

The Quest

Isabelle Johnston

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By: Isabelle Johnston

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Stephanie Bolster Chair

Kevin Pask Examiner

Kate Sterns Examiner

Trevor Ferguson Supervisor

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Date

Abstract
The Quest
Isabelle Johnston

The Quest by Isabelle Johnston is Part I of an Arthurian fantasy novel structured as a frame narrative. This novel explores gender and class dynamics through romantic and chivalric pursuit. The story opens with Merlyn, who has been imprisoned by his lover Nyneve. The reader learns that Nyneve stole Merlyn's magic and imprisoned him in a tree. Within this frame, Merlyn tells the story of Nyneve's sister, Vivienne, who falls in love with Sir Pellinore after he rescues her from her violent husband. Pellinore is initially reluctant to enter into a relationship with Vivienne, in part because she is a peasant, but also because he must carry on his family tradition of pursuing the beast Glatissant (a monster who is part deer, part dragon, part leopard, and part lion).

Within this frame, the characters present tales that uncover dark secrets about themselves and their relationships. The tales of Pellinore's quest and his family line reveal a history of men struggling to adhere to impossible codes of manhood, and devoting their lives to a pointless quest. The tales of Merlyn and Nyneve's relationship likewise complicate the idea that Merlyn is simply a spurned lover. Through these tales, Vivienne gains insight into the people she loves most, and in the end she is forced to make a terrible sacrifice in order to save either her lover or her sister.

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Prologue

The water ripples over the bank in little waves. In the center, it looks as though one might walk across a ridge to the castle on the other side. That castle had once been imposing; now the walls of Camelot are singed and crumbled, the coloured glass shattered, and the boats have long since left the harbour. The descendants of those who lived in that kingdom speak of it as something that existed ‘once’, but the word in their parlance has come to signify ‘a time that never was’. Some romantic souls still search for Camelot, but none have found it yet.

Long ago, people stood on that beach and gazed in wonder at the castle. It was a place they dreamed of visiting, a place of possibilities. In those days, the forest did not extend quite so far onto the beach, but the trees had grown quite tall in the last few centuries, and when the tide was high, the water splashed over the knotty roots that extended toward Camelot. A willow stooped forlornly in the sea, so far out that even when the tide was at its lowest some of her roots would be wet. Her branches shook in the breeze. She was a melancholy giant, taller than almost all of her companions. She might have provided a pleasant spot to shade under, if there had been anyone left to enjoy such pleasures.

Several centuries ago, when the beach was wider, an old man had sat in that spot with the woman he loved. When roots emerged in a ring around his feet, he knew their romance had come to an end. Merlyn had tried to follow Nyneve when she danced out of the circle, but he knew it would do no good. He was trapped in that ring. He watched as the roots wound around each other, forming a thick wall at his feet...at his knees...at his chest. Once, he would have been able to counter her spell, but by that time he was powerless against his love, having given most of his powers to her. He pleaded with her to let him go, but she only laughed her euphonious laugh, and when he cried and begged for mercy she laughed all the more. As the wall

of wood rose around him, he did his utmost to memorize her face before she turned away.

Merlyn still loved Nyneve, had always loved her, though he had always known that she would trap him in a tree. Such things are of little consequence to one in love.

Merlyn spent several centuries living in the tree. It is possible that he lives there still. His beloved was not so cruel, however, as to leave him without basic comforts. She had taken pains to furnish her lover's prison to his liking. The inside of the tree was quite spacious enough for a single person to live comfortably. The main room was a sitting room, piled with cushions, and a little round table at one side where Merlyn took his meals. A tray of food appeared on the table, like clockwork, three times a day. The food was always exquisite, and his dinner tray came with a little flask of wine. Tapestries depicting knights in battle, unicorns, and beautiful damsels hung on one side of the round room, and rows of books lined the other—more books than even Merlyn would ever be able to read in his lifetime. A spiral staircase would appear in the center of the room whenever Merlyn commanded it, leading to the upstairs room, which contained a soft feather bed, and a desk of the finest oak with an inkwell that never emptied and a never-ending scroll.

The finest feature of Merlyn's home was above the desk: a round window that looked out onto the water. This window was invisible from the outside, and although Merlyn, in his early desperate days in that place, had thrown his desk chair at it, the glass would not shatter. Still, it let the sunlight in and afforded a gorgeous view of the outside world. Once he got used to being imprisoned there, Merlyn grew contemplative, and he spent many an hour musing at his desk.

At the moment when our story opens, Merlyn sat at the desk, looking out at the water. Yet, his eyes did not see the ocean. He had the scroll before him, and he absently chewed the end of his plume, leaving a little black smudge on his lip. He should have been writing, but he did not

write, and had not written a word since he first came to that place. Instead, he tried to conjure up a picture of the woman who put him there (he had learned that there was a kind of conjuring that one can do even without magic). He summoned up her blond hair, her bewitching smile, her porcelain skin. He tried to draw her face, and then watched the ink fade from the page. He still loved her, despite what she had done—or perhaps the more because of it. She had outwitted him, stolen his magic, and become one of the most powerful forces in Arthurian England as a result. He had taught her all his magic, was even pleased with how clever she was, and when she asked for the one spell that could destroy him it was as if he was already enchanted. He could not tell her no.

“Nyneve,” he said, savouring the sound of her name as it rolled off his tongue, and then disappeared into the silence, just as her image had disappeared from the page.

Merlyn sighed a melancholy sigh, looking out at the water. Something rippled beneath its surface. At first, he could not make out what it was, only that it was large, and was coming toward him. Then he saw the gold back peeking out of the water, and as she approached, the head rose, then a swanlike neck, near as tall as the tree. Its blue colour unmistakable: a dragon’s head and neck, a leopard back, and then, when the water was too shallow for her, she waded on deer forelegs and lion hind legs until she reached the tree. Glatisant had come for him.

He knew not how, but she seemed to see him through the window, for she fixed him with one awful yellow eye. Merlyn stiffened, trying not to move a single hair, but his breath came out in heavy wheezes, his heart thumping so loudly he was certain she heard him. The creature was terrible to behold. He told himself she could not really see him. Perhaps she could hear, or smell him, but he had stood and waved at many people in the old days before the beach was deserted,

and he knew well that no one could see into the tree. He sat as still as he could, and waited for her to leave.

Glatissant roared. Her roar shook the desk, it knocked books off of the shelf. Downstairs he heard something hit the floor and shatter. Merlyn's hands went to his ear, and he knocked over the inkwell. Ink pooled onto the paper, and on the desk, and dripped on to Merlyn's gown, but still she roared, and Merlyn pressed his hands more tightly still against his ears. He screwed his eyes shut so he would not have to look at the terrible mouth gaping at him with a thousand yellow fangs. She could not enter there. No matter if she heard him, or even saw him (she could not see him!) Nyneve had made it clear that no one would ever enter there.

At last, Merlyn heard only the sound of his blood rushing between his ears; he lowered his hands. He opened his eyes. Glatissant was gone. He picked up the inkwell, and used his robe sleeve to mop up the spill. As usual, the ink marked his desk and his robe, but it did not mark the page. Had he imagined her? Perhaps he had been alone with his thoughts for so long that his mind had taken it upon itself to invent some company for him? Or perhaps this was some new form of torture from Nyneve? Had he not suffered enough?

"Hello, Merlyn." Merlyn jumped, knocking over the inkwell again as he whirled around to see who the voice belonged to.

Nyneve's face stared back at him, but without her fair hair and graceful figure. This girl wore a peasant's woven dress and a grubby apron. She was shorter, her skin not as smooth as her sister's, and her hair was dark and matted.

"Vivienne," he said, as if he did not believe that she was sitting on his bed—and indeed, it was difficult to believe that she, whom he had once transformed into the beast Glatissant, could be sitting in her woman-form before him.

“Oh, I’m not really here. You know well that would be impossible,” she said, with Nyneve’s mocking smile. And then she vanished, reappearing next to him. “Pick up your ink, Wizard!”

He followed her gaze, and found his feet, his chair, and the desk were rapidly disappearing in a pool of black ink. Fishing around in the liquid, he found the well and returned it to its usual place on the desk. Vivienne waved her hand and the ink was gone.

“My sister sent me to remind you of your promise.”

“My promise,” Merlyn repeated, still wondering if his eyes deceived him.

“Your promise to me. She wants to know why you are mooning over her when you have work to do.”

“I—I cannot! I know that I promised you I would write it, but the wounds are still fresh. Surely, you understand, after she betrayed me...”

“After *she* betrayed *you*?” Vivienne arched her eyebrows. She was not timid, as she had been. Even in her human form, she carried herself with the fierce majesty of the beast. Yet Merlyn had been avoiding the task for centuries. It was too difficult to write her story, for in doing so he would need to write his own. He was not ready, yet, to face the wrongs he had done.

“You could write it! There is no need for me to do it.”

Vivienne picked up the plume, and it fell through her hand. “As I said, I am not really here. The task is yours and yours alone. You gave your word to me, Wizard.”

She disappeared then, but Merlyn knew she would return. Nyneve would torment him with her until her story was known. It had been a rash promise, but he had always had a fondness for Vivienne. She was a fool like him who gave too much of herself for love. His story had been told. The details had been scattered so that the name of his lady has been confused, and no one

could agree on whether she had trapped him in a cave, a tomb or a tree, but people knew who he was. They still spoke of his feats, and the services he did for the king. No one knew what she had done.

Merlyn took up his plume, and he began to write. This time, the ink held.

Chapter 1

Dusk had fallen over the forest, the trees casting long shadows, like fingers laced together in the fading light. A rabbit ventured out from under the roots of a beech tree, its nose twitching, trying to catch every scent the wind carried. A movement in the branches caused the rabbit to turn, with a flash of its white tail, back to the safety of its burrow. A woman stumbled through the trees, one foot bare, her dark curls sticking out in every direction. She halted at the beech tree and near collapsed onto it, exhausted from running. She shrank into its shadow, gulping down the night air, doing her best to push the loose hair away from her face. She could not stop for long. The lost shoe had already slowed her down, and he'd be upon her soon.

Gingerly, Vivienne lifted her bare foot to inspect its sole. A stone had lodged itself into her heel; she winced as she pulled it out. The blood flowed freely. She had to keep moving, but she felt as though her lungs were made of lead. She was tired, not from running, but from fleeing. Fear wore her down.

A branch cracked, breaking the calm of the forest. His foot fell heavily on the forest floor, not caring if she heard. No, she thought. He did care. He wanted her to know that he was coming for her. She tested her foot, winced. She would never manage to outrun him.

Another crack. He was coming closer, so close she could nearly feel his breath on her neck.

Vivienne glanced up at the branch above her, just out of reach. She jumped, but her fingers merely brushed against the bark, and she fell again. A little squeal escaped from her mouth as her injured foot hit the ground, but she stifled it quickly, biting down on her lip until the pain subsided.

“Vivienne?” The sound of his voice all but made her scream in panic, but she kept her wits about her. There was no one to come to her aid. She couldn’t see him, although she guessed he was no more than ten feet away. Any moment now, she thought, I’m caught.

She managed to launch herself with a bit more force. Her hands closed around the branch, and she was swinging above the ground.

“Vivienne!” Closer still! Her hands nearly slipped when she heard him, but she managed to hold on. Bracing her shorn foot against the trunk, she pushed with all her might, and pulled herself up onto the bough.

She spied him, then, moving through the shadows east of her, searching for her in every one. His right arm swung with the weight of something heavy, a stick of some sort, but in the fading light she could not quite make out what it was he carried. She crept back a little on her perch, watched him peer into every corner. She’d seen the baker’s cat do this, when it knew a rat cowered in some nook, hiding in its own trap. Harry stooped to pick up some small object in the brush, and chuckled to himself.

She was already several feet above the ground, but she knew she was not high enough. Harry was a tall man, and when he lost his temper at her he was relentless. She reached for the branch above, and the leaves rustled.

He paused at the sound, and she could almost see the smile spread across his face as he rose. He let the stick drop in the brambles, and slowly turned to face her.

“Found you!” He did not slur his words. Only those who knew him best would notice the unnatural brightness of his eyes.

Vivienne’s arms still gripped the branch above her, but she dared not move. She forced the corners of her mouth upward, keeping her voice as light as his. “Hello, Harry.”

“Why don’t you come down from there, Viv?” He took a step toward her. She saw that he had picked up her lost shoe. There was not a trace of his former anger on his face. He appeared almost buoyant. Once, she would have believed that it was so, but she had learned that to trust him was to step onto a frozen lake.

“No, Harry, I don’t think that would be wise.”

“We can go for a nice moonlit stroll, you and I. Like in the good old days when we first married. Oh, but I suppose you’ll be needing this,” he added, holding the shoe out to her.

Caught in his gaze, Vivienne couldn’t help but recall the blushing boy who first kissed her in that very forest. He was older, and broader in the chest and shoulders, but his eyes had not changed. He took a step toward her, holding out the shoe like an olive branch.

“Don’t come any closer!” Her voice was shrill. He laughed at her, and she almost wept at how ridiculous she sounded.

“And if I do? Would you beat me with your other shoe? We’d be evenly matched!” He took another step toward her, brandishing the shoe about. “On guard!”

One more step and he’d be able to touch her—he mustn’t touch her! She started to scramble up to the branch above, but felt his hand around her ankle. The cat had caught its mouse. He guided her back on to the lower branch. “I’m beginning to lose patience with you, Vivienne.” His grip tightened. Her hands squeezed the branch above so tightly that she felt the wood dig into her fingers. She would not let go, nor would she give him the satisfaction of hearing her cry out.

“I could simply drag you from this tree, but it would be better for you if you came willingly.” He slipped the shoe on her foot with what might have been a sensual gesture, if not for the cold light in his eyes. “How about it, love? Come for a stroll?”

His lips parted in a ghastly grin. What was it he had dropped in the brambles, only a few feet away? He saw the hesitation on her face, and lunged at her. She kicked out with all her strength, her foot hitting him between the eyes. He howled, and she saw a flash of blood before he covered his face. “You ill-begotten strumpet! I’ll—”

Vivienne chose not to wait to see what Harry would do. The top branches wouldn’t hold his weight. Ignoring the pain in her foot, she hoisted herself up to the branch above. Below, Harry threatened to do something to her, but she only listened to the susurrus of the leaves as she climbed, higher, and higher. Even when his madman laugh chased her up the trunk, she would not look back; she climbed on until she could see the silver crescent of the moon, until she was certain that Harry and his stick wouldn’t reach her.

Twenty feet above the ground, she finally rested, leaning against the trunk. She’d have to stay awake until she was sure he’d gone. And then—the church? It didn’t matter. She was safe, for the time being.

She took off her shoe to examine her wound in the moonlight, shocked to see that the toe of the shoe was spattered with Harry’s blood. A momentary thrill ran through her, and then she felt ashamed. She wondered how badly she’d managed to hurt him. It was then she noticed the silence around her.

“Harry?” An owl called out somewhere in the distance, and another answered it. She squinted through the branches, but the forest was dark, and she could see nothing below.

She crept a little closer to the ground, but still saw nothing. Could he be unconscious? Perhaps when she kicked him... There were wolves in the forest, and other creatures as well. Things that would kill a man, given the chance.

“Harry?”

From below, she heard:

Thwack!

The Earth lurched forward, and Vivienne barely grabbed onto the trunk in time. No, it was not the Earth that moved, but only her sanctuary. She cursed her stupidity for not having realized that the stick Harry had laid in the brambles was his axe.

Below, Harry laughed.

Thwack!

He was hacking away at the thick beech. It would take time, but she had nowhere to go. She prayed the fall would kill her before he did. And then she heard another sound, faint at first, then louder. Someone was singing? Her first thought was that God had sent an angel to save her, but the singer did not seem to obey any of the ecclesiastical laws of music. He rumbled and rambled wherever-which-way he pleased.

O Glatisant of majestic form, her tawny-eyes a-glow, and fiercely wanders she about the isle where soft the grass doth grow O-Glatisant I pray that on my noble steed one day I shall run as fast as thee and then they all shall say...

She still could not see Harry, but she knew his expression: eyebrows furrowed in a mixture of bewilderment and frustration, the axe suspended, mid-swing, as the singer approached. Squinting through the trees, she caught a gleam of metal under the moonlight, and when he passed under the tree, she saw the peacock plume in his helm, and knew a knight had come to save her.

“What ho, good sir?” he asked, just as they did in the stories her sister used to tell.

“Move along, *good sir*,” Harry replied, mocking his courtesy. “This is no concern of yours.” His voice sounded nasal, as it did in hay-making season. She realized her kick must have broken it.

“Well, good sir, if you are certain I can be—Glatissant!”

Harry was startled by this outburst. “I beg your pardon?”

“Hush!” The knight looked sharply about him, producing a bow and a quiver of arrows.

“Did you hear some movement in the trees?”

Harry only shrugged, but the knight seemed to have made up his mind. He addressed his horse: “Thunderswift, I believe it is her! Good day to you, sir!” And, to Vivienne’s consternation, he began to ride away.

“No, stop, Sir Knight! This *is* your concern, despite what my husband says!” she called. She couldn’t let the knight get away. “Is it not the concern of all good knights to serve and protect damsels in distress?”

Pulling the reins, the knight brought his horse to an abrupt halt and turned back to Harry.

“What is the meaning of this? Are you the cause of this good damsel’s distress?”

“That *good damsel*, as you call her, is my unfaithful harlot of a wife, and she is the cause of her own distress.”

“Good sir, if you will not stand down with your axe and allow this lady to leave under my protection, I shall be forced to duel you for her.” And he dismounted from his horse, putting his pack under the beech tree, and squared off against Harry.

“That is a white-livered threat, brave knight! You, fully armed, against a simple woodcutter! I see what you *noble* ogres are like, hiding behind plate and mail, and your fancy

tricks, and bullying peasants into giving you what's rightfully theirs! If you want what's mine you must fight me for her like a man."

"Good sir, I am no coward, nor a thief. I am a brave and honourable Knight of the bravest and most honourable fellowship of Knights, King Arthur's Round Table. You will rue the day you insulted me and my brethren."

There was a struggle, not between Harry and the knight, but between the knight and his armour. The grunting and clinking lasted several minutes before a sigh indicated his release. While this was going on, Vivienne ventured a few branches lower so she could at least see the outline of the man fighting for her life. "Now will you fight me, good sir?"

"Whey-faced brute! That's what you call chivalry? You may be disarmed, but how can I get near you when you are hiding behind that great thing?"

A thud resonated through the forest as the shield landed in the grass. "Now will you fight me, good sir?"

After some deliberation, Harry protested "You may not have a shield, but your sword would slice me to ribbons before I got in a single blow with my axe!"

"I will lend you a sword. *Then* will you fight me, good sir?"

Vivienne's husband seemed at a loss to find any other reason not to duel.

The knight knelt below Vivienne's tree, rummaging through his pack for another sword. He had his back to his opponent. Vivienne looked instinctively to Harry, and sure enough, he stood poised, with the axe blade at eye height, taking aim at the unsuspecting knight.

"Look out!" she cried. She felt the wind of it as it flew under her feet.

The tree shook, and she heard the wood splinter as it lodged itself into it. A sickening silence followed. She did not dare look—but when she did, she saw the knight had dived out of the way in time.

He rose, throwing a sword on the grass between them.

“Take your weapon, cur. I will finish you quickly, for I have no patience for such unmanly behaviour.”

The two men stood apart from each other, each aiming their sword at the other with relish. The knight jumped forward, swinging his sword from over his shoulder with a graceful flourish. Harry leapt back, just evading it, but he had come up against a tree, and the knight seized the opportunity to rush at him. Metal scraped against metal. Her husband had raised his sword diagonally across his body at just the right moment, deflecting the knight’s second blow. They stood, swords locked against each other for a few minutes, and then the knight stepped back toward Vivienne to allow his opponent a sporting chance.

“Retreating already?” Harry cried, swinging his sword wildly as he followed the knight.

Their swords clashed, and soon Vivienne saw only a black mass moving amongst the trees, struggling against itself. Then she heard her husband’s wail, and the knight stood down. Harry clutched his sword-bearing arm just below the shoulder. The knight pointed his sword at him warily.

“Do you accept defeat, sir?”

“Yes,” Harry panted. “I am beaten. Now, let us shake hands.”

“With pleasure, sir.” The knight wiped his sword on the grass, then sheathed it. “For one untrained in the arts of—”

The courteous knight was interrupted mid-compliment as Harry—that treacherous whelp!—lunged at him, swiping his side; but the stranger had faced many a cunning opponent before and, quick as a cat his, leg twisted around Harry’s and he knocked him to the ground.

With his boot on Harry’s chest, he took out his sword again, pointing it right over his navel.

“Beg for mercy,” he ordered.

“I won’t, you bully! You thief! You coward—” The final word dissolved into a howl until he gasped, “Mercy! Mercy! Please.”

“Now you will beg for forgiveness; mine for insulting me, and the Lady’s for the harm you intended her.” Another howl, as the knight prompted him with the point of his sword.

“Sir, I beg your forgiveness! You are not a coward. You are a brave knight! Your fellow knights are brave knights! Your father, no doubt, was a brave knight, second only to your illustrious self, most great, most glorious—ow!”

“Good! And now, the lady.”

“But sir, she is not a lady, she is a whor—” His scream filled Vivienne’s ears. It seemed to linger in the night air even after he was silenced. It was too dark to see the expression on her husband’s face, but Vivienne knew he was dead. She listened in silence to the dragging sound along the ground, and the crackling of twigs beyond the tree. He was pulling her husband’s body into the brambles, shielding her from his violence.

“You can come down now, milady,” he called up to her when he had returned.

Vivienne realized she had been clinging to the branch above her since the fight first began, as if she might need to climb to safety again. She shook her hands out, their joints throbbing from having gripped the branch so tightly. Her arms tingled as they dropped to her

sides. She wanted to tell him that she couldn't move, but when she opened her mouth she found she could not speak either.

"Here, below you." His hand found her ankle; its smoothness was jarring, and she jerked away from it, then felt ashamed for her rudeness. "It's all right." He clicked his tongue as one might coax a timid horse. "I won't do you any harm."

Vivienne squinted into the darkness. His arm, stretched out before her, disappeared into the shadows, his face shrouded in shadows, but he was a knight, and thus sworn to protect all ladies. Slowly shifting her weight from the branch, she lifted herself down from her perch.

She landed without grace, on her wounded foot, cried in pain, and stumbled as she shifted her weight to the other foot.

He caught her, placing his hands on her hips to steady her. "Are you hurt?"

On one foot, she clung to her knight. She turned her head to indicate that she was not in grave pain, and pressed her cheek against the cool silk of his tunic. She felt his muscular torso against her breast, and pulled him closer. Then she felt him struggle against her.

"Hark!" His voice rang out.

"What's the matter?" Vivienne drew away, looking up at him in alarm.

"Glatissant! I hear her yonder!"

Vivienne hardly had time to admire the way his eyes caught the moonlight before they rolled back in his head, and her brave knight fell at her feet.

She tried to wake him:

"Sir! Sir? Do you hear me, sir?"

But the knight would only mutter, Glatissant, oh Glatissant, come to me my Glatissant. His forehead burned in spite of the cool evening breeze.

Vivienne wondered if her knight suffered from love sickness. She understood this was a common affliction amongst knights: one would meet a lady, usually by rescuing her, and fall desperately in love with her. He would wear her token in tournaments, go on quests for her, even dangerous ones, just to gain her affection. And if he failed, he would become so ill that he would require saving himself.

With some difficulty, she managed to get the knight to stand, and walked him toward his horse. A less noble steed would not have tolerated Vivienne leaning the knight against him, and then climbing into one stirrup and launching her other leg over so that she was seated on it, but Thunderswift (as she had heard the knight call his steed) obliged her with quiet dignity, and even knelt a little to allow her to pull the knight, like a sack of flour over his shoulders. He allowed Vivienne to guide him through the forest, unperturbed by the knight's periodic cries of "Hark! Glatisant!"

When the forest opened up before them, Thunderswift halted, kneeling as he had before so that Vivienne could dismount. Vivienne moved forward cautiously in the darkness as she led the horse to the entrance of Harry's straw hut. She thought the horse might balk at being taken into such a confined space, but he lowered his neck to the height of the doorway and allowed Vivienne to lead him inside.

The smell of hay and animal waste engulfed them. The fire made the tiny room almost unbearably hot. It cast a yellow glow over the single room, and the chickens' eyes glinted suspiciously at the newcomer from the kitchen table, as if to say, don't you think it's cramped enough in here? The goat munched indifferently on the hay bed in the far corner of the room.

"Be gone with you," Vivienne scolded, and the goat trotted back to the table with the chickens.

The knight was still muttering, hark, Glatisant, come to me, Glatisant; but he appeared somewhat subdued once she managed to get him onto the bed. He settled on top of the fur blanket, burying his face into it. The horse settled, of its own accord, in the corner with the other animals, and Vivienne snuffed out the candle, lying down next to her knight.

She reached for his hand, lacing his fingers through hers, then guided his arm around her waist. She felt the stickiness of their bodies pressed together as he pulled her closer still.

“Glatisant,” he breathed against her nape.

Vivienne did not sleep that night. Her back burned against the stranger’s torso, but she pressed deeper into him, letting its feverish heat cook her skin. She listened to the strange mutterings in her ear: he dreamed he was riding Thunderswift through the forest, always riding, ever in pursuit of Lady Glatisant. He must be lonely, she decided, for him so speak so frequently to his steed. The only other name he mentioned was Lady Glatisant’s. Sometimes he would see her from afar, and from the wonder in his voice as when he cried, “Look, Thunderswift! It is she!” Vivienne understood that this Lady Glatisant must be someone to behold.

“Thunderswift! Quicker, Thunderswift! Quick, before she disappears!”

Who was this shrew? She decided she hated the woman, whoever she was, for making her knight suffer so.

As the sun crept over the sky, Vivienne watched the black outline of her knight gradually brighten until she saw his face clearly for the first time. By then, it hardly mattered that he was handsome, for Vivienne had loved him from the moment she first heard his song. Yet he was handsome, and she ran her fingers through his hair, admiring the streaks of fiery red. She stripped him of his sweat-soaked tunic and took in his well-formed torso, his powerful arms. She

traced the lines of his face, letting her thumb brush over his parted lips, softly, so he would not wake. She longed to know the colour of his eyes.

“Glatissant,” he muttered.

Chapter 2

The knight slept for a fortnight, and Vivienne devoted all that time to his care. She spent hours by his side, spooning watery porridge into his mouth, then wiping it away when it slid from the corners of his lips. She sang the songs the French minstrels sang, about knights and queens, dragons, and wizards, love and enchantment. She sang until her tears dampened his skin, but the pain of it was exquisite. Even longing for this beautiful man to wake gave her greater pleasure than she had ever had in her life before.

Every morning, she groomed Thunderswift's chestnut coat glossy, for she knew that this most devoted companion occupied the only small corner left in his heart that he had not given to his Lady. She saw quickly that Thunderswift was not like her own beasts. His eyes gleamed with quiet intelligence, and she found herself confiding in him things she had not shared with any being in a long while.

"I did not realize how dull my life was here, until you and your master came." she explained, rubbing the spot between his shoulder blades so that his neck arched with pleasure. "I mean, it was awful when Harry drank, but even when he was away and I went about my day, weaving, tending to the chickens, selling milk and eggs at the market, each day was like the last. Mother always told me that I should be content with the lot God had given me, but even as a child, I always wanted my life to be a winter's tale with knights and princesses and dragons. I thought there must be something beyond these woods, something grand and exciting—but I never thought that adventure would find me here!

"I hope your master is awake by harvest time. It is the only excitement we have around these parts. Does he dance? Oh, I am sure all men must learn to dance at court! Dancing with him will be like dancing on clouds—Sorry, too rough? There—how the others will stare at me

with such a grand partner! I don't even think they'll recognize me, for I was always the plain one and Nyneve was the beauty.

“Have I not told you about Nyneve? I suppose I have not thought about her as much, since you and your master came into my life. She was my sister, and at one time, she was my constant companion. Nyneve was like the sun; her hair was like spun gold, and her blue eyes sparkled like a lake on the brightest summer day. And I was her shadow, for everywhere she went, I was right by her side, my arm linked with hers.

When we were children, we would go with our mother to market, and the ladies would fuss over her beautiful hair and her skin, which was as white as snow. She learned quickly enough that if she smiled sweetly for the baker's wife she would give her a little cake. She always shared it with me—”

“Thunderswift, don't fidget!” Vivenne scolded, for she had been so caught up in remembering her sister that she had quite forgotten she was holding the horse's hoof to wipe the mud from it. “I know I am slow, but you must be patient with me. You are the first horse I have ever had to groom, and a knight's horse must be groomed with the utmost care, I am sure.”

She finished Thunderswift's hooves, and commenced combing and braiding his lustrous mane.

“I was always by my sister's side. I loved her so dearly that it pained me to be apart from her for any amount of time. At night, we would lie close together, and she would whisper wonderful stories about our real parents, who she said were royalty from a far-off land. Our father, she said, had gone into hiding from a wicked king. He had given us to peasants so that the evil king could not find us and kill us. If you ask them, they'll deny it, she said. But that was for

our own protection. I worried that people would find her out, because she looked so much like a princess, and I saw from the way that people looked at her that her disguise was not working.

Our mother said Nyneve was too clever, and perhaps there was some truth to that for she could be mischievous at times. But I think that was why everyone adored her, for she was so charming and so full of fun that no one could be angry with her. She would have us all in stitches with her mimicries—the deacon was her best—but the moment he would pass, she'd smile at him sweet as an angel so that even he, who frowned at everyone, could not help but smile back. And she was always the first to dance on bonfire night, and that set everyone else dancing, because everyone just wanted to follow her. That was just the effect Nyneve had on people, she was just so lovely that everyone wanted to be near her.

Oh, Thunderswift! I would give my left eye to see Nyneve again. If I had known what would become of her, I never would have—”

Vivienne glanced at the bed, as if she feared Pellinore would hear her.

“I did a terrible thing, Thunderswift. You see, it is my fault that Nyneve is gone.

“As much as I dreamed of being a princess, Nyneve was the one who seemed to belong in the land of make-believe. With every passing day, she seemed to grow more beautiful, until any man who looked upon her beauty fell instantly in love with her. Nyneve was beautiful in body and in spirit, and I loved her so dearly that I could never resent her for it. As I said, we were inseparable as children, and because she was as kind as she was lovely, I was never jealous of the attention people paid her.

We had an Aunt Angharad, who lived in a convent and who had always doted on my sister. One day we received word that he had caught a fever, and was keeping the entire convent awake with her ravings. She would not be consoled. She kept calling out for her dearest niece

until the abbess had to fetch Nyneve and bring her to her just so that the poor old woman could live out her last days in peace. And Nyneve was such a comfort to her that her health began to turn around.

I was devastated when Nyneve was called away to the abbey—and she was as well, for she loved me every bit as dearly as I did her—and I thought that my heart would shatter into a thousand and one pieces when we received word that she must stay. Each time she so much as mentioned leaving, our aunt’s health took a turn for the worse. But it was winter when she left, and she stayed through the spring; as time passed, I missed her a little less.

One morning, I woke to the sound of birds singing outside our cottage. The sun had not quite risen, but it was a warm morning, and I knew that spring had arrived. I decided to look for strawberries along the edge of the woods, and soon I had quite a basketful, and I walked a little further into the forest to find some shade to eat them under. I saw him through the trees, a boy with a smattering of freckles across his cheeks. He was all limbs, and his skinny arms looked like they might snap under the weight of the axe he swung, but he was surprisingly strong. I watched him work, stroke by stroke, until he had felled the great oak to the ground. Then, he stood back to admire his work, and he took off his tunic to mop his damp brow.

His eyes found mine through the branches, and how he jumped when he saw me standing there watching him! I must have turned the colour of those berries! I didn’t know what to do then, I felt so foolish. He was quite red as well, and he stood there with his mouth open, as if he was getting ready to shout at me, so I curtsied and offered him a strawberry. Well, that certainly caught him off guard! He closed his mouth, and then he sort of crinkled his brow like he wasn’t sure he’d heard me right. And then he laughed. He took the basket and we both sat in on the trunk together until the sun was quite high in the sky.

That was how I met Harry. I know it is strange to think of being in love with him, when you saw only wicked, angry Harry. But he was not always so. Even now, the memory of that summer makes my heart flutter, for no one had ever made me feel as beautiful as Harry did then.

By the time Nynaeve returned, the leaves were beginning to change, and Harry and I were betrothed. I could not wait for the two people who were most dear to me in all the world to meet. I had forgotten how golden her hair was, and how her skin looked like roses on silk, until I saw the expression on Harry's face. It lasted only a moment, but it was clear that I was no longer the most beautiful girl in the world to him. And she had Harry in stitches with her imitations! I had never seen him laugh as he did when she showed us how the Abbess scolded, or how the nuns snivelled. I laughed as well, but only to conceal the ugly thoughts that tormented me. For the first time in our lives, I was filled with bitter envy for my sister.

For the rest of the evening, I watched them like the Abbess watches her nuns. Was he looking at her a little too closely? Did her hand linger on his arm any longer than necessary? And when Harry kissed me good night, I could not help but wonder if his kiss was not a little cooler than it usually was. I could not sleep that night, nor the night after that, nor any night that week, for I was tormented with fear and suspicion.

I had never felt anything but greatest affection for my sister, and apart from my fear that she would snatch my beloved Harry away from me, I was also wracked with guilt that I could have such base thoughts about her. I knew Nynaeve was innocent. She did nothing to encourage Harry, and indeed, she seemed to avoid him, even in my presence. Yet, when Harry and I met in our usual place beneath the apple tree, he seemed distracted. He still wooed me with declarations of my beauty, and he still swore he would crawl to the ends of the earth on his hands and knees for me, but his lovemaking seemed to have lost some of its ardour since he had met Nynaeve.

Every time my sister teased about my strapping groom and our wedding night, my bitterness grew, until I could no longer stand to be near her. I woke early every morning so that I would not have to speak to her, and I waited until I was sure she was asleep before I dared to go to bed at night. The following Sunday, on our way to church, she tried to catch my arm and walk with me as she used to, but I barked at her to stop being such a child, and after that she left me alone.

A few nights later, I was awoken by someone touching my cheek and whispering my name. I tried to ignore her, but she only said *Vivienne! Vivienne!* more insistently and started shaking me until I was afraid she would wake our father.

‘What?’ I mumbled into the crook of my arm.

‘You can’t marry him.’

‘What?’ I was awake then, and I turned and glared at her. ‘What do you mean I can’t marry him?’

Nyneve was as white as a clean sheet, and if I’d had any sense, I would have known she was afraid for me. ‘Please, just promise me you won’t marry him. He’s not right for you.’

‘I suppose he’s right for you, though. Is that it? You can’t stand that for once someone chose me over you. You wouldn’t even want Harry if he wasn’t betrothed to me, would you?’

Soon I had brought my sister to tears with my petty accusations. She pleaded with me not to marry Harry, but she would not tell me why. I said horrible things to her that night. Things I am ashamed to repeat even to you. But no matter what I said, she simply replied that if I loved her at all, I would not marry Harry. When she saw that she could not convince me, she gave a sad sigh and said may God and Lady Fortune watch over me. Then she rolled over and went back to sleep.

The next day, when I went to fetch water, I was still fuming over our conversation. How dare she tell me I couldn't marry Harry? Must she have the heart of every man in the village? Would nothing less satisfy her? But rippling below my rage was a current of fear, for though I would not admit it, I knew Harry would gladly have traded me for my sister, as any man would. And I knew that as long as Nyneve lived, I would never have the undivided affection of any man. This realization made me so sad that I sat by the well and wailed with despair. I must have cried quite loudly, for soon I heard someone inquire, 'Whatever is the matter, my child?'

Looking up, I saw a man in a tattered violet robe and a pointed cap. He was a very old and very queer-looking man with an overgrown grey beard, and he looked so frail that a gust of wind might have blown him right off his feet. Yet despite his odd appearance, I was so distraught that I did not hesitate to confide in him. I told him that my sister was trying to steal away my love, and I feared that he had fallen for her as well.

'Well,' said the old man, whose name was... Now what was his name? It was such an unusual name that I've forgotten it. Marvin? Malin?

In any case, the old man, whose name I have forgotten, said: 'It does not surprise me in the least that any young man would be in love with your sister. She is an uncommonly pretty girl.'

'She is,' I agreed, too forlorn to wonder how the old man knew who my sister was.

'And charming as well. It is no wonder that every man she meets falls in love with her.'

'I know! Poor Harry, he can't help himself!' And I burst into tears again.

'But it is hardly her fault she is prettier than you. Don't you think you are being unfair?'

'Yes, I know I am. I am a vile woman for being so jealous of her. I can't help it though. I love Harry, and until he met Nyneve, he loved me as well. Now she doesn't want us to marry,

and I know she will make him fall in love with her and I will be alone as long as we are together.'

'Humph.'" The old man twisted his beard around his index finger. 'Well, that is very sad. I suppose you must make a choice then,'

'What choice do I have?'

'Well, from what you have told me, as long as your sister is around, you can never have a husband. And as long as your betrothed is around, or any man you may fall in love with, for that matter, you will continue to detest your sister and make yourself detestable to her.'

I assented that that would probably be the case.

'Well, it seems quite simple then, doesn't it?' He paused expectantly, and then sighed impatiently when I did not jump in. 'You are sitting before a wishing well. So who do you love best?'

I turned to look at the well, which was a very ordinary looking brick well. I thought the old man must be having fun with me, or perhaps trying to comfort me by making light of my troubles. But then, when I stood over the well, a queer sensation came over me. I turned back to the old man, but he had vanished, and curiously the noonday sun had melted into a large orange disc and sank behind the horizon. I decided I should hurry back home before it was too dark to see the way, but as I lowered the bucket into the well, the water shrank away, and the well stretched into a long black tunnel. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to find Harry standing next to me.

'Oh, my Love. My Harry!' I was so happy to see him that as he pulled me into his arms I could not help but laugh, and then he came toward me and kissed me as sweetly as he had when we first met.

‘Harry! Wouldn’t you rather kiss me?’ Nyneve put her hand on Harry’s shoulder, and he turned toward her.

‘No!’ With all my might I pushed Nyneve into that deep, black well. Her scream followed her down the well and I felt the corner of my lips twist and curl so that my face split into a hideous grin. I—I know this sounds terrible, but I was laughing as I watched her fall.

Water splashed my face as my bucket landed in the well. The noonday sun glinted in the water again, and I rubbed my eyes, as if I could rub away that awful vision. What had I become? Once, my sister had been dearer to me than anyone, but now I knew that I would be miserable as long as she was around.

I knew then that the old man had been right. I made my wish.

I could tell you that I did not know what I did. I could tell you that I did not believe in enchanted wells, but in truth, I sincerely hoped my wish would come true. I simply could not live with myself, and with the bitterness I felt for Nyneve.

When Nyneve disappeared that night, I knew we would never find her. I searched every corner, every nook and hollow of that forest, along with Harry, our father, and every able-bodied person in our village, and I alone was not surprised when she did not turn up.

The following Sunday, Harry and I were married.”

Chapter 3

As the moon waxed, the knight seemed to fade away. No amount of porridge would fortify him. Vivienne added an egg to the porridge, (an egg she could ill afford, for the hens did not lay as many as they once had) but the knight grew thinner and paler every night, until Vivienne could feel his bones. He did not have the strength to talk, but his lips still formed the name Glatisant.

One evening, as Vivienne sat by the knight, scraping the last of the porridge from the pot, her eyes fell on a tough old hen, clucking to itself as it strolled across the table. She rose, her eyes never leaving the bird, and put the spoon in her apron pocket. She slunk over to the table with the porridge pot in hand. She focused on the hen's tail as she approached, careful to avoid its eyes, for it was a smart old bird. She tipped the porridge pot in a slow arc and then threw it over the hen. A squawk to wake the devil, but the old bird had seen the shadow of it, and Vivienne only caught its feathers. She scanned the room for the hen, then spied her cowering with the two others behind the stool. The three of them glared at her as she stood over them, as if to say, we know what you're about. Vivienne put the pot on the stool. She crouched low to the ground, as close to chicken height as she could get, and did her best not to see those black pebble eyes. Her hand shot out like an arrow through their flock, snatching up the eldest by its neck. Its toes scratched and its wings beat against her as it tried to get away but she pressed its struggling body against the ground with her arm, carrying it out into the dusk. With her free hand she found Harry's axe, surprised at the weight of it. She held the hen's body between her knees, and pressed its head against the tree stump, exposing its neck to the blade. The head fell away almost as soon as Harry's axe touched it.

She boiled the chicken until the meat fell away from its bones and then she fed him the broth. The meat brought some colour to his cheeks. He who was used to venison, and peacock—she should have known a knight required more than peasant food.

After grooming Thunderswift, Vivienne would often sit by the bed and gaze at the sleeping face. “What colour are your master’s eyes, Thunderswift? Are they brown like yours? Or green like the emeralds on his scabbard?” They were the only part of the knight that she had not yet seen, and the desire to know burned like a hot coal inside her. She had memorized every crease of his lids, she had counted his top lashes. Sometimes his lids would flutter, like curtains, and she’d almost glimpse beneath, but she never quite saw them.

One morning, Vivienne spooned a weak broth into his mouth. That day he slept quietly. He had been calmer, of late, and rarely more than muttered the name Glatisant. Vivienne had begun combing the knots from her own hair after tending to Thunderswift’s mane and tail. She teased them out from the bottom, just like the steed’s, and worked her way up. She went to the well often to wash the soot from her face and dress, and picked her nails as clean as she could. She even found a patch of wild flowers and made a crown of them, as she had with Nyneve when they were young. She imagined she must look quite lovely, though she knew better than to wear the flowers in view of any neighbours, much less for Sunday service.

She wore the flower crown in her hair, and her finger nails were as clean as she’d ever seen them as she spooned the broth into her brave knight’s mouth. She had not yet trained her heart to keep an even pace when those eyelids fluttered, and broth spilled over his chin when she saw his lashes move. She wiped it away with her finger, lingering longer than she needed at the corner of his mouth.

The eyes opened all at once.

“Glatissant!” The knight bolted upright, spilling the bowl on Vivienne’s apron and bed.

Blue-grey, she smiled to herself. She did not move to mop up the broth, though it had spilled all over them both, and on the pelt that covered the bed. She stared at the knight, ignoring the whirlwind of chicken feathers, the frantic clucking and braying. She did not even notice that the goat had jumped back at the same moment the knight bolted up and knocked over the slop bucket, while the horse was tactfully edging toward the far corner of the room in order to distance himself from the scene.

“You’re awake,” she said. His eyes were the colour of clouds breaking over the sky.

“Who—Where?” He jumped again as a chicken landed on the bed, beating its wings and squawking furiously until Vivienne shooed it away. He swallowed tightly at the stink of the place, his air holes closing at the rot and animal waste and dust that pervaded there. He coughed to disguise the gagging that forced its way up his throat.

“You poor thing,” Vivienne said, putting her hand on his as she had when he slept. But he drew his away.

“Who are you?” The knight demanded.

“I am Vivienne. You rescued me from my husband? I was in the tree?”

But the knight looked past her, breaking into a grin at the sight of his horse.

“Thunderswift, my boy! We must continue our quest! God only knows how far she is by now.”

He had risen from the bed, forgetting himself, then hastily pulling the blanket around him. “Milady, I thank you for your kind hospitality, but I must be on my way now. The quest beckons us!”

Seeing his clothes draped over the table, he forgot the pelt again. Her eyes dropped with it, and then they both blushed as he hastily wrapped it around himself again.

“But you have not eaten yet,” she protested, doing her best to wipe the broth from her clothes with an equally wet and dirty rag. “At least let me boil an egg for you. You are so thin I can count your ribs.”

Pellinore pulled the pelt up to cover his chest. He did not like the way she stared.

“No, I have imposed on your hospitality long enough.” The knight felt certain he could not have swallowed down anything in that place.

“You are not well, you are still recovering,” she clucked. And in truth, he felt light-headed. He wished there was a window in this place. “You are flushed. Let me feel your brow.”

Holding the blanket firmly in place with one hand, he reached for his leggings with the other. “No, that is quite all right. If I could just have a moment to myself to dress—”

But she marched toward him. She was short, a good foot shorter than he, and she had stand on the tips of her toes to feel his forehead. “You are still feverish,” she declared, snatching the pants away. “Get back in bed!”

The hut sweltered like a dragon’s mouth. He felt as though it might swallow him. He tried to stand back, but he found himself against the wall, crowded by this tiny woman touching his forehead and his cheeks, telling him he was too clammy, too hot, too sick and underfed for her to allow him to leave. Suddenly, his knees buckled, and he found himself at her feet.

“Milady, some water please.”

“Oh, my poor knight!” She led him to the bed, still wrapped in the pelt. “Here, rest, and I will fetch you some.” She hurried away with her bucket leaving the door ajar.

The knight lay in that putrid hut, drinking in the stream of cold air that blew over him. He pictured her, long blue neck, graceful forelegs, golden haunches. Glatissant: His quest. His heart

beat faster, as though he was already chasing her again. He began to feel better, then. And staring up at Vivienne's muddy ceiling, he whispered, "One day you will be mine."

When Vivienne returned with her sloshing bucket, Pellinore was fully dressed and standing in the clearing with Thunderswift. His face shone with perspiration, but he was armed, and he brushed and tacked up his horse with the zeal of a man who was determined not to spend another minute in bed. He sang to himself, as he had the day he had saved Vivienne.

Though you may hide your glowing eyes, though you may run from man and steed, my beauteous creature shall I pursue across ev'ry meadow, dale, and stream...

He drank as lustily as he sang, lapping up the water straight from the bucket alongside his horse, then looked up at Vivienne sheepishly.

"I have grown unused to the company of ladies," he explained.

"Are you sure you won't stay? I could make porridge. Or," she hesitated. "I could roast a chicken."

But Pellinore could not be persuaded. Vivienne watched her brave knight prepare to leave her. He fastened Thunderswift's bridle, and though that noble steed pawed the ground with impatience, though he actually champed at his bit, when the knight leapt on him and commanded him to tally-ho, the horse turned back to the peasant, and lowered his muzzle in a graceful bow.

Vivienne was so touched at the gesture that it lifted her spirits, just a little. "Farewell, sweet Thunderswift," she murmured, stroking the horse's nose. "I will miss you as well." She wiped away the tears that had gathered with a corner of her soiled apron, so that it left a dark smudge across her cheek, and impatient though he was to carry on his quest, Pellinore was moved by this display of affection between his faithful steed and the peasant woman.

“Never fear, milady. I will have a handsome bounty sent here to compensate you for your troubles. Come, Thunderswift!” the knight tugged at his horse’s rein, trying to make him turn. Thunderswift was being uncharacteristically stubborn. The beast was out there, growing bolder by the minute, no doubt. They needed to capture her.

“But—” Vivienne had to swallow back the sadness in her voice. “But sir, I do not even know the name of the man who risked his life to save my own. I would trade all the riches in the world to know you, and to spend a day in the company of my brave knight.”

The knight started at the tiny woman with the bird’s nest hair and flower crown, her shapeless woven dress, cinched at the waist with a blood-spattered apron. He saw the way she watched him, like a god. He was her saviour. Despite her peasant clothes, her bony frame and burnt complexion, she was rather a sweet-faced girl.

He thought again of that spectacular beast, galloping through the forest, always just out of reach. His heart filled with longing at the thought of her. He had been chasing her since he was barely tall enough to ride a horse, but he pushed her away for once and focused on the woman before him. The shadow of Glatisant still ebbed at the periphery of his mind, always pulling away and nagging to be chased; but though he longed to get on his horse and run for her again, he was a knight, and he had a duty to serve all women.

Pellinore descended from his horse, and swooped down into a dramatic bow before her. “Milady, Sir Pellinore at your service.”

Pellinore helped Vivienne on to Thunderswift’s back. He would show this peasant the most beautiful sight in all the land!

Chapter 4

Vivienne side-saddled like a lady. She had never known a pleasure so terrifying, or a terror so delightful; knight, woman, and steed became one creature, leaping over streams, whipping past trees so fast Vivienne felt sure they would go through them. Yet, she had never felt as safe as she did with Pellinore's arms reaching around her to hold the reins, his chest pressed against her back as they rode through the forest, across the stream, and over the hill, until finally the only land Vivienne had ever roamed disappeared behind them. All the while they rode, Pellinore sang:

O-Glatisant On my stalwart steed I pray I shall ride as swift as thee and one day, for all the isle shall sing my praise and to fair Listenoise we shall retire where all the people will admire the beauteous creature I carry with me...

As the forest fell away and the sun blazed down on them, the air began to change. The smell of dead leaves faded, and it was replaced by a different smell, crisp and completely unfamiliar. Thunderswift slowed as the grass grew rocky, and the land dipped inward, a sandy horse shoe adorned with curious shells and smooth round stones. The air grew cooler, and the wind was stronger here, but it was not unpleasant. Rather, the wind seemed to give Vivienne strength. Beyond the beach was turquoise water, and rocks jutting out of it. When a wave crashed and frothed against the rocks, Vivienne knew that this was what she smelled. She felt giddy, breathing in that air, and when Pellinore helped her dismount, she nearly leapt from Thunderswift's back. Pellinore looked different as well. His eyes were no longer grey, but as blue as the sparkling sea before them. His cheeks took on a rosy hue when she accepted his hand. How charming to see him blush, she thought, as they walked, arm in arm toward the beach.

“There lies Camelot.” He pronounced the word with apt reverence, for the towers on that isle beyond the sea shimmered in the sunlight, and Vivienne could make out azure, crimson and canary hues of banners, and flags, and stained glass windows against the golden walls. Even the mountains beyond Camelot looked regal. She pictured the grand ladies in their bright dresses, the page boys with feathered caps, swirls of moving colour all around her. And the King smiling at her benevolently as she made her curtsy to him.

“Would that I could go there,” she breathed. She had not meant to speak the words aloud, but her yearning for the place ached so that her thoughts left her mouth of their own volition.

“Would you!” Pellinore’s laugh made her bite down on her lip in shame, but he seemed to repent his rudeness, for he added more gently, “I only mean, it is a long journey from here. More than three days on a good horse... but perhaps one day I will bring you there.”

Vivienne smiled with pleasure at the thought. “I would be honoured to go with you, sir.”

But Pellinore did not hear her as he hummed his formless tune. It seemed to transport him to some other place, no doubt occupied by his Lady Glatisant, who could never be far from his thoughts. She turned her attention to the waves that lapped up against the pebbles. She went up to them, kneeling and gingerly putting her hand out, so the next wave hit it. Ice cold it was, but it seemed to draw her in. She hesitated to remove her shoes and stockings in front of Pellinore, but to her pleasure she saw he was removing his own boots and rolling up his leggings to join her for a wade in the chilly waves.

They sat on a rock, a little ways into the water, and let the waves kiss their feet as they looked out at the great city. Pellinore told of his journey there to meet the child-king, and how that boy had knighted him in his palace at the Pentecost feast. “I will have to weave some extra fine cloth when we go,” Vivienne said. “Unless someone of your acquaintance could lend me a

dress?” She had lifted her skirt higher than she needed to avoid the ocean spray, and Pellinore reddened at the sight of her bare legs.

“Well, I hardly go there myself, since I am so often riding about the country. It has been years since I’ve been to Camelot. I have my quest, you see, and I pledged, you see, to go after her...”

Pellinore was humming again, his mind far from her, far from the beach, far from the rock. Vivienne wanted to call him back, but she would do so gradually. She would slip into that place he went to, and lead him back to her. She allowed her foot to drift toward his, to touch it just gently. “Does *she* not live there?”

“She?” He sat by her, staring out into at the horizon, past the great city and into the mountains beyond.

“You spoke of her in your sleep. Every night you called out the name Glatissant. I thought—I thought she must be someone from Camelot.”

The knight’s foot jerked away from hers. “What? Glatissant in Camelot! Nay, she would no sooner set foot on that fair isle than she would destroy us all!”

“Destroy you? Why? Is she not nice?” Vivienne traced circles in the water with her toe, letting her foot wander back toward his.

“Nice! She’s a beast!”

“A beast, sir?”

“Aye, and what a beast she is! That is why it is both my duty and my destiny to pursue her, to the ends of the Earth, for as long as either she or I may live.” Pellinore stared out across the water still. There was pride in his words, but the pride had a heaviness to it. He looked as ancient as the rock they sat on.

“But what happiness has such a life brought you? Can there be any satisfaction in always pursuing and never catching?” Her hand covered his then, and she waited for him to pull away but Pellinore hardly seemed to notice her touch. “Why would you devote your life to such a cruel mistress, when you could have a kind one instead?”

But Pellinore only shook his head sadly. “It is an honour to chase her. She is my life’s purpose, and as long as I am devoted to her—”

“Ah, that is a pain that I know only too well! As you saw, I too was tied to a beast. The cruelest of beasts. Until you saved me, my brave knight.” She slipped her fingers between his, and still he did not pull away. “But surely, that is no way to live. Yes, I know, as an honourable knight, you are devoted to your lady, but if she truly loved you—”

“My lady? I have no lady. I have only my quest.”

“But of course. I know it must pain you not to be with Lady Glatisant—”

“*Lady Glatisant?*” Pellinore balked at his companion’s ignorance. “Have you never heard the tale of Glatisant!?”

Vivienne shook her head, and the last petals from her flower crown fell into the water.

“Lady Glatisant,” he said to himself, testing the sound of it. He stared at Vivienne in amused amazement, still pondering the thought of a lady-monster. Her hair was a mess of twigs and petals. She looked like a sort of lady-monster herself. “*Lady Glatisant.*”

The words tickled him. Pellinore was a noble man, and as a noble man, he was raised to treat all people, especially ladies, with respect. But as he looked at the ridiculous creature before him, and thought of the Monster-Lady Glatisant, he was so amused by the image that a snort escaped his nostrils. And as he snorted, he blew away the last remaining flower from Vivienne’s crown, and then he howled with laughter.

“Lady Glatisant!”

Vivienne blushed furiously. “What are you laughing at?” But the more Pellinore laughed, the more he realized that he had not laughed in years. Vivienne’s brow furrowed, but he could not stop. He had forgotten what a joy it was to laugh, and this made him laugh harder still. He slapped his leg in delight, and this tickled him until he found himself helpless to the laughter.

He very nearly fell off the rock laughing, and Vivienne would have been glad of it if he had. She was not a wholly ignorant woman. Perhaps she was unaccustomed to the ways of knights and ladies; she may not have spent much time listening to the gossip of the court, or been to tournaments, or even set foot in Camelot, but she had heard tales of knights, and knew that they were not supposed to laugh at wretched peasant women, particularly peasant women who had given them hospitality in a time of need. This knight was behaving most uncouthly, and it was more than less deserved. She balled up her fists, and dug her fingers into her palms to stop her eyes from welling up. She would not cry in front of this rude man. She leapt up from the rock, and lifting her skirt with as much dignity as she could muster, she marched back to shore.

It sobered Pellinore to see that woven skirt trailing in the waves. Her attempt at dignity made him realize what an ass he was. He was not a bad man, really, but the months (years?) he had spent chasing a monster who did not wish to be found had made him peculiar. He had grown unaccustomed to company; he had forgotten how to be mindful of feelings.

He followed her to the shore, but stopped at the water’s edge to watch her. Vivienne walked toward his steed, and Thunderswift’s head lifted in recognition, then lowered to allow the wench to stroke his muzzle. She was turned so that Pellinore could not see the blood-spatters on her apron, and her hair looked more curled than matted. The light hit her face, giving it a look of tenderness that had not been there before.

At first, he was so taken by the lovely picture they made that he did not notice her lips moving. Forming solemn words, at the horse. And Thunderswift—*his* Thunderswift—looking back at that wench with such understanding. Pellinore often spoke to his horse. In fact, he was so often on the trail of the beast that he sometimes spoke almost exclusively to Thunderswift for months at a time. In moments of crisis, he had whispered things into his loyal steed's ears that he would never share with any man. What could this woman possibly have to say to his horse? Was she speaking ill of him?

His blood frothed at this thought, pushing aside any sense of contrition he had felt. She must be stopped! He marched toward them, his mouth open before he knew what words would come out, but then her eyes shifted away from Thunderswift's, locking with his. And her lips eased into a smile. The sweetness of that smile distracted him from his feet, and one dug into the sand while the other kept going. His vision was filled with that bewitching smile, and then he was sprawled on the ground, spitting out sand.

Laughter rippled above his head.

“Are you all right, sir?”

He looked up. Her lips still twitched, though she made a valiant effort to look concerned as she offered him her hand.

“No cause for alarm, milady.” Pellinore hoisted himself up, brushing the sand from his elbows and shins, then smiled as he picked out the grains that had lodged themselves into his skin. A snort escaped her nose, and she giggled again.

“I suppose we are even now,” she said, kneeling to his level. She dabbed his scrapes with her apron, and Pellinore gritted his teeth to stop from wincing.

He didn't mean for it to happen, but some things are inevitable. There was the stinging of the cloth against his broken skin, and her face bent over his, and then her eyelids lifted. Her irises were deep brown and flecked with copper. Their faces were so close that when she looked at him, he hardly felt himself lean forward, but he did. And then, Pellinore closed his eyes and kissed Vivienne.

Her lips were softer than they looked. A wave of warmth ran through him, and he forgot who or where he was; his quest, the beast, he forgot his very name as he sank into that kiss.

Then, that tiny hand was on the back of his head, pushing him closer. Pellinore never knew there could be such force in a woman's touch. Their teeth scraped together. He tried to pull back, but Vivienne followed him, her wet lips locked to his. They were still kneeling on the ground, but then she was trying to push him down into the dirt; her arms twined about his neck; he tried to rise, but, but she held him so tightly that he lifted her up with him, and fell back into the sand. Her kisses were unrelenting. She was climbing on top of him; he knew it would all be over soon if he didn't manage to—

At last! He rose, leaving the wench in an indignant heap in the sand.

"It grows late." Pellinore wiped his mouth with as much dignity as he could muster. "I believe it is time that I escorted you back."

"The sun won't set for hours. Come, lie here with me and tell me more about Camelot." Vivienne pleaded. The knight's leggings were still rolled up to his knees from wading in the ocean. She ran a hand along one muscled calf, but he jumped away at her touch.

"We must be going. It is a long ride." If he was not bound by honour to serve and protect all ladies, he would have hopped on to Thunderswift's back and ridden as far from Vivienne as he as his steed would carry him.

“As you wish, my brave knight,” Vivienne sighed, taking the hand he did not offer to help her rise. “I shall have to wait to see it for myself.”

She walked back along the beach to where she had taken off her shoes and stockings to swim. Vivienne took longer than she needed to put these items back on; she hoped the knight was watching her. Pellinore turned away from the water and took more care than he needed to lace up his boots so he would not have to look at Vivienne.

Chapter 5

Pellinore promised himself he would not get distracted again. He must be on his guard with this peasant woman, for evidently she was not as guileless as she appeared. The thought of that kiss made his pulse quicken. He wanted to push the thought from his mind, but he could still feel that mouth clamped on to his, and—that witch! He would have to watch her carefully. Tomorrow he would set off on his journey, and then the whole ugly incident would be forgotten.

Pellinore kept Thunderswift at an easy trot. The ride back to her hut would take far longer than the ride there had, but Pellinore was anxious not to tire out his horse. It had been foolish of him to drive Thunderswift so hard earlier, when he knew they would have a full night's ride ahead of them, and the steed had grown fat from whatever table scraps Vivienne had been feeding him. Pellinore's knightly instincts told him that the beast had gone north, to the mountains. The journey would be arduous, but at least Glatissant would be off her guard.

“Do all the ladies wear silk in Camelot?”

“Yes, of course they do.” He was only half listening to her. Could Thunderswift navigate those icy paths? If any horse could, it would be he. Yes, they would find Glatissant's lair, and then Pellinore would triumph where all his forefathers before him had failed.

“I am not sure I have anything that will do, and if we are to go to court and see the King and Queen—”

“What?” Pellinore shook himself from his thoughts. “We are not going to Camelot.”

“What do you mean? You said you would take me there.”

“I am certain I did not!” Pellinore hoped he had not. He tried to recall their conversation. What had he told her? “I am not going to Camelot.”

“You said it would be a three day’s journey. I wonder if we will see my sister. She was last seen west of here. For all I know, she is already in Camelot. She has a way of—”

“I am not going to Camelot,” Pellinore said again. “I am a knight. I must complete my quest.”

“Do knights not keep their word? Oh, let’s not argue.” She retreated, lest she rouse Pellinore’s anger. “I know you will take me there one day, just as you promised you would. Why don’t you tell me more about the gentlemen and ladies at court? How do they amuse themselves? What intrigues are there? Feuds between brothers? Scandalous affairs? Unrequited love?”

But Pellinore would not be lured into a conversation. He gave the curtest possible replies to every overture she made until she fell silent. He would not think about Vivienne; he would only think of Glaisant, and how, soon, she would be his.

Pellinore hummed quietly to himself, his mind and heart already on those northern mountains in pursuit of the beast. Vivienne leaned back, nestling against his chest, feeling the rumble of that strange and rambling song.

“Sit up straight!” Pellinore said, squirming as far from Vivienne as he could without falling off his horse.

“I only wanted to hear what you were singing. You sang it the day you rescued me.”

“I wasn’t singing anything. I was merely humming, as I do sometimes when I am riding. Now, sit properly. I need to be able to guide Thunderswift.”

“It’s about the beast, isn’t it? I thought you were singing about a damsel, but it is the beast you are yearning for.”

“One doesn’t *yearn* for prey. I am pursuing her. She’s my quest.”

“Tell me about this beast you are so fond of questing, then.”

“Her name is Glatissant. And it has been the quest of every King of Listenoise to hunt her for as long as anyone can remember.”

“Are you a *king*?” As a peasant, Vivienne was too ignorant to realize that there were many minor kings in those days, and that the isle that Pellinore’s clan ruled was such a pathetic kingdom that the title was hardly used beyond his own castle walls. In fact, Listenoise was so far from the minds of anyone who lived beyond its borders that it had survived undefended for generations, as king after king strayed further and further from their home in pursuit of Glatissant.

“I am the King of Listenoise,” Pellinore replied solemnly. “And like all kings of Listenoise before me, I have pledged to hunt the beast Glatissant. No one has ever succeeded in catching her, but each generation has come closer than the last.”

“But then, if all the men in your family must spend their lives hunting Glatissant, how do they continue the line?”

“What?”

“Well, when do they take wives, and have families?”

“Oh!” Pellinore frowned, for this question had never occurred to him before. “Well, my mother was the daughter of another king, so I suppose they must have arranged it. But King Pellas passed away some time ago.”

“That is a pity! I suppose you will need to arrange your own marriage then. Please, tell me more about this Glatissant. I find it quite fascinating!”

Oh, she was a cunning one! She knew that his quest was the one topic he would not be able to resist. The ancient words were laced into his bones; they were as much a part of him as his red beard, his shield, his name, his blood. The words Pellinore spoke were the ones his father had spoken, and the one his father had spoken before him, and the ones *his* father had spoken

before him. That is how stories were told back then. There is a power in such repetition, like an incantation; each time the words are spoken they grow stronger. The words had been around for so long that they had taken on a life of their own.

“She lurks in mountain caves, for she learned long ago to fear my people. Yet, she can only escape destiny for so long. It is our destiny to catch her, and thus it is her destiny, sooner or later, to be caught. She leaves her cave to hunt, feeding on whatever forest creatures she can find. Her hooves are not much use for hunting, but her head darts snake-like at her prey, and she can break a neck with one swift snap of her jaw. Her mouth waters for the flesh of babes, but her fear of the Listenoisean blade usually conquers her monstrous appetite, and she’ll content herself with hare or boar instead. Some say she was born of Cain, and others that she was put on the Earth to punish man, but in either case, she has roamed the country since the time of the giants, and even they feared her. She can see for a thousand miles on either side. She might be watching us right now, and we would never know—Stop that!”

Vivienne was fondling Thunderswift’s ears. He neighed happily at her touch.

“I only wanted to reassure him. This is a very frightening tale.” His horse’s pace was steady, but Pellinore didn’t like the way Thunderswift’s ears twitched as she ran her fingers slowly along them.

“Thunderswift is as brave as any warrior. And we’ll be out here all night if you distract him.”

“All right then,” Vivienne sighed, leaning back against her knight, her head was nestled under his chin. “Now, tell me more about this Glatissant. That figure on your shield, is that her?”

“That icon is a mere sketch of her. No craftsman could capture her magnificence, much less the terror she inspires. She stands ten feet long from head to tail. Her head and neck are like

a dragon's, but bluer than these jewels. Her scales are as thick as leather. No ordinary arrow will pierce her skin—only these, made by elfin woodsmen, and given to my father's great-grandfather as a token of gratitude for one of his many courageous deeds. Glatisant's eyes are amber, like this stone, but they do not catch the light. They are the soulless eyes of a monster. The gold leaf here represents a leopards' back, and the haunches of that king of all beasts, the lion. She is quick and deadly as these cats, and quicker still for her front hooves. She is said to be a cousin of the elusive white stag. She is a majestic creature, a regal warrior, and no knight has ever been honoured with a worthier quest. King Pellas—my father—” he explained, remembering his uneducated audience. “King Pellas thrice came close to capturing her, and each encounter brought him closer to death.”

“Have *you* ever come close to catching her?”

“Do you want to hear my story?” Pellinore squirmed against Vivienne, who was by this time settled quite comfortably against her knight.

Her lips grazed his neck. The kiss was so gentle it was almost imperceptible, but Pellinore shuddered in the darkness. “I won't interrupt again,” she promised.

Chapter 6

“Any beast that could kill King Pellas would have to be formidable indeed, for with his fiery beard, and his arms that swung at his side like battering rams, he was a fearsome man. The halls shook when he walked through them, and the servants shrank into the shadows whenever he entered the room. Even I, born of his own flesh, trembled in his presence.

“The first time King Pellas encountered the beast, he was a young man. Some faulted him for being prideful, but King Pellas’ pride was warranted. My father was a fierce fighter who rarely lost a joust, and his prowess as a hunter was more impressive still. Yet, no one will deny that it was hubris that nearly cost him his life the day he first encountered the beast.

“Hunting is slow work, especially when the prey is a beast as cunning as Glatissant. Her spotted coat serves as camouflage in almost any terrain, and aside from her far-seeing eyes, her ears pick up vibrations from many miles away. She has the attributes of both predator and prey: the swiftness of a leopard, the strength of a lion, the ferociousness of a wyrm—a *dragon*—” He anticipated Vivienne’s question before she could interrupt him. “And the heightened senses of a hart.

“One day, King Pellas was riding through Cerniw. He had been on the trail of the beast for many years at that time. He had had other adventures along the way, but like any true and honourable knight, his mind was always on his quest; and so when he came upon her at last, he was ready.

“Cerniw is hilly country. It is hard going for man and horse, but it is beautiful as well—Lush green rolling hills, and the vast Lake Cerniw at its edge. King Pellas was riding through the forest, headed for the mountains, where Glatissant most likes to hide. He came to a place in the forest where the ground sloped upward, and there, through the leaves, he espied her massive

speckled back. A less watchful man would have missed her, but King Pellas' eyes were as sharp as an eagle's. Nothing could escape them.

“He dismounted some distance from her, and scrambled up the muddy slope on his hands and knees, his eyes never straying from the enormous body that lay in that clearing. He had forgotten how large she was. Obviously he had seen her many times before, but hunting Glatissant is like that: She is so impressive that she hardly seems real when you see her up close. He knew he would have to ascend the hill slowly, lest she hear him moving in the grass. Halfway up the hill, he saw the golden tuft of her tail twitching in the grass. He was well-positioned to fall upon her without her so much as noticing him—and then the trophy would be his!

“He crept closer still, gripping the hilt of his sword in anticipation. Her steady breathing, soft and nasal, told him that the beast slumbered. He would have to take great care that she did not hear him, but though he usually thundered about his castle, King Pellas could tread as silently as a mouse. As a child he had practiced stalking sparrows until he could catch them with his bare hands. He crept up the hill toward Glatissant as softly as he had then.

“He came to the place where the trees thinned, so close he could almost touch her tail. She was larger than King Pellas had remembered, and her body was as lean and muscular as the most powerful stallion he had ever ridden. Her neck was at least five feet long, and as thick as a tree trunk. She was at once beautiful and grotesque, but King Pellas was not afraid.

“He found the tree closest to the edge of the clearing, and scaled its trunk as quietly as he could. Halfway up the tree, the snoring halted. King Pellas was a tightly coiled spring; his arms and legs gripped the tree tightly, and he twisted his neck around to watch the beast.

“Glatissant's neck jerked up, and her nose sniffed the air suspiciously. But the beast did not turn around, and after a moment, she again rested her head on the grass. When he was sure

she was asleep, King Pellas shimmied the rest of the way up the trunk, and to the edge of a low-hanging bough, so that he was directly above Glatisant's shoulder blades. Her neck sloped down on to the grass, almost as if she were offering herself to him.

“King Pellas jumped, his sword drawn and ready to strike.

“He had underestimated her speed. The second he landed on her back, the beast roused herself with an awful shriek, and King Pellas had to cling on to her neck just to stay on as she reared up. A lesser man would have been thrown, but as all Listenoisean Kings are taught, when you take on a beast as awesome as Glatisant, it does not matter that she has never been defeated. You must approach her as if she is already yours.

“Her terrible cry rang in King Pellas' ears—the cry of every demon in Hell—but the beast was bucking so wildly that if he had loosened his grip he would have been thrown from her, and that would have been the end of my father. He clung to her even as she twisted her neck to bite him. King Pellas still held his sword in one hand, and he felt her warm and putrid breath on his neck as she snapped at his shoulder again and again. Though King Pellas must have truly feared for his life, his blood raced with the possibility that he would have her if he could just hang on a bit longer; no matter how the beast rattled him about, Pellas hung on fast, and this infuriated her all the more.

“Unable to shake King Pellas, Glatisant bolted down the hill, and though he knew he might be hurtling to his death, he still held on, his knuckles white around the hilt of his sword. Even when tree branches scratched against his back, even when the beast made a sudden turn and nearly knocked him clear off, King Pellas held on to his prize with every ounce of strength he possessed.

“Because he was holding on to the beast, King Pellas did not see the river they were approaching. He barely had chance to fill his lungs when he was hit with a cold splash. My father could hold his breath longer than any man, but even he feared his head might burst, and then his lungs, as she dragged him deeper and deeper into that black water. He held on to her all the way to the bottom of the lake, all the while trying to reach her with his sword.

“Why did he still hold on to the monster, you ask, when he would surely drown? A knight will never let danger stand between him and his quest. We fight always at the side of God, and so we trust in Him to save us if that is His will.

“Glatissant swam steadily downward, aiming for a cave at the bottom of the lake. King Pellas knew he would never rise again if he followed the monster into that dark place; already, he felt his spirit leaving him as the pressure mounted. His sword had never felt so heavy. He had to hold on to her with his legs and use both hands to lift it, but with the last of his strength, he managed to drive it into the side of Glatissant’s neck.

“How she writhed with pain, then! How she screamed, so that she must have been heard even above the surface of that lake! She threw Pellas right off her back, but he held on to the hilt of his sword. Even as he felt those terrible jaws snapping at his feet, he held on, driving the sword into her flesh until he could no longer see the blade. A cloud of blood poured out of the wound, filling his vision. His grip slipped, and found himself floating helplessly away from his trophy! He tried to swim back to her, but he was so weary it was like swimming through clay, and soon he found he had not the strength even to lift his head.

“King Pellas would have perished there, but by providence, a fisherman saw him bobbing along the water and dragged him aboard. When he had recovered, they told him they had seen the silhouette of a great serpent rise on the horizon. Glatissant had survived.

“The second time King Pellas nearly caught the beast—”

“Sir, we have arrived.”

Pellinore looked around in surprise. He had been so absorbed by his story that he had failed to see the mud-straw hut, even when Thunderswift halted in front of it. Now that he had fulfilled his promise to the peasant woman, he was free to pursue his quest. He imagined her again, that magnificent dragon neck, her golden fur. She would be his!

He expected his pulse to quicken at the thought of her, but something had shifted, and the thought of his journey weighed on him. He dismounted, and helped Vivienne down as well.

“I thank you for such a lovely day, Sir Knight.” She curtsied. “I hope you will find your beast at last.”

“Yes.” His melancholy was reflected in her face as well. He was thinking about his father, and his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father’s father’s father, who had died without ever knowing triumph. “It was an honour to wait on you, milady.”

“Farewell, my good knight.” Vivienne rose on the balls of her feet, and wrapped her arms about his neck, and his hands went to the small of her waist. He was surprised at how slender that waist was under the folds of her shapeless dress. She kissed him chastely on the cheek. “Until we meet again.”

“Shall we meet again?” His forefathers had searched for the beast until end of their lives. Would this be his destiny as well? He pushed away a nagging doubt. He had never allowed it to take shape—a mere shadow, but the shadow was terrible enough.

“Yes, of course we will! You must take me to Camelot one day.”

“Ah, yes. To Camelot.” So distant was his memory of that place that it felt like a faerie land. He might as well have promised to take her to a castle in the clouds.

“And perhaps we could see Lister-noise as well.”

His dear Listenoise! It had been near ten years since he had returned to that place.

He was still holding the peasant woman’s hands. She dreamed of seeing castles, but thinking of home made him envy Vivienne her simple life. What would it be like to be an ordinary man? To take a wife and live in a little house in the woods with her?

“It grows late,” he observed.

“I suppose you must be anxious to resume your journey.”

“Yes, I suppose.” He sighed. “Perhaps, though...since it is so late...”

“Would you like to stay until morning?” Vivienne prompted him.

And Pellinore agreed that it would be best if he did not leave until the morning.

Chapter 7

The stench of the place hit her as soon as she entered, and though Pellinore did not complain, she left the door ajar. She fumbled her way through the darkness to the candlestick on the table, chickens scurrying to avoid her feet. Its amber glow was just enough to light the way to the foot of the bed, the only comfortable seat in the small hut. The animals scattered into the shadows, except Thunderswift, who turned tactfully away from his master as he followed Vivienne across the room. He would not look at Thunderswift either.

The hut walls no longer seemed to be closing in on him. When he was a child, he used to hide himself in the smallest nooks of the castle. He would imagine he was a rabbit, or a badger. He remembered what it was like to burrow.

“What happened next?” she asked, reaching for him across the long shadows cast by the candle glow. Pellinore did not flinch at the hand that rested on his knee. In the darkness of the hut, he was free to admit that he liked it there.

But Pellinore did not want to think about the quest. His father’s adventures only reminded him of the fruitlessness of it, the interminable search, and of the nagging doubt that had begun to take shape in his mind.

“I could tell you another story. Don’t you want to hear more about Camelot? At Christmastime, King Arthur has a feast, and there is a contest between all of the knights—”

“No, I can already picture Camelot so beautifully, I’d rather wait until you take me there. Tell me more about your quest.”

“But at Camelot there is a market where people come from the furthest corners of the Orient to sell their wares. They have different kinds of monsters in the Orient. I saw a painting of a long skinny dragon, like a snake with legs. And their dragons are gold like the sun. They don’t

fly but they breathe fire, and they hoard treasure just like British dragons do. The Orientals wear robes of silk in bright colours, and they have sticks that burst into rainbows when you light them, and some nights—”

“I don’t want to hear about Camelot.” Her head was bent. Her hair veiled her face, but it did not conceal her sadness.

“What’s the matter, milady? Have I distressed you?”

“Oh, no, my good knight! No one has ever made me happier.” Her voice was muffled by her hands. She could not stand to show him her red eyes, her runny nose. “It’s just... Well, I *know* you aren’t going to take me to Camelot. Or to Lister-noise. I am not such a fool that I really think you would. I don’t belong there any more than you belong in a peasant’s hut, and it is so good of you...” She sobbed into her apron. “Never again will I be as happy as I am right now, with you.”

Pellinore swept her hair back behind her ear. The gesture soothed her.

“I *will* take you there,” he insisted, (and he surprised himself, then, for he truly believed he would).

She wiped her face with her apron, and even managed a watery smile.

“Please, finish the story about your father and your quest.”

“We could leave tomorrow, if you like.” He could finish his quest later. After all, was it not his duty as a knight to protect and serve ladies?

“When you leave me, I will understand what it is you are protecting me from. That will bring me comfort.”

Pellinore stared into the flickering candlelight for so long that Vivienne thought he had drifted off. His speech startled her when he finally resumed his story.

“After his last adventure, King Pellas was more determined than ever that Glatisant would be his. But the leaves went from green to gold, and he did not see her. The winds blew in from the mountains, and shrivelled the leaves until they fell from the trees. Still, King Pellas did not find her. The trees blossomed again, but King Pellas had not seen any trace of her. A lesser man would have despaired long before King Pellas, wandering from mountain to valley to mountain again in search of the elusive Glatisant. King Pellas himself was beginning to lose hope. In each message he sent home to Listenoise he promised to return soon, for harvest, for Michaelmas, for Christmas, for Easter; but each time he made such a promise, he believed it less and less. In his heart he knew he could not bring himself to return without the beast, and that might mean he might never again feel Listenoisean sands between his toes. Still, he did allow despair to dig her cruel talons into his heart. Against all odds, against all reason, King Pellas continued the quest he had pledged his honour to, for he knew that this was the duty of every brave and noble knight.

Chance brought him across the Northern Sea, to a little village in the shadow of Black Mountain. Have you never heard of Black Mountain? I am afraid, then, that this tale is about to get more frightening, for the mountain is known to be haunted by sprites, gnomes, and all manner of other demonic creature. Come, let me put my arms around you, my dear. There, that’s better. You are safe here, with me.

When King Pellas came upon the little parish, and he hoped to find sustenance there, and to take confession, which he had not done for many moons. The village should have been a-hum with the usual noise of men ploughing the fields, or selling wares at the market, or children playing at knights with twigs for swords, but instead it was silent, and by all appearances, deserted.

In the market square a rotten pig still hung from its spit. Crows pecked the flesh from its bones. Chickens skulked across the cobbles, pecking at whatever grubs and seeds had fallen between the cracks. The fields were likewise deserted. A plough lay forgotten in the half-mown grass. The horses were skeletal, their eyes bulging in their skulls. They pawed the ground with heavy hooves, as if they longed to get out but would fall to the ground the moment he opened the gate. King Pellas wished he had food to give them.

A cottage overlooked the field. He knocked on the door, and he was sure he heard rustling within but nobody answered. He tried another house, and when no one answered there he rapped on the window and called out, 'Hello!'

The curtains moved slightly. 'Hush, you fool! You will awaken it!' came the rasping whisper from within.

Though King Pellas begged the stranger to let him in or at least to tell him what the matter was, no other sound emerged from the cottage.

King Pellas walked on until he came to the church, tried the door and found it unlatched. His footsteps echoed down the empty altar. The pews were covered with a thick layer of dust, as if it had been many weeks since any Christian had knelt there. 'Hello? Is anyone here?'

His voice bounced against the walls, and King Pellas was about to turn away and ride into the next village when a trembling wisp of a voice said, 'Good King Pellas! At last, you have come to save us.'

He turned to see an ancient priest, his threadbare robes flapping over his gaunt frame, and his beard grown long and wild. King Pellas was certain he had never seen the priest, but his eyes shone with joy at the sight of the good knight. 'I prayed you would come,' he said.

He gave King Pellas wine, with stale bread and cheese, apologizing for the modest food, though it had been so long since my father had broken fast that he relished every morsel. As he ate, the priest told him what ailed his parish.

For some months, the villagers in Black Valley had been living in fear of a certain beast. It began with the disappearance of a few children who had gone berry-picking at the foot of the mountain. These children were known to be wild, just the type of children to disregard their parents' warnings never to wander too far into the woods, and after searching for a few days the villagers concluded that they must have been taken by the faeries. It was not the first time such a thing had happened. They had long since had an understanding with the faerie-people; the valley belonged to the good Christian men and women of the village, and the mountain belonged to the faeries. The villagers knew that if they ever ventured past the foot of the mountain, they did so at their own peril. The parents dried their eyes and told each other it was a pity, but that of course it was to be expected of children who did not pay them any mind.

But then another child, a sensible and pious child, was taking advantage of the last of the dusk light to play hide-and-seek with some of his fellows when they heard a blood-curdling scream from the woods. The children ran to where they heard him, but the child was gone. All that was left of him was a spattering of blood and entrails leading into the woods.

This was not the work of faeries, the villagers told themselves. They forbade the children from playing outside, and even the adults were sure to be safely shut in their huts before the sun set each night. For a fortnight, no other children went missing. And then one hot August night, a mother left the door open, just a crack, to let some air in for her feverish infant.

The family slept peacefully in their bed, the babe resting his hot cheek on her breast, while her husband's arms encircled her waist. But then, in the middle of the night, the child was

ripped from his mother's bosom, screaming. The woman bolted upright just in time to feel the child's blood spurt on her face. His scream burbled to a stop before her husband had a chance to bark, 'Who trespasses here!'

Two yellow eyes blinked in the darkness over their bed. The mother sobbed, whispering the Lord's Prayer to herself. The husband held her to him, hoping she would not hear how loudly his heart hammered in his chest. They smelled the monster's rancid breath, and thought that they were smelling death. But the creature simply turned and left through the door from whence it came, carrying the babe in its maw.

The villagers despaired. They were under siege— afraid to leave their homes, but knowing that if they did not, there would be no one to reap their harvest, and they would starve. It was a terrible choice to make, but they decided to live off their stores for as long as they could, and to pray that God would send some brave knight to deliver them from the monster.

When King Pellas heard of this, he felt sure that it was Glatisant who was stealing the village children, and his blood boiled with rage. He swore to the priest that he would stop the vile beast before any other children were taken.

The priest thanked him tearfully for his bravery, and gave him more provisions for himself and his horse to take on their quest. However, he warned King Pellas that the woods on Black Mountain were inhabited by faeries, who would attack anyone who entered their kingdom unbidden. King Pellas chuckled inwardly at this, thinking that the villagers had many queer superstitions, but he nodded solemnly to the priest and assured him that he would not venture too far into the woods.

At first King Pellas did keep his word. He set out on foot to the edge of the forest, and at dusk he found a bush, well within the safe region of it, and hid himself. He stayed, crouched in

that bush, until his knees were sore and threads of pink sunlight appeared in the sky, but never did she come. The next evening, he crept a bit further into the woods, but he was still well within the mortal realm. That night it rained, and he had to shelter under his shield. Still, he saw no sign of Glatisant. By sunrise the next day, King Pellas began to doubt that Glatisant was on the mountain. He was about to give up and go home when he heard something snaking through the trees toward the peak of the mountain. As he approached he saw her speckled back, and King Pellas knew it must be she!

King Pellas kept his distance, not wanting to spook the beast. Instead, he would follow her to her lair, and wait until he was sure she was asleep. Then, he would ambush her there and slice off her head before she woke! It would be glorious to come back to the village holding the head of the terrible monster, and more glorious still to return to Listenoise a conquering hero, to hear the throngs of cheering peasants, and to humbly accept the gratitude of the British King.

The mountain was shrouded in a dark and tangled forest, with tree branches like terrible tendrils that may grab a hold of you at any second. Knights do not feel fear as ordinary men do. Had King Pellas believed the tales the friar told him about Black Mountain, had he believed in magic of any sort, he would have known that he was in imminent danger, but as I said before, my father scoffed at such tales. He was not thinking about faeries, he was listening to the crack of twigs underfoot in the forest, and the rustle of grass against a large body. He was so intent on his hunt that he did not notice, at first, the movement in the leaves right above his head.

He might have doubted the villagers' warnings of faeries in those woods—peasants are wont to gossip, as you know—but as he walked into the thick of those trees, their leaves began to whisper in his ears. The wind blowing through the trees, no doubt, he told himself. He marched on with his sword unsheathed to cut away the thickest tangles.

He no longer heard the beast, but he knew it must have headed upward, toward the peak of the mountain, for that is where Glatisant prefers to shelter. As he climbed, the air grew colder, and a mist wrapped itself around the mountain. The faint Northern sun hid behind the clouds, so that even though it was hardly past noon, the woods were nearly dark. The wind was still, but nonetheless, King Pellas heard the rustle, rustle, rustle of leaves in his ears. He slashed at the branches around his head. He thought he heard the laughter of a child in his ears. A bird, he told himself, and walked on. He hummed over the laughter.

King Pellas walked on. He would make it to the peak of the mountain by sunset, when the beast would no doubt be waking. She would not get away from him that time. He would find her lair, fall upon her, and cut her head off with his sword while she slept. He would bring the head back down to the villagers, and the mothers and children would be able to sleep peacefully again. He would be back in Listenoise for Easter.

Then it was unmistakable. A little voice humming along with him. He changed his tune, but the voice followed. He began to whistle, and two whistles followed, then three, and then a whole chorus of tiny voices singing all around him.

King Pellas the noble, King Pellas the brave.

King Pellas will lose his courage in the faeries' cave.

‘Show yourself!’ King Pellas took out his sword, ready to attack the mysterious chorus. But he saw no one among the trees. Gradually the singing faded to a hum, and then the woods were quiet once more.

Darkness fell over the mountain.

King Pellas feared he might be going mad. It is not unheard of for knights to go mad after years of questing. The months and years spent alone, with only one’s horse for company,

sleeping outside in rain and snow, and the ever-looming threat of an attack, they can wear on even the strongest of men, make him lose sight of what is real and what exists only in his imagination. Soon, he promised himself, he would be able to rest. Glatissant was almost his.

King Pellas felt something cold against his nape, and he thought it must be raining again. He brushed it away, and his fingers brushed against a hand as cold as death. He whirled around, his sword ready, and came face to face with her. The girl-child appeared to be made of moonlight, her eyes as black as a moonless night. A slow smile spread across her face when their eyes met and he realized that they were not eyes but ghastly holes. Her face was a skull with hair, and even the hand that had touched Pellas had no flesh but only bone.

King Pellas screamed. The faerie girl laughed. King Pellas fled, but the laughter followed him, as if it was coming from inside his brain:

King Pellas the noble, King Pellas the brave.

King Pellas will lose his courage in the faeries' cave.

Faeries cannot hurt a man in the regular way. They are diminutive creatures who possess little physical strength. But they do not take kindly to mortal trespassers, and they will drive a good man to the limits of his sanity simply out of spite. King Pellas ran blindly through the forest. There was a screaming in his head and the screaming drowned out the laughter, and he wanted more than anything to make it stop. He ran blindly, trying to outrun the awful skeleton woman, and the awful skeleton woman's laugh and the awful, awful screaming that followed him wherever he went.

I could not say what happened next. My father thinks he may have tripped over a root or a rock, or perhaps the faeries themselves tripped him up and he tumbled a little way down the

hill and off the path. In any case, he awoke in the forest, and it must have been hours later for it was black as pitch and he heard the haunted call of owls hunting overhead.

The screaming was gone. The laughter was gone. He was alone in the merciful quiet of the woods. It took a few moments for him to get his bearings. He had hit his head when he fell; he was dizzy and it was dark, so it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust. He was still on the mountain. It was mossy there, and the trees a little sparser. The ground before him sloped upward, and the earth was rocky. He tried to stand, but the ground tilted and spun so that he could not stay on his feet. He dragged himself on hands and knees over the earth, but the ground crumbled under his weight. He found himself at the bottom of a deep, dark pit.

He had landed painfully on a pile of sticks and rocks. The moonlight scarcely entered the pit, though he could see he was in a sort of tunnel, and there was another opening a few feet down, which he realized must be the mouth of a cave.

The moonlight girl seemed to appear out of thin air, and several others with her. All children, hollow-eyed and ghostly pale, taunting him with their horrible song:

King Pellas the noble, King Pellas the brave.

King Pellas will lose his courage in the faeries' cave.

She was carrying a basket, and she took a handful of berries from it. The juice dripped blood-red from her lips. Then she raised one red-stained finger and pointed. As the awful creatures came toward him, the cave grew brighter, as if they were illuminating it with their own unholy light. The light shone on him, and he realized that the sticks he had fallen on were bones, children's bones, and the rocks were tiny skulls grinning back at him. Their laughter filled his head. How his fear delighted them!

(And here, dear reader, I shall tell you something that Pellinore did not know: That awful laughter was not the laughter of faeries, but that of a man who had gone mad with fear.)

They stopped inches away from him, and in one movement all the children turned their back to him and disappeared, and he was immersed in darkness once more.

Pellas heard a low growl, and saw those yellow glowing eyes at the mouth of the cave. They have brought me to the beast's lair! Pellas thought. The very place he had been looking for. But instead of cornering the beast, it appeared she had cornered him.

His hand had scarcely reached his scabbard when he heard her horrible cry. The ground shook with every step she took as she charged at him. The beast was upon him before he could unsheathe his sword. She pinned him to the ground. Those yellow eyes coming closer and closer. Her claws ripped into his bicep, and he felt the hot blood trickle from the wound, but his hand still grasped the hilt of his sword. His nostrils were filled with her foul breath, and he knew in another moment she would sink her fangs into his neck, but he managed to pull his arm free, and he drove it into her ribs until he felt her blood-matted fur against his fist.

King Pellas held the sword until the beast howled her last breath. Then he swooned, thinking he had completed his quest at last."

Pellinore fell silent. Vivienne leaned against his chest. She felt his heart pounding, but she did not understand the cause. She was only thankful for the warmth of his body beside hers.

"He managed to slay Glatisant then?"

"Of course not!" Pellinore snapped. "If he had, I wouldn't still be on this quest, now would I?"

A cold wind blew the door open, and Vivienne thought of the beast snatching the child from his bed. She shuddered, and moved closer to him again. She wanted to cheer her knight, but she did not understand what had upset him. She cursed her stupidity. “The beast your father slew was not Glatissant.”

“No. She had charged at him so quickly, he did not realize it at first. Even when she was upon him, he could hardly see in the dark cave, but when the dead weight fell upon him, he knew that he had only slain a mountain cat.”

He wiped away the tears before Vivienne saw them. “My father was pinned under a giant mountain cat. He was so weak with hunger and loss of blood that he could not lift her. He remained in that cave for three days.

“I don’t know how he found the strength to rise at last, but he did. And he brought that vile cat down to the foot of the mountain and presented it to the priest.

“The villagers were overjoyed to be rid of the monster. Their stocks were too far depleted to fête my father in the manner he deserved, but they presented him with a cloak made of the mountain cat’s pelt. He returned to Listenoise, for he needed rest before he could continue his quest, and he wore the cloak all the way home. The cloak still hangs in Listenoise to this day as a reminder of my father’s heroism.

Chapter 8

“So you come from a family of heroes,” she said, unaware of how her words stung him. She only felt the warmth of the body against hers, the hand absently stroking her hair.

Pellinore sighed. It was wonderful to be thought of as a hero. If only he were! Or better still, if only he was born into a life where he wasn't expected to be so heroic. He thought of his father, how he had returned from Black Mountain a broken man, after staring into the face of his failure for three days. That was his destiny. It was not heroism, but failure that was inevitable. It haunted him.

Vivienne kissed his cheek, and her lips were soft against his skin. “How can I thank you for everything you have done?”

“Until the beast is caught, no Listenoisean king can rest.”

“But you must rest, at least for tonight, my brave knight.”

Her brave knight. He knew her expression, though the candle had melted down to a stump. The way she looked at him made him love her. He wanted to exist within her gaze, to be the way she saw him. A man without doubts, without fear. Oh, how he loved her then!

In the darkness of the hut, there was no need to resist her. He returned her kiss earnestly, like the hero she thought he was. He pulled her into an embrace that was furious, passionate, that crushed her tiny body against his.

Her hands found their way under his tunic, feeling their way up his stomach, brushing against his nipples, and lifting the garment over his head; she could hardly believe she had him. Her knight. Her lips found the hollow of his neck, and she kissed her way along his shoulder, and then his chest, working her way down his muscular body. He fell back on the bed, pulling her down with him—

And heard a piercing scream. The bed was alive! Not just alive, but kicking and punching beneath her body, and forcibly pushing her off of it!

Pellinore jumped back, and she heard the scraping of metal on metal as he drew his sword from its sheaf, ready to take on the unknown enemy, be it animal, demon or ghost. As Vivienne tried to rise, the creature kicked her legs, and she lost her balance. Her hands touched a woman's mouth, and a nose—and hair. Her fingers grabbed it, and pulled until she squealed.

“Vivienne!” The creature cried.

“Identify yourself, intruder!” Pellinore demanded.

The intruder giggled.

Pellinore's sword wavered above them. Vivienne loosened her grip on the creature's hair.

“Nyneve!”

The two women burst into such rapid chatter that Pellinore could hardly make it out.

“You were about to—”

“I had no idea you were even—”

As the invader seemed not to pose a threat, Pellinore sheathed his sword. He found his tunic where it had landed at the foot of the bed, and felt his way to the candles.

“How I've missed you, Nyneve! I thought we had lost you forever!”

“No, sister. You know I was never meant for a provincial life. I have been—”

The flame found the wick, bathing the hut in light once more. Nyneve turned and saw the knight, stooped over the table of Vivienne's low-ceilinged abode. For the merest second, recognition flickered across Nyneve's features. Her eyes pierced him like a spear, as if she could see right to his core. Pellinore was staring into Vivienne's face, but Nyneve's eyes were sapphire blue, her hair as light as the sun.

Her smile was a smirk. “And who is this, my sister?” she asked without looking away from him. “I see you have come to your senses and traded away that lout I last saw you with. Quite a bargain you’ve made, haven’t you?”

“This is King Pellinore of Lister-noise, my brave knight who saved me from Harry when he tried to slay me for—”

Pellinore straightened self-consciously, and bowed. “Greetings, fair Lady.”

“*King* Pellinore, is it?” Nyneve curtsied before him, ever regal. “Of *Lister-noise*?”

“Listenoise,” he corrected. He felt flushed under her gaze. She circled him, appraising him. He half thought she might check his teeth.

“Well done, sister,” she said, finally breaking away, returning to Vivienne, still seated on the bed.

Vivienne had forgotten how her sister’s hair shone, how clear her skin was. And in her silk dress, she was lovelier than ever. Vivienne tried not to think about how she must look next to her, her own dark hair matted and dull, her plumper, shorter form next to her sister’s tall, slender one. A pumpkin next to a rose.

“King Pellinore, why don’t you join us here?” Nyneve moved closer to the edge of the bed, making space between herself and her sister. “I would love to hear more about this—*Listenoise*. Are there any particular traditions or, er, legends that belong to the kings of Listenoise?”

Pellinore looked at the space between the two ladies, glancing from the coy face of the one to the bashful face of the other. He carried the stool to the foot of the bed, and sat facing the two ladies instead. “I fear that subject may be tedious for Lady Vivienne. She has already heard

so much about myself, and perhaps she would rather hear news from her fair sister, who I understand has been absent for many moons.”

“Ah! Only a man of noble blood would be so considerate. We peasant women are not used to such fine manners! If that is your pleasure, I will certainly oblige you—both,” she said, glancing at Vivienne as an afterthought.

“You must find our lives quite dull, Your Majesty. And it is true that we ride asses instead of horses, wear garments of rough woven cloth instead of silk, and most of us will never leave our villages. We will never see a castle, or eat venison, or fight in a glorious battle. Most of us will never see anything beyond these trees. We spend most of the year working the fields, and we look forward to the coldest weeks of winter, when the ground is frozen, for this is the only time we rest. We live in fetid huts strewn with chicken droppings, and sleep on beds that are swarming with lice. No, Your Majesty, you needn’t spare our feelings by pretending it isn’t so. Vivienne knows as well as I that a peasant’s life is everything that is low and dirty. Even as young girls, we dreamed of escaping such a life—”

Vivienne started, suddenly, grabbing her sister’s arm. In the far corner of the room, a man in a pointed hat was standing amongst the chickens. “Look!”

Pellinore looked as well, but when they turned their heads, the man Vivienne had seen was gone.

“Oh, it must be all the frightening tales I’ve heard this evening.” Vivienne blushed, cursing her foolish imagination.

She expected Nyneve to laugh at her, but her whole body tensed, and she continued to stare into the corner. Nyneve pressed: “Are you certain, Vivienne? What was it you saw?”

“No, it was nothing. My eyes were only playing tricks on me. Please, go on with your story.”

And soon Vivienne had succeeded in believing her own words. It was only natural that the tales of faeries and monsters should bring to mind the queer figure she had seen at the well long ago. The fire would cast eerie shadows, and she was certain, now, that she had not *really* seen the old man.

Chapter 9

“The night of the Harvest bonfire—has Vivienne not told you about that? I am surprised she hasn’t begun to teach you our dances yet. It is the only fun to be had here in the village and I am sure my sister is anxious to show you off! In any case, I do not want you, either of you, to think that I look down on my former friends and family. It is only that I have always known I was destined for something greater. But the Harvest bonfire is the night every man and woman in our village looks forward to, for it marks the end of the toilsome harvest season, and the beginning of winter.

That day, my heart had been heavy with sadness and foreboding for my dear sister. If you met the scoundrel she married, you will understand that I had felt uneasy since the first day I met him. When I looked that wretched man in the eyes, a hand as cold as ice clutched my heart. It was not the only time I had had such a premonition, and though I tried to put it out of my thoughts for my dear sister’s sake, I knew that that man would bring her nothing but misery

Vivienne was far too smitten to see it, but the look in his eyes was as plain as daylight to me from the moment he introduced us. I could not explain how I knew, and so of course Vivienne was angry when I tried to persuade her not to marry him. Sister, do you see now that I was only trying to warn you of what awaited you?”

Tears welled in Vivienne’s eyes, and she threw her arms about her sister’s neck, forgetting Pellinore was even there for a moment. “Oh Nyneve! If I had known—”

“Oh, no, sister, there’s no need for that. All is forgiven. If it had not been for our quarrel, I never would have had the heart to leave you.

“I needn’t go into that, Your Majesty. For Vivienne is my sister in spirit as well as in blood. I love her, and have always loved her, more than anyone else on this Earth.

When dusk fell, I tried to forget my worries. I hoped that I was wrong about Harry, though I rarely am about such things. I brushed my hair as well as I could, and made a garland of wild flowers and ribbon that was given to me by this dear boy, Tommy, who was quite smitten with me—remember Tommy, Vivienne? Is he married now? I hope he is not still pining for me.

As they did every year on the eve of the harvest, the men stacked logs as high as they could and lit a bonfire, and the whole village drank and danced around that great fire until the stars spun around them and their brows were wet against the crisp night air. I can almost feel those flames licking my skin now. Back then, I knew no greater pleasure than dancing around that fire on a crisp autumn night. The pipes and lutes were ever-changing, but somehow that music found its way into every merry dancers' feet as the men spun the women round and round and round the fire.

It was a wild dance we danced on Harvest night. We women danced across the wet field until the stars blurred, the grass licking our feet as the musicians scratched out a madcap beat. We were giddy from dance, and drink, and from being spun like a top from arm to arm. It was easy to forget one's troubles on such a night. It was like being under a faerie spell, so far were we from our everyday lives that it was hard to believe my sister would be married in a week, that she and I were no longer friends, or that the oaf who had come between us even existed. That is, until I was whirled into his arms.

'Good evening, Harry,' I greeted him, as politely as I could.

'A beautiful evening, Nyneve!' He exclaimed, a bit too jovially. I tried not to mind that his unsteady gait and boisterous manner. We were all a little tipsy by that time, and he would be my brother soon. 'A beautiful evening and a beautiful, beautiful girl who will be my beautiful, beautiful sister-in-law on Sunday next!'

I had done my best to avoid him since my sister first introduced us. The very sight of him repelled me, but I smiled as sweetly as I could. I felt his hot palms against my waist. He pulled me so close to him I could hardly breathe, but my feet obeyed the steps of the dance, keeping time until we switched partners again.

When the time came, Harry sent me whirling toward the next man, but then he pulled me back, and held me more tightly still. ‘Why would I send such a pretty girl spinning into the arms of another man?’ He growled into my ear, his whiskers tickling my neck until I squirmed away.

‘See the confusion you’ve caused, my almost-brother! That poor girl was waiting to dance into your arms, and you have ruined the dance now!’

But the dance was so disorderly that no one else noticed the interruption. The girl found the next unpaired dancer, and the dance carried on around them. We continued to follow the steps, but his hand gripped mine so tightly I feared he would snap my fingers if I tried to pull away.

‘Let go of me, Harry!’

Again, he spun me into the night, and this time I really tried to escape, but he pulled me back with such force that if I had resisted he would have pulled my arm clean from its socket.

‘It’s you I want, Nynaeve! It has been since the day we first met.’

‘You lout!’ I followed the one-two step around the circle, my smile taut. ‘She knows it, too. Let go of me, before you make a fool of all of us!’

I kept my smile, for I dreaded a scene. How would it look if Vivienne knew how her betrothed was behaving toward me? After our quarrel, I already feared she would never speak to me again.

‘We will run away together, my Nyneve! My sweet Nyneve! My beautiful Nyneve! My charming, my bewitching, my captivating Nyneve!’ I tried to spin away from him again, but this time he held me tight, and the crowd of people closed around us as he pulled me away from the fire.

‘Let go of me, Harry!’ And this time I really struggled against him. I tried to wriggle free of his strong grip, I kicked, and scratched him, but it was no use for he was far stronger than me. I was about to give in and cry out for help at last, when a tall man emerged from the forest and came toward us.

I had never seen such a handsome man. You know, my sister, that I am not...

She blushed charmingly, glancing at Pellinore.

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty. What I mean to say is I am not susceptible, as some of our sex are, to masculine charms. But this man possessed an almost unearthly beauty, like an angel or a faerie. His beauty actually *struck* me—he left me breathless. His hair was silvery white, and it fell in tiny crescents around his head, but his skin was smooth and had the glow of youth. He wore a robe of dark purple embroidered with gold symbols, but I could see his limbs were powerful and well-formed beneath the fine-woven fabric, and though he carried no weapon I knew, as soon as I saw him, that he would rescue me from my tormentor.

The stranger used no force against Harry. He merely put up his hand, enveloping us in a ball of light, so bright that for a moment I was blinded by its brilliance. Harry’s hands were no longer about my waist, and when I could see again, I followed the stranger’s gaze upward, and saw Harry floating about twenty feet above our heads, his limbs flailing about like a man caught in a heavy current.

‘Let me down you tyrant! You grey-headed warlock! I’ll call every man in this village and have you burned in that bonfire!’ Harry turned as I said this, and we saw that though he squealed like a swine before Sunday dinner, not a single soul turned our way. Oh, sister, if you could have seen how his eyes widened with horror and dismay when he realized how helpless he was. What a sight it was! And the stranger let Harry’s threats wash over him while I laughed into my sleeve.

‘I will let you down if you give me your word that you will return to your home at once and put yourself to bed without causing distress to any other ladies.’

‘I give you my word!’

‘And you will apologize to this lady for the distress you have caused her.’

‘Yes! I beg your forgiveness, Nyneve!’

‘And you must give your word that you will honour and respect all ladies from this day forward.’

‘Yes! Yes! I swear that I will!’

The stranger lowered his hand, and Harry plummeted toward the earth. Though I had little love for your husband, I feared he would break his neck in the fall, but then the stranger put up his arm again, leaving Harry suspended a few feet from the ground. ‘I trust you do not give your word lightly, sir. For if ever you break your oath, a worse fate than this shall befall you.’

‘No, sir! My word is my word!’

The stranger scratched his chin pensively with his free hand, and looked over to me.

‘What say you, Lady? Should I trust this ungracious man?’

If I could have spoken freely I should not have been so generous, but I did not want this man to think me lacking in charitable spirit, so I said, ‘He is betrothed to my sister, and if he has

truly learned his lesson and swears to behave in a manner that is worthy of her, then I give him my blessing.’

‘Then, if you will behave in a manner worthy of the husband of anyone of this lady’s blood—that is to say, if your comportment is immaculate from this day forward—then I shall release you. However—’ The stranger lowered his arm to eye-level, lowering Harry inches from the ground. ‘If you go back on your word, then you will meet a disgraceful and excruciating end.’

Harry swore that he would, and though I hardly believed him, I understood that we had to release him and give him the chance to keep his word. And so, the moment his feet touched the ground, he ran through the forest, more panicked than any man I had ever seen, and I can only assume that he did, at last, reach his hut. When he had disappeared, I turned to the handsome stranger. He opened his arms to me, and I thanked him for his valour with a warm embrace.

Since we are in the company of a gentleman, I will leave to your keen imaginations what went through my mind when our lips met. Suffice to say that for the first time in my life I was ready to surrender myself completely to another person. I felt just as I had when the ball of light washed over me. And when at last our lips parted he said to me, ‘Fair Damsel, you know well that you are no ordinary lady, and your destiny is extraordinary as well. If you will consent to come with me, I will teach you my arts.’

And so I did, and I’m afraid any thought of you, or any of my kin, had quite left my head the moment our lips touched. I followed the stranger—whose name was Merlyn—

“Merlyn, you say?” Vivienne looked at Nyneve sharply, then covered her surprise with a smile. “What an unusual name!”

“Yes, Merlyn. We were quite in love. He was teaching me his spells. He said I was quite a clever pupil, but it is demanding work. That is why I have been away for so long.”

“What happened?” Vivienne asked, glancing down at Nyneve’s foot, which was stretched out toward Pellinore’s. Pellinore wound his leg around the chair leg, tactfully moving his foot as far away from Nyneve’s as he could without actually moving his chair away.

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Well, you said you *were* in love. Did you quarrel?”

“Ah! Well, that is a rather long story, and I have already demanded so much of your attention. What of you? Did Harry keep his word? How is it that I find you with this handsome gentleman now in the place of a woodcutter?”

“Oh, that is an exciting tale! And it is funny, because your story reminded me of how I came to meet my love. Your silver-curled stranger must have been a powerful sorcerer indeed, for what he said of Harry came true, and it was King Pellinore himself who made sure of it with his own bravery! I believe it must have been some enchantment that brought him to me, for although he was weak with hunger and with a fever that nearly killed him, he quite valiantly—”

Pellinore cleared his throat, his face turning quite purple at being spoken of in this manner. “Vivienne is much too generous with her praise. As you well know, all knights are bound to protect damsels in distress. It is quite late, and I am sure you ladies must be tired.” Pellinore cleared his throat to fill the silence that followed. His brow creased, as if he were gauging a shot at a bird many miles away. Nyneve, looking every bit the princess with her blonde hair coiled in a coronet about her head, just a few wisps of hair fallen about her face. She caught his eye, arching an eyebrow as if to say, come hither if it pleases you. And Vivienne, in her woven frock, too large for her petite frame, her eyes hopeful, an earnest blush upon her

cheeks. He studied these two sisters who were watching him expectantly from their seats at the foot of the bed; the only bed in Vivienne's cramped, single-room hut.

"Er, I shall seek shelter under the boughs outside," he said at last.

"But sir!" Vivienne's eyes fell away from his, as she tried to master her disappointment. "You have a long journey ahead of you, and it may be many moons before you are able to enjoy the warmth of a—bed."

"Nay, a Lady's comfort must come before a knight's. I am well accustomed to solitary nights, outdoors, far away from domestic comforts." He looked at Vivienne forlornly, and she was comforted by the knowledge that he was as disappointed as she to miss the opportunity to enjoy such comforts.

"Most gracious of you, King Pellinore!" Nyneve rose and curtsied at him. Pellinore responded with a bow, and as he rose, Nyneve pecked him on the cheek.

Unable to suppress a gasp, Vivienne stood opposite from her sister, curtsied, and was about to kiss Pellinore's other cheek, but Pellinore was so startled by this bold outpouring of affection from the ladies that he jumped back, and a screech pealed through the room as he stepped on a chicken. He jumped again, and Vivienne cried out as her honourable knight landed right on her foot. He found the door handle, and rushed out of the room, begging her forgiveness, wishing them both a good night.

The door closed behind them, Nyneve burst into laughter. "That lumbering fool! It is as if he has been galloping about the country on his horse for so long that he has forgotten how to behave around ladies!"

"You seemed quite charmed with him," Vivienne replied testily.

“Oh, sister, you know that is my character. It amuses me to see a man fall all over himself for a lady.”

“Yes, I remember all too well how you enjoy toying with men’s affections.”

“Vivienne! You can’t possibly still be angry about Harry. Did you not hear my tale?”

“Did *you* not tell me yourself, that you are in love with this sorcerer of yours?”

“I said I *was* in love with him. There are things that I have not told you about Merlyn.”

“Yes, I know that! I met your frail old wizard, and he is quite unlike the man you described in your story. A sack of dust and bones! Was there any truth in your tale?”

“You met him? When?” Nyneve’s voice was shrill. “Where is he?”

“Ah, yes! I met your handsome wizard. Is there any man you will not throw yourself at?”

“Vivienne, please. You must tell me. Where did you see him? Did he come here?”

Vivienne relented, hearing the urgency in her sister’s voice. “It was the day you disappeared. He came to see me at the well. He told me—” she burned with shame, remembering what the wizard had told her, and what she had done. “He told me that you were the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He was in love with you, whatever you felt for him.”

“There is more to my story than I dared say in front of your guest. I cannot explain now. It is not safe.” She looked around again, as if she thought he might be listening from outside the hut. “You must promise me that if he comes to the hut, you will not tell him I am here.”

“But how will you hide from him here?”

“I have ways, sister. Now, promise me or I will not be able to sleep.”

“All right, I give you my word.”

The two sisters lay beneath the pelt, but neither slept. Vivienne thought of her knight, sheltering in the woods outside, and of Camelot, where she would have a silk gown like

Nyneve's made for her. She might be quite pretty enough to marry a nobleman, then. She knew it happened, from time to time; she had heard the stories of scullery maids and shepherdesses charming errant knights, and she knew that once the grime was scrubbed away and their wool garments removed, they could be every bit as beautiful as the ladies of Camelot. If she could only get there, she could show Pellinore that she was worthy of him.

Nyneve was occupied by her own troubled thoughts, but these do not concern us yet.

"Nyneve, did Merlyn take you to Camelot?"

Though the bed was hardly large enough for two, she could not feel her sister. She was so slender, she hardly seemed to take up any room at all!

"Yes."

Vivienne waited for her to say more, but she did not.

"Did he give you your gown? It must have been made for you, it fits you so perfectly."

"He used magic, as he did for all things."

"Did he give you many others? Perhaps you could give me one, and I could alter it for myself."

"What would you do with a silk gown here? It would be covered in muck the first day you wore it."

"King Pellinore will take me to Camelot. I cannot wear peasant's clothes in Camelot. It would be embarrassing for him, do you not think?"

"Did he say he would take you to Camelot?"

"He gave me his word, and a knight must always keep his word."

"Certainly an honourable knight will always *try* to keep his word."

“King Pellinore certainly is an honourable knight,” Vivienne sighed. “If you could have seen him the day he rescued me! I am sure there is no greater knight than he.”

“But even honourable knights must be prevented, sometimes, from keeping their word.”

“Yes, I suppose sometimes they must. But King Pellinore is even more honourable than most honourable knights. Even if he cannot do so immediately, he will take me to Camelot.”

“I do not say he will not, but even a knight may have to break his word sometimes. And he is only a man, after all.”

Vivienne said nothing. She was reminded of Nyneve’s warning to her, before she was married. “Please, do not take King Pellinore away from me.”

Nyneve was silent for so long that Vivienne wondered if she had fallen asleep. Finally, she said, “Vivienne, I will never love any man as much as I love you.”

“Then let me have him! You can have any man you desire. Why must you steal away the ones I love?”

“Did Harry love you?”

“Before he met you he did!”

“And after I left, did he behave like a man in love?”

“What do you know of that?”

“I did not want Harry’s love, Vivienne. I tried to warn you away from him. And how did you thank me? You become so besotted by men that you can’t see them for who they really are.”

Vivienne began to weep. “King Pellinore is different. You should know, Nyneve. You said you felt love for Merlyn when he rescued you.”

“Merlyn deceived me.”

They both fell silent, so the only sound in the dark hut was Vivienne's snivelling, until at last, she fell silent as well.

"Vivienne, do you not find it far too warm in here?"

"It is warm in here, but if I put out the fire you will see it will quickly get cold, for there is a fierce wind outside, and this hut is quite drafty."

"No, I do not suggest you put out the fire."

"I could open the door, but the chickens may wander outside, and there are often wolves skulking about these woods."

"No, I do not suggest you open the door, sister, but I am far too hot beneath this pelt, and I wonder if we could do without it."

"Yes, I could do quite well without it."

"And I am quite distraught, thinking about King Pellinore, who graciously gave up your bed, at the mercy of the cold wind and the wolves."

"Oh! You are right! Poor King Pellinore. And he only recently recovered from his illness."

"Why not bring the pelt to your brave knight to protect him from the wind and wolves, then? And you might also give him a kiss to remind him of his promise to you."

Vivienne chuckled with understanding. "Ah, you are cunning, my sister! Do not wait up for me, then, for I may have to give King Pellinore many kisses to ensure he does not forget his promise."

Vivienne rose from the bed, smoothing back her hair as best she could.

"Can you feel your way across the room without a candle, Vivienne? I think I am finally beginning to feel sleepy, and the light would disturb me."

“Yes, sister, I certainly can make my way to the door without light. Good night.”

“Good night, Vivienne.”

Vivienne struggled to lift the blanket, which felt much heavier than she expected. Nynveve must have fallen sound asleep, for she did not make a sound after bidding Vivienne good night.

Outside the hut, the wind swept Vivienne’s hair from her neck, and blew through her shift, causing her skin to prickle with gooseflesh. She wrapped the blanket about her shoulders, like a cape, and entered the woods with the fur on her back.

Chapter 10

His back against a tree, in full armour, Pellinore's teeth chattered. His head was slumped forward, but he rested at the surface of a dream, still aware of the cold wind screaming in his ears. He was aware of every wing that flapped, every creature crawling through the brush, for a knight must always be on his guard when he is outdoors at night, particularly in the woods, where many creatures hide.

Yet, Pellinore had been bred and raised to think only of one thing, and so despite his earlier resolve, *she* had followed him into his dreams. He and Thunderswift flew through the forest; his hooves barely touching the ground, but Pellinore urged him on faster, and faster through the night. The gold tail flashed in the darkness ahead of them. "Ride on Thunderswift!" he cried, digging his heels in her sides, though his faithful steed hardly needed urging, for he knew almost as well as Pellinore, that this was their destiny.

Oh, Glatisant! At long last, he would behold her, the beast that King Pellas had described. At last, people would tell tales of *his* heroism, as they had of his father's, and his father's father's, and his father's father's father's father's father's. He longed to see her for himself, this beast that he had been told he was destined to catch. He longed to see her speckled back, her scaly blue face, and her terrible yellow eyes. If just once he could behold her, he would know that his years of riding, alone, through the forest, would not have been fruitless. He would know that he was worthy of this quest, that he was not doomed to failure. His eyes affixed the golden tail, and he leaned forward in his saddle.

"Ride on, Thunderswift! Ride on!"

She was so close now that even without sunlight he could see her spots. She was as breathtaking as his father had said. He reached for his bow, and one of the elfin wood arrows.

Ah, he had carried them for so long, where were they? He looked away for only a moment, but when he looked back, she was gone.

Pellinore yanked the reins, bringing Thunderswift to a halt. Blood raced through their veins, both man and horse breathless but alert. He dismounted, still clutching the bow and arrow, crouched low behind the trunk of a tree, and listened.

A branch cracked, startling Pellinore into consciousness.

It was nothing; only a hunchbacked man in a heavy cloak, a pilgrim or a peddler looking for shelter.

Then another creature came into view. Not a man, but a beast. It might have been the hunchback's dog, were it not for the way it slunk through the trees, trailing behind him. The creature stopped, a few feet away from the hunchback. It crouched down with a menacing growl.

Vivienne stooped under the weight of the pelt, as she crept through the forest. She was puzzled by the weight of the pelt, for it seemed to weigh as much as a whole animal, and each time she readjusted it, it seemed to struggle against her. With her free hand, she held a candle close to her chest, but it afforded little light since she had to keep it under the cloak to shelter it from the wind. Vivienne wondered why Pellinore had ventured so far into the woods. She did not want to walk back too far in her nightclothes. It would not do to catch a chill tonight, and have to delay their trip to Camelot. The sooner they left, the sooner Pellinore would forget all about Nyneve.

Vivienne did not hear the growling at her back. With the blanket over her head, she could hardly even hear the shrieking wind. But she heard, distinctly, a whisper in her ear. The voice said, "Wolf!"

She turned. At first she saw nothing but shadows, but then she shone her feeble light in front of her, and caught a flash of white teeth in front of her. Vivienne let the pelt fall to the ground, and for a moment, the woman in the white shift was bathed in light.

Pellinore watched from the trees. He strung his bow, aimed his arrow at the wolf. And then the candle went out.

Vivienne was thrown back, the full weight of the beast pushing her down, the stench of death on its slaving jaws. She pawed the ground, groping desperately for...and then her hands closed on a heavy branch. She raised it above the wolf's head, and with all her might she brought it down. But the angle was awkward, and she barely glanced the beast. It growled even more ferociously than before. Vivienne struggled desperately to free herself from the paw on her chest; she would not be cheated. She would see Pellinore again. She raised the branch once more and this time she caught it in the back of the head. The wolf appeared dazed, then shook itself, growling again. The jaws came closer, slaving over her neck. All of a sudden, there was a *ping* in the air; the wolf wailed, then collapsed over her.

Vivienne lay beneath the dead animal. Blood trickled down her arm, but she had been spared. She lay in the cold, listening for her knight's footsteps, (for she knew, without seeing him, that it was he who had rescued her,) and tears gathered in her eyes. She lay motionless, even when he lifted the wolf's body from her, and then she smiled at the touch of his hand on her cheek.

"I thought I would never see you again," she said.

"Oh Vivienne! Thank God you are all right!"

His lips found hers; his mouth was so warm, so inviting, that she would have spent an eternity kissing him, but this time she was too weary to pull him in, she simply yielded to him, and allowed him to lift her body to his, to cradle her like an infant. Pressed against him, her body felt small and fragile. He found her candle, and inspected her wounds. She had been lucky, the wolf had not had a chance to bite her before Pellinore's arrow found him. She was scratched, but most of the blood on her was the wolf's and not her own. Pellinore praised her quick wit. He felt tender toward her, realizing how vulnerable she was.

He found the blanket, wrapped her in it, and carried her back to her hut. He was surprised at how heavy she was in the blanket, and had to keep adjusting to manage the weight of his swaddled damsel, but Vivienne did not seem to mind. She could have walked; She felt fine, better than fine in fact, but she enjoyed the warmth of Pellinore's body against hers, and this new feeling of being taken care of by someone, of being protected. Her head resting against his chest. She closed her eyes.

“Sir, will you really take me to Camelot?”

“Upon my honour, I shall.”

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“As you wish, milady.”

Vivienne wanted to stay with Pellinore, but he insisted it was far too cold, and too dangerous, for a lady to sleep in the woods. And so, after kissing her good night again, he thanked her for the blanket and sent her inside.

Vivienne opened the door to the dark hut as quietly as she could and crept into bed, but she was far too excited to sleep.

“Nyneve!” She whispered, but Nyneve did not respond. Vivienne reached over to shake her sister awake, but she touched only the straw bed.

Chapter 11

Wrapped in the pelt, Pellinore lay beneath a tree a short distance from the hut, to hear Vivienne, should she call out to him. He was warm beneath the pelt, which was so large that it enveloped him, protecting him from the bitter wind and the hard ground. Not even his head peeked above the fur; but he slept restlessly nonetheless.

The strange sounds of the forest did not trouble Pellinore. He always slept with his sword by his side, ready to leap into battle should a wolf, or any other wicked creature, come upon him. Nor was it concern for his Damsel that kept him floating between consciousness and sleep. She had seemed quite recovered by the time he kissed her good night. Vivienne had pleaded to be allowed to lie with him in the forest, as if the wolf attack had never happened. The thought of her in Camelot brought a smile to his face. She would want to see the castle, and the carp in the moat, and the minstrels, and the coloured glass, and the stables where Thunderswift and his fellows lived.

The other knights would want tales of adventure. They would want to know if he had caught the beast at last. Pellinore would simply say, Glatisant can wait, and kiss his new mistress on the head. He did not need to hunt Glatisant to be an honourable knight. He had rescued a Damsel, twice. He was Vivienne's hero, and he would be content with that.

The pelt slipped from Pellinore's back, and he shivered in his sleep. Behind his lids, he saw the flash of her golden tail— then it disappeared into the trees. He was certain that Vivienne would tire of Camelot quickly. Then he would take her to Listenoise and marry her there. His own people would welcome them warmly and throw a feast in their honour. There'd be music and dancing to rival Vivienne's bonfire nights. Vivienne would love the merry people of Listenoise, and they would love her. They were warm, unpretentious people. Not like the

people in Camelot, who seemed to be always posing and comparing titles and feats, and speaking as though they were characters from ballads.

The end of the blanket that had fallen away took on a strange shape: a bulk, almost as long as his body, curled at his back. After he and Vivienne had started a family, he could take up his quest again. It was not as if Glatissant had been particularly active in the years since he had started his hunt for her. Not as she had been in his father's day. He could wait a year or two, then go away once Vivienne had settled in. And he needn't rush off on his quest as soon as his lady was with child. Glatissant was such an ancient beast that perhaps she was dead already, after all.

The bulk beside Pellinore grew furry limbs, but Pellinore slept on, oblivious to the transformation taking place at his back. He thought it probable that Glatissant was dead. And if that was the case, perhaps he need only go away for a few weeks, to be sure that there was no trace of her in the neighbouring kingdoms. There was no need for him to go himself, even. He could send messengers, and when they found no trace of her—and he was quite certain they would find no trace of her—he and Vivienne could ride on Thunderswift's back and sing ballads every day from sunrise to sunset.

Or perhaps there was no need for him to go to Listenoise at all. His people were quite used to having an absent king. He could let them think he was still on his quest. They might prefer to think of their king on a quest, even if it was not a real quest. He could build Vivienne a little cottage in the woods. Even a very small cottage would seem like a castle to Vivienne, after living in her dank little hut. As a knight, Pellinore was quite accustomed to rough living. He was strong; he could work the land as well any low-born man. He would be able to provide for Vivienne. His own people seldom ventured from their island. They would believe he was still on

his quest, and the minstrels would sing songs of him, and old women would tell tales of his courage on winter's nights, as they had in his father's day.

The limbs had taken on a lovely shape. They were fine, delicate limbs. A cold breeze blew, and Pellinore reached for the end of the blanket that had fallen away. He found one furry hand, and pulled an arm over him.

"Thank you for rescuing me," a voice whispered in his ear.

Pellinore mumbled into the fur, pulling it closer to him. He stroked the arm. It was as soft as down. And as he stroked it, the fur fell away until a lady's naked arm encircled his waist.

"Vivienne," Pellinore mumbled to himself.

He could teach their children how to hunt, and Vivienne would tell them stories about how he had rescued her from the wolf, and from a wicked man

"I was so frightened when I heard the wolf behind me. And the crushing weight of them. I could hardly breathe with them on top of me. I would have died if you had not rescued me."

"It's a knight's duty..."

"No, what you did goes beyond duty. When you carried us back in your arms, I could feel your heart pounding. You were frightened too, weren't you? Many a man would have fled to save his own skin, but you—you are a hero, Pellinore."

She pressed her lips to the back of his neck, but Pellinore only sighed in his sleep. "Ah, Vivienne! If only I was, really."

"You are." She kissed his neck, and then his mouth, gliding on top of him. "You are my knight in shining armour."

Pellinore was fully alert, then. He gasped with pleasure at the ebb and flow of the damsel on top of him. Clouds had covered the moon, and he could not make out his damsel's features.

“Vivienne, you should be resting—”

She stifled him with a kiss. “My sweet knight, always looking after others' needs. It is time somebody looked after yours.”

After they made love, they lay together on the pelt, which no longer seemed to be large enough to wrap around them. Pellinore sighed with contentment, his beloved resting her head on his chest. How wonderful life was! How strange that one might spend a lifetime chasing after one thing, only to stumble upon happiness somewhere else completely. He leaned forward to kiss Vivienne's curls, but found himself kissing a smooth head of hair instead.

He sprang to his feet, sword in hand. “What sorcery is this?”

Nyneve screamed, diving to the ground just in time to avoid his sword. “Mercy! Mercy, my Lord! It is I, Nyneve. I beg you —”

“What? Nyneve!” Pellinore jabbed at the girl again. “*Nyneve* has caused me to betray her sister's good heart?”

Pellinore's sword swiped a hair's breadth above Nyneve's head as she ducked again.

“No, my Lord! Have mercy!” She knelt before him, her fine dress smeared with dirt. “It is only by chance that I came to be lying with you.”

He pointed the sword at her chest, forcing her to lean back until the tips of her flaxen hair trailed in the dirt. “And it is by chance that you deceived me into thinking that you were she?”

Nyneve scrambled backward in the dirt, but the sword followed her. “I did not deceive you. I had no choice—”

“You had no choice but to make a traitor of me?” She had come up against a tree trunk. Pellinore stood above her, pointing his sword at her breast. If he had wanted to, Nyneve thought, he could have driven it straight through her heart.

“You must speak quietly, my Lord, lest you wake Vivienne.”

“Then tell me *quietly*, Witch, how you came to be in my bed!”

“I am not a witch. I used the pelt to conceal myself from—it does not matter who; but I could not know that Vivienne would take it into her head to carry me to you, and then, after I was so frightened by the wolf, and I found myself wrapped in the arms of my rescuer...I could not resist stealing but one kiss from you.”

“But *one* kiss?” Pellinore’s palm sweated over the hilt. He felt qualmish. He had never slain a Lady.

“What woman could resist a kiss from a man of your courage? And when you returned my embrace with such insistence, naturally I obliged you.”

“You ill-nurtured wench!!”

“Hush, my Lord. Has Vivienne not suffered enough without hearing of this?”

It was an abomination! How could such a deceptive woman kneel before him with such wide-eyed concern for kin? “I would be doing her a kindness by ridding her of such a sister.”

Pellinore allowed a drop of blood to swell against the blade.

“And add murder to the list of your transgressions?”

Pellinore’s sword wavered. He had not noticed how like Vivienne’s her face was: round eyes, thick lashes. A mouth that was always laughing. How he hated her!

“You will not kill me, and you will not tell Vivienne what passed between us. Your heart is too pure to show my sister such indifference.”

The sword slipped to the ground, and Pellinore buried his head in his hands. Nynaeve had spoken the truth; his heart was pure. So pure that he could not but feel guilt-ridden by what had passed. It did not matter that Nynaeve had tricked him into sleeping with her. He had allowed his lust to master him, and he had betrayed Vivienne as a result, and worse still, although he was revolted by Nynaeve, he was, undeniably, still attracted to her. Nynaeve had powers even before she mastered my spells. She knew how to seep into someone so that their skin tingled at the thought of her. For as long as he lived, Pellinore would never forget her touch.

When Nynaeve had blended into the pelt once again, Pellinore crept into the hut and placed it on the bed next to Vivienne, so that when she awoke, she would find her sister in the bed beside her.

Chapter 12

They would not go to Camelot that day, Vivienne thought. She stretched, and was painfully aware of where the wolf's paws had pushed her to the ground. She felt every root and rock that had been pressed into her bones, and her skin bore the angry traces of his claws. And yet, her body also bore the memory of Pellinore's arms carrying her to her door. Yes, now that she knew his heart belonged to her, Camelot could wait.

Nyneve was already at the table. It was a cold morning, and she wore a hooded cloak over her gown. She held a loop frame covered with cloth, and her needle was threaded with red floss, a red more lustrous than any she had ever encountered until the day before (was it only the day before?) when she had first set her eyes upon Camelot.

"What is it you are sewing, my sister?"

"The wizard taught me," she replied without dropping her needle. She did not look at her work. It was as if her hands were driven by some external force, up and down, through and through. Then, before Vivienne's very eyes, the red darkened to purple, and then to blue—and what a blue! Vivienne had little to compare it to, as all her cloth was dull brown or dirty white, but a more cosmopolitan observer would have sworn the thread was spun from the feathers of young parrots and lapis lazuli.

Nyneve hardly glanced at her work. In fact, her lids drooped as if she was weary of it. Curious, Vivienne sat beside her, and watched over her shoulders as those nimble fingers stitched a lady with light blond hair, threaded with gold, standing in a lake. A man knelt before her, and she pointed a sword at him. The gesture was not threatening, but rather, she seemed to be offering it to him. The man's head was bowed in humble gratitude.

"That is a lovely picture. Did you come across it while you were away?"

“No,” Nynaeve replied, her hands still busy at her needle.

“The lady bears some resemblance to you,” Vivienne observed, and Nynaeve saw that it was true.

“I do not know what the picture means,” Nynaeve muttered. “My hands twitch, and the cloth appears. They will not rest until their work is done. I thought I had done with this...”

But Vivienne was too full of excitement to pay any attention to this strange speech, remembering that her sister did not yet know the latest developments between her and Pellinore. “Where did you get to last night? I have such things to tell you, my sister!”

“Last night? I was asleep.”

“You were not there when I returned. I thought perhaps you had gone looking for me.”

“If I was not in bed, it is possible I was wandering outside. Of late, I have taken to walking in my sleep.”

“Ah, you should take care, my sister! I will be sure to keep the door firmly shut so that you cannot escape tonight. Last night, when I went out to meet Pellinore, I was attacked by a wolf!”

Vivienne paused expectantly, but her sister merely continued her embroidery. She was stitching silver into the sword. “Ah, and I suppose King Pellinore rescued you?” she said at last.

“He did! Oh, it was so splendid, Nynaeve! He shot the wolf with an arrow. He must have such keen ears, for it was as black as pitch. I don’t know how he managed it. But then, he stood over me, and he was so concerned for me. It was touching, really. Harry never looked at me that way, even when we first met. And then, when he was satisfied that I had not been seriously wounded, he carried me back in his arms. And he promised he really would take me to Camelot!”

Oh, Nyneve, I really believed that I was in love before with Harry, but it was never like this. Now I know what it really is to be in love. What is the matter, Nyneve?"

Nyneve's face was suddenly heavy with melancholy. "Do you really love him, sister? Or is it the thought of fine gowns, and fine jewels, and horseback adventures, and Camelot that you love?"

"Do you think me so shallow, Nyneve? You of all people—"

"I, of all people, know that it is dangerous to get caught up in romance. Life is not a ballad, my sister. It is all fine and well to be in love, but do not forget that each of us has a destiny to follow. King Pellinore must follow his, no matter what he has promised you."

"I do not understand you! King Pellinore rescued me in my hour of need. Harry would have chopped me to bits with his axe if he had not happened upon him at the right moment. And again, last night, he was there to slay the wolf that would have devoured me. Is that not destiny?"

"Perhaps it is. It is only that—"

Pellinore entered, then. His eyes went from the face of one sister to the other, and he flushed with the awareness that he had walked in on a discussion about himself. "Good morning, fair damsels." He bowed to the table.

"Good morning, sir." Vivienne lowered her eyes, overcome with bashfulness. Perhaps she had only dreamed that he had kissed her and promised to take her to Camelot with him; or if was not a dream, perhaps in the daylight he would see her differently, and repent his decision.

Pellinore crossed the room, and with his kiss he assured her that his promise had been real.

"Did you sleep well, Darling?"

"As well as can be expected."

“Ah, good! We shall set off for Camelot as soon as I have breakfasted, then. I cannot wait for you to visit the castle. There are the most wonderful minstrels that come to court quite often, or at least they did when I was last there. Though that was some time ago, I suppose. Still, I am certain they will have performances unlike any you have ever seen. And—”

“Sir? I thought we might postpone our journey to Camelot for a few days.”

“Postpone? Whatever for?” He looked in dismay at Nyneve, who smiled sweetly at him as she stitched.

“I am sorry you are disappointed. It is only that I felt rather sore when I awoke this morning. I am not sure if I could manage a long journey on horseback until I am quite recovered.”

“Thunderswift will trot as gently as a lamb if I bid him. We needn’t get there in three days. We can take four, or even five days.”

“But then I would not have the pleasure of your company, my Lord.”

“Are you certain you couldn’t manage it, milady?” Pellinore pressed, disguising his revulsion for the fairer sister with concern for his true beloved. He tsked over her scratched arms, kissing them with exaggerated concern.

“My back is a bit sore as well this morning,” remarked Nyneve. “Perhaps I had some misadventure while I was wandering about last night.”

Pellinore turned sharply to her. “But you did not leave the cottage last night.”

“Oh, there is no need for concern,” Vivienne assured him. “Nyneve told me she has taken to sleepwalking. But I will make certain she does not leave our bed tonight!”

“That would be advisable. It can be dangerous for a lady to wander about at night.” He returned his attention to Vivienne’s lacerated arms. “Now, how are those scrapes? Have my kisses healed them sufficiently?”

“Oh, there is no need fuss over me!” Vivienne protested with a giggle. “I shall soon heal, and as soon as I do we will set off for Camelot. We need only stay here for a few more days.”

Pellinore felt Nyneve’s smirk at his back. It made him feel sick him to look at her, and it was only his chivalric code that prevented him from tying her to Thunderswift and dragging her out of the forest at a gallop.

“I will spend our time here preparing. I must scrub my frock so that I have something clean to wear until I can procure a more fitting dress, and I shall prepare some foodstuffs for us to eat on our journey, and perhaps Nyneve can twist my hair up into a coronet, like hers.”

Pellinore was forced to turn to inspect the wicked sister’s braids.

“But you have lovely curls, Vivienne,” he argued, kissing one of her dark locks. “There is no one’s hair that I admire more than yours.”

“As you wish, my fair knight. I am glad you are not too disappointed that our journey will be delayed.” Vivienne smiled up at him in blissful adoration. Never in her brief and simple life had she known such joy.

“Yes, though I do not wish to dally here too long. I am anxious to leave—er, to show you Camelot.”

“And Nyneve can stay here as long as she wishes, of course. She will keep house, and make sure the chickens and the goat are looked after. Unless you would care to accompany us, Nyneve?”

“It is kind of you to include me, sister,” Nyneve said, watching Pellinore attempt to conceal his agitation by marching across the room to Thunderswift. She took her time answering her, as if she was really contemplating joining them. “I am quite certain King Pellinore would prefer to have one lady to himself. Would you not, Your Majesty?”

Her eyes locked on to his, and she watched him writhe like a legless insect. She had let her cape fall to her shoulders, revealing the milky skin of her neck and the shadow of her breasts, even more exquisite now than they had been by starlight. It seemed to him that she was amused by his discomfort, and that she triumphed in the power she held over him. He turned to his horse, still aware of her gaze.

“I will take Thunderswift for a ride, then. I want him to be in shape for our journey when you do heal.”

“Do you not want breakfast?”

Pellinore declined—the hut was too cramped for Pellinore, and the smell of animal waste and hay filled his nostrils. He led Thunderswift outside as quickly as he could. As he departed, he heard Vivienne ask her sister about the bruise on her back.

Vivienne watched her sister work until it grew tiresome. “Come! Put down your needlework and let’s go see if we can’t pick some berries.”

“You go. I would rather remain here.”

“Wouldn’t you like to make those tarts we made when we were girls?”

Nyneve put down her needlework, cracking her knuckles one by one. The picture was complete, and Vivienne saw that the blond-haired girl was indeed her sister.

“It is a lovely likeness,” she said but Nynaeve only nodded and rested her head in her hands, her eyes closed, as if she could hardly stay awake.

“You do look ill,” Vivienne observed. “I think some exercise would do you good.”

“No, my sister,” Nynaeve replied without opening her eyes. “I am unwell. Let me remain here.”

But Vivienne was far too excited by her new love, by the return of her sister, and the prospect of her journey, to remain seated. “Come!” She tickled Nynaeve under her arms until she shrieked—for her sister knew her weakness—and then pulled her halfway to the door. “Come, you lazy layabout!”

“Vivienne! Stop!” But she tittered despite herself, and Vivienne paid her no mind. She yanked open the door, letting the sunlight pour through the opening.

Standing in the forest, Nynaeve saw a man with a pointed cap. Quick as she could, Nynaeve lunged past Vivienne, slamming the door shut. She stood with her back flat against it, glaring at Vivienne.

“I told you, I wish to stay here.”

“But Sister!” Vivienne tried to tickle her again, to pry her hand away from the latch, but Nynaeve shoved her with such force that she landed on her bottom. The chickens squawked in distress around them, showering them in feathers. Nynaeve leaned against the door with her arms crossed. Vivienne remained on the floor. The two sisters glared furiously at each other.

“Have it your way, then,” Vivienne grumbled at last, brushing the dirt from her bottom as she picked herself up.

And so Vivienne left her hut to wander about the forest, indignant and alone.

*

Without meaning to, Pellinore set off at a gallop, exhilarated by his solitude. With Thunderswift he did not need to be on his guard; there was no one to adjust for. He and his steed had ridden together for so long that they rode in tandem, man and beast forming one galloping creature. As the trees blended into each other in his periphery, so too did his troubles fade into the background, shapeless and indistinct. The old song returned to him as he rode:

O Thunderswift ride e'er swifter afore she slips out of our arrow's range for Glatisant shall not escape what hath been pre-ordained...

Pellinore knew not where he was riding. This part of the country was unfamiliar to him, and even if he had not been feverish when he had stumbled upon Vivienne and her husband, he would have been quite lost in those woods. In truth, Pellinore would not have minded losing his way again. He was not anxious to return to the hut. He wanted to be lost with Vivienne, to ride deep into the woods and disappear with her. He thought he might be happy, then.

Pellinore found himself back at the beach where he had taken Vivienne the day before. It was cloudy, and too chilly for the water to be tempting. Camelot was lovely to behold even on the darkest days, though Pellinore did not much care for cities. He allowed his eyes to close as he rode along the coast. The sound of the waves lapping against the rocks reminded him of Listenoise, and it occurred to him that if he did disappear he would never go home again.

Pellinore had never given much thought to his happiness before. He was not by nature a contemplative man. Knights are men of action, after all. Yet, the thought of his own Listenoise

filled him with such melancholy that he lay his head on Thunderswift's neck and allowed fat tears to roll down his face.

“We are a long way from home, aren't we, my boy?”

I doubt Pellinore had ever been in love before, though it is hard to say what counts as love. There had been a girl, once, when he was a boy. He had brought her flowers, and she had laughed at him. Now he could not even remember her name. There had been women since then, of course, but they had wanted nothing from him, and had offered him nothing in return. When he rode away, he must have faded as quickly from their thoughts as they did from his. If I could have asked him if he loved Vivienne he would have replied indignantly that of course he loved her. But he would have doubted it all the same.

Perhaps a man like Pellinore did not need love to be happy. Pellinore wanted to be depended on, and Vivienne gave him that

As a boy, Pellinore had thought of little more than being a knight and questing like his father. That was all he imagined, apart from his brief infatuation with the girl, whose name, he now remembered, was Madeline—Or was it Magdalene?—but even then he had fantasized about wearing her favour in a tournament and winning her admiration through jousts. Young Pellinore had shown great promise. He had held his first sword at the age of seven, and could best boys twice his size by the age of nine; he practiced shooting a bow and arrow until he could pierce an apple at a distance of fifty yards. Every moment he was training, he thought of his father, and how one day he would be a great knight like him.

Pellinore met Pellas for the first time when he was twelve. He was hardly a stranger to him, of course, because he had heard the stories of all his father's brave deeds so many times he could recite them word for word, but when Pellinore met him he was in awe of him. It was after

he had rescued the Black Mountain village from the beast, and he was so ill that for several days no one but the Queen was allowed to wait on him. The servants had whispered about funeral arrangements. “Prepare for the worst,” they had told him. But King Pellas had lived.

One day, he summoned Pellinore into his bedroom. He showed him the cat skin the people of Black Valley had made for him, and bid him put it on. “You have the look of a true hero, my boy,” he’d said, and almost didn’t get the words out before he erupted into a coughing fit, and had to take a swig of brandy. He asked Pellinore if he would like to learn to be a knight, and to go on his quest with him. Pellinore’s heart sang at the thought of riding with his father, but he only nodded sedately and said, “I would, sir.”

He had never thought of leading any other kind of life. The quest was an honour that only the Listenoisean kings had. Other men had envied him. Women, including—Madeline? Marylin!—had cheered tearfully and thrown petals at his departure. The people prayed for his safety, but never voiced any doubt that he would return triumphant. The way Vivienne looked at him reminded him of the way his people had looked at him then.

Pellinore stayed by the edge of the water until his fingers were numb. When he opened his eyes again, the clouds had taken on an orange-gold hue, and the castle towers on the horizon were black. Once he and Vivienne were there, he would be able to forget about Nyneve. Surely that one indiscretion would not haunt him for the rest of his life. Not when he had so much to offer his damsel. They would build a life together, away from her sister, and away from his people as well. He would be happy, then.

Turning his back to the sea, he made his way slowly back to Vivienne’s hut.

Chapter 13

Vivienne thought herself very sly. That night, long after she and Nynve had wished Pellinore a good night, long after they had blown out the candle, she whispered, “Nynve.” When her sister did not answer, she said, a bit more loudly, “Nynve!” When still she did not answer, Vivienne took the blanket and brought it out to her knight.

He was too courteous to accept it, at first. He said it was far too cold for two ladies to be in bed uncovered. “And what if you caught a chill?” he added. “Would you have me wait longer still to take you to Camelot?”

“I would leave tonight if I could, my Lord.”

“Oh, my darling Vivienne! I would give my last arrow to be able to run away with you tonight.”

“Run away? But what are we running from?” she teased, and he gasped in horror at her smile. Nynve’s face looked back at him, mocking him.

“I spoke in jest, my love. I hope I did not insult you?” And there was Vivienne again, her brow creased with concern.

“Oh, no, my pretty one. I only thought I saw a wolf in the shadows.”

“My poor darling! It must be frightening, even for a brave knight like yourself, to sleep outside in the woods. I would that you would come inside, with Nynve and myself. I am certain we could make room for you in our bed.”

And the pelt, which they were sitting on, wriggled beneath Pellinore.

“No! That would not be proper.” Sweet Vivienne! She did not even suspect—and why would she? Could anyone imagine a more callous and duplicitous sister than hers? Certainly, Vivienne would not allow herself to be ruled by such ugly suspicions. Impulsively, he covered

her cheeks with his hands, kissing her with more warmth than he had allowed himself in the daylight. And Vivienne would have lain with him there, in the woods, but Nyneve was chuckling in Pellinore's ear.

"Please, Vivienne, take the pelt. I do not want it." His voice was tense; he could not keep the edge of desperation out of it. But Pellinore could offer no reason why he should not have it, and Vivienne refused to go to bed until he had wrapped himself in the warm cover. She kissed him good night and returned to bed, pushing the table in front of the door so that her sister would not wander outside in her sleep.

If Nyneve had been a man, he would have stabbed the pelt until he had killed her, but he could not bring himself to treat his beloved's sister thusly. And so he folded the pelt with care and put a rock over her. Not one heavy enough to crush her, but heavy enough that she would not be able to move. Yet, while he slept, a little snake disappeared under the rock. The serpent emerged, more than five feet long, coiled around Pellinore's leg, and slithered up his body. Pellinore moaned. The snake's tail forked into two legs, and arms grew out of its sides, but Pellinore slept an enchanted sleep, and he knew not what he did when he moaned with pleasure at her touch. He grabbed her hips before he even woke, and when his eyes opened to her naked breasts, he was already crying out in ecstasy.

Pellinore dreamed that Nyneve was making love to him all that night, and in his sleep he shuddered with pleasure, and revulsion, and pleasure again. He saw her writhing on top of him, felt her mouth on his neck, and the flick of her tongue on his skin. It was as if his imagination had revolted against him. When he awoke, she was gone, but still he could not get the image of her out of his mind. It tortured him so that he pressed his knuckles into his eyes to blot it out, but

then he caught the stench of her on his hands. His whole body smelled of her. He went to the hut to bid Vivienne good morning, and asked her if she wasn't feeling well enough to leave that day. Alas, she was not. The scent of Nynvee was so strong on him he wondered how she did not smell it. How stupid must she be to not suspect him? No, it was not stupidity but her own good nature that made her blind. Pellinore could hardly stand to look at her. He was not worthy of her. He rode to the sea again, stripped, and waded up to his neck in the cold water. He scrubbed himself until his skin was pink, but after he dried himself in the sunlight, he found the stink of her remained.

That night Vivienne came to him for the third time with the pelt over her head. Pellinore recoiled at the sight of her; with her hair covered, she looked so like Nynvee.

"Be gone with that lousy skin!" he shouted drawing his sword. Vivienne backed away.

"But my Lord!" was all she could say before her eyes filled with tears. How Pellinore burned with shame! But what could he do? He could not bear to spend another night with that wicked woman.

"I did not mean to speak so sharply, my love. Please, come to me," he opened his arms to her. "Only leave the pelt on the ground, there."

Vivienne dropped the pelt, and Pellinore folded his arms around her. The smell of her scalp reassured him. How he loved those dark curls! How wrong he had been to associate evil with darkness and light with good! He hoped that their children would be as dark as this little woman. "Perhaps we can leave tomorrow?" he asked tentatively, and his heart soared when Vivienne said that she thought that perhaps they could. "I am quite warm enough without the pelt, my love. Why not take it for yourself? It cannot be comfortable to sleep on a bed of straw."

“I assure you Nynaeve and I are quite comfortable, my Lord, but if you do not want the pelt, I will take it with me.” And she rose on the balls of her feet to bestow the sweetest of all kisses on her noble knight’s lips. “Until tomorrow, my beloved.”

“Rest well, for we have a long journey ahead of us.”

“I will try, though my heart beats fast with thoughts of Camelot!”

“Sleep will make morning come more quickly, my dark-haired beauty.” He kissed her again. “And do not forget to push the table in front of the door before you go to bed.”

Vivienne said, how kind of him to think of her sister, and was more assured than ever before that he was the noblest, most kind-hearted knight ever to grace the British kingdom. He sent her away, comforted that the pelt would be locked safely away with her (for it had not occurred to the simple knight that Nynaeve had the power to change her skin for any other creature’s, alive or dead).

Vivienne near-skipped back to her hut—she could not quite skip, with that cumbersome weight on her back—but she paused at the doorway as a gust of wind blew through her shift, turning her skin to goose flesh. She folded the pelt carefully, and left it just outside the door so that Pellinore would be able to retrieve it should he get cold.

Nynaeve strode over to Pellinore, humming to herself. Only one who knew her well would have noticed the trembling of her hands as she walked, or seen her sideways look, and understood that she was afraid. She walked toward the knight as resolutely as a charging soldier, humming the song she had overheard.

She sat cross-legged with the pelt wrapped about her, lifting the knight’s head on to her lap, her fingers roaming through his copper curls as he slept. She was looking into his closed

lids. The loop frame materialised in her hands, and she set to work. Soon she had stitched the most peculiar creature. Its golden haunches resembled a lion's. It had the speckled back of a leopard and the forelegs of a hart. But its head was truly grotesque, for this creature had the long neck of a serpent, as thick as a tree, and its lips were curled into a terrible grimace, baring a mouthful of teeth as sharp as spears.

Pellinore dreamed he was riding with Vivienne. She leaned against him in the saddle, singing a song that seemed to have no words. He kissed the top of her dark head. The beating of Thunderswift's hooves accompanying the familiar melody soothed him. He could not remember ever feeling so content.

They came to a wood cottage, where two boys, the younger one dark-headed, the elder with hair lighter than the sun, were fencing with twigs.

"Father!" they cried, and ran over to greet him as he dismounted.

A doll-like girl walked through the door. Her glossy curls hung neatly down her back, and her eyes sparkled like two blue jewels. Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled.

All the while, Vivienne was humming; humming a familiar tune.

A wonder artists devoted so much time to painting nobility, when this simple family made such a pretty picture! Pellinore smiled in his sleep, lulled by his beloved's song.

The boys returned to their fight. The younger waved his twig in earnest, determined to beat his older brother for once. So intent was he on the match that he did not see the shadow pass over him, nor did he see his brother's eyes widen with horror as *she* emerged from the woods.

Pellinore reached for his sword, but there was nothing but a peasant's rope belt at his waist. He opened his mouth to call out a warning—but there was no time. She had him in her

jaws, and even as the boy cried for his father, Glatisant was stealing back into the woods with him.

Pellinore leapt back on his horse, spurring him on with his heels. The beast was already out of sight, but he heard the little boy's cry, and branches splintering as she charged through the forest. He leaned forward in his saddle, shouting, "Faster, Thunderswift! Faster!"

He would catch her, at last!

And through it all, his ears were filled with the familiar song.

"Faster Thunderswift! Do not let her get away!" His own cry woke him, and he was surprised to find himself alone. He sat up, listening to the noises of the forest. He heard something—what was that, tramping through the forest?

Pellinore sat up in the grass, his ears alert to every twig that snapped under the foot of some beast, of every leaf or branch that swished as something moved past

Tomorrow he must take Vivienne to Camelot. He knew he should rest, but it seemed to him he heard a heavy foot creeping through the trees. At first, the sound was faint. It could have been any creature, really. But as the sound grew louder and more distinct, Pellinore's palms began to sweat with anticipation. His heart thumped, he clenched his fists. Was it she?

The song from his dream still played in his head:

*Oh Glatisant, Oh Glatisant fang'd beasts, your terror is famed and the isle shall ring
with cries of joy when I finally end your reign!*

He had given his word, had he not? Yet, with every sound his stomach lurched. Without realizing it, he began to hum to himself. He felt as though he had been under a spell. He was no

ordinary man after all! He was not pledged to a woman, but to his people, and to his quest! The old feeling had returned—she was calling him back.

Nyneve sat in the shadow of a tree, wrapped in the pelt. She stitched still, though she could not have seen her work. She had stitched a silver figure, standing before the beast. She watched Pellinore open the door to the hut, and she added the Listenoisean crest to the knight's shield. She watched the knight prepare his horse, and look back at the hut with a single melancholy sigh before he galloped off into the distance. "Bless you, Sir knight," she whispered as he passed, for she pitied him.

His voice carried through the woods, and his song crept into Vivienne's dreams. A tear rolled down her cheek, over the kiss that still lingered there.

Nyneve sat stitching under the tree until first light, and when the rosy sun shone through the grey sky, she thought she had never seen anything more glorious. It had been three days since she had seen the sun. She looked down at the picture she had created, and when she saw that the knight's hair was blond and gold-threaded, she wept with relief.

She stayed past when she should have, past when Vivienne might have been awake. Although the air was cold, the sunlight was warm on her cheeks. For the first time since she had arrived at Vivienne's hut, she did not wonder who watched her. I daresay she hoped she was being watched. No more would she need to seek protection from a knight, or cower in shadows, or cover herself with the flesh of another being. She was better than invisible; she had rendered herself untouchable. At last, when she knew she could stay no longer, she brought the pelt to the door, folding it as neatly as Vivienne had.

Later, she would deal with her sorrow, (and the sorrow she had caused,) but for now she would enjoy the forest where she had spent her childhood. Nynve went to look for the old tree that she and her sister used to climb.

Chapter 14

Thunderswift was gone. The chickens milled about the newly vacant space, and the goat was happily crunching on a mucky apple core that the horse had presumably rejected. Vivienne blinked at that corner of the hut, as if she expected the horse to materialise.

Rationally, Vivienne knew there were several possible explanations for his absence. Pellinore had taken to riding the horse before breakfast. He may have taken him for an early ride. Just yesterday, she remembered, he had complained that he was picking up dust and dirt from the hut; he may have decided to groom him outdoors, or to take him to the well for a proper wash. Yet his absence was unsettling. She had grown accustomed to their daily ritual—she would wish Thunderswift a good morning, and he would lower his velvety nose to accept her kiss while the goat bleated at them; and then she would divide up the slop, giving the best and most generous helping of scraps to the nobler beast.

Nyneve was gone as well, but this was not unusual (though Vivienne was puzzled that the sound of her sister moving the table back in its place had not awoken her). Nyneve was most often dressed and at her stitching before Vivienne woke. She might well be outside, enjoying the sunshine. Already, bright shafts of light had made their way through the gaps in the wall and stretched across the floor. That would be a relief, for she seemed sickly and in need of some brisk air and sunshine.

It really was a beautiful day for a ride. Perhaps Pellinore—

And all at once she remembered their conversation from the night before. Today was the day they were to set off for Camelot! She burst through the door, still wearing only her shift. The pelt was not where she had left it, but Pellinore was not near the hut, and neither was his horse.

She walked barefoot through the forest, to the great oak he usually sheltered under, but there was no trace of him. Even his satchel, which he rested his head on at night, was gone. Vivienne wandered a little further, hoping he had merely moved to a different tree, but she came across hoof prints in the mud, leading away from her home.

Vivienne went back to her hut. She took her time packing her few possessions—a kettle, her apron, stockings, her other dress, some grain for porridge. She folded the clothing carefully before bundling it in a coarse cloth, and all the while she listened for Thunderswift's familiar canter. When she had done packing, she put a pot of water on the fire, staring into it until bubbles broke through the surface. She did not dare think where Pellinore had gone—not yet—but an unnamed anxiety gnawed at her as she waited, listening for his horse, his voice.

Once she was packed, she went back to the forest, and sat on an old rotten log at the edge of the clearing with her bundle at her feet. As she waited, fluffy white clouds gathered. If she had been in a less anxious humour, she might have noticed that one of them looked very much like Pellinore's beast, that this cloud seemed to gallop into the very center of the sky and idled over the sun. She only noticed that it was not nearly as bright, and she crossed her arms to stay warm.

When Vivienne finally did glance up, the sky had turned slate grey; still he did not come. If Pellinore had taken Thunderswift for a ride, surely he would have seen them gather and would have turned back. They would be home within the hour, she thought. She could not tell when an hour had passed, but she waited until she thought it must be noonday, and still he did not come. She took out one of the eggs and peeled away the shell. As she ate it, she thought it was curious that Nyneve had not stayed to see them off. And then a sickening thought occurred to her. Could Pellinore have run away with Nyneve? No, it was shameful to think it. Pellinore was not Harry; he was an honourable man. And Nyneve would not—not after their last quarrel...

Vivienne ate the other egg. Time passes more slowly when you're impatient, she thought. Perhaps it had not been an hour after all. A plump drop splashed on her hand, and then all at once the sky seemed to spill over on to her. Her hair and clothes were plastered to her skin, but she would not move from her spot. Pellinore was coming, he must be coming. He would know that she was waiting for him, and he would not want her to wait out in the rain.

It rained for the rest of the day, and when darkness fell, Vivienne still sat shivering on the log. At last she heard footsteps approach, and a gentle hand on her shoulder!

But it was only Nyneve. Her sister wrapped the pelt about her shoulders, and held out a hand to help Vivienne from the log.

“Come, my Sister.”

And Vivienne allowed herself to be led back to the hut.

*

For some time after Pellinore left, Vivienne awoke every morning expecting to find Thunderswift in the corner of her hut; and every morning the disappointment of finding him gone—and of being reminded that his master was also gone—bore her down, making it impossible for her to rise from her bed. I do not know how she would have managed if Nyneve had been away. She was a better nurse than one might think. She made regular excursions to the forest in search of roots and herbs to boil into broth, and even on Vivienne's worst days she managed to coax her sister to swallow down a spoonful or two to keep up her strength. On better days, she managed to tempt her to eat a few berries as well.

She could not say how long this lasted, but it must have been four moons at least, for Nyneve's belly had grown quite round before it attracted her sister's normally sharp eye.

“My sister, I see your sorcerer used more than magic tricks to entertain you!” she said to her one day, and Nyneve’s blazing cheeks made her smile for the first time since her knight had left.

Vivienne jumped up, nearly crushing her sister in her arms, and then pulling back lest she hurt the child. The tears in her eyes were as much of relief as of joy. When she first noticed the round belly, she had worried that it was connected with Pellinore’s departure. She had been afraid to ask—but thank God! Nyneve did not contradict her, and she wiped the hateful suspicions from her mind.

Vivienne’s anticipation of the child’s birth helped her to forget her own sorrows. Nyneve had always been beautiful to behold, but now she grew plumper with every passing day and Vivienne’s heart brimmed over with joy and affection for her.

“Do you feel him stirring inside of you yet, Nyneve?” She placed her hand on Nyneve’s belly, quite beside herself with excitement.

Nyneve did not want to talk about the baby. Indeed, whenever Vivienne brought it up, she tried to change the subject. This was not surprising; Nyneve had never been maternal. Yet Vivienne was certain that when a woman was with child she must feel a natural connection. After all, women had been created for the very purpose of bearing children. And how could any woman not welcome the warmth of a child on her bosom, or the sound of their gurgling laughter?

Vivienne longed for a child. “When Harry and I married, I thought I would have children. I hoped, with every cycle...but I always knew by the swelling of my belly that my time had come. I would cry to myself for days until the bleeding stopped, and then I would hope again.

Even when Harry was horrible to me, I never stopped wishing for a child. Now at least I will be an aunt.”

She smiled at her sister, but Nyneve would not look at her. She busied herself with the new dress she was sewing, and that she urgently needed since the seams of her silk gown were now so strained they were on the verge of tearing. She rarely embroidered anymore, but her hands twitched whenever they were not occupied.

“Perhaps it is a blessing after all,” Vivienne sighed. “When King Pellinore returns we will start a family of our own. And then our children will be able to play together, and we—”

“Oh, Vivienne!” Nyneve set down her sewing at last, shaking her head at Vivienne in exasperation. “You must give up this idea that King Pellinore will return to you!”

“Why must I? He is an honourable man. I am certain he will return to me once he has completed his quest.”

“And what if he does not complete it? His father did not, nor did his grandfather before him!”

But the more recovered were Vivienne’s spirits, the more infuriatingly certain she grew that Pellinore would return to her.

One day, Nyneve proposed that they take a journey before the birth of her child. She wanted him to know his father’s family, she said.

“But if we leave, how will King Pellinore find me?”

Nyneve could not bear to tell her again that her knight was hers no more. “Please, sister. It is important to me. Surely, Pellinore would think to inquire after you in the village. You can leave a message for him at the church.”

“But what if he does not know that I waited for him? What if he falls ill again and he needs me to care for him?”

“I need you, sister! I need you to care for me!” She saw that Nyneve was anxious, though she did not understand the cause.

“But surely it would not be prudent for you to travel in your current state.”

“I will get a carriage. I am certain I can arrange it—Please, Vivienne, I cannot stay here and I do not want us to part again so soon.”

“I could visit you. When Pellinore returns.”

Nyneve saw that it was useless to argue with her, though she did not see how she could make such a long journey alone. As the time for her to give birth approached, Nyneve would lie awake for hours. She could only sleep on her back, and even this was painful, for her extra weight crushed her into the straw bed so that every lump pressed into her back. Besides this, she grew fearful. Poor Nyneve had not yet found the courage to tell her sister who the real father of her child was. Of course she was not a selfish woman, or at least she did not like to be. She had only done what she saw as necessary, to look after herself. Vivienne would never understand that, for self-interest was far too alien to her nature.

Perhaps it was her own guilt that tormented her, for another worry kept her awake at night as well. Sometimes, after she finally managed to drift off to sleep, she would wake with the sensation that someone was watching her. It was only by lighting a candle and peering into every corner of the hut that she could assuage her fear that there was another presence in the hut with them.

Vivienne noticed her sister was starting to look haggard again. She thought perhaps she was worried about caring for the baby, since their own mother had passed and there was no one

to guide her, having no experienced mother around to help her care for it. It seemed reasonable, considering how anxious she was to travel to the father's family to have the child. She began to reconsider the journey, for the sake of her sister's health. Someone could stay at the hut while she went to care for her sister. Then the hut would not be empty when Pellinore returned.

Yet, it was not clear if the family was expecting her. Whenever Vivienne tried to broach the subject of the father, Nyneve evaded her. Had she known she was with child when she left him? Was he angry with her, did he want her to give up the babe when he was born—or worse? She asked her who these relations were. Were they cousins? Or children from a former marriage? She imagined he could not still have living parents, and she feared they would more likely drive away the unwed mother than welcome her. But Nyneve insisted that she needed to bring the child home—which was puzzling as well, because Nyneve did not seem to think that she could give the child a home, even when Vivienne offered to let them live with her.

Having someone else to care for made Vivienne brave in the face of her sorrow. She had put all her energy into tending to her sister's needs: rushing about making broths for Nyneve, or rubbing her feet, or even diverting her with the old stories they used to tell each other as children, that she had little time to think about her knight.

Yet, whenever she found herself alone, the fears she would not entertain hounded her. She wondered why he had left her, and if he really would come back. Nyneve had made a fair point about his quest. If none of the previous Listenoisean kings had succeeded in catching the beast, was it at all likely that King Pellinore would fare better than they? Her time with Pellinore, though brief, had been enough for her to know that she would gladly spend the rest of her days with him. She believed that still. Yet, perhaps he had had a change of heart about devoting his life to such a simple woman. She would not blame him, for in truth she knew she was not worthy

of the knight. In the tales she and her sister told each other, the peasant woman who won the heart of the king was invariably a maiden, uncommonly pretty, and an unblemished soul besides. Plain, impious widows never married kings.

Chapter 15

Everywhere, the lush green trees had brightened to yellow or deepened to crisp red in the cool of the season, and the forest was effused with orange light. In the spring, Vivienne's hut was shaded under the boughs of the surrounding trees, but the leaves had grown sparse, and the autumn sun beat down on her little home. A stench emitted from the hut, held together by field-muck, and also from the trench in the back, where Vivienne and her sister squatted. The trees could no longer support the weight of their fruit, and apples heaped on the ground, rotten, and muddy and worm-eaten.

I had lain in wait in that squalid place since the springtime when Nyneve left me, using my arts to conceal myself as I had in the days before she knew me. I, Merlyn the most illustrious wizard ever to grace the British Kingdom, was pining away in that filthiest of places for the woman who had spurned me.

Nyneve loved me, once. Or, if she was not in love, then she held me in high regard; and it is no small feat to earn the regard of a woman such as Nyneve.

In happier times, she enjoyed hearing about magic. I was always careful not to tell her too much, lest I hasten our eventual end. But I knew the allure of my magic, so I told her of a spell I was commissioned to perform for a certain ruler of a small kingdom, years ago.

King Pellan belonged to a line of knights who were bound to complete a particular quest for a creature who could only be caught by a knight who shared his blood. It was therefore imperative that the king, who was approaching the winter of his life, secure a wife who would provide him with an heir to continue the family quest when he was gone. Pellan chose a fit young girl, and he was confident that she would soon provide him with an heir. Yet, he was a sharp man, and he saw how other gentlemen coveted his betrothed, and that she sometimes

smiled a bit too long in returning their attentions. Pellán worried that his wife might dally with a younger, more vigorous man whilst he was a-questing. He was not a romantic man. He only took a wife to continue the family line, but he could not risk being cuckolded. If his family line was tainted, the clan would never succeed in its quest. Therefore, he needed a means of guaranteeing that his pretty young wife remained faithful to him.

To this end, Pellán summoned me to his castle. At first, he wanted me to make it so that his wife, and the wife of his heir, and the wife of *his* heir, and so on, would be seared by the touch of any other man. “She shall be branded by her infidelity if she dares to stray from us!” he commanded of me.

I persuaded him that this would be unnecessarily cruel. Pellán’s quest demanded much of his time, and I thought it not unreasonable that his young wife should wish to take a lover after she had fulfilled her function as the bearer of the next king. I did not tell him that, of course. I merely pointed out that if some insolent puppy should put an unsought hand on her she should not suffer for it, and after some deliberation, King Pellán conceded my point.

“What do you suggest, then?”

I suggested that he protect, rather than punish, any woman who might produce an heir to his throne. The spell would be in his seed, so that the first time he lay with a woman who could produce his heir, it would take root inside her. After that, if any other man put his hands—or any other part of his body—on her, the offending appendage would heat up until it burst into flames. The fire would spread until it engulfed the treasonous wretch, reducing him to ashes. To ensure that his child was properly reared, the spell would last until he was strong enough to hold a sword. It would be passed on to the next generation, and the next, and it would continue to operate in the same manner for every king of his clan.

The King was satisfied with this, and on the eve of their wedding I performed the spell as we had agreed. Soon after, it was announced that Pellan's new queen was with child. The kingdom rejoiced, and Pellan was delighted to see his affairs wrapped up so quickly, for he was anxious to get back to his quest. He bid farewell to his wife, and invited me to stay at his castle and enjoy her hospitality for as long as I wished. Even with child, Pellan's wife was a very beautiful woman. Not nearly as beautiful as Nyneve, of course, (I was careful to stress that to Nyneve, though it was long before she was born) but still so lovely and so charming that I soon became quite taken with her. And she, equally taken with me.

One day, not long after Pellan's departure, I remarked that she looked to be quite advanced in her pregnancy for one who had been so lately married. The Queen burst into a tearful confession: her father had married her off when he discovered that she was with child by another man—one who, being quite inferior to her in wealth and station, he did not deem worthy of his daughter's hand. The poor girl was terrified, knowing that their deception would be discovered once the child was born several months before it was supposed to. I drew her into my arms, and the queen jumped back in amazement. "How are you not burning? Why are you not in flames?" she asked, and I laughed, for of course King Pellan had not succeeded in planting the spell, since she had not been in a condition to produce *his* heir.

The Queen and I came to an understanding. I brought her back to my tower under the guise of nursing her through the pregnancy, and after her child was born we spent several blissful months in each other's company. Then she tired of me and took another lover. He was the very devil, I believe, who had gotten her into trouble in the first place.

The following year, when King Pellan returned to find his wife had run off with another man, and taken his son with him as well, he lost no time summoning me to his castle. When I

arrived, I was seized by two guards, who forced me on to my knees before his throne. Needless to say, he would never suspect me of interfering with such a young and beautiful lady, but he wanted someone to bear the brunt of his anger, and to help him retrieve his queen.

“Useless wizard! Your spell did nothing!” King Pellan barked.

“Sir, Your Majesty has yet to test my spell.”

King Pellan’s face turned a most regal shade of purple. “Are you suggesting that I failed to plant the spell? I can assure you that I did several times. So many times—”

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty,” lowering my eyes as if I actually feared his wrath. I pitied the fool, and I could not but feel badly for having deceived him, though I had saved the Queen in the process. “I did not mean to imply anything of that nature. However...” I beckoned him closer, and whispered into his ear what the girl and her father had done. When he understood the embarrassment I had spared him, he could not but thank me for my services. And since that day, I have earned a reputation as a trusted advisor among British kings.

Nyneve was delighted by this story—there was nothing that amused her more than trickery—and it delighted me to delight her. I knew she would use it to drive me away, and if I had stopped to consider it, I would surely have realized how agonizing it would be for us to be apart. Yet, none of this mattered when we were together. The music of her laughter was enough to make me give her anything she wanted, no matter what ill came of it later on.

What came of it was this:

I flew after her to her sister’s home, disguised as a pigeon. I could have dragged her back to my tower then, but it would have given me little pleasure. Instead, I waited in the trees, and when she went inside, I followed her. I faded into the walls of the hut, visible only to the keenest eye, and I watched her body merge with the pelt. Though it had been foretold long before her

birth, her mastery of my arts astounded me. If my heart was not already brimming over, my love for her would have deepened then.

Oh, Nyneve was clever! And perhaps that is what drove my ardour for her even when she spurned me. For how can one not love a woman who is, against all odds, constantly besting you? Only a stupid man fails to see the charm of a clever woman, and that is only because he does not like to be reminded of his own inferiority. But, as you know, my imperfect powers of foresight and intuition were no match for Nyneve's wit.

If you have never experienced true love, you will think me a pathetic old man. You will wonder why I did not simply find another, less fickle woman to give my heart to. But if you have loved, then you will understand that there was a noose around my heart, and the further she ran from me the tighter she pulled the knot. It would have been agony to leave her.

Often, I stood in front of the door, for the hut was too cramped for me to remain undetected in the daytime. Nyneve thought she could hide from me inside, but when Vivienne left the door open, I would slip in and stand close enough to feel her breath on me as she slept, and then I would slip away again when Vivienne went out.

*

One day, Vivienne went to get water from the well, and I followed her. I knew she would understand me. Though she was braver than anyone had yet acknowledged to her, I knew that her suffering was nearly as great as mine. Shrouded in the shadows of the trees, Vivienne's whole demeanor changed. Sadness did not suit her; her shoulders rounded with the weight of her heavy heart, and the amiable spark that usually lit her features had been extinguished. Her evident misery so affected me that I quite forgot myself and put my arm about her shoulders in a

gesture of paternal care. Vivienne screamed and ducked away from me, running as fast as her little legs would carry her.

“Vivienne!” I called after her, but she did not turn back, and if I had not been a sorcerer she surely would have gotten away from me. I waited for her to recover from her scare, then I appeared before her on the path. “Hello, Vivienne.”

She looked only slightly less startled to see me, then, and for a moment she considered running away again, but instead she gave me a watery smile and wished me, “Good day, sir.”

I begged her forgiveness for having frightened her, and asked if I might walk with her the rest of the way to the well. She nodded her assent.

“How fares your sister?” I asked.

“She is keeping well. And her—” She hesitated, and I realized she was unsure if I knew that Nyneve was with child. “Her health is good.”

“I am glad to hear it! The babe will grow to be a spirited lad, no doubt.” Abhorrent obstruction! How I hated myself for having cast the spell that kept Nyneve from me! By carrying the next heir to the throne, my old spell was in full force.

Vivienne attempted a smile in reply, but she was far too gloomy for polite conversation, and soon we lapsed into silence again.

“Would you like to see how Pellinore gets on?” I asked at last, and I was pleased to see her step a little lighter, her spirit lifted at least a quarter inch at the thought of seeing her beloved again.

We arrived at the well (the same well where I had first appeared to her), and I bid her fill the bucket. Puzzled, she found that even when she pulled down on the crank with the whole weight of her body she could not lift it.

“Do you require assistance, my dear?” I could not but chuckle at her disdainful expression—it was only natural for her to doubt the power of my spindly limbs, but of course no man could have lifted that bucket by physical force alone, for the substance it contained was not mere matter—the bucket contained a moment in time. To Vivienne, it seemed to rise of its own accord. I poured the contents on the grass, and the liquid hissed, forming a thick fog around us.

We were staring over a deep chasm, the air cold and wet, the kind of air that penetrates your bones. A path wound like a ribbon below us, disappearing into the mist. Vivienne looked faint. She stepped back as far as she could on that narrow ledge, flattening her back against the wall. She would have missed her beloved if I had not made her understand that we were like ghosts in this place, mere observers of the passage of someone else’s time. She regained her composure, stepping out much further on the ledge than would normally have been prudent.

“Look, there!” I pointed to a figure winding its way up the path. We heard the thundering of hooves before he came clearly into view, but her eyes shone as soon as she made out his blue plume in the mist.

“Pellinore! Thunderswift!” She called out to them, but I doubt he would have noticed her even if he was able to hear us. Even I, who had long ceased to be impressed by errant knights puffed up with their inflated sense of purpose, sucked the air through my teeth in nervous awe of man and horse. They *galloped* up that narrow path! There was hardly room for man and horse, yet they covered that icy ground without hesitation, taking each turn with a sharp tug at the reins.

One hoof hit a patch of ice, and they skidded, nearly sending them both over the edge. Vivienne’s scream pierced the air, and did not echo, but Pellinore did not let Thunderswift hesitate. He tugged the reins. “Ride on! She must have passed this way!”

They were riding toward us now, Pellinore's eyes narrowed on some invisible point beyond. I reached for Vivienne's hand as they came toward us. There is a look that knights acquire, when they have been too long on a quest, and the single-mindedness of it begins to eat away their brains. The man charging at us looked only half human: his eyes were tiny black specks, narrowed on to their prey, his mouth twisted with grim and blood-thirsty resolve. The beat of hooves against the rock filled our ears as they approached. Dust clouded around the horse's legs; the cloud of dust grew as they got closer, and closer, and vanished.

"Oh, Pellinore!" Vivienne cried, and then sat by the well with such a look of despair that I nearly regretted having shown him to her. But then she seemed to collect herself and sighed, "I suppose he is doing his duty."

"Perhaps, but we saw only a window into Pellinore's life. There is much happening there that we did not see."

"Will he catch her at last?" she asked with such an air of pleading that I very nearly shook her.

I wanted to scream in her ears to make her hear me, but she would not. She loved Pellinore far too much to see what he really was. "It is not for me to say what the future will hold for him, or for you."

Knowing my fate did not prevent me from hurtling toward my eventual end; so it would be for Vivienne as well.

"Do you miss my sister?" she inquired, as if she knew my thoughts.

"Indeed I do, Vivienne. As much as you miss Pellinore."

"Perhaps if I had been with child, he would have stayed."

“I believe he wanted to stay.” Those words seemed to bring more joy to that little face than I had seen since he had left. So much so that she looked almost beautiful. So much so that if I had not been very much in love, I would have been loath to dash that smile from her face. “And he would have, if your sister had not driven him away.”

“What?” It was terrible to see that smile fade when she absorbed what I said. “How dare you speak ill of my sister!”

“Whose child does she carry, Vivienne? You know very well it is not mine.”

“No! You are nothing but a bitter, spurned old man! A lecherous greybeard! You have no right to speak of Nynve that way!”

And she stalked back toward her home, forgetting the water she had come for.

“Remember what I told you when we last met,” I called after her. She hesitated, for she remembered all too well the choice she had made then. “I can prove that your sister betrayed you.”

Slowly she turned, her face twisted with anguish, a dark and ugly version of Nynve’s.

I walked alongside Vivienne, her perfect double. The bucket sloshing on my apron. Her wool skirts chafed my skin. We did not speak; for the time being, there was nothing left to say.

I bid her wait outside, blending her into the shadows of the trees, and then I entered the little hut. Nynve slept, buried beneath that awful pelt, and for several minutes I could only stand over her, feeling her breath on my cheek. She did not sleep peacefully. She groaned, as if distressed, and her brow was moist with sweat. Once I would have smoothed back the blond locks that had fallen over her face. I would have kissed her eyelids to wake her. Now, I could only speak to her.

“I have brought you some water, Nynaeve. Come, sit up and drink.”

Her eyes opened, like curtains lifting over a clear sky. “Ah, Vivienne. I had the strangest dream.” She reached her hand out for mine, and I moved away just in time.

“What was this dream you had?” I busied myself with the cup and bucket.

“I dreamed I was a prisoner again. I turned and turned around the wizard’s garden...”

“A prisoner!” I wondered what delayed Vivienne.

“Yes—the wizard I told you of. He...if my plan did not work...” and she lay back down on the bed, as if the effort of sitting up was too much for her.

“You were never a prisoner. Here.” I put the cup on the floor beside the bed, lest she brush my fingers.

“Oh...there is much I have not told you...I still dream I’m there...the child...”

“Yes, well there is plenty of time for that still. Take your water!” I snapped, taking a seat at the splintered table as Nynaeve reached for the cup. Furtively, I dabbed at my eyes with the kerchief in my pocket.

“Are you angry with me, Vivienne?” she asked when she was somewhat recovered from her nightmare.

“Why would I be angry!” My chest tightened. When would Vivienne arrive?

Then, mercifully, there was a knock.

“Oh! Sister, do not answer that!” she cried, but my hand was already on the latch. “I beg of you!”

How cruel I was. I hardly want to admit that I took pleasure in it, but it cannot be denied. I let out a gasp of horror as I opened the door on the still-invisible Vivienne. “Oh, hello,

Illustrious Wizard! Are you here to see my sister?” and I practically pulled Vivienne through the door, so greatly did I look forward to exposing Nyneve for what she was.

Vivienne entered the hut, unseen. She stood before her sister while I carried out my charade. Only I heard the pained breath she drew, as the near-invisible Vivienne, now beside me, watched her sister’s body merge with the pelt. Vivienne teetered, hardly able to support herself.

I turned with a laugh, to let Nyneve know there was no one at the door. Vivienne fell against me. “When I brought him the pelt...” she breathed. The whole weight of her little body was pressed against me, and since I was only as small as she, she very nearly toppled me. “It cannot be true!”

“What? Nyneve? Wherever did she go?”

“Please, open the door. Let me out.” she whispered. I felt her arms around my waist, her cheek dampening mine with her tears, but I could not let Nyneve suspect us.

“Nyneve? Where are you, Nyneve?”

“Please, I cannot bear to be near her.” “Nynenve?” I stepped through the door as if I thought she might have left without me noticing, and I pulled Vivienne outside with me. The colours bled back into her—first red, then yellow, and finally blue—until I could see her plainly again. Any pleasure I had taken in exposing Nyneve dissipated at the sight of Vivienne’s face. It was all I could do to silence her wailing, lest Nyneve hear us. When she was calm, I left her to confront her sister.

I had done what I had to do, but I could not take pleasure in having caused an innocent woman such pain. I vowed, then, that I would recompense her for her suffering.

Chapter 16

“There will be no more lies,” Vivienne declared when she walked back into the hut, her eyes still red and shining as she looked at the pelt on the bed. “I know what you have done, and if you have any love for me, sister, you will reveal yourself now!”

Even Nyneve was not so unfeeling that she could ignore her sister. A lump formed in the middle of the pelt and grew, until a figure emerged from it; and there was Nyneve, sitting at the foot of the bed with the pelt wrapped around her.

“I want to hear it from your own mouth. Who is the father of your child?”

Vivienne held her sister’s eyes, made her look her in the face until she flinched and turned away.

“Oh Vivienne!” she sobbed. “You know very well who he is!”

“When you *advised me* to bring him the pelt? I was *delivering* you to him? Did you take pleasure in such deception, Nyneve? Such betrayal?”

She shook her head sadly (though who can say if she did not take pleasure in such trickery?) “I had no choice, Sister. I swear to you I could not...”

“And when I accused you, that first night, of trying to take him away from me, and you said that I was mistaken—”

“Sister! You do not know how it was.”

“You knew I loved him!”

“I warned you against it! I did not want to hurt you. I hoped that it was the idea of him—his nobility—that you loved.”

“I loved *him!*” She shook her head in disbelief. “What could have compelled you to spoil the only happiness I have ever known? After everything you and I have been through. After—”

“After you wished me away, you mean?” She said it softly, as if it was not an accusation. “First you forsook me for Harry, and now I will lose you again over this deluded, self-aggrandizing man? He did not leave because of me. He left us both to chase after some ill-begotten creature that hasn’t even been sighted for half a century!”

“Oh Nynaeve!” Vivienne was not cruel like me or like Nynaeve. She took no pleasure in causing others pain. She went to her sister, and they held each other, each feeling the other’s grief shaking in her sister’s bosom. “You are right. I did miss you when you were away!”

“Vivienne, you must listen to me,” Nynaeve whispered when their sobbing had subsided. “There is no one in the world I love more than you. I did what I did because it was the only way I could escape from him.”

“But did you not love him?”

It was quite dark in the little hut by that time. They lay back against the pelt, listening to the crackling fire, and Nynaeve told her story:

Chapter 17

“Dear sister, when I told you I fell in love with the wizard Merlyn, I spoke truthfully. Merlyn is skilled in the arts of magic, more so than any other wizard alive today, but even he could not have used his arts to make me fall in love with him. There are rules to magic, and just as the alchemist requires crude metal to produce gold, so Merlyn could not have taken my heart if I had not felt something for him already. It is nearly impossible, as you well know, for a woman not to love a man who rescued her; and besides, he had, as I later found out, used his arts to enhance my attraction to him to the point that it was nearly overpowering. Yet, even this would not have been enough to induce me to follow him blindly through the forest, if not for his promise:

‘Fair Damsel, you know well that you are no ordinary lady, and your destiny is extraordinary as well. If you will consent to come with me, I will teach you my arts.’

Vivienne, you know that I had always dreamed of leaving and going on adventures. I was not meant to marry; to farm and weave cloth and scrub floors with a brat latched to my breast. Merlyn offered me a chance to escape that path.

I do not have your romantic heart, my sister, but those words, from the lips of such a handsome man, made me fall in love. I did not hesitate to follow him through the dark woods without knowing where he led me. I held his hand, and a current flowed through me; my heart raced, and I felt flushed. If he had let go of my hand, even for a second, I would have gone mad with longing. His kisses were like water to my parched lips, and every few minutes I would beg him to stop and refresh me again, but this only made me thirst for him more.

We arrived at the well. If I had not been so giddy, I would have wondered why we stopped there, but I was only glad we stopped, and wrapped my arms around his neck; but this time Merlyn pushed me away.

‘Patience, Poppet.’

I stood back, but I could not let go of his hand. I dropped to my knees, kissing the tips of his fingers. He was oblivious. I know not what he did, for I was too absorbed in that beautiful satin smooth hand, but after a moment, he pulled me up again, and instructed me to look inside the well.

‘What do you see?’ he asked.

I had expected to see something wondrous, but I saw only my face reflected back at me in the moonlight.

‘My reflection.’ Losing interest in his experiment, I turned away from the well and wrapped my arms around him, trying to pull him closer, but he pulled my hands away.

‘If you wish to learn my arts, you must discipline yourself, my lamb. Now, look again.’ He bid me take off my left shoe and drop it into the well, and I obeyed him. The image of my face rippled away, just for an instant, and then I was staring at my reflection again.

‘Now what do you see?’

I had caught a glimpse of something else, but then the water smoothed and I was staring at my reflection once more. Perhaps it was mere suggestion. I saw something because I was looking for it.

‘You must learn to trust your eyes, my sweet.’ He bid me remove my other shoe and instructed me to drop it, as before.

I held the shoe over my face, and I watched it fall. I watched it in the water get larger, and larger, and then sink into the water with a splash. Black rings appeared over my face, and this time, I was certain I had seen it; a garden bathed in moonlight, and a pebbled pathway in the centre of it, leading up to a vine-covered stone wall.

When my reflection rematerialized, Merlyn's face was beside mine. I watched him kiss my neck. 'Did you see it?'

I nodded, and he told me to sit on the edge of the well, with my feet dangling over the water, and he did the same, so that we were both sitting, facing each other. He was so handsome that I nearly forgot myself. My foot found its way beneath his robes, stroking its way up the inside of his leg, but he closed his knees on my toes.

'Discipline, my dear!' he admonished me with a smile. 'You must focus, or I will have to pull you out of this well. Now, do you trust me?'

'I shall place myself in your very capable hands, sir.' I gave him my most coquettish smile.

'Good. Then, you must close your eyes, and picture yourself in the garden you just saw.'

I closed my eyes, just as he had commanded, and did my best to conjure up the image of the garden. It was difficult; at first all I could see was his full lips, his pensive grey eyes, and his luminous white beard.

'Concentrate!' He commanded. I shut my eyes more tightly, willing myself to think of the garden.

Roses bloomed like blood drops against the grey stone wall. I breathed in their perfume. I felt the sun on my arms, and the gravelly path beneath my feet. I heard the sound of water

rushing, but I could not see its source. The sky rippled, and I found myself staring into the well again.

‘Is that where you live?’ I asked, unable to disguise my awe.

Merlyn nodded solemnly. ‘Would you like to live there with me, Nyneve?’ I started at the sound of my name. There was something so intimate about the way he said it, as if he had physically touched me.

‘Yes.’

‘Then let us go.’ I did not need to ask him what he meant. In one motion, I lifted myself into the well, feeling the cold wind on my legs as I rushed toward the water, my eyes tightly shut.

When I opened them, the wall of roses stood before me. I was standing on the pebbled path, leading up to a door in the wall. I had not noticed the door before.

I looked down, and saw my shoes were lying in the grass. I picked them up, and walked through the door, and came to a little courtyard overlooking an ancient tower. A fountain in its centre. I sat on the edge of the fountain, dipping my feet in the water. Little fish darted around my legs, and I smiled as one brave little one nibbled at my toes.

Suddenly, Merlyn was behind me, brushing the hair away from my neck, surprising me with a kiss. ‘Come, Nyneve.’

I followed him into the tower.

I am sure you can guess what passed between us then. It is difficult for me to reconcile that night, now, with the dread I have come to associate with the wizard. I had never felt for any man what I felt for Merlyn that night, and in truth, I do not think I will ever be capable of loving anyone again.

I awoke the next morning with a luxurious yawn. I believe that was the first time I had not been awoken by a rooster's call, and I lay like royalty in a canopy bed. You, who have always slept on straw, cannot imagine the softness of that bed! The sun filtered through the curtains. There was no reason to rise, so I lay on that soft mattress, with my eyes closed, simply enjoying the feel of satin against my skin and the feather pillow cradling my cheek.

I stretched my arm over to the other side of the bed, but found it empty. I was about to call out to my lover, to entreat him back to bed, when I heard the door open and he entered, singing to himself.

'Is my little nymph still asleep?' he asked, but preferring that he wake me, I shut my eyes and pretended to be still asleep. I listened for the curtain to open, anticipating his sweet kisses, but instead he left the room again, returning a moment later with what I guessed, from the sloshing sound it made, was a wash basin.

I smiled to myself, listening to him hum. What a cheerful mood I had put him in, I thought, and chose play coy a little longer. I peeked through the curtain, hoping to spy on my bathing lover, and I nearly shrieked at what I saw.

I did not recognize the old man stooped at the basin. His papery skin was crossed with blue veins, his arms and legs were broomstick thin. I only knew him from his beard, though it was no longer the milky white of moonlight, but a lifeless grey, and scraggly as an old barn cat.

He must have heard me gasp, for the old man looked up sharply—almost before I had time to draw back the curtain—and then he spoke some words in a strange tongue and his sagging body filled out again, the loose folds of his skin tightening over his limbs.

'Do I hear my little nymph stirring?' he called. I threw myself back down on the bed, but too late! I heard him approaching. I rested on the pillow, as if I was just waking. The curtain

opened: I turned to him with a little yawn, and found myself staring into the face of young man I had fallen in love with the night before.

‘Good morning, my love.’ I smiled sleepily at him.

‘I trust you slept well, Poppet?’

‘Indeed! I have never slept so well.’ I started to rise from the bed, but he stopped me with a kiss. Vivienne, you cannot know how he revolted me, for even in his current form, I could only see the hideous old man who had deceived me. You, who know my character, might wonder why I did not confront Merlyn about his deception. I was so angry with the wizard that it was only with great difficulty that I managed to maintain my composure. Yet, I knew that my foolishness had put me in a dangerous position. I should have known better than to follow a stranger to his tower. I was utterly defenseless against him—how could I flee a man with the power to hold me twenty feet above his head? —and even if I managed to escape I would not know how to return home. He had taken me down a well, by what enchantment I knew not; if there was another route back, I would have to wait to discover it. Foolhardiness had led me to this place, and now only through my cunning would I be able to escape it.

I allowed him to kiss me, but when he pulled away the sheets, I pulled away from him. ‘Did you not promise to show me your spells, my sweet?’ I pleaded, winding his beard around my finger.

‘In good time, Poppet.’

He proceeded to climb into bed with me, and wrapped his arms around my waist. He tried to entice me by nibbling at my earlobe, but I turned to him with a pleading look and said, ‘The way you saved me from that awful oaf was so gallant! I wish I knew how to perform magic like that. Though I am sure I could never hope to match your skill!’

I went on about how much I admired him, and how grateful I would be for even the smallest morsel of his knowledge, until he led me to his library.

And so I plied the wizard with my charm, begging him to teach me his arts. At first he would only teach me simple parlour tricks—how to pull a dove from a sleeve, or to slip a pea out from under a cup when no one was looking, so that it seemed to have disappeared. He thought that these would satisfy me; of course, I had to act delighted, but then I would ask him to teach me something more impressive still, and he would teach me more illusions.

After a week of this, I began to despair. It seemed the wizard had no intention of teaching me real magic, and I still had found no way of escaping. Feigning idle curiosity, I asked him about the well, and if there was a portal back to the world I had met him in. But he was not such a fool, and he said that such magic took years to master.

Every night, when Merlyn thought I was asleep, he would rise from our bed and allow his body to lose its colour and wrinkle like rotting fruit. And then he would pace about the room for a few minutes, stretch, and with an awful grimace, return to his previous state. Now that I know how taxing it is on the body to change forms for even a few hours, I cannot imagine how he must have suffered, being almost perpetually in this youthful form. He must have truly loved me to put himself through so much.

One night, when he was pacing about the room, I pulled open the canopy curtain before he had a chance to change. I screamed as if I was horrified by what I saw, and shrank to the far end of the bed.

‘Nyneve! My poor poppet, don’t fret. It is I. It is your Merlyn. See?’ He came to me, so that I could see his face. I let him explain that his other form was only a disguise, and that this

was his true physique. ‘I am sorry I frightened you. I only wanted you to love me as I loved you. And I was afraid that you never would if you met me as an old man.’

I covered my face, letting out a tortured sob.

‘But it is still I, still Merlyn, the same man you fell in love with, and who is a slave to your every whim! Surely you can love me as an old man, now?’

‘Perhaps I would have loved you, but how can I now, knowing that you deceived me?’

“He opened his mouth to protest, but I would not let him speak. ‘No! I cannot look at you like this. You have betrayed my trust.’

‘Poppet—’

‘I am not your Poppet!’ I said, allowing the rage I had been stifling since I first found him out to enter my voice. The force of my voice thrilled me. I was worried that my outburst would not affect him; or worse, that he would punish me for it. But as I said the old man was very much in love with me, and the angrier I got, the more power I wielded over him. I rose from the bed, and with each step I took toward him, he was forced back, closer and closer to the door.

‘But, Pop—Nyneve! My beautiful, sweet Nyneve! You know that I would never try to hurt you. I only wanted you to love me as I love you.’

He tried to take my hands, to look into his eyes, but I pushed him into the doorway.

‘Leave me be!’

‘You are right to be angry. I did lie. But please, Nyneve. Have I not been kind to you? Have I not shown you affection and given you every comfort you could ever desire?’

‘You know very well it is not luxury I desire. You want to keep me as your doll—as your pet! But you have not done what you promised. I am tired of your parlour tricks. Now leave!’

He did not try to stop me from shutting the door behind him. I spent a few peaceful hours in his quarters, though there was little in there to amuse me. I did some needlepoint; the repetition of the needle and thread soothed me somewhat, and after a time I felt freer in those quarters than I had since my first morning in Merlyn's tower.

Merlyn had sought to impress me by teaching me needlepoint. It is a favourite diversion of noble ladies, he had explained, and as there was little else to occupy me I had spent much of my time in this fashion. At this point in my tale, you will not be surprised to learn that the needlepoint frame he had given me was enchanted; no matter how many flowers I embroidered, I neither ran out of floss nor cloth.

My fingers had grown quite nimble, and by lunchtime I had embroidered a lily pond carpet, with coy fish swimming beneath the green. A tray appeared at my feet, with cold meats, and jam tarts, and other dainty treats that I do not know the name of. In more cheerful times, I would have thought of you when I saw that tray. You would have devoured those little tarts! Yet I thought only of escaping the wizard. I set down my needlework to eat.

On the tray, there was a sheet of paper, folded in half. It was a drawing of the handsome young Merlyn. I was about to crumple the paper when the Merlyn on the page blinked at me, startling me so that I dropped it.

'Oh Nyneve! How apt that I should fall at your pretty little feet when I am here only to beg your forgiveness! Since the day I first espied you in the convent gardens, I gave my poor old heart to you. In the eight hundred and ninety-seven years I have walked this earth, I have never loved anyone as I love you, and if you will only stay with me, I will lavish you with every jewel, every garment, every trinket, every kerchief, every falcon, every lute, every cake, every tart, every needle, every harp, every ruby, every diamond, every sapphire, every—'

I crushed his foolish portrait in my hand, but even that did not deter it. The Merlyn portrait shouted to be heard, so that even when I squeezed it in the ball of my hand I could still hear its muffled protestations. I tried to cover my ears to drown out his moaning, but in doing so I let the paper fall, and it un-crumpled itself and shouted:

‘Nyneve! My queen! I beg your forgiveness! I would crawl at your feet over shards of glass if that would make you happy! I would—’

I balled up the paper again, and plunged it into a vase of flowers. For a moment, my ears were still filled with the wizard’s gurgling speech, but then the ink dissolved and he was silent at last.

I returned to my embroidery, my pond growing until it covered the entire floor. Our chambers were becoming a veritable garden of my embroidery. Already, I slept in a bed of painted daisies; and the walls were draped with gladiola.

I did not envy the court ladies, for it was tiresome to have nothing else to do. Yet, there was a certain meditative pleasure in stitching, and my mind was still busy plotting my escape. By nightfall, I had completed an apple tree, its branches bowing under the weight of red fruit.

As before, the tray was stacked with rich foods, and as before, there was a folded sheet of paper on the tray. I savoured every morsel of my supper, ignoring—or doing my best to ignore—that odious sheet. I was allowed to enjoy the tranquility of my meal, and when I was done I wiped my greasy fingers on it.

It gave me so much pleasure to imagine the real Merlyn smeared in venison grease that I was almost disappointed when no noise emitted from the page. I took it in my hands, without unfolding it, and in one swift motion I ripped it down the middle. A high-pitched scream emitted from it, and then all was silent again. It was so satisfying to hear Merlyn’s scream that, after a

moment, I took the two halves of the sheet, pressed them together, and ripped them as well. So delightful was that sound that I giggled to myself, and I ripped the quarters into eighths, and the eighths into sixteenths, and the sixteenths into thirty-seconds, laughing almost ferociously to myself. I threw the pieces into the air letting them land like snowflakes on my lily pond.

A thousand shrieking Merlyns stared up at me in despair.

‘Oh Nyneve! Oh cruel Nyneve!’ they chorused. ‘We have loved you since we first espied you over the wall of that convent garden. We wore a nun’s habit to be near you, and we watched you, our tender-hearted damsel, nurse your dear aunt. How we envied her when your white hands pressed a wet cloth to her feverish brow! We would have licked a pestilent rat just to feel those hands against our skin. We were intoxicated by you, we were driven to lunacy by our love for you. We kept her on the edge of death just so we could be near you a little longer, and when you finally left, we crept alongside you. We bided our time, we watched the tide turn, the moon fatten and thin and fatten again; we waited until every leaf fell from the trees, and we could bear it no more. We deceived you, but only so that we could—’

I wanted to stick my fingers in my ears and wail just to drown them out, but there were so many that I knew they would only raise their voices and protest louder still. I gathered up the tiny Merlyns in my hands and ran to the hearth at the far end of the room. I threw them into them into the flames. Oh how they screamed! But in my haste, one or two Merlyns had slipped through my fingers, and they still carried out about their love for me, about how sorry they were, and begged me for mercy. I fell to my hands and knees to find the stray pieces, and I burned them too; and at last, the room was silent again.

Though I tried, I barely slept that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I heard the Merlyns calling out to me. I embroidered by candlelight until my candle had melted to a stump, and then I

stitched blindly; my hand was so accustomed to the motion that I hardly needed sight. My eyes knew not what my hands stitched. I could not see the colours or the shapes, but I moved the fabric along, the needle looping through the cloth over and under and over and under and over and under.

Over and under and through and through until daylight broke. My eyes, weary for want of sleep, gradually focused on the picture before me. At first I saw nothing but trees. The apple tree I had embroidered yesterday in the foreground, and many others beside it; but then through the trees I saw there was a small structure; a straw hut. My hands stitched something sticking out from the leaves of the tree, not fruit, but flesh. It was a lady's foot. And then I noticed another figure walking in the woods near her; a shadowy figure holding an axe.

I did not know what the picture meant. There was nothing distinctive about those trees; they did not remind me of any place I had ever been, but the woodcutter filled me with dread. Had my own hand created that monster? I set to work adding another figure, in the far corner of the woods. A noble knight with a peacock feather in his helm, waving like a flag in the wind as he rode toward the two other figures. When I had put the final touches on this heroic figure, my dread subsided and I fell, exhausted, on to the wooded landscape.

It was nighttime again when I awoke. The candle had been replaced, and a supper tray awaited me by the side of the bed. I shuddered at the sight of the usual paper, folded and tucked between the cup and the plate. I contemplated throwing it in the fire, but feared Merlyn had learned from this last experience. The very ashes from the burnt paper may begin to speak, and how would I rid myself of them? I decided I'd best hear what he had to say.

Merlyn, the real Merlyn, ancient and haggard, stared back at me with dispirited eyes.

‘Nyneve,’ he said, in a voice that cracked like dry wood. His face was drawn with a trembling hand, as if the artist’s hand was too weak to draw a steady line. ‘Do you know who these figures are?’

I was about to shake my head, but I hesitated. Did I not know them?

‘Your hands work more quickly than your mind. So it is for every young sorcerer. I will release you, if that is your wish, and return you to the safety of your little village. But if you stay with me as my wife, I can teach you to harness the true magic that already runs through your veins. It is your choice, my love.’

“Tell me, sister, what would you have done in my place?”

Chapter 18

“He was a patient teacher, and for a time I was satisfied. He showed me his books; taught me to read the ancient symbols within. There was a sensual pleasure to those words, the way they resounded, like organ music, against the ancient stone walls of the library. Soon enough, I could cast a simple spell. My first was to bring my embroidered flowers to life. They wilted in minutes, but Merlyn reassured me that, with practice, my magic would grow stronger.

“He brought me with him to court, for he was a friend and advisor to the King, and we performed for the nobility. We did not do real magic—Merlyn said that it would make them uneasy to see a lady of such skill—but the parlour tricks he first taught me: the pea under the cup, the dove in the sleeve, some tricks with cards. They were delighted by our performance, as stupid as it seemed to me, and made us promise to come back as often as we could.

“It quickly became clear to me that Merlyn was not teaching me all he knew. Every morning, we breakfasted in the library and worked for an hour or two, and then Merlyn would announce that he was weary of magic. He would ask me to read to him, or propose that we take a turn about the garden for a while before coming back to our lessons. I would have to oblige him, but invariably when I asked if we couldn’t return to our spells he would put me off with some feeble excuse.

“‘My pointing fingers aches,’ he would say. ‘We will continue tomorrow.’ And then we would return to the library the following morning.

“I soon stopped insisting we go on with our lessons for more than a couple of hours. I had a plan to escape him, as you will discover. If it was to work I would need to catch him off his guard. This meant that I needed to make Merlyn believe I was content with our life, which was sometimes an arduous task.

“I dreaded going to bed with him. Now that his true form had been revealed to me, he never put on the disguise of the younger man. Sometimes I pretended to be asleep, but no excuse would dissuade him. Every night, he would kiss me good night, and then his kisses would become more and more insistent. I had to train myself not to shrink from his advances. At first I tried to picture the younger, handsomer, Merlyn, when he lay with me, but he insisted that I watch him as his body writhed on top of mine. It was almost more than I could bear, but I needed him to sleep soundly for my own purposes, so I managed to moan with feigned pleasure at his touch. I urged him on until he was so exhausted that he rolled off of me and promptly fell asleep.

“When I was quite certain he would not wake, I would rise from the bed as quietly as I could and steal away to the library. As Merlyn had said, magic is a part of my soul. That is not to say I inherited it. No one knows how the magic ones are chosen, but just as some people are born musicians, or painters, or warriors, so it is for sorcerers and sorceresses. But I knew I would never become a real sorceress if I relied only on Merlyn’s lessons. I practiced the spells he had taught me until sunrise every night. By this time, my embroidery decorated every room in the tower, and so there were plenty of flowers to practice on. I could make them last half the night or longer, but then I would have to kill them lest Merlyn discover me. Then during the day, I pretended to struggle with what Merlyn taught me, though it was ever so easy compared to what I did alone in the library while he slept.

“Yet, the spells Merlyn taught me were scarcely more potent than the tricks we performed at court. They would not help me hatch my plot. I pored over the spell books and taught myself new tricks without his help. I despaired when I realized that there was no order to his spells; the pages seemed to have been bound together at random, and most did not even have titles, but I knew Merlyn himself had used it the night I left with him.

“I needed to seduce a certain knight. I knew that I looked well enough to catch the eye of most men under ordinary circumstances. Yet, I also knew that only a fool would anger a sorcerer as powerful as my captor, and so I needed to make the knight fall for me as madly and recklessly as I had for Merlyn. No doubt you have guessed who that knight is, my Sister, and are wondering what ill fortune had made him the only knight capable of delivering me.

“Merlyn had bragged to me of a certain jealous king he had tricked in order to steal his queen from him.

(And she told Vivienne the story, but since you have already heard it I will not repeat it here.)

“I did not know how I would manage to escape from Merlyn long enough to carry out my plan, but I thought that if I could make this knight fall for me as I had fallen for Merlyn, he might help me escape. I know this must sound very callous to you, Vivienne, but by this time my life with Merlyn was so stifling I would have done anything to escape him. Save for from my nightly escapades, we were never apart.

I was never allowed to leave the tower grounds except when we went to court,. One day I asked Merlyn what lay on the other side of the walls of his garden. He would only say that it was a ruined city and that I would not like to go there. When I pressed him, he said, ‘Anything you desire, my love, I will summon here for you.’

“The only exception was our visits to Camelot. Yet, even when we were summoned to court, he transported us there directly. I would close my eyes, and when I opened them, we would be in the King’s throne room. The ladies exclaimed over his touching devotion to me. ‘You are so fortunate to have found a husband who dotes on you!’ They would whisper. ‘I hope that my husband will treat me so well when he is in the winter of his life.’

“It was not only that Merlyn doted on me, though he certainly did. He guarded me, jealously, watching my every move. When I spoke to the gentlemen and ladies of the court, he was never further than an arm’s length away from me. He listened to every word I said to him, and ever I felt his eyes on me.

“I had no trouble, despite this, finding out about King Pellan’s great-grandson. Merlyn was so proud of this story that he told it almost every day on our walk around the gardens, and when I pressed him for details about the foolish king—where he lived, his name, his shield, he never suspected the reason for my curiosity. Or perhaps he did. It is hard to say what Merlyn knew or didn’t know. I sometimes thought he had so much knowledge packed into his brain that he himself had trouble keeping track of it. In any case, he never minded when I asked him about King Pellan or his line.

“One day when we went to court, I tried to slip the present Listenoisean king’s name into a conversation with some ladies and gentlemen, but they had never heard of him. I did not let this discourage me, however. Instead, I turned to the British king himself, who said, ‘Ah! You speak of good King Pellinore! He has been on a quest for many years, and I’m afraid we have had no news of him.’

“My spirit cried at this news, but I could not allow myself to give up on my plan. Be he alive or dead, I knew my only chance of escaping my misery was to find him. I needed to find a spell that would allow me to escape the sorcerer.

“I persevered with my nightly lessons. As I said, the spells were not compiled in any logical order, nor were they titled. I had to muddle through the entire spell to in order to understand what it did, and even then they sometimes yielded rather unexpected results. On the third night after my disappointment, I found a spell to shoot a bolt of lightning from my finger,

and I came close to burning down the library before I learned to control it. Now I can make them quite small. See?”

Nyneve demonstrated, and it was indeed no longer than her pinky finger.

“There were also spells that very nearly gave me away. One night I turned the entire room upside down, so that the bookshelves and all the furniture were on the ceiling. I had left the book containing that spell on the table, well out of my reach and had to use a rope to climb to the table so that I could find the spell to reverse it! And there were nights when I cried from frustration. It was only the thought of the wizard’s bony fingers crawling under my frock that made me press on.

“I learned a great many other spells on those nights I spent in the library, but none seemed to answer my purpose. I hoped I would come across something that would allow me to either elude or destroy the wizard. Though I knew either option would require as much cunning as magic, and that if any attempt I made to these ends was foiled, I would be even worse off than I was then.

“One night, I was almost at my wit’s end, looking for a spell to deliver me from this place. I kept coming across the same spells I had already done, and none of them inspired in me a way to escape. And then I came to the end of a book, and there was a spell scribbled on the back cover. Though I had never seen it, I recognized the words. It was the spell Merlyn had used to change his appearance!

“Now, I knew that turning into an old hag or a young child would not fool Merlyn. Yet, when I read the spell it seemed that I could, by changing a few words, turn myself into any living thing. The cautious thing to do, of course, would have been to turn myself into a rat or a bumblebee, so that I could escape the tower unseen; but I had been with the wizard for so many

moons, by that point, that I quite loathed him. I decided turn myself into something large and powerful, and snap the wizard in two with my bare hands before he had a chance to use any spell against me.

“I closed my eyes, and imagined the most frightening monster I could conjure: Like a man, but as tall as a mountain, and covered with hair from head to toe. I imagined sharp teeth, and ears so keen I would have no trouble hearing him scramble at my feet. I drew a breath, pronounced the words of the spell, and waited. When I opened my eyes again, I was still at the wizard’s desk, and still exactly as I was before. I tried changing the inflection of the final words, but still I remained a feeble young woman. It was puzzling, but as I said, not unprecedented that the spell I tried did not work. The sun would soon rise, however, and I had to return to the wizard’s chambers without successfully casting this spell.

“The next day, Merlyn remarked that I was an inattentive student. I had no patience for his lessons. I could already make a violet grow from my fingertip well enough, but I was distracted by thoughts of the spell I had not been able to teach myself. How had Merlyn done it?

“All day this problem preoccupied me, until Merlyn asked me if I was not unwell, and would rather postpone our trip to Camelot.

“‘No, I am quite well, my Lord,’ I assured him, lest he suspect I was unhappy, and then I allowed a tiny violet plant to emerge from under my fingernail, and cover the desk with its deep purple flowers.

“‘Bravo, my dear! You must show that to the new queen. I am sure she will be impressed if we tell her it is done by sleight of hand.’

“‘It was then that my eyes fell on the row of jars that lined the shelf above the desk, and an idea took root just as my little flowers had.’

“‘My darling,’ I began. ‘You know when we first met, and you doubted whether I could love an old man such as yourself?’

“‘Yes, my dear. And I would that I could undo those days, for I know now that you love every line on my ancient face.’

“‘Each line is a mark of your wisdom, my Lord, and no stripling could rival you for my heart.’

“‘My dear, think how wise you will be when you are half as old as me!’

“‘Will I live for so many years?’ I asked, though he had promised me many times that he would not let me die before his time had come.

“‘Whatever you desire you shall have.’

“‘I wish that I knew how to perform the spell you used to change your appearance. I never told you this, but though I was quite furious with you for deceiving me, I could not but be impressed with the skill of such a powerful sorcerer. Will you teach me how to perform this spell, my wise old wizard?’

“‘But why would my beautiful nymph want to change her appearance! It would be an outrage to change even a hair on your little golden head!’

“‘Oh, you are far too kind, my Lord. But I only want to *try* the spell, and then I will change myself back right away.’

“‘Ah! That is very advanced magic, my beauty! Perhaps one day I will show you, but you have much to learn still...’

“‘Ah, quite right.’ I sighed, although I had not expected him to reveal his secret to me.’
‘Well then, could *you* demonstrate the spell for me? It quite frightened me to see you change the

first time, and I would like to witness this impressive feat again now that I know I need not fear my grey-bearded old man.’

“‘Well! I suppose there is no harm in that,’ Merlyn replied, and I watched and listened attentively as he obliged me. When he had returned to his usual appearance, I clapped my hands together in admiration.

“‘Most impressive!’ I exclaimed. ‘Now, what if you were to turn yourself into something else. Something small, like a pebble?’

“‘Ah! That would require some calculations, for I have no ready spell to turn myself into an inanimate object. Spells are a bit like equations, and each side must balance. So if on the one hand, you have organic matter, and on the other you have inorganic matter, then where does the inorganic matter go? It leaves one with a metaphysical impossibility. Wizards have souls, and rocks do not. Therefore, if I were to become a rock, my soul would need to be floating somewhere above me, and where would it go? And if it was not in the rock, then how would the rock become a man again? Do you see?’

“‘I nodded as if I did not quite see, though I understood him perfectly. I had puzzled over this problem myself. I tried not to look disappointed, for my plan was to keep the rock in a jar, and then throw the jar at the bottom of the first lake I came to. Then I needn’t have bothered with the knight, whom, by that time, I feared really had perished on his quest.’

“‘What about a mouse?’ I asked, as one scampered across the floor. ‘I would be ever so impressed to see you turn into something so tiny!’

“‘If I could catch a mouse, dead or living, I could turn into one easily enough. Otherwise, I would require a different spell, for I would have to build matter rather than borrowing it. This spell requires flesh to become flesh.’

“‘Here! I can catch you one easily enough,’ I said, taking a jar from the shelf. ‘There were so many at home that I am almost as quick as a cat at it.’

“‘Ah-ah, my dear! That will have to wait another day, for we cannot have you sully your pretty gown when we are going to Camelot!’

“It seemed my plan had failed. I had begun to look forward to our Camelot excursions, for although many of the King’s courtiers were silly, shallow people, they were the only people I ever saw apart from Merlyn. I had grown quite melancholy by that time, without any companionship apart from his. I once thought to become a travelling performer, a singer or an acrobat like the ones who have wandered into our village from time to time, and here, at least, with Merlyn, I had a chance to perform magic. If I ever escaped him, I thought I might tour the country performing magic, as I did at Camelot. It would be a good life, don’t you agree?

“In any case, we performed for the King, and his new queen, who was the daughter of another, lesser, king, and like me much younger than her husband. She smiled gaily as she took her husband’s arm, but I wondered if she would not have liked to escape her fate. What life had she traded to be the queen of the most powerful man in the world?

“The first trick I was to perform was to pull a dove from my sleeve. There was no magic involved, of course. What a stupid trick it was! But it was a favourite of the lords and ladies of the court, and so it was the one we opened with. I stood before them, the dove nestled against my arm, but with a deep purple cape draped over it, no one could see her.

“Our eyes met, mine and the Queen’s, as the court watched in anticipation. She had hardly spoken a word all evening. She was younger than I, probably no older than fifteen. I felt the little heart pulsing against my arm. It was the dove that did the trick, really; they are intelligent birds, and have learned signals. I raised my arm with a glossy smile at the court. The

bird flew from my sleeve; it was supposed to fly into the audience, but I caught a-hold of it as it exited my sleeve. And I spoke the spell.

“The audience gasped, and applause erupted. What a wonderful trick! What a wonderful show! How clever that sorcerer was! I did not have time to watch the confusion that followed. I flew to the window, beating my wings as hard as I could until I could see the rooftops, and in the distance, a harbour and the sea beyond.

“I would not let myself look back to the castle, and I would not think about where I would fly. The inspiration had come to me in an instant, and I had not thought beyond fleeing the castle. Surely, Merlyn would turn into a hawk, or cause hail to fall from the sky or find some other way to stop me; but I flew over the rooftops of Camelot, through the market, without anything crossing my path. I wish I could have stopped there, and seen all that I had not been permitted to look at before, but I knew there was no time for that. I flew higher, and crossed the sea to the land beyond—and imagine my delight when I saw our own little village below!

“My new wings ached from flying so furiously. It is much more strenuous than our little songbirds make it look, and besides I needed to collect my thoughts. For the time being, I was free, but I knew that Merlyn would be after me soon enough. And I also knew that I could not remain a bird for very long. Already, my spine had begun to ache from being curved into such an unusual shape, and my feet hurt from hanging on to the branch. Looking about me as if Merlyn might be waiting with a net (and I suppose he might have been), I spoke the words of the spell again and returned to my regular form. I sat on the bough of the tree for a long time, wondering what I should do, but also simply enjoying the solitude I had not felt for more moons than I could count. I watched the sun set and rise on that perch, and still I had no idea where to go. And then below me, I heard the sound of clomping hooves, and saw a magnificent stallion riding through

the forest. Now this was unusual enough a sight for the woods around our poor village, but more remarkable still were the riders on that swift steed. One was a man of clearly noble blood, for though he was unshaved and a bit dishevelled, he wore garments of the finest cloth, and carried armour as well-crafted as that of the knights of Camelot. There was a damsel with him, who was not nearly so well dressed, and when they passed under the branch, I nearly fell from the shock of seeing that *you* were the companion of the noble knight!

“I called out to you, but of course you were galloping away at such a speed that you never would have heard me. Far too worn out to attempt another spell, I climbed down the tree, retracing the horse’s hoof prints. I found your little hut quite empty, with a warm fire still burning in the hearth.

“I could think of no better place to seek shelter and protection than in the home of my beloved sister.”

Chapter 19

“You know the rest, dear sister. When I realized who your companion was, I was faced with a difficult choice. You do not know how heavy my heart has been since that night. It chagrined me to betray you and then to not be able to confide in you; but I knew when the needlepoint frame reappeared the morning after I came here, that he was sending me a sign. He would not have let me be if I had not...”

She waited for Vivienne to cut her off, to tell her that of course she understood that after everything she had been through she hadn't had a choice. In truth, Vivienne did not know what to make of her tale. At last, she said, “You should rest, my sister. We will speak of this some more tomorrow.”

Her conscience eased, Nyneve slept more soundly than she had since the night she followed Merlyn down the well.

Naturally, much of her story was untrue. You, who have listened from the beginning will know that I loved Nyneve, and that I would not have kept her as my prisoner. It is true that I doted on her, and that is why I was always by her side. I was enchanted by her! But I did not deceive her, and she was always free to go whenever she wished. I know that Vivienne, even now, has her doubts about this—but she does not possess my omniscience. She cannot know how I loved Nyneve, how even though I knew her to be cruel, unfeeling, and dangerous. I preferred to harm myself than to harm her.

Vivienne sat up in her bed, every breath as painful as if a sword had pierced her heart. Nyneve snored quietly beside her.

Pellinore had not wanted the pelt. She had been baffled by his reaction, then, but now she understood perfectly why he had recoiled from it. It was as Merlyn had said. Nynve had driven Pellinore away—and she had helped her to do so.

Nynve's plan unfolded in her mind with perfect clarity as Vivienne remembered her insistence that they journey to the father's family to have her child. To *Listenoise*! She would insist the child should be raised at Listenoise, and she could not disagree—a knight could hardly be raised by peasants, and Pellinore's heir would be no ordinary knight. He would need training that he could only receive in Listenoise.

But she knew Nynve was not simply looking out for the future of Pellinore's line. Nynve would introduce herself, bashfully, as the expectant mother of Pellinore's child, and they would take her in. Poor thing! To have come all this way...And they would send out messengers for Pellinore. Naturally, he would do the honourable thing and marry Nynve. Being a doting mother she would nurse the child for as long as she could. Perhaps until she found a way to keep Pellinore at home and have another child by him. Who could say how long she would go on shielding herself behind Pellinore and his children?

In her imagination, Vivienne had built a life for herself and Pellinore at Listenoise. She imagined rocking her children to sleep in a bassinette overlooking the courtyard. The walls would be covered with tapestries depicting the feats of Listenoisean kings, and when the children were old enough she would tell them stories of all the brave men who had protected the land from Glatisant. And then, one day, she would hear the clattering of Thunderswift's hooves approaching, and trumpets would sound at their arrival. Her own knight had slain the beast at last! And she would run to him, and he would lift her up and swing her around until she was quite giddy, and kiss her, and tell her he had done it for her, because he could not bear to be

away from her any longer. And there would be a grand feast, and the king and queen Nynve had spoken of, and all the ladies and gentlemen of the court (whom Vivienne was certain were far more pleasant than Nynve had described) would be invited, and they would wear garments of the finest silk, and jewels that shone like stars, and dance from sunset until sunrise.

Now it seemed this would never be. Nynve had usurped her. It was not that Vivienne did not pity her sister—there was hardly any lady on the Earth who had a more generous and forgiving spirit than Vivienne—but she saw no end to her own misery—or to Pellinore’s—while Nynve was in their lives.

Vivienne was waiting for me at the well the next day. A pitiable sight, her face was ravaged with tears. She had been awake all night. Indeed, she had spent the last hours before sunrise waiting for me there.

“Will Pellinore ever know happiness with Nynve?”

“There is no woman he despises more than she,” I answered truthfully.

“And if she returns to you, will I have the happiness that I desire?”

Those pleading eyes were so like Nynve’s on our first night together! Vivienne’s face so resembled hers that I could not but speak the truth to her. “You will never have the happiness you desire with King Pellinore.” Poor Vivienne! This was more than she could support. Her knees buckled, and she fell weeping at my feet. How well I knew her misery!

If I had been a younger man, perhaps I would have crouched in the grass with her. Instead, I held her hand, gently guiding her up. I held her while she cried. When she was calmer, we sat together on the brick wall of the well.

“Why must I be deprived of the only thing I ever wished for? Why does Nynaeve, who is loved by all men and scorns their love—why should she have the life that is rightfully mine?”

“Why is it rightfully yours, Vivienne?”

“Why should it not be, when Pellinore is my knight and I am his Lady? Is that not our destiny?”

I put my arm around poor Vivienne’s shoulders. How I would have liked to let her go on believing in fair and happy endings! “Vivienne,” I said, and I told her the story of two brothers who stumbled upon a hollowed out tree stump filled with gold coins. The brothers, who were quite destitute, were overjoyed to see the treasure. “Now we will be able to provide for our families!” they exclaimed. But as they reached for the treasure, a tiny voice shouted:

“Stop! Please, sirs, do not abscond with this treasure! The ogres who live on the other side of these woods have entrusted my people with it, and if anything should happen to it, they will pepper their stew with our bones!”

Though the owner of the voice was no taller than the brothers’ thumbs, they decided to oblige him, and in return he took them to the ogres’ castle and gave them fine food and fine beds to sleep in for the night, and more food to take back to their families. Vivienne settled her head against my shoulder, closing her eyes as I listed all the marvelous luxuries the brothers enjoyed that night. Then I told her how the younger brother woke up the next morning to find the elder one gone, along with his satchel. He then discovered that the tiny people had all fled the castle. Troubled though he was, the younger brother had no choice but to set off for his home by himself, hoping to find his brother along the way.

“What had become of the elder brother?” Vivienne asked, lifting her head in genuine concern.

“Well, Vivienne, when the younger brother passed the tree stump where they had met the tiny man, he was troubled to find bread and cheese and little tarts like the ones in his own satchel strewn over the ground. At first, he feared his brother had been attacked, but saw that the stump had been emptied, and he understood then what had transpired.”

“How selfish of him after the tiny people showed them such kindness! Did they manage to escape? Did the younger brother have to rescue them from the ogre?”

“I do not know what became of the tiny people, and it did not occur to the younger brother to look for them. He journeyed back to his village with his head hung so low that his nose very nearly touched the ground. He evenly divided up the food he carried with him between his family and his brother’s, and they ate fairly well for a day. Then they eked out the leftover food for as long as they could. They ate very sparsely until the thaw. The elder brother never returned to the village. It was said that he had used the gold coins to buy a castle and a plot of land, which he divided up amongst many peasants. Realizing the peasants would work harder for a kind master, he repaid them handsomely for their labours. But he never spoke to his family again.

“And what of the younger brother? Did he become a prince? Or perhaps he found another treasure in the woods and became even more prosperous than his brother?”

“I wish I could say that it was so. He did his utmost to feed the two families, but because they were so many they often went hungry. He worked hard, and became cross so often that his family soon learned to fear him. At night, when his stomach growled, he would often curse himself for not having the courage to take the coins as his brother had.”

“Surely that cannot be the end of it?” Vivienne exclaimed.

And when I told her it was, she shook her head in disgust and shrank away from me.

“Did it not please you?”

The tale disturbed her more than she cared to admit. She rose, and stood over the well, as she had so many moons ago when we first met, as had her sister the night she traveled through the well in pursuit of her own happiness. Their paths had been tangled together, either by chance or by some perverse twist of fate; but she did not yet understand the sad tale’s meaning.

“But there was no hero,” she said at last, and she would not look at me. “All good stories have a hero.”

Chapter 20

That night, Vivienne fell asleep thinking about the night her sister came to her home. *Each of us has a destiny to follow*, she said. The image her sister stitched the morning after she arrived followed her into her dreams: the lady with the gold-threaded hair, standing over the kneeling knight. She had always known that Nyneve was destined for greatness. Everyone who knew her knew that she was extraordinary. They knew it by the way she carried herself, by the way all eyes were drawn to her, but above all, Vivienne knew it because Nyneve never let anyone stand in her way.

The next day, Vivienne returned to the well. She looked better rested than she had the day before, but still heavy with sorrow. It was clear she was still troubled by my tale.

“In every other story I have heard, the hero is good, and his goodness makes him happy; or he is foolish and he is punished for his foolishness.”

“And I did not follow the convention?”

“I thought the elder brother was being rewarded for his wickedness, as the younger was punished for his goodness. But you did not say that the elder brother was happy, only that he was no longer poor.”

“Do you not think he was happy?”

“I could not be happy, knowing I had caused so much suffering to others.”

“What would make you happy, Vivienne?”

“Are you going to pretend this is a wishing well again, sir?”

I smiled beneath my beard. “I will not insult your intelligence.” She could never equal her sister for wit, but still she was a sharp little dagger!

“You know the one thing that would make me happy, and you have told me that I will never be with my beloved.”

“You will never be with him the way you imagined you would be; but this is the hard lesson that all ladies who love knights must learn. Pellinore, like his father before him, and *his* father before him, and his father’s father’s father’s father before him, was nursed with the milk of legends. The walls of Listenoise are draped with likenesses of his ancestors; every cup he drank from and every dish he ate from bore his family crest, an image of the monster they had pledged to destroy. He heard the legends of King Pellas long before he ever met the man. While the boys of your village learned to swing an axe and plough a field, Pellinore learned to duck a charging knight’s javelin, and how to shoot an arrow at a moving target across a wooded meadow.

“Pellinore was twelve years old when he met his father. Pellinore told you the story of Black Mountain, did he not? It was when his father arrived home from that misadventure that they finally met, and by then King Pellas was a broken man. He came home raving about wood sprites and demon children, and how he had caught the beast at last. He had let it slip from his mind, you see, that it was only a mountain lion he had caught. He wanted so desperately to believe that his quest was over.

“Luckily he was brought back to Listenoise by some discreet people of that village, who were of course indebted to Pellas for ridding them of the man-eating beast that had plagued their village. He came back wrapped in that awful lion skin—he had insisted on having the lion

skinned, insisted on having his trophy—and they had to wait until the Listenoiseans were in church to bring him, for he would not stop crying: ‘Sound the trumpets! Sound the trumpets!’

“Pellinore never knew any of this. His mother, who was a discreet woman, told the servants that their King was very ill and was not to be disturbed. She served him herself, bringing him bowls of stew that he would hurl across the room, and whatever alcohol she could find—for she found that when he did not have it, he really did become ill. In her heart of hearts, the Queen hoped he would destroy himself before he brought disgrace to her and to their people. But King Pellas was a strong man, and while the greater part of him seemed intent on destroying himself, in the recesses of his mind he remembered what had been instilled in him since he was a boy. The storm passed; after a fortnight he was strong enough to sit up in bed to take his stew. And one day, he announced that he would be taking young Pellinore on his quest.

“King Pellas was still somewhat peculiar. He insisted that the boy wear the lion skin when they departed, and ordered the villagers to line the streets as they went and throw flower petals as if they were watching a coronation. But the people of Listenoise did not dwell on this, and they soon forgot the King again, though they hoped young Pellinore would be safe and not pick up too many of his father’s bad habits.

“Once Pellinore got over his awe of his father, he thought it great fun to travel alongside him. He rode his first stallion on that journey: a black beast, two hands too tall for him and hardly tamed. Pellinore adored him. The boy had learned the language of horses from hours spent in the barn. He knew more of them than half the stable-hands, and this was one of several horses that only he knew how to handle.

“This skill of his was what helped him feel easy with his father, for as awesome as Pellas seemed to him, it was plain that he admired the way his son handled Firebrand (for Firebrand

was the horse's name). And once he got over his shyness, he was able to ask Pellas the many questions that had occurred to him over the years when he heard tales of his adventures

“And so the days passed; Pellinore would pose a question, such as, ‘How did you manage to stay on Glatisant when she was charging through the forest in Cerniw?’ and King Pellas would answer his questions as well as he could. When they were fortunate enough to come upon a church or a castle, they would accept hospitality from whoever dwelt there; and sometimes they would spend weeks dining and drinking until all hours of the night, then go on hunting parties the next day. At first, Pellinore was impatient to return to their quest, for he thought two Listenoiseans would surely be able to best her. Yet he soon learned not to pester his father lest he grew cross with him. King Pellas, he learned, hated to be questioned. This was only natural, Pellinore thought, for his father was a seasoned knight, and he did not need a twelve year old boy to tell him how to catch the prey he had been after since he was a boy himself.

“Pellinore also learned to enjoy these nights of comfort, for they gave the father and son a much needed reprieve from the days and weeks spent in the wild country once these often fruitless ventures lost their lustre. The weather was gloomy that year, and when they took shelter outside, the rain sometimes leaked through their armour until their very bones trembled from the cold. It often seemed to Pellinore that they wandered aimlessly. He learned that this was the nature of the quest, for Pellas would halt and point to the ground. ‘Look, boy! We have her!’ he'd say, showing Pellinore a hoof mark in the mud, or a dried pile of dung. And then they would be off in a new direction, often before they had even bid farewell to their host.

“One day, King Pellas heard of a tournament, and he decided to show his son his skill. They rode along, Pellinore's mind full of the prospect of seeing real jousting knights, for there had been no occasion for a tournament at Listenoise since before Pellinore was born. Pellas

seemed to be in good spirits that day, and as they rode along he fed his son all kinds of gossip about the other knights who would be jousting that day. He told him of Sir Grummore, who grew old and stupid, and his two young sons, who were younger and stupider than he. He told him about the rivalry between Sir Jerome de Bon-Coeur—who needed to be nimble with his twiggy limbs, because whomever got hold of him could easily snap them in two—and Sir Bruce the Fierce, who was as strong as an ogre, and as clumsy as one too. He told him about Sir Ryan the Wrathful who flew into a rage every time he lost a tournament, and because he was so ungracious was rarely invited to joust at all, and Sir Mark, who was a weak fighter but—quite by accident—had saved the king’s life on two occasions and had been given a dukedom as recompense. Pellinore was certain from his father’s description of these men that he was braver and mightier than all of them combined, and he relished the thought of seeing him ride out on to the grounds with his peacock feather flowing from his helm, and the glinting gold and blue beast on his shield.

“By that time, they had been on their quest for so long without ever encountering Glatissant that Pellinore had nearly forgotten that the gold and blue creature on his father’s shield existed. But as they cantered along toward the castle where the tournament was to be held, King Pellas suddenly pulled his horse to a halt. Pellinore was cantering closer behind his father than was really prudent, and had to use all his might on the reins for his horse to stop in time.

“Pellinore opened his mouth to ask what the matter was, but his father’s glare silenced him. He pointed into the branches, and Pellinore heard the rustle of grass being pushed aside as someone—something—crawled through it. Without a sound, he dismounted, and walked toward the noise. It seemed to be moving away from them, whether it was the beast or not, and he had never seen his father move as deftly as he did when he followed it into the trees. Pellinore swung

his leg over to follow him. His heart pounded at the prospect of finally coming face to face with his quest!”

I paused, and took some water from the well. When I had finished, Vivienne, who was leaning against the wall of the well, looking up at me expectantly. “Well, what happened then?”

“How well do you recall the scene I showed you of Pellinore on his quest?”

“Very well,” she said.

“What sound did the beast make?”

Vivienne tried to recall. She closed her eyes, and summoned the sounds from that moment. “I heard Thunderswift’s gallop first before they appeared; then Thunderswift slipped on the ice, and he grunted as Pellinore pulled the reins, and Pellinore sucked in his breath...and then Pellinore said, ‘Ride on Thunderswift! She must have passed this way!’...and when they passed they panted, both together... the beast must have been quite a distance ahead of them.”

“And yet we heard Thunderswift’s galloping from several miles away. Is it not strange, then, that such a large beast as Glatissant would make no noise at all?” I allowed her to contemplate this as I continued my story.

“Pellinore leaped from his horse, ready to follow his father; but Pellas put his hand out and shook his head, signaling for the boy to wait with the horses. Pellinore was disappointed, but he knew better than to defy his father. He stood by the horses, watching the woods swallow up the older knight; and he waited.

“The sun had been high in the sky when Pellas had disappeared into the trees. Pellinore watched it set, but still his father did not return. Perhaps it was a test of his knightly worth, he thought. His father wanted to see how long he could wait, how well he would keep his word. But when night fell, and his father still did not return, Pellinore became frightened for him. He knew

his father would be angry at him for doubting him, but perhaps he was in real trouble. He might have caught the beast, as he had at Cerniw, and been carried away to God-only-knew-where.

“Pellinore waited in the forest until dawn. He would not sit down, for fear that his father would come back and find him slumbering. He recited the names of all the swords he knew, and then all the types of spears and javelins and shields and arrows and knives, to keep himself from nodding off; once or twice he nearly fell asleep leaning against Firebrand’s back, but then the horse stepped away, and he would shake himself awake.

“In the morning, when King Pellas still had not returned, Pellinore set out through the forest after him, and when he did not find him, he rode to the castle where the tournament was being held to beg for assistance.

““Oh you poor boy!’ The lady of the castle exclaimed when she saw Young Pellinore. It had been many weeks since they had slept indoors, and the boy looked quite thin and bedraggled by that time. Pellinore tried to insist that he must go back to the woods lest his father come looking for him and finding him missing, but the lady quite firmly ordered him into a bath, and her own servants were dragging him away, still crying that he must not abandon his father on their quest, when two knights who had heard the commotion approached.

“The good and noble knights who heard his cry came over to see what the matter was, and when they heard, one ah’d in recognition. ‘Your father and I were good friends in our younger days,’ he told him. Pellinore was surprised to learn that this was Sir Mark, whom his father had spoken so ill of the afternoon before. ‘We will seek him out,’ Sir Mark said. ‘The woods west of here, you say?’ And they were galloping off in that direction before Pellinore had quite finished his bath. The good lady tried to coax some food into the boy, but he would not eat

until he heard news of his father. He sat between the Queen and King at the tournament with his hands folded in his lap, motionless except when he clapped obediently at the end of each bout.

“The castle where the tournament was being held was halfway up a mountain, overlooking an enormous waterfall. Sir Mark and his companion, whose name was Sir Connor Wildfire, followed the water down the hill and then traveled West through the woods until the rocks were too steep to climb; and then they headed West through the woods, traveling in wide circles through the trees to be sure they did not miss some trace of their missing fellow.

Sir Connor Wildfire had only heard tales of King Pellas and his ancient quest, and he spoke of him with admiration. ‘Did you hear of how he wrestled a mountain lion in Black Mountain, not two winters ago? I hope that I will have that much strength when my hair turns grey!’

“Sir Mark was more reserved. ‘I would be content with a quiet life at his age,’ he said.

“Sir Connor laughed; but soon they grew more sombre, for they traveled further and further down the slope without seeing any sign of King Pellas. There was hardly any daylight left by that time, and they resolved to continue their search the following day; but before they turned back, the two knights decided to climb down the rocky ledge to take some water from the stream.

“They sat on a rock, high enough out of the water that they could let the cold water rush over their feet without fear of being swept away by the current. It was cool and pleasant there, for the trees bowed over the stream, sheltering them from the hot sun, and the two knights had nearly forgotten the purpose of their quest when Sir Connor caught sight of something rushing along with the current: a jeweled scabbard, which when they fished it out of the water, they saw bore the distinctive Listenoisean crest.

“They waded against the current, taking care to stay at the shallow edge of the water, until they came to a recess in the rock, a sort of natural cave elevated from the stream. They could see a man lying, face down in the entrance.

“Sir Mark did not at first comprehend what had happened. He sputtered with laughter. ‘That old drunkard! We missed the tournament for him, and meanwhile, he’s been here dozing! Pellas! You’ve lost your—’

“But as they approached, they realized the old knight was not slumbering. He was bent over himself in an awkward position, lying in a black puddle; and when they lifted him, they saw his own sword was buried in his abdomen, almost up to the hilt.

“Poor Sir Connor could only heave into the stream as the elder knight removed the sword and cleaned it off as best he could. They buried him in the woods; taking turns to stand watch, lest someone happened upon them. And they swore they would never let Pellinore hear the tale of how his father had ended his life. The story they invented was far more exciting than this one, but Sir Connor Wildfire tells it better than I ever could, for it is he who made it up to tell young Pellinore when they presented him with his father’s sword.”

Chapter 21

Vivienne understood that her knight, who had rescued her not once but twice in the brief time they had known each other, was on an impossible quest. She thanked God for his faith and his courage, for surely he would have despaired long ago if he even suspected that *she* was not real.

When she returned to the hut, she announced to Nyneve that she had met an old woman in the village who would take her to Listenoise in her cart. Nyneve was taken aback by this, but she was so relieved that they would make it to Listenoise after all that she squealed and kissed her sister and thanked her and kissed her again.

“Oh, thank you sister! Now Pellinore’s heir will receive the training he needs to carry on his quest. And I will be safe for as long as I—”

“We will set off at daybreak,” Vivienne said, doing her best to look pleased, though Nyneve’s excitement over entrapping *her* beloved sickened her.

“Then you will come with me, Vivienne?”

Vivienne sighed, allowing the merest shadow of sadness to pass over her face. “I will accompany you for the first part of your journey, and then I will leave you.”

“I will be glad to have your company a little longer, my sister. It may be a long time before we meet again.”

Vivienne looked at her sharply. “Why do you say that?”

“Oh! Well, you are welcome to visit me at Listenoise, of course. I only thought you might not want to stay there after...” Nyneve trailed off lamely, and Vivienne had to bite back a sarcastic reply; but she knew there was no sense in arguing with her sister on the eve of their last day together.

The old woman and her cart were certainly a peculiar sight, Nyneve thought. It was as if all the colour had been drained out of them, for the cart was made of grey splintered wood, and an old grey mare, who looked far too weary to be pulling the load, trudged along before it. Even the woman who drove the cart was entirely grey: she wore sooty gloves, and a grey woolen dress, and a grey apron, and grey stockings. Even her wiry hair, poking out from her scarf, was grey, and despite the warm weather she remained bundled up to her ears in a grey shawl.

If Nyneve had not been so uncomfortable from the weight of her enormous belly, (for by that time she was very nearly as wide as she was tall,) she might have snickered at the peculiar old lady. She quietly accepted Vivienne's arm to steady herself as she climbed into the cart, and then leaned back against her sister with her eyes closed, as Vivienne braided her hair.

The mare lumbered through the woods, and it was a mercy she did not move more quickly. As it was, Nyneve felt every bump they rolled over. Once she was jostled toward the front of the cart, and fell on the old lady's back. The old lady screamed out in pain and shrank away from Nyneve as if she had splashed hot water on her. The mare was so startled by this commotion that she stopped in the forest, and the old lady had to descend the cart and feed her a sugar cube to make her walk again.

"I am sorry, dears! I'm afraid she is rather easily startled," she explained, as if it was the mare who had caused the commotion.

Their companion certainly was peculiar, but once they got out of the woods and on to a clear path, she was quite jolly, and diverted the sisters with stories of her own childhood, in another village in the mountain regions, where snow sometimes blanketed the land for weeks at a

time, and the villagers would huddle around hearths and tell each other stories to divert themselves from the gnawing hunger in their bellies.

She told them the story of two boys she once knew, who were brothers with many children to feed. The two brothers went into the woods one day, searching in vain for some sustenance for their families, and they came across a tree filled with gold coins. The elder brother was about to take a handful of these coins, when a tiny voice shouted...

But you have already heard this story, and if you had not guessed it already, now you know that I was the old woman driving the cart. The story was as much to distract me from my own discomfort as it was to take her mind off hers. Her beauty brought tears to my eyes. Oh, what I would have given to have traded places with Vivienne! To be running my hands through those silken tresses, to feel that pretty little head resting on my knee. My gloves were moist with sweat, so great was my desire to throw them off and put my hands on her. But when she fell on me, my skin burned through four layers of wool, reminding me that I had best keep away if I was ever to enjoy her flesh again.

When we came to the end of the story, Nyneve exclaimed, "What a wonderful story!"

Vivienne stared at her in surprise. "What is wonderful about it? Is it not tragic?"

"In most stories the poorest characters are made more virtuous by their poverty, and then they are rewarded for their virtue with wealth, which makes them more virtuous still. I never understood how this could be—if poverty encourages virtue, then would not all wealthy people be wicked, and all poor people be good?"

Vivienne said she supposed that would be the case.

“And yet, in this story, we have two brothers who are both poor: one is a virtuous fool, who becomes more wicked when he grows poorer. The other behaves wickedly in the pursuit of happiness, and when his wickedness is rewarded with wealth he is both wise and virtuous.”

“But did it not bother you that the younger brother’s noble sacrifice went unrewarded? Surely you were as surprised as I that he was not the hero of the story?” Vivienne blushed, forgetting her sister thought she was hearing the story for the first time. She turned to me. “And what is your interpretation, Madam?”

I winked at the two girls, genuinely enjoying the lively debate. “I am always interested to see how others will react to this story. One lady I told it to claimed that the tiny man must be the hero, and another swore it was the older brother’s wife. Every listener seems to think the he who is most like himself is the hero. Shall I tell you another story?”

“Yes!” they both exclaimed at once. And if I had not known what lay ahead, I might have thought that all was forgiven between the two sisters. But once or twice through her laughter, I caught Vivienne’s wistful look, and I understood: she was saying goodbye. Vivienne still loved Pellinore, and she would sacrifice much for his happiness. She was indeed a noble and foolish creature; but I know now she was better than I, for I was a very selfish old fool.

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We rode until long after dark, leaving behind roads for fields. I let the girls sleep, Nyneve’s head still resting on Vivienne’s lap, while Vivienne’s own head dropped forward. How lovely they looked together, each breathing softly. Nyneve’s parted lips so slightly, like a crocus peeking out from the snow. Gingerly, I edged over to their side of the cart and put my face above hers, close enough to feel her breath enter my mouth. I closed my eyes and imagined her lips coming closer to mine.

And then the cart hit a bump, jolting me forward. I fell over her, feeling the impression of her face on my bosom for only a moment before the burning started. I cried out as if she had pressed a hot iron to my chest. She blinked sleepily at me.

“Madam? Is everything all right?”

“It is nothing,” I managed to say, though my eyes watered with pain and I had to ball up my fist to stop myself from pressing my hand to the burn. Later, when I was alone, I would lift my dress before the looking glass. Her face was seared into my skin, and though the burn faded to a shimmering white, it remained even after I returned to my original form. “You were talking in your sleep. I only wanted to comfort you.”

“Oh, that is so kind of you, Madam. Sometimes I have nightmares, you see. About a man who—”

“No!” Vivienne stirred at my outburst. I did my best to compose myself. “You should not speak of distressing things, my dear. It is not healthy for your unborn child to experience so much fear.”

“Ah, yes, you are probably right. I will try to think soothing thoughts.”

“Can you not sleep, Nyneve?” Vivienne asked, for she was properly awake by that time.

“No, my sister. I felt a terrible presence—something looming over me in my sleep, as I do sometimes, since—since—”

“Hush, Nyneve! You must not distress yourself. It is only natural to be frightened in your state. Vivienne, my dear, will you find the little flask in my pack and give it to your sister?”

And Vivienne found the tiny flask for Nyneve.

“This potion was taught to me by my own mother, and when my daughters were with child I gave it to them as well. It will clear your mind of any trouble so that you can sleep soundly.”

Almost as soon as the flask touched Nyneve’s lips her muscles loosened. She leaned back against her sister, closing her eyes. “Madam?” She asked, and her voice seemed to come from far away. “Did you sing to your daughters?”

“Why yes, my dear! There is no more beautiful voice to a child than that of her own mother’s.”

“Yes...that must be...I do not remember my mother singing...Did she sing to us, Vivienne?” It was a beautiful sight to see Nyneve curled up with her head on Vivienne’s lap. If it was not for that cursed spell, I would have kissed the top of her golden head before she drifted off to sleep.

“I do not recall,” Vivienne said. “I do remember you singing to me.”

“Your child will sleep so peacefully. As I did when you—er, when my mother sang to me.”

Nyneve sighed contentedly as her mind started to drift away into the night. I too, drifted, recalling the pleasant days I had spent sitting with her by the coy pond, transported by her mellifluous voice.

“Will you sing to me?” she asked. She was on the verge of sleeping, then, lulled by the gentle rocking of the cart

“Yes, of course Poppet. I will sing—”

Her eyes opened in a flash. “What did you call me?”

I crinkled my brow, looking at Vivienne as if Nyneve's reaction was puzzling to me. "Poppet is what I called my own daughters. But I will not say it again if it upsets you. Now lie your head back down—"

But Nyneve had vanished, and Vivienne started at the fat rabbit sitting beside her. Even I was amazed, for this was magic beyond the spells in my books. Truly, Nyneve was a prodigy! But I had no time to dwell on this as the rabbit leapt over Vivienne's lap and out of the moving cart.

I pulled the reins back so sharply that my poor mare was nearly pulled back, and turned toward the fleeing rabbit. I raised my hand to hurl a freezing spell at her, but as soon as my magic reached her, my hand burned as if I had put it in a cauldron of boiling water. Curse my spell!

One of her hind legs dragged a little, but still the rabbit ran. Vivienne would need to do it.

"Get her!" I yelled, for Nyneve's white tail had already disappeared into the tall grass, headed for the thicket beyond. Vivienne only looked back at me with her mouth open, as if she was too much of an imbecile to comprehend what was being asked of her.

"She's escaping!"

"But per—perhaps it is better this way. If she really is afraid of you—"

"Afraid of me? You do not know what she will do to me, and still I love her! I will give her everything, for a picosecond of pleasure in this interminable life of mine! I thought *you* would understand that."

"But she is my sister..."

"Our bargain is made." Poor girl, I should have been patient with her, but my heart was full of terror as I watched my love slip away from me. I could not let her go, not yet. I aimed a

bolt of lightning at Vivienne's feet. She jumped, but I would not be moved by the fear in her eyes. Let her think me a tyrant! "Go!"

She followed the rabbit through the grass and into the trees. I waved my hand over the cart, watching the grey drain from the splintered wood, from my frock, and from the grey mare, until we had all faded into the night.

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Vivienne ran until she could no longer see the cart through the trees, (until she thought I could not see her). And then she crouched in the brush, her heart pulsing, pulling the air into her chest with sharp shallow breaths. By God and Lady Fortune, she thought. What had she done? What would she do?

And then she heard a rustling in the brambles, and when she went over, a rabbit, round with the young inside her, was trying to scrape a hole in the rocky ground. She looked up at Vivienne with brown glassy eyes, her whole body trembling.

"Nyneve," Vivienne said, kneeling over the roots to stroke the rabbit's ears. "It's all right, Nyneve. It's only me."

The rabbit's neck and limbs stretched out until they were as long as a human's, and then they retracted; she lay on her side, too weary and addled to turn back to her original form. She allowed Vivienne to pick her up, holding her to her chest.

"It's all right, Nyneve. Now go to sleep." She stroked the rabbit until its heart beat more slowly against hers. She held her as she would hold a newborn babe. I am holding Pellinore's child, she thought, and it saddened her to realize that she would never get to hold him after he was born.

The black shape of a man stood in the clearing, and as it came toward her its black robe turned deep purple, and then, line by line, his grey beard.

I had conjured a cage, with a little wooden house for her to sleep in. Vivienne glared at me, but she did not say a word as she placed the rabbit on a heap of hay inside its little hutch. The wire lid fused shut when she closed the lid. Nyneve would not be able to escape her tiny prison. Vivienne peered grimly through the wires, but her eyes were dry.

“Do you repent our bargain, Vivienne?” I asked.

“What does it matter? The bargain is made.”

“The bargain is made,” I agreed.

Vivienne watched the cage fade into the leaves on the ground, and the bark of the tree behind it. “If I could undo this—”

“You would have forsaken Pellinore?”

“No, I could not have let her go to Listenoise, knowing the misery she would have brought him. My poor knight! He has already suffered so much.”

But this was not a night for dwelling, for we had far to go still. Taking care to step over the cage, I walked toward the center of the forest.

Vivienne followed. “You will be kind to her, will you not?”

“I love her,” I replied, but Vivienne did not look any less distressed.

We walked into the thickest part of the woods, and then the ground inclined, and as it got steeper, the trees dispersed, and the soft grass gave way a hard rock. By that time, the black of night had faded into a grey dawn. The air grew colder as we climbed, and the mist was so thick that soon we could not see more than an arm’s length before or below us. We came to a place

where path narrowed, and we hugged the wall of the rock as we passed. Vivienne gasped in recognition.

“You know this place,” I said.

“It is the place you showed me, with King Pellinore! Is he still here?”

“Not far off.”

We walked on in silence, for it was a difficult climb and we were both troubled by our own thoughts.

“Nyneve will be happy with you in time, will she not?” Vivienne asked at last. Her pleading tone angered me. It was I who suffered. But of course, Vivienne would not see that; Nyneve had only told her own story, and I knew it had taken courage for Vivienne to do what she had done—and what she would do—for Pellinore.

“I will teach her all my magic. Not all at once; I will try to dole out the spells at a leisurely pace, but the longer we are together, the more she will demand of me, until there is nothing left. Her making will be my undoing.”

“And what of me? What will be my undoing?”

“You have been given the luxury of choosing your own fate, Vivienne. Few of us are so fortunate.”

“It is not quite what I would have chosen.”

“Do you regret our bargain?”

“No,” she sighed.

We stopped, at last, at the mouth of a cave. “Come.”

She hesitated.

“There is nothing to fear. I assure you the cave is vacant. Few creatures are able to live in this place.”

Soon we were enveloped in darkness, feeling our way along the walls until we were in the bowels of that place.

“Are you ready?”

Again, she hesitated. “I suppose there is no other way?”

“It is as Pellinore told you: every Listenoisean king has devoted his life to pursuing her. Their every thought, their every breath—”

“I want to be with him. I want to be in his heart and mind, as he is in mine. If this is the only way...I am ready.”

“All right.” I took a few steps back, cracking the joints of my fingers. There would need to be some distance between us. I took a deep breath, summoning the ancient words of the spell.

“Will it hurt?”

“No.” I tried not to show my impatience. “But we should begin soon, so that I can return to Nynveve before she awakens.”

I inhaled deeply, summoning all my strength.

“But, sir, one last thing. When I die—I mean, when he—will you tell my story?”

“Tell your story?”

“As you did Pellas’. It is only...I will not be able to speak, and I would like for others to understand what I did for him when I...”

“Yes. I will tell your story.” I did not know what I had promised. I would have promised anything, so anxious was I to return to Nynveve. “Are you ready?”

She hesitated once more, and I heard her suck in her breath. “Yes,” she said at last.

I spoke the ancient words, and the magic flowed from my finger.

“Wait! I—” but I never knew what it was she wanted to say, for her tongue stretched until it rolled out of her mouth, and the ends forked apart. Her scream dissolved into a hiss, her jaw cracked, and her teeth grew like a row of yellow spears in her mouth; and then one by one with a terrible pop her vertebra spread apart. Her neck wobbled above me, so long her head hit the wall of the cave and then looped back down toward the ground. Her hiss turned into a terrible cry that bounced against the cave walls; she rubbed her cheeks against the rock until great flakes of skin fell away from her face revealing patches of scaly blue. Her eyes sank back in her head; her irises blended into the whites and her pupils shrank into tiny black points.

Next, her chest and her arms widened until her dress tore; sinewy muscles rippled over her torso, and her arms were so long they dragged on the ground. Her fingers fused into two hard black shells, and when she pawed the ground, I saw a single black claw at each heel. She toppled forward, almost treading on me, as her legs broadened into wide golden hindquarters; but then her tail curled out behind her, and she found her footing as black spots speckled her back. Last of all, as she leaned back on her haunches, silver claws sprang, sharp as knives, from her toes.

And there she stood, the legendary Glatissant, thrice as tall as a stallion, and as terrible as she had been in the imagination of every Listenoisean King.