's real identity.

But right now, she didn't care about his comfort. "\*\*\*I'm going home, James, and you're going to lead me there.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*I can't--\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*James!\*\*\*" she growled. "\*\*\*I'm going home! Don't forget--I will soon be the queen of Metropoli, and as such, I will have power over Peri.\*\*\*"

"\*\*\*You're not queen yet,\*\*\*" James pointed out.

"\*\*\*Fine,\*\*\*" she gritted. "\*\*\*Then I will go without you. But if I get lost, it will be on your head!\*\*\*" She lowered her head, resolved to leave this place.

"\*\*\*All right, Your Highness,\*\*\*" the bird said meekly. "\*\*\*I will lead the way.\*\*\*"

A smile of triumph touching her face, Loisette snapped the reins and kicked her heels into Phantom, who lurched forward. Then she turned and saw Clarkent running after them.

"Phantom, stop!" he called out desperately. "Princess, please don't go! It's too dangerous!"

But she simply continued to spur Phantom on and follow James through the forest. There was no way Clarkent would be able to catch them. Especially not with that cursed black armor on. She was safe from his meddling at least.

\*\*\*

When Loisetette was near the castle, James left her, perhaps to go back to Clarkent or to see Peri. She went to the Riding Stable and put Phantom in Penelope Grace's old stall, not knowing what else to do with him. She politely asked Dwayne if he would take care of the horse, and he agreed with a puzzled look, but she didn't stick around to answer the questions he must have had.

Finally, she went into the castle. Though she held her head up high, her resolve was beginning to fail her. What if Clarkent had been right? What if Alexander *did* mean to make her marry him? Was she walking right into his trap? She had never thought of Alexander as more than a cousin. It was possible she wouldn't have the luxury of marrying for love, but she *knew* she couldn't marry him. That was something she could not bear, and she would do almost anything to avoid it. Despite her defense of him to Clarkent, there truly was a part of her that didn't like the man.

"Your Highness?" a voice said unsurely, and she turned.

A guard was standing there and looking surprised. "Your Highness, are you safe?"

They must have known something had happened to her. "Yes, I am," she told him, her voice steady. "Where is Regent Alexander?"

The guard looked down at the floor. "The Regent was murdered by the Black Knight, Your Highness, before that criminal escaped with you."

"What?" Loisetette whispered. "He's ... dead?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the guard confirmed solemnly. "Regent Tempos has been worried about you. How did you get away?"

"He didn't want to hurt me," she murmured, turning away from him. Alexander was dead, and now Tempos was Regent? How had everything changed in such a short time?

Her thoughts flashed to Clarkent. She didn't want to believe him capable of murdering a monarch--she balked at the thought of her kind friend doing such a thing. Could Tempos himself have done it? There were all those rumors about what had happened to his wives ...

One thing was for certain. Even if Sir Tempos--now a Duke, she supposed--was only Regent for less than a day, it could not be good. He had never been "nice" to anyone--much less actually worried about someone as the guard had indicated. She might have doubted that Alexander would force her into marriage with him ... but she wasn't sure she could put it past his brother.

"Regent Tempos is in the throne room, Your Highness," the guard supplied helpfully. "Shall I escort you there? I am certain he will have a lot to talk to you about."

Loisetette looked at him for a few seconds. She would much rather have been with Clarkent ... and then she remembered that he was the Black Knight, an accused murderer and someone she had thought was her friend until she discovered he had been deceiving her for years. Her mood darkened, and she took in a deep breath. There probably wasn't any way she could get out of seeing Tempos, so she might as well go quietly.

"Very well," she acceded. "Take me to him."

\*\*\*

### Chapter 33: The Dragon in the Castle

"Your Highness," Tempos called out in greeting as Loisetette walked the length of the throne room up to him. "I am so glad to see you are safe." But though the words themselves might have seemed kind, there was no warmth in his voice. There never was.

"I am sorry to hear about your brother," she said in a soft voice when she was finally a few feet in front of him. She curtsied to him, and he responded with an aloof nod. He was flanked by a pair of guards and was lounging in an unRegentlike manner on the great chair that was Loisetette's by birthright. He obviously wasn't upset about his brother's death. In fact, it was possible he had been sleeping when she first came in--there was a

lethargy to his bearing that went a bit beyond his normally casual manner.

"These things happen, Your Highness. But don't worry--I won't handle the funeral details until after your coronation," he said casually, as if he were simply talking about delaying a picnic. "We don't want to take away from your shining day."

Loisetette almost breathed a sigh of relief. He was going to let her have her coronation ceremony after all. There had been a part of her that wasn't sure he would. But she was no fool--she knew he could care less as to whether something detracted from her "shining day," and the fact that he was letting her have it meant he had plans of his own. She was going to have to tread carefully. It was certainly possible he intended to do nothing bad, but Clarkent had made her paranoid despite herself. In this instance, it was better to be safe than end up miserable.

"How did you escape anyway, Your Highness?" he asked, one eyebrow lifted. "We were preparing a rescue attempt, but I was not aware it had been successfully made yet."

"I ran away," she returned, curtsying. "Please excuse me. I must go prepare for my coronation."

"Your lady-in-waiting should be ... well, *waiting* for you," he called out after her.

She frowned to herself. Had he *expected* her to return so quickly? Or had he just told Mishal to wait until she returned? Or was she simply reading too much into it? Her paranoia only seemed to be increasing.

Her thoughts turned to Clarkent. A flash of frustration spread through her. Even if there was no truth to Clarkent's claim that Alexander had intended to make her marry him, the stableboy had spoiled the time leading up to her coronation. He had made her unnecessarily anxious. Though he wasn't with her, he had utterly ruined her day.

But then a small and annoying voice pointed out that he had been her friend through thick and thin. Even when she had disagreed with him, he had always had her best interests at heart. He had never shown any desire to purposefully hurt her in either of her personas. He was all kindness and sincerity, even though she had frequently been unkind to him.

She left the throne room bogged down in such thoughts, and as she traversed the halls to go to her chamber, she noticed there were a lot of guards patrolling the castle. It made her feel ill at ease. What if she wanted to leave the castle without being noticed? Or to sneak around after the coronation ceremony and see if she could find out anything about Tempos's plans? She had the feeling that it wouldn't be easy. The best way for her to do it would be as Gawain--but what if the guards started poking around in her secret alcove and made it hard for her to change? The whole situation made her nervous.

Before going into her room, she went to her special alcove and retrieved her Gawain clothing, which was wrapped in an old blanket. Replacing the loose bricks quickly and holding the items in her hand as if they were nothing special, she took a deep breath and went to her chamber. Inside, Mishal was waiting for her, as Tempos had said.

"Your Highness!" exclaimed Mishal, curtsying. "I was worried about you. I am glad you are safe."

Loisetette gave her a nod of greeting as she crossed to the trunk by her bed and stuffed the blanketed clothes into it. "After I rest a little, I will need some assistance in getting ready for my coronation," she said, immediately getting down to business in hopes that it would distract Mishal from what she had just done. She suddenly felt really tired, and she did not want to have to deal with any prying questions.

"Of course, Your Highness," Mishal said, seeming suitably distracted (to Loisetette's relief).

Princess Loisetette took in a shaky breath. Soon, she was going to be Queen Loisetette. That thought was frightening.

\*\*\*

At the coronation ceremony, Loisetette wore a white and gold dress. Over it, she had on a red robe bordered by a golden pattern and trimmed with ermine. Mishal had brought her a diamond necklace to wear with the outfit, but Loisetette had refused it. She'd wanted to wear the necklace Clarkent had dropped at the ball. He wouldn't be there to see it, but she had felt the pegasus would serve as an important symbol.

After all, she intended to keep the royal line as strong as the pegasus looked--she intended to protect her people. She wasn't wearing the necklace because of the person she had indirectly received it from ... but because of that symbol. She had always wanted a pegasus, and now, in a way, she was to become one. Just as the flying horse symbolized the royal line, so would she symbolize the fortitude of her people. And if Clarkent's face happened to pop up in her mind's eye whenever she thought about the necklace, well, that was just unfortunate. The reason she was wearing it had nothing to do with him.

Though nervous, she bore herself unwaveringly throughout the coronation ceremony. Both the recognition of her as monarch and her oath to be a proper queen to her people went off without a hitch, and then she was given the royal scepter and the ring which represented marriage between her and the nation. These objects made her nervous--particularly the latter--but she did not allow herself to show it in her face. And when the crown was placed upon her head, she gave a regal smile to the people watching. And then the Nobles came forward to swear their fealty to her as their ruler, and she looked down at them from her throne with a kind but firm expression.

But during this part of the ceremony, she noticed that Tempos slipped out of the room after swearing his own oath, and the slightest of frowns wrinkled her forehead before she wiped it away. She was intrigued by his disappearance, but she knew she couldn't investigate what he was doing until afterward.

So she simply concentrated on the final part of the ceremony that made her queen, unable to shake the disconcerting feeling that everything was different now.

\*\*\*

After her coronation, Loisetette tried to return to her room. But before she even got to the door, she ran into the castle librarian.

"Hello, Herbie," she greeted warmly.

"Greetings, Your Majesty," he returned with a bow, blinking furiously at her. He lifted a hand to wipe it over his mustache nervously. After glancing around to make sure they were alone, he said in a quiet voice, "I'm worried about Tempos."

"What do you mean?" she asked, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. What had happened?

"I saw him disappear behind a tapestry in the west corridor, and I fear he is up to no good, Your Majesty."

Loisetette furrowed her brow. She had heard of rumors of secret passages, but she hadn't actually found any herself. She had her own secret alcove, of course, but that was nothing like this. She had always hoped her father would one day tell her about the castle's secret passages--if they did exist--but he had died before she had asked him. Perhaps now she would find one of them.

But if Tempos knew of one secret passage, it was likely he knew of others, and that thought made Loisetette uneasy. She swallowed nervously. "Which tapestry was it?" What was Tempos up to?

"The Solarian tapestry, Your Majesty," he replied. When she didn't appear to know what he meant, he further specified, "The one with the pegasus and the d--"

"I know which one you mean now," Loisetette cut in, realizing what he was talking about. "Do you know what Tempos might be doing?"

Herbie shook his head. "I saw him take a man in there, Your

Majesty--somewhat forcefully, I might add. The man looked frightened."

"Thank you," she told him. "I'll take care of it."

He nodded in relief and started to leave, but then he paused and turned. "You won't be taking care of it yourself, Your Majesty, I hope? You will send someone else."

She smiled at him. "Don't worry, Herbie."

He gave a brief bob of his head. "Quite right, Your Majesty."

She watched him leave. It was true that she didn't want him to worry--but she had no intention of sending someone else to check out what Tempos was doing. She didn't know who she could trust. She would have to take care of this herself. Luckily, her queenly duties wouldn't start until the next day.

\*\*\*

Loisetette went to her room to change out of her coronation outfit. Unfortunately, Mishal and a rather nosy maid were there, so she was unable to change into her Gawain clothes. Instead, she quickly put on a blue dress, rejecting the red and gold one the two girls tried to get her to wear. She was beginning to be sick of the royal colors and the fact that everyone wanted to foist them on her.

She slipped away from Mishal and the maid and hurriedly went to the tapestry in question. Two great creatures were rearing up opposite each other, and though they were very different in appearance, in some ways they appeared to be mirror images of each other.

"Here goes," Loisetette whispered to herself, reaching a hand out to pull back the golden tapestry. All she saw was the wall, so she put her hands on it, feeling for anything unusual. She finally found an indentation and applied pressure, part of the wall pushing away from her. A secret door and a secret passage. It sent a thrill of excitement through her. What was she going to find? And how many of these secret passages were there? Had several things happened inside her own home that she had no knowledge of?

She padded quietly down the dark passageway, her heart pounding as it curved around toward a light source. What if this was where Tempos kept his dead wives? What if he brought people in here periodically to murder them for pleasure? She shivered, less than comforted by the morbid thoughts.

As she continued, she heard the sound of voices, and she began to move slower, wanting to make out the two men's words but not wanting to be caught.

"--don't take kindly to people whose noses are bigger than their brains," Tempos was saying.

"I wasn't spying on you," the man pleaded desperately. "You have to believe me."

Loisetette peeked around the corner into a small chamber where Tempos was pointing a dagger at a man's throat. The room itself was plain, with a pair of chairs, a table that had a few books on it, and some weapons against the back wall. The stony ground was red in places, as if this wasn't the first time that blood had painted the floor.

"That's what you have been telling me--save it for someone who cares," Tempos said, sounding bored. "I certainly don't." And with one quick movement, he drew the dagger across the man's neck.

Loisetette gasped and then reached a hand up to cover her mouth. But it was too late.

Tempos swiveled toward her, his eyes widening. "Your Majesty!"

She turned and ran, barreling down the secret passageway as fast as she could. She had just reached the tapestry and was about to burst out into the corridor when a hand yanked at the bow on the back of her dress, causing her to jerk backward.

"Your Majesty," Tempos breathed into her ear, his dagger now hovering by her throat. "What a surprise. Most damsels have

to prick their fingers or eat poisoned fruit before the villain can have any control. You just gave yourself to me. It feels like my birthday.” With a chuckle, he lightly pressed the dagger up against her flesh. “You’re even wrapped with a bow.”

Trying not to move, Loisetette gritted, “Let me go, or I’ll--”

“Or you’ll what?” Tempos asked, sounding amused. “Huff and puff and blow my castle down? I don’t think so. Now, we’re going to take a little trip to your room, and you aren’t going to scream. If you do, I’ll kill you. And we don’t want that, now do we?”

“No,” she whispered in return. Even if she did manage to run away, it was obvious he had spies everywhere. If he didn’t catch her, they would. A part of her wished she had gone in the passageway as Gawain, but if she had, he would have surely killed her.

“Now, I’m going to put the dagger away,” Tempos told her, “but I can just as easily pull it back out. Understand?”

“Yes,” she bit out angrily.

“Let’s go,” he instructed, pushing her out into the hallway.

They wasted no time in walking to her room, and when they stood outside it, he said to her, “Tell whoever is in there to leave.”

She took in a deep breath and nodded. Opening the door, she entered with a blank expression. Mishal and the maid were talking--gossiping, no doubt--and they curtsied when they saw her come in.

“Please go,” she said, biting her lip. “I would like some time alone.”

They murmured their acknowledgement and left. Loisetette was glad that at least they would be safe.

Tempos stepped into the room and shut the door, pulling his dagger back out and pointing it almost lazily at her. “Here are the rules, *Princess*.”

“I’m a queen now,” she snapped.

He rolled his eyes. “I beg your pardon, *Your Majesty*,” he said sarcastically, giving a mock bow. “Here are the rules, *Queen*. You will stay here in your room until you agree to marry me.”

“*What?*” she exclaimed.

Tempos ignored her outburst. “I’ll be posting guards outside your door with instructions not to let you leave. They’re loyal to me, so don’t even bother trying to convince them with your feminine wiles to let you free. And as for your friends in the castle, well ... remember that my people are everywhere. They are more than willing to kill anyone who opposes me. My brother did a good job in weaving a web of followers who were more than willing to transfer their loyalties to the stronger dragon in this place.”

“I’ve faced a dragon before,” she growled. “You’re nothing but a *snake!*”

He laughed. “You’ve got fire of your own. Good. I like that in a wife.”

“I’ll never marry you,” she insisted, seeing a hint of movement out of the corner of her eyes. Turning her head slightly, she saw Robert Bigmouth leaving his hole. She wanted to call out and tell him to go back where it was safe, but she didn’t want to draw Tempos’s attention to him. She doubted he would hesitate to harm a mouse. “And I’m going to tell everyone what you did to that poor man.”

“The evidence will be gone,” Tempos told her. “And you know how people feel about women--they get hysterical over the smallest things. Besides, you won’t be talking to anyone else until you marry me. And when I’m your husband, your word against mine will mean very little.” He flashed his white teeth at her. “Besides, I have a new magician to help me out. Perhaps he can concoct a love potion for me.”

Robert Bigmouth had finally scurried up a nearby table, and he now launched himself across the room, biting down with tiny rodent teeth on Tempos’s dagger hand and causing him to drop

the weapon with a muttered curse.

Loisetette started to run toward the door, but then she heard a thud, and she turned and saw Robert Bigmouth sliding down the wall to the floor.

“No!” she cried out in fear and worry.

But Tempos had his dagger again, and her opportunity for escape had vanished. She hadn’t used the distraction her friend had provided, and she hated herself for it. Why hadn’t she continued on?

“A rat!” Tempos exclaimed in disgust as he approached her with his weapon. “Where’s a flute player when you need one?”

“You monster,” she spat before running past him to kneel by Robert Bigmouth’s still body.

“Everyone keeps calling me that,” Tempos said in a dry voice. “But you know what they say--sticks and stones may break my bones, but a crown is worth it all.” Then he laughed at himself. “Now, *Your Majesty*, I’ll be waiting outside your room until I can grab a guard, so don’t think you’ll be able to escape the moment I close the door.” And then he left the room.

She made an angry and unintelligible noise beneath her breath before turning to her rodent friend. She picked him up and held him against her cheek, crying quietly.

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### Chapter 34: A Revelatory Shoe

For a few wretched minutes, Loisetette’s tears continued to fall on the tiny gray body she was cradling in her hand. But then she froze as she felt something soft tickle her skin.

Staring at the mouse--barely daring to hope--she gasped as she saw him open his eyes. As he shook his head to dispel the moisture that had landed on it, Loisetette brought him up to her face and gave him a quick and ecstatic kiss.

“\*\**Robert Bigmouth, you’re alive!*\*\*” she said joyously. She’d been so distracted she hadn’t noticed he was breathing!

He brought his hands up and smoothed his whiskers back, acting as if he hadn’t just been thrown against a wall. His only reply was: “\*\**Yeah.*\*\*”

Still holding him--not wanting to let him go, lest this turn out to be a daydream--Loisetette hurried over to her desk and took out some cheese from the drawer. She placed it in her palm and watched with a smile as the mouse began to devour it.

“\*\**Thank you for trying to help me.*\*\*” she murmured. “\*\**I’m sorry I didn’t take advantage of it.*\*\*”

But he was too busy eating to pay her any attention. Evidently, he recovered fast if food was involved.

Her heart feeling so much lighter, she lifted her eyes from the mouse to look at the trunk in front of her bed. She had initially been planning to move to the royal chambers after her coronation, but it looked like that wouldn’t be happening anytime soon. Not that it mattered--right now, something as simple as sleeping arrangements meant nothing to her. She was in trouble, and she was going to have to save herself. That was all she needed to be focusing on at the moment.

Lowering Robert Bigmouth and his meal to the floor, she wiped her hand on her dress to remove any cheese crumbs and stepped toward her bed. Opening the trunk, she picked up the old blanket and took her Gawain clothes out of it. A few easy spins later, and she was dressed like a boy. She patted her crown and inhaled deeply before placing it and her feminine clothing into the trunk. She had an idea about what she needed to do. She only hoped it would work.

“\*\**Wish me luck,*\*\*” she told the mouse, but he didn’t even look at her. She smiled to herself and went up to the door and rapped on it loudly.

The door slowly opened, and a wary guard peeked in. His expression turned to one of surprise as he saw her. “Who are you?” He opened the door wider and stepped inside, looking around. “Where’s the queen?”

Drawing on the self-defense techniques she had learned while sparring with Clarkent, she punched the guard in the solar plexus--knocking the wind out of him--and then kned him in the groin. He sunk to the ground, groaning loudly, and a second guard called out, "What's going on?"

Loisette stepped flat against the wall and waited for the other guard to come in. His sword was drawn as he walked through the door, and he paused as he saw his partner on the ground.

Loisette kicked him in the back of his knee, causing his leg to buckle. Then she slammed her fist down on his neck. He fell forward onto the floor, and she ran out of the room. Fortunately, Tempos had believed two guards were enough to keep her imprisoned, so she didn't have to face any others.

Once she had several yards' worth of distance between her and her room, she slowed down. If she was going to get out of the castle alive, she would have to look like she had nothing to hide--like she was just a simple servant boy going about his duties. She didn't think the second guard had seen her, and the first guard would need some recovery time before he would be able to identify her ... She knew *that* after having accidentally kicked Clarkent in that particular spot during one of their mock-fights.

Despite knowing that, it was extremely difficult to slow her feet, and it didn't take her long to get to the castle's exit.

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After the princess had left, Clarkent had stood and stared into nothingness, not sure how he should feel. His secret was finally out--and the princess hadn't exactly taken it well.

That came as no surprise. Deception wasn't exactly something to be taken lightly, especially since the princess had detested Clarkent's alter ego. Would she ever speak to him again? Or had he torn them asunder for good?

Despite the princess's irate feelings, he had known he couldn't stand idly by and let her life be ruined. Unfortunately, however, he'd had no idea how to navigate his way out of the woods.

Feeling helpless and frustrated, he had decided to get a few winks of sleep before trying his hand at navigating the maze of the forest. But then James had returned and woke him up and finally--after receiving a piece of Clarkent's mind, the giving of which made the stableboy feel better, even if he wasn't entirely sure the bird could *understand* it--led Clarkent out of the woods before disappearing once more.

This time, Clarkent wasn't wearing his armor as he went to the castle. He had brought his sword--not wanting to be weaponless--but he had known it wouldn't be a good idea for the Black Knight to be seen traipsing around the countryside. It was one thing to do said traipsing on a fast horse with the ability to outrun the authorities; it was another to do it on foot when no such ability was to be had. In addition, the armor was heavy, and he was tired enough that wearing it would sap most of his strength.

When he finally reached the castle, he went straight to the Riding Stable. He knew the stablehands were supposed to have already been dismissed from their duties due to the coronation, so he entered with only a small amount of trepidation. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realized no one was inside. If he still had his job after all this mess, he would have to apologize to Dwayne about missing so much of his work.

A snorting noise caused Clarkent to turn his head, and his eyes widened as he saw Phantom munching on some hay. A feeling of relief came over him. At least the horse hadn't just been set free to wander the kingdom. That relief quickly turned to anxiety, however. What if someone had recognized the horse as the Black Knight's? And what if the princess--no, she must be queen by now, right?--had mentioned his name in conjunction with Phantom? He shook his head. If that had happened, there was nothing he could do to change it.

He found that Phantom had already had his saddle removed and been groomed, so he put the horse's tack back on, thankful the destrier had been taken care of before the stablehands left for the day. Still, he worried about who had done it. Yet that seemed like it was the least of his problems.

Clarkent had no idea what was going on at the castle, and it made him nervous to be in the dark, but he was trying to think things through this time. If he *did* manage to extract the princess--no, *Queen Loisette*--from Alexander's grip, then they would need a way to escape. Hopefully, Loisette--why was it he wanted to think of her so familiarly?--would come with him willingly this time. If she came without a struggle, they would need two horses. If she demanded he let her stay ... well, he didn't want to think about what he would have to do. It could be that he would need to give up and just bide his time ... and he wasn't sure he could handle that.

After tacking High Flyer, he brought the horse out of his stall. Then, he went forward and started to lead Phantom out. That was when a noise caused him to turn. His body became rigid as he saw who was there.

Gawain was standing in the entryway and looking at him with a strange expression.

Clarkent took in a deep breath and gave a tight nod of greeting. Privately, he was panicking. What was he going to do? Gawain was familiar enough with the stable to know that Phantom didn't belong there. Gawain was smart, and considering his dislike of the Black Knight, it seemed more than likely that he would realize--if he hadn't already--that this was the Black Knight's horse.

Gawain stepped forward. "What are you doing?"

"Gawain," he rasped, his mouth dry. He couldn't explain what he was doing. He had to ask his friend to go. "If you value our friendship, please go away and don't ask me any questions."

Gawain gave him a confused look. "You want me to go away?"

Clarkent felt a pressure building in his chest. He didn't have time for this. He had to go and rescue Loisette before it was too late. He couldn't let her marry the Duke of Lutheria. He loved her too much for that.

The feeling in his chest had become an almost physical pain. He couldn't deny it any longer. He loved Loisette. He loved her with his whole heart, his whole being, his whole *soul*. He didn't know when it had happened, but he knew he couldn't stand to see her unhappily wed to *Alexander*. He held her happiness over his own--he would live in misery if it meant she would live a joyful life.

His voice shaky, he told his friend, "Go away, Gawain. Don't ask me questions. Just go."

"I'm not going to let you order me around," Gawain responded, obviously perturbed. He crossed his arms stubbornly.

Trembling, Clarkent lifted his hand and closed it around a horseshoe hanging on a nearby stall. He held the metal object behind his back and stepped forward. "Please, go away," he pleaded. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to hurt his friend. But he was willing to risk everything--his friendship with Gawain, his position at the castle, his stint as the Black Knight, his life and self-respect, *everything*--for Loisette's sake. He would do anything for her. He would die for her.

Gawain stared at him, not moving to leave. Clarkent clenched the horseshoe and stood right in front of his friend. Tears springing to his eyes--his heart aching--Clarkent whispered, "I'm so sorry," and he brought the horseshoe up in the air above Gawain's head. Gawain's eyes widened in fear.

A high-pitched noise sounded. There was a flash of tan. Then a painful blow to his chest sent Clarkent to the ground. The horseshoe clanged on the ground beside him.

He stared up in shock at High Flyer, who was standing

nearby and almost seemed to be glaring down at him. And then, Clarkent, stunned at what had just happened, looked at Gawain.

It was as if a blindfold had been removed from Clarkent's eyes. A connection he had never before suspected was suddenly made. High Flyer, he realized, had been protecting his master ... or, to put it more properly, his mistress.

"Loisette?" Clarkent whispered.

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Loisette hadn't been thinking when she entered the stable as Gawain. If she had, she would have realized the magic of her clothing prevented her from revealing her identity. But when she had gone in and Clarkent had started ordering her around, she'd found herself becoming annoyed. Who was *he* to tell her what to do?

And then he had lifted that horseshoe in the air, and she had suddenly felt frightened of him. Was he going to hurt her? To kill her? She wanted to shout out her identity, but she couldn't. She was helpless.

But High Flyer had saved her. He had brought his hooves down on Clarkent and sent him to the ground. Then Clarkent had said the last thing she had expected--her name.

She stared down at him, not certain she had heard him properly.

"Is it really you, Loisette?" Clarkent asked softly, sitting up and bringing a hand up to touch the part of his chest where he'd been hit.

She smiled at him with a surge of joy, her eyes filling with tears, and she pulled off her hat, letting her long hair flow down her shoulders. She felt suddenly free, and she dropped to her knees beside him, so glad he finally knew the truth about her. Her mind flashed back to what Imp had said: "*When--and only when--your true love proves himself willing to give up everything for you, then he will see you as you truly are, and the magic surrounding the clothes will disappear completely.*" Did that mean--?

She suddenly embraced him, burying her face in his shoulder. "Clarkent ... " She didn't know what to say--how to express herself. All she knew was that it meant the world to her that he now knew the truth.

"I never realized ... " he whispered, putting shaky arms around her as he placed his face in her hair. "All that time we spent together--"

"I know," Loisette said, pulling back so she could look into his eyes. "Who would have thought that you were getting in mock-battles with a future queen?"

He reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear before putting his hand on her cheek. He studied her for a few seconds, causing her to blush under his scrutiny, and then he said in wonderment, "How could I not have known? We've spent all this time together, and I never even realized it?"

"They're magic clothes," Loisette told him with a gentle smile. "They hid my identity from you. I couldn't--I couldn't tell you. The magic wouldn't let me. I wanted to, you know. I'm so sorry for everything. I haven't--I haven't been good to you."

He rubbed his thumb across her cheek, looking sad and guilty himself. "Lois," he said softly, causing a chill to travel down her spine. This was the second time he had used the shortened version of her name. It seemed so ... intimate. But the look in his eyes was one of pain, and he told her, "I almost hurt you in order to help you. If I had hit you--"

"But you didn't," she said. But his pain was still there, and she added in a low voice, "Clark."

His eyes darkened, and she stared into them, unsure whether she was drowning or flying. All she knew was that something big was happening to her. She felt her pulse speed up, and she was suddenly very conscious of her closeness to the stableboy. Her eyes flicked down to his lips, which were parted slightly, and then

she leaned toward them, longing to feel them pressed against her own.

For perhaps a second, she was certain he was moving closer to her, but then he slowly retreated and shook his head. "No, Your Majesty," he said, his voice sounding hoarse. "We can't."

The distance between them--not physical, but emotional and mental--seemed to have turned into a great chasm. And that gaping hole was only made bigger when he lowered his arms from around her back.

"Clark," she said desperately, feeling cold now that they weren't touching, "I love you." She had been subconsciously fighting against it--but the realization of that statement's truth had suddenly sprung up within her even as the words were spoken. She stared at him, fearful of how he was going to respond.

He looked as if she had just hit him. His eyes widened, and the shock on his face was easy to read. There was a look of hope and maybe even gladness there--and then a shutter came down over him. He closed his eyes, his pained expression tearing at her heart. "You're the queen," he said quietly. "I'm not allowed to love you."

"Clark--" she protested. It felt as if a life which had abruptly become whole was now falling to pieces again.

Clarkent pulled further away and got to his feet, not looking at her. "We need to go." He walked over to Phantom and mounted him, still avoiding her eyes. "I have to protect you from Alexander."

She winced at that. "Alexander's dead, Clarkent."

"What?" he exclaimed, turning his head toward her.

"Now Tempos is the one who wants to force me to marry him," she admitted, staring down at her hands. "He had me locked up in my room, but I escaped. You were right that I was in danger."

Clarkent made a hissing noise. "Well, no matter who is coming after you, we need to get out of here. Get on High Flyer, and let's go."

Her eyes fell on his sword, and she realized she didn't want to feel like a hopeless damsel again. "I have a bow and quiver stashed near the archery targets," she said quietly. "Could we get them first? I would ... feel better having a weapon."

"You shouldn't need a weapon," he growled, but his face softened as she flinched. "I'm sorry. I'm just--stressed. We'll get your bow and arrows and go from there. But I'll protect you with my life, Your Majesty. You have my word."

<Call me 'Lois' again,> she thought to herself sadly. But she just nodded and walked toward High Flyer. There was a part of her that missed the fact that she could never be just "Gawain" to Clarkent again. It was better that he knew, yet she hated the distance between them. But there was nothing to be done but to accept it.

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Unfortunately, someone recognized the queen as she was retrieving her weapons, and he sounded the alarm. Clarkent and Loisette then spurred their horses into a gallop, getting away from the castle as fast as they were able.

"We should return to Peri's cottage," Clarkent suggested, throwing a glance at her. High Flyer was running beside Phantom, so it was easy for him to talk to the queen. The fatigue that had been weighing down on him seemed to have dissipated for the time being. He was anxious, and the blood seemed to be pounding through his veins, purging any lethargy from his system.

"We don't have James to guide us," Loisette pointed out.

He hesitated. "We could go to my--the Black Knight's hideout."

He didn't miss the narrowing of her eyes. She told him, "I don't think that's a good idea. They'll be searching the whole kingdom for us."

“There’s a concealment spell--”

She interrupted, “Tempos told me he has a new magician working for him. I don’t know how powerful he is, but it’s possible he can break through spells like that. There’s only one place to go--Kryptonita.”

“What?” Clarkent asked in confusion. “Kryptonita?”

“The Barbarian Kingdom,” she specified. “Its true name is Kryptonita.”

He frowned. “Then why do people call it the Barbarian Kingdom?”

“Prejudice, I guess. They’re Metropolita’s enemies, so it’s easier to think of them as barbarians. But as queen, I think I should start calling the kingdom by its proper name. It only seems right.”

“Your Majesty,” Clarkent said uneasily, “there are all those bad stories--”

“Those ‘bad stories’ were made up to keep people in Metropolita,” she told him. “I bet Kryptonians probably have similar stories about Metropolitans.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Clarkent insisted. “The last time--”

“The last time we were there, we were kids and didn’t have any weapons,” she pointed out firmly. It had been about four years before. “We’ll be more careful this time--we need to sneak across and hide for a while. We could even put the horses somewhere and go into a village and see what it’s like.” She spurred on her mount, pulling ahead of her companion.

“The border guard is going to catch us,” Clarkent called out after her. “This is a bad idea, Your Majesty!”

But she ignored him, concentrating only on guiding High Flyer toward Kryptonita.

Clarkent sighed and tried to let go of his fears. She was his queen, and he would follow her anywhere.

He just wished it felt more like he was following her into safety and less like he was following her headfirst into danger.

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### Chapter 35: The King of Kryptonita

Loisette and Clarkent had slowed their horses down a little after getting out of the immediate vicinity of the castle, and that turned out to be a mistake. The distant sound of pounding hooves and shouting came to their ears, and Clarkent threw a look of trepidation at the queen.

“I didn’t think they would react that quickly, Your Majesty,” he admitted, ashamed he hadn’t made them push their horses harder. “We need to go faster.” It was dark. If they were lucky, it would be hard for the guards to find them. Maybe that would save them.

She nodded grimly and leaned down to talk to High Flyer. “\*\*Go as fast as you can,\*\*” she told him. “\*\*We’re in trouble.\*\*”

“\*\*All right,\*\*” the palfrey responded. He put on a burst of speed, and Clarkent’s destrier followed suit.

As they approached the border, however, they still heard the far-off noise of their pursuers. It sounded as if they might be getting closer. It was going to be hard to lose them.

But then something happened they hadn’t expected, and they were forced to stop High Flyer and Phantom abruptly. In front of them, from the Kryptonian side of the border, a line of fifteen armed horsemen had appeared.

A very unladylike curse escaped from the young queen’s lips, and Clarkent glanced at her, surprised.

“It’s the Green Guard,” she told him tightly. “Watch out. If what Peri told me about them is true, the blades of those swords are poisonous. Don’t let them touch you.”

Clarkent nodded in acknowledgement, glancing from the visible threat to behind, where danger was still approaching. The Green Guard certainly looked formidable with their light green

swords and dark green armor. But he didn’t know how many Metropolitan guards were approaching. They were trapped between a dragon and a chimera. Neither option was good.

“What are we going to do?” Loisette asked him quietly.

“I don’t know,” Clarkent returned, his body rigid. If only he’d been able to bring his armor--then he would have had a chance in this battle. As it was, the situation looked hopeless. He was willing to protect the queen with his life ... but what if all his actions turned out for naught?

To the front of the Kryptonian line of men came a brown-haired man in golden armor. A dragon was perpetually rearing on his blue and gold shield, and a regal crown sat on top of his bare head. His beard and mustache merged into each other, but rather than make him appear cultured, it made him appear sinister. Was this the Barbarian King whom Clarkent had heard so much about?

“So,” proclaimed the crowned young man loudly, “I have finally captured the thief of the Metropolitan princess.” He looked at Loisette with a dubious expression. “I must admit, however, the miniature of you which Tempos sent me made me think you would be much prettier.”

“I am *queen* now, King North,” Loisette growled, sitting up straight on her horse and looking every part the queen despite the fact that she was wearing boy’s clothing. “And no one has *stolen* me.”

Clarkent threw her a *look*--she shouldn’t have revealed her identity like that, though he guessed it had been foolish of him not to make her put her hat back on at the stable to make her identity less obvious--and told King North in a voice filled with confidence he didn’t quite feel, “You haven’t caught her yet. You’ll have to go through me first.” To Loisette, he said in a low voice, “Go hide by the enchanted blade.”

She threw a look at the sword in the stone and then glanced back at him. It was obvious she was about to protest, and he pleaded, “Please, Your Majesty.” He couldn’t concentrate on fighting if he was worried she would get caught in the crossfire.

Hesitating only for a second more, she nodded, and then she obliged, guiding High Flyer over to the object in question. Then she dismounted and stood directly behind the stone for cover, causing Clarkent to breathe a quiet sigh of relief.

North watched the queen’s actions in amusement. “You believe you can protect her from me and my men all by yourself?” He stared at the enchanted sword and scoffed, “Do you think yourself the next ruler of Kryptonita? Is that why you believe that *stone* will offer her some refuge?”

Clarkent had no idea what King North was talking about, but he had no time to consider it, as the king then gave his men the signal to attack.

The fight had begun.

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For a few minutes, Loisette watched in awe as Clarkent battled his opponents on horseback. The stableboy fought like ten men. He must have really been going soft on her whenever they sparred together. She had never seen him like this.

But though he was obviously strong--likely having enhanced his skills during his time as the Black Knight--he was outnumbered and in desperate need of help. She had to stop watching and start concentrating on doing something to help him.

Loisette nocked an arrow and shot it off at a man. It bounced off his armor, and she narrowed her eyes. She would have to aim more carefully.

Suddenly, however, she had an idea.

“\*\*High Flyer,\*\*” she called out. “\*\*Can you guide some of the other horses here one at a time? Maybe I can convince them to turn on their masters.\*\*” They needed every advantage they could get.

“\*\*Yes,\*\*” the horse replied shortly. He trotted away, and she

concentrated once more on utilizing her bow and arrow as best as she could.

Aiming slowly, she let fly another arrow, and this one landed in the weak spot beneath a man's arm. "Yes!" she crowed. She didn't want to kill anyone, but she was pleased at the painful inconvenience she had caused that man. He cried out and yanked at the arrow and flung it to the ground.

She loosed a few unsuccessful arrows, and then High Flyer managed to press a horse close enough to Loisetette that she could hold a conversation with it.

"\*\**What's your name?*\*\*" Loisetette asked hastily.

The black and white horse's human was fighting to pull it back into the fray. "\*\**Sonata,*\*\*" the horse answered.

"\*\**Can you please try to keep your master away from my friend? This is not a fair fight, and I don't want my friend hurt.*\*\*"

The horse glanced at Clarkent, who was ducking one sword and pushing back another. "\*\**You are right, human. I will try. I dislike bloodshed.*\*\*"

"\*\**Thank you,*\*\*" Loisetette said, watching the angry rider pull Sonata away.

Loisetette was able to speak to a few more of the horses as she continued using her bow. She was adding to the confusion of the fight, and she prayed it would be enough to make her and Clarkent get out of this alive. Sweat was already pouring down the stableboy's face. She wasn't sure what else she could do. She could try to steal someone's sword, but she just didn't have enough confidence in her skills as a sword-fighter. She had only practiced with sticks, not real blades.

She suddenly noticed a horseman coming up behind Clarkent, who was already embroiled in a sword-fight with two other opponents.

"\*\**Help him!*\*\*" she shouted out to the horses, hoping one would listen to her.

Sonata rushed forward at her call and bumped into the horse whose rider was about to attack Clarkent. The man dropped his sword and flailed out, grabbing a hold of Clarkent and bringing him down to the ground with him. Phantom leapt aside so as not to crush his rider. Clarkent rolled away from his opponent and jumped to his feet, holding his sword at the ready. A nearby man on horseback swiped at him, but Clarkent dodged the attack. Loisetette watched him, worried.

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Clarkent was exhausted.

His morals wouldn't allow him to kill anyone, and it wasn't exactly easy to knock someone out who was wearing armor, especially since he wasn't well rested. So far, he and Loisetette had succeeded in incapacitating five men--the incapacitation of one of those men owing to the fact that his horse actually ran away from the battle--but there were still too many left for them to defeat.

Clarkent slashed and dodged and parried, but he was tiring quickly. And then he heard the thud of hooves and turned. A horse was bearing down on him.

He braced himself for the impact even as he tried to get out of the way. But the horse missed him at the last second. It was instead the lashing out of a rider's foot that knocked him to the ground, his sword flying out of his hand.

"No," he groaned helplessly. He ran to get the sword, but a man had already dismounted and picked it up. Clarkent backed away, knowing it would be difficult to retrieve the weapon now. And then, unexpectedly, someone grabbed at his arms and pinned them behind his back. He struggled, kicking backward, but the armor--which a sword might have succeeded in piercing--withstood his attacks, and no amount of squirming would make the knight release him. And then his own sword was pointed at his throat. Irony was laughing him in the face. Was he doomed to die by his own blade?

The noise of battle had quieted now that he had been captured, so he was able to hear approaching hoofbeats. He and his captors turned to see who was coming.

Six horses were approaching, the front one of which was bearing Tempos on its back. Clarkent felt like cursing. Of course *he* would show up. Things couldn't get much worse.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Tempos said loudly. He was wearing a gold and red tunic, as if announcing his royal aspirations to the world. "I had come to have a friendly chat with you, King North, but it appears you aren't a fan of conversation." Though no one was fighting anymore, the disorder of battle was still readily evident.

King North, who had kept out of the fight, gave him a slight smile. Nodding toward Loisetette, he said, "We have captured your queen and your thief."

"It's like Yuletide and my birthday all wrapped up in one," Tempos said in amusement.

The man holding Clarkent pointed his own blade at the stableboy's throat. The man with Clarkent's sword then went up to King North with it.

"His sword, Your Majesty," the man said, holding the sword up for his ruler to take. The king frowned down at it, running a hand along the hilt.

"My, what a big sword you had," Tempos sneered at Clarkent.

"The better to defeat evil men like you with," Clarkent growled in return.

Tempos laughed. "I like you. You've got spirit. It's too bad I'll have to kill you." He brought his horse up in front of the Kryptonian king. "I have to thank you for helping me with these little pests. The Black Knight has been a thorn in my side for too long."

Clarkent's eyes widened. Tempos ... knew?

Glancing at Clarkent and seeing his expression, Tempos chuckled. "You think I don't recognize that horse you're riding? I've seen it twice. I make it my business to know horses just as I make it my business to know the people working at the castle. I have to admit, though, I wouldn't think the queen would go for the stableboy type. I guess you never can tell."

Clarkent narrowed his eyes and growled.

"Ha ha, the little horse keeper is angry, isn't he?" Tempos said, smiling sinisterly.

King North cleared his throat. "I was glad to help you--and now I shall help myself." He lifted his hand, and a Green Guardsman on horseback near Tempos plunged a sword into the duke's chest and then removed it.

Tempos looked down at the bleeding wound in his chest in a detached way. "You know, I expected more of a back-stabbing than a front-stabbing, but I guess we can't have everything." Then he stared at King North defiantly for a few seconds before slumping on his horse.

King North's Green Guard sprung into action, attacking Tempos's men. The Metropolitanans were slow to respond, overcome as they were by the betrayal of their master, but they nonetheless started to fight back.

In the confusion, Clarkent managed to break free of his captor and escape to the great stone Loisetette was taking cover behind. She lunged forward and embraced him. "Clarkent, I was so scared they were going to kill you," she told him.

"They still might," he said grimly. But he looked down at her soft brown hair and softened. Then he placed a kiss on her head, deeply inhaling her scent before lifting his gaze to look at the battle waging before them. "But I won't let them kill you. I can't."

"Clark," she whispered. "Can't we escape? Maybe they won't notice us."

"We have to finish this, Lois," he told her in a quiet voice,

squeezing her tightly. *<This could be the last time I hold her,>* he thought. *<No matter what happens, I won't let her die. Somehow, I'll save her from this monster of a king.>*

He pressed one more kiss on her, this one on her forehead, and then he pulled away. If he was going to fight, he would need a weapon. He had only one hope.

He hoisted himself to the top of the large rock and wiped some sweat off his brow nervously. If this didn't work, he didn't know what he would do. It was his last chance.

He stepped up to the sword in the stone, wrapping his hands around the hilt. Closing his eyes and throwing a prayer heavenward, he pulled upward with all his might.

A loud noise split the air.

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### Chapter 36: Birthright

Cheen watched in bitter disgust as the other members of the Green Guard attacked the Metropolitan soldiers. He hated fighting in situations like this--he hated when the opponent was so obviously outnumbered. It felt more like a slaughter.

He and his wife Araz had initially jumped at the opportunity for him to be part of the Green Guard. They had thought it would be a great honor. He had always been skilled with weapons. He could throw a dagger with pinpoint accuracy, and there were few who could best him in a sword-fight. He was meant to be a fighter, and he had believed the Green Guard to be a good fit for himself.

But he had soon found that the newly crowned king was no better than his usurper of a father. King North was cruel, and he was hurting the Kryptonian people by levying heavy taxes and turning a blind eye to injustices. And--to make things worse--he had also been leering at Araz lately. It made Cheen nervous. Kryptonian law dictated that one man could not take another's wife--but that was only so long as that other man was living. Did the king want Cheen to die so he could marry Araz? Would the king find an excuse to kill Cheen himself? His greed was such that Cheen would not put it past him.

Most of the other members of the Green Guard shared Cheen's unease about what the king made them do. Even if Cheen hadn't been part of their hushed conversations behind closed doors, he would have been able to guess at their wavering loyalty at a battle like this.

Though the knights of the Green Guard were fighting and winning, they were not giving it their all. While the young man they had attacked had shown his impressive strength and skill in battle--and the queen in boy's clothing had proven herself quite able of assisting him from afar--there was no way the two young people could have been a match for the well-trained men of the Green Guard when they were fighting at their best. But the Green Guards *weren't* fighting at their best. They were sick of serving a cruel ruler, and they were ready for change ... but no one wished to be covered with the taint of treason. And so they fought, though it was half-hearted.

Cheen moved his horse closer--there wasn't really room for another horse to move into the fray, but he wanted King North to at least think him alert--only to almost drop his reins at the sound of a loud *crack*.

Swiveling his body toward the source of the noise, he stared in wonder. The large stone once holding the enchanted blade had split into two. And the young man who'd fought so skillfully had the sword in his hands.

Cheen's eyes widened in surprise. Only the rightful ruler of Krypton was supposed to be able to pull it out--as the script on the now-cracked stone had read.

Cheen turned his gaze toward King North, who was staring at the boy with a stunned expression. "Kallel?" North breathed in disbelief. "Is it you? You're alive?"

Hope suddenly flooded Cheen's heart. Without any

hesitation, he brought his horse closer to the young man. Then he dismounted and walked forward.

Wary, the boy held his sword at the ready, glancing behind briefly to where the queen was still down on the ground at the base of the rock. But Cheen had no desire to hurt either of them. Instead, he dropped to his knees and bowed.

Tentative tendrils of joy were spreading through the Kryptonian knight. Was this the change he had been hoping for? He barely dared believe it was.

He raised his head as he heard a noise behind him.

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North's horse galloped over to the great stone, and the king leapt down with his sword drawn.

"Be careful," Clarkent warned Loisetette. But though she was still on the ground and he was up on the stone, he knew she wasn't in danger. North was coming for him.

The Kryptonian king jumped up onto the cracked rock, his green blade flashing downward. Clarkent met it with his own silver sword.

"I will kill you," growled King North. His eyes were filled with fury as he glared at his opponent.

"We'll see about that," Clarkent returned. He shoved his sword forward and to the side, pushing North off the left of the rock. Then he jumped down beside him, making sure to keep himself between North and Loisetette.

North's sword flashed once, twice, three times--Clarkent beat it back, his gaze unwavering. Then North kicked him in the knee, and he stumbled backward. North's sword came crashing down, and Clarkent ducked to the side. It missed his head, but it sliced down the flesh of his left arm.

Clarkent hissed in pain. His shoulder was burning far more than he would have expected. Did that mean Loisetette was right? *Were* the swords poisoned? Were the toxins going to spread through his body?

He heard Loisetette gasp, "Clarkent!"

"Your little queen is worried about you," sneered North as he parried the stableboy's sword. "Perhaps I ought to kill her so you won't be distracted by her screams anymore."

"No!" Clarkent growled, lunging forward. He would protect Loisetette no matter what.

Clarkent made one thrust and then another, his attacks like the strike of a snake. A blow to the shoulder. A sudden punch to the face. A kick to the stomach. A strike to the underarm. Clarkent's attacks were relentless.

Though some of his strikes were rendered useless by North's armor, Clarkent continued to fight like a madman. His fury boiled inside him, urging him on. His wild barrage surprised the king and sent him backward, forcing him to remain on the defense. Clarkent had to win for the queen. He *had* to.

Clarkent pushed his opponent's sword arm aside. Then he shoved his shoulder into North's chest with all his might. The king went toppling to the ground.

Clarkent glared down at him, his chest heaving. His sword was pointed at North's throat. "I won't let you hurt the queen," Clarkent said in a low voice. He would fight for Loisetette until his dying breath.

North swallowed, his eyes fixed on the sword. "Green Guard!" he growled, a note of desperation in his voice. "Come protect your king!"

Clarkent watched him carefully, wary for any sudden movements. He tensed and listened for the sound of horse hooves indicating the approach of his enemies. Instead, he only heard the sound of feet hitting the ground.

Taking in a deep breath--his vision was beginning to swim a little now, the effects of the poison taking hold--Clarkent turned his head. His jaw dropped.

The Kryptonians were bowing to him.

“What?” Clarkent whispered in disbelief. What was happening? He shook his head, trying to clear it. Was he hallucinating?

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Loisette had been almost certain they were going to die. Though Clarkent was an excellent swordsman, he was outnumbered. And Loisette’s bow couldn’t help much due to the Green Guard’s armor.

So when the Kryptonian knights got off their horses, she feared they were going to overcome Clarkent by attacking him all at once. Instead, they dropped to the ground and bowed their heads.

King North appeared just as taken aback as she was. When he finally found his voice, he hissed, “Rise, you imbeciles! *I* am your king! Not this tattered *boy!*”

But the knights of the Green Guard did not obey.

Loisette stared at them, but there was no trace of tension in their stances. Her head turned when she saw a flash of movement, but it was just Clarkent taking a few steps away from North.

“What are you doing?” he asked the bowing Kryptonians. Loisette understood his confusion--minutes ago, they had been his opponents. Now, they simply remained kneeling, their heads bowed in respect and submission.

Was it connected to the sword? She fixed her eyes on the blade, which was hanging down by Clarkent’s side now.

And then there was another flash of movement, and Loisette gasped out in warning for Clarkent, “No!”

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At Loisette’s cry, Clarkent turned. North was charging toward him.

Clarkent tried to step aside and bring up his sword, but the poison was draining his energy. His movements were too slow. He wouldn’t be able to block the blow. He closed his eyes and waited for death to come.

But instead of pain and darkness, there was a gargling noise and a sharp intake of breath.

Clarkent opened his eyes. North was slumping to the ground, a dagger embedded in his throat.

In confusion, Clarkent turned his head. One of the Kryptonians was standing, his arm still raised in the air. He had to have been the one that threw the dagger. It was the man who had first bowed to him.

“Why did you do that?” Clarkent asked him. North had been his ruler. Why would he do something so treasonous?

“He was trying to kill my king,” the Kryptonian replied, as if it were obvious. “I could not let him do that.”

Clarkent’s surprise--which was already great--grew. “*K-king?*” he sputtered.

“Yes, his *king*,” a familiar voice confirmed loudly.

Clarkent looked across what had minutes before been a battlefield and saw Peri approaching with his staff in hand. “Peri?” he said, surprised to see the magician.

One of the Kryptonians gasped, and another said, “Is that the Merlin? I thought he was dead.”

Clarkent blinked his eyes, trying to fight against the poison. “How did you find me?” he managed.

“James found me,” Peri explained as he stepped up to him. His eyes fell down to Clarkent’s bleeding arm. “North got you with his sword?”

“Yes,” Clarkent confirmed. Then his knees buckled. Fortunately, Peri caught him before he hurt himself. Then he lowered the young man gently to the ground.

“Clarkent!” Loisette called out as she ran to him. She knelt as soon as she reached him and took his right hand in hers. “Are you all right?” Her face appeared above his.

He gave her a small smile. “You’re alive, Your Majesty. Of

course I am.” As he stared up at her, he thought about how beautiful she was, even in her Gawain clothes. She was his battlefield angel--his warrior queen. He loved her so much. He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if she had died.

“I will try to draw the poison out of your system,” Peri said as he brought out his medicine pouch. He spoke in a low voice so their conversation wouldn’t be overheard by the nearby Green Guard. “We can’t have Kryptonion’s new king dying of a wounded arm.”

“New king?” Clarkent echoed, blinking the haze out of his eyes. “Why does everyone keep saying that?” he asked. He hissed as Peri touched his arm.

“Because you pulled the sword out of the stone,” Peri told him with a smile. “Before North’s father was king, *yours* was, Kallel.”

“What do you mean?” Clarkent said in confusion. “Kallel? My father?” His head was swirling, and he was finding it hard to understand anything.

“Your birth name is Kallel,” explained Peri slowly, “and your father was Joreth. When you were an infant, he and your mother, Laural, feared that the ambitions of North’s father would lead to your death. I was Joreth’s court magician and counselor, and he entrusted me to find a good home for you in Metropolita.”

“Joreth was right to think there would be danger,” Loisette said softly. Her fingers were gently rubbing Clarkent’s unwounded arm, causing it to tingle in a pleasant way that distracted him from the pain of his other arm. “He got killed, and North’s father married Laural.”

Peri nodded, looking sad. “In order to hear important news about both kingdoms, I established myself as court magician in Metropolita, replacing the scamp who used to be here. I came upon James, and he helped me find Marta and Jon.”

“You know my parents?” Clarkent asked, trying to keep the conversation straight in his head. Peri’s work on his arm was starting to take effect. He began to sit up, but Peri gently pushed him back down. Clarkent sighed in frustration but remained on his back nonetheless. It felt weird to be lying down with all those people staring at him. But Peri wasn’t finished with him yet, and Clarkent truthfully wasn’t sure if he could stand. The fury of fighting North might have kept the poison at bay, but it had really flooded his system once the king was killed.

“I do know them,” Peri confirmed. “I speak with them from time to time. They like to know how you are--they fear you leave things out of your letters.”

Clarkent couldn’t help but feel a little hurt. “If they knew who I was, why didn’t they ever tell me?” he asked. They could have let him know when they told him he was adopted.

“It wasn’t fair for a king to grow up as a stableboy,” Peri said with a sigh. “But I needed you to be somewhere close to me so I could watch over you, and there were no ideal occupations for you because of the Assigning.” He shook his head. “I didn’t want you to know about your heritage in case things didn’t work out. I had to wait until you were strong enough to face North on your own. Dwayne helped me keep an eye on you--he was one of the people at the castle who I knew I could trust with your secret.”

“The sword in the stone--how does *it* play into all this?” Loisette ventured, squeezing Clarkent’s hand. He smiled at her and was overjoyed when she smiled back. Having Peri heal him didn’t seem so bad when she was with him. He wished she would never let go of his hand. He never wanted to let go of hers.

“I got that from the Lady of the Lake,” Peri told her.

Clarkent--though wrapped up in thoughts of Loisette--was paying enough attention that he caught what Peri said, and his eyes widened. “She’s real?”

Loisette punched his shoulder lightly. “I told you!”

Clarkent grinned at her. That was Gawain shining through the young woman. Then again--the princess had liked being right,

too.

“I thought the Kryptonian people needed a symbol that all was not lost,” Peri told them, drawing Clarkent’s attention back to him. “The sword’s magic was strong by itself. When I applied my magic to it, the spell created was powerful indeed. You were the only one who could have pulled that sword out, Clarkent. And now these Kryptonians know you’re their king beyond a doubt.” He gestured for Clarkent to rise; he was done with the poisoned arm.

Carefully, Clarkent got to his feet, Loisetette and Peri assisting him. All the knights of the Green Guard had their eyes on him. He was ... their king? Truly? This wasn’t some façade or dream, was it?

Peri, perhaps sensing his doubt, said loudly for all to hear, “This is Kallel, the rightful king of Krypton. He pulled the sword from the stone and proved his worth to us all.”

The man who had killed North looked up at Clarkent and smiled. Then he responded to Peri’s pronouncement with a shout: “Long live the king!”

His cry was echoed by the other Kryptonians.

Clarkent looked at them, wide-eyed, and Loisetette stepped up beside him and squeezed his right arm. “Long live the king,” she whispered back with a smile, leaning her head against his shoulder.

Though still overwhelmed by all that had happened, there was one thought resonating in his head: he was no longer a stableboy, but a king ... and kings *were* allowed to love queens.

He placed his right arm around Loisetette and pressed her up against him. Despite almost dying, it was the happiest day of his life.

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### Chapter 37: Unity

Loisetette stared at Clarkent and hid her grin. It was the day of his coronation ceremony, and he was squirming under everyone’s scrutiny. He obviously didn’t feel the part of a king. But he certainly looked it.

He was dressed in blue and gold. In fact, his outfit was very similar to what he had worn at Loisetette’s birthday ball, though the gold cape he had on now was much heavier and lined with ermine. Like before, his chest bore a rearing dragon, which was the symbol of Kryptonian royalty. His tunic showed off the broadness of his chest and shoulders, and that in conjunction with his fine clothing and the muscles he’d built up over the years gave his form a powerful look that befit a king.

She allowed herself to stare at him without any reservations. She studied the line of his jaw, the softness of his eyes, the slight curl of his dark bangs over his forehead ... He was a handsome man--deep down, she’d always known that--but to see him here like this really drove the realization home to her. He had such strength of character and body ... and now he would have the power of the crown to go along with it. He would make a wonderful king.

She glanced beside her at Clarkent’s parents. He’d refused to have the coronation until they were there, though his new Kryptonian advisors had wanted him to be crowned as soon as possible since they didn’t want their kingdom to be kingless for long. Loisetette had shaken her head with a smile at his stubbornness, but she hadn’t argued with him. She knew his parents would want to be there.

Marta caught her movement and gave her a warm look. She and Jon had been given a quick explanation of the connection between Loisetette and Gawain before the ceremony, and though they had been surprised, they had also seemed strangely glad. “I hadn’t realized my son was so close to royalty,” Marta had whispered with a wink, and Loisetette had flushed. But there hadn’t been time to point out that Marta’s son *was* royalty before they were whisked away to the ceremony, so Loisetette had been forced

to stifle her reply.

After leaving the border between Krypton and Metropolita, however, Clarkent had made Loisetette go to the stable with him. He had brought out a book from underneath a pile of hay and handed it to her.

“I was going to give you this as part of your birthday present along with the necklace,” he had told her.

She had opened the book and gasped as she realized its subject. “This is about your mother.”

“I know that now,” he had acknowledged with a smile, “though I didn’t when I first got it. I was thinking ... maybe we could read it together?”

“I’d like that,” she had told him.

They still had yet to crack it open again, but she knew they would. It would be nice for them to learn something about the family he had never known.

The former stableboy’s gaze found Loisetette’s across the room, and she smiled at him. He beamed back at her, the traces of discomfort disappearing as their eyes connected. His gaze then shifted from her to his parents, who also smiled at him.

The words of the ceremony were lost to Loisetette, who could barely even remember what had been said at her own coronation. She was too lost in thought to pay attention to anything but Clarkent. But when they finally placed the crown on his head, she felt her chest swell with pride. She thought again to herself, *<He will make a wonderful king.>*

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The Black Mage stared with no small measure of bitterness as people stepped forward to swear fealty to Krypton’s new king.

He had not been able to convince North or his father of their need to imitate their successors and employ a court magician. Though they hadn’t said it explicitly, both North and his father had disliked the idea of having someone around who might be stronger than them. It didn’t look like he’d be getting employed by the new king either--the boy was too friendly with Peregrine the White for that to be a feasible possibility.

If only he had known the stableboy was a king--then he could have really caused some mischief. Maybe he could have even “befriended” him, cultivating good relations for the time when the boy became Krypton’s ruler. But that despicable White Mage had kept the boy’s identity under wraps.

He hated White Mages. They were always interfering.

His stint as the reinstated court magician of Metropolita had been short indeed, and it made him feel very sour. The new queen had brought back Peregrine to the position, blasted usurper as he was.

Things just hadn’t worked out as he had planned. He had thought that creating some mischief with Princess Loisetette would work as suitable revenge on King Samuel for replacing *him*, the Mystical Sorcerer. His “deals” with people had been disliked by King Samuel, who had jumped at the opportunity to employ Peregrine the White in his stead.

After that, he had wanted vengeance. And he had thought the best way to achieve that was to toy with the king’s daughter.

Even after the king died, he figured he could at least make the dead man roll over in his grave by ruining his only child. But the spell surrounding the clothing had been broken--and not by him. He had privately hoped to at last find a good opportunity to reveal to Tempos that Loisetette had been running around as a boy, but then Tempos had to go and get himself killed, and the clothing spell had been broken before there was really a chance for the Black Mage to bring his plans to fruition.

He wanted to lash out one more time at this group of people who had foiled all his mischief. He had bided his time--hoping he could still one day become absolute ruler of absolutely everything--to no avail. They needed to pay. They had torn

everything he had worked for to pieces, making his patience worthless.

But he couldn't decide what to do. A blazing fire at the coronation? A gift of a cursed shield? Or perhaps a cursed hairbrush?

He stared at the Metropolitan queen. She was utterly oblivious to his presence, too caught up with staring at her one true love, who seemed just as intent on giving her goo-goo eyes across the room.

Dragon's bones, how he hated lovers.

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Peregrine frowned to himself. He had been watching the room carefully, fearing some of North's followers would be present and bent on revenging his death by killing Kallel. He could sense some sort of malicious presence, but he was having difficulty pinpointing its location.

Finally, he found it. Though the man was in a black cloak that covered his face, Peri realized who it was immediately. And he saw that the man was staring at Queen Loisetette.

As inconspicuously as he could, Peri went over to stand by Loisetette. She glanced at him briefly in surprise.

"I have a question for you, Your Majesty," he murmured, keeping his eyes focused straight ahead.

"All right," she whispered back, looking nervous.

"Did you make a deal with the Mystical Sorcerer?"

There was a pause before she answered. "I did make a deal with a magician," she said slowly. "But I broke the spell--nothing bad came out of it."

Peri heaved a sigh of relief. That was one of the best things she could have said. Though the Mystical Sorcerer was a powerful magician, someone who had broken one of his spells would have a measure of control over him if they knew one vital thing. "I am glad to hear that," he told her. "Please, come with me."

She looked at Kallel with a frown, obviously loath to leave since the coronation ceremony was not finished, but then she nodded. She excused herself from Marta and Jon and went with Peri.

The Mystical Sorcerer was standing at the back of the room. Upon seeing them, he slipped out, but they followed him.

"Stop," Peri said in a firm but low voice.

The Black Mage did as he said and turned, pulling down his hood and revealing his perturbed expression. "What do you want, *White Mage*?"

"I told you not to make any more of your 'deals' with people," Peri said, his tone harsh.

"You are not the boss of me," the man said, crossing his arms. "I can do whatever I want."

"I will not let you run around ruining people's lives like a child whose toy was taken away," Peri told him.

"Oh, really? And how are you going to stop me?" challenged the Mystical Sorcerer.

Peri leaned down next to Loisetette and whispered in her ear.

She nodded, and a small smile spread across her face. "I command you to leave ... Mxyzptlk." The last word was said slowly but properly.

The man's eyes widened. "How did you know my true name?" His whined question sounded strangely pathetic. He knew, as Peri did, that he had no choice but to leave. Part of his strength was tied up in the fact that his name was rarely spoken--but now Loisetette had said it aloud. His game was up.

"I have my ways," Peri returned. "Now, you must go."

Mxyzptlk sighed. "You really have ruined my fun. But I guess I'll go. Perhaps I can find another lonely princess to fool."

Peri gazed at him sternly and watched as the magician left. Finally, he turned to Loisetette. "You should have nothing more to worry about from him, Your Majesty."

"Thanks, Peri," she said with a smile. "I had worried a little bit after I broke the spell. I wasn't sure if he would know about it."

"Well, it's over now," he said. "Perhaps one day you can tell me more about what that spell actually was, Your Majesty. But for now, let us return to Kallel's coronation." It was so nice to be able to speak the name the young man had been given at birth. Peri had barely even let himself think it for years.

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After the ceremony, Clarkent--now King Kallel--went and hugged his parents. Loisetette watched him, her heart bursting with joy for how things had turned out for them all. Clarkent would never have to worry about his parents' situation again.

"We're so proud of you," Marta told him, tears in her eyes. "You deserve to be happy."

"I'm just glad I'll finally be able to really help you," he returned with a grin. "You'll be living here from now on. And I'll be able to see you as much as I want!"

Jon laughed. "We'll enjoy seeing you more often, too, son."

Clarkent embraced his parents once more and then turned to Loisetette. "Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she replied, smiling at him. When he had spoken to her, something inside her had jumped. It was as if there was something charged in the air between them. A warm look from him was enough to make her weak, nervous, and happy all at once. She wasn't sure how he managed to do that to her. But she liked it.

Without another word, he offered her his arm, which she took, and he led her outside to the courtyard. It was more secluded there, so she was glad. She had wanted to be away from all those people.

He sat her down on the bench and then lowered himself to sit beside her. So much had happened in such a short time--it was nice that they could have this time alone. They needed to unwind a little.

"You're wearing the necklace I gave you," he noted, a happy grin tugging at his lips.

"I am," she said warmly, reaching up to slide a thumb across the pegasus. A part of her never wanted to take the necklace off.

"Why did you leave during the ceremony?" he asked abruptly, sounding a little worried. "Is everything all right?"

She nodded reassuringly. "I'll tell you more about it later." She didn't want to waste their time together by talking about something negative. The explanation could wait.

"All right," he said, perhaps thinking along the same lines. He picked up one of her hands and lightly slid his fingers back and forth across it, causing goose bumps to spread all over her arm. Then he lifted her hand and placed a kiss on it. "Lois," he whispered, the name causing her breath to catch in her throat, "I've loved you for so long. I tried to fool myself into believing otherwise, but I never really succeeded. You don't know how I've ached to tell you how I feel, but a stableboy has no right to utter such words to a princess. I love you so much."

Loisetette gave him a crooked smile. "What about the boy part of me?"

He chuckled. "I love every bit of you, Your Majesty, from your head down to your toes."

"Please," she murmured, "call me 'Lois.'"

"Lois," he said, his voice husky and his eyes dark with passion. Her gaze was fixed on him, and she couldn't have looked away even if she'd wanted to. "My brave adventurer. My wonderful friend. My spirited filly."

That last phrase broke the reverie Loisetette had slipped into, and she shook her head in disbelief. "You *would* compare me to a horse--"

"My beautiful young lady," he continued, narrowing his eyes slightly at her interruption. "My ... " He frowned, having run out

of descriptions.

Loisette laughed at him and patted his leg. “There will be plenty of time to write me love letters and sonnets in the future.”

“I suppose you’re right, *Your Majesty*,” he stated, smiling.

She tilted her head, looking at him. “You know, I can call *you* that now, too, *Your Majesty*.”

“No, I’m just a simple stableboy,” he denied. He lifted his hands in the air for emphasis.

“Then what’s that thing on your head?” she asked him, reaching up to tug at his crown. He brought his arm up and lowered her hand, engulfing it in his.

“That’s just a decoration,” he told her. He was staring into her eyes again. They had been oscillating between seriousness and play, both of them nervous about what was happening between them, but now it had turned to pure seriousness. For a moment, she felt as if they were frozen in time. It was just him and her and their insurmountable and titanic feelings for each other. Before, they’d had to fight against those feelings. Now, there was nothing to hold them back. There was no need to fight them.

“I love you,” he whispered, choked with emotion.

“I love you,” she returned, melting under the intensity of his gaze.

“Lois--I have to ask you something. Some may see me as a king; others knew me only as the Black Knight. But deep down, I’ll always be a stableboy. I’m not sophisticated like a Metropolitan Noble, and I’ll probably never be a great dancer. But I know how I feel ... and I know that I need you to do me--a stableboy-turned-king--a tremendous favor.”

“And what is that?” she murmured, caught in his eyes and the emotion of his voice.

“Will you marry me?” he asked, sounding almost desperate as he brought one of her hands up and pressed it against his chest. The gentle throbbing beneath her fingers was slightly faster than normal.

She gave him a half-smile. “I guess every king needs his little queen.”

“Little queen?” he repeated, sounding startled. “That’s not what I mean,” he proclaimed firmly, shaking his head with vehemence. “I want you to be my equal, Lois. You will never be inferior to me. *Never*. Both Princess Loisette and Gawain were my good friends--pieces of my soul. I would never wish to rule you. But with you as my equal, we could do great things together--we could unite our kingdoms back into Solaria. We could heal that break.”

After being viewed of late as a marriageable item rather than a person, hearing words like that felt comforting. She smirked at Clarkent and said teasingly, “I’m not going to have to ride sidesaddle, am I?”

He laughed at her question and shook his head. “No, Lois, no. Not if you don’t want to. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What about our people?”

“Them, too,” he returned with a grin. He pushed her hand harder against his chest. “This heart inside me--it beats only for you. You make it--you make it gallop ... like a whole herd of High Flyers.”

Loisette couldn’t help but snort. “Again with the horses?”

“Remember—I will always be a stableboy at heart, my queen.”

“And that’s just how I like you,” she told him. “Of course I’ll marry you. I never could have married anyone but you.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he murmured. And then he crushed her against him and claimed her lips for his own.

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The marriage of a king and queen was not an easy affair. There was a contract to sign—How many days out of the year were they required at each castle? What would the dowry be?

How would heirs be handled? What power would they hold in each other’s kingdoms?—and though Loisette and Clarkent believed much of it would become meaningless when they finally drew up the new Solarian government, their royal advisors insisted on following protocol, and neither monarch had wanted to fight against them for long.

Finally, however, the wedding day came.

Much to the frustration of royal advisors from both kingdoms, they held the ceremony in one of the courtyards at Loisette’s castle. Even more exasperating to said advisors was the fact that the royal bride and groom wished to be wed while riding horses.

Clarkent, who was riding Esroh Repus, wore a red cape and a blue tunic, and his chest bore in gold the future symbol of the united kingdom of Solaria. On the front of his tunic was a rearing Pegasus facing a similarly upright dragon, combining both the palette and symbols of both kingdoms. The pegasus was known for its flight and speed, whereas dragons were known for their strength and endurance. Both Clarkent and Loisette had felt it a solid union of meanings for the Solarian royal symbol, and it was a way to revert back to what the united kingdom’s symbol had once been. Peri he told them that a pair of twin brothers had once ruled Solaria, which was why there were two symbols. When Solaria split, each kingdom had simply taken one of the brothers’ symbols as a crest.

Loisette was also in the united royal colors, with a blue cape and a red and gold dress. At her neck was the pegasus necklace, but she hadn’t forgotten Kryptonion’s royal symbol--her wedding ring had a tiny dragon engraved on it.

As the Metropolitan queen approached on High Flyer, Clarkent merely stared. Even when she was beside him and when Peri, who was administering the service, began talking--asking if anyone knew why the two should not be married--Clarkent couldn’t do anything but watch her. She was beautiful, radiant, happy ... And she was marrying him.

Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that he could truly and honestly and without any regrets be marrying Loisette. He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself if he had brought her any disgrace by marrying her. He hadn’t known that he was a prince of the *Barbarian Kingdom*.

He finally began paying attention to Peri, who was talking specifically to him: “Kallel, do you take this woman to be your wedded wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her, and keep her in sickness and in health, as a husband should his wife, forsaking all others, keeping yourself only unto her ... for as long as you both shall live?”

Clarkent gave her a wide smile. “I will,” he promised.

Then Peri turned to Loisette and asked her if she would take Clarkent as her husband. Her lips pulled upward as she gazed at Clarkent. “I will,” she answered.

Clarkent grinned. He was so happy. He hadn’t realized he could experience such joy. The love of his life was becoming his wife, and his parents would be taken care of for the rest of their lives. He couldn’t ask for anything more.

He was lost in Loisette’s eyes when a slight nudge from Peri caused him to look up and flush. He’d apparently missed his cue. But he knew what he was supposed to say next.

“I, Kallel,” he began, using his Kryptonian name since he was being married as a Kryptonian king, “take you, Loisette, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish ... until death shall us part. This I pledge to you.”

And then it was Loisette’s turn, and she had a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I, Loisette,” she said, “take you, Kallel, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and

in health, to love and to cherish--until death or *adventure* shall us part." Her smile widened, and it was all he could to keep from laughing at her for being so pleased with herself. "This I pledge to you," she finished.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur for Clarkent. He was too far gone in love to think about anything but Loisetette.

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At the wedding feast, Peri and Aliss gazed with no small amount of pleasure at the happy couple. The young queen and king were radiating their joy so intensely that it was somewhat infectious. There was not a dour face to be seen in the crowd. Everyone was glad to see the two kingdoms uniting, for it meant the on-again and off-again war between the two Metropolita and Kryptonita was truly over at last. The two monarchs had a lot of work ahead of them--one of the easier steps of their unity was having a castle made on the border between the two kingdoms, but there were more difficult steps to attend to such as drawing up plans for a government that advisors from both kingdoms would accept--but they also had a lifetime of bliss to look forward to. The hardest part of their lives was over.

"Now that our charges have a happy ending," Aliss finally said, "might we have one, too?" She was looking up at the wizard with a ghost of a smile on her lips.

"You sure know how to make a wizard's heart dance," he told her with a chuckle. "I suppose since the King's son and King Samuel's daughter are now working on their happily ever after, we can start as well." He put an arm around her, pressing her against him, and then he lovingly kissed the top of her head. "I'm just glad you're still interested in an old sorcerer like me."

She hit his chest lightly. "I'm no young lamb myself. But I'd say we both have a lot of life left in us yet."

"That we do, Aliss. That we do." Peri gazed across the room once more at the newly married couple. "But somehow, I don't think we've seen an end to the adventures of Loisetette and 'Clarkent.'"

Aliss laughed. "I have the feeling you're right, Peri. If trouble doesn't find them, then the queen will find it. And we know that wherever the queen goes, the king will follow."

Peri shook his head with a smile. "I fear you're only too right about that."

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## Epilogue

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"Now, watch your left side. Sometimes, you get a little overconfident and leave yourself vulnerable. Though these aren't real fights, people still get hurt, and I want you to be careful."

The fifteen-year-old Prince Gawain sighed. "I know, Dad. You've told me that a thousand times."

Clarkent grinned. His eldest son may have been pretending indifference, but Clarkent could tell Gawain was nervous just by the way the boy's eyes kept flickering to the list field.

Gawain had always looked up to both of his parents, but he was especially close to his father, whose stories of his days as the Black Knight were always enough to make Gawain listen intently and with admiration. And now, Gawain was about to participate in his first sword-fighting tournament.

"I have something for you," Clarkent said, reaching down to his side and removing the sword and sheath from there. "This sword used to belong to belong to King Joreth, your grandfather. It's the blade I carried as the Black Knight. I want you to have it now. There's no need for you to carry that rusty old thing around any longer."

With fumbling hands, Gawain removed his old sword and exchanged it with the one his father was giving him. "Th-thanks, Dad," he managed, obviously touched by the gift.

"I'm glad to do it," Clarkent returned. Then, smiling to himself, he reached up a hand and lowered his son's visor. "All

right. Do me proud, son."

"I promise not to run away, Dad," Gawain teased, referring to his father's first jousting tournament.

Clarkent thumped his son's armor-covered chest. "You'd better not. Good luck."

And then he moved away back to the spectator area where the rest of his family was waiting. The tournament was about to start, and as king, he was supposed to be the one that cued its beginning.

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Loisetette watched her son nervously as he carefully sidestepped a swipe from his opponent. He was using the sword his father had just given him, and they looked so well-suited--the old sword and the young knight.

She stared at her son in admiration. Her son's form was a bit obscured by his jousting armor, but--with his broadening shoulders and his love of horses--he reminded her very much of the stableboy who had stolen her heart. A part of her suspected that one day a new and mysterious knight would be spotted traipsing the countryside ... and on that day, she would be certain to check the Riding Stable and see if Gawain's favorite horse, Spirit Chaser, was missing. The black destrier was one of Phantom's descendants, and Loisetette had a feeling he would make just as good a horse as Phantom had for Clarkent. While Clarkent had (mostly) retired the Black Knight to concentrate on his royal duties, there were always criminals to be caught.

The crowd cheered as Gawain felled his opponent, and he pulled his visor up and grinned at his parents.

Loisetette smiled back. "He won!" she cheered.

"I knew he would," Clarkent said proudly, pulling the Solarian queen into a kiss.

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At the end of the tournament, as people were dispersing, Clarkent couldn't resist giving Loisetette another victory kiss.

"That's gross," came a male voice. "Don't you two ever stop?"

Clarkent broke away and looked at Gawain, who had come up to talk to them. "I can't help it if I love my wife," the king stated. But there was a slight flush of embarrassment to his cheeks.

"Well, you can at least spare the rest of the world," muttered the boy, though there was no real malice in his voice.

"Oh, why don't you go play with Spirit Chaser?" Clarkent said, reaching out to drop his son's visor.

"Would you stop doing that?" Gawain said in annoyance, pushing away his father's hand and lifting the visor up. "I'm not a little kid, Dad."

"I know, I know--you're a knight in training," Clarkent teased. He liked to give his son a little grief on occasion, but the prince had too much of his mother in him not to give as good as he got.

"Be nice to your son, Clarkent," Loisetette admonished.

"Yeah, you'd better listen to Mom," the ten-year-old Jerome spoke up. "She tames dragons, and she can tame you, too!"

Clarkent put up two hands like claws and swooped down on his son with them. "I don't think so!" he mock-growled, chasing after the boy.

"Daddy!" squeaked Lois, their youngest, as she went after him. "Don't hurt him!"

Loisetette rolled her eyes and turned to her children. Someone was missing. She frowned.

"Where did Loral go?" she asked as Clarkent came back with Lois on his shoulders and Jerome trailing him.

Ellena, the second eldest of Loisetette and Clarkent's children, answered with a note of exasperation in her tone. "I bet she dressed up like a boy again and snuck off to the stable." Ellena really resembled the painting of the grandmother she had been

named after, and sometimes Loisetette wondered if this was what her mother had been like as a girl.

Smiling at her daughter, Loisetette told her, “She probably just wants to play with Billy’s son.” Princess Laural was twelve, and she was beginning to become a bit rebellious. Dwayne was still Stable Master of the Riding Stable, but Billy had taken control of the other stable, and his son helped him with it. Because the other stable mostly housed working horses rather than riding horses, it was sometimes difficult for Laural to come up with a good excuse to go ... hence the need for a disguise.

Peri had approached to the queen and king a few weeks ago and mentioned the possibility of training Laural as a sorceress. They had both been flabbergasted, not having realized their child had any potential of that sort, but he had pointed out several strange instances where Laural had done things that she shouldn’t have been able to. Loisetette and Clarkent were still discussing the issue--a princess being a magic-user *was* something to give a person pause, after all--but Loisetette had the feeling they would be agreeing to it soon.

“You should have never told them those stories about you sneaking out,” Clarkent suddenly murmured into his wife’s ear.

She rewarded his comment with a gentle elbow to the gut. Then she turned around and put her hands on her hips, giving her husband a venomless glare. “If she wants to play with her friend without being the source of gossip, who am I to stop her?”

The king just grinned at his wife. “I guess you can’t blame her for wanting to be like her mother. Her mother *is* a brilliant woman, after all.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she told him, hiding her own smile under a façade of sternness.

Clarkent pulled her to him and kissed her.

“I thought I told you two to stop that,” grumbled Gawain.

The king and queen slowly broke apart.

“Maybe one day you’ll understand when you’re in love,” Clarkent told him.

“Whatever,” Gawain muttered.

Loisetette touched the pegasus necklace at her neck. She had the feeling that day would be coming soon for Gawain. His touchiness about his parents’ open displays of affection only seemed to indicate to his mother that he was already interested in a young lady. She had the feeling he was fighting against his own feelings ... and failing.

She smiled to herself. Her son really *was* becoming a man.

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Back at the castle, the royal children scattered. Loisetette and Clarkent met with some of their advisors and then sat down to have a rare moment of blessed peace.

The serenity was soon broken by a child’s cry: “Look at this!”

Loisetette and Clarkent stood and turned to see Ellena and Lois running toward them.

“Herbie made me a time-teller!” Ellena exclaimed, holding the device up in the air. The castle librarian had succeeded in making his personal time-teller years before, but he had sworn never to make another one. Obviously, he had been willing to break that vow for the second eldest of Loisetette and Clarkent’s children. Ellena was, after all, his favorite, and she loved listening to his stories and marveling at his inventions. Little Lois often tagged along with her, much to Ellena’s annoyance.

“That’s impressive,” Clarkent told her, looking down at the device.

“I’m going to show it to James when he comes back from his visit with his parents,” Ellena proclaimed. Aliss had given both Ellena and Laural the ability to talk to animals, and James was a favorite companion of Ellena. Periodically, the Peregrine Falcon would go--with Aliss and Peri as translators--and visit his parents, and he seemed truly happy with his life.

About half a year before, Loisetette had told Clarkent that she wondered if James and Ellena would fall in love and break the falcon’s spell, but he had laughed it off. Now, however, he wasn’t so sure. True love had been able to break the spell on Loisetette’s clothing--could it also break a transformation spell? And if it did, would James appear as an old man? Clarkent had expressed his concerns to Peri, but the magician had just smiled and told him that if the spell was broken in such a fashion, love would take true love’s form. Clarkent had guessed that meant James would not only become human but also assume Ellena’s age--provided love *did* spring up between the two. When Loisetette translated James’s conversation for Clarkent, the falcon had certainly seemed to act young despite his years, so his assuming a youthful form (again, if it *did* happen) wouldn’t be as strange as the fact that he was no longer a falcon. And as for the suitability of the match, well, James’s parents were Nobles, so there wasn’t anything to protest on that front. But Clarkent did think it weird that he could possibly have a falcon for a son-in-law.

“I want a time-teller,” pouted little Lois, her eyes filling with tears. “Make her give it to me!” Her face was turning red, and it was obvious she was on the verge of a temper tantrum.

Clarkent walked over and knelt on the ground, looking up at her. “Lois, Herbie gave that time-teller to Ellena, not you.”

“But I want one,” she sniffled.

“I know, Princess, and I’m sorry. But when someone gives a gift, it belongs to that person alone. You know that, don’t you, honey?”

Lois stared at her shoes. There was a small gray mouse nibbling at her right shoe, and she picked it up and looked at her father. The mouse was one of Robert Bigmouth’s many descendants, and he often managed to find Lois when she was sad.

“And besides,” her father continued gently, smiling at the mouse in her hands, “your grandparents give you gifts all the time. You wouldn’t like it if Grandmother gave you a special gift, and then I made you give it to Ellena.”

The little girl shook her head.

He hugged her, being careful not to disturb the mouse. It was sometimes difficult for Lois, as she was quite a bit younger than the rest of her siblings, but her grandparents made sure to spoil her to make up for it. Sometimes, however, she did need a little special attention. And since she was Daddy’s little girl, he always made sure to give it. He only worried that one day she would get the idea to go on adventures like her mother had--heaven help him if that day came. She was just as strong-willed as her mother, and he didn’t think he would be able to stop it.

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Loisetette watched with a smile as her husband interacted with their youngest child. She wished her own father had exhibited just some of the understanding that Clarkent seemed to have naturally. If her father had paid just a bit more attention to her and a bit less attention to the ghost of her mother, it would have made her feel so much better. Clarkent was such a good father. Her children were so fortunate to have him.

“Would you stop following me?” complained Gawain as he came up to his parents with Jerome tagging along behind him. “Mom, Dad, can you make him leave me alone?”

Before either Loisetette or Clarkent could reply, a soft voice said, “Your Majesties,” and everyone turned to see the approach of one of the castle’s servants, Kline. He was wearing the same strange bow he always had pinned at the top of his tunic--Loisetette had always meant to ask him why he wore it, but she had never gotten around to it. “There is someone requesting to see you,” Kline informed them. “She says she once knew a friend of yours.”

Clarkent nodded at the servant. “Please send her in.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Kline acknowledged before turning

around and going back the way he had come. He was absentminded sometimes, and he had forgotten to bow. But he was a good man, and neither Loisetette nor Clarkent minded when he forgot about formalities or left his post to look over some of Herbie's inventions.

"Gawain, will you please go ride horses with me?" Jerome pleaded. He really admired his older brother ... much to Gawain's annoyance.

"Go ride horses by yourself," the eldest prince said with narrowed eyes.

"Gawain," Loisetette said warningly.

"Oh, all right," Gawain conceded, glowering at his mother.

"Can I come, too?" Ellena asked, turning her own doe eyes on Gawain.

"Me, too!" insisted little Lois. Though it made her parents a little nervous, she really liked riding High Flyer and Esroh Repus because they had once been ridden by her parents. They weren't as young as they used to be--neither was Ellena's favorite, Agides, for that matter--but they were still going strong.

"Why not?" said Gawain with a dramatic sigh. Mumbling something about babysitting not being part of a prince's job description, he ushered his three siblings out of the room.

"We really need to work on his attitude," Clarkent muttered as he watched them go.

"He's just cranky because he hasn't seen that Nobleman's daughter in a while," Loisetette told him. "We should host a party soon. That will make him cheer up."

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When Kline entered, a young woman was with him. She had auburn hair and blue eyes, and she reminded Loisetette of someone, though she wasn't able to ascertain who.

The young woman curtsied, and Kline introduced her: "This is Kitty, Your Majesties."

"Hello, Kitty," Loisetette greeted. "Kline says you knew a friend of ours."

The young lady smiled at her and gave a short bob of her head. "My mother used to be your lady-in-waiting, Your Majesty."

Loisetette gasped. For a few seconds, her composure was utterly gone. Finally, she managed, "Are you ... Catherine's daughter?"

"I am," confirmed Kitty. "My mother spoke very highly of you, Your Majesty."

Loisetette glanced around hopefully. "She isn't here, is she?"

Kitty looked down, her expression sorrowful. "No, Your Majesty. She passed a few weeks ago."

Loisetette was stricken, and Clarkent put a comforting arm around her.

"I'm so sorry," Loisetette whispered.

"Mother wanted to come see you, Your Majesty," Kitty told her. "But a few months after my youngest brother was born, she became very sick. She survived the illness, but it left her weakened, and she was never strong enough to make the journey here. After she died, I told Father I wanted to come see you, and he agreed to come with me. He has family in the region."

"Father?" Loisetette asked, barely able to speak.

Kitty gave her a gentle smile. "I am under no delusions about the circumstances of my birth, Your Majesty. But when I was two, my mother married a widower named 'Daniel' who had a daughter, and he has been every bit the father to me. He loved my mother very much."

"I'm glad to hear that," Loisetette told her sincerely. "I had wondered all this time where Catherine was, how she was doing ... I would have gone to her if only I had known where she was."

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Kitty said. "She did not wish to distract you from your commitments here. You have done a

wonderful job of uniting the kingdoms ... and in fighting for equality. Father has told me stories of how terrible the Assigning was, and I am so glad I was able to stay with him and Mother--I'm not sure Mother would have lived as long as she did if I hadn't been able to stay at home and help her."

"I'm glad she had you by her side," Loisetette told her, tears glimmering in her eyes. The Assigning had been so cruel to families--at least she and Clarkent had been able to stop it from hurting more families. The transition from the Assigning to paid voluntary servitude hadn't been an easy one, but they had managed, and things were going a lot smoother now than they had initially.

"Our entire family is grateful to you," Kitty said softly. "Father tells me the guards patrolling the united kingdom were once not so many in number as they are now--that it was once not as safe to venture outside. The people of Solaria owe you a great debt."

"We have only been trying to help," Clarkent told her, squeezing Loisetette gently with his arm.

"Your mother was a great friend to me," Loisetette said. "I'll never forget that."

"I'm glad, Your Majesty," Kitty replied with a smile.

"What are you going to do now?" Loisetette asked her.

"In taking care of my mother, I learned a lot about medicine, Your Majesty," Kitty noted, looking suddenly shy and almost unsure. "I would like to become an apothecary, but ..."

"An apothecary?" Clarkent said, sounding surprised. "You've really learned that much?"

Kitty nodded. "I looked at a lot of books and talked to a lot of people. Now that things are better than they used to be, everyone has the chance to follow the path they want rather than the path that has been decided for them."

Loisetette smiled. "Well, I think we're going to need a new apothecary at court soon," she told Kitty. "Perhaps, if you are interested, you could fill the position?" Loisetette was no fool--she knew that apothecaries were traditionally men. But she and Clarkent had been fighting bit by bit against some of the restrictions placed on women, and this would be another good step in the right direction. And if the court hired a female apothecary, perhaps others would see the example and follow it.

"I would like that, Your Majesty," Kitty said, her eyes on the ground and her cheeks a little red.

Loisetette broke away from her husband and enveloped the young woman in a hug. "Thank you for coming to see me. Whenever you're ready for that position, please return. I'll be holding it open for you."

"Th-thank you, Your Majesty," Kitty stuttered. "Goodbye, Your Majesties." She curtsied and then left the room.

Clarkent leaned down to gently kiss his wife. "You are the kindest woman I know."

"I'm so glad to hear Catherine found happiness," Loisetette whispered, leaning forward into her husband's chest.

He wrapped his arms around her. "I am, too."

She looked up at him with a smile. "I love you, you know."

"I know," he murmured, lightly brushing his lips against her own.

She smiled against his mouth. "This is the part where you say you love me, too."

He kissed her. "I adore you." Another kiss. "I worship you." Another one. "I idolize you."

She laughed as he nuzzled her neck, and she tried to squirm away. "Those aren't the words I'm looking for."

He pinned her against him and lifted his mouth to her ear. "I love you so much, dear queen," he whispered. "And I always will. I love you more every day--every time I see one of our children or hear your voice, I fall in love with you over again."

"And I love you, my dear king," she told him. And then she

brought his head down and kissed him.

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## Glossary

### Chapter 1

**Lady-in-waiting:** A lady-in-waiting was a woman (and occasionally a girl) who served as personal assistant to a queen, princess, or other noblewoman of higher rank. She did not do servant duties per se since she was a noblewoman herself, but she would do tasks such as brushing hair, playing instruments, singing, and needlework.

**Animal Familiar:** An animal familiar is an animal who serves a magic-user as a companion and/or servant, and they are often portrayed as spirits. A commonly seen animal familiar for a witch is a black cat.

**Tack:** Tack is a horse's equipment. To "tack up" is to equip a horse.

**Caparison:** This is the ornamental part of a horse's tack, as seen in medieval movies (think about the colorful cloths over knights' horses).

**Palfrey:** Horses were not identified by their breeds/colors in medieval times as they are today--"palfrey" was a term that could be applied to nearly any breed of horse. A palfrey was a horse with a smooth and ambling gait which was comfortable for riders. As a result, palfreys were popular with nobles, women, and highly ranked knights. They were used for general riding, war, and travel.

**Curry Comb:** These have short teeth on one side, and they help loosen dirt and hair on the horse. They also encourage a horse's skin to produce its natural oils.

### Chapter 2

**Buckskin Dun:** To be simplistic, this kind of horse is generally golden in color; has dark legs and a dark face; has a dark mane and tail which are "frosted" with a lighter color; and has a dark dorsal stripe. Buckskins and duns can be hard to tell apart, and some people argue over whether Spirit in the *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* movie is a buckskin or dun (though Wikipedia says "buckskin").

**Palomino:** This kind of horse has a golden coat and a light-colored mane and tail.

**Lead Rope:** Lead ropes are used to lead horses around, not their reins, and they are attached to halters. I am conflating halters and bridles for this story.

**Salt Lick:** A salt lick is a block of mineral salts which animals like horses and cattle lick to get important nutrients in their diet.

### Chapter 3

**Courser:** This kind of horse was the most common type of horse used in warfare. They were the fastest kind of horse--small, light, strong, steady, and long-winded. They were valuable and expensive, though they weren't the most pricey horse. They were frequently used by knights and cavalrymen.

**Gareth and Gawain:** Though Gareth and Gawain (and the others mentioned) are characters in Arthurian literature, the story I have included about them was entirely made up by myself. In Arthurian stories, Gareth is killed (as is Gaheris), and Gawain does become really angry, but Gareth's death is brought about by Lancelot, who was sincerely apologetic about it afterward (not having meant to kill him).

**Chimera:** A chimera is a monster made up the parts of different animals, usually a snake, goat, and lion.

### Chapter 4

**Horse Gaits:** Horses have four types of gaits. In order of speed, they are the walk, the trot, the canter, and the gallop. The trot is a stable two-beat gait, but it is not necessarily the most comfortable for beginning riders.

**Jess:** Jesses are thin straps of leather attached to falcons' legs. A jess can be held on to by the falconer to prevent the bird from chasing something it shouldn't.

**Falcon Hood:** Hoods are placed on falcons' heads to help keep them calm.

### Chapter 5

**Simmel Cake:** In medieval times, this was a cake of hard pastry filled with different kinds of dried fruit (like raisins and figs).

**Bryndons:** These were small cakes served in a sauce of wine, nuts, and fruit.

**Villanelle:** A rustic song from Italy ... or a 19-line poem with a specific rhyme scene and refrain, the most famous being "Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night." Here, the two meanings are sort of conflated.

### Chapter 8

**Rouncey:** In medieval days, this kind of horse was meant for general use and could be trained for various purposes. It was utilized by poorer knights. It was never used to pull carts, though it occasionally served as a pack horse.

**Farrier:** Farriers put shoes on horses. They aren't necessarily skilled in all the ironwork done by blacksmiths, though they may do blacksmithing to craft horseshoes.

### Chapter 11

**Grip:** The grip of a sword is part of the hilt. It is the part a person grasps when holding the sword. It was usually made of wood or metal.

**Pommel:** The pommel of a sword is also part of the hilt. It is the part at the very end of the hilt and is often circular. It acts as a counterweight.

**Cross-guard:** The cross-guard is yet another part of the hilt. It is the long bit above the grip but below the blade. It helps protect the user's hand from his/her own blade and the opponent's blade.

### Chapter 16

**Peregrine Falcon Speed:** These truly are the fastest living creatures on the planet. When diving, they can reach speeds over 200 miles per hour (about three times the speed of a cheetah)--one Peregrine Falcon was clocked at 242 mph. Their horizontal flight speed, of course, isn't as great (probably around 55 mph).

**Destrier:** These horses were fast, agile, tall, strong, and highly trained. They were treasured by knights and made really good war horses, but they were rare and expensive.

**Mail:** This is a flexible armor made of interlinked rings that was worn beneath plate armor to protect vulnerable places.

### Chapter 17

**Dragon Lairs:** Dragons (particularly in European stories) are often portrayed as having a lair filled with treasure which is jealously guarded by them, as can be seen in *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*. The song "Puff the Magic Dragon" seems to draw from this in a lesser fashion, with Puff being interested in "strings and sealing wax and other fancy stuff." Trout Fishing in America's song "Lullaby" has a verse which pulls from this as well: "Dragons in the sky / Flying with their golden treasure. / And if you catch their eye, / A wish is granted more than you can measure."

### Chapter 19

**Dam:** A dam is a female parent (usually utilized in regard to four-footed livestock).

**Ogres:** Ogres are typically portrayed as big, ugly, and cruel, and they are not usually associated with hoarding (as far as I know, that's something I've made up).

**Tilt:** "Tilt" is another word for "joust," in which two knights attempt to knock each other off their horses with lances. Jousting tournaments were popular among the upper classes.

### Chapter 22

**Avalon Lake:** I'm using only the Arthurian association here rather than the full traditional meaning of "Avalon." Avalon is not actually a lake but an island where Excalibur was forged and where Arthur is taken to recover from his major battle with Mordred (in versions where Arthur does not die).

Lady of the Lake: The Lady of the Lake is figure in Arthurian legend whose role varies depending on the author. She is often portrayed as giving Arthur the sword Excalibur and occasionally as enchanting the enamored Merlin.

Chapter 24

Garm: In Norse mythology, Garm is a monstrous dog associated with Ragnarok. Ragnarok is an event wherein the gods are destroyed and there is a final battle with evil which leads to a new order.

List Field: The list field is the roped-off area where the joust would take place. It is also called the “lists.”

Horse Armor Spikes: Occasionally, horses would have spikes on the part of their armor protecting their heads. These seemed to be primarily for a decorative purpose by making the horse look like a unicorn.

Tasset: Plate armor has two pieces of metal that protect the thighs; these pieces are called “tassets.”

Chapter 36

Merlin: In addition to being the name of a famous wizard, “Merlin” is the name of a type of falcon sometimes referred to as a “pigeon hawk.”