



*Return*  
*of the*  
*Guardians*



Published by Jennifer Wherrett

[www.thelady.com.au](http://www.thelady.com.au) (Return of the Guardians)

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*The wisdom of transcendence*

*What be the true meaning of a fairy tale?*

*Is it, for you, naught but a child's bedtime story?*

*'Tis a pity if so, for, you see, a fairy tale is fair to bursting with myth and metaphor, rich in symbolism, abounding with archetypes, and overflowing with analogy – the language of the soul. If 'tis only the story you are aware of, you will miss the richness of the deeper meaning weaved into the threads of the fairy tale's unfolding storyline. You see, fairy tales are tales of a return to innocence, not naiveté but innocence – that place where fear no longer holds sway. They are tales of transformation, for does not our fair maiden always awaken to the reflection of True Love within her as her tale blossoms into the flower of its fruition?*

*See you no meaning in that for yourself?*

*Still, even so, what would you look like if you, too, awakened to the reflection of True Love within you? What would the landscape of your life look like if it reflected Love back to you, not fear?*

*Mmmm . . . . I wonder . . . .*

*Now, if you are to unlock the deeper meaning of the fairy tale, you must remember one thing: every character in the story is an aspect of the whole, like facets of a beautifully-cut diamond, not separate at all, as you would believe were you to read the fairy tale as naught but a child's bedtime story.*

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Author's note:

I deliberately use capital letters for the following words:  
Love, Light, Truth, Wisdom, Fate, Destiny, Knowledge, Purpose, Will, Way, and  
Process to distinguish these as higher-dimensional concepts from the common  
usage of these words and from the misguided mindsets of lower dimensionality,  
or third-dimensional physical reality.

# Prelude

*He glanced at her again, unable to stop himself. He was riding just behind her so that part of her profile was in his line of sight. Every now and then, she turned her head slightly as something caught her attention, and more of her profile came into view. Whenever she turned her head, the action drew his attention and he looked at her profile. He'd given up trying to fathom her thoughts, so now he just watched her and wondered. All these years of guarding and watching over her – watching her grow from child to girl to young woman – he'd paid her scant attention, seeing her as naught but a duty, and dismissing her as a spoiled and privileged princess, born into the highest ranks of society, but having done nothing at all to earn her rank and privilege. Never, in all these years, had he thought to cast her in the role of a tragic princess. But now, in the final moments of their acquaintance, she had become an enigma – a puzzle he wanted to solve – as he realised he knew her not at all.*

*The riding party was as silent as the forest that surrounded them. The terms of the treaty had expressly stipulated that she come to her husband's kingdom alone. She was not allowed attendants. It was, he thought sourly, a miracle she was allowed her guard. So the party consisted only of him, a handful of his men, and the princess. Despite his musings, the silence did not escape him. He was uncomfortably aware of the lack of companionable banter his men normally threw back and forth to each other. Slightly more unnerving, though, was the lack of birdsong in the forest. Nor could he detect the normal rustle of movement as the forest animals scattered before the intrusive pound of the horses' hooves. Twice now, he'd urged his men to vigilance. There was an unnatural tension pervading the forest, as if it knew something they did not and held*

*its breath in anticipation of trouble. It was impossible not to be affected by it, so the tension hung, too, over their party like a heavy, unseen fog.*

*He glanced at her again. She sat ramrod straight in the saddle as she rode in complete silence. But she was present. He wasn't sure if she felt the tension hanging over them, but he knew she was aware of both her situation and her surroundings. Though her body did not move, he saw her absorbing the scene around them, her eyes moving first this way and then that way. Every now and then, something caught her attention and she turned her head slightly for a better look. Yes, she was aware.*

*A noise like the snapping of a twig pulled sharply at his focus, and he scrutinised the forest around them, seeking even the smallest of movements. Nothing. The forest was as still as it was silent. He liked it not. A chill raised the hairs on his arms. He continued to scan the forest as they rode in silence, but then, again, his concerns for his charge intruded, and he abandoned his scrutiny of the forest to glance at her once again. This time, his concern deeply furrowed his brow. What horrors awaited her in her new life? And he would not be there to protect her. Her soon-to-be husband, like her father, was a king. Surrounded by kings she was. But he knew now she was little more than another possession to them – something to be bartered, swapped or sold like a piece of gold. And this new king, her future husband, was as ruthless and brutal as he was bad tempered. He who watched her now had hoped she'd not heard the stories, but that hope was dashed by the events of the morning. She knew.*

*Again, he glanced at her, and this time his eyes lingered on her. Why was she drawing his eye now, after all this time? Was it the air of mystique that surrounded her now? Or was it her implacable aloofness, as if she had locked herself in a protective tower of her own making and thrown away the key? Or perhaps it was simply the stark and stunning contrast of her purple gown, with its layers and layers of skirts, and the royal blue of her cloak that covered the white rump of her horse. A subtle smile danced in his eyes. All that was missing was the horn, for she looked like the Lady on*

*Her Unicorn. Today, he thought she looked like a princess – calm, regal, proud, aloof, beautiful, and wholly untouchable.*

*His smile vanished, stolen away by the train of his thoughts. That which he had witnessed this day had left him with the unpleasant suspicion there was more he should have done to help her. He was even toying with the idea that he might have failed her. But what could he have done? He was a man paid well to guard her, but there were rules and boundaries that must needs be adhered to and honoured. To break the rules and step over those boundaries . . . well, he shrugged as he turned to resume his scrutiny of the forest. It did not bear thinking about.*

*But again, the scene he'd witnessed that morning intruded, and he pursed his lips in agitation. He had stood beside her, waiting patiently, ready to escort her to her horse, watching as she farewelled the king and queen, her parents. It was not so much the absence of affection between the three that had profoundly shocked him, it was the absolute lack of any emotion whatsoever. Cold. Distant. Disconnected. Empty. Why had he never noticed it before? Because, he realised with a jolt of shock, he'd never before seen them together. She had curtsied low and deeply before the king, and as she'd risen from her curtsy, she had looked him in the eye and said simply and calmly, "You are marrying me to a monster. And for what? A treaty of peace that will last not five years. You will be at war again before that time. Mark my words." And then she had smiled a smile that did not reach her eyes – a smile utterly devoid of amusement as she'd added, "But this you know . . . father." And without awaiting a response she had turned and offered he who witnessed her arm. "I am ready," she'd told him. Unable to stop himself, he'd glanced at the king and queen to gauge their reaction, but he'd been unable to perceive any, anything at all, in either the king or the queen. Not even by an altered expression did they acknowledge her words. They'd stood as though carved of stone, watching as their only daughter walked away from them, perhaps forever.*



*And that was how she'd said goodbye to her parents. No kiss of affection; no tears of farewell; no sentiments of fondness, nor of love; no request to write or to keep in touch; no advice to take care or to be a good wife or to do them proud.*

*Nothing.*

*He frowned deeply as he looked at her yet again. How had it come to be there was so little feeling between her and her parents? He remembered the scandal that had rocked the court many years ago when the nursemaid in charge of the princess' posse of attendants had been banished from court, escaping with her life only through the personal intervention of her charge. Was that the cause? Or had it always been thus?*

*And why oh why had he never noticed? Now it was far, far too late. He was sorry, so very sorry, and he wanted to tell her, to ask her forgiveness. But something stayed his hand. What difference would it make now? What difference could he make now? What was done was done, and what must be must be.*

*But he liked not this new feeling, this new way of looking at her.*

*Pity.*

*Sympathy.*

*Guilt.*

*Regret.*

*None of these sat well with him . . . not at all. But he knew now. His eyes had been opened, and he could not now avoid knowing the truth.*

*She was utterly alone.*

*And she was not free.*

~~

*“You have brought warmth where once there was only cold.  
You have brought hope where once there was only despair.  
You have brought colour where once there was a dull and dreary landscape.  
You have brought light where once there was only darkness,  
And life where once there was only death.”*

# *Snow*

Ravenna felt the tension in the forest and among the few members of the riding party – her personal guard and their captain – but chose to ignore it. This passage through the forest was, for her, a brief moment of respite. Here, now, in this moment, she could lose herself in the beauty she saw around her. The sunlight formed jewels of bright light as it penetrated the canopy of green leaves, sometimes sending shafts of light to spear the pathway in front of them. The trees were tall, majestic, proud, and timeless – witnesses to the events of many, many, many lifetimes – and their fallen leaves covered the forest floor in a carpet of different shades of brown. It was cooler here, and quiet. And the scents of the forest filled her lungs so that she breathed deeply, savouring the fresh, clear air. Yes, here, in this moment, in this place, it was easy to forget the loneliness of years past and the trepidation of ones to come.

In some ways, she'd learned to become impervious to whatever it was Fate threw at her next. And when the blow had finally come, it had been expected. She'd long been preparing herself for it, knowing it to be inevitable and, therefore, unavoidable. Had that made it easier to bear? Not in the long term but in the short term, yes, it had. 'Twas rather like bracing oneself for each lash of a whip but feeling the sting long afterwards.

The first sign of the blow had come in the form of a rare summons to 'the royal presence' – her secret name for her father. Recognising it for what it was, she'd stood before the king with her defences intact, even fortified – that impenetrable wall of protection she'd long ago learned to pull tightly around herself. He'd told her she was to marry in the same tone of voice he used to pass judgement on the pickpockets and petty thieves who were brought before him with uncommon regularity. They bored him, and he did not bother to hide the fact. In the same tone, he'd then told her who she was to marry and what he was acquiring in the process. Well, at least she knew at last what she was worth to him: a treaty of

peace and a tract of fertile land, long coveted, on the border between the two kingdoms. Bartered away like any of his assets. She'd wondered since if she was listed in that weighty leather tome he used to record the rest of his wealth and assets. She pictured her name scratched out in it, and written above it the words 'Fertile Crescent'.

But she could not have predicted the change in the way people responded to her when her impending marriage was announced. Try as she might, she had *not* been impervious to that. Nobleman and servant alike, they had all looked upon her with the same sentiment expressed on their faces: pity. She could handle being looked upon with scorn, disinterest, annoyance, envy, arrogance, criticism, and even ridicule. But not pity. Not that. Never that. Many a time, she would pass a cluster of people and watch them hush each other as she approached. What did they think? That she did not know? That she had not heard the stories of cruelty? Their efforts to protect her from the truth only earned them her scorn. Did they really have such flimsy memories? Did they really not remember that King Menelaws, her soon-to-be husband, had visited her father's court not two years past? And did they really think he'd not seen her? *She* would never forget. He'd made his intentions clear to her back then. He was that sort of man, you see. Whatever he wanted, he bought, like a coveted jewel or a valuable painting, and if he could not buy it, he took it. And she was beautiful, like the oil painting of a master artist. She knew that because he'd told her. Many times since, she'd spent long hours looking at her reflection in the looking glass in her room, wondering what it was about her that made her beautiful. It mattered not, really. Her beauty was a liability because it had drawn his eye. She'd thought of disfiguring herself, using a knife perhaps to scar her flesh and make herself ugly in his eyes. But then she would become valueless to her father, and she knew she would remain forever in his palace, under his roof, discarded like a piece of disused furniture, good for nothing but gathering dust. Best just to allow Fate to weave the threads of her life, and to try and live through whatever was woven into the fabric of her existence. In truth, she knew, one was actually powerless to fight or resist one's fate anyway, so best not to even try.

The snap of a twig brought her sharply back to the present. She felt rather than saw the captain's tense, anxious scrutiny of the forest immediately around them. With her attention drawn his way, she thought back to the events of the morning. She'd felt his shock as, together, they walked away from the king and queen, and *that* had shocked her. At last, too late, she knew she had misjudged him, for she'd always thought him her father's man. She could feel his eyes on her as they rode, questioning, reassessing, wondering. She toyed with the idea of answering some of those questions. But what was the point? Very soon, he, the captain, would hand her over to her new husband. Very soon, he would relinquish the responsibility for her safety he'd long held. Very soon, they would see each other no more and their acquaintance would end.

Too late, they had both realised their error of judgement where the other was concerned. Too late, they had realised the loss of opportunity . . . .

Of a sudden, the forest erupted in a cacophony of shouting and yelling. Men appeared from nowhere, from everywhere, black-clad and masked, brandishing swords, knives, clubs, and other weapons. In a heartbeat, the riding party was surrounded. Ravenna barely had time to tighten Isabelle's reins, trying to stay in the saddle as Isabelle reared in fright, kicking out her legs. The captain yelled orders at his men, quick as ever to respond to a threat, and the shouting of the attackers was joined by the scraping of metal as swords were pulled from scabbards. The captain and his men, as one, turned their horses to face the onslaught.

The skirmish that followed was brief but bloody. Men were felled on both sides so that men in black lay, bloodied, on the ground beside those in the king's blue and red livery. But the captain and his guard were hopelessly outnumbered. Ravenna tried desperately to keep Isabelle under control within the protective circle of the captain and his men, but she could not help but watch the bloody, violent struggle around her. One by one, she watched the men of her guard drop, her circle of protection losing its protective power with each one felled, until it disappeared altogether and only the captain remained to defend her. He'd abandoned his horse so that he stood in front of her, fighting two of the black-clad men, a sword in one hand, a knife in the other. But with only two hands, he

was doomed as soon as a third entered the fray. When a sword skewered him from behind, Ravenna watched in horror as he dropped his own weapons and fell to his knees, his bloodied hands clasping the blade of the sword that protruded from his wounded gut. He looked up at her, and her breath caught and burned in her throat at the profound sorrow she saw in his eyes.

Oh no, *no*. He believed he had failed her again.

“Run, princess, run,” he urged her.

It was not his words that spurred Ravenna into action, it was the anguish with which he spoke them – the moan of a tortured soul. Ravenna did nothing to urge Isabelle into a gallop, she simply gave Isabelle her head. Isabelle reared again, kicking out at the men in front of her, and then she jumped forward, crashing through and past the group, hurdling the bloodied bodies of the wounded. She galloped through the forest, running faster than Ravenna had known she could. Ravenna’s cloak billowed out behind her, the hood whipped from her hair as she hunched low over Isabelle’s neck. Trees whisked past them in a blur, and a cloud of disturbed leaves followed in their wake. Instinctively, Ravenna knew they had to get off the path, and with the thought came instant action. She pulled at the reins, and Isabelle obeyed, veering sharply left. Now Ravenna and Isabelle both needed every shred of concentration as they galloped between the trees, with only a fraction of an instant to make each choice as to which way to go next. Left and right, and left and right again they weaved as Isabelle demonstrated a nimbleness of foot, a previously unknown talent and ability to change direction in the blink of an eye. But then, the two had never before been pursued by men who wanted to hurt them. The two of them had never before had to run for their lives. They ran until Ravenna felt Isabelle tire. She’d lost all track of time, but she knew they had to stop or Isabelle would run herself into a state of collapse. Gently, she urged Isabelle to a walk so she could look behind her. She could see no one. The forest was still and empty. They were alone.

She slid from Isabelle’s back and, keeping an eye on the forest, ran soothing hands down Isabelle’s neck, calming the horse with words spoken in the old tongue. The language of the ancients, she knew, was far more than just words, and she tapped their power now, watching as Isabelle responded. Ravenna

wished the words could calm her too, but, alas, her own heart pounded with fear, and it would not be calmed. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and her skin tingled uncomfortably. Now that she'd stopped, and with her concentration thus released, images of the captain presented themselves in her mind's eye. Tears of sorrow and frustration filled her eyes and spilled over, leaving trails of moisture on her cheeks. She wished, *wished* she could tell him he had not failed her.

Trying to pull herself together, she took a deep breath, wiped her eyes, and looked again at the forest. She had no idea where she was, but she knew she had to keep moving. In every direction, the scenery was the same: tall, moss-covered trees, bracken and foliage between them, and the endless carpet of brown leaves. She glanced upward, seeking the sun, trying to gain a sense of direction. But the sun was high overhead and provided no guidance at all. She had no choice but to continue in the same direction. They certainly could not go back, her and Isabelle. Holding the reins in one hand, she lifted the skirts of her gown in the other and started walking.

For hours she walked. She knew it was hours because her feet burned with blisters, and the sun was edging ever closer to the horizon on her right. So she knew she was heading south, away from her father's capital. Strange how, in the midst of trauma and crisis, the knowledge of that gave her comfort. In an effort to keep unwanted, unwelcome thoughts and images at bay, she'd concentrated on a tale she'd heard in childhood – an old favourite – recounting it to Isabelle in low, hushed tones. In the absolute silence of the forest, talking was probably not the best of ideas, but it was either that or surrender to the utter panic that threatened to overwhelm her. If she gave in to the panic, she would lose her ability to think rationally, and that could prove disastrous should thinking rationally again become a necessity . . . .

A rustle of leaves behind her, sounding strangely out of place and overly loud in the silence, caused the words of the story to die on her lips. She stopped and turned, scanning the forest. But the trees were thick here, and she could see nothing, not even the barest movement. The forest was still.

Isabelle became skittish again.

“Isabelle,” Ravenna whispered, “what is it?”

Isabelle tossed her head in response, and Ravenna knew, then, they were not alone. Her heart resumed its pounding beat. Loath to turn her back on the direction from which the rustle of leaves had come, she gathered her skirts in one hand, the reins in the other, and resumed a hesitant, uneasy walking pace. The sensation of being watched prickled the back of her neck, and without meaning to, she quickened her pace in response, knowing, even as she did, that any effort to outrun her attackers would be futile if the black-clad men had somehow found her.

With her senses honed on the forest behind her, she failed to perceive the danger ahead. Only once she walked straight into it did she realise she’d made a mistake. She and Isabelle walked into a natural clearing ringed by a circle of tall trees, and then stopped, standing in the circle’s centre. A feeling of utter helplessness washed over Ravenna as black-clad men emerged silently from the trees, surrounding her. They’d discarded their masks, so she easily read the warning in their eyes. Do not run. We will catch you.

Questions presented themselves in Ravenna’s mind like shooting stars, one moment there, the next gone. Where had they come from? How had they found her? How had they caught up with her? And why had she not sensed or heard them? There were no answers. And then there were no more questions as, abruptly and with no warning, she was grabbed roughly from behind. Holding her firmly against him with one hand around her waist, with his other, her assailant held a knife against the skin of her neck. The force of the attack pulled her backwards, and she dropped Isabelle’s reins, instinctively bringing her hands up to try and remove the knife from her throat. Her feeble strength was no match for his, though, and her efforts were futile.

“Ye’ve led us a merry dance, princess,” he growled into her ear. “But y’re too valuable to us to let y’ go dancin’ off alone.” With a nod he signalled one of his men to grab Isabelle and hold her still. “Rumour has it Menelaws has taken quite a fancy to y’, princess. He might even want y’ back badly enough to pay handsomely for it, methinks. What do y’ think, princess?”



Ravenna did not respond. She was struggling just to stay on her feet. He was slightly shorter than she was, so his arm around her neck was pulling her backwards and choking her in the process.

“Do no’ fear,” he continued the one-sided conversation, “we’ll no’ hurt y’. Y’ be worth too much to us alive and unscarred, though there be places on the body where scars do no’ . . . .”

A low, deep, ominous growl in the foliage behind them silenced him. Ravenna, held tightly against him, felt his body tense, and saw it echoed on the faces of the other men. They looked around anxiously, some of them slowly pulling swords and knives from their belts, others tightening their hold on clubs and axes. For a moment, there was a strange lack of movement – an uncanny stillness – once weapons were held at the ready. Each man stood still, listening to the low growl. In the silence, it was magnified and seemed to reverberate around them all. Then Ravenna heard a twang followed by a whoosh, another twang, another whoosh, and yet another in quick succession. The strange stillness was broken as three of the men in the circle dropped to the ground like sacks of grain thrown from a wagon. Ravenna craned her head against the arm around her neck to try and see the one closest and saw an arrow protruding from his body. Fleetingly, briefly, she silently acknowledged the skill of the archer. To fell a grown man with a single arrow required great skill and the precision of deadly accuracy . . .

Large, dark, grey shapes bounded into the clearing, one after the other . . . wolves, Ravenna realised, surprised. Wolves, crouched low, ready to attack, baring their teeth, eyeing the men standing amidst the ring of trees. Already still, the men froze, as if each had even ceased breathing. Ravenna, watching the unfolding scene, realised her situation had altered yet again, like the swift turning of a kaleidoscope that changes the pattern within it. Were wolves to be her rescue? This day had brought so many swift turns in the kaleidoscope of her reality, she was struggling to keep up. Although her heart pounded with fear, she began to observe the unfolding scene as though from a great distance. When she saw a blurred flash of white on the periphery of her vision, and the arms around her vanished, she took a moment to register her freedom, and then turned as

though in a dream to see her assailant on the ground wrestling a wolf as white as the driven snow. The fight was not a fair one, of course, and within a moment, he lay flat on his back, pinned to the ground, arms splayed, with the wolf's mouth clamped over his throat. He stilled, but Ravenna saw his hand twitch, still holding the knife, and recognised his intent. Calmly, and without conscious thought, she picked up her skirts and stepped on the man's wrist, grinding her boot into the soft flesh as she leaned all of her weight on it. When the knife dropped from his nerveless fingers, she bent to pick it up but did not remove her boot.

"Down, Snow. Down."

Ravenna turned. Another man had stepped into the clearing, an arrow nocked against his bow, and both raised as he took aim at the black-clad man holding Isabelle's reins. He, too, was dressed in black – boots, trousers, and tunic – and for a brief moment, Ravenna thought him one of them. But his long, hooded, fur-edged brown cloak set him apart, and then she realised it was he who had spoken to the white wolf.

The wolves were his?

Ravenna looked to see if the white wolf had obeyed him. Instead of obeying the command, though, the wolf tightened her hold and growled low in her throat, obviously reluctant to release her prey.

Without altering his stance or removing his eyes from the man at whom his arrow was aimed, the archer spoke to the man on the ground. "It seems my wolf does not want to let you go, mercenary. She wants blood, your blood . . ."

"Wait," Ravenna said before she could stop herself.

The archer flickered the briefest of glances at her.

She swallowed. "This man killed my men . . . men who were guarding me. He has no respect for the sanctity of life. So why should he then be allowed to keep his?"

The archer glanced at her again. "You want this man executed?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Are you sure? His blood will then be on your hands."

She nodded again, struggling to banish the image of a man kneeling on the ground holding a bloody blade with bloodied hands. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Still without lowering his bow, the archer nodded briefly. “Gheist, Snow,” he commanded. “Gheist. Kill.”

With one quick, deft movement, the white wolf jerked her head and ripped the man’s throat from his neck. Droplets of blood flew into the air around her and splattered like raindrops on to the leaves in the clearing. Some fell on to the coat of the wolf, starkly red against the pure white of her coat, and some splattered the skirts of Ravenna’s gown. Ravenna looked down. Suddenly, the events of this long, horrible day, one after another after another, crashed in on her, sapping all that remained of her strength. Her knees buckled, and she half fell, half sat heavily on the ground. The white wolf levelled her dark eyes at Ravenna over the body of the dead mercenary.

“I thank you, Snow,” Ravenna said to the wolf in the ancient language, bowing her head in reverence, knowing the power of the words would convey the depth of her gratitude though their recipient be a wolf. “I thank you.”

The archer lowered his bow briefly, distracted, his eyes narrowed on Ravenna. And then, refocussing, he raised the bow again and re-aimed it at the man holding the white horse. “Get your men out of here,” he commanded the man. “Take your dead with you, and do not come back.”

Every man responded, galvanised into action. All the while they gathered their dead, the archer held his bow and arrow raised and ready, alert for any sign the men intended to fight for their quarry. The wolves, too, watched the movements of the men like sentinels, teeth bared, ready to pounce. Ravenna did not watch her attackers leave, but she saw two of them haul the dead mercenary up, and she heard them throw him over a horse like a heavy sack of grain.

Finally, when only the wolves, the archer, Ravenna, and Isabelle remained in the clearing, the archer lowered his bow. “They’ll not come back for you, princess, not with the wolves to protect you.”

Ravenna nodded. “How come you to be here?”

“We’ve been tracking them for days,” he told her as he re-stashed his arrow. “It was obvious they were up to no good. They’ve never before come this far east .

. . or south for that matter. Come, princess,” he said, leaning over to help her to her feet, “there’s still time to get you back to your father.”

Ravenna jerked her arm out of his grasp. “No,” she said harshly.

He crouched beside her, putting his bow across his knees, and looked at her curiously. “You’d prefer I take you to your new husband then?”

Ravenna shook her head as she looked forlornly at the carpet of leaves upon which she sat. “No.” And then, aware of the uncomfortable silence as he awaited an explanation, she told him, “I am caught between two undesirable fates. I cannot go back, but neither can I go forward.” She looked at him, unconsciously imploring him. “Is there no where else you can take me? Is there not a third option . . . anything . . . ?”

He was silent for a long moment. There *was* a third option, but she would like it not. No one would. Still, it was her choice. He had no right to make it for her.

In the silence, Ravenna became aware of the wolves. They circled, some sniffing the pool of blood on the leaves beside her. The white wolf, sensing the tension in Ravenna, came to sit beside her, offering comfort. Without thinking, Ravenna put her hand on the wolf’s coat, the lightest of touches, but the movement drew the eye of the archer and seemed to help him make up his mind.

“You do not wish to be found, I take it?” he asked her.

She shook her head, wanting him to understand without the necessity for explanation. She had not the energy for any more explanations.

“Well,” he said, rising, “it just so happens there is a third option. I can take you to a place you will never be found though they search for you high and low. But it comes at a price, princess. If you are willing to pay the price, I can help you disappear.”

“I’ll take it. I’ll go with you.”

“Without asking the price? Aye, princess, that you will,” he said, leaning over again to assist her to her feet. “But do not ever let me hear you say I did not warn you.”

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“How do you know the old language well enough to speak it? It is not the language of your people and has not been spoken in the northern kingdoms for many centuries.”

Ravenna looked up, over the flames, at the archer. His face was bathed in an orange glow as he looked at her intently. All around them was darkness. They were again in a clearing ringed by a circle of trees, a long way from that other clearing. They had walked until the light of day had disappeared completely, plunging the forest into darkness, so that walking had become difficult. By the time they stopped, making camp for the night, Ravenna could concentrate on nothing but the fire in her feet. They burned. She'd tried not to appear to him as a weak, helpless female, but by the time they stopped, she could barely walk and had to lean on Isabelle for assistance. Once they stopped, the archer built and lit a small fire, lighting the area in the clearing. After rummaging through his pack, he threw strips of dried meat to each of the wolves and handed one to Ravenna.

“Eat,” he commanded. “It's tough, but it'll ease your hunger.”

As she chewed on the meat, she watched him rummage through his pack again and withdraw an apple. Then he stood, used his knife to cut the apple into pieces, and fed them to Isabelle. When the apple was gone, he uttered not a single word as he came to crouch in front of Ravenna. Gently, slowly, he lifted her feet, untied and removed her boots, and then used his knife to cut her stockings at the knees and peel them from her legs, ignoring her sharp intake of breath when the material stuck to her sores. When her feet were bare of stockings and boots, he opened a small tin, scooped out the salve within, and touched it to the weeping sores and blisters. The ointment soothed the burning almost immediately. When he was done, he used her stockings, cut into strips, to bind and bandage her feet. For the entirety of his ministrations, Ravenna remained compliant. He could've done anything to her, anything at all, and she would not have had the energy to resist him. But when he'd wrapped her feet, he went to sit on the other side of the fire and asked her the question she knew he'd wanted to ask since she'd thanked Snow.

“I was taught it when I was a child,” she answered his question.

“By whom?”

“By the woman in whose care I was placed as a babe.”

“And how does she know the ancient tongue?”

“She would never tell me. She always said only that it was a part of her, and she was a part of it.”

“And did she also teach you the power of its words?”

“She taught me how to connect the words to the power within me.”

The archer nodded, smiling despite himself. She kept surprising him, this princess of whom he had heard much. He wondered if she knew how much her father’s people loved to gossip about her. There was always much information to be gleaned where she was concerned. He suspected much of it was little more than embellished rumours and fabricated stories, but he had, it seemed, believed more of it than he realised.

“She was a priestess then, this woman who was charged with your care.”

Ravenna hesitated. She’d never thought of Viviane as a priestess.

“Nay, princess,” the archer said quietly, watching her expression over the flames of the fire, “’twas not a question. It was a statement of fact.”

Ravenna looked back at the flames as his words evoked memories of the past, and she re-examined them in a slightly different light.

He watched the interplay of expressions on her face. She wasn’t very good at hiding her thoughts. Surely that was not good for one who lived at her father’s court.

“Your future husband has many enemies, princess,” he observed quietly, deliberately slicing through her thoughts to steer the conversation where he wanted it to go. “Anyone who knows anything at all about him would know that.”

She raised her eyes to his again. “Please, call me Ravenna. And what is your point?”

“My point, Ravenna, is that your father knows his enemies,” and then he added half under his breath, “King Raymond is known for that,” his tone conveying his dislike of her father far more effectively than words. “Those men who were hunting you today were mercenaries. Do you understand what that means?”

Ravenna shook her head.

“It means they are men for hire. It means someone paid them to do what they did today. Why were you travelling with such a small escort? Seven men.” He frowned. “That was never going to be enough.”

His words triggered several thought processes, and, as each one led her to the same conclusion, she stared at the archer with her mouth slightly agape. She could barely bring herself to frame the question. “Are you saying my father paid those men?”

“That would be my guess.”

“For what purpose? He got what he wanted when he bargained me away for his long-coveted piece of land.”

“But Menelaws is not to be trusted, and your father, probably better than anyone else, knows this.”

Ravenna sighed deeply. If what the archer said was true then her father bore the responsibility for the captain’s death . . . then her father had knowingly *sent* the captain and his men to their deaths. Thus was the captain’s loyal service to her father rewarded. Ever was it so. People were naught but pawns in his games, to be used and moved where he saw fit. Ravenna closed her eyes as the pain accompanying the realisation washed through her. Her only consolation now was the knowledge that she had slipped out of her father’s grasp. He had lost her, and in the process had lost his bargaining power since she happened to be the only thing her father possessed that Menelaws wanted. And, with her thus gone, so, too, had that long-desired piece of land slipped through her father’s fingers. He had lost, period. Now, he would have to defeat Menelaws in a battle to acquire the Fertile Crescent, and that, Ravenna knew, was highly unlikely. King Menelaws had never been defeated in battle, and he had fought many in his time – a fact her father knew all too well. Facing Menelaws in battle was the one thing her father was always utterly determined to avoid. He much preferred to outwit his rival under the auspices of his political games, manipulations, and intrigues – his particular talent.

“How is it you are so well versed in the politics of kings?” she asked the archer, looking at him again over the flames of the small fire.

“I have long observed their games.”

She digested that. “And from whence do you hail, archer?”

“From the place I am taking you to.”

“What is the name of this place?”

“Arnheim.”

She frowned, recognising the old tongue and trying to recall if she'd ever heard the name in other contexts.

“You have not heard of it, Ravenna. No one in the northern kingdoms who now lives has heard of it, not even your father.”

“Why ever not?”

“It would be easier for me to show you the answer to that question rather than explain it. For now, you must needs be patient. Tomorrow, your answers will come.”

Ravenna absorbed this in silence, wondering, fleetingly, if she'd made the right choice. Strangely, though, she had never felt as safe as she felt in this moment, with this man and his wolves.

“What is your name?”

He smiled grimly. “Around these parts,” he answered enigmatically, “I am known as Hunter.”

“Hunter,” she repeated. “And do your wolves have names?”

He pointed to the wolves on one side of the fire as he named them.

“This is Sylvan, the leader of the pack, Roulle, and Mandrake, although we call him Drake.” And then, pointing to the wolves on the other side of the fire, “This is Maine, Tor, and you already know Snow.”

Ravenna looked at the wolves, each in turn as they were named, smiling her amusement as the ears of each one moved and twitched in recognition of his own name. And then, when it was Snow's turn, she smiled down at the white wolf lying beside her. “Yes, I know Snow,” she said quietly, laying a hand on the wolf's white coat. “How come you to have wolves as companions?”

“I came upon them when their mother was near to death. She'd been injured and had only the strength left to birth and suckle them. I cut her throat and took her pups to raise as my own. They have been with me since.”



Ravenna nodded and then asked him, “Are you helping me because you heard me speak the ancient tongue?”

“Yes. And because I’ve not ever seen Snow respond to anyone the way she’s responded to you. She does not normally like people.” He smiled then, his smile full of affection as he looked across the flames at the white wolf. “If there’s one thing I have learned in my travels, Ravenna, it is that the instinct of wolves can be wholly relied upon. If Snow likes you, I can trust you.”

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*End of Excerpt*