

Mandra

by Chris Slusser

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He saw red out of the corner of his eye and calmly looked toward it. His breath fogged the air, but when it cleared, he realized what he was looking at. It was a form, lying 20 feet away in the snow at the base of a tree. He ran over to it.

It was a girl, maybe twenty years old. She was unconscious. There was a red scarf wrapped around her head. Her blond hair was coming out from under it in messy strands. He kneeled down and pulled off his glove to touch her cheek. She was alive.

The man quickly got to his feet and ran through the trees. "Sire!"

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She walked in the garden thoughtfully. It was late at night, but she was too preoccupied to sleep. She had a lot to think about. Actually, the trouble was that she couldn't find much of anything to think about. Her memory was lost.

From what she'd been told, she'd probably fallen from a horse after being hit by a low hanging branch. The horse had never returned, but its hoof prints were left in the snow.

It was good that the king had found her when he did or she would've frozen to death. He and his two men had carried her back to the castle.

That was where she was now, in the garden at his castle, in Aerineva.

Frozen trees and bushes sparkled in the moonlight. Up above a light burned just inside His Majesty's windows. He kept a close watch on her. He must've heard her in the passageway.

The castle was well protected. She was in no danger. Why was he so worried? It was all right. He was a kind man. King Valen was well-liked by the few subjects he had. At least she knew she was in good hands. Just then he stepped softly into the garden.

"Oh, Your Majesty, good evening."

"How do you feel?" he asked her.

"Oh, I'm better. My head is a little tender, but I'll be fine."

He smiled for a moment, "You know, I'll have to call you something eventually."

"Oh, yes..." she muttered. She hadn't thought to wonder about her name.

"Would you like to invent a name... or shall I?" he asked.

"Why don't you?" she said smiling, "but make it a pretty name, of course."

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of anything else," he assured her. Then he brought a finger to his lips, deep in thought. "Isabel? How would that suit you?" he asked. "I'm sure I could think of better, but given only a moment's thought..." he trailed off charmingly.

"Oh, Isabel is wonderful. I love it. Thank you," she exclaimed. "I would've muddled it up, I'm sure." She blushed.

"Well then, Isabel," he began, taking her hand, "can I walk you to your room?"

"Yes." She nodded, and followed him into the castle.

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"You know, Isabel," Valen said across the breakfast table, "I was very surprised to find you lying there in the snow alone. It's customary for a lady to have an escort while traveling."

"Perhaps the gentleman went for help. Do you suppose?" Isabel asked.

"I think not." Valen wrinkled his brow. "The evidence leans more toward a solitary journey. Wouldn't a gentleman place you on his horse, and ride to a doctor, rather than leave you lying there?"

"You may be right," Isabel answered, sipping her tea. "I still can't imagine what I could've been thinking to go out in such weather in the first place. You said it was especially cold that night?"

"Yes, I almost didn't go out hunting at all that day."

Isabel shuddered.

"It's all right." He placed his hand on hers, "You're safe now. Okay?" He placed a finger under her chin.

"Yes, I'm all right," she said glancing up. "It's just chilling to think what might have happened. Death by freezing—thieves could've found me instead of you."

"Now, don't think of such things. What would you like to do today? Let's keep your mind off the accident," Valen suggested.

"Shall we ride?" she asked.

"So soon after your accident?"

"Well then cards... perhaps?" she queried, trying to hide her disappointment.

"Yes, that's much better. We want you well, don't we? As soon as possible. Come." He moved her chair as she stood. "I'll teach you a game."

She smiled and took his arm.

Valen was a kind man, much older than herself, with white streaking through his gray hair. He was of average height, and thin. He seemed to be in excellent health for an older gentleman, and full of energy.

As they walked, he talked about his kingdom, and how he wished it were bigger, but with an army the size of his, battle would be suicide. That was the one thing he would change if he could, he said. But at his age what could he do?

"My dear, do you think you might like a tutor? For any subject?" he asked her. She only looked at him with questioning eyes. "I mean, it would pass the time, wouldn't it? I suppose it could be arranged. Latin, geography, poetry, perhaps? Hmm?"

"Well, I don't know..."

"Oh, yes, enough time for that later. We should be trying to figure out WHO you are, shouldn't we? I will look into it, you know." He suddenly stopped and looked seriously at her.

That being said, he continued leading her to the games room.

* * *

That night, as usual, Isabel was having trouble sleeping. The nightmare kept coming back, and how was she supposed to know where it came from when she didn't know that much

about herself? Had she been married? Did she have children?

In the nightmare, she is in a castle, not Valen's, but another, and she's being chased by someone or something. She can't see it. She can only hear the brisk march of an armed guard... maybe. That's when she wakes up, every time.

Her fear was almost gone now, and her mind wandered to other things. To Valen. It was almost as if he didn't want her to think at all. To have no time to possibly remember her past. He even made decisions FOR her. She didn't want to complain. Where would she be without him? If only she could be alone for a while.

With that thought in mind, she quickly dressed in one of the simpler gowns she had. Valen had had many made for her when she'd arrived. He liked to dress her up like a doll, Isabel thought with a chuckle. Most of the gowns were a bit extravagant. Lovely to look at and admire, but a nuisance to wear. They would have to do for now.

She opened her door carefully, so it wouldn't creak. With a cloak over one arm, she crept slowly down the passageway. She hoped Valen was sleeping and not listening to see if she'd go out again. There were guards here and there, but she could avoid them. Valen hadn't yet taken to propping one up against her chamber door. Thank goodness, she thought.

Isabel needed to walk when she was thinking. This much she did know about herself. She smiled as she breathed in the crisp night air. It was a chilly night, but to be out in it was better than pacing her floor. Cape over her head and body, she made her way past the garden this time and onto the grounds themselves. In spring there would be rolling hills of grass with green trees here and there, she supposed. Now it was a rumpled blanket of snow sparkling in the moonlight. There was hardly a sound as she shuffled through the powder.

She walked deeper into a thicket of trees weaving between their gnarled branches. She heard a noise, and stopped walking. The noise had stopped. It must have been a strange echo of her steps. She began to walk again and the noise followed. Once again she stopped, beginning to fear she was being watched. Faster this time, she made her way toward the clearing. The noise grew faster too. She stopped. It couldn't have been made by her, though it corresponded to her perfectly. In the darkness of the thick trees she couldn't

see well.

Her heart pounding, Isabel decided to make a run for the clearing, and get away from the animal or whatever it was. She began to run, and the noise followed at the same pace. Finally in the clearing she tried to turn to see what it was, but as she did her foot caught on that ridiculous fancy gown.

She tumbled to the ground. Her pursuer had been so close it fell right with her and landed on top of her as she screamed, her voice muffled by the snow.

The person scrambled off of her and pulled her arm to turn her over. In fear she glanced up at a dark figure, black cape and hood, which overshadowed his face. It was a man. He said nothing, only held up a hand, then quickly fled into the night, past the clump of trees and out of her sight.

She was still gasping for breath as she gathered her snow covered gown around her, and struggled to her feet. It was over now, he was gone, but the fear remained. Cape clutched tightly around her, she hurried to the castle.

Were the castle grounds this badly guarded? Was Valen's army so small he couldn't protect the land surrounding him? She would have to be more careful on her excursions. She felt lucky to be alive. Why had the man not said anything? Or taken anything? Especially her virtue. A woman alone was prey for a man like that, she thought. But her curiosity remained. What a strange fellow.

Once again in her room, Isabel climbed out of her wet clothing and right into her warm bed. She felt ready to face her dreams again. The nightmares could be no match for the real scare she'd just experienced.

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A small hand tapped her on the shoulder as she rolled away from her dreams. "Yes?" she muttered. A fairly young and tiny maid, teenage perhaps, stood politely at Isabel's bedside.

"I'm sorry, miss, but the king would like you to go on a journey with him for the day. It is early, but he asked me to wake you. Will you go with him?"

"Yes, of course, I'll be ready as soon as I can," Isabel said quietly as she stretched herself into a sitting position. "Did he say where we would go?" she asked as the maid reached the door.

"No, miss, he didn't say."

"Thank you, Zenie."

"Yes, miss." Young Zenie smiled and left the room, surprised Isabel had remembered her name. She shut the door quietly on her way out.

The rumpled wet dress she'd worn the night before had been discreetly removed to be cleaned Isabel noticed. She hadn't heard anyone. She had slept more soundly last night. There were no nightmares. There was, however, a curious dream about the man in the black cape.

He had stumbled into her, as in real life, and helped her up, but this time he spoke, and he said only one word, "Mandra." She'd never heard it before. It could be a name or a word from another language. She did not know. Then the man had run off, like a strange messenger, there just to give her the word. The meaningless word. Isabel dressed as fast as she could, eager to see where they were going. Perhaps they were going to try to find out who she was.

Down in the dining hall she greeted Valen quickly as she made herself comfortable in her chair, "Good morning, Sir. I hear we will be making a trip today?"

"Oh ho!" He laughed, "Let's not forget we know each other too well for formalities. Why, there's no other person you know as well as me. Call me Valen, my dear," he coaxed her.

"Valen," she corrected herself with a smile and a nod, "we will be traveling?"

"Oh, think nothing of it, a mere jaunt into the western hills. 'Tis a sort of... hideout for me, you might say. I do not like being a king every day, you know. Sometimes thoughts of politics can be too troublesome. You will join me, I hope."

"Yes. I told Zenie I would." Isabel smiled, but inside she was a bit disappointed. She didn't need to take her mind off her troubles. She needed her mind on them. Her mind was her trouble.

"Coincidentally, were you in another accident, my dear? The maid found your dress on the floor this morning, all wet. Are you all right?" Valen asked.

"Oh," she cleared her throat, "yes, I was walking in the garden again and tripped on something. The dress was soaked." Isabel glanced at him sheepishly.

"No bother, I'm sure." He patted her hand. "We should be going now."

Inside the carriage, Valen kept glancing at her and smiling, and Isabel kept her eyes on the passing scenery, hoping she might recognize something. She must've been this way before to travel alone, she supposed. But nothing looked familiar to her. It was no use, for now anyway.

Valen's "hideaway" turned out to be just that. It was a cabin actually, set back from the road in a mixture of trees and open space. He led her by the hand in the front door. It stuck at first, but Valen gave it a shove and it swung open for them. There was a cold chill in the air, and a dusty smell. He waved his arm and the two servants he'd brought came in and set about making the place habitable. A fire was made in the bigger room. Another room was a sort of pantry or kitchen.

He collected their wraps, and laid them across an old wooden chair. He motioned for her to sit on the long sofa, the only other sitting place. A short table filled the space between the chair and couch. He sat beside her and once again took one of her hands in his own.

"Now, don't be alarmed, my dear, but I'm going to introduce you to someone." He paused and her heart skipped a beat. He looked so serious. Who could it be? A silly thought crossed her mind that it could be the man in black, the man who'd been watching her in the trees. Her heart beat faster with that irrational thought.

Then Valen continued, "Someone who can help you with your memory, if we are lucky. Now, have you ever been in a trance, darling?" He looked earnestly at her.

"A trance?" Isabel's eyes widened. This sounded strange to her.

"Apparently not, but if you could remember it, we wouldn't need it now... what was I thinking? Well!" he said suddenly. "We will have to pass the time until my friend arrives, won't we?"

She nodded, still perplexed about the trance comment.

"A game of cards, then?" he asked. "Not too rowdy or upsetting." He smiled as he pulled an old deck off the mantle. "It's really our only choice, I'm afraid. Spare surroundings, you know." He winked.

"Oh, no, that's fine, Valen," Isabel assured him.

"Good." He began shuffling and pulled the small table closer to them. "My friend is a young man, about your age actually. He's been living with a strange tribe of gypsies for

many years, almost since childhood, I suppose. I've only known him a year or two. Found him asleep on this very couch when I arrived here for a hunting excursion. He hunts as well, and that's how we became friends at all. I would've had him dealt with otherwise."

He looked somber, and Isabel somewhat feared he really would have had him "dealt with".

He continued, "Breaking into my property like he did... but it's fine. Let me see, what else can I tell you?" he mumbled to himself. "His name is Nole. You will be kind to him, won't you?"

"But why shouldn't I?" Isabel looked at him seriously. She was growing more uneasy.

"Well, my dear, how can I put this nicely?" He thought for a moment. "He's... a frightful thing to look upon, I'm afraid."

Isabel looked worried.

"But he's not frightening in himself, you must understand," Valen continued. "It's just his ways. They're... a bit wild, you might say. Well, you'll see what I mean, but I just wanted to warn you, darling. All right?" Valen's eyes widened as they looked at her, as if waiting for the answer.

"Valen..." She rested her card filled hand in her lap, "what do you mean by a trance? What is this... Nole going to do to me?" she questioned him.

"A trance, my dear, is like dreaming when you're awake. It's mostly about being relaxed. You'll lay here, on the lounge, and he'll speak to you in an even voice, about nothing in particular. Sometimes he'll speak in the tribe's tongue instead of his own. It does not matter as long as you fall into the trance. Then he'll ask you some questions." He saw by her face she was relieved by this new information. Apparently she'd been expecting worse. "He's never tried it on someone who's lost as much memory as you have, but it's helpful for finding lost items, treating illnesses, and such. Don't worry." He patted her hand.

"I won't." She smiled at him.

The card game continued for a half hour or more before they heard someone stomping through the crisp snow. Before Valen could even stand, Nole was inside the cabin. Knocking seemed an unnecessary formality for him. He closed the door behind himself and began to take off his wrap. It was a vulgar wrap to Isabel's eyes. It was made of several animal's furs sewn haphazardly together. He was indeed a frightening

sight, even if one were prepared beforehand. His hair, which was brown and long, appeared never to have been cared for at all. It hung in total disarray around his face. Although he appeared clean, his face had a dirty brownish color from sun, wind, and cold exposure. His hands as well. He wore simple garments underneath his cover. Ones that a peasant might wear. Once free of his strange cape, Nole stood quietly and only waited for a sign from Valen about what he was to do.

Valen, of course, had kept his attention on Isabel to gauge her reaction to the wild looking young man. She appeared taken aback at first, but seemed fine at present. "Nole," Valen began, "this is Isabel, my new ward, you might say."

Nole gave a nod and sat in the chair with their coats flung over the back.

Isabel nodded in return and set her cards on the table.

"Shall we have her lie here, Nole?" Valen indicated the couch. "Or seated? Which is better?"

"Yes, here," Nole answered putting his hand on the couch. "Lie back," he instructed her quietly.

Isabel gingerly lifted her skirts with her hands to cover her legs as she laid them on the couch. She settled back just as Valen quickly placed a folded cloak under her head and shoulders. Folding her hands over her stomach, she waited for Nole to begin.

"Close your eyes," Nole said and placed his hand over her eyes briefly. "Listen, and let yourself relax," he instructed. Then he proceeded to do what Valen had said he would.

As Isabel lay still, he spoke to her gently, sending her mind wandering. It soon grew tired of that, and she drifted in a half-awake state as Nole finished his calming speech.

"Isabel, are you asleep?" Nole asked.

"No," she muttered softly. She felt very at ease in this stranger's presence.

"Isabel is not your real name. Can you think of a name you would rather be called?"

She tried to find another, but no specific name came to her mind. "No... I can't think—"

"It's all right. Don't strain," Nole interrupted. "Do you have pastimes you think you'd enjoy more than others?" he asked.

"I..." she began, "horseback riding..."

"Yes, she fell from a horse," Valen said excitedly. Nole

motioned for him to be quiet.

"I want to ride a horse..." Isabel continued, "walking... I want to walk..."

"Good. This is fine, and when you see children, how do you feel?" Nole asked.

"Children?" Isabel frowned slightly. "I don't know... I haven't seen children..."

"Okay." Nole turned to Valen, "Was there a wedding ring on her finger? I see none now."

"No, there was none," Valen whispered.

"What kind of terrain do you like best, Isabel?" Nole asked her.

"Hills... trees... green grass..," Isabel went on.

"All right," Nole reassured her. "Now I will ask you to imagine something. Bring into your mind the person you have known longest in your life. Put their image in your mind. What do you see, Isabel?"

Isabel sat for a moment, perfectly still. A picture began to form in her mind, but not a face... not a clear face. She was afraid. She began to tense her body. It was that sound. It was so familiar to her. The march of a guard on a stone floor... and it grew nearer. Nearer and nearer as it had in her nightmare. And her heart began to pound, and she could still hear the march. Yet she was awake and didn't know how to stop it. She drew a hand to her mouth as she gasped and then let out a muffled scream. Her eyes flew open. The spell had been broken. The march subsided and ended abruptly altogether as she took in the familiar sight of the cabin. Valen was at her side quickly helping her to sit and pulling the wrap around her shoulders. "My goodness, darling, what on earth could you have seen? Hmm?" He held her in his arms.

Nole sat patiently in the chair. "I did not expect it to work well," he said. "I must go." And with that he rose and swiftly threw on his fur cape.

"Worth the try, lad, I'm sure. Thank you." Valen winked at him.

Nole nodded and was gone just as abruptly as he had arrived. He didn't say goodbye.

Isabel stared at the door where he had just stood. She had been comforted by Nole's gentle voice and manner, as abrupt as he had also been. She hoped he wasn't angry at her for not making progress. He was gone so fast. Valen still patted her on the back as she thought again of the nightmare

she'd just had.

"What a fright you've had," Valen informed her, while shifting to the chair where Nole had sat. "Don't you worry, dear, we'll outwit that stubborn brain of yours yet." His eyes twinkled.

"Yes," she spoke finally. "It was just a rough beginning. My memory will return," she said, only half believing it.

"Mm... Nole is actually a very well-read young man, you know," Valen said. "Little formal education past the age of ten, I believe. He appears a ruffian, like those tribal people, you know, but he has quite a bit of great literature and more stored in his brain. A marvel, that one. I can't understand it. He's fascinating to talk with usually. He barely spoke a word today." Valen scratched his head thoughtfully. "No matter, we'd best be on our way, my dear, to make it back before dark. Do you feel well enough yet?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes, I'm fine, Valen," Isabel said. She was anxious to get back to the castle. To be alone to think more than anything else. She thought of what Valen had said, "fascinating to talk with." Why did she feel fascinated with Nole's unique manner, when he'd only said a handful of things to her, most of them meaningless? He couldn't help with her memory, but he was a relief from the over protectiveness of Valen. But now it was important for her to work on her memory. It had just occurred to her she may have had a suitor, if not a husband. There was no ring on her finger. She hadn't thought to look.

They rode home in the carriage in relative silence for once. Valen seemed to have a lot on his mind as well.

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"Isabel," Valen began at breakfast one morning, "do you remember what I said about getting you a tutor?" He glanced at her thoughtfully.

"Yes." Isabel wondered what he was planning.

"I've been thinking... there's a gentleman I had recommended to me recently. He's very good... we could have him visit us a few times a week. What do you say?" Valen sipped his tea as he waited for her reply.

Isabel stared at her plate for a moment, thinking of his offer. She did have very little to do and was beginning to be bored and also aggravated that her memory still eluded her.

If Valen had some strange plan to keep her from concentrating on her memories, what did it matter now? They were gone. She felt like she'd never remember who she was. And she'd certainly like to get her mind off of THAT.

"Yes, that sounds fine. It'll give me something to do, anyway," Isabel answered.

"I thought you might think that," Valen agreed. "We'll have him out next week then, hmm?"

She nodded her acknowledgment.

Breakfast then continued on as usual, Valen telling her about the latest political developments or his business dealings. He had plenty to occupy his mind. Maybe it was time she started adding information to her own. It may be all she'd ever have. Memories from this time onward. No history or past. She put that sad thought out of her mind and concentrated on enjoying the meal and Valen's company.

* * *

The rest of that week went by like the one before it. She had her walks, which did her body good even if her brain went unchanged. Valen still wouldn't let her ride, though she wanted to. He thought it was too soon after the accident, and too vigorous an exercise for her to endure now. She thought perhaps he feared her familiarity with horses might bring some memory back. It was the only thing they were sure of about her past. She had ridden and perhaps done it well. Enjoyed it anyway, she was sure. She missed it, even if she had no specific memories of riding.

So that week she merely walked, and talked with Zenie.

Sometimes even helped her with her work. She was bored. So they sewed together, and Isabel followed Zenie around as she dusted. It was hard at first to get the shy girl to talk much with her, but they became friends at last.

Zenie was only 14, she learned, and an orphan, but only a recent one. She had lost her mother the year before. Her mother had also been a servant for Valen. Zenie as a child had followed her around, mocking her movements, and as she grew older she began to lend a hand.

Her mother had had a sudden attack and died quickly. Zenie lost some of her playfulness then. Life seemed to end when her kind mother left. Valen was very nice to her, and no doubt watched how bravely she took up her mother's

duties, determined to do as well as she had done. She was slow with things at first, and there were mix ups. It had been easier to watch than do.

Zenie did her job excellently now. This wasn't the only thing she did well. Isabel had found a great comfort in her friendship with the girl, who didn't know what a simple inspiration she was, especially those first few weeks.

* * *

The week the tutor would begin teaching finally arrived. Isabel was anxious as she dressed that morning, and astonished herself by skipping down to breakfast. To learn anything would be wonderful now. She lived in a world of nothing. No memories to fall back on, no rules for herself made by trial and error. She just was. A clay figure fired and glazed, but now softened again to be reshaped by anyone she let into her world. And she had made up her mind to let the tutor do just that: recreate her world.

Valen noticed the irrepressible smile that kept creeping onto Isabel's face, but he said nothing. He knew she was restless, but what could be done for her? Now it was apparent. All she needed was a happy distraction, a new pastime.

Devon Gabriel was to arrive at ten, and Isabel paced impatiently in the garden for the last half hour she had to wait. When the time came, she rushed into the castle and threw off her cloak. She sat on her knees on the library sofa, her face almost pressed up against the glass. Then she saw him.

He was about thirty, tall and thin, and fairly handsome. Black curly hair bounced out of his hat as he tripped on a wayward stone. A manservant rushed out to assist him. Mr. Gabriel waved him away and brushed the snow off his hat before firmly planting it back on his head. Then he disappeared inside the castle.

Isabel hopped off the sofa and tried to compose herself. She smoothed her ruffled skirts and placed herself in a ladylike sitting position facing the door. Feeling she looked too expectant, she absently grabbed a book from the low table in front of her.

Hearing a brisk clip in the hall, she stared more intently at the book, the subject of which still eluded her. Then the door

opened.

"Isabel?" Valen asked, as he stepped into the room. The tall gentleman stood at his side, minus the cloak and hat.

"Yes?" She glanced up from her absorbing book. "Oh, is this the tutor?" She smiled.

"Master Devon Gabriel, meet Mistress Isabel..." Valen trailed off, realizing they had chosen no last name for her.

"Pleased to meet you," Mr. Gabriel said with a clear deep voice.

Isabel nodded in return.

"Well," said Valen, "I thought this library would make an excellent schoolroom. Plenty of books, a fire, and tables to study at, hmm?" He clapped his hands together. "Perfect. All right, I'll leave you to your work now. Nice meeting you, Master Gabriel." He shook hands with the man. "Isabel." He nodded at her and then quietly left the room.

Mr. Gabriel approached the chair next to the low table, "Well, Mistress... I'm sorry, I did not hear your last name." He stood, his body frozen en route to a sitting position in the chair, waiting for her reply.

"Oh, no, call me Isabel, please," she said quickly.

"Yes, Isabel," he said finishing his journey to the chair. "All right. Valen didn't mention what you'd like to study. I have a knowledge of many subjects. What did you have in mind?"

Such a deep voice. Perfect for a teacher. Kept students in line. "Almost anything will do," Isabel said. "Has Valen told you of my situation?"

"Actually no," Mr. Gabriel said. "Is there something I should know?"

Isabel thought for a moment. "No." Then she smiled. "Why don't you recommend a subject?"

And he did. They began to study Latin that day, and over the following weeks, mathematics and composition lessons were added. Isabel finally felt like she was living. Like she was someone.

Each weekday she met her tutor at seven. He left at 2 or 3 o'clock. It was strange for her to spend so much time with this man and know nothing about him except his literary and artistic tastes. They had become friends. Yet they were strangers still. Her lack of a past kept her from sharing anything, and his interest in the studied subjects apparently kept him from talking about himself.

While Isabel was happy to have her time and her mind occupied by something other than worry, schoolwork made her a little restless. It could be somewhat boring to be made to repeat Latin translations over and over until she knew them by heart. Her mind began to wander to other things. She created stories in her head about Mr. Gabriel. About his origins. She gave him a wild and exciting past, and mysterious secrets.

She was so caught up in her imaginary work, she didn't realize he was staring right at her.

"Isabel?"

She was alert again. "Yes, sorry," she said. "Did you ask a question?" Her face reddened a little.

"What is the Latin word for 'tree'?" he asked.

She could see a slight smile behind his question, but she chose to ignore it. Looking down into her book, she answered matter of factly, "Arbor."

When she glanced up, he was once again his stern self.

"Master Gabriel?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes?" His eyes watched her expectantly.

"Where do you come from?"

"Oh." He looked very surprised by that question. "Um, further south from here." He flipped pages in his text book, searching for some lost passage. "Small village, nowhere you've heard of, I'm sure." Then he cleared his throat. "Page thirty one now, Mistress Isabel."

He looked as if he would like to get back to their schoolwork, so she didn't question him further. She turned to the page he had asked for.

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Every night thoughts of her past swam around in her mind barely out of reach. This drove her a little mad at times and certainly kept her from sleeping. More soothing were thoughts of Mr. Gabriel. It was much easier on her nerves to ignore the huge dilemma of her unknown identity and instead wonder about the past of her conservative tutor.

Why had he acted so strangely when she'd asked where he was from? Was he hiding something? Maybe he was just shy. No, it wasn't that, she decided. He wasn't nervous, just uncomfortable. How strange. With this puzzle in her mind, she drifted easily off to sleep.

The next day, as usual, they began their work with the study of mathematics. It was hard for Isabel to grasp these concepts with numbers. She must not have learned this before. She knew how to read, but Latin seemed unfamiliar to her as well. Maybe she had known them before and forgotten them along with her past. But why then had she not forgotten reading? Who could she be? She found no clues to her identity in these endless questions. Frustrated with it, she finally took up her study of Mr. Gabriel once more. Did he have a family somewhere, or was he alone?

"Are you married?" she blurted out suddenly.

He looked quite taken aback.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, blushing again. "I just, I..." She fiddled with the paper in front of her. She couldn't find words, couldn't figure out a way to erase that embarrassing question from his mind.

"Uh, no," he said finally, looking perplexed.

"You see, I'm just creating stories in my head, and..." Oh no, that sounded stupid, she thought. "I mean, mathematics is so trying for me, and... I..." She was lost.

"I see," he said. He couldn't help smiling at the stumbling she had just done over her words.

"But we could get back to it now," she said, afraid to look up at him. "Mathematics," she added.

"Of course." He picked up his book and was about to begin dictating problems to her, but changed his mind. He saw the look come over her face again, like she was a bit lost in her own world.

He put his book down and pulled the chair out from his side of the table. "Do you mind if I sit?" he asked politely.

She shook her head, still a little embarrassed.

"We could take a break from studying if you like." He sat down in front of her. "I mean, this is supposed to be for your own amusement. Is that not what Valen said?"

She nodded, still confused about what he was doing.

He looked a bit sheepish, like his words were all coming out wrong. "Would you like to learn a game?" he asked her.

"Oh," she said, relieved. She had begun to think she was in trouble with him. He had such a stern way of doing and saying things. "Yes." She nodded.

He began to look around the room, searching for something. "I have an idea," he said distractedly. He stood up then and turned toward the door. "I'll be right back," he said turning to her in the doorway. Then he quickly left the room, but she heard his footsteps stop and turn on themselves. He popped his head back into the room. "I think you'll like this," he said, smiling like a schoolboy. Then he was gone again.

She giggled at him. He had changed, suddenly. Something had come over him. It was very strange, but she liked it. What was this surprise he was searching out for her? He'd certainly helped in her game of figuring him out. He'd given her plenty to puzzle over in his quarter hour absence.

Finally he returned.

He came back into the room holding what looked like a tray. He was balancing it carefully. It had little figures standing on it. He smiled at her as he laid it down on the table in front of her as if it were a treasure.

"It's a chess board," he said excitedly.

"Oh, Valen was speaking of this game the other day." She was excited too. "It looks so complicated," she said, frowning a little.

"It is a bit complicated," he admitted, taking his seat across from her again. He began arranging the little figures in rows as Isabel watched, fascinated.

"I taught my sisters to play," he said a bit quietly, glancing up at her while he worked.

Sisters. He had given her a piece of information about himself, knowing she was curious. How sweet, she thought. He had even looked a bit shy as he said it.

She gave him a smile.

* * *

Isabel had begun to realize that a strange sensation came over her when she was near Mr. Gabriel. She smiled when she thought of him. And lately, she'd been noticing just how blue his eyes were. She couldn't help herself. She still called him "Master Gabriel", but her feelings for him were far less formal. And yet she tried to keep herself from feeling them.

She glanced at her ring finger often, and wondered if there were someone waiting for her in a home she couldn't remember. This thought was the only thing that kept her

from enjoying this relatively new emotion.

Despite her resolve to ignore these feelings, she found herself getting nervous at the thought of seeing him, and embarrassed when he caught her staring at him while he read aloud from one of the many books in the library.

He pretended, as best he could, that he hadn't noticed. He would clear his throat and continue on.

Why couldn't she control herself? She certainly tried. Maybe it was a lack of memories that led her to it. No ties to an old world, so she was trying to create new ties in this one. She went over it in her head like this, and tried to talk herself out of it. But logic could not conquer the feelings.

Isabel had been thinking that if only she could spend less time with Mr. Gabriel, maybe she would be cured of this infatuation. She had thought of something that might take her mind off of him for a while. She sat pondering it one morning at breakfast.

"Valen?"

"Yes?" he said absently, looking over some papers.

"I was thinking... now might be a good time for me to go riding. Do you not agree?"

"Riding?" Valen glanced up at her, "My dear, are you sure? What if you have another accident? You can't be too careful. We haven't got you quite well yet at all. But I suppose physically you are all right..." he trailed off as he thought it over. "You may need to completely relearn how. That could be a bit risky. We'll need to take all precautions... Ah, yes, I have it." He clapped his hands together. "Nole is at my cabin now. I will send word to him. He's an excellent rider, and someone I trust. I have stable workers, you know, but I haven't needed an instructor. Until now."

Isabel was smiling. This was easier than she had thought it would be. He had always said no before. "Then I can go?" she asked happily.

"Yes, my dear." He put a hand on hers. "Now you don't mind my taking all these precautions, do you? I just want to keep you safe. You understand?"

"Yes. I'll be careful. I've just wanted to try it for so long. I know it's something I'll remember." Her eyes sparkled excitedly.

"I hope so, Isabel. I really do." Valen smiled at her. Then breakfast went on as usual, except Isabel smiled a bit more, much as she had done the morning the tutor had arrived.

They had decided that afternoons would be a good time for riding, and when Nole arrived, she could finally work with the horses. He had been in the middle of hunting and so would be a few days. He had to stop back with his tribe to deliver the game. They would take care of that, and he would come to stay at the castle for a couple of weeks.

Nole asked that Isabel meet him at the stables when he arrived, so she trudged down to the stables in a heavy cape and gloves. She was happy to be able to ride finally, but also afraid. She feared she wouldn't feel at all at home riding. She wanted something to feel familiar to her, something that she could hold onto as a part of her identity.

She found Nole, saddling up a horse inside the stable. Valen had told her they had no side saddles—as no ladies had lived at the castle in recent years. Therefore, she would learn on a regular saddle 'til they could get a new one.

Nole saw her in the doorway and nodded. She nodded politely and smiled back at him. He looked the same as he had when they'd first met. Apparently, however, he was going to talk even less.

When he was through with the horse, he led it outside and brought it to the middle of a fenced area. In one hand he also carried a small stool. He set it next to the horse, then held the reins as he motioned her over. "I thought this would work best," he said. Then he took her hand as she stepped onto the little stool.

Once on top of it, she turned and tried to maneuver herself onto the horse, but it was too ridiculous, and she began to giggle.

"Okay." Nole cleared his throat. He came over and gingerly put his hands on her waist. "Ready?"

She nodded.

He lifted her swiftly and set her into the saddle with her legs both on the same side of the horse, the only way a lady was allowed to ride. He quickly took his hands away then, and went to the front of the horse. "I'll walk him for a while," he informed her.

"Okay."

As the horse moved slowly she realized how high up she really was and how precariously she was perched. A few times she felt like toppling, but leaned forward and held onto the saddle horn. One foot in a stirrup helped a little.

This was not familiar to her, THIS way of riding anyway.

She wanted to try it the way men rode, but didn't have the nerve to ask Nole if she could. He was so quiet and stern looking. She didn't mention it that day.

He led the horse around for her, and let her get used to the height and the movement of the animal. The next day he did the same, but she felt more comfortable with it. It did upset her that this wasn't something she remembered. She'd felt so sure. She kept taking the riding lessons, however. She'd need to know this.

Nole was so reserved, yet Valen had said he was a good conversationalist. That he talked with him all the time. She must've done something to offend him. Or maybe he was shy with new people. He didn't look shy. Just kind of disapproving.

The third day Isabel met him as usual. This time he had two horses saddled. He helped her onto one, then climbed easily onto the other.

"I'll lead them for now. We'll just go slowly through those fields," he said pointing. He held both horses' reins and led them at a comfortable pace.

They passed a tuft of small trees at what seemed to be a snail's pace. Isabel could balance well enough, and didn't have to concentrate on that today. She stared at the back of Nole's head in front of her. If only he would speak, this wouldn't be so dull.

Isabel considered something as the horses were led farther away from the buildings. She decided she would try to find out why he wouldn't speak to her. What harm could come from it?

"Nole?" she said nicely. "Um... could I ask you something?"

He glanced back at her, almost with a look of... fear on his face. He nodded.

"Do you... dislike me?" she asked.

"No," he answered quickly, then turned away from her. "Why do you ask that?"

"Oh, Valen told me of how you and he talk about books and things. But you don't seem to want to talk to me, so..." Isabel trailed off.

"Oh," he said, and hung his head for a moment. "It isn't that I don't like you," he began. "I do. It's just... hard to explain. It's stupid."

"I'm sure it's not," Isabel said kindly.

Nole stopped her horse just beside his.

"I'll understand. I mean, if you want to tell me." She smiled at him encouragingly.

"It's me," he said after a long pause. "I know how I seem to... 'civilized' people, Isabel. I mean, I'm different, and not everyone understands me because of that. I was raised by the tribe, and I never learned the right way to act around people... like you. Do you know what I mean?" He looked at her expectantly.

"I know what you mean," she assured him.

"I didn't want to offend you by being too direct. The gypsies are that way, and so I am too. I don't know how to be your way. Polite. With Valen it's different. He's a man. It's just different." Nole stared off into the trees.

"You can be yourself with me, Nole. I won't be offended." She looked up shyly. "I mean, you were talking to me just then and it was fine."

He smiled at her, "I guess I was."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Sure."

She paused for a moment. "Well, this way of riding feels so unnatural to me." She looked timidly at him, "Could I... you know, try it the way you are riding?"

He had been expecting a more serious question, and started laughing when he heard her request. She giggled along with him.

"I don't fit in with 'civilized' people either, I think," she said giggling.

"We're two of a kind." He smiled. "Just flip one leg over. I won't watch," he added, realizing she'd have to arrange her skirts in a rather unladylike way.

She spread her dress over the horse and then followed with her leg. That was immensely better, and the wonderful thing was that THIS felt familiar. Finally! She knew it would.

"Aha!" she cried. "I'm finished, Nole. You can look."

"Not bad," he said, swinging around to face her again.

"It feels so right this way, Nole. Oh, but Valen would NOT approve, I think."

"Well, he'll never know." Nole winked at her.

She smiled at him and slowly took her reins from his hands. Then giving her horse a tap she was off at nice trot, leaving Nole to stare after her in surprise.

"How'd you do that?" He galloped after her.

She let out a happy yell then pulled her horse to a stop. "I knew I could do it!" she cried. "Did you see that?"

"Of course! You surprised me. Why did you not tell me you could ride?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't know, obviously," she told him laughing.

"Oh, of course, sorry." His face turned red as he realized what he'd said.

"It's okay." She smiled, finally catching her breath. "Shall we ride?" she asked him playfully.

"After you," he answered in a mock gentlemanly way.

"Thank you, sir," she said, and then once again took off through the fields, practicing her newly realized skill.

He trotted after her with a chuckle, following her exuberant winding trail.

* * *

Isabel felt her heart pounding in her chest. She tried to calm her breathing as she sat still and listened to the even steps marching down the stone corridor. It was one soldier, walking briskly and determinedly toward her. But he didn't know she was there... yet.

Isabel tried to tip toe down the dark stairway softly. A drop of sweat ran down her forehead as she nervously took each downward step. She had the urge to scream as she heard the steps fast approaching her hiding spot.

Then she heard the voice. The man was calling quietly, "Mandra!... Mandra..." She quickly clasped a hand over her mouth to stifle her scream. She squeezed her eyes shut, and, frozen with fear, she waited for the inevitable...

Then she woke up, as always, sitting up in her bed, a cold sweat upon her face. A fear gripped her so fiercely in those moments, it was all encompassing. Then she would remember where she was and that she was safe. But she always lay awake, eyes aware, until morning, when sleep finally came after the dreadful darkness had gone.

Always the word "Mandra." It was like the man was calling her this. It must've been her name. Why was she hiding? Why was he chasing her? And why had she still not confided in Valen about her possible identity as this "Mandra"?

She herself didn't know. Maybe it was because the daytime reality she lived in and this horrible dream world

were markedly different. If that really was her life she was dreaming of, she wasn't so sure she'd like to go back there. So she said nothing for the time being, and still hoped that happier memories would emerge.

* * *

Valen walked thoughtfully through the white-blanketed garden. Turning a corner on the walkway, he found himself glancing up from the ground to see a man made of snow. Four descending sized balls of packed snow stacked on each other. Startled at first, he stopped quickly. Then he began to smile. It was like having a child in his home, the way he kept finding an open book lying on the stairs or a snow-covered scarf left absentmindedly in a passageway. Now this snowman. More evidence of the lively spirit who had graced his home for the last 2 months. He had never missed not having a family before, never marrying, never having children. Isabel opened the door into a wonderful world for him. She didn't even realize it, or seem to.

He couldn't remember much of what he'd done for the years before she came. But every day of the past couple of months was etched vividly in his brain. He would miss her.

Suddenly her quiet laughter broke into his thoughts. Glancing to the side, Valen saw Isabel perched on a low stone bench, watching him with mild amusement.

"You stared at that snowman so sadly, I thought you were going to embrace him soon." Isabel smiled.

"Oh," Valen said with a laugh, "that I might. He reminds me of someone special." He went and sat next to her on the bench. "I could tell he was your handiwork. Must be all the artistic skills Devon is teaching you, hmm?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Isabel blushed, "Well..." her voice trailed off.

"He's missing a face, my dear. Had you noticed?" Valen asked chuckling, glancing at the faceless mound before him. Isabel shrugged her shoulders and gave him a childish grin. "Allow me, darling," he said charmingly, and reached under the bench where there was less snow, and retrieved a small handful of dark stones. Then, hopping up, he began busily placing the stones in a pattern to create a face. Once finished he glanced at Isabel triumphantly. "Hmm?" he asked. "He can smile at us now. I rather like him."

Isabel smiled back at Valen, but her mood had changed. She seemed far away now.

"Did I say something wrong?" Valen asked her.

"No," Isabel said, snapping back to the present. "No, I just... I was thinking. Sorry."

"Oh, don't be, my dear." He went and sat again and patted her hand. "I understand," he said sincerely. "You're having memories?"

"Well," Isabel began, frustrated, "not so much memories." She searched for the right words. "It's like my hands remember things. Do you know what I mean?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Like this snowman. I was walking here in the garden, and I kicked some snow with my boot and I thought 'This is the perfect type of snow to build with' and so I did. And I knew how." She used her hands as she spoke. "But I don't... remember doing this before. I just know I have." She looked at him hoping she had made him understand her.

Valen only nodded and held her hand once more, intent on listening to her.

"It happened with the horses the other day too."

He glanced up when she said that a little surprised. "So you do remember riding then?" he asked with emotion in his voice. Every memory she had was a step she took away from him and he knew that.

"Not with my mind. My body remembered it. I didn't need to be taught, Valen." She put her hand over his, wondering why his playful mood had once again turned sad. "What is it?" she asked him.

"Oh..." he sighed. "Just some old man's thoughts bobbing around in my head, darling. Life regrets and rubbish like that. I was miles away, but I'm back." He squeezed her fingers, and thought he might get emotional as he stared at her small pale hands in his older, rougher ones. "Well now," he said, rising from his seat. "Let's name this young gentleman, hmm?"

He offered her his arm, and she rose politely, taking it with a smile. "You name him," she said softly.

She gazed at his face as he surveyed the snowman in play seriousness. "He looks like a Fredrick to me. What do you think?" He glanced down to find a caring face.

"Oh, yes, that's lovely," she said sincerely.

"Splendid." He patted her arm. "Tea?" he asked her.

"Certainly." She smiled warmly at him.

As they walked past Fredrick on their way to tea, an idea suddenly struck Valen, "You know he has one too many middles," he said tapping one of them.

Isabel laughed.

* * *

It was storming the next day. A heavy blizzard bombarded the castle so furiously it was almost like night instead of morning. But Mr. Gabriel and Isabel went on with their lesson as usual, undaunted by mother nature's cry for attention.

They sat side by side at the library table. Because of the fading light, Isabel found herself having to lean ever closer to the book she was reading aloud from. This also brought her ever closer to Mr. Gabriel. While this made her heart beat faster in a wonderful way, she found herself stumbling over simple sentences.

"Sorry, Mr. Gabriel... it's just getting so dark in here," she apologized. "I just can't see the page anymore."

"Oh, yes," he answered. "I hadn't noticed. You have such a lovely voice, you know..." He was looking down at her. His eyes lingered a bit long on her face and he stopped himself and stood up. "Well, a candle will help, I'm sure. Here..." he said reaching to a shelf with a short candle on it. "It's not much, but it may last the rest of the lesson."

He lit the candle, and set it near the edge of the table between them.

He stood for a moment just behind Isabel, and she had her eyes on the book. She hadn't resumed reading yet. She could almost feel his eyes on the back of her head. She thought that if she turned around at that moment she would see him look at her in a way she couldn't ignore. And she couldn't let that happen. She fumbled the pages with her fingers and waited. But the air only grew more tense and she had to look at him.

She turned.

He stared down at her with a sort of gentle devoted look, and he cleared his throat, then said her name, "Isabel..."

"No, don't say anything, Mr. Gabriel... please," she said softly, "Don't..."

He glanced at his nervous hands for a moment, then looked at her again. The gentle look persisted, but suddenly his eyes grew large and he reached quickly toward her shoulder, so it seemed.

He was patting her hair as she turned and tried to see what was going on.

"The candle," he sputtered.

He had moved it away, but apparently when she'd turned a piece of her hair had fallen too near to it and caught fire.

She felt a rush of energy throughout her body suddenly, realizing real harm could've come to her, but just a little of her hair had been singed.

Mr. Gabriel still held her hair in his hand. He worked it lovingly with his fingers. "All better now," he said gently, taking a seat beside her again. "You can see I care for you, Isabel..." he said, taking advantage of the incident that had just occurred, to make his point, and only half joking. He took his hand away from her and let it rest on the table. "I would never hurt you."

Isabel was shaking her head and staring once again into the book. "You don't understand..." she said with tears in her voice. She couldn't look at him this way. It was hard enough when he was just being her teacher, but this...

"Make me understand," he answered her. He sat patiently, intently looking at her.

She didn't know if she could find the words to plead her case. This was harder than she'd ever imagined it might be. All she wanted was to give in to this feeling, and she was quickly losing her resolve.

"You don't know me," she began. "I mean, no one knows me." She paused. "I could be married."

"No—"

"No, listen." She stopped him. Looking at him finally she felt her heart melt. She looked away. "I can't... do this... I have no life... no memories... nothing to offer you... not with a clear conscience." She felt a tear slide down her face. "Who am I?" she asked imploringly, looking at him with tears in her eyes.

He put his hand on hers, "I wish I could tell you." He put his other hand up to her face and wiped the tear away with his thumb.

Their eyes locked for a moment and he took her face in his hands. Slowly he wiped more tears away, and smoothed

her hair back from her face. Then, leaning closer, he whispered softly, "Don't cry anymore." He kissed her forehead, then wrapped his arms around her.

She gave in, and rested her head on his shoulder, feeling better than she'd probably ever felt, wrapped in his protective arms.

They sat like that for a while, Devon sometimes patting her back or tracing his fingers down her hair. She sniffed and finally pulled away from him, able to let him go, she felt.

He slid his hands down to hers once more, not wanting to stop touching her, and waited for her to speak. It was clear she had something to tell him the way she stared seriously at their clasped hands.

"What will we do now?" she asked him. "You can't ask me—"

"Marry me," he said suddenly. "Let's just get married," he said determinedly.

Isabel was shaking her head. "Somewhere," she said, "people are missing me. I mean," she suddenly thought about it, "God, I hope someone misses me. Why has no one been looking for me?"

She stood up and began pacing the dimly lit room. "It's like I didn't exist until now." She laughed a bit hysterically. "Not even to myself," she said putting a hand to her chest. "And now you want me to promise myself to you, and..." She paused, "I want to, but... a big part of who I am is a mystery to me. You don't know this person standing in front of you." She walked toward the window and looked out at the swirling bright snow.

A tear slid down her face again, "What have I done?" she asked. "I could've sinned an unpardonable sin, and you wouldn't know," she said.

"But think of all the wonderful things you could've done too," he said getting up and joining her at the window. He leaned against the wall and stared at her. "I know you, Isabel. You are a good person now." He touched her arm. "You could not have been much different before." He thought for a moment. "Please don't let your imagination upset you this way. Trust me," he said, and she looked over at him, "I know you were a good person."

"All I know," she said gazing into his eyes, "is that I don't want to ever be away from you." She gingerly wrapped her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. "But,

please don't talk of marriage now."

His arms were around her once more. "I won't." He placed a kiss on the top of her head. "But promise not to shut me out of your life. Just promise me," he spoke into her ruffled blond hair, "we'll be together someday."

She looked up at him with childlike eyes. "I promise," she whispered. Then kissed him.

* * *

The next day during the morning meal, Valen was uncharacteristically quiet. Usually he was quite talkative, but this morning he just stared at his plate, and didn't touch his food.

Isabel had quite a bit on her mind as well, and breakfast mostly remained untouched that day.

Finally Valen mentioned the strange silence. "Well... it seems we have something in common, Isabel. Either the food is awful or we've all got something on our minds, eh? But I can see you haven't even tasted yours," he said glancing down at her plate.

Isabel smiled as she glanced down also, realizing she had been in a kind of reverie. "Oh, I just had an odd dream last night."

"Really? Like the others you told me about?" Valen asked, picking at his food.

"Yes," she answered, then felt bad for lying. Her mind was on Devon, and her impossible past, but she couldn't tell Valen that. What would he think of her falling in love at a time like this? Life goes like that sometimes, she thought. Couldn't be stopped from happening.

"Did you have something on your mind, Valen?" she asked him.

"Nothing of consequence, dear... nothing important." Valen's voice trailed off. He stared out the window at the snow still coming down softly. "Quite a storm we're having, isn't it? I'm surprised our Mr. Gabriel got back home safely. I sent him in the sleigh, but still... couldn't see a foot in front of you last night, hmm?"

Isabel nodded her agreement.

Valen suddenly put a hand on hers. "Darling, I hope you aren't slipping into a fog over this whole mess. Are you? You must let things unfold as they see fit. You can't force your

memory to return, hmm?" he said quietly, looking encouragingly at her.

"Oh, I know you're right," Isabel said. "I just get so worried sometimes. I think that this is what life will be like for me for the rest of my life. I don't hate it here, Valen," she assured him. "I just can't help thinking of the people waiting for me to come back." She looked at her lap. "And then sometimes I think..." She shook her head.

"What? Tell me." He patted her hand.

"What if no one is waiting for me? What if I had no one? No one has been asking after me."

"Oh, Isabel," Valen sighed. Then he put both hands on her hand. "I hate seeing you like this, you know."

"I know. I can't help it," she said.

"No, I understand..." Valen answered quickly, "I'm just... sorry."

She smiled at him and added her other hand to his. "I'll be fine... I just have to keep busy until my memory decides to return."

"Wonderful plan." He cheered up. "How about a sleigh ride? The weather's ripe for it."

She laughed, "All right."

* * *

Isabel inched her way down the stairwell, trying to think of a hiding place. The march of the soldier's boots grew closer and her heart pounded faster than she thought possible. It was too late. She would be caught.

The man called quietly, with a growl in his voice, "Mandra!... Mandra!..."

She said nothing. She only closed her eyes and prayed. But he was so close now. She heard the door to the stairwell creak open, heard him step inside and felt his steady gaze upon her.

"No," she whispered.

"Come with me," he ordered and she felt herself yanked up by the arm. She opened her eyes. He was shoving her up the stairs and into the corridor. The man had a firm grip on her arm and marched her along at such a speed, she had to almost run to keep up.

"In here," he said and they entered another stairway, which they quickly descended. Then he led her down a hall to

a heavy looking corner door.

Oh, God, she thought. This was it. He was turning her in. It was all over.

He shoved his body against the door to open it, and when he did a draft of cold air shot into the hall. It led outside!

She looked at the soldier in utter surprise. He grabbed her arm again and almost tossed her into the night.

She swung around to stare at him. Why had he let her go?

"Go!" he hissed, breaking her out of her daze.

Still quite startled, Isabel realized her situation. She began to run across the snow-covered castle grounds, amazed that she was finally free.

She woke up.

It had been the usual dream, except this time it had gone further. It had to be a memory. It had been repeated too many times to be just a dream.

Isabel sat up suddenly in her bed. She had just realized something. The soldier in her dream... had been Devon.

It was his voice calling her "Mandra." It was his frightening soldier's march that had haunted her all these weeks. How could that be? How could that kind man be the menacing nightmare guard that kept her awake at night? There must be some other reason he'd shown up in her dream... but it was so real. It was so real.

She lay awake, once again, until morning.

* * *

Mr. Gabriel ambled up the stairs early for their morning session. He held a book under one arm, and whistled a soft tune as he stepped into the library.

He had already slapped the book onto the table before he noticed her.

She sat in a chair by the window, and stared at him. Her look was so serious, it made him uncomfortable immediately.

"Isabel?" he asked, "What's wrong?"

Her gaze never wavered. She said nothing. Her face looked tired and pale, and her eyes were the slightest bit red.

"Are you sick?" he asked, coming towards her and putting a hand to her cheek.

She looked up at him, "Devon..."

"Yes, dear?" He sat down in the chair opposite to hers.

Her expression worried him.

"I have to know something," she said, suddenly standing and beginning to pace. "I've been thinking about it all night, and I can't make sense of it." She stopped and turned towards him. "Just tell me if you know me," she said firmly.

"What do—" He started.

"No." She shook her head. "You know what I mean. I can tell you do, Devon." She fought the tears that had sprung to her eyes. "You know me... and you never said a word. How could you do this to me?" she cried. "I was under the impression that you cared about me."

"Isabel, please..." Devon stood up.

"All these months..." She waved her hands in the air, "the nightmares I suffered through... and you knew all along!" she shouted.

"Will you let me explain?" he said trying to grab her wrists as she went for the door.

She waved him away, "You can explain if you want, but do not touch me."

The way she stepped away from him sent a pang through his chest. They stood quietly, her leaning against a table, he studying the glass of the window, searching for words.

"I didn't think this would happen," he said. "I didn't plan to hurt you. That wasn't what I wanted." He looked at her imploringly. "I guess you've had a memory," he said when she wouldn't return his look.

She didn't answer.

"I was a soldier in your father's army," he admitted finally.

"My father?" she asked, looking up.

"Eret," he said. "He's king of the Kargid Lands. And he's fighting a war right now to expand those lands." He paused for her to digest this information.

"My father is that king?" she asked. "The man Valen talks about?" She laughed, but without merriment. "He calls him 'the greedy serpent'." She shook her head in disbelief. "And to think the 'serpent's' daughter was right there listening."

Devon wanted to reach out for her, but felt she would push him away. "Valen was right," he said quietly. "Eret will never stop fighting... for more. Do you know why you were trying to escape?"

She shook her head.

"Have you heard of Tailo? The king of Malsa?" He waited,

again 'no'. "He's very old, you see, and his lands are quite sizable. Well, your father had a more devious plan than battle in mind to win that kingdom." He glanced out the window. "He had arranged your marriage to that old man." He looked at her then. "And when Tailo died, he planned to take the land from you... without a fight."

She said nothing, so he continued, "You were... expendable to him. And he didn't expect you to resist actually. You had pretty much obeyed him up to that point. Not that he'd been much a part of your life until then. Do you recall any of this?" he asked.

"No..." She sounded faraway. "And my mother?" she asked.

"Died," he answered. "You were probably too small to remember."

She looked crestfallen.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She shook her head. "Go on."

"All right." He took a deep breath, "You were always good with horses, I guess. It was your most common pastime. Anyway, I suppose you figured the only way out of the marriage was to escape. I think you'd quarreled with your father, and he wouldn't back down. Not surprising." He sat down in his chair again. "He asked that an extra guard be in the castle that night, right outside your door... and that was me."

"And I got past you?" she asked.

"In a way," he answered. "You were already missing when I arrived. I didn't want to cause a great alarm by reporting that. I didn't want to get in trouble for losing you. So I looked for you myself. I found you hiding in a stairwell, a small bag packed, your cloak on, all ready to go... somewhere." He chuckled. "You looked so afraid of me. I made a decision then."

"What did you decide?" she asked.

"I thought to myself, 'This girl doesn't belong in the middle of this mess. She's so innocent.' You didn't look like you had it in you to keep fighting him. I had begun to doubt his sanity. He just wouldn't be satisfied with all he had," Devon said profoundly. "He had so much... you, for one." He looked at her intently. "I would've treated you differently." He sounded far away.

"And you have," she said sitting down beside him. "Finish

your story," she said quietly.

"I knew what I would do, when I saw you there. I sent you out an unguarded door, and when I got back to Eret—an hour or two later—I said you must have left before I got there, because when I went in to check on you, you were gone." He threw his hands up, ending his story.

"Was the fighting not near the castle?" she asked curiously, still unable to believe she had such a fascinating life.

"Oh, no, his army was in the far west by then," he said. "And I did not know of your nightmares, Isabel. I thought it was best that you had forgotten him."

She glanced up suddenly, remembering her purpose. "You lied to me."

"No, I just didn't tell you all I knew. But it was to protect you... or so I thought at the time," he said.

"Did you follow me?" she asked, suddenly curious about his presence in Valen's castle.

"Oh, that. Well, in a manner of speaking. I was dispatched on a mission, you see. I was to hunt you down, and bring you back. It fell to me because I was the fool who had let you get away." He smiled. "The funny thing is that I had always done well in school, and figured that tutoring would bring me money to live on while I searched for you." He laughed. "Imagine my surprise when I walked into this room for the first time, and you acted as if we had never met. I could see you had found what you needed. I had never really intended to return you to him, of course. His sending me away was the only way I had to escape. Deserters do not fare well with him." He had finished his tale.

He looked so serious, she put her hands on his. "I understand why you didn't tell me," she said softly. "But I wish you had. I worried over it for so long."

"I know. I'm so sorry, Isabel." He put his hand to her cheek again. "I love you, you know," he said.

"And I love you." She took his hand from her face and kissed it, then stared sweetly at him.

"We're quite a pair of runaways." He chuckled quietly.

"I'm still in danger, aren't I?" she asked him seriously.

He looked down before he answered, and cleared his throat.

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid so."

The war was inching closer to Aerineva every day. Smaller kingdoms had combined to fight off Eret's growing army. Still it moved north, slowly but steadily. Every day Valen became a little more serious, even a little paler. Seeing this, Isabel had decided not to bother him with her newly discovered secret. He worried too much, she knew, and it would upset him so to know where she had come from. That the evil man fighting ever closer to his door was her own father. She shuddered to think she had ever actually lived in his castle.

She also kept her secret to herself out of a groundless fear. How would Valen feel if he knew not only was he in danger because of his land, but because he was sheltering one of Eret's most valuable playing pieces? She feared Valen would send her away if he knew. Part of her told her he would never do such a thing, but still she had these thoughts.

So she kept her true identity to herself, and watched with pity as she saw her dear friend grow restless and irritated. Then she found out exactly how far his thoughts had gone.

They were walking over his rolling land. The snow had melted so only patches remained. It was a warmer day than they'd had in a while. He was silent for a long time, then he spoke.

"Do you see all this land?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It isn't much," he said shrugging, as they stopped to look around them. "I know that. And I never cared much for it except..." He looked down at her and then away. "I know you aren't my family, Isabel, but I feel like you are. This place has never felt like a home so much as it does now. I can't help but think this way." He surveyed his surroundings again. "I have to fight for it," he said quietly reaching down for her hand.

"What do you mean?" she asked, but she already knew.

"I have to join the resistance, dear." He looked her in the eye.

"Valen, you don't have to—"

"Yes, I've thought about it for a long time, darling. I used to think that when it happened, it would happen. It's only land." He shook his head. "But it isn't only land. It's my freedom, for one. I'm old. I thought it wouldn't matter in the

end. I'd had a good life, you know? But I don't want this to end." He squeezed her hand.

"Valen, nothing can end this." She held up their joined hands. "This land is not worth your life." He said nothing. "Leave it," she said, "but don't leave us."

He stared at the ground for a moment. "Isabel, Isabel..." he muttered. "You're so young. He won't just take the land. He's a tyrant. He'll make all our lives miserable. It isn't about being poor... he'll take our souls if it suits him. He's mad."

Isabel only stared at the mountains in the distance.

"I have to go," he said, then patted her hand with his free one. "I have to try."

She glanced at him, her heart was heavy. She felt like he would be going to his own death. "I know," she said finally. "I know."

* * *

The morning Valen left, Isabel couldn't go down to breakfast. She couldn't say goodbye to him. She knew she'd cry and she didn't want him to see her upset. So she watched and she waited. Out of her window, she saw him finally leave. He had five of his men with him, and they left on foot. He had wanted to leave the coach for her. And, as he had said to her the day before, "No sense in going as fast as you can toward a battlefield."

As soon as he was gone, she ventured downstairs. She went outside and stared across the rolling hills, dusted now with a gently falling snow. She was standing like this when she heard a voice behind her.

"He'll be back, I think."

She turned to find Nole leaning up against the old gray stone wall that encircled the garden.

"It's not very likely, Nole," Isabel answered.

"No," he admitted. "But I can't help but think so anyway."

"Why are you so calm?" she asked suddenly. "Was he not your friend?" There was some bitterness in the last question.

"IS my friend," Nole corrected her. "I don't feel he will be leaving us just yet. That is all. Don't you have faith?"

"Sometimes."

"That isn't faith. Faith is all the time. Not just when it seems likely things will go your way. You need to let go of what you think you see, Isabel," Nole said seriously, "and

realize that Valen has just begun his journey back to us." He pushed himself away from the wall. "He will be back." And with that he slowly ambled his way across the field to the stables, leaving Isabel to follow him with her eyes, perplexed.

* * *

With Valen gone, and bits and pieces of her memory starting to come back, Isabel grew restless. She began taking long walks once again. In the garden, and over the hills. She discovered in her treks, quite far away from the castle, a small lake. Trees surrounded it, and hills rose up from it, but at one spot there was a clear gentle slope down to the water. Almost spanning the clearing was a fallen tree. She went over to it and sat down on the end with no branches. It made a perfect bench. The sun was beginning to set, and Isabel watched it glisten off the melting lake. Suddenly she heard a rustling in the trees.

Her eyes darted over, but she couldn't see anything in the dark woods. Snow was falling softly that she hadn't noticed before. She convinced herself that the sound was a branch shifting under heavy snow, and looked once again toward the lake.

Then she definitely heard it again, louder this time. She stood up and whipped around to face the sound. "Who's there?" she asked firmly.

To her great surprise, she then heard someone walking toward her through the trees. She cursed herself in her head for having spoken at all. But she stayed where she was, not sure she could outrun this person and not being able to even try without going right past him. "Fool!" she scolded herself.

Then a man emerged from the trees dressed in a black cape with a hood. It was the same man she'd met in the woods before.

"You!" she said.

He started walking towards her, and she made up her mind she would try to outrun him. She put a foot on the log, and stepped on top of it, meaning to leap over it and away. Then he came towards her quickly, seeing her intention. She made one last effort to escape, but her dress caught on the bark and she fell off the tree and right into the man. He fell too, and she landed on top of him. An "umpf!" escaped him. She must've knocked the wind out of him.

Then he spoke in a young man's voice, "Well we've been here before."

She climbed off of him and stood up, staring at him. "Do I know you?" His voice had struck a chord in her mind.

"Are you Mandra?" he asked, pulling off his hood. A tousled blond mop of hair sat above an almost angelic face except for a faint scar from his right eye almost to his ear. He looked about 20 years old.

Her mouth dropped open, and she pressed one hand to her head. She pointed at him with the other. Then she waved them in the air, as she searched her memory. She almost had it.

"Kie!"

"In the flesh," he said pushing himself into a standing position. "You had me worried there for a while. I wasn't sure it was you."

Her mouth was still agape as she stared up at him.

"Mandra?" he said trying to pull her back to the present.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed finally. "What could you have been thinking all these months?" she asked putting a hand on her heart.

"A hug for an old friend?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

She laughed, still trying to digest this new information, and gave him a hug.

They sat down on the tree and stared at one another for a moment. She spoke first.

"I'm so sorry," she began, "I never made it to our meeting place—"

"Believe me, not as sorry as I was," he interrupted.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Oh, I stayed in the village for a week or so. There was a barn there I could sleep in and... well, you know, I needed food, so... I had to do a little thieving."

"Kie!"

"Well..." he stammered. "I didn't want to get myself hanged, so I tried to find a cave or something. There's a little cabin just a ways over those hills—"

"Oh, yes, Valen's cabin," she said. "You stayed there?"

"I see you can guess the rest. Who's Valen?" he asked. "And what's with these clothes?" he added with disdain. "You look like a real girl now, you know."

"Well, I AM a girl," she said smoothing her ruffled skirts as he chuckled. She shot him a glare, and he stopped. Then

she told him her story. How she'd had an accident on her way to meet him so they could run away together.

During the story, Kie threw in a few low whistles and "Really?"s for effect, but he had expected such a tale. Why else would she fail to meet him? He knew she must have had some bad luck of some sort.

"I was very lonely, you know," he said seriously, and yet the twinkle never left his eyes. Everything he said was laced with potential humor, as if he feared being sucked into a dark abyss by his emotions.

"Oh, I can't even imagine," Isabel said kindly. "I am sorry." She entwined their touching arms. "Ever since we were children, we've been together. I would never have failed to meet you on purpose. Do you know that?" she asked.

"I guess." He nodded. "But I kinda forgot," he said sheepishly. "I guess I don't see why you'd go out of your way for me. I didn't blame you for not coming. A common thief—"

"Kie," she interrupted, "you are my best friend, and my family too, in a way." She smiled remembering. "I don't care if we aren't really related." She squeezed his hand. "We'll always be together."

"Okay," he said quietly. Then he jumped up, and paced a little. "What now?" he asked.

"Come with me for now," she answered, thinking as she spoke. "Tonight I'll sneak you into the castle, and tomorrow we'll think of something." She began to worry quietly. Was this fair to Valen? Sneaking a thief into his house, when he'd been so good to her?

It was only for one night, but then his cabin? That was just as dishonest. She would talk to Nole about it. It wouldn't be kept a secret. She couldn't keep it inside herself like that. Zenie wouldn't be around until morning, so it would be all right until then.

They walked back to the castle as the snow fell, Kie trying to juggle rocks as they walked. "Nice place," he said, following it up with a whistle, as he caught sight of the castle.

"Yes, it is," Isabel agreed.

There was no trouble sneaking him into the castle, and Isabel opened up one of the unused rooms herself, and they dusted off the bedding, and tried to make things livable. They started a fire, and sat in front of it for hours, late into the night, talking about old times. Neither of them had anything new to say it seemed.

To Kie's eyes, Mandra had changed. This was not the daring tomboy he had known. She had softened, in a nice way, he had to admit, but still... He missed the fire that used to be behind everything she said, the impatience in her quest for an adventurous life. A quest they had shared once. But now she seemed very calm, and peaceful... settled. That was something he did NOT want to do himself, and yet in her—or through her—it began to appeal to him.

* * *

Isabel nodded as she listened to Devon lecture on poetry the next morning. She'd had little sleep, since she and Kie had talked so late. She felt her mind wander, even as she tried to focus on Devon's deep voice. She realized she had failed when, what seemed like minutes later, she heard a pause in the lecture, and the kind accusation, "Am I really that boring, Isabel?"

Her eyes popped open to see him staring sternly down at her. "No..." she reassured him. "I'm sorry, dear, I..." She yawned.

"Mm hmm," he said decidedly. "Did you sleep at all last night?" he asked.

She glanced up at him coyly, suspecting he knew she was hiding something. "Okay," she said finally, sitting up straight. "I was up very late." He took the chair opposite to hers, and listened with curiosity. "I met... an old friend while I was out walking, and I invited him to stay here for a while. We talked for a while." She searched his face for a reaction. His eyebrows merely raised.

"Him?" he asked.

She smiled. "He was at Kargid with me—us," she answered. "I've known him since childhood."

He still looked at her suspiciously.

"He's like a brother to me," Isabel added with exasperation. "You know where my heart is." She placed a hand on his.

"I know." He winked at her. "So, how did he find you, Isabel?"

"We were running away together, and were supposed to meet somewhere, but I never got there, so he looked for me... and found me."

"Why was he leaving Kargid? Were things not going well

for him either?"

"Uh, no," Isabel stammered. "Devon, will you promise not to lose your head, or do anything against my wishes?"

"Why?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Well... he's wanted for stealing a castle stallion. It wasn't his first robbery. They wanted to hang him. But they haven't found him... yet." She peered up at him carefully, ready for an angry outburst.

"Isabel!" Devon said shaking his head. "I'd almost think trouble seeks you out. How can you associate—where did you become acquainted with—how did this man become your friend?" he asked finally, looking over at her pityingly.

"He was one of the maid's sons. We played together as children, and we just stayed friends, Devon. That's not so unusual," Isabel protested.

"Maybe it's a good thing you didn't meet him before," Devon said soberly. "Where would you have gone, Isabel? How were you planning to live? On stolen goods?"

"Please, you know I would never do THAT," she said to him as he paced. "I had some jewels," she said quietly. "We were going to sell them and buy some land for a farm." She glanced up at him, afraid he might find their childish dream stupid.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing before her. "I just lost my head. But I never promised I wouldn't," he said with a slight smile. Then he stared out the window for a moment. A thought occurred to him. "Where are the jewels now?" he asked.

Isabel thought about it. "I don't know," she admitted at last.

* * *

Later that night, Isabel tried to fit together her pieces of broken memory, to figure out where the jewels had gone. She'd had a delicate sapphire and diamond necklace that had been her mother's. Also a gold and diamond ring, an emerald ring, and a large diamond studded choker with an emerald in the center. She had a bit of sentimental fondness for the sapphire necklace. She had no memories of her mother, and had only seen her in a painting at Kargid. Kella was her name. Isabel had her mother's blond hair, and her father's green eyes. The blue eyes of the painting had often haunted

Isabel, for in every other way, Kella looked just like her daughter.

Kella had died when Mandra was 2. She just faded away. The doctors couldn't figure out what her illness was. She just grew weaker, and her eyes seemed far away. She became bedridden, and one day, staring out the window at the falling rain, she just quietly passed away. Her eyes were still open, facing the open window.

It had been Kie's mother who had told Mandra this, when she and Kie were children. She was Kella's personal maid and nurse at that time. She found her there like that with just a sprinkling of windblown rain on her beautiful face.

Still Isabel was willing to part with the necklace that linked her to her mother, if only it could buy her freedom. Freedom from a father who had grown too fond of material things to even notice his only daughter.

And where was this necklace now? And the other jewels? Had she hidden them or taken them with her? She was sure she'd had them with her the whole journey. Hadn't Valen said there were no footprints near her in the snow when they'd found her? It was just the horse's prints, and he was nowhere to be found.

Isabel paced her room, suddenly obsessed with this new puzzle. Where were the jewels? She began looking for the dress she had been wearing that night. There could be a clue. Finally she found it, and searched all pockets. There was nothing. It was a heavy dress and the thought occurred to her that jewels wouldn't weigh it down much. She began feeling every layer and quickly found what she had suspected: a lump near a seam. Undoing the threads by candlelight, her heart leaping in anticipation, she finally held the rings in her hand. They sparkled in the soft light. But she set them aside to continue her search. She had certainly been thorough about hiding them. The choker was lodged in the fabric under the dress, tied with threads to the seam. The necklace was the hardest to find. She'd actually sewn it into the lower end of a sleeve.

After her collection was reassembled, she sat gazing at them and rearranging them on her small table. Amazing that all this had been hidden in a dress. And she hadn't known it until now. Of course, she hadn't worn the dress since the day of the accident. Otherwise she would've surely felt something.

A new problem arose then in her mind. What to do with the jewels now? She'd felt secure before, knowing Valen would take care of her, at least until she was better. But now she was better, and her family was not what she had hoped it would be. Her father seemed to be the enemy of the whole world. She could not have thought of a worse situation if she'd tried. If he missed her at all, it was only as a valuable playing piece in his sick game. Without her, he'd lost a desired bit of land. A very large bit. She wasn't sorry for that, but there was no doubt in her mind... he was.

* * *

Isabel and Devon walked arm in arm across the rolling meadow of Valen's land. It was spring, and the air was cool, yet inviting. The grass was still dull brown from its hibernation, but the sky was blue, and birds were singing in the distance. They walked in silence, enjoying the day.

As they walked, Devon became curious. "Have you remembered anything lately, Isabel?"

Isabel answered slowly, as if being pulled back from a far away place. "Yes, I had a memory about my mother," she said. "I mean, I don't remember her. She died when I was a baby, but I remember Kie's mother telling us about her death. She was cleaning one of the rooms. Kie and I were about seven." Her story stopped there.

"Isabel?"

"Yes?"

"How did she die?" he asked gently.

Isabel fiddled with her overcoat as she answered quietly. "I don't know. She just sort of... faded."

He looked perplexed. "Faded?"

"I mean, she grew sick and weak and then just died." Isabel thought for a moment. "It's like she died of... sadness."

"I didn't know that," he said.

"Well, it's just that Kie's mom found her. No one else would know how it was. Eret could call it what he wanted." They walked quietly for a moment, then Isabel shook her head.

"What?"

"I can't believe that man is my father. I don't even think of him that way. I never called him anything but Eret. Isn't

that sad?" she asked, glancing up at him.

"It can be," he answered, putting his free hand on hers. "But you had people who took care of you and... loved you, right?" He thought back and realized he hadn't even thought of her much when he was there. Now he felt guilty. It was like she was merely a name before. Until the night he helped her escape.

"Yes, people took care of me," she answered. "It's not the same. I don't know. He's my flesh and blood. That SHOULD mean something."

"I know," he said, giving her hand a quick kiss.

They strolled in thoughtful silence after that, she still trying to sort through her feelings, and he wondering what Eret thought of him not reporting back.

* * *

Mandra and Kie were sitting in her room at the window, giggling over old times when Zenie came in with a duster in her hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered and blushed, and went to leave, but Isabel stopped her.

"No, Zenie, don't leave. Come meet my friend."

Zenie turned back around and walked gingerly towards them.

"Zenie, this is Kie, a friend I grew up with. Kie, Zenie," she finished quickly.

"Hullo," Kie said with a grin.

Zenie curtsied quickly, then cleared her throat. "Um, I was going to dust your room... but I'll come back," she said, then looked at Isabel questioningly.

"Okay," Isabel agreed.

Zenie looked relieved, and turned to go.

"Bye, Zenie!" Kie called out.

"Bye," she said quietly from the doorway, then scurried off down the hall.

"Mandra, have you been beating the help again?" he teased her.

She slapped his arm, "Only the obnoxious boys!"

"She's as shy as they come, huh?" he asked.

"Well, not around me... when I'm alone, I mean. We talk sometimes. She's a good friend. I like her."

"Me too," he said with a thoughtful look. Then his face

grew animated. "Let's go riding now, eh?" he suggested.

"Okay, but I don't want to see you slipping any horses into your pocket," she warned.

"Promise," he said in mock seriousness.

"Okay." She got up and followed him.

Once out at the stables, Isabel remarked, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Spring is here to stay, I think."

"Hope so," Kie answered.

They walked inside, and found Nole brushing one of the horses. His back was to them.

"Whoa! His hair could use a wash!" Kie noted quietly to Mandra.

"Kie, be good," she scolded him.

He chuckled.

"Hello, Nole," Isabel said to announce their arrival.

He spun around easily. "Ah, hello," he said.

"We'd like to go for a ride, dear sir," Kie said with charm.

"This is Kie," Isabel said almost apologetically. "Kie, this is Nole," she said to the young man beside her. The two men nodded at each other.

Once saddled up and on their way, Kie and Isabel rode easily in silence together over the small hills.

"Let's stop at the lake," Kie suggested.

"All right."

Once there, they dismounted and began walking along the shore. It was rough and the path wasn't very wide.

"Are you happy here?" Kie asked suddenly.

Isabel glanced at him with curiosity. "Yes, I suppose I am." She paused in thought. "It's not what we planned, is it?" she asked.

"No."

"I want to stay here," she told him.

"I know."

"It's a good place to be, Kie," she explained. "I feel welcome here. It's like a... home." She shrugged her shoulders. "You could stay too," she entreated him.

He smiled at her. "It's not my place, is it?" he asked. "I am NOT welcome here, I think," he said.

"I'm sorry. I know how things are for you." She looked distressed. "I know we haven't talked about it since you came here, but—"

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. "If you're going to say the deal is off, I'd rather not hear it aloud."

"Were we naive to think it could work?" she asked.

"No," he said earnestly. "I meant to marry you, and stand by you for the rest of our lives."

"Even if we didn't love each other?" She sat down in some tall grass on the bank. She wondered if it would be wise to mention Devon now.

He took a seat beside her. The water rippled gently next to their feet and sloshed against the grassy bank. "We loved each other enough." He looked at her, trying to burn his unspoken message into her mind: that he loved her now, more than a friend loving a friend, more than a brother loving a sister. He loved her as a man loving a woman. It didn't matter that he was barely a man. He'd never known a feeling like this, and he knew it could never end. He knew he could love this woman forever, if he could have the chance.

He spoke again. "I know we only meant to marry so people would accept us. So they wouldn't think you were a loose woman, and your father couldn't make you marry anyone... if you were married to me."

"Yes," Isabel said. Her stomach began to tie into knots. She didn't want to hurt Kie, her only friend for so long.

"I would've stood up to your father for you," he said quietly.

"God," she said to herself, "I know." Her father would've won that fight and Kie would've been killed. Knowing his commitment to protecting her under those circumstances only made it harder for her to say what she had to say. Maybe too hard.

She cleared her throat. "Kie..." but she couldn't say it. Even though she knew she could never love Kie the way she loved Devon, she heard herself speak the following words, "We could still be married," quietly. "If you want." She was brave enough to look at his face then.

What she found there was a mixture of surprise, relief, and a bit of happiness. "You'd still marry me?" he asked. "And what about this place you've found that is so much your 'place'?"

She pushed her feelings down into her gut. She couldn't cry in front of him. "What would you do if I stayed?"

"Go on as I have been."

"And you'd die alone in a barn someday."

"Thanks," he tried to joke. Then he asked a serious question. "And if I were married to you, how would I be?"

"We'd start our farm, maybe you'd stay out of trouble... if I made things nice for you." She nearly choked up at that last part. "I've known you too long to go back on our promise." Tears did run down her face then. "You're my oldest friend, Kie."

He reached up and wiped a tear from her cheek. "Mandra, don't marry me," he said. He leaned over and kissed her, then jumped to his feet. "Go find your man." He spoke quickly, then took off running back the way they had come. Away from her.

She buried her face in her hands, and let the tears fall. He understood. Thank God, he understood. Still she let her tears fall. She cried for him, and was grateful he hadn't professed his love to her. It would've broken her heart not to be able to return it.

* * *

He had turned away from her just in time. His eyes were already filled. He cried silently as he ran, letting the wind try to dry his tears. Kie was not a man who often thought of others first, but he couldn't take that look on her face for a lifetime. That pained, submissive expression. He wanted her passion to match his own, and if it couldn't, he wanted nothing. But because he loved her, he, in spite of himself, wanted her happiness above his own. He knew she loved that man with the black hair. Any moment she would've said it and sent a cold knife of pain into his heart. So he said it first. And gave her no opportunity to agree or argue.

He ran, and when he found the horses again, he rode. Then dark came and he let the horse walk aimlessly, so he could wallow in self-pity, and try to get used to the new heaviness in his chest. He couldn't, so he tried to ignore it, and rode quietly back to the castle.

* * *

For a week, every time Isabel ran into Kie, he was cold to her. She had thought things would be fine between them now that they had settled the marriage matter. But things were worse. She knew he loved her, and she couldn't make him stop. Though she would if she had that power.

He had developed a sort of mean streak. Only towards

her, it seemed. Whenever she tried to talk to him, he answered her quickly, and wouldn't look her in the eye. She grew sullen as well, and even began having bad dreams about him. They were vague, but he was definitely upsetting her.

She once again found her mind too filled with thoughts to sleep at night. He had refused her offer to marry him. Why was he being so difficult now? Why couldn't things go back to the way they used to be? She felt she had lost her friend forever.

Throwing a cloak over her shoulders, she went outside for a walk to clear her head. Rain lightly sprinkled her hair as she wandered into the grassy hills. It was a dark night except for an occasional flash of lightning.

She walked slowly on the slippery grass, and felt her way with each step. Tears fell from her eyes as she thought of how terrible it was that everything had to change. Her best friend hated her. Valen might never return. And part of her missed her life at Kargid. She knew that was foolish, but all she ever was still echoed around the Kargid castle walls.

It was lonely, cold, and yet it was her home. She longed for it, standing there on that rainy hill, with all of her being. There was a craziness there that she missed. A recklessness. No one expected anything of her there. She was a nobody.

But what of the marriage to that king? If she returned she would most definitely have to marry him. She cried more tears then, at the thought of losing Devon. Devon could never really love her, she reasoned with herself.

If he really knew the selfish things she thought, he wouldn't love her. How could he? He was a good man, and better than she deserved. She knew that. How could she be married to a soldier? He'd be poor. He'd have to teach to make money now that he'd abandoned Eret's army.

Could she live like that? She'd be like Zenie, scrubbing floors and folding laundry. Forever. That word sounded so final. It made an echo and she saw right down to her grave when she thought of it. She didn't want to do anything forever.

Whether or not she was in her right mind she couldn't tell, but she found herself moving towards the stables in the dark. Once there, she felt her way and managed to get a horse ready to ride. She climbed on top of it and thought for a moment. As the lightning flashed, she glanced back at the

castle she had come to love so much, and everyone who went with it. Then she thought of home. With determination, she took a deep breath and started riding back toward Kargid, her way lighted occasionally by the crashing sky.

Rain splashed on her face as she traveled and her skin grew cold. She took no notice of it, but kept riding. It grew light after a matter of hours and she rode on. Her stomach grumbled, and her head was dizzy. She ignored these and thought of the one thing that could solve all her problems. She was tired of making decisions and trying to find her life outside Kargid. There was no life outside. She was a shadow outside. A mist that anyone could see through or would soon. Kargid was real. She was real there. If there was pain there, at least it made her feel alive. In Aerineva there was nothing. Everything floated there. It was all too easy.

The trees began to pitch and swim around her as the horse slowed to a walk. Daylight seeped through them and played tricks with her tired mind. Her soaked clothes clung to her body and chilled her to the bone. She had come too far.

Her trip away from Eret had been well planned, and even then there had been an accident. On this trip she had no food, no warm clothes anymore, and no idea of which direction she should be going in. She was now lost. But unaware of it.

In her mind, she was home. She slipped off her horse and fell to her knees in front of the castle gate.

"Home!" she whispered. In her mud stained dress, she entered the grounds. The gate was never left open, but they must've expected her return. She suddenly found herself in the Great Hall, and her father stood before her. He was a still figure, fading then reappearing vividly. She tried to hold him, but felt air.

"Father! Why do you not know me?" she cried. He was gone. Her hands went to her feverish head. "Father..." she said feebly, "I am here..." Trees were in the Great Hall. Rows of black trees. She was in the forest. She had never left it. She put a hand to her forehead again, and then to her cheek. The world around her was pitching and reeling. She put her other hand on a tree near her to stop the movement.

"I am ill," she said quietly to herself, then sunk lower, down to her knees in the mud once more. "I am very ill," she said, as if to reassure herself. She leaned her back up against the tree and closed her eyes to rest.

"Very ill..." Everything faded to black.

* * *

Devon waited in the library for about fifteen minutes for Isabel to arrive for their daily lesson. He started walking the halls casually, whistling as he went, hoping to bump into her. She was often late. This was not unusual. He couldn't find her, and began to worry a little bit. He ran into Zenie in the hall.

"Have you seen Isabel?" he asked her.

"No, sir," she answered quietly. "She was already gone when I went to check her room this morning."

"When do you check it?" he asked, concerned.

"Just after the sun rises," Zenie said meekly, not liking this direct questioning.

"Thank you, Zenie." Devon concluded their conversation, and walked briskly to the stairs. He went out to the stables, feeling she could've gone for a ride. But so early? That was unlike her.

Nole was there reading a book, leaning up against the door. "Excuse me," Devon said politely, "has Isabel had a ride this morning?" he asked.

"There is a horse missing," Nole said calmly. "I assumed she had taken it."

"Oh, that must be it," Devon said, relieved, but not totally convinced. "She wasn't at her lesson. I was concerned," he said in explanation. "She deserves a scolding," he said jokingly to lighten his own mood. "I'll wait for her inside." He nodded to Nole, and turned to go back up to the castle.

As he did, he saw Kie going toward the stables. He had a sort of pack under his arm, as if he were intending to travel.

"Kie," Devon said as he approached him.

Kie lifted his eyebrows in response.

Devon rubbed his hands together. "Nothing," he said finally, smiling sheepishly, as if he had just reconsidered saying something stupid. He went on his way up to the castle, as Kie shook his head and continued walking.

Once to the stables, Kie nodded to Nole and asked, "Have you seen Mandra around?"

"We think she's gone riding," he said, putting his book down again. He was becoming amused at this sudden urgent need for Isabel.

"Oh," Kie said, disappointed. He glanced off in the distance as if hoping to catch a glimpse of her somewhere on the hills. He thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll go find her. Spare a horse?" he asked.

"Ya," Nole hopped up easily and opened the stable door for Kie.

Kie got himself and his belongings situated on his horse and set off to search for Mandra.

He rode at a trot over the hills, thinking of what he would say. He was leaving. He didn't know where he'd go, but he couldn't stay here. Not if she didn't want him.

He rode for an hour or so, all around Valen's land, but there was no sign of her. He thought perhaps she had ridden back, so he headed toward the stables.

"Is she back?" he asked Nole when he reached them.

Nole glanced up from the shirt he was mending. "No, I thought you'd find her. She wasn't anywhere?" He was becoming concerned himself.

"I thought she'd be here by now," Kie answered with a sigh as he dismounted.

"Hmm." Nole set his mending aside. "Maybe I'll have a go at it. Where did you say you looked?" he asked, going inside for another horse.

"All over the castle grounds. I even passed that little cabin." He put his hands in the air. "No one there."

Nole paused in thought. "I'll look beyond the grounds then, I suppose. Devon's been looking in the castle, and walking around."

Kie scowled involuntarily. "Great."

Nole noticed the sarcasm, and knew the reason for it. Not much escaped an observant person. "Well, wish me luck," he said, hopping onto the horse.

"Luck," Kie said absentmindedly.

Nole smiled, then took off in the direction of the cabin.

He rode for quite a while before he reached it. There was still no one in it, but he thought it would be a good starting place. He rode past it, and into the dark trees beyond.

He didn't even know where Isabel would go or why, but this was the direction she had arrived from months ago. It seemed logical to him, for an unknown reason, to look for her there.

So he zigzagged through the trees, occasionally calling her name. It had rained the night before, and it made the air

colder than it might be. He had left around noon, an hour or more ago. He kept going in the same direction, however, farther and farther away from the castle. It was as if he were being tugged by an invisible string.

He had taken no food, thinking it wouldn't be this long. She must be somewhere nearby. Why would she run away? He began to get hungry. Hours passed as he continued his thorough search. Then around supper time he saw a flash of blue on the ground a ways away. He rode swiftly over to it. It was the blue of her dress. She was extremely pale and had fainted or fallen asleep, leaning against a tree.

He was off his horse in a moment, feeling her skin. It should have been almost frozen, but it was warm. Too warm.

"Oh, God," he said to himself, "Isabel." He managed to pick her up and get them both onto the horse. Hers was nowhere in sight. Her clothes were damp. He rode as fast as he could through the trees in the direction of Valen's castle. They were hours away from it. Nole began to worry. How long had she lain there like that already? Would it be too late when they arrived home?

His arms were around her as they traveled, and he could feel her burning up. He was tired and hungry himself. Finally, they reached the small cabin, but they were only halfway home. He made a decision then. The others would be very worried, but he had to help her now. They would have to wait at least overnight for news from him.

He carried her into the cabin and laid her on the sofa. As quickly as he could he built a fire in the fireplace. Then he brought out some of his clothes he had stored there. He took her wet cloak off, then as politely as he could under the circumstances, he peeled off her clothes and put her into some of his dry things. He hung hers close to the fire to dry.

In the other room he also had some dried herbs and food stored. He set about making an herbal poultice to help her fever. He warmed some water from the nearby river and added the herbs. A rag soaked in the mixture was placed on her forehead.

"There," he said to the still sleeping Isabel. He patted all her exposed skin with the rag, and did so occasionally throughout the evening. For his supper, he ate some dried fruit and meat. Mostly, he waited for her to wake.

She must be hungry as well as tired. He wrapped her loosely in a blanket, and kept dabbing her pale skin with his

herbs. "Come on, Isabel," he whispered.

Her face looked troubled. People usually looked at peace when asleep, but she did not. She whimpered now and then, and Nole would pat her hand, not knowing if she was aware of him or not.

She began to toss and turn sometime after dark. Nole figured this was a good sign, perhaps. At least it was a change.

At one point he must've laid down on the floor beside her because he woke there in quiet darkness, what seemed like hours later. The fire was just a pile of glowing embers, and Isabel was quiet. He rose stiffly and put some kindling and another log in the fireplace. Then he looked at her with squinting eyes. She was sleeping more peacefully now, and her skin was moist. Her fever had lessened. He smiled to himself, then pulled a chair up next to her and watched her for a while.

Sleepiness was getting to him. He woke to a soft touch on his arm. He had fallen asleep on his hands.

His head popped up and he remembered where he was. "Isabel," he said.

Her eyes were open and calm. She stared at him. "How did I get here?" she asked hoarsely.

"I found you," he said, suddenly shy about his patient being aware of him.

"I was ill?" she asked.

"Yes."

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"Everyone was looking for you."

She nodded with a painful expression on her face.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine." She smiled. Thoughts of Devon searching for her flashed through her mind. And of Kie. Would he even care?

Her body ached all over, and she felt very dry. Her lips were parched and her throat scratchy. "Is there water?" she asked.

"Yes," Nole said, hopping up to get some as if suddenly remembering his role as healer. "Here." He helped her lean forward and held the cup for her as she sipped.

She smiled in thanks as she laid back down. "This is sort of your cabin," she said glancing around.

"I spend a lot of time here," he said in return.

"It suits you," Isabel said sincerely.

He nodded. "It's simple. The way I like it."

She nodded her agreement, then grew thoughtful. "Are you happy, Nole?" she asked in her raspy voice.

He looked a little startled, but gave her question a moment of thought. "Yes," he said simply.

"I can tell you are," she said, pulling the blanket up to her chin. Then her face grew puzzled and a little sheepish. "Is it hard to be happy?" she asked quietly.

Nole chuckled a little. "I don't think so," he replied. "Aren't you happy, Isabel?"

She shook her head slowly, but added, "Part of me is."

"What part isn't?" he asked, intrigued by these questions.

"I don't understand some things."

He waited for her to go on.

"My father doesn't love me," she said frowning, "but I never knew it before." She stared into space. "'Til I came here."

He didn't agree or disagree. He just sat and waited for her to speak again.

Her green eyes looked toward him. "Why doesn't he love me, Nole?" She asked plainly.

For some reason, her simple question cut through him like ice. "I don't know," he answered. He was remembering his own past and the parents he had never met. He wondered if he had been loved. He was lost for a moment. Looking up from his reverie, he realized she was still staring at him, dissatisfied with his short answer.

He cleared his throat. "I think..." he began, organizing his words in his head, "that... greedy people have a hard time appreciating what they already have." He looked at her for a reaction. She seemed satisfied with his explanation, but sad too. It was a sad subject, though. That couldn't be helped.

"Hmm," she said.

He left her alone with her thoughts then as he made her some stew. She must be hungry.

* * *

The next day, Nole packed them both up and started back toward the castle. The sky was overcast and gray, but there was no rain.

He'd never asked her what she was doing so far away,

and he didn't intend to, even though he was curious. She seemed withdrawn, and he thought making her talk about it might make her sadder. So he stayed quiet.

When they got back to the castle, no one seemed to be around. They took the horse to the stable, and Isabel saw that the horse she had been riding was safely back in its place.

"I wonder where everyone is." Nole mumbled almost to himself. They walked toward the castle in silence. When passing the garden Isabel saw a flash of white out of the corner of her eye. Peeping around a thick bush, she saw Kie, asleep, somewhat uncomfortably, on the small bench.

"Look!" she whispered to Nole while grabbing his sleeve.

"Ah," he said, seeing the young man. "There's one."

She tiptoed over to him and gently put her hand on his arm. "Kie," she said quietly. He woke slowly with a scowl on his face, and groaned when he tried to move. All his muscles were sore from folding up on that cold bench.

Once he'd gotten himself into a stiff standing position, he didn't say a word, but wrapped his arms comfortably around Isabel. Finally he pulled away from her.

His hands still on her shoulders, he said to a surprised Isabel, "Welcome home."

She smiled, but still couldn't hide her confusion at his friendliness. "Thank you," she finally stuttered.

"Everyone's been looking for you." He turned to survey the cold bench. "I fell asleep there, I guess. None of us are thinking straight."

"Is... Devon out looking?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't react badly to Devon's name.

"Yes. I think he took a horse up that way," he said, waving a hand in the opposite direction from the one they had just come. He didn't seem at all uncomfortable mentioning his competitor for Isabel's affections. "Good guy, that Devon," he said with a genuine grin.

Isabel looked truly amazed.

"We had a good chat," he said as if to explain. But he would say no more. "I'll be sleeping if anyone asks," he said as he wandered toward the castle, stretching his arms as he went.

"Hey, there," he said to Nole as he passed.

"Hey," Nole answered, thinking what a strange fellow Kie was.

* * *

Devon was still gone when nighttime fell again. Isabel waited up as long as she could, but she was still weak from her ordeal. Kie promised to tell Devon the news when he returned, so she went up to her room.

She lay in her bed watching dark clouds through her window. She saw the moon's faint glow behind them and wondered if it would break through if she watched long enough.

It didn't. Or she fell asleep before it did, because it seemed like hours had passed when she heard her door creak. She listened, still half in a haze.

"Isabel?" A voice whispered.

Now she was awake. She peered toward the doorway trying to see the person. "Yes?"

Her voice sounded sleepy.

He stepped into the room.

At that moment, the moon did break through the clouds and illuminated Devon with a sudden otherworldly light. He looked like an angel to her eyes. She had been so homesick for him.

He glanced casually out the window at the intruding moon, then his eyes were on her again. "I didn't mean to wake you," he said quietly in that wonderful deep voice she had missed so much. "I just had to see with my own eyes that you were all right."

"Yes," she said, still distracted by the vision he made in her doorway bathed in the soft light. He had no idea how he appeared to her. She noticed he wore no jacket, just shirt and pants, both a bit dirty from riding in muddy weather for hours. His hair was a mess. Matted down a bit from rain and sweat. He looked tired, and yet his eyes were so awake. He looked so ready to do anything for her, even after all he'd done.

"I'm all right now," she said.

"Good." He patted the door, and cleared his throat. He wanted to stall his departure, but he knew it would be improper to enter her room in the middle of the night. "Goodnight, Isabel," he said finally, and turned to go.

"Wait," she said quickly, sitting up.

He poked his head into the room.

"I haven't seen you for days," she said shyly.

He stepped sort of gingerly into the room.

"You can come in," she said, hoping he wouldn't think less of her for doing so.

He took a few steps toward her, still unsure.

"Devon, it's okay," she reassured him, then held out her hand to him.

Finally sure she didn't mind, he came toward her and took her hand, then sat down on the edge of her bed and wrapped his arms around her as he had wanted to do all day.

His clothes were damp, she noticed as she held tightly on to him. He buried his face in her hair.

The moon faded into the clouds once more and it became quite dark. He finally pulled away from her.

"I was so worried," he said, pushing a lock of hair away from her face.

"I know." She felt that if she apologized it would make it all more serious somehow, but she had to. "I'm sorry."

He hugged her again. "I know," he answered. "It's alright now." He pulled away and put his hands on her shoulders. "I must go," he said with regret in his voice.

"No, stay," she said before she realized how that sounded. "'Til I fall asleep, I mean," she said quickly to explain. "But you don't have to."

"No, I want to," he stuttered, surprised she had said it.

"I just feel so... safe with you," she spilled out. "Like everything is right in the world. It's like where you are... is where my home is."

"I feel the same way about you," he said softly, wishing he could see her better at this magical moment. It occurred to him that she had changed since her trip. Something had changed in the way she saw things. She seemed more sure of her feelings for him.

"Isabel..." He knew she was listening, but he became tongue tied. "Does this mean you'd consider... marrying me now?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said calmly. "I want to always be where you are." She wound her fingers around his.

He jumped off the bed and did a funny dance all around the room to celebrate. She giggled. It was light again, and she could see him hopping about.

It started to rain at that moment, and she could see rain drop shadows falling on him from the window pane.

"Come here!" she scolded him, still giggling. She stepped onto the cold floor and joined him in a crazy waltz.

They finally collapsed on her bed laughing as quietly as they could.

She felt immensely tired after the dancing and the illness, so she curled up under her covers once more. She moved over and patted the space next to her.

He laid down obediently, on top of the covers. She rolled over to face the window, and pulled his arm around her as she went.

It was so peaceful being next to him, she thought sleepily. This must be what heaven was like. She drifted off with the rain pattering softly on the window and his arm comfortably embracing her.

Devon watched the rain make patterns on the window as he lay next to her and felt her breathing slow down and become more regular. He knew she was probably asleep, but he stayed. He wouldn't stay 'til daylight. Her reputation would be ruined. He just wanted to enjoy this moment a little longer. To be this close to her, to feel her breathing, and to know at last that she was safe.

* * *

Isabel sat in the garden with a blanket wrapped around her. It was still and quiet. The flowers sent a sweet smell into the air. Devon had gone into the village that morning to look for work teaching. She was in a daze, thinking about him, when she heard a man clearing his throat just behind her.

She spun around, startled. "Kie!"

He grinned, but his eyes had no sparkle. He sat down beside her. "Mandra," he began, "when you disappeared the other day, I was... well, I was looking for you... so I could say goodbye."

"But why?" she asked. She put a cool hand on his arm. "Don't you like it here? Do you hate me so much now that you have to leave?"

"I don't hate you," he said. "Ah, Mandra." He shook his head, "You know how I feel about you. And that's why I can't stay." He wouldn't look at her.

"Doesn't our friendship mean anything to you anymore?" she cried desperately. How could he leave now, when everything else was going well finally? "Where will you go?"

she asked him. "Will I... ever see you again?" Her voice cracked. "Since we were children we've been together." She stared at the thin scar near his eye, then she traced it with her finger. He closed his eyes. "I thought I would always know you, Kie. Always."

He pulled her hand away from his cheek and kissed it gently. "You have good memories of me now," he said quietly. "But if I stayed, I'd become bitter watching you with... him. You wouldn't want me to stay then." He looked at her again. "I don't like the way this feels, Mandra." He put a hand on his chest. "It's awful. There's this... huge hole here where there wasn't before, and I can't explain it, and I don't know why it's happened now. But I must go. Before I do something I'll regret." He stood up slowly. "I wish I could always know you," he said quietly, and took one last memorizing look at her sad features. His bag was with him, already packed. His cape draped over his arm now.

She jumped up as well as she could in her weakness and put her hands on his shoulders. Her warm blanket fell to the cold garden stones. She looked determined. "Promise me something then," she pleaded.

He nodded at her, surprised at her earnestness.

"Promise it isn't forever." She grasped his hands. "That we will see each other again. Just don't walk away now thinking we'll never meet again. Please."

Her misty green eyes cut into him and he knew he couldn't deny her anything. "I promise," he choked out. He touched her cool cheek and turned to go, unable to actually utter the word 'goodbye'. He wanted to stay. To hold her, to cover her up again with that ragged blanket. To kiss her lips one more time. Anything just one more time. Anything to delay the moment. But he walked away. And he didn't look back. He couldn't look back.

She watched him disappear behind the garden wall, and put a hand to her mouth to stop her tears. She shivered in the chilly air, but made no move to cover herself. She buried her face in her hands, and cried.

* * *

Isabel sat in murky darkness, a pleasant muffled noise comforted her ears. Her hair floated around her in waving threads. Finally she came up for air.

She shook her head as she shot through the surface of the water. She blinked awkwardly at Devon.

"Here," he said, brushing the lake water away from her eyes with his thumbs. "Better?"

"Oh, yes, much," she said, then shivered involuntarily. "It was so warm under the water." She sunk in again up to her neck. She was wearing very little besides her undergarments, and thought it best that she keep her body covered with water, in case someone should see them.

"Now what?" she asked Devon.

He was standing in waist deep water in front of her in just his pants and a shirt. "You know, I can't believe you never learned to swim," he said for the tenth time.

"I TOLD you, I couldn't go outside the castle grounds, and we only had a stream. Don't mock me." She splashed him.

He flicked some water back at her and she squealed. "Shh, someone will hear," he said seriously.

She pouted. He flicked water at her again.

"Okay, tell me more," she said, recovering from the splash.

"You move your legs and arms around in circles fast and it keeps you afloat."

"What? I don't believe that."

"Watch." He moved out about five feet and demonstrated. "I'm floating. Come ON." He came back and grabbed her by the hand.

"No, no, no," she said quickly. "I'll do it later, maybe."

"Uh-uh!" he said laughing. "Come on. He put his hands on her waist, and she threw her arms around his neck. "Relax, Isabel."

"Oh, no, you'll drop me."

"You know I won't." He untangled her arms and pushed her away while he held her up with his hands on her waist. "Just try it. I'm right here," he said warmly.

She sighed miserably and took a deep breath. "Catch me," she said sternly to him, "if I start to sink."

"I will."

She took another deep breath and started moving her arms and legs back and forth under the water. He let her go and she frantically kept beating the water with her limbs.

"It works!" she sputtered. Then after a few seconds, "How do I stop?"

He pulled her closer to the shore where she could touch

the bottom again. He grinned.

She was still breathless. "I did it!"

"Yes," he chuckled. "Want to learn more?" he asked.

"No, no, no, I've had enough," she assured him with her teeth chattering. "I need a fire."

"Okay."

They shivered onto the shore and dried off as best they could. This had been an unplanned adventure, so they had nothing to do but put their dry clothes back on over their wet ones.

"Ooo, so much wet hair," he said looking at her as she buttoned her dress. "You'll get sick if we don't dry that." He took his jacket and began drying her hair with it.

She stopped buttoning and just stared at him.

He was intent on his task of drying her hair and didn't notice her look for a moment. "What?" he asked, shaking his jacket off.

She pushed her hair away from her ear. "Nothing."

She looked sad. "What?" he asked determinedly, putting on his damp jacket.

"No one's ever done that for me before," she said.

"Done what?"

"Dried my hair." She twisted a blond lock around her fingers. "You really care about me," she said as if amazed.

He looked at her with an odd expression, a mixture of pity and mostly love. "Oh, Isabel." He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned her head against his chest. He rocked her back and forth in a silly slow dance, that settled into a tender embrace. "I will always take care of you," he said, running a hand down her still wet hair. "Always."

She closed her eyes and believed him. "I love you," she said looking up at him.

"I love you too." He took her face in his hands and kissed her. "My bride," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

She smiled.

The sunlight was beginning to fade as they made their way quietly back to the castle, holding hands and dreaming of a warm fire.

Isabel woke to the sound of a cracking log. Her eyes stung a bit as she opened them. Her face was warm. Devon's arm was around her. They had fallen asleep in front of the fireplace in her room. She sat up stiffly and stretched her

arms.

Devon lay sleeping soundly next to her. She sat gazing at his peaceful face for a moment. He looked so happy. She smoothed hair away from his forehead. He began to stir.

He woke slowly and squinted up at her. "You look like an angel," he said gruffly with a sleepy voice. "How long have I slept?" He stretched himself out on the tapestry rug.

Isabel glanced out the window. "It's still dark. I fell asleep too." She smiled as she watched him curl up again and roll right up against her. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Dev?" she said quietly.

"Mm-hmm."

She put her palm to his cheek. One eye opened, then closed again. She stroked his face with the back of her hand. "Do you think it'll always be like this?"

"Like what?"

"Wonderful. Us... together." She pulled her hand away.

"I mean... what if we were somehow... separated from each other?"

"Isabel." He looked clearly at her, then propped himself up on an elbow. "Why would you ask that?"

"I never want to lose you," she answered quietly. "But..."

He put a finger to her lips. "Don't even think it, Isabel. I'd hate to be away from you."

"What would you do if it happened?" she asked seriously.

He looked down, wondering why she went on with the subject. He glanced up and her face was expectant, and definitely sad. "I'd find you again," he told her. "With all the power I had, I'd find you somehow."

She kissed him. Then took in his face for her memories of this moment. His messed up black curls. His gentle blue eyes, and handsome face. "You won't let us be separated?" She curled up next to him and put her arms around him.

He embraced her too. "I won't." He held her tight, suddenly fearing the possibility.

She buried her face in his chest. A tear fell down her cheek, but he didn't see it. Why did she feel this way all of a sudden? She held onto him tightly, feeling she could never get a good enough grip. She wouldn't be able to keep him with her always. But she would try.

* * *

Isabel watched Nole as he expertly got two horses ready to ride. He moved with grace and ease. As if his hands had done those same chores a thousand times and knew them by heart. She fiddled with a piece of hay, and marveled at how a simple task can be beautiful when it's done with love. He obviously loved what he was doing, and was oblivious to her stare.

Devon was meeting her soon for a ride. He had gone into the castle to change his clothes. Isabel had her hair pulled back into a simple bun and her riding gloves were draped over her arm. She had on a sturdy traveling dress, perfect for riding. Not as good as boys' trousers, she knew from past experience, but as good as she could expect.

It was an unusually chilly day for August, but the sky was fairly clear. She had longed for a ride for days. Cold weather couldn't keep her from it. She was trying to be patient as she twisted the piece of hay with her fingers.

Devon stepped out of the castle and immediately noticed two men on horseback galloping towards him. He stopped abruptly and stared. They grew closer. It was just what he had feared. He knew them. They were Kargid soldiers.

His heart began beating faster and his hands grew clammy. His mind worked quickly on what to do, what to say. He walked over to meet them.

They pulled up their horses and one of the men sneered down at him. "Well, here we find our traitor," he said harshly.

"You didn't go far enough away if you were planning on deserting, Devon," said the other one calmly.

"I'm not deserting," Devon said coldly. "Why have you come here?" he asked.

"Why do you think?" said the angry one. "Do you have the girl or not?" He scowled again. "I wouldn't think she'd be much of a match for you, but I see I was wrong."

Devon prayed silently that Isabel would not choose this moment to come out of the stables. He didn't even dare to look in her direction to check. "I couldn't find her," he said to the soldiers.

"And yet here you are," said the calm one. "Having a nice holiday, are ya? While the rest of us are off fighting for the king?" He smiled sarcastically.

"I just recently stopped here," Devon said, thinking

quickly. "I was on my way back from the north. She's not anywhere in these parts, I'm fairly sure," he said, trying to stay calm, hoping they'd believe him.

"I'd say he looks well rested up, wouldn't you?" said the hot head, looking at his companion. "I guess he'll know in future not to leave his important work to you, won't he, softy?"

Devon glared up at the man. "I did my job, and I did it well. She's not to be found here," he practically growled at the man.

"Maybe you'd like to invite us into your humble castle, my lord," said the calm one mockingly.

"I'll get my things and we can start back now," said Devon firmly. "I need my horse, and I'll be ready." He watched them coldly, waiting for their reaction.

The calm one shrugged his shoulders. "It's all the same to me, boy," he said, "but I can't promise there'll be a happy greeting at the other end."

"Ay, that there won't," said the other. "Don't worry, we'll watch your hangin'," he said in mock sweetness. "And we'll put pretty flowers on your grave too."

Devon glared at the man and gritted his teeth. He wanted to explode in angry words at them both, but instead he turned toward the stables finally, and quickly went to get his horse. He knew the soldiers' eyes must be on him and he prayed they couldn't see her as well as he could.

She was in shadow, a worried expression on her face.

"Where can he be?" she thought to herself. Then suddenly she heard his voice outside. It was strange, urgent in a way. Surprised, she went and glanced out the stable door.

It took a moment to register in her mind what she was seeing. Two men dressed like soldiers, in black, sat on horses. Devon stood in front of them. They were arguing. She couldn't hear their exact words.

Nole had stepped quietly beside her to watch. Automatically she started forward, wanting to go to Devon.

Nole stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Step back," he said quietly.

She glanced at him, a little annoyed, but did what he said.

Devon said something to the men. One of the soldiers sat still for a moment, then replied and nodded at him. Devon spoke again, then began walking swiftly to the stables. He looked very worried. Quickly he came inside and went straight to her. With his hands on her arms, he moved her even further into the shadows.

She felt a chill go through her body. "What is going on?" she could barely whisper. Her throat had tightened up from the tension.

He looked stumped, as if he had no idea how to answer. His eyes were intently looking at her. His grip on her arms just a little too hard.

"Devon," she whispered. Somehow she knew what would happen next. Already she knew.

He quickly got a hold of himself. He rubbed her shoulders compulsively with his fingers and stared at her, memorizing everything. "Forgive me," he managed to choke out. He glanced out at the men. They looked agitated. He took one last look at her and touched her face. Quickly, and with great emotion, he kissed her lips and then pulled away. He was blinking his eyes so he could see through the gloss of tears in them. He went over and grabbed a horse by the reins.

She watched him from a daze, disbelieving what seemed to be happening.

Suddenly he swung up onto the horse and looked fiercely at Nole. "Watch her," he said seriously. "Don't let her go." And then he was gone. He rode rapidly out of the stables and over to the men.

She felt herself walking slowly to the door. The chill she'd felt before was still with her.

Almost as soon as he joined the men, they were all off together, going south... toward Kargid.

She felt a hand slip around her arm once more. She ignored it. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "Oh God." Her feet wanted to run, but Nole wouldn't let her go. She lurched forward, but he had a good hold on her and pulled her back.

She struggled to get away, but he put his arms around her and held her tightly.

"Damn you!" she yelled at him. "Let me go!" Tears stung her eyes. Anger seethed inside of her. Why would he not let her move? She had to follow Devon. Wasn't he in just as much trouble as her with the Kargid soldiers? They wouldn't kill her, but they might him. She could help him. Could Nole

not see this? "Bastard!" She hurled curses at him, as she grew angrier and angrier. "What are you helping!"

She fought against him with all her strength, and it did her no good. He was simply stronger than she was. She stopped struggling. Her head dropped forward and she began to cry. Tears of anger and frustration. How could this have happened to them?

When Nole felt her relax in his arms, he loosened his hold on her. She crumbled to the ground. He followed. Gingerly he put his arms around her again. This time for comfort.

After several minutes Isabel sat with her head in her hands, taking deep breaths. She looked up finally. Nole left a hand on her back and waited to see what she would do.

"We could go after them," she said suddenly, with renewed vigor. She got herself on her feet again, and Nole followed her as she went to the other horses. "We could find them and... DO something," she said pathetically.

Nole just listened. Isabel put her hand halfheartedly on the saddle horn, as if she were going to climb up. He put his hand on hers to stop her. She didn't resist.

"I'm sorry..." he said.

"Fine," she said coldly, and marched out of the stables. He watched her head in the direction of the lake. Just to be sure she wouldn't try to leave, he followed her at a distance. Devon's sacrifice would be meaningless if she put herself in danger for him.

He stayed in the woods and saw her as she went to the clearing, by the big fallen tree. She sat and stared into the lake.

Random thoughts were running through her mind as she folded her arms around herself. The day before, Devon had been right there, teaching her to swim. Last night she had feared this would happen. And here it was. It was completely unreal to her, that he could be gone. Her head ached from crying, but nonetheless, she felt hot tears run down her face as she stared at that shimmering water. Everything became blurry, but she didn't care. She didn't bother to wipe her tears away. Nothing mattered now. Not like it had. He had risked his life to help her and to be with her. She was the one who should be with those soldiers now. Being led back to Kargid for that false wedding. Would that be so horrible compared to this?

She found it hard to breathe. Her spirit struggled inside

her in agony. If they hang him... she thought, then shuddered. It could be worse if they didn't. She made herself calm down and breathe properly. She wiped her eyes carefully and dried her cheeks. Her lips tasted salty from her tears.

The water in front of her lapped aimlessly against the shore. As she stood up, she gazed blankly into it. It must be deep, she thought, glancing at the darkness farther out. It shimmered and called to her.

Her feet began walking towards it, almost without her permission. They took her to the edge of the water. She stepped in. She felt the cold morning water fill up her boots slowly and chill her toes. The bottom of her dress soaked up the clear water. It became heavy, and she moved further into the lake. She knew, under the water, sounds were muffled, everything was dark and soothing. There was peace. There could be.

It was cold. She waded in up to her waist and dragged her fingers around beside her. She'd sink like a big rock in this dress. She took another step.

A splashing noise behind her startled her out of her daze. She turned to find Nole striding through the water towards her. But she had reached the drop-off. She took another step.

Over the unseen edge she fell quickly, and the water rushed up her body and over her head. It made her shiver involuntarily with its sudden coldness. She held her breath, though there was no need. Soon it would all be gone, all the breathing and living and pain. Her waterlogged clothes pulled her downward into darkness. Her chest grew tight. This was all wrong. It shouldn't hurt. A fear gripped her suddenly: what if this didn't end the pain? What had she done?

She struggled in vain to raise her body to the surface. Her hands flailed above her. She could see their white shapes swinging to and fro in the darkness and her chest hurt. The white shapes began to fade. But there was something else, a form, coming to get her. To take her away. She felt the water enter her lungs, and gag her. Then she felt nothing at all.

There was something beating on her, smacking her in the back. Isabel felt herself cough and sputter up a horrible amount of liquid. She wanted to cry because of the way it

stung inside her nose. She did cry. The beating on her back stopped. She opened her eyes carefully. She saw dirt and a pair of rough leather boots.

Nole turned her over on his lap and sputtered, "Thank God!" He helped her to the ground, then slid off the big log himself and put his head in his hands. They were shaking.

Isabel curled up on the ground next to him and shivered. She couldn't think anymore. Her stomach began to hurt as she realized she was right back where she had started. And her pain was still here. She prayed that God would let her die, would kill her somehow, if she couldn't do it herself. Would He PLEASE end this?

Nole sat beside her still shaken. His prayers were of a different sort. He begged the Almighty to please watch over this girl and not make his job so difficult. He began to feel peace again. His heartbeat calmed down. His hands were steady. He grew strong again, and he knew it was because she couldn't be now. He would have to be her strength. He would do his best anyway.

He looked down at her. Her eyes were squeezed shut. He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. Ice cold. She was always getting herself into trouble, he thought to himself. Kind to everyone, but horrible to herself. She tortured herself over the troubles of others. It chilled him to the bone to think of what she had just tried to do.

"Isabel."

She didn't answer. She lay there, locked somewhere deep inside herself. She heard him, but prayed endlessly for deliverance from the world she was now in. She couldn't answer.

He wanted to cry his eyes out, but he held back. With his last ounce of strength, he managed to scoop her up into his arms. She clung to him like a child as he staggered back to the castle. He made himself keep moving, thinking of her tormented spirit. God, he would do anything to soothe it for her. If he could reach her at all. This time no herbs or words of wisdom could help her, he knew.

Zenie ran out to meet them, as he neared the castle. She wore a profound look of worry on her face.

"The door," Nole said, out of breath, and nodded for her to open it.

She ran obediently over to it and held it wide open for him. He got them through the doorway and into the parlor.

He set Isabel down quickly in the couch nearest the fireplace. Zenie watched closely, eager to help, but not knowing how.

"Zenie, would you build a fire?" Nole practically whispered as he sunk into the nearest chair. She scampered off to find firewood and he collapsed into long held back tears.

* * *

Isabel had lain in that bed for hours, Nole thought. He sat next to her fireplace, and watched her stare at the wall. She didn't even look out the window, at the stars. She stared at the wall below the glass. The sky was clear and unusually bright that night.

She had been this way all day. Since the incident at the lake. The maids had put her into some warm dry clothes. Zenie had carefully brushed out her hair as it dried. Isabel had not reacted to any of this. Nole had tucked her carefully into her bed. And now she just stared.

They had tried to give her food, but it was futile. She was far away. He couldn't leave her. He was afraid to leave her. If only she would fall asleep. Perhaps he could do the same. He had his bedding with him to spread on her floor, should he get a chance to rest.

It had been a long hard day for him. His muscles ached. His mind was foggy. At least she hadn't MOVED for hours. Did it matter if she closed her eyes? He rubbed his own eyes and pondered this. He needed rest. He promised himself he'd hear her if she moved. His head was pounding a little bit. What good was he to her if he couldn't keep himself well?

He sighed and groaned a bit as he shifted his sore muscles and began laying his bedding on the floor. Sloppily he crawled into it and relief rushed over him. He pulled the covers around his body and let himself float into sleep.

He dreamed vividly of frightening scenes. The specific details escaped him, but he kept waking suddenly to an eerily quiet room. He swore only minutes had passed each time he woke. The night would take forever to pass at this rate.

Finally he felt himself drop off into a true sleep, after his mind was finished with the troubling dreams. He felt peace and knew everything would be all right. He slept soundly.

Something cool had settled between his eyes. It was soothing, but as he slowly came back to consciousness, he

began to wonder what it was. It moved to his forehead, and he cracked his eyes open a bit.

After a few moments of blinking, he saw her. Her golden hair was the first thing he noticed. It was down in a dull mane around her face. Her face was blank and she stared at him now, instead of her wall. She was kneeling beside him, with her cool hand on his forehead. She removed it and spoke.

"Look at you," she said.

He listened.

She waited for her words to sink in. "Not a wrinkle in your forehead while you sleep." She wrinkled up her own absently as she said this. "I envy you."

He sat up slowly, not wanting to startle her out of her talkative mood. The fire was still burning and the sky was still dark. Her bare feet were right next to the cold stone floor and she didn't seem to care.

"Why didn't you let me die?" She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. She pressed her face to her knees, so only her serious eyes peeked out at him.

"How could I?" he asked softly.

"You could've saved me from much pain if you had," she said and buried her face in her arms.

"You know I couldn't have let you drown." He put his hands on her arms. "Isabel..." She was so cold still. He rubbed her arms a bit to warm her up.

Her head came up then, with glassy eyes. She sniffled, and blinked. "If you won't find it too improper..." she began quietly in a childish voice. "Could I climb in there with you?" she finished in a whisper. He thought he heard a sob behind her voice.

He said nothing, only made room for her in his makeshift bed. Like a little girl, she crawled under the blankets and cuddled up next to him, as he laid down again.

She sighed as she felt his warm and comforting arm close protectively around her. She wouldn't think of how wrong this was now—to sleep next to a man this way. She needed his calmness near her. She melted into a fitful sleep.

* * *

Isabel woke slowly as if sleep were still trying to hold onto her. She saw light through her eyelids and tried her best to

open them. All around her was a blur of dull light, morning light. Her muscles were stiff. She had once again slept on the floor. Why had she done that?

Dear God! She remembered. She was awake now. She sat up quickly and put a hand to her mouth. Nole was gone and early morning light was seeping through the window. The sky was dull gray.

She looked at the makeshift bed in horror as she stepped out of it. Only one night before, she had slept in this same room, on this same floor. In the arms of her love. And now already she had crawled into another man's bed. How could she have betrayed Devon in this way? And after what he'd done for her.

She cursed herself silently and vowed it would never happen again. There would never be an opportunity. Quickly, she dressed in the gray light. She made her way downstairs as stealthily as she could, hoping Nole was nowhere near.

He wasn't. Relieved, she sneaked outside before anyone could tempt her with breakfast. It was once again unusually cold for summer. She was in the garden again, the place she thought best. Beautiful flowers growing and weaving all around her. High stone walls to block out... everyone else. She was safe here. And calm. She could think.

She paced and chewed her thumbnail. She could make no sense of anything today. Questions she posed silently to herself remained unanswered. There were no answers. There was nothing. Simply nothing. Her tears were meaningless, a slow trickle down her face. Helping nothing, fixing nothing. Just constantly THERE, she thought.

Her tears didn't last long this time. An emptiness came over her and swallowed her up. A deadly calm. A little unsettling to her, but a bit of a relief. Her upset stomach relaxed. The knots she had felt since Devon left were gone. She felt nothing. She WAS nothing.

She sat down on a stone bench and watched gray clouds roll slowly across the sky. Pebbles shifted as she heard someone take a step. She didn't bother looking at him. She knew it was him. Her ever present guardian. Damn him for being there! Always being there.

Seeing she had no reaction, he kept walking towards her. There was the blank expression on her face again. How long could she go on like this? He wondered. Without a word, he sat next to her. He knew she was cold, but he did not offer

her his warm coat. Nor did he put his arm around her. Her real pain was something deep inside. Something he couldn't reach. No matter how hard he tried. So he sat. Calmly, and patiently, just so she'd know he was there.

Without even a glance at him, she let her head fall towards him and rest softly on his shoulder. She closed her eyes. And he sat there, unmoving.

* * *

The days blended into each other, Isabel thought. They were all gray. All lifeless. She found herself getting more and more tired. There were days when she didn't even bother to get out of bed. Zenie would bring food to her on a tray, but she ate very little. Nole came to see her often and tried to get her interested in getting up and going outside.

He talked about the horses, but that only reminded her of the day Devon left. He told her how beautiful the garden looked after the recent rains, but she hated the garden. With all its annoying brightness. She preferred to be where she was. In her bed with her view of the gray cloud covering the sky. An omen, she thought. It must be her time. She had given up on living.

One day it came to her attention that she rarely got up. And when she did, she was very weak and trembly. Nole's face had grown more and more worried. Isabel's dreams grew more and more vivid. She began to live in them, instead of in the real world.

Devon came to her in dreams often. Sometimes he held her. Sometimes he just spoke. His message seemed urgent, but she could never remember it. She'd wake and his blue eyes would fade into the daylight surrounding her. And she'd remember he had gone, and it would sadden her all over again.

She tossed and turned one evening. She could not get comfortable. The blankets were too hot, so she threw them off. Then she got a chill. Dark images flooded her mind. Of being chased, of being knocked off her horse and into the snow. She dreamed of Devon being tortured in her father's prison. And she tossed and turned some more.

She woke to find herself calling out. She was yelling various things and she felt hands trying to hold her steady. A cool hand pressed her forehead for a moment, then it was

gone. She remembered very little after that, and seemed to sink into another world, a mystical world, where nothing was what it appeared to be.

"Mandra!... Mandra... please wake up!" She heard this faintly in the distance. Somewhere, someone was calling her. He repeated himself occasionally. She tried to ignore it, but sometimes the words were so strong, she could not get away from them. Her eyes would open a bit and she'd see a flash. Blue eyes.

A hand was often in hers, and when she wriggled around in feverish agony, she could feel hands holding her still. Trying to. There were just so many hands suddenly. And the voice with the blue eyes. They were always there. But she could not go back. There was a light and a warmth in this new world she had found.

There came a time, however, when she suddenly felt the need to be free of this lovely dream world. It grew too heavy on her, like a sticky syrup. She fought against it. There was a feeling that rushed over her lately, and it didn't come from the dreams. It came from the hands and the voice. It was love. It grew stronger and it made her stronger. It's power hit her deep in her belly and gave her strength. She felt her heart warm up again with life. She felt a peace she had not felt in a long, long time. She slept soundly.

* * *

There was a pattering sound in her head. No, it was outside her head. What was it? It was a familiar sound. Her head ached as she began to wake up. She recognized the noise. It was a gentle rain on a window. Her window.

She moaned and brought her hand to her throbbing head.

"Mandra?" An urgent voice asked her.

She tried to open her eyes, but the lids were so heavy and fixed in their place. She tried to speak but her throat was so dry. She only croaked something unintelligible, then cried because she couldn't speak.

"Here," he said and she felt a hand lifting her head and something wet being poured into her mouth. She swallowed it eagerly. It was only water, but it made her a bit queasy.

"My head..." she said finally.

"I know..." said the familiar voice and a wet cool cloth was immediately placed on her forehead. "I know."

Her eyelids had loosened up a bit and she managed to get them open. Everything was a blur before her. It was dark. Must be evening. There was an orange glow in the background, a fire probably. And there were the hands, patting her face with the cloth. And behind them, the eyes.

Her vision became a little clearer as she blinked. There was that angelic face she had always known. The unkempt blond hair and those blue eyes. Kie's blue eyes.

"Kie..." she whispered happily.

"Yes," he said, glad she could recognize him. "Now don't speak anymore. I'm going to make you better."

She nodded, and reached up to her face and took one of his cool hands in her feverish one. "Don't go," she whispered as her eyes closed again and she sunk back into sleep.

"I won't," she heard him say as she drifted away, feeling his cool hand on her face.

* * *

A woman with long blond hair sat on the edge of her bed. Starlight softly lit her features, so like Isabel's. The woman put a hand on Isabel's and kindly looked into her eyes. She sat for a moment, exuding peace, saying nothing. How familiar she seemed. Then she spoke.

"Go back to your family." That was all. She smiled and was gone. Vanished.

At that moment Isabel woke. She looked around her room. It was the same as in the dream. Starlight from the window, darkness. She looked to the spot where the woman had sat. It seemed so real, she could still feel her presence. It was comforting. And very odd. But Isabel was too tired to ponder it all, so she rolled over to face the window, the stars, and fell asleep.

* * *

"Isabel..." a gentle voice said.

She felt herself waking up in a way she hadn't in a long time. There was a crispness to every sound, every movement. To the air she breathed in as she yawned. She began to stretch her body and realized she hadn't done that in a long time. It felt good. She squeezed her eyes shut, then blinked them slowly open.

Sitting before her with a big grin on his face was Nole. "How is my patient?" he asked her.

"I feel better," she said hoarsely and rubbed her eyes. "I dreamed that Kie was here, Nole."

"He is here," Nole said casually as he felt her forehead.

Isabel was startled. "What?"

He looked down at her a little sheepishly. "I went and found him, and brought him here." He waited for her reaction.

"Why?" she asked, seriously confused.

"Isabel..." He paused to search for the right words, "I didn't know if you would make it this time," he said quietly.

"Nole, what happened?" She reached out a hand to him.

"Later, we'll talk all about it," he said with finality. "I'm going to send Zenie for some food. Can you eat?"

"Yes," she said absentmindedly. Why was he so worried? Was it that bad?

Zenie came with the food and Nole helped her sit up in bed and fed her. She was too weak to feed herself. She began to realize how sick she had really been. In her dreams, everything had seemed so normal to her. The reality of it struck her hard.

She noticed her hands were thinner and she became cold more easily. She could feel her ribs and hip bones were a little more prominent than they had been. She was afraid to see herself. Nole didn't seem alarmed anymore, so she tried not to be.

Kie came to see her as soon as he heard she was awake. In his eyes, she saw the truth. He was making an effort to be gentle with her, not his usual joking self. He was kinder than she'd ever seen him. It made the seriousness of her condition all the more obvious.

He talked about the weather and simple things that wouldn't upset her, as if she were a child. He held her hand as he never would have before. She missed him and felt he was holding a lot back from her. She had to know his true thoughts. This charade could not last.

"Kie," she interrupted his lecture on the importance of keeping the blankets tucked in close around her for warmth.

"Yes?" He recognized the sternness in her voice.

"Why are you doing this?"

"What am I doing?"

"Treating me like a child."

He glanced over at the fire. "Come on, Mandra... you must know how it is." He walked over to the fire, still not facing her.

"How is it?"

He warmed his hands for a bit, then ambled back towards her with a serious look on his face. "If you could've seen yourself..." He couldn't finish. He looked down.

She understood. "You thought I was..." She couldn't say the word 'dying', so she stopped talking.

"Leaving us," he finished for her. "Yes, I did." He sat down without looking at her. "We all did."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't know what I had become."

His blue eyes were on her again. "I'm glad you're back," he said with a slow smile.

She smiled back. Then her face turned serious again. "Then you'll stay?" she asked him.

"Yes." He took her hand again. It was a new habit, and he liked it.

She squeezed his hand.

* * *

She was getting stronger and could be out of bed for a while each day. Nole carried her down to the parlor with the garden right outside its windows. Fall was coming and leaves were changing colors. The flowers were gone.

A warm fire glowed beside her. Blankets were tucked in all around her. She stared out at the dying garden and felt for it. So beautiful and fragile in the spring, but so ALIVE. Now it had a harshness to it, as if the garden were facing reality, as she must.

She still ached for Devon when she thought of him. There was no word about what had happened to him. No word from him. She thought of him less and less now. Not because her love for him was fading. It would not fade. But because he wasn't there. She couldn't express her love for him. She couldn't even know if he was well or not. So she shut him out of her mind, bit by bit. And her heart closed up as he left her thoughts. It became a bit cold and vacant. There was now a hole that could never be filled by another. Only Devon. And she knew she must learn to live with that emptiness, if she were going to live at all.

So she learned to appreciate simple things, like a warm fire or a gentle rain. She gave up all grand thoughts of passionate romance. She had enjoyed it once, had been lucky to have it, but now it was different. Life was smaller. She had her friends. They had become her new family. She had life in the castle. These were good things. She focused on them when she could.

Still Isabel could not bring herself to do the thing she had once loved so greatly: ride horses. The stables reminded her of that dreadful day. When she was well enough to walk the grounds again, she stayed far clear of them.

Yet a place she was now fond of visiting was the fallen tree and the lake. She had a happy memory of Devon there. And it was where she had found Kie again. She wouldn't think of the day Nole had had to drag her out of that water. She sat and watched the sun glint off the water. Watched the leaves twirl down into it. And as winter approached, watched it grow still and solid and white.

Everyone watched her carefully, she knew. She felt their eyes on her. She noticed the gentle way they handled her. She was fine, if only they could see that. Nole was always asking how she felt. Kie was always making sure she had on enough warm layers before she went out. He still treated her like a child, but she saw the fear behind his eyes, of losing her, so she let him.

No one really understood her. She knew this. And yet the silence and the pain were all so real. The absence. She faced it the best way she could. She let it slip away. She sat quietly, and let it fade.

Nole had grown accustomed to keeping a watchful eye on Isabel. With the onset of winter, this did not change. Days were getting shorter and at the same time colder. Isabel grew quiet. She hardly ever laughed or smiled now and when she did laugh, it had an empty sound to it.

She was always wandering the grounds. On foot, since the incident. He watched her from an upstairs window sometimes. He'd taken a room in the castle for the winter. Sometimes he threw on his ragged coat and followed her at a distance. She didn't seem to notice. Or mind, anyway.

This night it was snowing softly. There was no wind, and the flakes settled so gently on the ground one could blow them apart with their breath if they wanted to. It gave the night a fairy tale feeling.

The sky was bright with a glowing pink haze. The air was crisp, and silent. Nole watched Isabel waft into the delicate snow like a phantom. She had on her cloak and her hood was pulled up.

He suddenly had the urge to be out in that beautiful land of white silence. He put down his book and headed for the door, but not before he made a mental note of which direction she was going. She was headed for the stables.

As he reached the spot where she had been, he felt a sudden charge through his body. He stopped walking. How odd, he thought to himself. Pulling his coat closer around himself, he ambled toward the stables.

Not twenty paces from them, he stopped again. There she stood in the doorway. She slowly pulled off her hood as if to get a better view. Her free hair tumbled out of it. She was unaware of this. Her hand rested on the stable door as if she were steadying herself. She stood so still, Nole was afraid to breathe, lest she should hear him. He didn't want to break this moment.

Then she did something that made him want to kick himself for having witnessed it. She bowed her head and began to cry. Her free hand went to her face. At first they were silent tears, then she let herself go to the ground in a huddle, and cry openly. There in the doorway to the stables.

As she did this she had turned and was almost facing him. He felt his heart leap in his chest and didn't know whether to run or wish to disappear. He had no chance to do either because she looked up.

She stopped crying, but her eyes and cheeks still shone with her tears. She stared at him as if they shared a secret now. She didn't turn away, but tried to wipe her cheek with her mitten. She did this absentmindedly, because Nole was walking towards her.

He felt so bad for having seen this, but all thoughts of himself went out of his head as he looked at her. He walked slowly over and helped her to her feet. She took his hand easily and didn't let it go once she was standing.

He wanted to apologize, say that he was sorry for not leaving her alone, for seeing her like this. The words would not come, but he had never been a man of words.

She gazed up at him trustfully, knowing it was all right if he did see her tears. He'd seen worse from her before. The look of concern on his face held her attention completely. She

didn't feel the need to speak.

He reached up to her cheek with his free hand and carefully wiped her tears away. Suddenly, as if in a daze, he let his hand cup her face. Her green eyes sparkled in the snowy light and drew him in. Like a man bewitched, he felt himself lean forward and felt his lips on hers. A tender kiss soon grew into a passionate embrace.

Breaking them both from this daze, Isabel began to untangle herself from his arms. She was saying "no" quietly and without much conviction.

Aware of himself again, Nole pulled himself away and put his hands on each side of her pleading face. Dear God, what was he doing? "I'm so sorry..." he said as he quickly walked away from her.

"No..." she said as her hand slid down his arm. But he was gone. It wasn't his fault, she meant to say. It was okay, it was... she suddenly realized what they had done. What about Devon, whom she had only moments before been mourning? This was wrong. She knew it was wrong.

She gave the stables one last guilty look before she quickly shut their doors. Her hand over her sinful lips, she hurriedly ran back to the castle, and to the safety of her room. Where she could think.

* * *

Isabel woke suddenly and sat up in bed. Her sleep had been so light. It had been difficult to sleep at all. It hadn't bothered her that she and Nole had kissed as much as it had bothered her that she'd wanted to. And she hadn't even known it until it had happened. Until his arms were around her.

This was so wrong, she told herself over and over again. Devon could be in her father's prison or, God willing, on his way back to her right now. He had risked his life for her. Everything. He might never come back.

That last thought, to her horror, helped her justify to herself what she had done. But the truth was that there was no excuse. The worst thing she could do to Devon right now was betray him this way. And she had. How could she forgive herself? And, worse, how could she forgive the way her heart leaped just now as she saw Nole stomp through the tall snow to the stables? This was madness. How could one woman

divide her heart between two men?

She hurriedly dressed and had a small breakfast. She had to keep moving. Keep herself occupied. Soon she found herself in the library.

Reverently she touched the table where Devon had taught her chess, and recited poems with a fire in his eyes, so dramatic. She saw the window where they had first kissed.

She sat in the chair near it and closed her eyes, imagining she was waiting for her tutor to arrive. There was a quietness to the room she had never felt so profoundly. And an emptiness to the chair closest to hers that made her heart ache. Of course, she loved Devon. It wasn't he, who was the problem. It was Nole.

If only he had never come here. If only she'd not wanted to learn to ride. Maybe if he hadn't been there that day at the lake... none of this would've happened. Her head was spinning with these insane thoughts. She was biting her thumbnail and glaring at the floor when he spoke.

"You never come here." It was Nole.

She glanced up at him, startled. His quiet shoes had allowed him to surprise her. He made such an odd addition to this conservative room with his wild clothing and chaotic hair.

He looked as though he wished he hadn't come to find her. She had been staring at him too long, too coldly, making him uncomfortable.

"Sorry," he said finally, and turned to go.

"Wait." She stood up slowly, not knowing what she should say. She had only meant "wait."

He had turned to look at her. His brown eyes seemed more intense than usual, more piercing. More vulnerable. He couldn't hold the gaze and it fell to the floor.

Feeling her indecisiveness, he decided he would just go. He quickly left the room. It had all been a mistake. It would pass. She couldn't love him, and she shouldn't under the circumstances. He was just lonely. That was all.

He made his way to the snow covered garden, and breathed in the crisp winter air. Yes, he told himself, he was lonely. That was all it was. It would pass. Anything else was impossible.

Isabel had watched him go and guilt had flooded into her as she felt a part of her go with him. If she stayed away from him, she thought, maybe it would be all right.

But her fears about Devon returned. What if he was hurt

or locked up? What if he couldn't get back to her? What if it took years for him to get back to her? What if... no, he wasn't dead. Of course, he wasn't dead. Don't be ridiculous, she scolded herself. It was worry over Devon that must've caused her to cling to Nole. Nole was here. Devon wasn't. That made him easier to love. But it wasn't real. She must remember that. It wasn't real.

* * *

It was hard for her to look at Nole again after the absence of a few hours or a day. Every time she saw him again, unexpected feelings rushed over her. She remembered his lips on hers. Or his arms tightly around her, as if he had needed her. It was always hard to once again push those feelings into the background. It was hard to resist pushing a lock of hair away from his eyes or laying a hand gently on his arm. She had forbidden herself to touch him. Unfortunately, this made her think of it more. And when she did accidentally brush him, those feelings would rush in anew. It was a constant struggle to act normal around him.

He went along with the charade and they acted as if nothing had happened. They were more formal with each other now. Neither of them would risk another episode like the one on that bright snowy night. They saw each other less and less as the strain became too much. Complete avoidance seemed to work better. Isabel didn't ride anymore, so it was not hard to avoid Nole. When they passed each other, a simple nod assured them both that they were still friends. And that was enough for now.

Still the guilt of what she had allowed to happen weighed heavily on Isabel's heart. It was a secret that burned her from the inside out every time she thought of it. It could never happen again. That was all she could do about it now. It had come out of grief, she reasoned with herself. The circumstances were just too overwhelming. But she knew to avoid that now. Any situation that might lead to a similar incident.

She had taken to studying her books again, as she had with Devon. The library had enough books to keep her occupied for a lifetime, she thought, had she chosen that. She would read anything and everything. As long as her mind was free from thoughts of Devon and Nole, she was at peace.

There was nothing else for her to do in this big empty castle, but study.

Kie was spending quite a bit of time down at the stables lately and Isabel was surprised at this. He didn't make friends easily. It was odd he should grow close to Nole so quickly. She would see them together outside her window sometimes. Getting along amiably and laughing at this and that. They went riding, groomed the horses. It seemed that Valen had acquired another stable hand, she thought.

She rarely saw Kie, but this didn't bother her at first. Now and then she became quite curious about what he and Nole discussed together. What they laughed at so heartily. The week before they had even gone hunting together for a few days at the cabin.

Isabel couldn't bring herself to approach the stables, so she just watched the two of them. Or watched the stables for signs of them. The book in her hand stayed on the same page for quite some time.

Zenie quietly slipped into the room to bring firewood and turn the logs in the fire.

Isabel heard a crack and turned with a start. "Oh, Zenie," she said, relieved.

Zenie blushed. "Sorry." She began to go towards the door to leave.

"Oh, don't leave yet," Isabel said quickly, climbing off her window seat perch. She walked over to the chairs near the fire. "Come warm yourself for a minute." She motioned for Zenie to join her, and sat in one of the chairs.

Zenie gingerly followed and perched herself on the edge of the opposite chair, her hands folded neatly in her lap, her back straight. "Are you feeling all right?" she asked Isabel kindly.

"Oh, yes, thank you." Isabel smiled and laid her book down beside her. "I was wondering... what do those two have to talk about, do you think?" She motioned in the direction of the stables. "They spend a lot of time together lately, don't you think?"

"Yes," Zenie said quietly and a small smile crept over her lips. She even suppressed a giggle. "I think Kie might be staying on to help with the horses. That could be it."

"Yes, that could be it." Isabel eyed Zenie closely. The girl's smile had gotten broader as she said Kie's name. It suddenly dawned on Isabel that something quiet may have

been growing for quite some time in Zenie's heart. She smiled back at the girl. She was fifteen now, and still a tiny person, but her outfit did seem to have more curves to it. Subtle curves. She'd be a petite woman, but lovely. Isabel wondered if Kie had noticed these things about the young maid. And if he had would he take her seriously or toy with her and break her heart? This worried Isabel, but for now it all seemed neatly contained in Zenie's innocent imagination. It would be safe there for a while, Isabel thought, and didn't try to draw it out of the girl.

Still, she had wanted company. They chatted for a few minutes, until Zenie said she'd best get back to her duties, and in a flash she was gone again. Isabel thought of her for a long time after her departure. She saw her in a new light now. Poor Zenie, she thought, with no one to guide her through things like this.

Isabel never did get back to her book that day.

* * *

It was a cold winter that year and there were few days warm enough to walk out into. But those days did come, and when they did, Isabel hurriedly bundled herself up and went out to face them.

One day after breakfast, she stomped through the thick layer of snow on the hills, her breath clouding her view as she went. She stopped at the top of a small hill far away from the castle. Facing south, and Kargid, she hugged herself for warmth and looked longingly at the horizon. Farther out there was a thicket of trees. Behind them, a few miles away, lay Valen's cabin and many more miles beyond that, her childhood home. Only from the outside did it seem ugly to her. Only from this great distance of time, experience, and miles.

She and Kie had grown up there together. He was an only child, with no father. His mother was a maid in the castle and she was older than most mothers of a child Kie's age. This made her a wiser, more forgiving parent. But for all her wisdom, she could not make Kie into the man she hoped he'd be. He was wild and reckless. He always wanted more. More action, more adventure. More danger.

This appealed to young Mandra, bored daughter of the king, often left alone to entertain herself. She rarely saw her

father and her mother had died long ago. Aside from lessons in reading and etiquette, she had no obligations. She was trained in courtly manners, should the king ever have need of her in diplomatic affairs. He never did. And so she was free to do as she pleased.

Eret was her father in name only. She could see that people were tense around him and grew tense at the mere mention of him. And those who did not know Mandra well, grew tense at the sight of her as well. She was the princess. She was his blood. Surely, she was not to be spoken freely in front of or allowed to see anything a little off kilter.

Things grew quiet wherever she went. Conversations would stop. She had a sort of power and she knew this. She felt it. She accepted it, expected it.

But then there was her family. They were every bit her family even if they weren't her blood. Kie's mother was just as much her mother. Aunt Kady was her aunt just as much as she was Kie's.

Kady was also a maid at Kargid. She had raven black hair, green eyes and an infectious laugh. With her hair pulled back in a knot for her work and a serene expression on her face while she cleaned, you could not tell she was bubbling with happiness, except for the unmistakable twinkle in her eyes.

Mandra had worshipped her. She was beautiful and nice and had a strong will. Mandra had once tried to color her hair black with paint to look like Kady. Kie had laughed so hard, he made her burst into tears and run back to her room.

Kie's mother had smiled and said that if God had intended all people to look alike, he'd have made them that way himself. She said the reason Kady was so beautiful was because she had a beautiful spirit, not because she had pretty hair. That would fade one day, she told Mandra, but her beauty wouldn't.

This was a nice thought, Mandra decided. From that day on, she saw herself differently. She saw that she could affect people, not with her looks, but with her spirit. And beauty would naturally follow. Kie had had a good mother, and so had Mandra, in the same woman.

In their teens, the two friends were separated more. Kie ran off and got into trouble more times than she could count. Mandra often found herself trying to console his mother. Their mother. She never succeeded. The worry stayed on her

face 'til he returned, every time.

Then there was the stallion. Eret's own horse, newly acquired, beautifully tamed to suit a king. White and strong. Kie did what he did for sport, and nothing else. That was the insanity of the whole matter.

Mandra had woken to shouts and flashes of torchlight.

Out her window she could see a crowd at the stables. Guards mostly. Two stable hands as well. The horse was already gone, and Kie already accused of the theft.

He must've known he would be accused. He was seen by a stable hand. He was known for his pranks. He must've known the penalty for this must be death. Hanging. The king would not be made a fool of by a poor maid's son.

It did not help when the stallion was found the next day roaming a meadow just outside the castle grounds, his beautiful mane and tail clipped short.

Kie was wanted badly. He had carved himself an awful fate. There was no escaping it, or so it seemed.

In their younger days, the two had discovered a secret meeting place for themselves. Eret's castle grounds were much larger than Valen's and the land much more rocky and rough. Beside a stream that swelled each spring, there was a pile of huge rocks. If one were to weave through these boulders just right, the opening of a cave would appear. Just as it had one moonlit night when Kie discovered it.

He'd led her there the next day. He often swore to her he spent whole nights wandering the grounds without a bit of sleep. She hadn't believed him... until she saw the cave. One must've had to search carefully to discover such a place.

They were 10 then. Over the years they held many meetings there for many clubs now forgotten. Many one person plays were put on in that cave. For an audience of one, shadows flashing on the wall as the firelight danced in the drafty air.

She'd had her first kiss there. Though she was sure it wasn't his. He'd convinced her they needed to practice, for what if one day their spouses were appalled that they didn't know how to kiss? She doubted his logic, but he pestered her so much she finally gave in. They were 15 then.

They were 17 when Kie acquired his scar. Reaching from his right eye almost to his ear. It was her fault and she knew it. He must've known it too. He never blamed her for it aloud. Never played on her guilt. He just took it and went on.

They had been playing in an area they shouldn't have been in. They had invented a spying game, and it took place in the guards' area of the castle.

It was daytime, but rainy and dark outside. It seemed like nighttime to them. At the time she was dressed like a boy, wearing Kie's clothing, too big for her, but cinched here and there. She had pulled her hair back out of the way, and hidden it under a funny cap they had for playing dress up.

The game was simple. Each had a false dagger carved poorly from a stick. The guards quarters had more twists and turns and stairways than any other place at Kargid. This was why it must be played there. They parted at the entry way, each walking quietly. The objective was to sneak up on the other without them knowing until they were poked with a dagger stick.

Mandra never won this game. She was determined to win it anyway. At least once. Her concentration was fierce as she tiptoed along a dark passageway. She was aware of every sound, but not aware of every presence.

Sneaking around a dark corner, she was suddenly shocked to find a meaty hand reach out of the darkness and snatch her to the wall by her shirt. She was so surprised that only a peep escaped her lips before another meaty hand slapped itself over them.

She could smell ale on these fingers, as well as the stench of an unbathed man. Her heart pounded and she struggled to get away, but the drunken guard only laughed. Kept calling her 'princess' and chuckling. Saying he wouldn't hurt her, such a pretty little thing.

His mumbling may have been quiet, but not to the ear of a champion of the stick dagger game. She hadn't even heard his footsteps, but suddenly there he was, untangling her from this drunken fool.

The guard mumbled in annoyance at this sudden forceful opposition. He may have been intoxicated, but he was still stronger than the two of them. Finally Kie, desperate to free her, leaned over and bit the man hard on the hand. He had to dig his teeth in for a long second before the pain registered in the man's mind and he yelled, "Ow!"

He let his captive go as he swung his hand around and held it up to the light to check the wound. Sure enough, there were teeth marks... and blood. Kie was wiping his mouth and spitting as Mandra brushed herself off profusely and hid

behind Kie.

Kie grabbed her by the waist and pushed her in front of him as they walked away, to stay between her and the man. And now the man was angry. He cursed at his hand and then cursed at Kie as Kie pushed her forward and whispered loudly to her, "Run! Go to the cave!" She hesitated because he wasn't moving. "Now! Run!" he said again. He was so serious. She ran.

Kie turned to face the man, one averaged sized young man against a cursing giant. He would not run. He never ran. He had told her so once.

The last thing she saw was Kie standing squarely, ready for an attack as the man stumbled towards him.

She was scared. More of Kie than of the guard. The stern way he had spoken scared her, as if she had been in more danger than she realized.

Only later did she learn the rest of the story. The man had cursed and chided the boy, trying to taunt him into a fight he would've surely lost. Kie had one main rule when it came to fighting. He never threw the first punch. He stood his ground. He would not run, but he would not start it either.

He could throw a punch with the best of them, as the guard soon discovered after a powerful sock to Kie's jaw. Kie belted him swiftly right in the lip. The guard, now truly angered, started swinging blindly at the boy, only half of his punches hitting anything.

One of his swings made a permanent impression on the young man. The man's right hand had on it a ring that all of Eret's soldiers wore. It had the seal of honor on it. It was a gaudy lump of ragged iron with the shape of a lion pressed into it. It had sharp edges and Kie's skin felt the burn of this as it cut him from his eye outward.

By now the man was tiring himself out with his mad swinging. Kie hit him in the stomach, then realized the guard was stumbling backwards onto the floor, seemingly exhausted and once again mumbling to himself, as if he had forgotten his opponent entirely.

Kie stopped and stared at the fool lying back on the stone floor, passed out now. He stood there catching his breath and leaning against the wall.

In the heat of the moment, he had felt nothing. Each hit came with a force that he could feel, but not a pain. Each hit woke up a rage inside him to fight harder, but pain was

something he only felt after a fight was over. After his breathing slowed down, after his hands stopped shaking.

Shaking his arms to restore their feeling, he walked quickly out of the maze of the guards' quarters, wary of every noise that might be another guard, returning from a watch.

He made it out of the quarters safely and began jogging along in the rain toward the cave. His arms still tingled from the excitement. His legs barely wanted to move under him. He wanted to collapse somewhere, anywhere. Just sit and rest, even to lie back in the grass with the rain pelting his face would have been nice.

But he ran on, for her. She'd be frightened. He had to get to her. As he ran, he felt the rain hit his face. His right eye began to sting and he felt the sting trail across his face to his ear. At least that far. It hurt badly now as the rain slapped it mercilessly. He put a hand to his face and looked at the blood on his fingers when he pulled it away. He had always hated the sight of blood. He'd always made himself stomach it somehow, be a man.

But he was weak from fighting. Cold from the rain. Tired from running. The pile of rocks was in sight. He barely managed to weave himself into the cave still on his feet. He entered it and saw the warm glow of the fire she had started.

Her back was to him, but she spun around when she heard him in the entrance. He was catching his breath and had one hand on the cave wall to support himself. Her face had looked anxious when she turned to face him, but an expression of horror came over it as she caught sight of him standing there. Blood mixed with rain streamed down his beaten face, and trickled over his shirt, down his arm.

She couldn't move. He reached a hand to his face once again and pulled it away to see it covered with blood. It was too much. He felt the ground come up to meet him as the world faded into blackness.

Kie woke with a warm hand on his chest. His shirt had been taken off. She was leaning over him, pressing something to his face. His shirt, he realized it must have been. He groaned in agony as the pain of his injuries came back to him.

"Oh, thank God!" she said as she fell on him and hugged

him to her as best she could. He managed to put a tired arm around her as she cried into his shoulder. "Thank God!" she said again.

He pulled his other arm around her and held her tightly as they lay there. His blood had gotten into her hair. He could see it out of the corner of his eye.

She pulled away then and wiped her eyes hastily. "Oh, Kie..." she said with a shaky voice. She once again pressed his wet shirt to his face. He reached up to touch her blood tainted hair.

"It's bad?" he asked weakly. "I've never had blood come out of me like that before," he said. He sounded as scared as she had.

"I just got scared when you fainted," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry." He sat himself up slowly and took over the pressing of the shirt from her.

She let her hand drop into her lap.

"I didn't mean for..." she began.

"Shh..." He put a finger to her lips. "We'll never speak of it again. Do you promise?" He took his hand away for her to answer.

She stared down for a minute, wrestling with her thoughts.

"I wouldn't want people to know I fainted," he said quietly, with a grin on his face, to reassure her.

She cracked a smile then and looked shyly at him.

"Promise." He spoke sternly.

"I do," she said. "I promise."

"Good girl," he said affectionately, then put his hand on her head as he leaned over and kissed her cheek. She stared at the ground still and he gently put his hand under her chin and brought her face up to look at his.

She made herself look him in the eye then and his face was so kind, she felt relief spill over her. He didn't hate her. He sat there looking hopefully at her with that silly blood spattered shirt pressed to his cheek. She smiled a bittersweet smile at him, then reached for the shirt. "Here," she said. She gently turned him around and laid him back down, this time with his head in her lap.

She pressed the rumpled shirt firmly against his cut and ran her fingers lovingly through his hair. He gave her a grateful look, then relaxed and let his eyes close.

The memories were so vivid now, Isabel thought as she

stood shivering on that snowy hill. The crisp air had begun to bite at her skin and she felt it was time to go back. She gave the south one last longing look, then began trudging her way back to the castle.

* * *

Isabel's curiosity got the better of her one day. She had to find out what Kie and Nole were up to. She decided it was time for her to take a ride again. She never thought of Devon now if she could help it. So she would just think of riding the way she always had and try to forget that they had been about to ride the day he left.

Early one morning, after breakfast, she put on her warmest riding outfit and tromped through the crisp snow to the stables. The air was still and made her skin tingle. It was an unusually cold morning, but she was determined to do this.

She pushed open the stable door and saw complete darkness. She let her eyes adjust to the dimness. Around her stood a neatly kept stable, everything in its place. And not a person in sight.

But this was all right, she thought. She certainly knew how to get a horse ready herself. She wouldn't be able to talk to either of them, but perhaps when she returned. She took a deep breath and set about her work. The saddle was heavy, she had forgotten that about saddles. She somehow hoisted it up onto the horse, though, and then stood, out of breath, mumbling to herself with her hands on her hips, "Never seemed this hard before..."

Suddenly she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. It was two feet swinging down from the loft above her head.

"Trouble?" Nole asked kindly as he climbed down the ladder to the ground.

"Uh..." She was speechless from the surprise of finding him there. She'd had an audience the entire time. How embarrassing! "Uh, no," she said finally.

"I can help, anyway, since I'm down," he said matter of factly and picked up the tack and got to work. She helped him and together they got the horse ready to ride. Neither said a word as they worked.

When Nole was done, he smoothed his hand down the

horse's neck and stood for a moment, as if deciding something. "Want company?" he asked without looking at her.

"Okay."

He brought out another horse and together they prepared it also. They were both still very quiet and it was becoming awkward.

Finally she turned to him as if to say something, but at the same time he had opened his mouth to speak. They laughed nervously.

"You first," he said politely.

"Oh, I didn't... go ahead," she said.

He looked at his shoes. "I just wanted to say—I mean I wanted you to know I'd never—I mean, the other night I didn't intend—" He stopped himself abruptly and took a breath. This time he spoke slower. "I don't want you to think I would take liberties like that with you, being betrothed to Devon and him away and me supposed to be protecting you..." he trailed off. "I'm very sorry it happened and I was not myself." He looked at her then, but couldn't hold her gaze. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"It's all right," she said, relieved that he had been brave enough to bring up the subject. "I wasn't myself either," she said quietly.

"So, everything's all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said and smiled. Then she cleared her throat. "Shall we ride?" she asked, to change the subject.

He nodded and helped her onto her horse.

From then on, their relationship went on as if that snowy kiss had never happened. They were friends again and they grew closer than they had been. He knew her as well as anyone now, as well as Kie, and better than Devon she often scolded herself for thinking. Devon loved her and he knew her well enough, and he would return soon. Any day, she told herself.

She'd wake every morning with the idea in her head, "This could be the day." She imagined the scene over and over. She'd be taking a long walk and then he'd appear over the crest of a hill and she'd run to him and hold him and never let him go. And it didn't matter what he said, only that he was in her arms again, alive and loving her... She'd change and vary this fantasy, but she thought it in one form or another every single day. And every single night she took

to bed with her that day's little piece of disappointment when her love did not return.

She was so caught up in herself and her worry over Devon that she completely forgot all else. Everyone else and their troubles. And when Zenie actually ran into her room shouting, "He's come back! He's come back!" she immediately thought of Devon and with a sudden burst of shock felt herself buckle into the nearest chair.

"What?" she almost whispered.

"It's Valen! He's alive!" Zenie squealed and then bolted back out of the room.

Isabel felt her head spin as she realized the meaning of Zenie's words. It's Valen... it's Valen... it's Valen... She heard Zenie's clattered footsteps echo down the stairs as she ran to meet her master.

Isabel put a hand on her forehead and took a deep breath. Of course, it's Valen, she thought. Of course. How selfish of her to forget that he too was away and in danger from her father's army. But he had returned. She felt bad for feeling disappointed that it was not Devon. Then it dawned on her: Valen had returned. He was here right now, in this castle.

"Oh, my God, Valen," she said to herself and sprang to her feet. She found herself clamoring down the stairs just as Zenie had done.

She didn't even know where he would be, but she followed the sound of voices and found herself rushing toward the parlor and bursting in to find Nole and Zenie and Kie and other servants crowding around a chair by the fire.

Nole turned as she sped into the room and caught her eye. He smiled slightly and moved away from where he stood to reveal a tired old man sitting in a parlor chair. All chattering came to a halt as Valen's eyes fell upon Isabel and his words ended abruptly.

"Isabel..." he choked out and she found herself going to him and falling to the floor on her knees to grasp his hands and kiss them.

Slowly and quietly the servants left the room to leave the two of them alone. Isabel had her face buried in his hands and couldn't bear to look at him. She had not thought of him nearly enough or worried over him nearly enough. When he had gone, she had tried not to think of him at all, not to feel his loss, the possibility that he might never return.

Seeing him now brought back to her her love for him. All the feelings she had buried deep within herself to avoid the pain of it all.

She raised her head to look at him. He looked older, a little more tired, but his eyes were as bright as they always had been. She knew that he was all right, without asking. He was so alive and so real, sitting there.

He pushed the hair back from her face lovingly and said her name again, "Isabel."

"Valen..." She wanted to say so much, but nothing came. She couldn't say it all now and she wouldn't try. It was just too much.

He understood this and suddenly rose to his feet, helping her to do the same. Without words he opened his arms and looked at her. She wrapped her arms around him and he held her tight. They had said all they needed to.

* * *

That winter passed as the one before it had. Isabel was relatively happy. She and Valen fell back into their daily routine of walks and talks and an occasional ride. He refused to tell Isabel any of the details of his wartime experiences. Isabel was not altogether against this, except she suspected that her mind would create imaginary war stories far more horrifying than Valen's actual experience.

There were times now when he would grow quiet and say nothing for a while. They would sit or walk in silence, and she never asked him what was wrong.

Valen told her fairly soon after his return that he knew of her identity. It was a story going around the soldiers' camps that Eret's fair-haired daughter had run away from him. Valen had fortunately not mentioned his new ward before he heard this news. He was utterly shocked to find it out, however, he told her. And no one to share it with, no way to be sure, and yet in his heart he knew.

He approached the subject with her delicately, not knowing whether or not her memory had returned. But he soon found that it had. She was glad to see he already knew who she was and it was all settled easily.

Valen was curious as to what she'd done while he was away, surprised to hear of her engagement to Mr. Gabriel, and saddened by its outcome. He was also interested in

hearing about her friend Kie, and how he'd come to the castle.

Kie and Nole spent most of their time together now in an easy camaraderie. Isabel didn't see Kie nearly as much as she thought she would when he returned, and was always surprised to bump into him.

One day in the spring, she took a walk into the woods. It was early in the season and the air still had a chill to it. The ground was still damp. The trees were black in this rich atmosphere and she wove between them carefully, putting her hands on their slippery trunks as she passed.

It had rained recently and the ground was wet. Drops were still falling from the branches where they had collected earlier. The bottom of her dress was getting heavy and soaked, but she kept walking happily, humming as she went.

He must have been just sitting there, because she had not heard him approach. She heard him clear his throat to her left and nearly jumped a foot in the air.

"God!" she cried and put her hand to her heart. "You scared me!"

He grinned slightly and wove a flexible twig between his fingers and just looked at her.

She looked back, but then she became nervous at his intense stare. "What are you doing here, Kie?" she asked finally.

"Just thinking." He shook his head and looked to the ground. "About you."

"Oh..." she muttered. "What about me?" she asked with too much cheeriness.

His eyes darted back up to look at her, sharp and blue. "Mandra," he began, "You know—" he couldn't finish.

"What?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't think he's coming back."

She felt a chill rush over her as his words hit her ears. She felt a lump in her throat suddenly, and her body became tense. "Who?" she asked politely, feigning ignorance.

He looked her squarely in the eyes, still twirling the twig. "Devon."

She took a deep breath to control the anger that had come over her when he spoke. "I don't think anyone can say that for certain, Kie," she managed to get out.

He just shook his head and looked down again. Then she,

because she didn't want to yell at him or because she didn't want to admit he was right, resumed her winding walk through the trees, blinking back tears as she went.

Damn him! she thought to herself. Just when she had finally felt it all right to even hope he was alive, Kie was trying to crush her spirits. Why would he try to hurt her like that? It wasn't fair and it certainly wasn't true. Devon would not leave her like that, forever. Things just didn't happen that way. They loved each other. They must be together. People didn't just disappear like that!

She was still fuming with these thoughts in her head, when she heard a twig snap behind her. She stopped abruptly, but refused to turn around, refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her in tears. But what if, she asked herself, it were Devon? Just finding his way back, seeing her enter the woods, sneaking up behind her... whispering in her ear... putting his arms around her, "It's all right... I'm back... it's all right now..."

She turned slowly around to find Kie looking at her with genuine pity on his face. Rare for him to let her see something like that. So unusual, and so uncalled for, she thought...

He stood still, inviting her to him with his eyes. Drawing her in against her will. She missed Kie... She found herself stepping towards him and his hands went out to her, pulled her to him. She let him and her arms went around him. He held her close and she needed that more than she needed anything else, even if he didn't understand her.

He pushed her away tenderly, and put his hands on her cheeks. She began to shake her head and whisper "No..." but he did it anyway. He kissed her tenderly on the lips and she resisted, but he pressed his lips to hers anyway, and pulled her body close to him. He kissed her face, her cheek, her hair... he whispered in her ear, "You see... you see how perfect it is with us..." and he kissed her ear.

She was mesmerized by him, by the fact that it was Kie doing all these things, touching her like this. The boy she'd known and loved since childhood. His hair that smelled so sweet, his lips she couldn't tear herself away from... but she did, finally.

It was hard to untangle herself from him. They did seem to fit together perfectly. But something was wrong. Everything was wrong. There was just nothing quite right

here. That was all she knew, and in another minute she'd have let him take her anywhere and do anything he wanted. She feared that in herself and she took a step back from him and leaned against a tree. One arm still held him back, one hand still on his chest, feeling his warmth, tempting her.

He tried to lean in again to kiss her, but she turned her face away and pushed him with both hands, gently, away. "It's not right," she said.

He moved his head, trying to find her eyes with his, trying to look right at her. "What could be more right than this?" he practically begged her. "We are right together," he proclaimed. "We belong together, not you and him, you and me. Us... Mandra," he touched her face, "it's always been us..."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I'm promised to someone else," she said clearly.

He stood a moment, then quietly took his hand away from her face, took the other hand off her hand resting on his chest. Her hand fell to her side. He said nothing as he mechanically turned back and walked away from her.

She didn't watch him go, only stared at the ground, at the toes of her shoes peeping out from under her dress. Her heart lingered on what had just happened, even while her head struggled to forget it completely.

It would be so much easier to stay true to Devon if Devon were actually here, she kept telling herself in frustration. Every beautiful spring day that came and went without his return turned her heart a little colder.

It rained a lot that spring. She and Valen spent many hours in the library by the fire, reading, talking, or sitting in silence.

Nole and Kie stayed close to the stables, and both slept there, in the loft. She saw little of either. The gloom of a continuously dark sky, along with Kie's foreboding words: "I just don't think he's coming back" put her in a terribly agitated state. Not sadness as much as anxiety. A thought, a question, began to circle in her mind, "How long should I wait?" or "How can I be sure he won't return?" Should she spend the rest of her life pining away for a man who may be... dead? She shuddered to even think the word. What if she sat here forever, pushing away the affections of others only so she could cuddle up at night with the fading memory of a man she had once loved? Still loved, she meant to say.

What if he were dead? She asked herself. What if it were all right to go to someone else? To start a life with someone else? Their life... but how could she? Even if he were dead and gone forever, how could she ever love another man?

But hadn't she felt how—just a few weeks ago in the woods with Kie... She wanted to feel alive like that again, the way she used to feel every time she looked at Devon, black hair falling onto his forehead, no matter how he tried to arrange it so it wouldn't.

How could she ever forget the details of one man, to make room for the details of another? How could one man's words and kiss replace another's? Ever? There was no way this could be. If love existed, then it continued to exist, it did not end. He was alive somewhere. He had to be, her love for him was still alive... or her need for him anyway. She needed for him to be here for her, to make the decision easy for her. She couldn't stand to be wrong about this. To decide whether or not to betray a man she'd promised her life to.

The answer must be 'no'. Of course, it must be 'no'. That was logical. A promise is a promise. And loneliness is loneliness, she thought bitterly to herself. And what is there to a life filled with nothing but old books, and a warm fire? Was she an old woman now, waiting patiently for death to come and claim her? Like the old man sitting next to her almost nodding off into his history book?

She studied Valen as he blinked his eyes back open and took a firmer grip on his book. He adjusted his spectacles with one hand and settled back into his reading. Could this be life? she asked herself. Could this be all it meant? she wondered. Just a string of days made up of small unchallenging activities? Things that people do just to do something?

She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. She felt a headache coming on. She was just thinking too much, she told herself. Wearily, she picked up the book nearest her on the table. She sighed, and then began to read.

Four years passed in that manner. Isabel and Valen and their daily routines. Nole and Kie caring for the horses. They'd built an addition to the stables, for their sleeping quarters, fireplace and all. Zenie grew into a woman, quietly and gracefully. She grew less timid, though she still spoke only when spoken to and didn't say much when she did speak.

The war moved away from them farther to the south and eventually across the sea, so far they hardly knew of it anymore. Isabel thought little of Devon—at least she tried. Though she noticed not a day went by when he didn't come up in her thoughts, however casually.

The passionate spirit that Isabel had once had had mellowed with the fine tuning of her daily routine. Breakfast with Valen, a morning spent in the library reading or playing chess. Valen's time in battle had turned him into a less talkative man and as she and he spent most of their time together, neither had anything new to tell the other. So they went on in a kind of quiet companionship. The kind that accompanies old marriages.

Kie had never again tried to romance her, perhaps seeing the futility of it. Her mind was set. He knew her stubbornness from the past. And yet, he was stubborn too. He had refused to leave this time, refused to give up on her completely. They spoke politely and that was better than nothing, he told himself. And he lived on that.

Nole and Zenie had developed a friendship over the years. No one knew when or how it had started. They were both so quiet. But they were seen often walking a polite distance from each other, chatting softly, laughing lightly now and then. Zenie had a tinkling laugh, like bells, and Isabel could not remember hearing it anywhere but in response to things Nole said.

Their relationship could account for Zenie's calmness. She had been so anxious before and it had all melted away over the years. She and Nole would work in the garden together and had a collection of dried herbs, labeled carefully in the big shed that held the gardener's tools.

They spent quite a bit of time together and as a result Isabel rarely had a moment with either of them. Kie seemed to spend most of his time alone now, wandering a little restlessly over the castle grounds.

He had been patient for so long, he often thought to himself. And one could be patient only if one believed the thing waited for would actually come to pass. He had seriously been doubting for a long time now that anything would ever change.

It had all begun when Nole confided in him about Zenie. About his love for her and his desire to make her his wife. Things were progressing nicely for them, he observed. Nole

was only waiting 'til he could find a place for them before he would ask her. Kie alone knew this secret, though it would be obvious to anyone who saw the two together that they would soon be married.

He saw how love and friendship had grown between them steadily and in contrast how he and Isabel had grown more distant, more cordial and polite. He had even begun to call her by her adopted name of "Isabel" instead of her childhood name. And with the name "Mandra" seemed to go any spark of the lively girl he had once known so many years ago. She truly was a different person now. And he longed for the girl she had been, the familiar laughing eyes. Now her eyes were empty, like stone. She had taken to wearing spectacles to read, and read so much that she sometimes left them on, sloppily settled on her nose, making her look more like an old spinster than a young woman of 25.

It had gone on too long like this, he decided. He had thought that being patient would be enough. He saw now that he was wrong. He should take action of some sort, probably should've done it long ago. But it wasn't too late.

It took him a while to decide what to do. But once he had it seemed so perfect it surprised him he had not thought of it before.

He would find Devon. Yes, it was brilliant! Unless, of course, he actually found Devon alive and well and desperate to return to Isabel. He could be trapped in a dungeon or camp somewhere. He knew this was possible. He did not deny it. But what drove him on was the idea that he could find proof. Proof that Devon had died years ago and that Isabel was freed from her vow to him.

Sad as this would be to her, it seemed sadder to Kie that she should go on the way she was, determined to live out her days alone, in reverence for a disappeared lover who would never return.

And, he knew that if he left, the little building next to the stable could be fixed up. Perhaps become a home for a newly married couple. He discussed his plan with Nole a few days before his departure.

"So you really want to do this?" Nole asked seriously.

"It's the only way," Kie answered. He was anxious to start, to do anything. "She'll never marry anyone else unless she knows the truth," Kie said and began pacing the small room.

"Kie," Nole said gently, "you may not find anything."

"I know," Kie said, exasperated with the endless possibilities. "I know," he repeated, "but I might find something." He pleaded his case. "If I could in some way prove it to her, then..." he searched for words, "she'd have to—"

"I know," Nole said. "It's a big undertaking," he added solemnly. "Are you prepared for that?"

"Yes!" he answered quickly. "I mean, in my head, I am. I know it'll be hard and maybe if I knew how hard, I wouldn't go. But I must." He looked imploringly at Nole. "I just can't stay here any longer!" He paced slowly. "It'll just kill me to see it all go on like this... forever." He looked at Nole. "Tell me you understand," he said. "Am I a lunatic?"

"I understand," Nole said simply. "You're not a lunatic." He smiled.

Kie smiled halfheartedly back at him. "Then I'll go," he said with finality. He sighed. "I'll just... go." He waved his hand in the air.

Nole said nothing.

* * *

Isabel's life had become very predictable. It followed a certain routine, but she was not unhappy. Though not a day passed when she didn't think of Devon, it no longer made her sad. She began to feel lucky to have known him at all, to ever have felt that kind of love for anyone. A part of her still held onto the belief that he would one day return, but she had given up looking for him stepping over the southern horizon. She had become used to the disappointment of him not returning. It had become a way of life. She had done it so long, she didn't even realize anymore that she was still waiting for him. She thought of him as a cherished part of her past. And it would not be sad to her if she never felt that again. She had felt it once.

Over time she had begun to see Devon as perfect. The absence of a good person tends to erase their faults so that they seem flawless in memory. When he was with her, she had often felt he was too good to be true, and apparently he had been.

She had watched Nole and Zenie effortlessly grow closer and felt a pang of jealousy. In her heart she had truly

believed that real love could never really last, but here it was in front of her in the form of two of her closest friends. They were happy. And God was allowing them to go on this way.

It was at this time she started to see the flaw in her theory. Love could go on. Two people could be happy. Then why couldn't she? Why was she kept from it? Where was Devon? Where was the happy life they had promised each other? These thoughts made her too sad and she usually pushed them aside. But every time she saw Nole and Zenie together, her eyes would cloud over involuntarily.

She knew Kie had once wanted her and she was not oblivious to the longing looks he gave her when he thought she wasn't paying attention. Something always kept her from giving in and letting him love her. She always turned away when he looked at her like that, and put it in the back of her mind. A strange sense of honor and obligation kept her tied to a man who had long ago disappeared, and built a wall between her and someone who loved her in the present.

She lived in her own little world now. Of books and stories of other people's lives. Of imaginary wars played out on the chess board. She rarely rode anymore because the physical alertness it caused snapped her back into a reality she'd rather not experience anymore. So she ate, she slept, she read, she walked, and her days had turned into years that way.

She did not even know of Kie's absence 'til he had been gone nearly a week.

Isabel walked her usual walk on this late spring day. Up over the hills, near the woods and around in a loop. She passed the stables and saw Nole busily brushing a brown mare. They had not spoken in a while, so she wandered over to see him.

She leaned quietly against the door frame and watched him brush, oblivious to her presence. Finally he did turn around to put the brush down and saw her. He immediately smiled.

"Isabel," he said, walking to her. He gave her a big hug. "How've you been?" he asked.

"All right," she answered. "I finished that book you loaned me. This morning."

She sighed.

"What?" he asked her seriously.

"Nothing."

"Is it because Kie left?" he asked.

She looked up suddenly. "What?"

"I thought you knew, Isabel."

"Where did he go?" She was suddenly alert.

"Kargid," Nole said gravely. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no." She covered her face with her hands. "No, not again... He's wanted there, you know. For something they hang men for." A look came over her face then. Of anguish, but what made it worse was the tiny bit of acceptance mingled in with it. As if she had long ago realized her life would be filled with pain and this were merely the latest blow.

"He didn't even speak to me," she said quietly. "We haven't spoken in so long... it's about Devon isn't it?" she almost whispered. "To see where he is."

Nole nodded.

"Oh God... I can't lose him too..." She shook her head and wandered out of the stable. Nole followed her, of course. All the way down to the lake. She sat on the log and stared out at the blue water.

"He'll be careful, you know," Nole said from behind her.

"You think Devon's dead," Isabel said to him after a pause.

He didn't answer.

"It's all right," she assured him. "Everybody does."

She turned around and looked at him then. "Sometimes even I do," she said. She turned back to the lake. "Sometimes I wish he was dead."

Nole sat down quietly beside her.

"I think if he were dead I wouldn't have to wonder... but that's not true. He could be dead. Sometimes I think I don't care one way or another as long as I know which one it is. But I guess I don't get to know," she said.

"Maybe you will," he said. But it was not really comforting. They both knew what he meant.

It rained a lot that spring. Nole had decided that the shed next to the stable would never be fitting for a wife and family. So, with Valen's permission, he had begun to build a little cottage for himself and Zenie near the edge of the woods.

It was hard working with wood for the cottage in the rain, and tending the horses too. Zenie and he hardly saw each other except when she'd run out to bring him food or a drink of water. She always made him sit and rest with her for a

while. He was not the kind to overwork himself, but that was just her way. Extra careful with other people, and strict with herself. Nole had that same quality, Isabel noticed. It was clear they were a good match.

A good match. She had once been part of such a couple. Or had that been only a dream? Sometimes she believed it was. But if it was a dream, it was better than anything in real life. It was better to think it had really happened, here in this enchanted place. To know that it was at least possible.

But it was only a flash of time. Her time with Devon had been too short. It was meant to go on and on and never end. It was wrong that they were apart. She consoled herself with the idea that she had been younger then. Everyone should be happy when they're young, she decided.

She'd had her share of happiness and the memories to prove it to herself. But now was not the time for that. That time had passed. Life would just BE from now on. It could never soar as it once had.

She took pleasure in the little things now. In a good book, the way air entered her lungs when she went for a walk. These things gave her happiness now. Not as extreme as the happiness she'd had with Devon, but it was nice in its own way.

And the rain beat on into early summer. She worried about Kie constantly. She knew what news he would bring of Devon. She did not dare to hope it would be good. She didn't bother to think of that aspect of Kie's journey at all. She only thought of Kie. And how foolish it was for him to go. Why should he worry her like this? Why should he put himself in danger over her? She only hoped he'd live through this latest crazy scheme and come back safely. She prayed and she waited. It was all she could do.

She gave up praying around mid summer. Her stomach had begun to twist into knots every time she begged God for Kie's safety. As if she were merely lying to herself to think he would return. Or even be well. She braced herself for the inevitable. Braced herself against the possibility of another unresolved mystery. Another disappearing man who would not return to ease her spirit or her mind.

She became bitter and more of a recluse. There were days when she did not leave her room. Though that was a nasty habit and she knew it, she couldn't help herself. She curled up in the seat near her window and stared out over

the southern hills, resting her head against the cool glass.

She did this in the daytime and sometimes at night. At times she would merely stop in the middle of reading a book or tending the fire as if the window had called to her. She would wander over to it obediently and sit down once more, to keep watch.

Late summer came and went. Days grew shorter. Zenie visited her in the evenings and sometimes Valen would insist that she at least take a short walk around the grounds with him. She did this, willingly, and enjoyed it too, but never would've bothered to make herself do it, without him.

Fall came quietly, casting a shadow over the land. A chill hung in the air and cut deep if one stood outside in it long enough. It suited her, this cold weather, she thought. It fit her mood nicely. The crispness of the harsh air, the twirling dead leaves spiralling down from their summer perches. The wind eddying them around. The crackle of them under her feet as she walked. She ventured out alone again, and often.

Valen watched her with pity, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing anyone could do. He let her go off alone and tried not to worry about her.

Nole did the same. The cottage needed only finishing touches now, and Zenie helped him with that. They were happy, but neither could forget how forlorn Isabel looked each time they saw her. They discussed asking her to do things with them, but decided that their happiness would be irritating to her, so they let her be.

They were right too. In spite of herself, Isabel found them irritating. She was happy for them, but she could only stand to spend a certain amount of time with them before she felt like screaming. It was so unfair, she thought. That they should be happy and she should not. She wished them well in her heart, but tried to avoid being around them when they were together. It made her too sad. Especially now, with Kie gone too. Why did life have to be this way for her?

She came in one evening late, after a long walk. In the parlor she took off her wraps and pulled a leaf out of her windblown hair. A fire was already going nicely, so she sat down lazily in the chair nearest it, and stared at the flames. She fiddled absentmindedly with her hair.

The wind howled outside. It was a dark night, with no moon.

She had sat there for at least half an hour when she

heard someone step into the doorway. The hall was dark, but she could see by the white hair that it was Valen standing there. He stepped into the light.

"You look tired," he said gently and sat across from her in the other chair. He reached over and pulled another stray leaf from her hair that she had missed.

She looked at him with empty eyes as he did this. "Oh, thank you," she said, watching him throw the leaf into the fire. "I'm not tired," she told him and smiled to reassure him.

Still she did look worn out. Maybe not even physically, he thought. Maybe it was just her spirit. Her face had a look of exhaustion on it. Perhaps from thinking, not walking as he had originally thought.

"You won't sit here all night, will you?" he asked. Her gaze had drifted back to the fire.

"Oh, no..." she said. "I promise." She smiled again kindly and looked at him. "You don't have to watch me," she said quietly, "or worry."

He looked a bit relieved and glanced at his hands. "I suppose you're right, of course," he said. He rose to his feet then and took the hand she held out to him. "You often are." He smiled, then he squeezed her hand and left the room. He gave her one last look at the door, and then forced himself to leave her. He was worried about her, but she would never appreciate him admitting it or showing it to her. He went back to his room to retire for the night.

An hour or so later it began to rain heavily. Isabel didn't really know how long it had been because she woke with a start to hear tapping on the window. The fire was low and the room nearly completely dark. She rose with stiffened muscles and stretched herself before fixing up the fire again. She may be sleepy, she thought, but she couldn't go up to bed yet. She'd just listen to the rain for a while. Stare at the fire. Think of nothing. Think of days gone by, but mostly think of nothing if she could help it.

In the quiet stillness of the room, with only the steady tap of rain or crackling of the fire, the outer door slamming made a huge racket. It startled her so much she actually jumped. She had been standing at the window, staring into the blackness and watching the rain streak down the glass.

Now she started walking towards the doorway, thinking the wind must have blown open the outer door. She only got halfway across the room when a figure appeared in the

doorway, blond hair wet and messy, serious look on his face.

She stopped in her tracks and laughed happily. "Kie!" she cried. She started to run to him, but he held up his hand and then walked slowly towards her.

He looked so serious, she was afraid of what he would say. "Kie, what..." she began, but he shook his head and looked at his feet.

When he finally did look up, she could see there were tears in his eyes. He looked away again and cleared his throat as if to say something. He shook his head as if some long speech he had planned were too much for him. "Goodbye, Isabel," he said finally and reached over to touch her face. He kissed her quickly on the cheek and then swiftly walked back out of the room.

She stood there puzzled for about half a second when an amazing thing occurred. Into the light of the doorway where her eyes still watched, stepped the gray clothed, worn out figure of a man with a rough wooden cane. This startled her. She had not known anyone else was in the hall.

He took a step closer to her then, limping on one side. The firelight caught his features suddenly and Isabel threw a hand over her mouth, afraid to speak, afraid to move. It was Devon.

She thought it was, she dared to hope it was. He was thinner and paler. His eyes were bright as he gazed at her. Neither one of them moved toward the other.

She was afraid that if she spoke or tried to touch him he would disappear, that it was all a horrible vision and he wasn't really there at all. That she was sick and had finally lost her sanity.

She almost couldn't breathe as she watched him. He blinked away a tear and she watched it roll down his dirt stained face. His eyes stared out so clear and blue compared to his dirty skin and clothes. Finally he dared once more to move.

With the aid of his cane, he took another small step towards her. Suddenly she felt her knees become weak and knew that she would fall soon, so she collapsed into the chair behind her. He stopped walking then, seeing her reaction, feeling he was pushing her away.

He looked at her intently and walked slowly towards her again. She began to cry into her hand and his image was blurred, but she couldn't stop. Years of pent up feelings were

bursting out of her in one moment. She was sure he couldn't be real and at any moment he would disappear again.

He stood before her now, quietly, as she cried. She couldn't take her eyes off of him and saw him reach out with his free hand to touch her face.

"No," she managed to get out. "Please..." She held a hand up to stop him, but he only grasped that instead. He was real!

"Oh, God..." she said. He felt so real. His warm hand. He was actually here with her. In front of her. She couldn't speak. Her tears came too fast, and all she could do was stand up and throw her arms around him finally.

He put his arms around her too and the cane dropped to the floor. Tears were running down his face as she looked up at him and he laughed. He grabbed the sides of her face and kissed it a dozen times or more, and threw his arms around her again. He held onto her so tightly she thought she'd suffocate, but she didn't care.

She held onto him just as tightly until she pulled away to look up at him again. Finally one of them spoke. He reached up to her face with one hand to wipe away some tears. He held her face and gazed into her eyes. "Isabel..." he said.

Her heart leaped at the sound of his voice and she smiled at him, so happy she couldn't believe it. "Don't say anything," she whispered and pushed a curl of black hair off his forehead.

"Oh, I do love you," he gushed, and bent down to give her a long and heartfelt kiss. A kiss from a lover greatly missed, to his beloved.