Gifted Grace

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English Departmental Honors

Gifted Grace

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Abstract for Gifted Grace

In this story Grace has the ability to control animals. In her world, certain people have supernatural powers called Gifts. Grace must contend with the war that stole her father, a treacherous stepmother whose Gift is to command others to her will, and the mysterious Keenan McDougary who can neither tell nor be told a lie.

My inspiration for Gifted Grace first came from watching Disney’s Cinderella as an adult. For the first half of the movie, Cinderella’s interactions center mainly around animals. I thought that it would have been much more interesting if the animals were a more integral part of the plot – hence Grace’s Gift was born. The rest of the world fell into place around that idea.

I wrote the first two chapters as a freshman, but then it took about a year for the entirety of the plot to come together in my mind. Normally I write in a piecewise fashion, first sculpting the scenes that come easily in no particular order and then filling the in-betweens. Because I had a good measure of the plot already thought out, Gifted Grace was the first piece that I have written linearly for a majority of the process. It is difficult for me to advance without a driving plot; the character possibilities seem endless and I tend to become indecisive. Therefore most of my ideas form around a compelling storyline, which aids in the process of learning about my characters given their motivating circumstances. I have an entire novel planned out for Gifted Grace and I was delighted for the opportunity to force a schedule on my progress through writing an honors thesis. I have since reached a suitable stopping point for the extent of the thesis, approximately halfway through the story.
For my younger audience, I wished to create a strong heroine but without the complete role-reversal between damsel-in-distress and a heroic prince charming; I wanted to create a Cinderella story where the relationships between the characters are not always predictable. Central to the story is the growth of an enchanting partnership where both parties rely on each other. The novel in its entirety is a journey towards closure for the two main characters – one cognizant and one unwitting. Grace embarks on her journey in search of closure after the revelations concerning her father’s death and McDougary comes to help those who suffer from the same curse as he. Lastly, I wanted to incorporate the values of truth and intelligence into the story – which became the two main features of Keenan McDougary’s character. The handicap of his Gift simultaneously brings flaws and strength to his personality.

The defining feature of Cinderella is the slipper, regardless of the actual shoe type. After reading many of the original variants of the Cinderella tale, I realized that while there is no actual slipper in my story, McDougary serves as a symbolic slipper. In the fairytale, the slipper serves to reveal the true identity of Cinderella; in my tale, McDougary is also an agent of truth for Grace. However, the revelations he brings to Grace regarding her identity appear in the second half of the novel. Grace is a dauntless young woman, partly due to her powerful Gift. Throughout her journey, she learns to look beyond the Gifts of others to see how their Gifts shaped who they are – which is the same fantastic journey that I undertook as the writer.
BOOK LIST:

**Relevant to this project:**
*Ella Enchanted* – Gail Carson Levine  
*Just Ella* – Margaret Peterson Haddix  
*Gakuen Alice* – Tachibana Higuchi  
*Disney’s Cinderella*

**General influences:**
*Cassie Palmer* series – Karen Chance  
*Fever* series – Karen Marie Moning  
*Claidi Journals* series – Tanith Lee  
*Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series – Laurel K. Hamilton  
*Alexia Tarabotti* series – Gail Carriger  
*The Storyteller’s Daughter* – Cameron Dokey  
*Poison* – Chris Wooding  
*Brother to Dragons, Companion to Owls* – Jane Lindskold  
*Goblin Wood* – Hilari Bell  
*Unicorn Chronicles* – Bruce Coville  
*Winter of Fire* – Sherryl Jordan  
*Master of Shadows* – Janet Lorimer
Gifted Grace
By Jessica Atha

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Chapter 1 – Papa’s Request

Voices shouted over thudding hooves and a dull buzzing roar came from outside the manor. They were still occupied with the ruckus I had arranged. My arms shook as the teetering pile of books pulled against my muscles, but I couldn’t afford to take more than one trip. I exhaled and tiptoed into the empty main foyer and up the stairs towards my room, trying not to topple the massive careworn tomes in my arms. Even though Papa had only been gone for six months, my stepmother, Clarice, was already selling off his belongings. This was my last chance to rescue our favorite books from the library for safekeeping. The rest would all be auctioned the next day so that Clarice could turn Papa’s cherished library back into the garish ballroom it had ceased to be long before I was born. I was nearing my bedroom when a familiar voice shrieked my name, “Grace!”

Uh-oh. I put a hand on top of the stack and broke into a run. In my hurry, I squeezed too hard causing the books to explode out of my grasp. They cascaded onto the wooden floor before my bedroom door, where a small hand-woven rug used to lie. That was sold too, of course. I scrambled to my knees and started flinging the books into my room. I prayed that the rough treatment wouldn’t damage any as I threw the last one, stood and slammed the door shut.
I spun to see Clarice storming up the stairs, her face flushed and angry. She was a tall woman who carried herself with noble elegance that, to me, always seemed faintly spiced with condescending malice. But sometimes not so faint, like just now. At this moment, gone was the careful elegance that masked her distaste for her pampered stepdaughter, or so she called me. She advanced quickly down the hall with her shoulders bunched and her head forward – she slightly resembled an enraged charging moose. Her graying black hair was attempting to fly away from the elaborate twist atop her head and some of it was sticking to the sweat on her neck. I might have laughed at how undignified she looked if it weren’t for the tight lips and accusing glare pinning me in place.

“Grace, you little wretch! You called those bees, didn’t you? And the horses, too! They escaped from the stable. All you, wasn’t it? And don’t you dare lie to me,” she spat.

I snapped my mouth shut on my denial. She had tacked on that ‘Don’t lie.’ Clarice had the Gift of Command and I couldn’t disobey. Her Gift gave her the undeserved ability to force people to do her bidding. Even without it, she was an old hand at manipulating people, which made her a bit tricky to handle. But over the years, I had learned. For me, the compulsion to do as she says usually faded as soon as I was out of her presence. My real mother had the Gift of Resilience; maybe I inherited a pale ghost of that, although I’ve never heard of anyone having two Gifts. In any case, Clarice didn’t know and I tried to keep it that way. So I acted like everyone else by pretending to be utterly powerless before her Gift. But face-to-face, my dim resistance didn’t do much good. The best thing to do at times like this was to evade or distract.
“Sometimes animals act on their own, you know. I’m not constantly pulling their strings.” I wagged my finger at her.

She leaned over me with her formidable height. “Don’t sass me. That swarm nearly took my head off, leaving the groundskeeper and maids alone. You can’t tell me that was natural.”

I shrugged and the crease between her eyebrows deepened.

“Grace, I specifically forbade you from using your Gift. How could you disobey me?”

“No, you forbade me from using my Gift in the manor, remember? You said the animals made too much of a mess indoors.” As soon as the words were past my lips, I wanted to reel them back as I had a sudden premonition of a thorough verbal lashing followed by a possible confinement. But then I realized that it was necessary to explain the loophole to her anyway, to soothe any possible suspicions about my shaky resistance.

She straightened slowly. “And you continue to prove that you can’t be trusted to prevent them from doing just that, even outdoors.”

“What? So now anything any animal does is my fault? Even outside?” It just so happened that this time it was my fault, but that wasn’t the point.

“They won’t be doing anything that I don’t like anymore, will they Grace?”

“You don’t like it when the crickets chirp too loudly at night. Do you want me to leave them to their singing or is it my responsibility to keep all of nature in check? Do you expect me to teach the horses to use a bedpan so they don’t leave droppings where you might step in it and soil your shoes?”
“Just do not use your Gift anywhere on this property, ever,” she said with frustrated finality. “And you stay in your room for the rest of the day, young lady, so you have time to think about that little stunt you pulled.” She turned on her heel and walked away, leaving me feeling somewhat persecuted but itching to do it all over again just to drive her up the wall.

I entered my room and closed the door softly behind me. For seventeen years, my room had been crammed almost too full to navigate through with furniture, toys, and trinkets. Luckily the cramped space hadn’t been much of a problem because as a child I spent most of my time with Papa or outside playing with other children or else being schooled in the library. But now my room had been reduced to bare bones: a tiny bed, a bald beech wood armoire, and an old hard desk chair. And I didn’t have schooling, or friends, or Papa anymore. Clarice said that all the things she sold were to pay for Papa’s debts, but I couldn’t believe her. My father was too smart for that. I thought they were her debts.

I slumped to the floor next to the haphazard pile of Papa’s books. My cat, Bastio, came crawling out from under my armoire and began rubbing his black chin on my leg. “Ever since Papa’s been gone, Clarice doesn’t even try to be nice to me,” I told Bastio, stroking his back. “She fired my tutor, saying that my lessons were expensive and a waste of time. But now, I just laze around the house and try to stay out from under her feet. One would think that she would marry me off and get rid of my waste of space as well. I turned seventeen three months ago, I’m old enough. But she doesn’t want to pay my dowry, does she?” I sighed. “You’d come with me, though, wouldn’t you, Bastio?” Bastio blinked big green eyes in that sleepy way cats do and purred, making me smile.
Animals had always been better for pouring out my thoughts than any diary. And they kept secrets better than a piece of paper ever could.

I sat up and scooted Papa’s books across the floor and began stacking them underneath my bed alongside some other items I had managed to pilfer: Papa’s dagger, his pipe, a few pieces of the good silver, and a portrait of Mama. Bastio crept under the bed to see what I was doing. He stepped on Mama’s portrait with a padded paw and bent down to daintily sniff her face.

“Get off that.”

He quickly hopped off and I gently stood it upright.

Papa had loved Mama and I never would have guessed that he would remarry.

“You know what I think, Bastio? I think Clarice used her Gift to snag Papa. A wealthy widower? He was shark bait. I’d wager the only downside in Clarice’s mind was that I came with the deal. I know she never liked me, but seeing how she disrespects everything in the manor now that he’s gone? It makes me think she never cared for him either. He should have seen through her right away.”

It still surprised me that she pulled off the marriage because Papa’s Gift was Thought Skimming. He always knew what a person was thinking at the time, just whatever was foremost in the mind. Quite annoying as a misbehaving child. But whenever I was troubled, he knew exactly what was wrong and how to comfort me and that was priceless.

“Perhaps he knew that she didn’t love him and that’s why he started traveling more and more. If it weren’t for her, perhaps he wouldn’t have been across the border in Molthova in the first place. Perhaps he would still be alive.” Bastio, who had been
listening patiently, meowed at me. “He would have liked you. If only you had come around a little sooner, you could have met him.”

When I was finished stowing the books in their hiding place, Bastio batted out Papa’s favorite novel with his paw. I picked it up and patted Bastio on the head. “Good idea. Since I’m stuck in here, at least I have something to do.” Putting Papa’s novel away, instead I pulled out the animal encyclopedia he had bought me before I could even read. Sitting down on my bed, I put Bastio in my lap and began to fondly leaf through the faded pages when several sheets of thin paper fell from the center. I picked them up and was surprised to discover that the top sheet was a letter, addressed to me in Papa’s handwriting.

I almost tore it in my hurry to open it. It read:

*Dearest Gracie,*

* If by the time you’re reading this your birthday has passed then it is most likely that I will not be returning home. I am truly sorry for that, but I must ask one last favor of you. It is of the utmost importance that you deliver the enclosed documents to Keenan McDougary with the greatest haste and discretion. He can be found in residence within the royal castle. Place them into no hands but his. Speak to no one of your purpose and I beg you to be careful. It grieves me to put you in possible danger, but the lives of many hang in the balance. I apologize that I can no longer be there for you and I hope you can find it within yourself to forgive me for leaving you. I wish you happiness and I love you with all my heart.*

*Always & Forever*

*Your Papa*
I read it twice before I squeezed the parchment to my chest and fought the threatening tears. “What does this mean, Bastio?” Papa had been killed in Molthova during one of the first skirmishes of the war, or so we had been told. I blamed it on Clarice. But what if he wasn’t just an unlucky traveler who was avoiding his wife? Was he involved in the conflict? I flipped to the documents he mentioned. Scanning them, I found that they were all in a cipher or secret language, written in a scrabble of scratchy markings that I couldn’t tell from chicken doodles.

I shoved them away from me and rubbed my burning eyes. I couldn’t wrap my head around the message so I focused on the confusion, letting the need for answers squash the fresh wave of grief. I brushed the letter with my fingertips. This McDougary would know how to read the papers. He would probably also be able to answer a lot of the questions clamoring in my mind.

But he lived in the castle! He must be someone of great import. I had only been to the castle once to meet my sovereign on the annual archival day for children with newly discovered Gifts. I was three. And even though I was young, I remembered that the castle was splendid with tall turrets and towers, grand fountains and extensive gardens – everything one would imagine a king’s castle to be. I remembered being terribly impressed by the King and his Gift of Fire. The royal family traditionally possessed extraordinary Gifts. The first king, King Tsybrus, had possessed the Gift to animate trees. Hundreds of years ago, he conquered this land with a silent army of trees without losing the life of a single one of his people. And he called his country Tsybrunia. A little conceited if you asked me. However, his royal descendents became the largest patrons of the Gifted in our country. Those with Gifts were a minority but most of us were
members of the upper class. It made me wonder what kind of person this Keenan McDougary was and what he had to do with my father. I wasn’t the type to dither around once the need for action was clear. The next day, I would make my visit on the castle.

I set out in the carriage with Benson, the carriage driver, before Clarice was awake. I told him she’d given me permission. During the hour ride to the castle, we passed through the countryside that had been made beautiful by generations of Gifts with Greenery and others. The grass grew lush and flowers flashed their colors at passersby amidst the plum and orange trees that stood ripe and full, shading the road and offering their fruit to travelers. But I didn’t pay any attention to the landscape that day, for I was practically feverish with anticipation. After reaching the city, Benson navigated through the lively market. Boasted sales included everything from jeweled hairpins that changed hair color to loaves of bread that couldn’t go bad. That bread was sold by our neighbors, Samuel and Valerie. Then I passed by the grandiose homes of the upper nobility and finally arrived at the gate of the outer wall to the castle. But the guards turned me away. They instead directed me to the cluster of government buildings just outside, where the more mundane aspects of governing were carried out, the kind that the King couldn’t be bothered with on a day-to-day basis.

The public official I met there said that he would help me with whatever problem I had and insisted that I could not see Lord McDougary without good reason. While he spoke with me, he was scribbling at the papers on his desk with a quill in each hand without even looking down at them. The Gift of Ambidexterity, I surmised. As per Papa’s instructions, I didn’t tell the truth, but as a result I couldn’t say anything that
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would convince him. I told him who my father was, hoping his rank of Lord might still hold some sway, but it didn’t help at all. How could I explain? As I grew more agitated, he just stared at me calmly and continued to scribble away with both hands, making me feel like I had a third of his attention at best, which only irritated me more.

“Can’t you stop that for a moment? Do you know how rude and distracting that is?” I burst out.

“Are you equally aware that you are wasting my time with your questionable request?” he replied primly and his hands continued moving across the desk.

“Questionable?” I reached down and snatched the quills from his hands, giving myself a pair of plumy fists. He blinked at me in affronted surprise. For the first time, I had his full attention. I leaned over and spoke into his face. “I just want to speak with Keenan McDougary. What is so questionable about that?”

After that he called over a security guard. The overzealous man tugged the quills from my grip and then used some sort of invisible wall to push me out of his office and forcefully eject me from the building. The wall was pliable, like a soap bubble made solid, but it was unyielding and wouldn’t let me back in no matter how I prodded and shoved. With no plan to fall back on, I had nothing to do but turn around and go home.

Clarice was piqued that while I was supposed to have been acting contrite in my room, I had left without permission and missed the auction of Papa’s library. I had totally forgotten. After a quick pang of sadness, I decided it was better that I had missed it. It would have been torture watching Papa’s belongings being carried away by complete strangers. My unexplained absence prompted Clarice to order Benson not to take me anywhere without her direct say-so. I went to bed feeling that all I had managed
to do was to recklessly hack down my chances of contacting Keenan McDougary and finding out more about Papa’s death.

Clarice ordered me to oversee the servants in the cleaning of the manor all morning and afternoon because we were having guests for supper. It wasn’t all that unusual, but this time Clarice had planted a special revenge. She had given my formalwear dresses, the dresses Papa had tailored just for me, to the maids and ordered them to be used to scrub the kitchen floors. I arrived in the kitchen to find them already sodden and filthy from the black grime that crusted the walls and floors around the three-doored oven on the back wall. I was too late to stop it, but even if I hadn’t been, nothing I or anyone else could have said would have been able to overpower an order from Clarice.

The maids wouldn’t meet my eye as I watched them soiling the dresses on the floor. None of the maids had worked here for over six months. Clarice had laid off all of the old servants. I realized that I didn’t know any of their names. They seemed afraid of my reaction, even though they knew I was aware that they couldn’t stop. I wasn’t sure which was worse: the loss of the dresses or that Clarice was trying to make sure I didn’t make friends with the maids. My throat closed and I fled the room. I found Clarice and demanded an explanation. She replied simply that I’d outgrown them. She even deigned to say, “Sentimentality will only get you hurt, Grace.”

Her words held the echo of experience, but that didn’t give her the right to be cruel. It only made me all the more determined not to let her win. I made sure that the manor was swept and polished until it gleamed like a glossy egg nestled in the nest of
surrounding trees. The manor was still a place I loved and it didn’t hurt me a bit to see it looking immaculate. All the things that she had taken away from me were just that, things. I couldn’t let it destroy me every time she took something else. There were many who had it much worse than I did, who had lost their homes and entire families. I reminded myself that what I really needed to cherish were the memories. Memories could not be sold or dirtied. I would keep the memories of my girlhood and my father. And I would find out what happened to him.

The guests turned out to be my stepsister, Eleanor, and her new husband. I don’t know why Clarice didn’t tell me that earlier. She probably just enjoyed withholding information from me. I wasn’t really happy to see Eleanor, despite the short reprieve from Clarice she brought. Eleanor’s Gift was to Nullify other Gifts, even her own mother’s. Often, a mother has a slight resistance to the Gift of her child and vice versa. It has something to do with the sharing of blood inside the womb. But Clarice wasn’t so lucky and her Gift went caput just like everyone else’s when she went within ten feet of her. That’s why Clarice had Eleanor married and out of the household at age fifteen. It must have been cutting to know her own mother wanted her out, but that still didn’t make me feel sorry for Eleanor; she was the lucky one.

Because we had company, propriety required that I remain present for the entire five-course meal. It was stupid that we had to maintain such decorum when our company was the same girl who used to follow me around to play with my animals all day. That was before she was bitten by a badger and blamed it on me, not realizing that I couldn’t control them when she was present. Clarice punished me anyway. Eleanor didn’t mean
any harm; she was just plain annoying and incapable of grasping the moods of other people. It was going to be a long night.

The first three courses went slowly enough. There was chicken dumpling soup, a nutty brown bread with spinach dip, and a salad with a bed of romaine lettuce sprinkled with baby carrots, spring onions, and almonds, all drizzled with a creamy dressing. But even the most delicious food tastes bland in poor company. I was sullenly poking at my uneaten roasted pheasant, the fourth course, trying my best to tune out Eleanor’s chatter when something that was said caught my attention.

“Royal function? What royal function?” I asked. I hadn’t heard about anything like that. The next masque was not until next month.

“Honestly. If you’re starting to go deaf, you can’t expect us to say everything twice just for you,” drawled Clarice.

But Eleanor was happy to do just that. “The King is throwing a gala to welcome the ambassador parties from the neighboring kingdoms. It’s this Friday. He’s trying to woo them into becoming his allies in the war against Moltova. How I hate politics. But, I’ll be going tomorrow to pick up my gown from the tailor. It’s a beautiful mauve velvet…” Eleanor went on, oblivious to the fact that I was no longer listening.

I didn’t even bother asking if I could go to the gala. I knew what the answer would be. Was this a motive for the assault on my dresses? But if Clarice were attending then she wouldn’t be around the manor to stop me from going. With such important ambassadors present, I’d bet anything that McDougary would be there. Who knew silly Eleanor would be the one to present me with my second chance? I really only needed a
A couple of minutes with McDougary to catch his attention and ask him to meet me another time. It should be simple to sneak in among the hustle and bustle of all the guests.

Chapter 2 – The Ball

Week’s end came and Clarice spent the afternoon readying herself before she was picked up by a friend’s carriage. As soon as she was gone, I prepared myself. All of my appropriate dresses were stewing in a crusty state of ruin in the trash heap, waiting for the incinerator. So, I had obtained a dress the day before from Valerie, our neighbor. In exchange, I promised to take care of the rat problem of her husband’s bakery shop in town. Valerie’s Gift was Illusions. She said that the ball gown illusion would kick in around nightfall and would remain until sunrise, unless it was damaged. Still, I was a bit apprehensive when I put the dress on over my bodice. It was a hideous drab brown, didn’t hang right at all on my frame and resembled a potato sack – which for all I knew, it could be. I supposed I would just have to trust her. I shoved Papa’s letter and documents into my bodice and went to fetch the carriage.

Of course, Benson refused to take me without Clarice’s consent. However, after he reentered the manor, the problem of transportation was easily solved. Who needs a driver for a horse-drawn carriage? Not I! But I do wonder how many people were scared out of their wits by my driverless carriage speeding down the road, while I had a merry time directing the horses from inside.

When I arrived at the castle, night had fallen and my dress tucked itself into a form-fitting shape with a poufy skirt made up of multiple gauzy layers. It brightened to a light shimmery shade, although I couldn’t tell precisely what color because of the dim
lighting. I also felt my shoes change shape and sprout heels. Overall, quite a peculiar sensation.

My carriage trundled through the gate of the outer wall, where I had been denied entrance just days before, and pulled into the line of other carriages with their passengers waiting to disembark at the castle doors. The empty driver’s bench was receiving lots of curious glances and I had a thought: how was I going to graciously descend the carriage steps in this dress without help? Luckily, when my carriage pulled up to the front of the line, I was saved by an attending footman. I stepped out neatly with his assistance and then watched his puzzled face with amusement as the horses pulled the now entirely vacant carriage over to park with the rest.

I climbed the stairs and approached the gleaming double doors with a grin still on my face. Above the doorway hung an enormous Tsybrunian flag – a great golden tree on a bright red background. The tree was the symbol of our country in honor of King Tsybrus and his Gift. The flag was a subtle reminder of the power that had founded our kingdom.

The doorman stood patiently and when I reached him, he held out his white-gloved hand and said politely, “Invitation?”

The grin slipped off my face. “Oh, dear. I knew I was forgetting something,” I said with the utmost sincerity. “Do you think you could let me in without it?” I gave him my best doe eyes.

“I’m sorry, my lady, but I cannot allow you to enter without an invitation,” he said firmly. He moved to block the doorway with a wide stance.
“I’ll just have to run home and fetch it, won’t I?” I said brightly. I turned around and with as much dignity as I could muster, walked down the stairs towards my carriage. Then as soon as I was sure his attention was on the next arriving party, I darted into the shadows of the parked carriages and slunk towards the side of the castle. Surely, there must be someway to slip inside a back door or a servant’s entrance.

I advanced on the castle and circled it, which took a while, for it was no small castle. There were three more entrances but they were all either locked or guarded. I circled again, this time looking for windows, but there were none on the first story and I couldn’t find anything to climb to reach the second floor.

I felt stupid. Of course the residence of the King would be fortified and well protected. They were not about to let intruders, even intruders with good intentions, waltz right in. And it only made sense that there would be increased security with important political guests visiting. Why did I think this would be so easy? I should have learned something from my first attempt. Lack of foresight had always been one of my downfalls. Papa had always been around to clean up after my mistakes, but I was learning to think things through myself. I decided to have another, longer look around before taking a crack at sneaking in past the guards. Fortunately, I didn’t have to try the latter because as I was coming back up behind the stables, near the carriage lot, I found a lucky charm. Several tons of lucky charm. It seemed one of the ambassadors rode an elephant.

I approached the enormous beast slowly. I had trust in my Gift, but I’d never seen such a large animal up close before. He looked at me with one big brown eye, then
huffed and looked away. Apparently, I wasn’t a threat. I took that as permission to come forward and stepped up to pat his foreleg.

“Where’s your attendant, huh? Don’t have one?” He slowly swung his big head down towards me and nuzzled me with his trunk. Obligingly, I rubbed his forehead. Well, as much of it as I could reach. “More like don’t need one. You’re as gentle as a lamb, aren’t you?”

I untied his tethers and then attempted to climb up the ten feet of elephant. It was a bit of a trial with the heels and skirt, even after I asked him to kneel down. At length, I had clambered up and was clinging tenaciously to his back. “Now, we just have to find an open window.” I guided him around the castle until I spotted a bright rectangle of light and brought him to stand directly beneath it. Then came the tricky part. I carefully tried to stand and after stepping on the hem of my dress and nearly falling off, I was balanced precariously with my feet on either side of the elephant’s unexpectedly bony spine. I cautiously made my way up to stand on his head and then reached for the window. It was still too far. My fingertips were about a foot from the ledge.

I took a steadying breath, “Okay, big boy. Stand on your hind legs.” There was a split-second pause and then the elephant bunched his muscles and I was suddenly surging up. I felt myself losing my footing as the windowsill shot towards me. I reached out and grabbed it, holding on for dear life while I found my balance again. I peered down the length of the upright elephant at the ground. That could have been a nasty spill.

The window was now about waist high. I peeked in and was incredibly grateful to find an empty corridor. I leaned forward and hauled myself in. Perching on the ledge, I said, “Good boy, you can go on back now.” The elephant pushed off the wall and with
one last melancholy look at me he meandered away. I pulled my knees up, swung my feet inside and—riiip! I froze and groaned. Standing up, I twisted to examine the back of my skirt. There was a tear, about five inches long, in what I could now see in the light was pale blue silk. Unfortunately, the illusion in the fabric of the tear was broken and there was a yucky brown splotch around the tear, the color and texture of the original material. I just hoped that no one would be looking at the bottom of the dress. The rest of it was exquisite. The pale blue was complemented by stylish white ribbon and a bit of lace along the dip of the neckline. The sleeves were nearly off-the-shoulder, as was in fashion. There was even a string of pearls at my throat. Valerie had really outdone herself. Ignoring the dirty-looking tear, I thought I looked pretty good. With my confidence restored, I strutted off to find the party.

It wasn’t difficult. I just followed the chattering to a bright, enormous ballroom. I stood for a moment admiring, for it was quite the spectacle. It was packed with people, dressed in all fashions and colors. Several of the different kinds of clothing were definitely foreign. The ones in headdresses and robes were likely from Anju, the land to the west. The owner of my elephant accomplice was probably among them.

I spotted several performers interspersed around the room. Closest to me was a cross-legged snake charmer, whom I thought also might have come with the Anjuvian ambassador. A hooded snake was swaying hypnotically in time with the movements of his feathered gourd flute when instantly, and I don’t know how I missed it, the snake had vanished. The charmer seemed surprised too and quizzically peered into and then under the snake’s basket. But then the missing serpent slithered out from the charmer’s collar
and curled up on his bald head like a crown while he continued pretending his frantic search, much to the amused chuckles of the spectators.

Many guests were dancing gaily on a large dance floor, done in glitzy polished marble, accompanied by a one-man band. Only the man had no instruments and all of the sound was coming from his mouth. Was it some kind of Echoing Gift or did his Gift really allow him to sing the music that would ordinarily take five or six practiced musicians? He did a little jig in time with the movements of his mouth and winked at me.

Then I was distracted by a space of wall near the dance floor where a woman was manipulating the shadows of the dancers into moving artwork. She waved her arms in an undulating motion and the shadows swirled into an image of a man, riding a horse through a forest. Something darted through the trees in front of him. A shadow rabbit – he was hunting. As I stared, entranced, the man raced through a stream in hot pursuit and the horse’s hooves sent a shower of droplets bursting out towards me and I flinched, half expecting the spray to hit me. But it didn’t and I looked back up to see the hunter had changed quarries and now gave chase to a high-tailed deer instead. I felt like I could sit and stare for hours but I shook myself. Enough gawking.

I approached a refined-looking gentleman with a handlebar mustache and asked, “Excuse me, do you know where I can find Lord Keenan McDougary?” When he didn’t even know the man, I began to circulate through the guests. I had asked about five other people with no luck when I spotted Clarice. I ducked behind a huge decorative plant and peeked out at her. She was chatting with an older man. A decorated military man, going by the bar- and medal-studded uniform. She was touching his arm an awful lot and he
Atha looked quite pleased about it. Gross. Clarice was beautiful, I suppose, discounting her personality. That really ruined the effect for me, but this poor fellow would be eating out of her hand any moment. Someone better save him. I glanced around for inspiration and spotted the snake charmer not ten feet away. An evil grin spread across my face.

A scream pierced the room, followed by “Get it away from me, you fool! Grab it!” Clarice ran pell-mell through the room, knocking guests out of her way, trying to put distance between her and the snake that was playfully snapping at her heels. They were followed closely by the vehemently apologizing charmer and the elderly military gent was left behind, forgotten. Apparently, he wasn’t too keen on rescuing the screeching woman. Some of the guests looked worried or sympathetic, but I was among the ones who were openly laughing. I was really growing quite fond of the animals of Anju.

But my fun was interrupted when several guards rushed by. “What’s going on?” I overheard a lady whisper. “I hear there’s an intruder. Someone snuck in through a window,” a man whispered back. “How do they know?” “One of the guards has the Gift of Tracking.” “An intruder! Goodness, I hope it’s not a Molthovan!”

Swallowing hard, I decided to hurry because I doubted there were two intruders. I spun and gave a start when I nearly bumped into a young man in a crisp white suit jacket. I looked up into a pair of crystal green eyes.

“May I have this dance?” Smiling politely, the young man gave a slight bow and offered me his hand. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the guards bustling over where I had first entered the ballroom. The tracker would waste no time tracing my steps, but dancing on the crowded dance floor might confuse him and buy me some more time.
“Of course you may,” I said graciously. I took his hand and allowed myself to be pulled onto the dance floor. I had only ever danced with Papa before, but my mind was elsewhere and I didn’t get to relish the idea of my first dance with a boy.

“What’s your name?” he inquired, as he twirled me expertly.

“Grace,” I said distractedly.

He waited for me to ask his name, but when I didn’t he asked, “What is your Gift?”

“What?” I tilted my head back to look up at him.

“Well, most everyone here has one, but if you don’t wish to tell me, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s alright. I can control animals.” He gave a nod and continued to guide me seamlessly through the steps; he was quite a good dancer. “And what’s your Gift?”

“Steam,” he stated.

“Steam?” I laughed out loud. “What use is that? For tea and bath time?”

He looked surprised for a second and then laughed under his breath. “Yes, it’s good for those. But it’s useful for other things too, like in a battle. It’s a simple matter to burn an enemy’s hand and make him drop his weapon, forcing him to surrender.”

“Interesting.” He must be a cadet in the army, I thought. We danced in comfortable silence for a moment while watching our shadows turn into a flock of seagulls soaring over a beach peppered with palm trees and then veering out over the ocean towards a little sailboat. “Listen, do you know Keenan McDougary? I need to speak with him. I’ve asked several people but no one seems to know who or where he is.”
“I know him. Hmm, let’s see.” He scanned the room. “Ah, there he is. The one in the navy waistcoat.”

I followed the direction of his gaze. “The one looking this way?”

“That’s the one.”

Keenan McDougary was a lot younger than I expected, maybe mid-twenties. He had dark brown hair and handsome clean-cut features. He noticed me watching him and our gazes locked for a few seconds. He smiled and raised his wine glass towards me before taking a sip and turning away.

Shortly, the music ended and I curtsied to my partner, “Thank you for the dance. I quite enjoyed it.”

He bowed, “The pleasure is mine.”

Then I hurried over to McDougary. He watched me stalk towards him with a thoughtful smile on his face. Before I could speak, he said, “Now, why would the prince send such a lovely lady over to someone like me?”

“Oh, why thank—wait, the prince?” My expression froze. I had thought Prince Drew was much younger because he had been called the Boy Prince, but that was years ago. I supposed he had grown up.

McDougary chuckled. “You didn’t know?”

I shook my head mutely.

“What will he think when he finds out?” he said teasingly.

“I made fun of his Gift,” I said, mortified.

“Oh my, you may have hurt his feelings.”
“Goodness, I hope not.” I stood dumbfounded for a few seconds more before waving my hands in the air. “That’s not important right now.” I looked him dead in the face. “I have something I need to discuss with you, in private. It’s urgent.”

Interest perked in his eye. But then at that moment, a group of guards rushed up and surrounded us. One of them seized my arm, “This is the one,” he said to his fellow guards at large. Several guests nearby overheard and stopped conversing to watch. “You need to come with me, miss,” he said to me sternly and began to tow me away from McDougary.

My blood started pounding in my ears. Where were they taking me? Were they going to arrest me? They wouldn’t put me in the dungeon, would they? Did they have a dungeon? This could not be happening, I was so close!

“No, wait!” I pleaded loudly as I struggled against his iron grip and dragged my feet uselessly across the smooth marble floor. “Please!” A crowd was starting to gather, gawping at the scene I was making.

“Stop,” said McDougary in a deep firm voice. We stopped. Everyone stared at him, frozen by the command. Myself included. He calmly strode over to stand beside me and put a hand on the guard’s arm, the one holding my own. “I’ll take care of her.”

“But, sir,” objected the guard.

“I’m interested to hear her speak. Now release her,” McDougary said sharply.

“Yes, sir.” The guard obediently let go.

McDougary gently took my hand in his. “In private, you said?”

“Yes. Thank you.” My voice was a tiny bit breathless.

“Then come with me.” He took my hand and put it through his arm.
My heart was still pounding, and I don’t know if it was from relief that I wasn’t hauled away and thrown in the dungeon or from the warmth radiating out through his sleeve. Before I could decide which it was, he escorted me out of the ballroom, ignoring the many curious onlookers as if we were simply taking a stroll.

“By the way, what happened to the hem of your gown? Trouble sneaking in?”

“I, uh, well-” I stuttered.

He merely laughed and didn’t press me for an answer. He led me through several long corridors and up some stairs before unlocking a door and stepping into a small room. “This is my office.” There was a desk, some chairs, and bookshelves all around. And there were books, scrolls, and papers everywhere. A lot of them weren’t even in the bookshelves; the slouching remainders were sorely missing their neighbors that were cluttered on the desk, stacked in the desk chair, and scattered on the floor. It looked like he was in the middle of reorganizing his filing system. He walked over to lean against the desk and crossed his arms. “So, what is this urgent business?”

“First I want you to tell me how you know Nicholas Cainsbury,” I demanded.

“Who’s asking?” he countered.

“His daughter.”

McDougary’s face softened. Looking down, he uncrossed his arms to place his palms on the desk, his fingers curling over the lip. “I thought you had been informed.” After a pause, he looked up into my eyes and said quietly, “I’m so sorry, but your father was killed months ago in Molthova. We never recovered the body.”

Pushing away a twinge of pain, I said, “I know that already. I want to know why.”
“Because of the war. Why else?” He cocked his head at me, seemingly confused.

“Excuse me a moment.” I turned around and retrieved the documents from my bodice. I turned back to find McDougary wearing a funny expression, as though he were slightly stunned. I ignored it and handed the papers to him. “Because of these. He left them for me to find and give to you.”

McDougary took them from me gingerly. He looked them over and began flipping through with increasing fervor. “Excellent. This is what I’ve been looking for.” He glanced up at me. “You say he left these for you?”

I nodded.

“I wonder why.”

“Maybe so I could come find some closure. And for what I don’t even know!” I said, throwing my hands up in exasperation.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps there was another reason.” He looked down at the papers again and then held them up to me. “Can you read this?”

“No. But I’m not leaving until you tell me what they are and what it has to do with my father’s death,” I declared.

He regarded me carefully for a moment, thinking hard. “All right,” he said slowly, “I’ll tell you. These papers contain information about the Gifts of the fighters at the disposal of the Molthovan army, among other things.” He took a deep breath. “And your father worked for me as a spy.”

“What?” My legs suddenly felt like boneless fish and I sank into an armchair before they flopped on me. I hardly noticed, but I had squashed some papers by sitting on them, crumpling them for life. “Papa was a spy?”
McDougary cleared the papers from the chair next to me and sat, placing a comforting hand over mine. “One of the best. He died bringing back valuable knowledge that will help us win this war. He was a hero.”

I thought that Papa might have discovered something on accident, that he had come across these papers by chance. Only a tiny worm of a thought had suspected something like this and I had buried it underground where worms belong. I had never wondered why a noble would also be a traveling merchant. Why would he actively seek out dangerous secrets when he had his family? The worm had crawled out of its hole and transformed into a deadly monster. To think he led such a perilous life that I never knew about. This news was like a stinger through the heart. I knew he had been a courageous and loyal man, but never a man of secrets. I wished I could send a stampede of bulls with really sharp horns charging after him until he apologized for never telling me. But I also felt a warm glow of pride that made me want to tell him how brave I thought he was. Then yell at him for being too reckless. I felt like I had a mountain of worrying to do. But it was too late to do any of that.

Numbly, I looked up to see McDougary watching me silently and letting me process things. “And who are you? How do you fit into all this?”

“Ah, I am the King’s Spy Master,” he revealed modestly.

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? What’s your Gift?”

“Spying.” He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms.

“Can you turn invisible or hear whispers from miles away or something of the sort?” I speculated.

“No, nothing like that,” he said.
I waited. “Are you not going to tell me?”

“I already did. I’m incredibly good at spying.”

“But that’s not a Gift,” I objected.

“Do you think that simply because a gift is not fantastical that it is not a gift?” he contended.

“You don’t have one?” I blurted.

“Did I say that?” he said innocently, and then he grinned at me.

“Fine, keep your spy secrets,” I snapped.

He sighed. “No one can speak a lie to me, nor can I speak a lie to anyone else. It’s a double-edged sword that often makes me resort to word games, sometimes even without thinking about it. I’m sorry about that,” he paused. “But now that I’ve told you, would you be willing to tell me about your Gift in return?”

“I suppose. I command animals,” I informed him.

“Your father told me that much. I meant more specifically. For example: is there a limit to how many animals you can command at once?”

“Um, I’ve never really tested that. A lot, I think,” I offered helpfully.

“Alright. How far away can you be?”

“Well, I can’t say precisely,” I thought for a second, “First, I need to see them, otherwise I won’t know that they’re there to command, will I? But that’s usually not a problem. They seem to be naturally attracted to me. And then they have to be within hearing distance to receive the command, but they don’t have to be anywhere near me to carry it out.”

“Good. How complex can the instructions be?”
“Moderately. I usually just simplify it for them. Although, I can’t make them do things they wouldn’t normally do, mostly because they don’t understand what I want. Like cleaning. I’ve tried, but I just can’t make animals understand scrubbing floors.”

McDougary chortled. “So, there’s limited understanding when you speak to them, but can they understand other people? Can they eavesdrop?”

“I’m pretty sure they can’t. But even if they could, it’s not like they can talk and tell me what was said,” I answered.

“True.” McDougary absentmindedly ran his hand along his jaw, lost in thought. He had a strong jaw line. And very nice tanned skin. He must have spent a lot of time outside, maybe horseback riding or fencing. Not what I might have expected from a spy. Certainly he had the frame for fencing. His musculature was that of an athlete, finely toned, and visibly so beneath his fine clothing.

“Grace.”

How had he known my name? Oh right, spying.

“Grace,” he said again, this time with a slight ring of impatience.

I snapped to attention. “Yes?”

There was a shadow of pleased smugness on his face, but it disappeared when he spoke. “Grace, I have a proposition for you.”

“And what’s that?”

“How would you like to come work for me?” he asked.

My mouth dropped open. “What?”

“As a spy,” he added.
There was silence for a beat and then I blurted, “But I don’t know how to act like a spy!”

“Well, if you acted like a spy that would rather defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?” he said drily.

“What would I even do?” I pictured myself skulking down seedy alleyways after seedier people.

“Well, I can’t give you specifics, but your Gift would be extremely handy in preventative measures. Things like stealing and delivering, diversions and protection. You won’t need to be quite as close to the enemy as your father was, but I have to warn you that there’s always risk involved,” he told me.

If I would just be sending animals to do my job, that couldn’t be so bad. I’d be safe, they’d be safe. No one could trace animal espionage back to me, right? Not unless they knew about my Gift. And my help would be needed somewhere no one knew me.

“I would be traveling occasionally, yes?” I asked.

McDougary nodded.

“Would I be able to move away from Clarice?”

“Our country pays her protectors well. You could afford a residence in the city with the salary. After a while, if you budget well, you could probably even buy your father’s manor back.”

It sounded too good to be true. “Can I trust you?”

“Don’t you think that’s a stupid question to ask me?” McDougary muttered.

“Oh yes,” I said, remembering. Could I trust a spy? A smart person would say no, but my truth was something different. “Well, Lord McDougary, I accept.”
Chapter 3 – The Stepmother Snag

I had an anxious feeling in my gut that I didn’t know what I had gotten myself into. I had just agreed to enter the lair of the same deadly worm monster that had slain Papa. Only this monster doesn’t kill outright but pulls people in by their good intentions and then drops them into an alligator swamp and watches the water churn.

Papa had chosen it. That was good enough for me. And I could make the alligators in the swamp work for me and make them roll the bad guys to the watery bottom. And McDougary was no monster. What kind of monster couldn’t lie?

Molthova was the real monster here that needed to be fought – they had attacked us with the intent to take over. McDougary had told me in his office that it didn’t make sense to him. Usually a country seeking to expand its territories is prosperous with growing wealth and population to back their campaigns, but Molthova had been declining the last several years. Their trade was struggling and they had fallen out of competition as exporters in the market for Gift-produced goods. They shouldn’t have had the means to fund an army, yet the fighting was desperate and our side was having trouble pushing them back from our borders. McDougary’s aim, aside from gathering the usual information about the enemy like numbers, locations, leaders, Gifts, etc., was to find out why they were attacking with such relentless determination when they were hurting more than they were gaining. Then maybe we could offer some kind of peace treaty they could accept.

Selfish thoughts had motivated my initial acceptance, but honestly, escaping Clarice was not really worth risking my life, even if I would say so in jest. I might have
reneged if that was my only reason. But there were other fathers still fighting. If there were anything I could do to shorten the war and get them home to their children, I would do it. McDougary assured me that any help would quicken the way to negotiations. So many of the Gifted were employed by the crown; it felt only natural to join their ranks. McDougary said he would mail a letter with my official appointment date, which was when the formalities would be carried out. All I had to do was make sure Clarice didn’t intercept it.

Three times a week I had to feign disinterest when the post came. Three times a week I had to wait until I could rifle through it unobserved. Three times a week I was disappointed until one morning, fifteen days later, when I saw the red flash of the royal seal in the stack of envelopes. One of the servants had carried it in at the end of breakfast and set it on the table next to Clarice’s elbow. She kept eating. I watched her and the stack out of the corner of my eye while I calmly choked down my last few bites of biscuits and gravy.

“You know, Clarice,” I began conversationally, “I noticed some spider eggs in a web near your room. They’ve probably already hatched. I can take care of that right now if you tell me to.” I pushed out my high back chair and took a few expectant steps towards the door.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.” She sipped her black tea and gazed at me over the rim of the cup.

“Doing?” I asked innocently.

“You’re trying to trick me into letting you use your Gift. It’s not going to work,” she informed me and set down her tea.
“But the spiders?” I could probably find some of the critters somewhere to back my story, if need be. Unless Bastio had hunted them all. The cat had a thing for meals on eight legs. But Clarice didn’t know about Bastio. He seemed to avoid her on his own.

“I’ll have the groundskeeper take care of them. Let him earn his pay. Actually, I have a few other chores I need done also, before the renovations on the library can start.” She wiped her mouth, stood and left the room.

I waited with bated breath until I heard her footsteps fade down the hall. Then I rushed to the stack of letters. I yanked the envelope out, scattering the rest on the floor and not bothering to pick them up. The vellum had my name printed on the front and the red royal seal depicting a tree on the back. With my head bent low, I broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

My eyes only had time for a quick scan, catching a time and date and a scrawling royal signature at the bottom when I heard Clarice say, “I was halfway out the door before I realized.”

I froze, my brain no longer comprehending the important words before my eyes. The paper felt heavy and conspicuous in my hands. Slowly, I raised my head to see her leaning against the doorframe.

“It was a nice ploy, but you’ve used it before. Last time it was crickets. And I don’t fall for the same thing more than once. I’ll wager there aren’t even any spiders.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she continued first.

“It doesn’t really matter though, does it?” She pushed away from the doorframe to stand up straight. “Bring me that letter, Grace.”
I fought to remain still, but it was no use. It was like pulling against a team of oxen determined to go in the opposite direction. What I wanted didn’t even matter as I walked over and handed it to her. Suddenly, I had a bad feeling that she never unleashed the full potential of her Gift and an even worse feeling about what that would mean.

She read the letter while I silently stood there. Snatching it back would only make things worse, but I wouldn’t leave her with it willingly. Her eyes narrowed.

“What is this about?” she said quietly.

“I could probably answer your question better if you’d let me read it,” I said, trying to hide my hopefulness.

“Grace, don’t. Tell me the truth,” she commanded.

I pursed my lips and then words spilled forth. “The King wants to hire me.” I only barely managed not to blurt out McDougary’s name. It wouldn’t do to advertise my imminent spy-hood, even less to reveal the identity of my spy chief.

“For what?” Clarice was falling into interrogation mode.

My tongue tried to supply the word ‘spying,’ but I cut it off with “I can’t give you specifics. I don’t know yet.”

“Then give me the general idea,” she snapped.

I spread my hands in front of me. “What else? He wants me to work with animals.”

She gave me a hard stare. “Nothing else?”

“What other use would he have for me?” I asked.

She thought for a second and then shrugged. Clarice had no use for me, so it would be easy for her to imagine. Maybe she wouldn’t care?
She ripped my letter in half. “Do not enter the employment of the King,” she said with finality.

So much for that thought. I forgot that Clarice never failed to chaperone my misery.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I am Mistress of this house and I make the rules,” she said.

“But-”

“No arguing, Grace.” She raised her eyebrows at me while watching to see if I would protest. When I didn’t, she turned around and left, taking the tattered remains of my letter with her.

In my experiences of sneaking out, I’ve found that stairs are the hardest part. They creak. They can’t help it – it’s in their nature. The stairs were very open and exposed in the front foyer, which had annoyingly good acoustics due to the vaulted ceiling. We had double curving staircases and they were very majestic and impressive but they were built to be showy, not for being stealthy. True, Clarice’s room was all the way across the house, but I swear the woman had antennae.

My room used to be on the east side of the house next to Papa’s. But when I turned eight, in a fit of needing to grow up more quickly, I demanded my own room on the other side. Papa had acquiesced with amused pride; he let me pick and move into one of the four theretofore largely unused rooms. Well, he did most of the moving. The room I chose was in the back corner and overlooked the vegetable garden from one window. From the other window, I could see the well and large stone basin used for
washing laundry. Some people would have been put off by that, but I always thought of
the laundry basin as a little fountain. Papa’s room, now solely Clarice’s domain, was at
the front of the house. I’m glad for my younger self’s desire for independence, otherwise
I would have had to sneak out under Clarice’s sleeping nose. At least now our rooms
were catty cornered.

It was early in the morning on the day of my appointment, before the sun had
risen to greet the morning songbirds. Clarice had been watching me closely since the
letter interception. She didn’t know that I had seen the date and time, or at least she was
unsure. I had been carefully acting as petulant as normal so that I could take the
opportunity to fly the coop.

I was making my way down the stairs, hugging the wall, because the middle
squeaked the most. Using the banister was out because it creaked more than the stairs
from years of climbing on it as a child. And maybe a few times since then.

Suddenly, my foot hit something soft that was most definitely not a stair. I
tripped down a few steps and my fall was accompanied by a couple thuds, a squeak of
wooden complaint, and the cry in my head that I refused to let out as I caught myself.
Something small and black streaked past me back up the stairs.

I decided to make an addendum to my edict against stairs: difficulties expound
when a cat is underfoot. Bastio stood at the top of the flight of stairs looking startled.
We both stood frozen silent for a moment with him watching me and me straining to hear
any sound coming from Clarice’s room. Nothing.

I exhaled and turned to Bastio. “You go out and catch a mouse or something!” I
whispered. He looked affronted like he couldn’t believe I’d just dismissed him. Or
maybe he just felt that chasing mice was beneath his dignity at the moment. He turned his
head and padded off. Good. I didn’t want Clarice seeing Bastio anymore than I wanted
her to see me.

The rest of the stairs presented no further feline death traps and I quickly
descended and crept down the hall and out the back door.

I couldn’t take the carriage this time. Too much noise. The carriage was kept
parked next to the stable, which was practically right outside Clarice’s window. Hitching
the horses to the carriage in the early morning quiet might bring her swooping down on
me. Arriving unfashionably windblown and sweaty from horseback riding was better
than not arriving at all.

Delicately, I saddled my horse, Duchess, then mounted and directed her out at an
agonizingly slow but quiet pace. She could stretch her legs once we were out of earshot
down the road. But that plan changed when we came around the front of the house and
there stood Clarice at the head of the driveway, waiting.

We gazed at each other for a moment, like two stags sizing each other up before a
territorial showdown. Duchess completed the impression by hoofing the ground and
tossing her head. Clarice narrowed her eyes, but I broke the moment first.

“Duchess, run,” I said and then I let go of the reins.

Duchess might have sensed some of the feelings behind my command because
she charged. Straight at Clarice. We launched on a collision course with the stepmother
roadblock – the crazy horse was going to crash into her. Clarice’s eyes widened as she
realized Duchess was bent on mowing her down. She threw herself out of the way at the
last second and Duchess shot past her.
It took a second for Clarice to recover and regain her feet, but then she shouted, “Grace, stop!”

Without turning around, I held up my empty hands as if to say ‘Stop what?’ Duchess was doing all the work. What a great horse, it was like she was reading my mind. The distance between us was already yawning.

Then Clarice shouted even louder, “Use your Gift and order that horse to stop!”

Something wrenched in my gut. “Duchess, stop,” I said in a stunned voice. I hadn’t known that Clarice could order people to use their Gifts. It just hadn’t occurred to me. And as Duchess screeched to a halt, I realized that I didn’t like it one bit. In fact, I hated it. And not just because she was stopping me from leaving. It felt like a violation of something personal and soul deep. My Gift was mine. Unique to me and as much a part of me as my mind or body. It felt very wrong to have someone else wield it through me. Clarice could steal away someone’s will, but I had never before felt like she was stealing who I was. This was uncomfortably close to losing oneself completely.

I sat there on the horse, shaking with anger and fear.

“Get off the horse,” Clarice called.

I dismounted, not looking at her.

“Come here. Bring the horse.”

I did. I could feel her eyes on me but I was still carefully avoiding looking at her. If I met her eyes, she would see the vulnerability in my own. And I think I would have lost a little more of myself if she saw that.

“Order the horse to go to the stable and stay there,” Clarice said tonelessly.
The sense of wrongness didn’t lessen at all the second time she ordered me to use my Gift. “Go on back, Duchess,” I murmured. The horse looked from me to Clarice and back as though she wanted to stay for me but then she turned and trotted away towards the stable.

“And stay,” Clarice said sternly.

“She’ll stay!” I said, aggravated and glad of it. Capitalizing on it, I pushed back my trepidation and let my anger fill up my eyes. Then I looked up at her and met her gaze. She saw what was in my eyes and didn’t flinch. She just smiled a grim little smile, as though she had expected nothing less.

“Tell me, what is the true nature of your work for the King?” she asked. She meant to catch me off guard and surprise the honest truth out of me without time to put my own spin on it. It almost worked. But I fought against it. I searched for the place inside me where I usually felt her commands fade with time and distance. I found it somewhere in my stomach, right behind my belly button. And I imagined it snaking through my entire body through my blood. It seemed to take all of my strength, but I managed to do even better than just put my own spin on the truth.

“I’m not telling you,” I refused outright.

Disbelief splayed across her face. “What?” she asked and turned her ear towards me a little, as if she had only misheard me.

“I’m not telling you,” I repeated, finding the words joyful.

“Tell me,” she ordered.

Concentrating hard again, I replied, “No.”
She looked worried. “Stand on one leg,” she said, testing. I lifted my left foot from the ground and wobbled; she looked reassured. “Now answer my question.”

“No,” I said in a firm voice with my foot in the air and my arms still wavering for balance.

She morphed back to puzzled. “Why do you obey other commands but not this one?” She paused. “Is there some other Gift that is protecting that information?”

“No, I just don’t see any reason to fight you on the others.” I’d rather save my strength for where it was needed. Each time I refused it took more than a little effort. My attention was divided between remaining upright on one foot and focusing on the force I felt at my center, which was quickly seeping away. My arms continued to wobble and I didn’t know how many more refusals I had in me.

“Fight me?” She was silent for a moment. “Of course.” She took on a speculative look, as if I was a common bird with colors in my plumage that she hadn’t noticed before. “I had noticed that sometimes you seemed to shrug off long-term orders. Tell me, under what conditions are you free to disobey me?”

I struggled. I’d kept this secret for long enough that hiding it had become second nature. But then I realized that now she would figure it out sooner or later, but I didn’t want to just give in, so I said, “When your ugly face isn’t anywhere near me.”

I should have learned by now that insults, although hugely satisfying at the time, don’t always produce good results. I would say the one good thing was that Clarice didn’t find out I was to become a spy. But the thing was, I wasn’t even sure whether I still would or could.
Clarice didn’t know what the appointment was, but she knew how badly I didn’t want her to know. Which was revealing enough in and of itself. It told her that I thought she would stop me if she knew. So she stopped me anyway. Lose-lose situation.

She locked me away. Not even in my own room. She locked me in the attic. She probably thought I’d be able to escape from my own room. I thought of Papa’s dagger under my bed. She was probably right.

I thought about the revelation that Clarice could, in effect, use anyone’s Gift. Why had she never done it before today? Maybe she understood how it made people feel. As hard as it was to put Clarice and empathy in the same thought, she was still human. But if she did have feelings, they sure didn’t extend to making me comfortable. It grew quite hot and stuffy up in the attic. Even at night. And all I had up here was a crippled old cot. We used the spare bedrooms on the second floor for storage instead of the attic. After my fury faded and the boredom started to eat into me, I realized I had nothing to entertain me. No chests of old clothes and heirlooms to dig through. No family paintings or books to look at, nothing. Bastio couldn’t even keep me company. But at night he came and found me. He meowed and scratched at the door for a spell. The little narcissist probably only wanted food, but it made me feel better that he came anyway.

I had to focus on things like that in order not to dwell on the fact that I had become a prisoner.

On the second day, I heard a huge commotion coming from the first floor. Curious, I put my ear to the floor and listened. There were thuds and muffled voices and the sound of splintering wood followed by louder thuds. The renovations on Papa’s library had started. Those were the sounds of hired men taking down the tall hand-carved
cedar shelves and ripping them apart without a spare thought for sentimental value. So glad to know that Clarice was moving on with her life.

On the third day I started to worry. There was no sign that Clarice would be letting me out soon and all I could do was think of how McDougary was probably regretting offering me the position. He would be thinking now that I was irresponsible, unreliable, and not above insulting the King to boot. I’d be discharged before I even started. That night, I even had a dream of McDougary with the King. The King had the prince’s green eyes and comically pudgy cheeks on top of a hugely rotund body. He was eating grapes while McDougary was kowtowing and apologizing gravely for his misplaced hopes.

No. I woke with a jolt. If only I could explain. They would have to understand. Or at least listen. Then if they still decided to fire me for complete and utter ineptitude, I would have at least tried. McDougary must have seen something in me to think I could handle being a spy. I should be able to break out of my own house. What would McDougary do?

What would Papa do?

Ask the servants to help? No one had told Clarice that I had commandeered the carriage the night of the gala. They wouldn’t tattle if they saw me leaving but neither would they help – too afraid to risk their jobs by aiding my jailbreak. A plausible fear, if you asked me.

I started walking in circles around my cot and thought of what kind of animal help I might enlist. Bastio picking the lock with a claw? No. An army of termites eating the
door away? I always kept pests away from the house. A flock of birds lifting me out of the window and carrying me up and away? Doubtful. That window was locked anyway. I stopped my pacing and stared at the sunlight beaming through the glass. If I could break it open maybe I could climb down the side of the house. After taking a good look at it, I found that I just needed to break the latching mechanism and the frame would swing out. I figured any noise I made could be blamed on the construction going on downstairs. Turning sideways, I raised my arm and bashed my elbow into the window. Instantly, tingling pain shot all the way down my arm and into three fingers. Wincing, I grabbed my funny bone and did a silent little dance trying to make the pain go away. I glared at the window and then I tugged the sheet off my cot and wound it around my elbow and tried again. It took two or three tries but finally the old wood around the latch broke and the lock snapped off with a clunk, along with the shattering of one of the four little panes. Sweeping the glass away with the sheet, I then pushed the window open.

I climbed out feet first, putting my toes on the ledge that came out level with the floor of the third story. And then I looked down. A brief sense of vertigo made me sway and I quickly turned and grabbed the wall. The vegetable garden below didn’t look so welcoming from this high up. I imagined a body going splat and the red of smashed tomatoes mixing with the – I stopped that train of thought.

Slowly, I lowered myself into an awkward frog crouch, with one hand firmly grasping the windowsill and the other with a death grip on the ledge. Carefully, I leaned out and peered down at the eight feet of wall that I would have to scale down to the second story ledge. A strip of decorative trimming lined the middle of the wall and the plaster had just enough lip for my fingers to grasp. Before I could scare myself out of it,
I took hold of it just below my feet and swung down, catching myself with my toes against the wall. Hand over hand, I began to descend. The joints of my fingers turned white with strain. I tried not to count the minutes and I quickly reached the first floor where I was almost level with the window to the library. Thuds sounded through the walls as the large wooden remains of the floor-to-ceiling shelves were being removed from the library. The proximity of the noise made me feel vulnerable, like I was crawling outside of a bear’s den, and I quickened my pace.

“What are you doing?” a voice yelled from above.

I screamed and lost my grip on the trimming. I fell the last six feet onto my tailbone in the dirt path beside the tomato plants. Splayed on my back, I blinked up at the man in the attic window.

“Lord McDougary,” I registered. He looked just as I remembered with his dark hair and sharp features, which were arranged in surprise at the moment. He stood with one arm flung out, as if he subconsciously tried to catch me even from three stories up.

Chapter 4 – I, Spy

“Are you all right?” McDougary huffed. He had sprinted down from the third floor while I had remained frozen on the ground for a moment. I was partly in shock and partly in suspense, waiting to see if Clarice’s workers inside had heard my scream. Thankfully, the window curtains remained closed and clear of curious faces. McDougary rushed up to me just as I was picking myself up.

Rubbing my sore tailbone where I had fallen, I said, “Yes, I’m all right.” I noticed he had a little smudge on his sleeve, dirtying what looked like a cross between an
officer’s uniform and a suit. Small gold buttons marched up to mid chest on a dark green coat, complementing his tan skin and hazel eyes. I suddenly felt incredibly shabby in my wrinkled off-white dress with mud smeared on the back. This scene was familiar. Last time, I had a tear in my dress. I was always climbing and ruining my skirts right before I met him. His neatly combed hair and nice clothes looked so utterly out of place next to me in the humble garden. Which begged the question.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted. “How did you even get in there?” I glanced back up to the attic, wondering if there was an open portal or hidden passage.

“I spoke with the Mistress of the manor.” With two fingers, he held up a blackened iron key. “I got this from her.” He tossed the key in the air and caught it in his fist. “Not that it was necessary.”

I didn’t want to comment because I felt it was my escape that had been pointless. I was thwarted three times and McDougary showed up, had a little chat with my stepmother and received what he wanted straight away. He did strike me as the type that luck would favor. Unlike me – if I had waited three minutes longer, I wouldn’t have had to risk life and limb climbing out a third story window. How had he even gotten the key from her?

“Did you steal it?”

“No. She gave it to me,” he said.

I was incredulous. “How on earth did you get her to do that?” That was even more impressive than stealing it.

“I threatened her.” He was as blunt as a rhino’s backside. Not his fault, I supposed.
“And she listened? What did you say?” I asked in disbelief.

The corner of his lip twitched. “Nothing unsanctioned. I do work under the authority of the King, you know.”

Briefly, I wondered what the extent of ‘sanctioned’ was. It had to be something pretty scary to make Clarice knuckle down. Prison? Death? Maybe I didn’t want to know. “I’m just surprised she didn’t make you throw yourself out,” I said.

“Ah. Well, let’s just say I’m not a man to make idle threats.”

“Clearly,” I said. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“That would be best,” he said mildly. “Now let’s go.” He started walking on the path that lead back to the front of the house.

“Where are we going?” I took a hesitant step forward.

“To the castle. I’m bringing you to be appointed,” he answered.

“So you still want to hire me?” I asked timidly.

He stopped to face me. “Do you still want me to hire you?”

“Y-yes,” I said hesitantly.

He rubbed the muscles in his neck with a hand. “You thought I wouldn’t want you anymore? Why then would I waste the effort to come fetch you?” he asked.

“Well, I couldn’t even divert Clarice when I needed to. Aren’t diversions a part of my duties?” And why couldn’t I keep my mouth shut?

“That may be, but I won’t hold it against you if you can’t overcome a Gift like hers. Especially if you’re trying alone.” I felt a little guilty because I did overcome her Gift. Even if it was only once. I also wanted to argue that he had been entirely
successful in overcoming her Gift and alone, too. But I didn’t say anything because it
wasn’t like I wanted him to see my point.

He saw me thinking and added, “You freed yourself in the end, didn’t you? It’s
always preferable to have your bases covered twice. It doubles the chance of success.”
Then he gestured to the path, standing back for me to go first. He was right, but I still
wished he hadn’t seen me in such an ungraceful state. I wasn’t living up to my namesake
very well.

At the front patio, McDougary handed me into his carriage, climbed in behind me
and we were off. The carriage clattered away and I stole a last look at the receding
manor. I expected Clarice to be watching us leave from her window, but I didn’t see
anything.

“Was Clarice in the library?” I asked.

“No. But the doors were chained shut. Do you have any idea why?”

I shook my head. At least I didn’t have to see the changes that were happening
behind those closed doors yet and I could preserve the memory a bit longer.

Soon enough we were passing by the nobles’ city homes, and then we were
through the outer gate of the castle, stepping out of the carriage, up the stairs, and through
the castle doors. If I was going to grow nervous, that would have been the time, but I was
far more excited than nervous that things were finally in motion.

McDougary told a castle maid to take me to a spare bedroom where I could
change and bathe. It wouldn’t give the proper impression to go before the King in a mud-
splattered dress. I was whisked away for a brief hot bath and a quick hair styling, and
then I was put into a formal dress. It was a pretty pale green with an empire waist and
elegant flowing sleeves. Papa used to say that I looked like spring when I wore pastels. I thanked the maid for finding such a lovely dress and she told me that McDougary had sent it. Before I could wonder about how he had known enough about women’s fashion to know what would suit me, let alone my size, the maid declared me ready. She shooed me out the door where a young servant boy was waiting.

He escorted me through several tall hallways. There were large brass candleholders every eight feet, separated by creamy white curtains that framed wide-open windows. These halls were crafted so that no matter what time of day or night, they would be well lit. The floors were done in smooth white and grey tiles in a braiding diamond pattern. I’d thought my manor was fancy but the scale of the castle was simply grander – everything I saw was just a little bit larger and higher quality than I had seen elsewhere. But it wasn’t overly extravagant, it was the kind of massive understated wealth that didn’t need to flaunt itself. Still, it lacked the warmth of personal touch and felt courtly rather than homey.

We passed by a small gallery of royal paintings. One painting in particular grabbed my attention. I’m not sure whether it was the large imposing man or the orange flames swirling in the air around him that caught my eye. He had a commanding presence, even on canvas and surrounded by a large gilded frame. The man stood with one foot planted up on a low stone wall on a twilight hillside with long wavy blonde hair blowing in a breeze. It didn’t feel right to call him strawberry blonde but there was definitely shimmering red scattered here and there. And his eyes were black, with orange dancing flames reflected in them. The effect was darkly arresting.
The young servant boy cleared his throat when he noticed I had lagged behind; I swallowed and scurried to catch up. Shortly, we came to a set of double doors.

“Your name?” he asked.

“Grace Cainsbury. Why?”

For an answer he gave two hard raps on the wood with his knuckle and opened the double doors. He stepped to one side and said in a loud voice, “Announcing Lady Grace, daughter of the late Lord Nicholas Cainsbury.” I glanced sharply at him, surprised that he recognized the surname well enough to know who I was. Was Papa better known than I thought? Was it the boy’s job to know? Or maybe it was a Gift? I gave an internal shrug and stepped into the room.

It was small compared to the throne room conjured in my mind. There was only a short walk to a wide table, not a throne, and a grand tapestry of our flag high on the wall. Six people sat at the table. The first person that stood out to me was McDougary, seated on the far right with his elbows were propped on the table. When I entered the room, he looked at me and stood with a short nod, which I returned. I noticed for the first time that McDougary was conspicuously missing any award pins or decorations. Almost everyone else in the room was wearing a few on their breast. I suppose in order to do what he did, he had to give up on recognitions like that.

There were three men I didn’t know. One had no decorations and was busily taking notes, appearing to be a secretary or scribe. The other two were older, wearing a cluster of pins, and were deep in debate; they must have been the High Advisors.

I did recognize one other man – the prince, with his startling clear green eyes and wavy blonde hair. He was looking very responsible and princely. The effect was aided
by the three pins and large royal crest stitched on his chest and the fact that he appeared
to be holding his own with two arguing politicians. And sitting next to the prince in the
center, watching him talk with the advisors, and sporting a smorgasbord of pins was the
man from the painting whose identity was unmistakable.

The King of Tsybrunia.

The large solid torso from the portrait had grown a little soft around the edges.
But he was certainly not pudgy. I could see now that the prince got his wavy hair from
the King’s blonde mane, which was now faded with grey.

I approached the table and when I was a few feet away, I stopped and curtsied.


There was barely a pause in the discussion when I spoke.

“--not as though we don’t have the means,” the advisor with a neatly trimmed
brown mustache was saying. “It’s an excellent time to send out the remainder of our
army with the prince to lead it.”

“I still stand against this. We mustn’t be greedy. We have to put the people
first,” the silver-haired advisor cautioned.

“And this is what they want, isn’t it? Fair return for their losses?” he persisted.

Then the prince happened to glance over at me and then turned forward as he
smiled slightly in recognition. “How nice to see you again, Lady Grace,” he said.

“And you as well, your Highness,” I replied, flushing as I recalled how
disrespectful I had been to him last time, even if it was due to ignorance. Actually, that
made it worse. He remembered the face and name of a nobody, and I hadn’t even been
able to recognize the heir to the throne.
The King noticed that his son was distracted and looked to find the source of his distraction and suddenly his full attention fell on me. He furrowed his brow and scrutinized me for a moment. “Gentlemen,” he said holding out a hand, halting the conversation of the advisors. “Is this your new recruit, Keenan?”

“Yes, sire,” said McDougary as he walked around the tables to come stand beside me.

It felt like he was presenting me, so I introduced myself with another little curtsy. “Grace Cainsbury, your Majesty.”

“This little slip of a girl breached these castle walls?” the King asked McDougary skeptically.

I flinched a little at that. I had thought that all was forgiven and done with.

“Yes, sire,” McDougary said again, with only the slightest hint of hesitation.

The King’s black eyes bored into me. The artist had definitely captured the eyes in the painting. I could almost picture the eerie flames in their depths. They were the kind of eyes that one doesn’t want to see angry. I wondered if the prince’s green eyes would eventually adopt that quality. I hoped not. I shrank a little under that gaze and tried to look apologetic and nonthreatening, all while praying for deliverance.

“How did you do it, Miss Cainsbury?” the King questioned.

“Uh,” I cleared my throat and glanced at McDougary, who gave me a little go-ahead nod. Only I didn’t want to go ahead. He wanted me to tell the most powerful man in the country just how I broke into his home? I thought I would rather eat a poisonous toad. But what could I do? “I used an elephant to climb in through a second story window,” I said helplessly.
“Really?” he asked. “An Animal Gift? You were also the one with the mysterious driverless carriage then, were you not?”

The King really ran a tight ship; even little things like that were reported to him. I let out a tense little laugh and hearing the nervousness in it, he chuckled and his whole face softened up.

“No need to worry, my dear. I needed to know so precautions can be taken to prevent future break-ins. You understand.”

I sensed then that his natural personality was as sunny as the next man’s and that the severe persona was just a tool. I relaxed. “Of course,” I said.

“And tell me, my son,” the King turned to his right, “Why was the young lady blushing all over you?” he asked in a suspicious tone. He was observant too.

In my opinion he was greatly exaggerating, but the prince still turned pink and I felt my own face turning a similar shade of mortification.

“Father!” the prince said in exasperation, like he couldn’t believe his father had asked that in front of company. But the King still looked like he was expecting an answer from him. “I’ve only met her once before. We danced together at the gala. One dance!” he assured.

The King raised bushy eyebrows at him.

To save both of us, I quickly explained, “I was just embarrassed because I didn’t realize who I was dancing with at the time.”

“You didn’t?” the prince asked, with a touch of surprise.

“No,” I admitted. “I was a little preoccupied at the time.”
“I had wondered why you didn’t know about my Gift,” he said. It had probably never happened to him before, being such a prominent public figure. “Does that mean you only found out who I am just now?”

“Well, no. I found out from McDougary immediately after our dance,” I replied and pointed at the man standing at my right who had cured me of my ignorance. “Your Highness,” I added belatedly.

The prince looked slightly unhappy and he was about to say something when the impatient mustached advisor spoke. “Can we please come back to the matters at hand?”

The King, who had been glancing back and forth between the prince and me, looked slightly disappointed that our exchange had been disrupted. Or did I imagine that? Because then he said, “Yes, let’s,” and looked to McDougary.

McDougary turned to face me. Then he bent down and placed a long, narrow cushion at my feet. I hadn’t even noticed that he had been holding it. He rose back up. “Please kneel.”

Sweeping my skirt out of the way, I knelt onto the cushion and my knees sank into thick feathery padding. I was suddenly very grateful because I could imagine how cold and hard the marble floor was underneath. Was a single pillow the difference between an amicable ceremony and unmerciful questioning?

McDougary took a few steps back and began. “Grace Cainsbury, do you possess any ill will towards the land of Tsybrunia, its people and properties, or its King and royal family?” he asked.

“Excluding my stepmother and the boys who kick stray dogs in the market, I do not,” I answered honestly and not by choice.
McDougary lips quirked, but he had a straight face when he turned to the King in askance.

The King waved two fingers and said, “It suffices.”

McDougary must carry out this first bit because his Gift of Truth ensured that the swearing in couldn’t be faked or fibbed. But the King was still the biggest cat in the room.

McDougary turned back to me and continued asking a few more questions. Questions meant not only to ensure that I would protect the country’s best interests through my Gift, my actions, by following orders and not selling out secrets etc., but they were also designed to weed out traitors.

When I had answered his script of questions to his satisfaction he said, “Very well then. You may now take the oath,” and stepped aside.

McDougary had taught me the oath on the way from the manor and I had easily memorized it. “I swear my fealty, my service, and my life to His Majesty King Dalton of Tsybrunia and to his heir, his Highness Prince Drew,” I pledged, looking each of them in the eye in turn.

Then it was the King’s turn. “I accept your fealty, and I thank you. By the power vested in me, I hereby pronounce you an agent of the crown. Come forward,” he said in an almost bored intonation.

I stood and stepped over the cushion and went to stand in front of the King. The table was on a slight platform, so instead of being taller than the seated monarch, I was a few inches below his eye level. McDougary retrieved a long sheet of paper from his seat
and passed it to the King. He scanned it and then swiveled it around to me and slid me a quill.

It felt odd being so close to him. Shouldn’t he be more careful about who he let near his royal self? What if I stabbed him in the wrist with the quill? But I suppose after all those promises I had just made to the human truth contagion, he felt safe. I had the brief absurd urge to flip the quill around and tickle the King’s nose with the feather end and see if the large royal feature would wiggle or wrinkle, but then I decided I didn’t really want to face the aftermath.

The document was made of the same vellum as the first letter and written with the same neat calligraphy as well. McDougary had already outlined the main points to me. It was basically a summary of the ceremony and the terms of employment. Taking the quill in my hand, I wetted the tip with ink. McDougary’s signature was already at the bottom and comparing it to the script above, I realized that the handwriting belonged to him. I signed my name below his and pushed the paper back at the King. The King took the quill and made his own loopy signature below mine.

Then he lifted a little red stick of wax and his pointer finger lit up, blazing like a miniature torch, which he used to melt the one end of the wax. The casual flick of fire made me doubly glad I hadn’t tickled him. His occasional public fire display for the people was a lot flashier. A fire-made phoenix soaring through impossible stunts and air acrobatics – the King was probably quite a hazard to the drapes hanging about the walls and ceilings.

He smeared a red blob at the bottom center of the paper and mashed the face of the ring on his right pointer finger into it, leaving the imprint of a tree and forming the
seal. The King blew on it and gave it a wave through the air and handed it back to McDougary who tucked it under his arm and gave a small bow.

“Good luck to you,” the King said in dismissal and their debate sprang back to life.

Chapter 5 – For the Birds

McDougary’s squared shoulders seemed tense after we left the King. Something had happened in the time we separated at the castle entrance to make him uptight.

“Is everything all right?”

“Hmm? Yes, the ceremony went fine,” he said absentmindedly.

“No, I meant with you.”

“Oh, nothing for you to worry about, Miss Cainsbury.”

While his tone was not unkind, he remained taut as a bow and just about as talkative. I had the feeling that when he was upset or stressed, he didn’t talk very much because he couldn’t hold anything back.

“There’s someone waiting for us in my office,” he said when were almost to his door.

“Who?” I asked, hurrying up the last of the stairs after him.

“You’ll see.” He swung the door open into his office. An empty office.

This time it was neat and orderly; the books, scrolls, papers and even some new folders were all squared away at home on the bookshelves. But there wasn’t a living soul beside ourselves.
“Or maybe you won’t?” McDougary said, as we both stood in the doorway looking around.

“Probably just stepped out for a moment,” I assumed.

He gave an ambiguous “hmm.” Closing the door behind us, he stepped further inside. He gazed down at a huge potted flower nestled into the seat of an armchair. The petals were a dark soft-looking purple with white speckles forming a deep neck and light green spiky leaves that stuck straight up. The plant was vaguely familiar.

McDougary ran a long petal between his fingers and reaching the end he plucked it off and rubbed it between finger and thumb. The dying petal sent its last breath of soft fragrance into the air. After a few seconds of inhaling, almost as though he was verifying that the flower had a scent, he dropped the petal back in the soil of the clay pot. He walked around his desk and sat, crossed his fingers and stared at the flower thoughtfully.

Who would send flowers to a man like Keenan McDougary? There was no tag or note, so they would be from someone he knew. Maybe it was the same person who was supposed to be meeting us. His wife? I glanced at his ringless fingers – he wasn’t married. A girl he was courting? But usually the gift of flowers between a man and a woman goes the other direction.

Wanting to ask who sent it, but thinking it would be rude, I dismissed it and took a seat in the empty armchair.

“By the way, what had happened in your office the first time I was here? It looked like a storm had passed through.” The current level of organization seemed more suited to his personality.
McDougary looked around at the immaculate office. “I had been searching for your father’s last report. Imagine that you had it all along,” he said.

Somehow I felt guilty. “Um, sorry?”

“No need to apologize. It’s in the past.”

Papa had hidden it in my animal encyclopedia and while it is one of my favorite books, I don’t exactly read it everyday. Whatever Papa’s intentions were, I doubt he had ever imagined this outcome – his daughter walking in his footsteps and becoming a spy. I don’t think he would’ve minded so much, but he definitely wouldn’t want me to end up like he did. Come to think of it, I didn’t really want that either. I would need to be careful, rely on my Gift, and arm myself with information.

“So what were they arguing about in there?” I inquired, referring to the two bickering advisors.

He thought for a second, recalling the conversation. “Half of the council is pushing for us to go beyond simply defending our border. Well, it’s more like they want to further our borders and continue to defend them there. And the other half disagrees.”

“You mean, the mustached one wants us to invade Molthova?” I didn’t really have the jungle ‘eat or be eaten’ mentality. ‘Live and let live’ was more my style. “He’s wrong – the people don’t want that.”

“Who knows? I could wager they do,” McDougary disagreed. “But they’re not the ones making the decision, are they?” He had a point. “The King didn’t have his entire council of advisors assembled there with him, just his two most senior advisors, which tells me that he’s already made up his mind. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gave the order for the battalions to mobilize in the next day or two.”
“Why would he do that?”

McDougary sighed before he began explaining in a resigned voice, “His rule is drawing to an end. The next ten years will see the prince upon the throne, whether the King passes on or only steps down. Despite his fierceness as King, or perhaps because of it, this invasion has been the only act of war during his reign since he ended the war that killed his father. Rather than being the aged old man who allowed an invasion, he would prefer to be remembered as the underestimated King who turned around and invaded them right back.”

It sounded a little juvenile to me. “So it’s all because they started it?”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“Why do men like fighting so much?” I complained.

“It’s more to do with winning, actually,” he remarked with a shadow of a smile.

“But in this case, it’s more than that. He cannot leave his country looking weak. Especially with the rise of a young new king.”

“This isn’t the first time Molthova has invaded, but he wants to make it the last?” I surmised.

“It sounds like the mantra of every war. But I do believe that the king has given this a lot of thought.”

“Well, that’s comforting, I suppose.”

“To you, maybe. But to me, it means less comfort and more work.” I guessed that was the reason for his shift in mood. He leaned his elbow on the armrest and stared at a corner of the ceiling. “And speaking of which, there’s something you can help with. I need to inform all of my people of the upcoming movements, and some of them are
many, many miles away. The problem is that quite a few of my messenger birds have gone missing recently. I suspect they were shot down out of the sky.”

I cringed in sympathy.

“And now I don’t have enough hawks, nor do I have time to train the new ones and regular post will be too slow and probably hazardous,” he said.

“Ah. And that’s where I come in?” I guessed.

“Precisely,” he confirmed.

“Okay, I can tell your new hawks what to do and where to go, but how do you plan on keeping them from being shot down as well?” I wondered.

He was silent. No bright ideas then.

I stared at McDougy’s desk as I thought for a moment. On the ledge, there was a large glass paperweight brown butterfly with staring eyespots encased inside the glass. A creature with eyes on its back – how appropriate for a spy. But perhaps a butterfly with camouflage colors would be more suitable than a threatening mimicry. And that thought gave me an idea.

“Instead of prized hunting birds like hawks, how about using pigeons?” I suggested.

“Would that even make a difference?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s not a perfect solution, but it’ll definitely better the odds. I mean, the mighty pigeon is hardly a prize to a hunter. And if you’re worried about someone intentionally shooting them down trying to intercept the messages, there are enough pigeons in the city that we could send them in groups to make it harder to pinpoint the one carrying the message.”
He looked a little dubious but then he lifted a shoulder in a lazy shrug. “All right. Starting tomorrow, I want you to gather enough pigeons to make, I don’t know, half a dozen teams to start?” he said.

“Oh, of course,” I said. It made sense that he would give me something simple and easy to start with.

He glanced at the flower again as though considering something. Then he picked up a silver goblet from his desk and eyed the inside. Apparently it was empty. Backing his chair up, he stood and went to a small square table in the corner and picked up a water decanter. He stood for a moment contemplating the goblet and decanter in his hands, looking like he was weighing his options. Setting down the goblet, he opened a drawer and pulled out a tea strainer. I wouldn’t have pegged him for a tea person. Next, he filled the goblet with only a small amount of water and placed the decanter back. Then he fitted the strainer upside down on the rim of the goblet so it formed a little rounded top. He walked around his desk to the flower pot.

Watching him as he held the makeshift watering can over the silky petals, I couldn’t hold it in. “So who sent the flower?”

“Oh, indeed,” he said and tilted the goblet.

A dozen minuscule streams poured out through the strainer onto the plant. I expected the drizzling sound of water against soil, but instead the pot said “Ack!” and I jerked in surprise. In a rippling motion spreading outward from the points of contact, the potted flower disappeared and in its place sat a woman. A woman I recognized.

“Valerie?” I gasped.
My dripping neighbor sat curled in the chair with her feet under her and pushing wet hair out of her face. “You nearly got it in my eyes!” she said grumpily.

“Now did the water break the illusion or was it because you moved?” McDougary asked with a look of professional curiosity on his face, totally unconcerned.

“I don’t know, you big oaf! And don’t you water me when you know it’s me!” she scolded, snatching the goblet from him.

“Don’t eavesdrop in my office any more,” he retorted as he walked around his desk to sit again.

“Oh, hush. I didn’t hear anything good. Besides, you knew I was here the whole time,” she said flapping a hand at him and turning to me with a motherly smile. “Hello there, sweetie, how are you?”

Her mass of curly red-brown hair and warm brown eyes in her plump face hadn’t changed. After my mother had died when I was six, Valerie had often invited Papa and me over to her house to eat dinner with her and husband, Samuel. Not because we didn’t have a cook, but because she knew how lonely we were. And she was a hard person to be gloomy around.

But then after Papa married Clarice, we never visited her anymore. I hadn’t seen more than a glimpse of her for years, except for about a month ago when I popped up suddenly asking for the ball gown illusion, which she had happily given, no questions asked.

“I’m great, Valerie. But what are you doing here? Why were you pretending to be a flower?”

“The lad here asked me to come. The flower was just for fun.”
“Lad?” objected McDougary in his deep voice. He was probably in his early twenties and definitely a man, not a lad. Still, he might as well just get used to it. She treats everyone as if they were one of her children.

“But how does he know you?”

“Oh, I do favors for him every once in a while,” she replied.

“And I knew you two knew each other because I recognized Valerie’s handiwork at the gala,” McDougary added.

The telltale clue had been the tear in my dress where the illusion had broken. It was a really beautiful dress, though. The flower, too. It had even smelled nice. “Why not more than once in a while? I’m sure your illusions would be fabulously useful!”

“Eh, my illusions are only small scale, temporary, and fragile,” she said modestly, downplaying her Gift.

“Plus she has a few young ones to take care of,” McDougary added, like they’d had this conversation before.

“The little rascals. I swear they’ll be the end of me but I love ‘em to pieces,” she said shaking her head. “I’m glad you asked me to come today. I haven’t been able to get out of the house for a while.” Then she seemed to remember why she was out of the house to begin with. “Keenan said you needed a place to stay in the city. When I heard that I just knew I had to offer you the room above Sammy’s bakery.”

I had temporarily forgotten about my need for a lodging arrangement, but it didn’t surprise me that McDougary had anticipated it.

“And Samuel will be all right with it?” I asked. Her husband was a cheerful man, just as long as you didn’t go near his bread. He was really touchy about it. No one knew
what kind of Gift he had that made it last indefinitely, never spoiling; neither he nor
Valerie would ever breathe a word of the secret. Believe me, I’d tried to find out when I
was younger, bugging both of them in turn. Samuel always grew irritated and refused to
answer at all when I asked, and Valerie always just smiled and pointed my attention
elsewhere, never giving me a clue. So I wasn’t sure if my sleeping above the ovens
would make Samuel uneasy or worse, if I would interfere with the process. Maybe my
dreams could affect the rising dough. I truly had no idea.

“Of course he’ll be okay with it. You know we’d do anything we can to help you
out,” she assured.

I was still worried that maybe she hadn’t consulted her husband yet. That would
be just like her. But she said I could have it, so I’d take her word on it. “Thank you so
much, Valerie. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.”

“Don’t mention it, honey. The key is under the flowerpot out back. Looks just
like, well, like I did a moment ago.” She smiled and I realized why the flower had
seemed familiar. She grew them in her yard, and apparently behind the bakery too.

Valerie glanced out the window at the setting sun past the open cobalt curtains.
“Dear me, I didn’t realize it had gotten so late. As much fun as this has been, I need to
run home in time for dinner.” She jumped up from the chair and bustled out the door. In
parting, she stuck her head in the closing gap and said, “Don’t let any of those dratted
pigeons in the bakery now, you hear?” And she was gone.

“For an older woman, she sure has a lot of energy,” I commented.

McDougary began to gather some papers in front of him and gave that
noncommittal “hmm” again.
I wanted to thank him for everything – for coming to fetch me, for talking to Valerie, even for the cushion – but he was rifling through papers in a drawer with his head bent down. He had such foresight and attention for details, but then seemed somewhat uninterested in the execution of his meticulously laid plans. He had finished with my affairs and his mind had moved on to the next priority. I watched him pause to scan a page.

“Well, I suppose I should be leaving then,” I said, standing.

He spared a glance up at me through his eyelashes. “Oh yes, of course you may go.” He thought I was asking for permission.

It was better to leave him to his papers and schemes.

McDougary’s prediction about the King’s mobilization orders came true and I had collected my pigeons just in the nick of time. After giving them standing no-pecking orders, they began to ferry tiny folds of secrets tied to their necks back and forth, to and from other spies.

But soon I figured out that the orders were too convoluted for the birds to do more than relay messages to one place and back to me; so unfortunately, McDougary needed me to stay put for the system to work. After the first week when the pigeons began returning, McDougary was satisfied with the new flow of information I brought to him almost daily. But I was less than thrilled with the fact that I wasn’t really doing anything. Thinking that I might be able to add some insight or help in some way, I asked McDougary whether he minded if I opened the return notes from his people.

“Not at all,” he had said.
But he knew full well that opening them would do me no good, which irritated me to no end when I opened one the next day to discover it was written in the same illegible cipher as Papa’s papers. They probably all were. That was the kind of detail I knew McDougary wouldn’t miss, which is why I also knew that he hadn’t forgotten I couldn’t read it. He had let me spend a whole night and day thinking I would be in the know, but then I realized that I was more deeply in the dark than I had thought before. I took the message to him and asked, “What good does it do for me to open letters I can’t read?”

He didn’t even look up at me over the top of the creased paper. “None, of course.”

“Then, with all due respect, wouldn’t it behoove you to teach me the cipher?”

“Hmmm. Eventually, yes. But I can’t at the moment, I’m much too busy.” He pulled out a quill, licked it, and dipped it in ink before writing loopy salutations on a fresh piece of paper. I was clearly dismissed.

I was really starting to hate that unclear “hmm” thing. I came to learn that it meant he was thinking and not sharing. I had thought of him as an open book when he was really much more complex than that. Just because he could only speak truth didn’t mean he couldn’t simply keep his mouth shut. There was one form of lying that was still completely open to him – the art of lying through omission. I suspected that he lived in a tight-lipped rut, never revealing more than he had to. It was probably a tendency born from necessity, practice, and a need for privacy. I sympathized with how tiring it must be even as it irritated me.

McDougary kept putting off giving me lessons. He was constantly in meetings or conferring with the King and his advisors about the reports from the army generals on the frontline and whatnot and always seemed to be in a testy mood. Every time I dropped off
the letters at his office, he either was out at those meetings or waved me away. But one
day when I caught him in the office, I proposed again that if I could read the cipher, I
could take some of the burden.

To that he told me, “Even if you could read it, you wouldn’t know what to do
with the information. And it’s faster for me to just read it myself than to have you try and
explain a situation you don’t know the half of.”

I thought we had established a certain camaraderie, but apparently I was wrong. I
had to answer to him, not the other way around, so there was no reason he should bother
trying to have an entire conversation with me. No, he wasn’t deliberately impolite. Most
of the time when he cut me off, it was the result of putting work first. The man
practically defined the word preoccupied. And the rest of the rudeness could be laid at
the feet of his Gift, which made it hard for him to be tactful.

For weeks, I sat passively in the dropping-spattered outpost tower where all the
messenger birds roosted, waiting for the next pigeon party to flap its way in to me,
bringing me something I couldn’t even read. Passing tidbits of information wasn’t
enough. To pass the time, I taught the other birds to do tricks, but it was too easy with my
Gift. I wanted to be out of this smelly tower and actively doing something. I swear I
could hear the regal hawks and haughty falcons laughing at me. They were free flying
spirits while I was cement. My only comfort was going home to Bastio, who I had
brought to the bakery from the manor. He was the only one who was always happy to see
me, especially when I had feathers on me. I would have brought him with me to the
tower, but it wasn’t good to scare the birds that much. Normally, I wouldn’t mind
working with animals, but I was supposed to be a spy. I didn’t feel like a spy. I felt like
a glorified bird keeper, only without any glorifying. I wanted to be the one sending reports back home with the feathery postmen. Not acting as a human mailbox.

One day after about a month, I knocked on McDougary’s door and entered. Again, he scarcely looked up until I held out a newly delivered tiny scroll, the size of my pinky.

“For Quelcor,” I said, naming the capital city of Molthova.

Putting down his quill, he took the paper stick and quickly unraveled it. He smoothed it out to reveal an intricate small-scale map.

He hunched over the minute topography with a magnifying glass and began the task of carefully reproducing it onto a larger piece of paper.

After a minute of watching him, I mustered up my courage and said, “I want to do more. Well, not more of the same. Something else.”

“Here. Take this.” He held out a square slip of paper.

I took it and placed it in my lap without looking. This wasn’t over. He could ignore me now, but I’d go back to the issue at hand as soon as I received my instructions. I doubted I’d get my way if I seemed like I wasn’t taking care of the one simple thing I had to do.

“Where do you want it sent? Toffee just returned yesterday, she can take it.”

He looked up. “Toffee?”

“Yes, she’s the tan pigeon. I named the distinctive ones and put them on separate teams so I could tell them apart. There’s also Frosty, Weedeater, and Squiggles…”

He raised dark eyebrows at me.

“What? I was bored.”
He shook his head like he was trying hard not to laugh at me. “Those papers are for you.”

“What?” I looked down at it and saw my name on the top.

“You’re to go to Vrabana by Thursday to set sail aboard the Queen Denissa.”

My eyes widened. “Really?”

“Really,” he confirmed.

The first sheet had my name, the name of the ship and a docking number. On the flip side was a little map of the Vrabana with a little circle drawn at the northern end. I felt like I had been handed a treasure map. I wanted to jump out of my chair and do a victory dance around the room, but I retained my dignity and said, “I will do my utmost.”

He nodded and told me about my assignment in Molthova, which should have been sobering but wasn’t. I kept it together long enough to walk out the door, where I started bouncing down the hall, which seemed to be the only non-verbal avenue available to adequately express my excitement. No more bird sitting!

Chapter 6 – Down to Size

White and grey sea gulls flew in funnel formation over hot updrafts of salty air. The wharf buzzed with activity beside a glittering emerald ocean. Bowlegged workers hefted heavy cargo up and down planks that rested precariously between land and vessel. Traders meandered to and fro examining the various goods for sale, and sailors overflowed the pubs intent on making the most of their shore leave.

I had travelled by night carriage, somehow managing to sleep through the arrhythmic jostling, to the coastal town of Vrabana. And now that I was here, I pulled
out the paper McDougary had given me and strolled down the main path of planks that connected all of the piers while looking for the *Queen Denissa*. McDougary had said that someone would meet me there with concurrent orders.

As I walked, I started attracting the sea gulls. They flocked over my head in curious circles, which made me a little nervous. Once when I was little, Papa took me to a petting zoo and all the sheep and goats and pigs crowded around me. At first I couldn’t get enough of their fuzzy little noses nudging me from all sides, but then one of them dropped a warm, wet turd on my foot. I started kicking frantically trying to shake it off while wailing my head off. It scared the animals into a panicked frenzy and they knocked over some of the other visitors, including a few children. In the end, we were asked to leave. But I did learn a valuable lesson – animals poop on their own schedule.

I pointed up at them and said, “You keep that business away from me, you hear?”

They just shrieked cheerfully at me in response. I continued on my way, carrying my brown leather travel bag and weaving around some children chasing a ball.

It didn’t take me long to find the ship; it was hard to miss. Not only was it one of the largest in the bay but also one of the most stunning. A frigate of the royal fleet. The bright red flag emblazoned with a gold tree waved at me from the top of the fifty-foot mast. The clean off-white sails were hoisted at the moment, but I could tell they were enormous. Like the vast bed sheets of a giant ten times the size of a man. The hull was painted with a dark wood stain with fat gold letters that spelled out *Queen Denissa*.

There was a man leaning against a post at the gangway, with a long, straight, and sun burnt nose and longish black hair pulled back into a little two-inch tail. He wore a red scarf around his neck and tucked into a white long sleeve shirt. Neither did much to
hide the brown skin that comes from years of baking in the sun. An official black coat with tasteful red and gold trimming was flung over the rail next to him. Undoubtedly, he was a navy soldier.

I approached him and said, “Good day, sir. My name is Grace Cainsbury. I believe I’m due to sail aboard this vessel.” I handed him the slip of paper, assuming it would function as a ticket.

He took it and glanced it over. “What is this?” he scoffed and threw the paper in the air. The wind snatched it, tossing it into the cresting waves below the wharf.

I darted to the rail and watched helplessly as the now sodden and clumpy paper sunk out of sight. I spun on him. “What did you do that for?”

“Who do you think you are? I haven’t heard that we’re taking on any passengers. And a flimsy sheet of paper isn’t going to get you anywhere.” He folded his arms grumpily over his chest and glanced up at the gulls that were still flying around above my head. “And what the devil is the matter with these blasted birds? You didn’t feed them, did you?”

I chose to ignore that. “No, you don’t understand.” I leaned in a little closer.

“You see, I work for Lord Keenan McDougary.”

He examined his finger nails and asked, “Who?”

Rats. If he didn’t know who McDougary was already, he wouldn’t believe me even if I could tell him. I bit my lip. “I was told someone would be waiting here for me.”

“Look here, Missy. This isn’t a passenger ship. It’s part of His Majesty’s navy and carries his Highness, Prince Drew. I’m not about to let any unauthorized persons
aboard, let alone a little girl.” He gave me a once over and his expression told me that he wasn’t impressed.

I wanted to tell him I was a woman, not a little girl. However, compared to his weatherworn face, mine must have looked like a baby’s. But who cared? “Prince Drew is aboard? He knows me! If you could just bring him out, we can get this sorted.”

He snorted. “Right. And I’m the Queen’s best mate. Take your yarn and sea story and be on your way. Or I’ll send you on your way, if you get my drift.”

When I didn’t move immediately, he took a step towards me. And with that menacing step, I turned tail and scurried out of sight, but still close.

Was I supposed to figure out how to sneak aboard on my own? Was that the standard approach and McDougary had simply forgotten to mention it?

Before I could further that train of thought, a swift hand snagged my travel bag. I was so lost in thought that it easily flew out of my grasp. I whirled around thinking of street thieves. I did not expect to see a pair of boys standing still with my bag between them as if they had every right to it. Despite their wooden expressions, they looked to be about my age or a little older. They were both taller than me and had short auburn hair that the sea breeze had fluffed up into insolent tufts. I felt like I was seeing double. From their hazel eyes to their oval faces, every feature matched exactly. Everything, except their noses. The one on the left had a slightly upturned nose of normal size and the one on the right was positively bulbous.

I held out my hand. “Give that back.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll hold onto it for you,” said the small-nosed twin with phony propriety.
“No thank you, that’s really not necessary,” I responded in kind.
They glanced at each other then back at me. “Actually, it really is,” said the other, his oversized nose moving as he spoke.
“And why is that?”
“Because you won’t be able to carry it in a minute,” said Snub Nose matter-of-factly.
“What do you mean?” I shifted uneasily.
The twins curled their lips in two identical frightening sneers.
Monster Nose reached out a hand. “This won’t hurt a bit.”
I took a step backwards. He didn’t touch me but I felt a sharp falling sensation, like the falling in a dream. Only instead of feeling like I missed a step, my feet stayed firmly planted on the ground. And this was no dream. The falling sensation halted suddenly and I found myself staring at towering wall of smooth brown rock.

What had he done to me? I looked around and saw a flat plain forested with enormous pillars that reached higher than I could see. And they were moving. Lifting off the ground, swinging through the air, and landing back on the ground with jarring thuds. Did he have a Gift of Illusion like Valerie’s, only much stronger? Or had he transported me somewhere on the other side of the planet? With my eye carefully on the flying megaliths, I backed against the rock wall next to me. It gave a little against my weight. I turned around and put my hand to it. It was soft, like leather. Suddenly, I recognized it. My travel bag. I froze for a second as my mind reevaluated. If my bag was still here, I probably hadn’t gone anywhere. But it was much bigger than it should be. Or rather, I was much, much smaller than I should be.
Still uncertain, I looked down at the ground. The grain of the wood jumped out as clear as day. Gaps between the planks were now canyons, so big that I could fall through in some places. A bug the size of my foot walked by, waved curious antennae at me and then continued on its way.

He had shrunk me. I now stood about six inches tall. And that meant that the enormous pillars were… legs. Oh, please let no one step on me. Something moved to block out the sun, casting me in shadow, and an ominous feeling slunk down my spine. I looked up and two huge faces filled the sky. And if I had thought the nose was big before, it was nothing to the titanic beak I saw now. I squeaked and fell over. The faces bared giant white teeth at me and a monstrous hand reached down towards me. I screamed, scrambled to my feet, and took off running as fast as my miniature legs could go.

I didn’t make it far. Snub Nose caught me easily in his fist. But he was gentle; he made a cage out of his fingers and trapped me. My head and feet poked out of either side of his hand and I started wriggling furiously. He lifted me up to face level and the world plummeted as my stomach was left behind on the ground.

“Strop struggling,” he boomed at me.

Since it was Snub Nose who held me, it was marginally less terrifying and I suppose his tone was meant to be comforting, but a voice coming from normal-sized vocal chords sounded like shouting to my miniscule eardrums. His other hand came up to cup the first, forming a pocket around me. His voice came muffled, “I’m serious. Don’t make me crush you.”

My struggles ceased. I couldn’t see anything but crevices of sunlight that turned the curls of his fingers a glowing red. It was impossible to see what was going on
outside. And I couldn’t hear much – just the same sounds of the wharf as before, only dampened down.

“Quickly now, we’re late as it is. And don’t forget to shrink her bag,” said Snub Nose. I felt slight vibrations through his hands from his voice.

“Right.” There was a pause. “There you go.”

“Thanks. Meet you later.”

I heard the other twin run off but the hands holding me were still enough that I could tell we weren’t moving. Not yet.

There came a loud whoop and then the guard at the gangplank shouted, “Oi, you! Come down from there!” Booted footfalls sounded on the wharf, increasingly distant.

Snub Nose ran and my makeshift prison of flesh began to bounce and shake. Judging by which walls I was knocked against, we rounded back towards the ship with a tip to the left and ascended the plank by a tumble to the back. After a final stumble to the right, there came the snick of a door closing. The hands lowered me and opened, depositing me on a flat wooden surface that looked larger than the main deck, up above which I’d glimpsed when I was the correct height. A quick glance showed me the surface was a small table beside a bed approximately the size of the entire ship.

“Now stay put, little midget. You won’t be alone for too long.” Snub Nose placed my now miniaturized travel bag beside me with two fingers, like he was moving a dollhouse toy. Then he turned around and left, closing the door securely behind him.

I stood there dazed for a minute. What was going on? Who were they? It didn’t seem like they were simply passersby; I couldn’t assume they were a good portent of
things to come. If they were allies, they should have said so. Were they Molthovans who had infiltrated our side? But then why had they brought me on board?

I went up to the edge of the table and peeped down. A wave of dizziness sent me windmilling backwards. It was many times my own height. I tiptoed around the four edges of the nightstand; the legs were too far under the lip for me to slide down them. The crisp-cornered bed sheets sat about a foot away – still too far.

I was marooned on a nightstand.

Was Snub Nose coming back shortly? Or was someone else coming? There was an atlas on the wall, a large roll top desk that was closed, a simple but intimate setting of table and chairs, and a square luggage chest. I ventured a guess and decided I was in the captain’s cabin. If the twins were spies from Molthova and they purposefully left their prisoner in the captain’s bedroom on the royal navy’s flagship, then that was a very bad thing. That meant that the captain of the Queen Denissa was an enemy as well and that Prince Drew was in danger.

Yet there was nothing I could do. My mini clothes from my mini bag wouldn’t be enough to make a rudimentary rope. My fellow nightstand occupants were a drip-covered brass candlestick, a folded handkerchief, a metal flagon secured with a lid, and a tin of bees wax nearly as wide as I was tall. Nothing helpful. Even if I could get down, I couldn’t open the door and I was a scant too big to slide underneath.

I began pacing circles around the candlestick, biting my fingernail. Was McDougary unaware of these moles? I wasn’t ready to handle it either way. All I could do was sit and wait for a traitor captain to come torture me for information.
I waited until the sun was high enough in the sky to be invisible from the porthole. Somewhere in that time, I heard a chorus of voices shouting, “Set sail!” and then the undeniable feeling of shifting buoyancy. My only consolation was that I was on the ship where I was supposed to be, regardless of circumstance. That consolation didn’t serve me well when I heard the door opening. I had prepared for this moment by preemptively hiding behind the flagon. The footsteps moved to the bed and halted, then there was a whumping sound and a grunted sigh, at which point I chanced a peek. A tall blonde man was sprawled facedown on the bed as though his head hadn’t felt a pillow in months. I sat down to wait again as quietly as I could. However, hardly five minutes had passed when I heard movement again and before I had time to react the flagon was lifted, leaving me frozen in very plain sight.

The man gave a startled shout and dropped the flagon with a clang, spilling water all over me. The cold wetness shocked me into moving and I started crab walking backwards. I was shaking too badly to stand and my waterlogged eyes were locked onto the man where he had taken two surprised steps back. I blinked the liquid out of my eyes and saw that the blonde hair belonged to Prince Drew himself.

I stopped and tentatively said, “Your Highness?”

He blinked at me. Small and big, we stared at each other.

“It’s me, Lady Grace, remember?” My voice cracked.

Recognition hit his eyes. “What are you doing here? Why are you so small?”

“Well.” I began laughing and trying not to cry. I gave my arms a single shake to fling off the excess drips.
“Oh! Let me get you out of there.” He reached down to pull me out of the puddle but his hands hesitated before touching me. “Pardon me,” he muttered and scooped me up and quickly sat me in the center of the bed. He knelt down to see me eye-to-eye.

“Are you all right? Would you like a towel?”

“Yes, er, I mean no, I’m fine.” I frowned at my incoherence.

“What happened?” the prince asked in a calm but urgent voice.

“There were these twins, and I think they might be Molthovans. They captured me and shrank me and brought me here. They’re on the ship, probably plotting something. We have to do something before they-” My words caught in my throat as I tried to speak too quickly and I swallowed to slow myself down.

“Hold on.” Prince Drew held up a hand. “Twins, you said? No, those redheads aren’t Molthovan. Their names are Avery and Alexander Duval. But they’re not supposed to be aboard this ship.” He glanced up at the cabin ceiling, as if he might see through the thick wood and spot them strolling on deck.

“Thank goodness.” Relief filtered into my mind, followed closely by confusion. “But if they’re not Molthovan, then why did they do this?” I gestured up and down at my paltry height.

“I’m not sure. They might be overly fond of misbehaving, but they’ve never disobeyed a direct order.”

“So they work for you?”

“No. They work for Lord McDougary, same as you.”
“What?” I stood up on the squishy surface of the bed. “That makes even less sense.” Did this mean that McDougary was playing with me? Or just that his subordinates were?

“We’ll ask them when we find them. And we’ll have them return you to normal,” Prince Drew said. He stood and held out his hand on the bed for me climb onto.

“We’re going to look for them? Out there?” I clambered into his palm and sat, curling my legs under me for stability.

Steadily, he lifted me up to face height.

I put my hand to his pointer finger. “Wait. Are you sure we want people seeing me like this? Since they did shrink me, I’m not certain that anyone should know.”

His brow creased. “You’re correct. If people see you, they’ll ask questions.”

There was a pause before he said, “I’ll return as soon as I find them.” He made to put me back on the bed.

I grabbed hold of his thumb. “You can’t leave me here!” I objected. I’d waited alone plenty enough already.

Chapter 7 – Travel with a Teapot

I wound up curled in the prince’s shirt pocket. We started with me standing, but my head and shoulders stuck out. Sitting sideways worked and the fabric was loose enough and thick enough that I didn’t make too much of a lump. I felt vaguely like a baby in a sling. I could feel the ample warmth from his body heat and with my ear pressed to his chest, I could hear the rapid fire of his heartbeat. He also smelled like
ocean water – he must have been sprayed as the ship sliced through the waves racing toward the shore.

Prince Drew exited his cabin and began searching the ship. Through the white cloth of his shirt I could see outlines and shadows. Everyone on deck dipped a short bow when he walked by and their fuzzy images reminded me of gulls bobbing on waves. Several of the sailors said some variation of “Thanking you kindly, your Highness,” accompanied by a deeper bow. Once we were below deck and in an empty hall, I asked him why, nearly shouting from inside my swaddling.

“I helped the ship out of the calm inlet waters by sending steam behind the sails. It saved the rowers some effort,” he replied.

“That’s incredible. I would never have thought it possible.”

I heard a smile in his voice as he said, “Nor I. But I have an advisor whose sole duty is to envision the potentials of my Gift. He used to work with my father as well.”

“Then he certainly must come up with some preposterous ideas.”

“Indeed, he does.”

We searched the galley first, then the cargo holds, the living quarters, and peeked in the bilge. Then Prince Drew stood for a few minutes on deck with a hand blocking the sun while he scrutinized the riggings before asking the first mate who was manning the crow’s nest.

“Ahoy, Mundy!” the aged sailor shouted.

From the ellipse-shaped opening of Prince Drew’s pocket I could see a head shrunken by the distant height poking over the high-stationed basket. The tiny pinhead was haloed by a patch of cumulus cloud backlit by the afternoon sun. Framed by the
white cloth of the shirt, he looked like an oddly proportioned angelic figure at the end of a tunnel. “Aye, sir?” His voice was young, almost cherubic; he probably sang lovely sea shanties.

“Anybody else up there with ya?” the first mate hollered.

“No, sir,” he yelled back.

Prince Drew’s chin came down, casting me in shadow and blocking the view of the crow’s nest.

The first mate began talking. “No one up there but Mundy, your Highness. Whoever you’re looking for is probably lining up for mealtime with the rest of ‘em by now. Will you be eating with the men or in your quarters?”

He thought for a second. “I’d like to eat with the men this afternoon. Thank you.”

Prince Drew followed the first mate to the mess deck, a section of the living quarters towards the bow. It was furnished with about ten long dining tables lined with sailors rather than the stacks of currently empty hammocks back towards the stern.

“Captain Railey, his Highness wishes to dine with us,” the first mate said. The oil lamps were aplenty and I could make out the stout, ruddy-faced man wearing a red overcoat and a cutlass.

“Thank you, Jutes. And welcome, your Highness. You may, of course, take the seat of honor.” He bowed, gesturing towards the head of the table.

Prince Drew held out his hands in deferral. “No, sir, I couldn’t possibly. You’ve already abdicated your quarters for me. It’s a small thing, but don’t let me take this from you as well.”
“Well, if you insist, your Highness,” the Captain replied amiably and seated himself.

Prince Drew took his place on the right hand of the captain, facing opposite Jutes whom I saw straight on, if fuzzily, for the first time. His short, fat nose was shaped like a walrus’s and the long tapering strands of his blond mustache didn’t help eradicate the image. But then when Prince Drew sat on the low chair, his shirt pocket fell almost exactly at the height of the table. It was dark and I could only barely discern the shapes of legs against the light of oil lamps thrown on the floor behind them. If I stretched upward a short way, I could see a small angle of the table surface.

The cook started passing out the food and drink, starting at Captain Railey. Judging by the cheers of the men, the first thing passed down was the ale. The captain poured for Prince Drew and himself before passing to Jutes. Then came bowls whose odorless contents I couldn’t see to identify. Although, the foods were revealed to me throughout the meal when Prince Drew would surreptitiously drop small morsels down into his pocket for me. A tiny strip of salted pork, two dried peas, and a piece of fresh bread – the time-defying handiwork of Valerie’s husband Samuel, I suspected. As I ate, I mused that I had been demoted from swaddled baby to pet. I sated my hunger long before I finished the food he gave me, tidbits though they were.

Captain Railey’s bass voice came, reverberating loudly even through the table. “You know, I usually take dinner alone, but I always eat with my men on the first night of the voyage. It’s a good omen that the lodger in the captain’s quarters is still keeping with the tradition, eh?”
“Most certainly. I’m sure that even on this short leg of the journey, luck will travel with us,” Prince Drew replied.

“You don’t have to be so polite with us sea bums, your Highness. Especially since we met when I was already creaking in the knees and you were still a young lad with steam coming out your ears.”

“What’s that you say?” Jutes asked.

“You haven’t heard the story? It’s a gas – literally.” He chuckled.

Prince Drew’s heart began beating faster again. “It’s really not that funny.”

“Oh, your Highness, you shouldn’t tell lies,” Captain Railey said.

Prince Drew let out a nearly inaudible groan, but I felt the thrumming vibrations from his chest loud and clear. Through my little ellipse window, I could see him covering his face with his hands in defeat. Already grinning in goofy anticipation, I strained my ears to hear the Captain’s next words over the din of the other sailors.

“Your Highness was small, maybe five-”

“Six,” Prince Drew interjected.

“-er, six. I had just gotten my promotion to lieutenant. On my way out of the castle, I met the young Prince Drew in the courtyard with his attendant and his Highness was in quite the curious state. I found out later – you were furious that the adults had died laughing when you burped in the middle of your progress recital for public speaking.” A wooden chair creaked, and I assume Captain Railey had leaned over in his seat because he began speaking more to Jutes. “Apparently, it was a doozy – one of those deep, belly burps, you know? His face,” he paused for effect. “It was red and puffed up and hot white steam was shooting out of his ears like genuine little geysers on
the sides of his head.” Railey and Jutes shared a loud chortle and Railey’s fist thumped into the tabletop, drawing the briefest pause in the chatter of sailors down the rows of chairs. Railey continued. “But it wasn’t the first time his ears had started steaming when he was embarrassed or mad. I heard he did it when he was angry with his mother for taking away the fruit tarts he had snitched before dinner and when his hound puppy piddled on his favorite shoes. He earned himself a nickname, he did. The maids around the castle gave him a nickname, and it eventually spread to the King’s ears and he began to use it as well. Do you know what the nickname was?”

Jutes’ voice responded in a mix of amused suspense and certainty. “Teapot?”

“Prince Teapot!” Railey roared in a pleased voice to many unbridled guffaws. “The only thing missing was the whistling!”

“Oh, Prince Teapot!” Jutes hooted and pounded on the table.

Covering my mouth, I stifled the laughter that wracked my body. No sound came out, excepting a small snort, but Prince Drew could feel my convulsions. He placed his hand over the pocket, not pressing but hovering, to cover the inexplicable twitching of his shirt. I doubted either of the merry sailors would have noticed.

“A toast, in honor of our very esteemed personage, Prince Teapot.” Drinks clinked to a short crack of laughter in humorous appreciation.

“Alright, alright. Thank you,” Prince Drew said good-naturedly. “But I had better not hear anyone calling me that, understood gentlemen? Or you’ll need to watch your mouths the next time you drink your hot tea.”

The old man returned with a rib about shaking in his boots.
With me still snuggled in his shirt pocket, Prince Drew returned to his cabin after dinner. He held a long finger at the mouth of his pocket, which I used to climb out, leaving behind the unfinished crumbs of my pilfered supper. He placed me on the bed and then sat down beside; the soft surface dimpled under him and I had to stop myself from rolling down the slope his weight created.

“I didn’t see or hear the twins anywhere,” he confessed. “But we’ll try again tomorrow.”

“We’ll find them eventually. I trust you,” I said. Then I couldn’t resist. “Prince Teapot.”

He groaned dramatically and flopped backwards onto the bed, sending me flying a short way into the air.

Grinning, I said, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. As long as you find me a place to sleep. If I took a corner of the bed, you’d probably roll over and kill me.”

Prince Drew fashioned a little bed for me inside the wooden lid of a tea box; he filled it with little folds of fabric, which he cut from his own sheets with a short blade. Normally, I would have felt nervous staying in the same room as the prince, but for the first time my size was a source of tranquility. I easily fell asleep wrapped in the fragrant spice of citrus peel and the summery scents of rose hip and hibiscus that had soaked up into the soft wood of the tea box.

The next several days were not so interesting as the first, especially because I spent them cramped in an awkward ball. I began to feel claustrophobic whenever Prince Drew would scoop me into his pocket, so he suggested a climb up to the crow’s nest so we could have a look at the sprawling ocean. Unfortunately, the lookout Mundy was
aloft and began chatting with the Prince. He was much too attentive for me to risk popping out of his pocket for a look around. But then Mundy said quite suddenly, “You know, your little friend can come out if he wants to.”

Prince Drew took a sharp but silent inhale, billowing his chest out into me. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s no use trying to hide it from me. I can see the Auras of Gifts and I’ve seen two on you since last evening. But don’t concern yourself, I won’t tell anyone.”

Prince Drew hesitated but I poked him in the chest.

“Grace, are you-”

With the lip of his pocket in my fist I pulled myself up until I was hanging by my underarms on the front of his shirt with two surprised men looking down at me.

Mundy’s thin brown eyebrows quirked up. “It’s a girl.”

“Yes, she is,” Drew spoke down at me.

“Nice to meet you.” I saluted him.

He followed suit while staring at me up close with big brown eyes. The tip of his nose was rather wide for the long narrow bridge and his jaw was very smooth and notably hairless after several days at sea with a troop of unshaven men. Even the prince had some blonde fuzz on his chin.

“How’d she get this small? Is that her Gift?”

“No, it’s not her Gift, but… someone else’s. It’s a long story.” Prince Drew sighed.

“Are you sure it’s not bad luck, bringing a woman aboard? She might bring a storm upon us,” Mundy whispered.
“Of course not. And even if she did, my steam can easily handle any bad weather we might encounter.”

“Hello. Just because I’m small doesn’t mean you can speak like I’m not here.”

“Apologies,” said Prince Drew.

“Sorry,” Mundy followed.

“So what do the auras look like?” I asked.

Mundy tapped his chin with his finger. “Well, they’re all different in color, brightness, and size. And those three mean different things with every Gift. Your Highness’s aura is a small and bright silvery grey – I think it’s the dense center of the steam you create. But you little lady, yours is big and loose, and spread out like a glowing yellow net.”

I could almost see it in my mind – a golden web, growing thinner and finer as it stretched out from the thick ropes gathered in my hands that I could also feel flowing warm through my veins with my life’s blood.

“You mind telling me what your Gift is? I’m curious.”

I smiled, more a baring of teeth. “I’m the beast master.”

The Queen Denissa was bringing the prince, his guard battalion, and something more to the front. The ship would be making a trading stop to purchase superior weapons. The city Lonagas sat on the border between Tsybrunia and Anju. While the Anjuvian queen hadn’t agreed to ally her soldiers with us, she had agreed to trade arms with us. Her land held the best ore for unbreakable sword metal and their craftsmen made the finest bows and arrows in the world.
However, Lonagas was where I would say goodbye to the *Queen Denissa* and Prince Drew before they continued on their way to Farkady, one of the border towns. In Lonagas, I would meet with a partner and board an Anjuvian passenger ship. Since it belonged to a neutral country, Molthovans couldn’t attack it without the risk of turning Anju against them. One of the stops would take us to Molthova, far behind the field of battle. I was beginning to grow concerned about my mission. Our final destination was Quelcur, the capital of Molthova, where we needed to locate one of our spies deep under cover who was unable to leave or send word. The way things were, I would be nothing but a liability to my partner – a monkey on his back as he trekked through the heart of the enemy city.

The last night of my part of the voyage, I dreamed we were sailing through an underground city, passing through large arches built directly into the buildings. There were huge sea creatures swimming around us, occasionally coming so close I could see a big black fish eye single me out for a long ominous stare. Then a fish with dozens of whirling fins darted out and I was too small to stop it before it snapped up the prince standing beside me and swallowed him whole.

I woke up and saw that the porthole was still dark. My stomach was abnormally uneasy about the rocking waves; it felt like my food from last night was walking nervous circles in my stomach. I needed some fresh air.

My sweetly perfumed little bunk had been placed on the nightstand with a long stick, more a plank to me, as a makeshift ramp, which I climbed down. The door to the cabin now had a string tied around the handle that dangled to the floor. I grabbed a firm hold on the rope as high as I could reach and jumped up, letting my body weight pull the
handle down, like a bell-ringer. I ended in a deep crouch and from there I rappelled a step backwards on the floor, swinging the door open just a crack. Standing, I released the string and the handle sprang back with a dull reverberating twang.

I slipped out through the small space into the chilly night air. Only a few stars were visible winking from between the sails and clouds. Slinking along the wall, I came to the stairs that led to the helm. The risers of the stairs were about chest high and I went about the arduous task of hauling myself up. I wanted a place where I could see what the ship was resting on and not just the sky. I wanted to see the ocean. After struggling up the wooden stairs, surprisingly clean for the worn smoothness created by hundreds of shoes, I slunk along the sturdy wooden fencing that would keep the sailors from flying off of the upper deck if the ship were to hit a particularly malicious wave. Not that it would do much to help me. The spaces between posts were easily two of my body lengths. I reached a spot more towards mid-ship and sat, dangling my feet over the edge. In anticipation of the occasional fitful wave, I leaned into the square post beside me and my fingers played along the vast grooves in the wood. The ocean was as black as the sky. The only reason I could discern the horizon was because the clouds swept like grey dust across the sky and the inky water bore no specks of starlight.

There were two men on watch, speaking to each other in low tones. Above them, a burning oil lamp hung on the mizzenmast casting yellow light and black shadows on their faces. One sat by the wheel on a three-legged stool while the other stood near the ship’s rail smoking a cigar.

“There’s another one. He just swam right under the starboard flank.” The sailor gestured lazily over the rail, the red circle of his lit cigar drawing lines in the air.
“You’re yanking my chain, aren’t you?” asked the other.

Still staring out and down into the ocean, he answered, “No, I swear to you, I’ve never seen so many dolphins and whales on a single voyage before, let alone a single night.”

“They have to be attracted to something in these waters but why would it be this ship?”

“Beats me.”

I snorted lightly under my breath. I hadn’t known that I could attract animals from such a vast area. And apparently shrinking did not impede the strength of my Gift at all. The sea creatures must have been caught in my golden net; I pictured it glowing like a beacon through the dark waters. I could feel them, several large presences grouped around the starboard bow of the ship and many smaller ones dotted the entire area. I could feel them feeling me, almost like they were reaching out to brush me with watery tentacles of thought. It was eerily reminiscent of the dream where I could see my reflection in their curious eyes. Maybe I had unconsciously drawn them here in my uneasy sleep.

The two sailors had been silent for while. The man at the helm tilted back precariously onto two legs of his stool, the third taunting the thin air. After a minute of trying to keep the wobbly position, he let it clunk back down against the deck.

“Are you nervous about fighting on the Molthovan front?” he asked while looking forward stonily.

A wispy puff of smoke issued slowly from the other man’s nostrils. “No. Why?”
“Well, it’s their Gifts. Supposedly there’s someone made of stone that can cause earthquakes. And another one can grow sharp bones out of his skin like body armor made of razor swords. Those are just a few, but there’ll be an entire army with who knows how many Gifts. Against ours. All of the most powerful and most dangerous Gifts will be right there, pitted against each other. We have some pretty strong Gifts on our side, like the prince’s steam. But who knows what kind of Gift might tip the scales? Did you hear that the Molthovan King is only fifteen, but he looks like he’s forty?”

“Yes, every time he uses his Gift to age someone else, he ages himself.”

“Even though he’s the enemy, I feel bad for the guy. He can only use his Gift sparingly lest he endanger his own life.”

“Don’t feel too sympathetic. He’s still dangerous. The way I heard it, he only ages one year for about every ten he takes from someone else. If he’s lost twenty-five years, that’s two hundred and fifty years taken from others. Do you know how many lives he could have ended with two hundred and fifty years?”

The man took a drag from his cigar and attempted to blow smoke rings, but just issued an amorphous cloud slightly more circular than before. “It’s terrifying to think.”

I watched the smoke as it passed over the railing and then the wind from the sails scattered it behind us. While my size made it difficult to get around, it had its advantages – I was able to listen to a conversation like this and pass unnoticed. But I wished I could tell them that our side had gained knowledge of the enemy’s Gifts through my father’s sacrifice and had prepared strategies. It confirmed to me that what I had done – struggling to find McDougary, acting as a conduit for messages from his people – had all
been worthwhile. It gave me confidence that embarking on this journey would be worthwhile as well. It was strange that someone’s worries would comfort me.

After staring at the distant horizon for a while my stomach settled down. I had acquired my sea legs quickly during the first hours awaiting Prince Drew that first day, but my sea stomach came and went. Seeing the bobbing waves and matching my sight to the bobbing in my stomach helped a good deal.

I climbed back down the colossal stairs by sitting on each ledge and slipping down, like a fat dewdrop sliding down a succession of leaves. Then I rounded back around to the door of Prince Drew’s cabin room, only to find it shut. I stood before it dumbfounded. The rolling of the waves must have tipped it closed.

There came another clunk from the helm – the stool slamming back to its standing position. Then low conversation followed by booted steps descending the stairs. A change in the watch? With my pulse thumping, I scampered into the triangular area under the stairs and backed as far into the corner as I could. Overhead, I watched a pair of feet come down the last few steps and their owner strolled across deck. It was the young sailor who despaired of surmounting our enemies’ Gifts. He glanced out over the unsettled waters before he ducked into the door opposite Prince Drew’s, heading below deck to the living quarters.

The corner smelled like wet wood and ale, as though someone had spilled on the stairs but only cleaned up the liquid that dripped below, leaving the undersides of the stairs to ferment. I would need to hide away here until Prince Drew woke up and opened the door. There were still a few hours before sunrise. The area was big and the corner dark, but come morning, the sun would shine in.
I sat there like an unwanted bug, waiting to scurry back into my hole, until I noticed something along the wall, closer to the base of the stairs. It was more shadowy than it should have been, as though there were a black spot in the wood. For one second, I thought it was a big bulky spider and my heart skipped. Then I remembered that size didn’t matter to my Gift at all. After tiptoeing in for a closer look, I saw it was a hole in the planking underneath the first step and behind it a tunnel space between the planks for the rail and the planks for the hull. The edges looked as though they had been chewed and sculpted by rats. Poking my head in, I could see it was littered with droppings and bits of wood. However, I also found a coil of rope and a hand mirror, which most certainly did not belong to rats. Who else would conceivably leave this small-scale evidence behind but the twins? I went down on my hands and knees and crawled into the little tunnel.

Chapter Eight – Farewell, Prince

There was very little light and I crawled forward mostly by feel. There were a couple of other holes that branched into other walls, but I ignored them and stayed straight on course. I crawled long enough that I wondered I didn’t crawl right out of the ship. It smelled of bad vinegar, like how I imagined rat breath would smell after it ate a dropping or two. After many minutes, I came to an outlet where I could stand. By then my eyes had adjusted to the dark and I realized I’d found the twins’ hiding place, inside the prow of the ship. It looked like a little log cabin, but the walls were actually the hollow wooden beaky nose of the Queen Denissa. Pilfered, shrunken hammocks were
strung from fist-size nails in the wood, with a table in between. I took a seat in the hammock to wait, swinging gently with the rocking of the waves.

I heard their footsteps scuffling half a minute before they entered from the little tunnel on the opposite side. They were exactly my size. The first twin carried a little flickering candle and a bottle of amber liquid, and the second carried a shrunken sausage link. Their hair shone with blonde hues next to the single flame. The dim firelight washed over my face and the twin who held it noticed me reclining there. He elbowed his brother, who glanced up to me and grinned. Since the first twin had a normal nose, I was expecting the second to have the beak, but their noses were the same narrow snub – they were truly identical now. That same twin that shrank me must have shrunk his own nose.

He gave a little flourish with the sausage and said, “Look who it is.”

The other twin came over and placed the candle on the table beside me. “How are you, my dear lady?”

I leaned forward in the hammock. “Don’t dear lady me, after what you did. As if shrinking me wasn’t enough, you left me completely in the dark. Would it have killed you to tell me what you were doing?”

From a drawer on the table, he pulled out a cork screw and began twisting it into the bottle. “Of course not, but that would’ve defeated the purpose of the test.”

“Test? I knew it!”

“More like an assurance – to see how you would handle an unexpected situation.” Then he went to work wiggling the screw back and forth. “We listened around and it sounds like you managed to remain undiscovered. And now, you’ve even found us. I’d
say you passed.” Pop! The cork flew off the bottle and tapped against the far wall. He held out the open container and said, “Cider?”

The crisp fruity odor wafted into my nose, washing away the memory of rat. “I’m still mad that you didn’t even tell me who you were.”

“We also have sausage.” The other twin waved his hand over the link and it doubled in size, making enough food for three.

I could tell they were attempting to win back my good favor. My treacherous stomach suddenly felt insufferably empty. “Oh, very well. But first things first, Avery and Alexander. Which one of you is which?”

The twin with the sausage answered. “Well, no one but our mother and sister can tell us apart by looks, but Alex does the shrinking,” he pointed to his brother and then to himself, “and I do the enlargements.”

“So the big nose – why do that?”

“We do that so people can tell us apart. But at other times, it’s to ensure that we’re unrecognizable to strangers,” Alex said.

I raised my eyebrows. “I see.” They probably took turns to make people think they had them straight when they were switched. I knew I would. So I took note not to trust that in the future until I saw them use their Gifts. Gifts don’t lie.

Alex pulled two glasses from the same drawer and poured the fizzing cider. He offered a glass to me. Then the twins hopped on the other hammock, which was not an easy feat. They synchronized simply by watching each other. Even though we were around the same age, they seemed so much more capable.
“Wouldn’t it have been more challenging for me to convince the guard to allow me on board and then hide by myself?” I asked. “Why did I need to be shrunk? It was certainly startling, but it ended up helping.”

“We just wanted to give you a small challenge. It didn’t need to be impossible,” Avery answered. I didn’t think he even realized that he and his brother had done the impossible themselves. It reminded me somewhat of McDougary – calmly accomplishing what he said I couldn’t. Did everyone have low expectations of me?

“It was also because women aren’t generally allowed on board naval ships,” Alex added.

“Well, that’s hardly fair,” I muttered.

“It’s for your own safety. The men can be very superstitious.” Alex pushed off my hammock with his foot, making both of us swing.

I remembered Mundy from the crow’s nest, worrying about the storms I might bring down upon us. But if I were stationed high up in the crow’s nest, I might worry about storms uncommonly much. “But not you two?”

“On the contrary, we’re very superstitious.” Avery nodded sagely, like it was a virtue.

“Just the other night, we saw a ghost in the prince’s room, floating over his face while he slept.” Alex wiggled his fingers at me, alternately looming and drawing back with the swinging hammock.

Avery leaned forward and said, “It looked like it was trying to suck his soul out. Maybe it was a previous captain who died in a battle with pirates and now, he’s bitter that
he lost and grows angry at anyone in the realm of the living who intrudes on his old room.”

A thrill ran through my limbs. There had always been rumors of Gifts that appear even after death – of ghosts, immortality, reincarnation. It is said that there is still a mobile tree that still protects the tomb of King Tsybrus. “What did it look like?”

Avery tapped his chin and said, “It was a white nebulous cloud, but more misty than solid.”

I covered my mouth and tried not to spit out my sip of cider by giggling. “That wasn’t a ghost.”

“No? What was it then?” Alex asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It was steam. Sometimes, Prince Drew uses his Gift when he’s dreaming,” I explained.

“No way,” Alex objected. “It was definitely an old captain who died horribly at sea.”

Avery started chuckling. “Was he dreaming of a ghost?”

I shook my head. “What were you doing in there in the first place?”

“Just checking on things,” Avery said.

“You mean me.”

Avery put down his cider. “Well, yes. But also to make sure that Prince Drew’s belongings were undisturbed. We don’t want any whistle-blowers getting their hands on his letters.”

“Doesn’t it ever feel a little strange, spying on our own side?”
“We have spies in the enemy military. Who’s to say that they don’t have spies in ours? We have to watch our side almost as much as we watch theirs,” Alex said.

The twins then told me that when we landed in Lonagas tomorrow morning, we would need to leave without anyone’s knowledge, including the prince. However, after a short plea, the twins showed me to his cabin so that I could at least leave a note. They only agreed because I also needed to fetch my travel bag. Even though the note was brief, it took a while to write because I was using a quill as thick as my arm and had to make every letter bigger than my own feet so it would be legible to him. It read:

Dear Teapot,

Good luck on the front.

Pockets

I didn’t want other people to be able to understand the names, just Prince Drew, because maybe the familiarity would help make up for not saying goodbye. I wanted to write more, but even that much was an effort. And it was for everyone’s good that I didn’t leave details in writing. I realized that I had just done the same thing as Papa – leaving a note that would never be enough.

After leaving the piece of paper on the floor, the twins and I hid in a wooden crate full of spare uniform shirts. They knew it would be temporarily unloaded from the hold to make room for the weapons and it was much more comfortable for our limbs and our noses than riding in the crate of spare boots. Come morning when we docked in Lonagas, we allowed ourselves to be unloaded onto the pier where it was simple to sneak away from among the dozens of crates, laid out in piles.
The twins resumed their original sizes and carried me into the town riding inside Avery’s shirt collar. We crossed the border into Anju at the midline of the city and the buildings went from largely brick houses to painted wooden homes of orange, burgundy, or yellow. The men and children wore baggy pants that looked as though they were made from skirts gathered and sewn together in between the legs. The women wore dresses that only crossed over one shoulder and were so narrow through the knees that they could never take a running step. The men wore turbans and some of the young women wore scarves covering their hair. Where Tsybrunian clothing had intricate stitching designs and countless types of cloth and fashions of seam to flare there or slim here, the simple Anjuvian style made up for it in colors and little pieces of metal sewn in for accessorizing. Their darker skin, the color of cinnamon, was complemented by the vibrant dyes of indigo, deep green, and wine red.

We entered the alley behind my destination, the Palm Shade Inn, where Avery returned both my bag and me to original size. The sensation of shooting up to approximately ten times my height had given me a head rush and I had to take a step backwards to steady myself as my balance readjusted.

“Is everything the proper size? I’d hate to leave you disproportioned,” Avery said.

I balked for a second, but then I took stock of myself. “Stop trying to scare me and scoot.”

Avery gave a cluck of disappointment but Alex saluted me with a smile and said, “Told you,” to his brother. Then he extended his arm and their limbs began to shorten until they had shrunk to the size of children. Their bodies were proportional to their adolescent appearance, even their faces were smaller. With a last impish wave, they
scampered off the way we came, back towards the *Queen Denissa* like hyper ten-year-olds who are up to no good. I rolled my eyes. It suited them.

I grasped my travel bag with both hands in front of me and I stared for a few minutes at the Palm Shade Inn sign with precise black painted letters on a brown palm branch that had been neatly pressed and dried. I was struck by the fact that, once more, I had no idea who I would be meeting. Although I was involved, I still felt somehow excluded.

I entered a cozy pub, which served as the first floor. There were a few patrons seated against the far wall and eating a midday meal. Weaving through the chairs, I went to the bar and asked the proprietor for a room. She was an older woman with a rail thin body. Her extremely long black hair was braided loosely and tossed behind her bony bare shoulder. She glanced up from kneading dough into perfect little circles on the counter. She took in my pale face and hair.

“Ah, your husband already arrived yesterday morning. He told me to expect you.” Her voice was accented, putting slight emphasis on the ‘t’ and ‘d’ sounds and cutting the vowels short.

My head cocked to the right, halfway to shaking my head. “You must be mistaken,” I told her.

She rubbed her nose, leaving a smidgen of flour. “Well, when I say he told me, I mean he wrote it down. Your husband is”—she made a swift motion across her throat—“the mute one, isn’t he?”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “Yes, of course. That’s him.” I prayed that she read the discomfort in my voice as embarrassment and maybe shame rather than confusion.
She nodded. “He wrote down what you looked like.” She began wiping her hands on a wet rag. “I’ll take you to the room.”

“No, that’s all right. You don’t need to stop what you’re doing. You can just tell me where it is.”

With her eyes cast down, she gave a half smile. “That’s very sweet of you,” she said, as though she wasn’t sure if I was being kind or condescending. Was it because I was a foreigner? Before I could judge, she turned and pointed to the left. “Just go to the hall around the corner. It’s the second to last door.”

“Thank you.”

I padded down the long narrow rug that lay down the hallway and knocked on the door. There was only one person who could be waiting for me. The knob turned and the door opened to reveal the tall figure of Keenan McDougary. His dark hair looked soft as it flopped with casual grace into his hazel eyes, topped by thick elegantly arching eyebrows. He was wearing green pants the color of shaded moss along with a mustard yellow vest over a white shirt in the traditional dress of Anju. He pulled me in by the arm and closed the door firmly behind me before he spoke.

“Grace, how nice to see you.” His lips widened into a smile. “I was starting to worry you wouldn’t arrive in time.”

I gave the space a once over. There was the bed covered in a russet mantle and a set of table and chairs. Then I responded, “Yes, I missed you too.” I placed my travel bag on the floor. “Darling husband.”

At the sound of my sardonic tone, he took one look at my face with my raised eyebrows. “Ah,” he said. He retreated into the room and took a seat next to black trunk
lying on the bed. He crossed his arms and stared at me with a resigned expression as though he expected me to start arguing. I didn’t disappoint him.

“Why didn’t you warn me about anything? This? The twins?” I threw my hands in the air. “You know, a mute is quite a fitting cover for you.”

“You already know the answer concerning the twins. And yes, it is.”

“Fine. But couldn’t you have at least told me that you would be here?”

“Everything was shifting so quickly, I wasn’t sure who it would be when I spoke with you. Besides you didn’t seem to mind the lack of information at the time.”

“It’s a little bit different in practice than it is in conversation. But wait, if you didn’t know at the time, you must have departed after I did. So how in the world did you beat me here?” I gesticulated at the four walls, indicating the Palm Shade Inn and Lonagas as a whole.

He smoothed out the cuff of his shirt. “I have other means of travel at my disposal.”

“Really? Is that a huge secret as well?”

He shrugged. “I suppose not.”

I knew that McDougary always needed prompting before answering a question, so I didn’t wait for a long silence to pass before I asked, “What is it?”

“Have you ever heard of seven-league boots?”

My neck straightened in surprise. The seven-league boots were created one hundred years ago by a man named Drake who appeared in the histories throughout the world as a mysterious merchant. It made sense for a man who could travel halfway around the globe by taking a short walk. Supposedly, he made five pairs, but there were
only two known at the time of his death, which was a century past. “I thought they were all lost.”

“They weren’t.”

“I bet those come in handy.” I bit my lip. “Can I see them?”

McDougary sighed and then dug them out of his trunk and handed them over. They were unremarkable, other than the fact that they were worn to dilapidation by use and age. The soles were flapping and the laces were frayed. They were scuffed, dirty, and appeared to have chew marks. They looked just like Papa’s old working boots, large enough that I could probably slip them on over my shoes but only tall enough to cover ankle. I returned them to McDougary’s hands and as he folded them back in his trunk, I felt pacified by seeing something so rare and I wondered if that had been his intention.

McDougary sat still for a short moment, to make sure I was finished with my tirade before he spoke, “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, we’re pretending to be a married couple. And the next time we step out of this room, we’ll be masquerading as Anjuvians as well. The ship taking us on our honeymoon, the Osprey’s Catch, sets sail this afternoon.”

There was a slight flutter of nervousness in my stomach at the word honeymoon, but he was much too young to be my father and we didn’t look enough alike to be siblings. And I was too young for us to be anything other than newlyweds. Almost any other pretend pairing would be implausible or improper, given our relatively small age difference.

“Now before we go, I have some things for you.” He pulled a vial out of a small drawstring bag.
At first, I thought the glass was dark brown but then I realized that it was the runny liquid inside clinging to the sides.

“Rub this all over your skin, and I mean everywhere.”

I took it from him with two fingers and held it up to the lamp light, which glowed amber through the browned glass. Since I’d never tanned very well, I was curious to see what I’d look like with such dark skin.

Next McDougary held up three simple hairpins. One in metallic black, one in creamy brown, and one in rust red. “These pins change your hair color.”

I took them in my palm and said, “I’ve seen these in the market.”

“Yes. Wear the black one for as long as we’re pretending to be Anjuvian.”

“I will wear it in my sleep.”

“Good. And put these on.” He handed me a soft dress of midnight blue.

I stepped into the washroom with the pieces of my disguise and proceeded to put them together. The oily substance from the vial smelled faintly of herbs. A little bit went a long way, but it still felt like I had taken a bath in it by the time I had covered my entire body. I took my hair down from the curled twist and braided it instead. The shiny black pin slid into my pale blonde hair. The dress went on next and even though only one shoulder was uncovered, I felt strangely naked. The garment was held up by one strap only about two fingers wide on my right shoulder. Small circles of silver dotted the neck hem. I looked in the mirror I was startled at the stranger with dark mysterious face and the raven locks so black they shimmered with blue highlights. The woman in the reflection was an exotic beauty with the blue of her hair and dress bringing out the rich blue of her eyes. I emerged taking small steps in the narrow sheath of the fabric.
McDougary saw my movement out of the corner of his eye and straightened up to look me up and down.

“I look all right?” I smoothed my hair with my hands.

McDougary followed my hand with his eyes. “Quite. Your blue eyes are even more striking with black hair. It’s unfortunate we can’t change those as well.”

I blinked at the backhanded compliment. “What about you? Are you going to use the stain?”

“I’m about to.” He strolled into the washroom for his turn to primp.

While waiting, I ran my hands absentmindedly down my dress and looked around the room. There was a spotted animal skin on the floor, its glossy fur arranged beside the bed as a foot rug. I frowned and made a note to myself not to walk over there. On the table was a sunflower in a tall vase, a glass of water, and a plate of shaved ham sandwiched with thick wheat bread, cut in two. Animal furs bothered me much more than eating animal meat because they still resembled the living form.

It was only a minute or two before McDougary came back out. His skin was even darker than mine, but it worked especially well because of his eyelashes like black lace. He’d also donned a simple white turban and his black hair escaped in wisps.

“Do I need a scarf for my hair too?”

“No, only unmarried women cover their hair here.”

Once I ventured outside in this guise, I would be directly advertising that I was married. To a man. My cheeks grew hot and I turned my face down. Somewhat desperate, I gestured to the plate of food. “What’s this?”
He came over to the table. “This is my goodbye to normal cooking. I don’t particularly like Anjuvian food. Too spicy.” He sat down on one of the small wicker chairs and picked up one of the stacks of ham and bread. Sliding the plate towards me with his pinky, he said, “Care for the other half?”

He didn’t look at me or the remaining sandwich so I didn’t think he was offering just to be polite. I took the seat opposite and said, “Thank you.” The meat was seasoned perfectly and there was a humble spread of a sweet creamy sauce on the bread that balanced the taste out.

It was our first time eating together. While I chewed, I wondered if he was the type to be silent while he ate or if he liked conversation.

I finished before him, as he appeared to be savoring the meal. Eventually, I broke the silence. “So, a mute. Since writing lies is no problem for you, it works. But are you going to continue with the silent role?” I asked.

He chewed and swallowed. “No, I always try to bring someone who can lie for me rather than traveling alone because it’s too easy to forget my silence. And if I were caught in that lie, it would likely be my last. They would then ask me questions that I would not be able to answer.”

“Good grief, I’d be too afraid to travel at all. Isn’t that what your web of spies is for?”

“I would have sent someone else, but there’s some information we require which is simplest for me to obtain. And you are new to this and in need of guidance. I thought our needs matched. But that means that the burden of acting like an Anjuvian couple
falls largely on you. I need you to take the lead.” He popped his last bite in his mouth and followed it with a swig of water.

“Take the lead?” I repeated and raised my eyebrows.

“I’ll tell you what needs to be done, you just have to interact with anyone we meet in a manner that encourages them to speak to me as little as possible.”

“All right.” With his Gift, a person only couldn’t lie when directly addressing him. It had taken me a while to realize that someone in his presence could lie, even standing next to him, if they were speaking to someone else. Which was why this could work.

He continued, “Keep in mind that it’s easiest to work with what you have. And if you ever run into someone who suspects you, act naïve.”

I frowned. Hopefully, he hadn’t meant for those two comments to go together, but with someone who can’t lie, you never know.

“One last thing, we should use our first names. From here on, call me Keenan.”

Chapter 9 – Taking Up the Mantle

At the lone dock sat a beautiful caravel with triangular sails like soft white veils over the sleek wooden body. This boat’s name was in written in curly white paint, the Osprey’s Catch. It was about half the size of the Queen Denissa, but the wooden hull appeared to be newer.

That morning, we had gathered our things and left the inn. Since McDougary had already paid for the room, we simply left without saying farewell to the owner. It was quite rude.
And now here we were, on the eve of our ‘honeymoon.’ McDougary gave a slight bow and indicated that I walk down the high and narrow wooden planking first. I understood that here, my role came in. Bossiness would largely explain his silence. I imagined how Clarice walked – poised but haughty. I took large quick steps and raised my head. As we neared the area where the ship was moored by three colossal ropes, a man hopped off the boat to greet us. He was a tall man with sinewy muscles and long limbs, like a string bean in his turban and robes. He wore the formal Anjuvian robes from neck to ankle with narrow sleeves rather than the usual loose billowy ones. His sideburns and temples were lined with silver.

“Good afternoon.” His head bobbed. “I’m—”

Before he could finish, I shoved my travel bag into his chest and brushed my hair over my shoulder with one hand. “My name is Grace, and this is my husband, Keenan.” I turned my head sideways without looking all the way back at him. I had almost forgotten to use his first name and the syllables felt strange in my mouth, but I managed to sound natural. “Keenan, give the man your trunk,” I ordered.

With surprised eyebrows nearly touching his hairline, the man said, “I’m sure someone will be on deck shortly to take your bags.” He tried to hand my bag back.

I pushed it back. “They’re not heavy. I know a man of your stature can manage.”

He blinked at the implied challenge and I saw the losing battle in his head – if he still refused, he’d look weak. His fingers squeezed around the edges of my bag. “It’s just, this is my boat. I’m Captain Cymbryl.”

“Oh. Then thank you, Captain, for being so accommodating.” I waved at McDougary to pass his trunk.
After a barely noticeable stunned pause, he moved to comply and Captain Cymbryl adjusted my bag to hold it by the handle so he could take McDougary’s. I didn’t shift out of their way, but made them awkwardly exchange the trunk around me on the narrow strip of dock. I wore an impatient expression with my eyes and nose upturned. Once Captain Cymbryl had both cases firmly in hand and made to transfer them to the boat, I put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“Tell me, what time is supper?”

“Seven o’clock,” he replied.

“And what time is cast off?”

Faltering a bit, Captain Cymbryl said, “I regret to inform you that an important guest of mine is late and will be arriving tomorrow morning. Departure has been delayed until then.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s my niece and her new husband. I can’t leave without them.” His voice lowered and he said, “My sister would kill me.”

“Well, I refuse to pay for—”

“Of course, today’s room and board is complimentary,” he said hurriedly.

“I suppose that’s acceptable then. Are the rest of the passengers aboard yet?” I asked, waving my hands in the air.

Captain Cymbryl nodded. “Yes, three other couples.”

“At least that’s something.” Cymbryl’s turn towards congeniality made me feel daring. I leaned in closer to him. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but this man is duller than a turnip.”
Cymbryl looked behind me and whispered, “He can hear us, you know.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see McDougary’s eyes downcast. “Oh yes, but you see? Still he says nothing. Doesn’t know how to respond.” I shook my head. “I wish I’d known he was no more than a pretty face before I married him. But at least he’s not the controlling type. He just lets me do whatever I want.” The boat made the smallest of dips as I stepped aboard and the two men followed me quietly.

After the captain lead us to our room and left us alone, McDougary turned to me. “Nice performance,” he said wryly.

“Thank you. I quite enjoyed myself.”

“No more than a pretty face, am I?”

Ignoring him, I said, “You know, McDougary, you should give me some money.” I had made a snap decision to switch back to calling him McDougary. When there was no one around to fool, we were just superior and subordinate and there was no reason to call him Keenan. Calling him McDougary would also quell my nerves when we were alone.

If he noticed, he let it go without comment. “Money for what?”

“Preemptive measures. I should pay for everything. It makes more sense for my character and people will speak with you less often.”

He pulled a small purse from the deep pockets of his pants and handed it to me with a clink of coins. “Yes, your character is quite the imperious miss.”

“Thank you.” Then I turned and stared at the single bed wide enough for two, but still singular.

McDougary noticed the direction of my gaze. “Don’t worry. I can assure you that I won’t act on any improper thoughts.”
He said he wouldn’t *act* on any improper thoughts because he couldn’t deny that he *had* them. I flushed to the roots of my hair.

At dinner, we shared a table with two other honeymooners. The woman was named Bibi and her husband was Shen. Bibi had a wasp figure that would have been voluptuous on a taller woman, but with her height looked small and adorable. Shen was bordering on pudgy and my mind immediately pictured a honey bear. When the food was served, Shen helped himself first from the large dish placed in the center of our table. It was filled with small grains topped in a meat sauce with chopped onions, along with flat breads for dipping. Lastly, there was a side bowl of a bright red sauce, which Bibi and Shen added liberally to their plates. From the scent of it, I knew that it was flavored with spicy Anjuvian peppers. Bibi passed it to McDougary, but I took it out of his hands and started spooning it onto my plate.

Our dinner companions looked quizzical, so I said, “Keenan prefers his food bland. I’ve asked him time and again, what kind of Anjuvian doesn’t like his food spicy?”

Shen chuckled and tucked in. I took a bite from my own plate. The flavor was good – zesty and meaty. There was something similar to the taste of tomatoes, but stronger. Heat flooded over my tongue, leaving it tingling. While it was hot, I didn’t understand why McDougary hated it so much. Then I swallowed. The spice hit my throat like a burning fist and I began coughing. It felt like the sauce had lodged in my airway and begun to eat away at my throat. I raked in air and grabbed for my glass, gulping water in deep. It washed away most of the sensation, leaving my throat feeling scratchy.
McDougary’s hand was on my back, rubbing small circles. With my eyes watering, I looked up at the concerned eyes all around me.

“Just went down the wrong pipe, is all,” I rasped in explanation.

I caught a knowing look on McDougary’s face as he refilled my water glass, but I ignored it and turned back to my plate. Suddenly the innocent red sauce didn’t look so inviting, especially because there wasn’t a bite on my plate without it. After my display of bravado, I couldn’t do anything about it though. I braced myself and took a second bite. The flavor wasn’t as smooth but this time I was prepared for the swallowing bit and it wasn’t so bad. The trick was to swallow it quickly. When the spicy built up too much and began to burn my tongue, eating the bread helped soothe it until I could continue. I began to eat normally again and joined in the conversation.

“What do you think of this delay?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter to me, since we’re together,” Bibi said, briefly taking Shen’s hand.

“Oh. How long have you been married?”

She put her hands to her cheeks. “Five days. I still can’t believe it myself.”

I forced myself to keep a pleasant expression instead of rolling my eyes. I was glad that displaying marital affection was generally considered tasteless because I knew I could never act like that.

Bibi talked with her fork, with brisk movements that made me concerned for the long-term future of her husband’s eyeballs. She had just finished a story, most of which I had missed because I was watching the fork, before she asked me, “So how long ago was your wedding?”
“Oh, when was it? Two months ago?” I made sure that McDougary heard my random answer so he could keep our story straight. Even if he wouldn’t say anything to the contrary, he could still betray us with a puzzled expression at an inopportune moment.

“And you waited this long to go on your honeymoon?”

“Well, there were family circumstances. You know how it is.”

“Oh yes, I remember my sister didn’t take her honeymoon at all because her husband’s leg was severed in a duel.”

I wrinkled my nose while she wasn’t looking and then offered a weak smile of sympathy when she was.

Shen had finished his first serving and was dishing himself a second. In the breathing break, he asked McDougary. “You are both Anjuvian, yet your accents are Tsybrunian. Why is that?”

McDougary opened his mouth to respond but then hesitated.

I quickly intruded. “We were both raised in Lonagas, you see, and little did we know that we shared the same Tsybrunian tutor. I always loved to mimic him after lessons and eventually that’s what became more natural to me. Keenan, on the other hand, spent more time with that tutor than he did his own parents, and well, you see what that did to him.”

Bibi laughed. “I didn’t know that really happened.”

“I know, hard to believe. But listen, I’ve been wondering, do either of you have Gifts?” I asked, hastily changing the subject.

Bibi waved her fork in an arc. “No, we both have relatives who do, but not us. You two?”
“Same, actually. What do you know?” I said.

McDougary excused himself first, and I followed soon after. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting when I arrived back at our room. I didn’t know if he would be in the bed or if he would be waiting to talk to me about the things I had said at dinner. I hadn’t expected the room to be empty. Briefly I considered waiting for him to return, but instead I quickly made him a little pallet on the floor with one of the pillows and a couple of the blankets. I climbed into bed and decided to pretend to be asleep when he returned so he wouldn’t want to disturb me and just take the floor.

When I awoke the next morning, however, the paltry setting of blankets was smooth and untouched. I didn’t think he could be upset with me about anything. Had something happened? Worriedly, I washed up and got dressed. I barely remembered to touch up the color on my face. The people on this ship weren’t supposed to be dangerous – we were only disguised so no one would be able to talk about the two Tsybrunians entering Molthova. All I could think was that McDougary had let part of the truth slip and someone was holding him until he gave up the rest. Making a mistake wasn’t like him, but then where was he? Nearly convincing myself he’d already been tortured, I went out on deck to look for him. He was sitting in the same place I last saw him, at the dining table with Bibi and Shen and my dread whooshed out of me in a long breath. This time, breakfast lay on the table – fruit, pastries, more of the round grains but fried in butter. When I joined them to eat, I couldn’t ask him where he’d been. He was pretending there wasn’t anything wrong, and I could do nothing but the same until we were alone.

Bibi asked us if we wanted to go with them to the aft of the ship and watch cast off. I agreed because when I’d been aboard the Queen Denissa, I had been trapped
inside. All four of us strolled to the back viewing deck. While the two men stood back a bit, Bibi and I chatted as the captain’s niece finally boarded with about ten pieces of luggage. A cream-colored cat came padding along the railing to rub his chin on my arm. Her paws, ears, and face were dusted with charcoal, her tail was dipped in black, and her eyes were the palest blue. Her collar tag read, ‘First Mate’ and I assumed it was the captain’s cat. Bibi reached to scratch her ear, but she abruptly turned and ran away. Bibi looked so dejected that I called her back and made her sit still so she could pet her. First Mate put her ears down and looked very put out, but she eventually succumbed and began purring. I smiled sadly as I thought of Bastio.

“How did you do that?” Bibi asked.

“I’ve always had a way with animals.”

“I wish I did. They seem to hate me.”

“Sometimes, there’s such a thing as smothering them too much.”

Then the sailors were lifting the ropes from their shipside pegs and letting them drop into the water. A combination of some rowing and a light wind in the unfurled sails carried us gently from the dock. The trail of white froth in the water behind the ship held my gaze. I vaguely noticed that Bibi had fallen silent and my mind floated, mesmerized by the tiny bubbles in our wake.

After the land faded in the distance, the men had long since stopped rowing and the wind had filled the sails to billowing. I decided to go speak with McDougary but I turned and saw Shen standing alone. McDougary had disappeared again. I wasn’t as worried this time. I still checked the dining room, both lower and upper decks but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Ships are isolated places, yet I seemed to keep losing people
on them. I went to lunch, expecting him to at least reappear for food. But I ate alone with Bibi and Shen at our table. I told them that the sea sometimes upset his stomach so he was resting in our cabin. That was the only place I hadn’t searched, and when I was finished I ventured below deck.

Opening the door, I found him lying on the bed, even though it was made-up, on top of the sheets and all. His feet were crossed, his eyes were shut, and his folded hands rose and fell with his chest where they rested. When his face was relaxed in sleep, it made his wide lips look softer and fuller. I stood over him and he must have sensed my gaze because his eyes blinked open, focusing on me.

I leaned over and crooned, “Why, you. You wanted to sleep on the bed without having to share. Tsk, tsk.”

Without moving, he lifted an eyebrow and said, “I thought you would be more comfortable if I didn’t sleep in the same room. I couldn’t find anywhere inconspicuous to sleep elsewhere, so I decided to catch my sleep in naps during the day.”

“So you stayed up all night? Look McDougary, you’re very attentive most of the time, but I think you missed something this time. How long did you think you could go without a proper night’s sleep?”

“I can go a long time without sleep.”

“Not without sacrificing some of your rapid fire intellect when you don’t need to. You need your wits about you.”

He just stared at me.

“Don’t be stubborn, McDougary. I don’t mind sharing a room with you. Look, I bet you were so tired that you didn’t even notice the pallet I made for you on the floor.”
His head flopped over to look. “Oh, I see,” he said neutrally.

Did he think I was distancing myself from him, both with the pallet and my avoidance of his name? I bit my lip, and then offered, “We could take turns.”

The corners of his mouth finally upturned and he said, “No, thank you. What kind of gentleman do you think I am?”

I smiled. There was the McDougary I knew.

“Welcome aboard the Osprey’s Catch. I am Captain Cymbryl. As my guests, I should’ve welcomed you before we set sail, but I know that we were all anxious to be on our way. I apologize for the delay. Many of you know that my niece, Irina, was postponed. A shattered carriage wheel was the culprit. However, she is here now, safe and sound, and I do to plan to make up for lost time.”

He raised his arms in a wide gesture and the breeze began to pick up. A white and grey whirlwind, ironed straight behind the ship by the power of his Gift, blew at us with a strength that made my stomach flip for an instant. The front of the ship tilted down as the streaming wind pushed us forward. A sheet of water twenty feet high flew out from our tail as we picked up speed until the ship sliced through the rolling waves rather than riding them. It was surprisingly smooth. I understood the meaning behind the name Osprey’s Catch now – the ship was like a powerful bird of prey skimming the water’s surface but instead of catching fish, the ship was catching the captain’s wind. Mutters and sounds of appreciation circulated through the passengers.

“Thank you. I hope you all enjoy your meal. But first, I’d like to introduce you to my good friend and tonight’s entertainer. I give you the Color Master!” With a bow,
Captain Cymbryl surrendered the little stage to a man in dark clothing with close-cropped hair and holding a staff with silken white streamers tied to both ends and in the middle.

“Good evening! My name is Viktor and I am the Color Master. It is my Gift and my pleasure to change any item in the world to any color of my choosing. I choose to do so for your entertainment and delight. Now pay attention, ladies and gentlemen, for you might not believe your eyes.”

With the sharp clean bow at his waist, the flames in all the lamps and candles went dim red and then shot to black. There were startled gasps at the darkness and the sounds of uneasy movements. A musician sitting behind the stage with curling wooden pipes began to play mournful notes in a key that evoked images of tall mystical mountains. The Color Master twirled his staff and the streamers leapt after it. As he moved, the long flowing ribbons of cloth began to glow iridescent. With the candles and lamps blacked out, they painted swirling lines and vibrant shapes in yellow, bright green, and electric blue. I nearly forgot there was a man behind the colors and then tried to focus on the shadows to find him, but it was impossible. Like a chameleon, he had blended himself into his background so that he was invisible. I couldn’t see him but the figures he wove floated in the air, telling a story of promising vivid pink turned to violent purple, coming to life. After a final flourish that created a spinning flower, he slammed the ground with his staff for a percussive beat and the lights relit, revealing him once more. Wild applause rang out all around us.

During dinner, both the captain and the Color Master mingled through the dinner crowd. From afar, we saw the Color Master at another table turning tricks with the candle flames, flashing through all colors of the rainbow. I wondered if one of his relatives
created the hairpin I was wearing, since certain bloodlines trended towards thematic patterns among their Gifts.

The captain arrived at our table and asked if we were enjoying ourselves. It was standard small talk for a polite host, but then his eyes fell on McDougary and then flicked to my face.

“I’m glad to see you let your husband out of the dog house,” Captain Cymbryl said to me while he winked at Keenan. At my stupefied expression, he explained, “I saw the poor man wandering around deck late last night.” Then he waved his fingers and moved on.

In the awkward silence, Bibi and Shen concentrated on their plates while I glared at McDougary, who simply continued eating. I knew that he couldn’t have told the captain anything specific, but he had still led him to think however he wanted. Based on Captain Cymbryl’s comment, I guessed that he was a sucker for gossip. I could almost feel him glancing back at our table, looking for my reaction.

The sky was lousy with pinhole stars and the moon was hanging low in the sky. The caps of every little wave reflected the white sliver like thousands of diamonds floating on the surface of the ocean. McDougary and I stood alone on the prow of the ship with the night wind caressing our faces. We had just left the port of the small Anjuvian town Ibemini where we had stayed for two days. While many of the passengers went ashore to shop and eat, we stayed on board in our room where McDougary taught me the cipher. The cipher was basically a substitute alphabet; however, there were a handful of rules for the sets of circumstances dictating that the alphabet morph. I had the
rules memorized but remembering how to apply them was tricky. We had finished practicing for the night and decided to take a walk on deck before going to sleep.

“Your father is the one who taught me the cipher,” he told me.

“You mean you didn’t come up with it?”

“No, one of my predecessors did. And although your father technically reported to me, he actually commanded the foreign spies while I was in charge of domestic spies.”

Pride warmed my cheeks. He was a good father; it didn’t surprise me that was a good leader even far away from home. “So then is this your first real trip abroad as a spy?”

“No. My second. But I used to travel with my parents.”

Even though we’d come out on deck for a stroll, we simply lingered at the prow. Above us the sails were gently ruffling in the wind, filling the air with the soft sounds of rubbing cloth and thin whistling.

“Speaking of traveling, the captain seems to have been around the block, but his ship is new. Have you noticed that there’s a good deal of timber built in his ship that has a Molthovan emblem under the carpenter’s mark? Do you think he’s in league with Molthova?”

“No, not in league. That first night when he found me wandering around alone on deck, he asked me if I had gotten into a fight with my wife. I had to redirect, so instead of answering, I asked him how he was able to safely make port in a country at war. He told me that he had rights as a merchant. He, like many other Anjuvians I’m sure, is taking advantage of their neutrality. They’re trading weapons to the Molthovans as well.”
“Those cunning two-faces. But we must abide Anju’s swindling because if we accused them of siding with our enemy, they would break off trade with us and Molthova would gain the advantage.”

“See, you’re learning.”

“I have a good teacher.”

McDougary leaned against the railing with his elbows resting on top and his back to the water. “You have the focus. It took much longer for me to teach the twins. They’re only smart when they apply themselves and they did not. They kept shrinking the quill.”

“You know, before I met them I didn’t know there were opposing twin Gifts that complemented each other.”

“It’s quite common for identical twins. I imagine that if I had a twin, he would only be able to lie.”

“Wouldn’t that be interesting? I wonder what mine would be. I guess it’s not so clear cut with every Gift.”

He gave a small smile. “Have you noticed anything odd about my Gift?”

The soft way he spoke made me ask carefully, “What do you mean?”

“The fact that I cannot lie. A Gift shouldn’t be a double-edged sword. Do you know anyone else whose Gift has negative effects on them?”

“No, not really.” I wanted to ask why but was afraid that would make him clam up. He’d never shared anything personal with me before. I wondered if this was how other people felt when they needed to coax a frightened animal. My voice was quiet as I said, “Do you mind if I ask why that is?”
Turning around, McDougary looked out over the sparkling ocean. “My family is cursed. Three generations ago. My great-grandfather spurned a woman with the Gift of Curses in favor of my great-grandmother. So she cursed him and all the future male children of his line.”

I followed his gaze towards the base of the ship where it cut through the water with small splashes of silver. “That’s horrible.”

“My father’s Gift is Ventriloquism. He vocalizes through others like puppet mouthpieces. He thinks what he wants to say and the words come out of the mouth of the person he chooses. But he himself is mute.”

“What? He can’t speak at all?”

“No. And when no one else is present, he can’t say anything.”

I thought of how lonely that would be, never to have a voice. In the presence of company, to have your voice heard, but never own it; and then worse, to be alone swallowed in a void of silence. “That sounds terrifying.”

“It is. That’s why he is so in love with my mother. And he teases her saying that she married him because she loves the sound of her own voice.”

I could almost picture it. “When that’s coming from her own mouth, it’s kind of hard to argue with him. I bet she thinks he’s adorably frustrating.”

“Sometimes he's not. Once he was lecturing me but I was basically yelling at myself. Coupled with my Gift, there were not many niceties falling out of my mouth. Finally, I became so angry that I threatened to gag myself with my fist so I wouldn’t have to hear it.”

“Did you?”
“No, before I could I – well he – said the only thing that could stop me.”

“What’s that?”

“That he’d go fetch Mother and she could yell at me for the both of them.”

My lips split into a wide grin. “And?”

“I did the only thing I could do. I let him finish his yelling.”

I snickered. “What did you do in the first place?”

“I, uh, I was at court and asked one of the high nobles an inappropriate question about a scandal. And of course he answered – with his wife standing right there. It caused an uproar. My father thought we would face problems with that high noble in the future because of it.”

“You were so mischievous.”

“Yes, well, as it turns out that incident is how I was noticed by the King and eventually hired in as a spy.”

“When I was five, I dared the boy next door to swallow a rock. He had been bragging nonstop about his Gift to manipulate rocks. But he got sick. His mom got really mad and they moved away.”

“And you call me mischievous.”

“Only I didn’t gain the King’s favor, just new neighbors. They sold their house to Valerie and Samuel.” I thought about how at that time they only had two children and both were too young for me to play with. “McDougary?”

“You can just call me Keenan.”

I took in a surprised breath and then let it out. I was so relieved. “All right. Keenan.” Saying his first name while we were alone still felt indecent somehow, maybe
because of the question I was about to ask. “Are you ever going to have children?” I didn’t have to explain for him to understand what I meant.

“Of course. My father had me and I turned out all right, didn’t I?”

I tilted my head from side to side, pretending to consider, and made a so-so gesture with my hand.

“Hey,” he muttered.

We stared at the stars dancing on the glassy surface. There was a black patch, a broken space where the twinkling lights from the sky weren’t reflecting.

“You think that’s another ship?” I asked.

He squinted at the point where I pointed. “I don’t see anything, but it could be.”

We retired to our cabin room and by then it had become routine for McDougary to stretch out along the floor facing the wall to maintain the veneer of privacy. I followed suit but I always ended up rolling over in the night.

Chapter 10 – Flee at Midnight

The next morning, the ship was nearly upon us. It was a sloop of unusually large size with faded grey sails. Peeling purple paint read, *Sleeping Manta*. A white flag waved from the mast, signifying a request for aid. Captain Cymbryl ordered the anchor dropped so the other more maneuverable ship could cozy up beside us. Most of the crew and passengers gathered on deck, watching like a smattering of sheep. I tucked myself next to McDougary and our eyes met with deepening shared concern.

Four men on the other ship quickly slid a wide plank over the ten-foot gap. A man I presumed to be their captain walked across with heavy footfalls. He wore loose pants
the deepest red and a high collared shirt with a black sash around his waist and a black turban that covered his ears. He also wore a black cloth tied over his mouth and nose, as well as black gloves. The only skin that was visible was his forehead and around the eyes. While he was dressed more or less Anjuvian, the skin was pale like a Tsybrunian. Or a Molthovan.

Captain Cymbryl came forward and they shook hands. “My name is Captain Cymbryl.”

“I’m Captain Jago.” His baritone voice was clear even through the cloth over his mouth.

The two men eyed each other. Cymbryl seemed disappointed that they were of equal rank. “Well, since you flagged us down, you must require my assistance.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I’m going to be quite a nuisance.”

“I’m sure I can manage whatever the problem may be.”

One of Jago’s eyes crinkled as though he wore a nasty half smile underneath his mask. “How reassuring. Well then, I’ll be having you turn this ship around.”

Cymbryl cocked his head. “Are there warships ahead?”

“Would you turn around if there were?” Jago asked dryly.

“No. So tell me why I should change course.”

“I need this vessel to take me where I want to go.” His tone had turned even and unfeeling.

Cymbryl’s fists tightened at his sides. “Pardon me? Absolutely not. Your ship appears undamaged. If you need supplies, I’ll make a trade. Otherwise, I’m going to have to ask you to remove yourself from my ship.”
Jago’s black fingers were curled around Captain Cymbryl’s neck before he could react. Half a dozen men leapt across the plank and drew swords as they formed a protective half-moon around the two captains.

“We’re turning the ship around whether you like it or not.” Jago rasped into his face, the cloth over his mouth billowing in and out with his breath. His words were still oddly detached, but the exertion from holding the other man so firmly made his voice sound low and rough. “Do you have any further complaints?”

Captain Cymbryl scratched at the man’s glove and gasped for air.

“Good. Now, one more question. Are there any troublesome Gifts aboard?” He loosened his grip slightly so the choking man could answer.

He coughed and then said, “You expect me to tell you?” His voice sounded as though his throat was full of prickly spines.

“That’s what I thought.” Jago dropped him and he fell to his knees, clutching his throat and hacking. Then Jago’s booted foot snapped out and kicked him in the temple. As Cymbryl’s head snapped back at an angle, his turban flew off and then he toppled over onto his back, eyes closed. Jago didn’t watch him fall but turned aside as if what happened to him was below his notice. “Gather them over there.” Jago pointed.

The six men advanced on us and we allowed ourselves to be herded. We were pushed towards the steps that lead to the bow of the ship until we were all together in a huddle. I noticed First Mate, Cymbryl’s cat, ignoring the activity and sniffing at an empty space by the rigging of the mast. Squinting, I saw there was a slight wrinkle in the air like a heat mirage in the figure of a man – it was the Color Master! I bet he was waiting for the opportune moment to help Cymbryl take back the ship.
“Don’t let that captain touch you,” Keenan whispered in my ear.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“You’re certainly doing a good job of it,” I muttered.

He hesitated. “He’s poisonous.”

“What?”

“Shhh. He’s coming.”

Jago was walking towards us and scanning over our numbers, probably estimating how many people could fit on the Osprey’s Catch and if they were all accounted for.

The wind began to pick up and ripples crested down through the sails. Captain Cymbryl was on his knees, climbing to his feet. Blood covered his ear and stuck in his hair. Jago noticed the passengers all watching behind him and turned just as Cymbryl made a swift sweep with his arm, like an uppercut punch. A slice of air flew from the sky and blew past Jago’s person, ruffling his clothing, but passing him by. The gust crashed over the side of the ship and wood grated on wood as the plank swiveled and slipped out of sight. The Sleeping Manta tilted on the swell of water. Then Cymbryl’s spine bent sharply and he clutched his head – the effort of the swing must have made him dizzy.

With one pale finger, Jago lowered the cloth on his face. His lips were a dry, sickly purple in an ashy face. “You could have stayed down, you know.” Jago stalked towards him while pulling off his right glove.

I glanced at the shadowy outline of the Color Master, expecting him to move but there wasn’t even a waver in that eerie silhouette. Jago grabbed Cymbryl’s forearm, but
didn’t try to drag him up or even move him. With a blank expression, he just gripped his arm while Cymbryl tried to jerk away.

Cymbryl’s head came up with wide eyes. “Let go.”

A wave of tremors spread through Cymbryl’s hands and spasms jerked in his legs. Still the Color Master didn’t move. Cymbryl’s eyelids were twitching and his mouth opened wide, but there was no sound. He went limp. Jago released his arm and he crumpled to the ground a second time, but now Cymbryl was facedown and much too still. Was he dead? A purple handprint bruised his arm with black veins webbing out around it. The Color Master had stood there hiding and did nothing while his friend was poisoned. The least the coward could have done was camouflage Cymbryl as well. My expectations for his aid were smashed flatter than a beetle under a shoe. Jago’s gaze lingered on the fallen man with an expression that was both harsh and miserable. His lips were curled but his eyes were narrowed in an aching grimace mediated by slow blinks.

The remaining men on Jago’s ship had brought out another plank, a narrow board that looked like it was meant to be spare wood for repairs.

“Bring him aboard,” Jago barked out. A man with the meatiest arms I’d ever seen jerked his head in acknowledgment and proceeded back to their ship. In a minute, he returned carrying something humanoid, covered completely with a thick mink blanket. It wasn’t wrapped around the shoulders but thrown over the head leaving only an opening for the swinging feet, but even those weren’t visible amongst the folds. However, there was the muffled sound of shallow labored breathing, almost wheezing through the sweltering cloth. That was all I could discern. The burly man cradled the blanketed thing
like it was a massively overgrown baby. The odd pair disappeared below deck as quickly as the heavy blanket would allow.

“What’s under there?” Keenan called into the silence and I stiffened in alarm. Even though he stood in the center of the crowd and remained out of a direct line of sight, I wanted to clap my hand over his mouth.

Jago grunted. “A pain in the neck, but his Gift is—” he began. “I mean, that’s none of your concern.” He whirled on us. “Who said that?” This time his dark piercing gaze scrutinized us closely.

All around me I could feel the eyes of the other passengers flick towards McDougay beside me.

“Who was it? Tell me. Or I’ll do to you what I did to your captain. One by one.”

The sight of the captain’s body behind Jago seemed to burn into my eyes. Everyone was silent as the threat sunk in. There came the rustling of clothes as people shifted their weight and I heard the softest wet smack of a mouth opening and then closing. After watching the Color Master do nothing, I was certain no one would protect us if it came down to facing Jago’s poison.

Before anyone could step forward, I spoke. “Who are you to question us? We have the rights of neutrality here. Why even seize our ship?” I sensed that McDougay had reached out as if to stop me, but then stepped quietly behind me. Did he trust me or did he think there was nothing he could do?

Jago strode to stand in front of me, seeming pleased that someone had responded, even if it wasn’t to answer him. “Well, we needed an Anjuvian ship,” he said.
I knew he wouldn’t answer if I asked why, so I said, “Then what do you plan to do with your ship?”

“We could rip down the sails and leave you all stranded in the middle of the ocean. But then, someone might chance upon you. After all, this is a busy stretch of waters. And you’d tell your rescuers all about us in your harrowing tale. No, better to keep you all prisoner here with us. We have enough men to take our ship back separately.”

Our exchange reminded me of my past quarrels with Clarice. Strangely, I felt like I was on familiar, if dangerous, grounds. “Then you think that you can control all of us with the remainder? You don’t know what kinds of Gifts these people possess.”

At my threatening insinuation he took a step closer and stared down into my eyes. And I stared back. He had violet eyes shot with slivers of black. Those eyes looked back and forth between my own.

“You know, I’ve just noticed, you have unusual eyes for an Anjuvian.”

I fought the urge to look away or blink and hide the blue ring of color. Instead I concentrated on not stepping backwards. “I could say the same for you, but your eyes would be unusual anywhere.”

“Your accent and your turn of phrase, that’s not normal either.”

“I was raised in Lonagas.” I gave an uninterested shrug, but I wasn’t sure how convincing it was because my fingers were trembling.

“Her tutor was Tsybrunian, that’s all it is,” Bibi chimed in shakily from behind me.
Jago ignored her and kept his glare centered on me. “But your parents are Anjuvian, yes? Your mother would’ve raised you, so why don’t you have her accent?”

I didn’t think he would buy the same excuse I’d fed Bibi and Shen, so I evaded. “Why do you assume a mother? She died when I was young. I was raised by my father but he was always busy traveling.” The best lies are built on truth anyway.

Jago didn’t say anything or even react with any big movement, but the hard line of his mouth softened infinitesimally and his lids lowered the tiniest of fractions. The rest of his body went very still and there was something vulnerable in it. His silence was incongruous and I took an intuitive stab in the dark.

“If a simple touch from you can drop a man where he stands, than I’d wager you weren’t all that close with your mother. She could never touch you, let alone hold you. That is, if she’s even still alive?”

His shoulders tensed and his hands formed tight fists at his sides. He tucked his chin down and glared at me with violet eyes shadowed by the severe furrows of his eyebrow. I could see his jaw muscles move as he ground his teeth together before saying, “There are two types of people that I hate: people who take good things for granted and liars. Something tells me that you are both.”

He seized my arm with one hand and with the other, he drew his bare pointer finger slowly down my cheek, staring down cruelly into my eyes. His finger left a cold tingle in its wake as though his finger were a toxic snail excreting a deadly slime trail. Then the cold flashed hot as though the temperature were so extreme, my skin failed to interpret it correctly. My face muscles clenched before the sensation spread through the rest of my body like a wave of lava, but something told me that it was more akin to an
intense freeze. Was this what Cymbryl had felt before his body seized up? I didn’t have long to wonder as my neck quickly went stiff, the feeling flew from my legs, and I crumpled to the ground.

Hands rolled me over, and then roughly grasped my cheek. Blackness bled in from the edges of my vision taking the sight of Keenan’s wide panicked eyes with it as he shouted, “Grace! Grace!”

The next thing I remembered was a sharp slap in the face. My eyes felt like balls of lead in my skull as I struggled to crack them open. I lay on flat on my back on a bed. My skull felt like it had been scraped like a melon from the inside out. The rest of me was overheated and weighed as much as if my innards had been replaced with bricks. Through the slits of my eyes I saw the roof of our cabin room and Keenan’s hand raised to slap me again, eyebrows knitted together and twitching jaw clenched.

“No,” I moaned softly.

He lowered his hand and let out a sigh of relief. “Grace? You’re going to be all right. You were poisoned, but it wasn’t too much exposure.”

I closed my eyes. “Head hurts.”

“I know, but we have to get off this ship. Now.”

“If you say so,” I slurred. Even my tongue felt tired.

“They locked us in our cabin, but I’ve picked the lock.”

My mind was a little slow on the uptake. My lids slid open. “Why?”

McDougary blinked at me. “So we can get out.”

I shook my head. “No, other thing.”
He looked guilty. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know how else to wake you.”

“Yes, you hit me. Bad husband. That wasn’t nice. But I meant about leaving?”

“Ah.” McDougary spoke quickly and softly, humoring me in my stupor. “The way I figure, if they’re going northwest they have the same plan as we did, but in reverse. They’re Molthovans using an Anjuvian ship to enter Tsybrunia. We have to escape not only to complete our task, but also to send warning.”

“Beware: Dangerous man bringing suspicious blanket,” I suggested.

He cracked a smile, but his eyebrows crinkled his forehead again. “Something like that.”

“And where exactly are we going? Are we commandeering the other ship?”

“No, that’s long gone. We’re going to jump overboard and swim to land.”

I touched my temple with my fingers. “Far be it for me to question your judgment, but are you crazy?”

“You should still be able to use your Gift, even in your state. Whatever you can call to us in the sea, we’ll use to stay afloat.”

“I see no way that could ever go wrong.” I decided to trust McDougary anyway, especially since I couldn’t seem to hold my eyes still. I sat up and stared at the floor until my vision stopped swirling from the sudden movement. “What happened after I fainted?”

“Bibi started wailing. The volume was impressive. Like a banshee. She’s quite fond of you, really. But we were lucky she did that, because she irritated Jago enough that he ordered us locked in our rooms. He was massaging his eyes and said he’d deal with us tomorrow.”

“And Captain Cymbryl? Is he…?”
“He’s alive, but still unconscious.”

“Thank goodness.” I glanced up at him. “McDougary, why did you call out like that?”

Without looking at my face, McDougary said, “My Gift doesn’t force people to answer specifically to the questions I ask. But sometimes when people are off-guard, they will. I thought it was worth the risk.” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “We should go.”

As he helped me to my feet, he said, “You know, you probably saved our lives.” He released me to stand on my own but my knees promptly gave way. I grunted as I tried to straighten my legs, but he caught me under the arm and held me up. “Sorry, my fault,” he said softly.

“I’m the one with the fickle knees.”

We took a few awkward steps and I almost tipped us over.

McDougary stopped. “This isn’t going to work. I need to scout out the deck before I bring you up there. I’ll come back for you.”

“You can’t leave me here by myself.”

“Would you rather run into Jago’s men when you can barely walk?”

I considered for a split second. I recalled Jago’s burning purple irises. “Nope. I’ll be right here.”

The effects of the poison must have been affecting my sense of time as well, because I had barely turned my head and then he was back. “All clear?”

“Somewhat. There are a few men at the prow. We need to be quiet and fast.”
We hobbled as quickly as we could down the hallway past the other doors. Yesterday there had been laughter coming from behind those closed doors and now, silence. Bibi and Shen – prisoners on their honeymoon.

“We’re abandoning them?” I said.

“Our escape is their best hope as well.”

We made it to the main deck where he sat me on the rail.

“Swing your legs over while I hold you steady.” His voice came in an uneasy whisper.

I tried to glance behind me at the water slapping against the hull.

“Hurry up. I can hear the men moving,” McDouary hissed at me.

The world spun as I swiveled and my dress twisted up against the friction of the wooden railing, but I didn’t fall before I was supposed to. My addled brain wondered at that. The water was so black that it looked like we were about to jump into an endless abyss. It would have been better to fall before I looked down.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” I whispered as McDouary swung up beside me.

“Neither do I. Don’t think about it and just go. On three: one, two--”

We jumped. My feet smacked into the water after a much longer time than I expected. The water exploded up around me in a rush of suffocating foam and bubbles. The plunge made me dizzy and it was McDouary’s hand in mine that pulled me up towards the surface and air. I took a deep breath and forgot to keep kicking – my head sank into the frigid water again. I flailed my limbs in a manner close enough to
swimming to lift my nose and mouth above water. I spit out a mouthful of the briny saltwater. Goosebumps had broken out all over my body and I began shivering.

“It’s cold,” I gasped. It felt like gritty old bath water.

“It’s not that bad. The poison probably gave you a fever.” Keenan took me by the waist while he treaded water and I uselessly paddled my arms. “Grace, I can’t hold us up forever. You need to call for help before I tire out.”

“Who’s going to hear us?”

“Animals, Grace. Remember the plan? Find us something that swims. Preferably big and preferably soon.”

“Right. I can do that, I think.” I concentrated as hard as I could, picturing the golden net of my Gift and imagining it pulsing outward for miles and miles with one message: come. I wanted to scream it, but I knew the sea creatures couldn’t hear me underwater. However, I remembered how the whales and dolphins came to the Queen Denissa without being called. And the time when Duchess and I were bearing down on Clarice and that clever horse seemed to obey my thoughts for a second. I recalled the confidence in that desperation and projected it along with my summons.

Then we waited. Even though I was hoping for the appearance of anything – a sea turtle, an octopus, or even a shark – I had the terrifying feeling that something slimy and hungry would reach up from the depths and grab my feet. McDougary started breathing heavily as he fought to keep our heads above water. I felt dreadful that he was literally carrying my weight, and my Gift didn’t seem to be helping.

“Why’s nothing coming? I knew it. We’re going to drown.”

“Try again,” he spit out between breaths.
“I’ve been trying constantly for the last twenty minutes.”

As the words came out of my mouth, a slim grey spine passed in front of me. I glanced down at the massive pale shadow in the water and a primordial shiver crept up between my shoulder blades. The head of a massive serpent rose out of the water and faced us with dead onyx eyes. Glistening water dripped from gaping fish lips full of a hundred miniature saws highlighted by the moonlight. Its body was longer than I could see in the dark water and thicker than my torso; it had spikes on its neck and layered faceplates.

“It’s a monster!” I screamed and began thrashing, causing us to abruptly sink down to our chins.

“Stop it, Grace! Just tell him not to eat us!”

“Don’t eat us! Not even a tiny bite! Just carry us to the closest land, please!”

The monstrous head lowered back underwater with a bubbly chuffling noise and the serpent began circling us so tightly that he overlapped with his own tail. Ignoring the jaw that could probably bite us in half with one chomp, we both hooked onto the serpent’s largest spike. The spike was bony with small notches on the underside and the skin was not as rubbery as it looked but abrasive, even more so than a cat’s tongue. After turning a wide circle, the serpent’s long body cut through the water in a lazy line that was deceptively fast. His speed dragged our legs out behind us, but they still didn’t reach half his length.

“Don’t bite us. Don’t bite us. Don’t bite us,” I was chanting over and over.

I’d never been so terrified because this was no natural beast. I wasn’t sure that I could actually control him. Especially because I felt the presence of a consciousness
unlike any I’d felt from an animal before. At first it was uncomfortable, like a head hovering over my shoulder, a head with lots of teeth. But there was no menace or blood thirst like I’d imagined. He knew he was the master of these waters but sometimes the company of the sea wasn’t enough; he missed people.

“You used to be human,” I whispered in awe.

“What?” McDougary looked forward at the creature’s head with an expression as though he were seeing it for the first time. “Someone did this to him?”

“No,” I said slowly. There was loneliness but no resentment in him. “I think this is the work of his own Gift.”

The creature turned his neck and showed his teeth in a slightly terrifying smile. He was acknowledging that we were speaking about him. I relaxed with a weak laugh. Something told me he would have answered my call even without the power of my Gift compelling him.

Even though the fearful tension had left my arms, my fingers started to cramp around his spike. After a waterlogged eternity, the water grew slightly warmer and he stopped swimming. He had brought us into the shallows as far as he could go.

We released him and I said, “You weren’t alone today. Thank you.” They weren’t the right words. But for someone with his fate, there were no right words. Then the grey serpent turned a last circle around us, rubbing against my leg, before swiftly slipping out of view in the dark waters.

Then in silence we sloshed the rest of the way to shore. The beach wasn’t very long and curved sharply back out of sight on either side of us. A few old wooden huts stood a hundred yards in along with a smattering of sickly trees, but no people. The
coarse sand was dark brown and mixed with sharp seashells but we flopped onto the beach anyway, McDougary on his stomach and me on my back. I closed my eyes against my fatigue, knowing that he was even more exhausted.

I listened to the soft churning waves. “That poor unlucky creature,” I said. “You know, I still cannot believe you trusted me to get us out of that. And if it weren’t for his help, this would have been the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done.”

“I knew you could do it.”

I scoffed. “Has your brain gone soggy? I wasn’t even sure I could do it.”

“I’d wager nothing else came within sight because of that fellow.”

My head lolled over to look at Keenan. For the first time, using his first name felt comfortable, even in my head. The saltwater had melted away the copper hue from his skin. He stared back at me and I realized that my skin must have returned to its original pale color. Incredibly, my hair was still held up with the black pin.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Well, Keenan, I’m hungry, thirsty, wet, tired, still a little woozy, and I think there’s a fish tangled in my skirts somewhere, but yes, I’m all right. Because we made it. We’re safe.”

“For now. Judging by the sunrise, that creature took us west.”

The sky over the ocean to the east was lightening like a pale ghost of yellow and grey. We were in Molthova.