

# Keeper of the Keys

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## Prologue

Raindrops skittered down the windowpane and shone like silver stars against a black velvet sky. Brass rings jingled across the metal rod, jolting the silence as manservants dragged the two-story drapes together, blotting out the pale moonlight that stretched across my feet. Flames in the fireplace flickered, wearied by their battle against the autumn chill. Their wavering glow, combined with the oil lamp positioned beside the four-poster bed, failed to sweep away the darkness at the edges of the room.

The watery breath of the woman beneath the covers echoed off the gilded walls. She remained still, but for the swelling and shrinking of her chest in uneven patterns.

A man sat on a cushioned bench, hunched over her bed, his shirt cuffs shoved above his elbows. Shadows played across his forearm as he scrubbed his face with his hands, then combed his fingers through his straight, dark hair and tugged. He stilled, gazed at the woman and reached for her. He repeated his restless motions in varying order. Hands to face, hands to hair, hands to her.

Seemingly in afterthought, the man rotated, facing me. "Kaylynn." My father's smooth baritone voice sounded gravelly and unfamiliar. He beckoned me with a raised arm. "Please."

I clutched the heart-shaped key, reliably resting at the hollow of my neck. My thumb smoothed over the sapphire that filled the center of the heart and the crusted diamonds lining the outer edge.

"Kaylynn, it is all right."

*No it is not.* I released a shuttered breath and crossed the room with someone else's

legs. I sidled up to him and ducked beneath the crook of his arm.

Mother's eyes flitted open and closed. Her hand raised slightly, and then dropped back to the bed. My nose crinkled at the warm, sour scent. *Mother does not smell right.*

My father's chest convulsed with a sob. "Madelyn."

She opened her eyes. "Benjamin." His name passed as a breath. "There's a Keeper in every" she wheezed, struggling for breath. "In every generation." Her lungs gargled. "Both are here. She must. You must." Mother closed her eyes.

"I love you, princess," she whispered through grayed lips.

"Mother?"

Horseback riding in summers at sunset. Holiday parties with clinking glasses, elaborate ball gowns and butter-brushed, roasted lamb. Mother's enchanting voice reciting bedtime fairytales of cousins—a prince and a duke—who fled a magical realm to save their kingdom. The smell of lavender blooming in our gardens.

These inherent truths left no vacancy for another reality. *Any second she will open her eyes.*

Mother wheezed. Two, three times. Her body became silent and still. I tugged at Father's cuff and whispered. "We should let her sleep."

Days of weeping caused his swollen, blotchy face the appearance of a dozen wasp stings. Ignoring me, my father rested my mother's hand across her chest and kissed her lips.

His red-rimmed eyes cleared with a realization I didn't understand. "Pack her bags with haste." Servants flittered into action. "And do not forget the box from her father."

"She has passed, Kaylynn. We must leave." He clasped my wrist and dragged me toward

the door.

“Nooooo!” I whipped my arm free and sprinted toward Mother. I lunged onto the bed. My full, white gown billowed around me. My crimped, straw-colored hair fell across her face and mine as I wept. *Mother, I’m so scared.*

My father’s arms latched around my waist, digging into my ribs. I clawed at the air, reaching for mother. Father pried my thirteen-year old frame away from her. I thrashed as he tore me from her, from the room, from our estate. He scurried down the broad, marble steps.

“What are you doing!” I felt the scream ripple at the back of my throat. I hammered at every part of him within striking distance.

“Enough!” He plopped me inside the waiting carriage attached to a six-team of black, Shire horses.

I leapt toward the door.

My body slammed into his as he crawled in behind me and pounded his fist against the front wall. The conveyance jerked into motion. Our bodies swayed from side to side.

“We can’t leave Mother!”

He squeezed me. Without his embrace I might have physically shattered. I felt the weight and the velvet of my midnight blue cloak across my shoulders, and I realized I’d been cold.

He reached for my cheek, but I shied away and turned to stare at the blackness beyond the window. My body and head felt heavy with exhaustion. In my fury, I determined to stay awake.

Rain padded on the roof. I stifled a yawn. Horse hooves plodded along the sandy soil.

My eyelashes brushed my cheeks. The carriage swayed in gentle rhythm. The damp air secured me in the sweet, earthy scent of familiar hills, of grass that remained a vibrant green despite autumn's frost. Of thickets of trees swathed in ribbons of moss. Of flowers that would bloom long beyond winter's first snowfall. The vehicle rocked.

Thirteen-year-old girls complain. Their gowns are out of style, their tutors are incompetent, their crushes are oblivious, their parents tell them no. To be accepted by debutants at socials, I only needed to be critical.

"My parents are my whole world," I would tell them. "I have everything I want and more. I would change nothing about my life."

I felt the impact of their stares, even in my memory.

They already thought me odd because I possessed no memories prior to age eight. Enjoying my parents company seemed a dull confession in comparison.

Hot tears trickled down my warmed skin. Now life changed without my permission. *Why did she have to die?* I closed my hand around the key at my neck. Alarm shot through me. My eyes flew open.

*Father is here. I am not alone. As long as we stay together, everything will be okay.*

I surrendered to the sleep overtaking me.

Dare to determine  
A prince travels with kinsman  
Maybe fable true

Two royal maidens  
Spears that pierced each sister through  
Sprint across field

Lavender tree yield  
Push through rushing waterfall  
Beauty is revealed

The river forestalls  
Therein lies the healing's curse  
Wed, six royal births

Fractured family  
Key and hope, of priceless worth  
Fractured memory

## Chapter One

The horses' hooves clipped at a trot. The carriage wheels crunched on impacted earth. I felt my father's warmth alongside me, the rough wool of his coat beneath my cheek, his sturdy arm draped across my shoulder. I nestled into him. My eyes fluttered open. Sunlight strobed into the carriage, perforated by barren tree branches. A lone bird chirped, rebelling against the impending winter.

Father combed his fingers through my long, golden strands of hair splayed every which way. His hand stilled as I straightened on the bench. Three weeks' growth of dark facial hair framed his gentle smile. "Your blue-green eyes remind me of..."

"The sea beyond the mountains," I finished with him.

He chuckled. "But what do I always say?"

"That my outer beauty is far outweighed by my inner beauty."

"And?"

"Never lose what makes me, me."

He pressed his finger into his heart. "Never lose what makes you, you."

My sea-colored eyes roamed about the carriage, which grew smaller by the day.

My sluggish morning brain was thunderstruck with realization.

*Mother's dead.*

We'd been on the road ever since.

I spun in my seat and stared through the rear window. A covered wagon rumbled along behind us. The driver's military uniform peaked out beneath his dark, unbuttoned coat. His breath emerged in puffs of vapor. The wagon he navigated carried cook, a handful of servants and several men from my father's personal military detachment, as well as crates of food and supplies. Behind the covered wagon was the cook's wagon. Several of my father's cavalry flanked the caravan on horseback.

I turned to the side window where my Shire Stallion trotted untethered beside the carriage. At nearly 20 hands, he stood as tall as the carriage itself. His parents and older siblings comprised our horse teams. Sunlight illuminated his glossy, black coat. Almond eyes bracketed

a blaze of white running down the front of his face. The white feathering at each of his cannons floated with each bouncing step.

I grinned at Ari and waved. He shook his head with a snort. I laughed. "Ari still believes *he* should carry me."

"Out of the question."

"But, Fa—"

"There are bandits in these woods."

I spun toward him. "Where are we going? Why did we leave Mother? And why we have brought so many men with us?" The questions hadn't varied much since our departure.

"Trust me, Kaylynn."

Neither had his answer. Since my father refused to speak of any matters of importance, attempts at conversation throughout our journey ended with awkward silence. I threw my head back in frustration.

"Only a few more days to the east."

I groaned, childishness winning out. In three weeks' time I'd completed three needlepoints—not easy to do in a bouncing carriage—and devoured eleven books, several of them twice. I'd also finished four paintings. Two landscapes of late spring with trees and flowers in full bloom. One birds-eye view of a debutant ball—in the foreground, gloved hands rested on a balcony. The fourth depicted painting and family picnics with plaid table cloths at the river's edge.

"That horse." My father chuckled.

His words brought me back to present. "The trainer story?"

"Yes."

When Ari was nearly one, I overheard our horse trainer and my father discussing breaking Ari.

"Break him?!"

"Horses must be gradually trained to wear a saddle and then ridden. Stallions like Ari, especially, prove quite dangerous."

"*All* horses must be trained?"



My father read my concern. "You've nothing to fear, Kaylynn."

"Oh, I know. Ari taught me how to ride months ago."

Both men's jaws dropped simultaneously.

I smiled at the memory and then brought myself back to the present. "Father, why did you bring Ari along if you will not let me ride him?"

"I didn't bring Ari. He kicked through his stall, reared, and chased us down. For the first time in his five years, he acted like a stallion."

"Well, I did ask him never to leave me." I settled back against my father's shoulder, content after our first real conversation in weeks.

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The following morning, our pattern changed.

The coach rolled to a stop. I rose, intending to exit. A meaty fist rapped on the window.

I squeaked and stumbled backwards. Father opened the door and stepped to the side. A large trunk grated across the carpet like sandpaper.

Father placed his hand on the doorframe. "Pack your belongings."

My eyes widened, my jaw dropped. "Which belongings?"

"All of them." The door fastened into place behind him. Gravel crunched beneath his receding steps.

I stared at the contents of the carriage, seeing, as if for the first time, the clutter strewn about. Gowns, cloaks, books, paint brushes, beauty products. By the door, rested a pile of interesting rocks I'd accumulated.

A softer knock sounded. The familiar meter stole my attention. I saw through the small window, the laced cuff at the edge of a black sleeve. "Come in Gertrude."

"Miss." She curtsied. A sagging brown bun framed her plump cheeks and narrow mouth. She proffered me the white gown draped over her left arm. "I sewed some modifications for you."

"I see that." The fashion atrocity I held in my hand bore little resemblance to the

shimmering garment I'd worn the night Mother died. Gertrude sewed a layer of off-white wool to the entire dress, leaving exposed satin only at the elbows and shoulders. Despite the atrocious choice in fabric, I recognized the meticulous attention to detail. Concise cuts and stitching created a seamless design. Jewels speckled the fabric at exact intervals. The gems winked with the morning's sunlight. If anyone could make wool look attractive, it would be me, and less for the wearer than the seamstress.

I crossed my eyebrows at the sight of slits in the skirt and lifted the fabric to find an underskirt fashioned into a replica of men's trousers.

"So you can ride abreast if you wish."

My lips parted to explain father's stance on my riding Ari, but movement beyond the window distracted me. Men busied themselves with delegated tasks, shifting cargo and rotating horses.

Gertrude recaptured my attention. She reached for a shawl with one hand and a blanket in the other and dropped them into the chest without folding them. She tossed several books haphazardly atop the fabric.

My rock collection caught her eye and she frowned in disapproval. She swept her foot toward them and the rocks clattered to the ground. She'd filled the trunk nearly to the brim by the time I thought to ask why she seemed in such a hurry.

"Tsk, tsk." She waved the back of her hand at me.

I slammed my knee into the trunk moving out of her way. "Ow."

Gertrude raised the bench seat, immediately recoiling at the smell. Her lips thinned at the sight of a basket overflowing with green, furry bread. She pitched the basket over her shoulder. The diseased pastries tumbled onto the dirt.

She glanced up at me. "Change, girl. What are you waiting for? Spring?"

I turned my back to her and she loosened the strings of my dress. I eased out of the gown while she continued sluffing through the storage compartment.

She plucked up the four canvases I'd painted. Staring at each, she flung the landscapes and the debutant ball into the road and tenderly placed the fourth into the trunk. She swooped up the last of the clothing and stuffed it into the trunk. She shoveled through the remaining

contents, pausing on a blanket and jewelry from my mother. She fisted each and then released them.

“Dress,” she pointed.

I dropped my previous gown into the trunk. “Gertrude, what is happening?”

She slammed the lids of both the storage compartment and trunk and then hopped backwards out of the carriage, leaving me alone. “Captain!” She strode toward the wagon. “She’s all packed up.”

*Pack her bags with haste, my father had said. Pack your belongings, all of them.*

*She’s all packed up, Gertrude told the captain.*

I smoothed the rough fabric at the front of my dress, trim at the waist and bowed at the hips. My fingers rippled over the white gems and investigated the seams of the slits stretching high along each leg, all of which Gertrude sewed into the fabric by hand. In a bouncing wagon with little heat provided. While I painted and read books and complained.

A soldier protested an order. My father’s sharp command sounded above dull murmurs.

My amplified thoughts muted each sound. I would change nothing about my life.

And why should I? My parents’ estate dwarfed the land owned by any of my friends. My parents fitted me with the most elaborate gowns and the most affluent tutors. As my parents’ sole heir and an only child, I never competed for attention from any of the servants or guards. An entire staff jumped at my beck and call.

The pungent smell of autumn burning wafted through the vehicle door that creaked and swung in the wind. I exhaled and crossed the threshold. At my first step, a manservant’s hand reached to assist me.

Men shifted boxes of supplies. A servant rolled a barrel toward a burn pile at the opposite corner of the crossroads. The drum bounced along uneven ground. A soldier sluffed the bread basket and my paintings into the tall flames. His shoulders stiffened and he jerked his head in my direction. The gazes of other staff members followed his, or maybe, he had followed theirs. The lapel of his uniform fluttered with the breeze. Every other detail about him remained still.

I recognized the company’s orchestrated busyness for the integral part it played in my

childhood. Their movements, though foreign and a bit frightening, somehow revolved around me.

I gathered the coarse fabric of my dress in both hands. Angling to include all of the staff, I bowed my head and curtsied.

The servants and soldiers bowed in return.

Father took note of my dress's design and turned his frown on Gertrude. She raised her chin and puckered her lips in defiance. Father shook his head and strode toward the back of the wagon, jumpstarting action in everyone around him.

Ari's clacking hooves were muted by the grass as he followed me across the road. The frosty dew seeped through my slippers. *There are leaves on the trees here*, I realized. The rising sun's rays spotlighted the bold colors of the rolling countryside—scarlet, tangerine, butterscotch and emerald. Without thinking, I reached for my paintbrush. *Packed in the trunk*. I smiled to myself, and sighed, absorbing the panoramic view.

A strong wind stripped the tree branches. Leaves flitted down in choreographed design. The wind persisted, tugging at the hem of my dress, begging me to dance, and causing my sun-illuminated tresses to take flight.

I pivoted in a circle. And again. My feet spun, my dress caught the twirled around me. My laughter bubbled up like chimes on the wind. *This is the first time I've laughed since ...*

The moment I remembered my great sadness, the wind died. Colorless leaves dropped lifeless to the ground. My father and his staff, who had paused to watch, intermittently went back to work. Ari nudged me.

"Hey, boy." I tangled my cold fingers into the warmth of his coarse mane.

Gertrude approached, fidgeting with a bottle of my conditioning oil. "Coconut oil, castor oil, green tea and lavender oil are the ingredients for this." Her calloused fingertips brushed against my hand as she placed the bottle in my palm.

I unscrewed the lid and inhaled the familiar scent. "Mmm. Thank you. But why would I ever need to know what the ingredients are when I have you?"

"Miss Kaylynn, is there anything I should fetch for you before...? Are you in need of anything?"

I wrinkled my brow in confusion. “Whatever is the matter?”

Beyond her, our caravan’s transformation completed, the purpose of the staff’s preparations became abundantly clear. The cook’s wagon and the servants’ wagon faced west—the way we’d come from. Mounted soldiers reined in their horses which side-stepped with nervous energy.

Anxiety shot through me like a lightning bolt. Dark clouds whisked in from the north. “Gertru ...” Her name caught in my throat. “Am I to lose you?”

But the answer was impossible to ignore. Of all the men and women and carts and horses and supplies that had accompanied us thus far, only two guards, so it seemed, would be traveling eastward with us. They stood by their own horses, poised to mount up. Their saddlebags, bursting with supplies.

Father crossed the road and neared Gertrude, Ari and me. His stern disposition left no room for argument. Suddenly, I suspected I knew exactly why my father’s guard argued with him.

Dead leaves crunched beneath my feet as I closed the distance. “They are not to come?” Father was making a mistake and I knew better. Thunder clapped overhead.

“Then I must say goodbye.” I dashed back to my maidservant and the shelter of her embrace. “I will miss you.”

“Don’t be silly.” Tears she refused to acknowledge collected at the brims of her eyes. She patted my face with hands I’d known as long as I could remember. “Now, go. Your adventure awaits.”

The older woman slid sugar cubes into my pocket—a new feature of the dress, and a fashion faux pas —and released me. Bitter wind chilled me in the absence of her warmth. “Child,” she pointed to her heart. “Never lose what makes you you.”

Ari nudged Gertrude’s shoulder with his face. She stumbled and laughed. The stallion dipped his head and rested his face against hers.

“You take good care of our girl.” Gertrude’s tears spilled over then. She scratched between Ari’s ears, but stared at my father.

“I’ll try,” Father said. He stretched his hand toward me and I placed my hand within his.

“Will I ever see them again?”

He tried to smile. “I certainly hope so.”

My father’s hold led me to the carriage and Ari flanked my other side, but I fastened my eyes on Gertrude. Her form occupied less and less of the landscape, yet her brave smile never wavered.

Before climbing into the carriage, I touched my forehead to Ari’s. “Father says I will be safer riding in the carriage.” The horse nodded fervently. “At any rate, I’m glad you’re with me.” Ari nudged my hip. I’d forgotten about the sugar cubes, and the pocket, but Ari had not. He slurped the white treats from my palm.

“Come,” Father said, from the doorway of the carriage. The original driver had been replaced by a soldier, who held the reins. The two cavalymen stared down the long road before us. I whirled around. Gertrude was not on the grassy corner where I left her.

“Ya! Ya!” The covered wagon and cook’s wagon rolled into motion.

My father met my gaze. “It is time.”

Our driver pushed the team through daylight into a blue-violet sky. The horses’ huffed and sucked in each breath. Father’s mouth turned down. At any moment he would pound on the wall as an order for the soldier to slow down. His eyebrows furrowed and his hands grabbed hold of his shaggy hair, and he allowed his man to drive at a pace deadly to the horses.

The five of us pitched camp in pitch darkness. I patted my hands along the ground, sluffing through wet leaves as I felt for firewood. The men raised a tent constructed of a thick, dark canvas with a large opening in the ceiling. I didn’t remember seeing the tent in all our previous nights of travel. They built the fire in the center of the tent. After dinner, my father’s three men fanned the perimeter.

The orange flames flickered highlights and shadows across Father’s face. New lines crisscrossed beneath his tired eyes. I noticed more gray hair above his ears since Mother’s death.

Father inhaled sharply, as if to speak, but no words followed. This happened several times. Finally, he said, “The fairytale your mother told you at bedtime is true. I am the prince’s cousin. You are the prince’s daughter. Madelyn is ... was your mother’s sister.”

The news might have incited anger and betrayal in most people. But ever since my mother's death, I'd existed in a permanent state of shock. I could not have been any sadder than I already was. Strong emotions like betrayal and anger felt vague and unattainable.

A thousand questions rose to the surface and a thousand more questions had been answered. "My missing years."

My father jerked his head up, confused, but too wearied by grief to be surprised. He expected a fight I couldn't muster energy for. "Anyone who crosses through the portal must surrender their memories of Ephee."

"But you and Moth ..." Neither of them were actually my parents. "You left with your memories intact?"

"I, we, found a way."

I watched the smoke pushing its way through the hole in the ceiling of the tent. People often asked about my first memory. I told them, as Benjamin and Madeline instructed, "riding in the carriage with my father." But I secured vague memories of a starry night in a field among strangers and the inherent knowledge that all these years no one was to know about the others.

I leaned so close to the fire I could feel the heat in my nostrils. My fractured mind couldn't grasp the implications of his revelation. I ran my hands down the opposite length of my stiff sleeves, remembering Gertrude.

"I've watched you grow," she always said. Never, "I changed your diapers," or "I held you as a baby."

"Did the servants know?"

"They knew you were royalty in hiding. They know nothing of Ephenia."

*They knew more about my identity than I did. And no one told me!* Embarrassment heated my cheeks this time, rather than the fire. I felt pathetic and pitied.

I rose. "Good night, Benjamin." I curtsied, spun.

Dark, almond shaped eyes stared at me through the tent's doorway. Ari's head blocked my dramatic exit. "Ari." I pressed my hand into the blaze streaking down the front of his face.

"Ari."

My father—Benjamin? I didn't know what to call him—chuckled. *Ari just sided with him! Didn't like how I spoke to him!*

Fear that I might lose Ari surged through me and awakened anger. I turned back on my father, on Benjamin, rather. "You are returning me to my parents?"

He nodded.

"And Ari will return to your estate with you?"

He snorted. "I couldn't separate that horse from you if I tried." Father's smile vanished. "Ari is yours. Ari will always be yours." More quietly, "So will I."

Tears burned my cheeks like liquid flame. "Then why are you returning me? Why are you giving me away?"

He shot up like a hot spark and appeared in front of me within the span of two blinks. "I love you. You are mine. There is something you must do—that only you can do." He brushed hair back from my face. "And we are out of time."

I leaned into him, pressed my cheek against his beating heart. "Father?"

He locked me into an embrace. "For always, love."

The key dug into the skin beneath my neck. Ignoring the pain, I gripped my father tighter.



## Chapter Two

“We are less than a day’s ride, Kaylynn.” He’d taken extra effort in anticipation of his audience with the king. His straight, brown hair was clean and slicked in place. He wore a starched, azure military uniform I’d rarely seen him in. The sapphire-and-diamond encrusted hilt of his sword, which paired perfectly with my necklace, poked out from a leather sheath bearing the crest of a griffin. The sword had been gifted to him by the king of Sardis—my birth father.

“Almost there.” He craned his neck to stare out the window and popped an orange slice into his mouth.

Minutes later, Ari whinnied. A whistle rang out from the guard flanking the left side of the carriage. My father hushed all eight-six of my questions with a finger to his lips. He tugged me to my feet, lifted the lid of our bench, and waved his arm from me to the storage compartment.

My eyes flexed. He was kidding, surely.

He swept his arm with a more exaggerated motion.

*Not kidding.*

I hiked up my skirts and clambered into the storage box, propping the lid open with my thigh. Father hefted a large jewelry chest from the storage compartment. He grunted, his fingers turned white and nearly slipped off the box entirely. He dropped the box with a loud thud on the opposite seat.

Father tossed my cloak and his onto the floor of the storage compartment. He lowered food and an unlit oil lantern within.

His urgency repelled my questions. *Why is your guard hiding his saddle beneath a pile of leaves?* appeared at the top of the list.

Father pointed at five brass latches inside the bench. “Lock these!” He whispered. “Remain quiet at all costs. Do not get out until dark. When you emerge, ride hard. East, by Southeast. Travel to the king of Sardis, to your parents.”

I sobbed.

“No, you mustn't.” His hands bracketed my ears, holding me close to him. “An entire kingdom rests on your survival. I love you with my whole heart. Do you know that? Hush now, hush. Listen to your father, one last time, my beautiful daughter.” He pressed his lips, hard, into my forehead. “Never, ever lose what makes you, you.”

I tasted the salt of my tears as they flooded my face. “You have made me, me, Father. You.” I squeezed his upper arms and allowed him to lower me to the floor.

He eased the heavy lid down.

My fingers fumbled as I slid each latch into place.

The weight of the conveyance shifted as father climbed out. Light pushed through slats in the under carriage and my eyes adjusted to the paltry light.

My father spoke instructions, his words muffled by the barriers between us. A second man's voice remarked. A horse hoof clomped. Heavy fabric thudded. Leather creaked. Metal jingled. A heavier thump. *Which horse are they saddling? Ari?*

I switched my focus to the front of the carriage. Again, two men speaking, metal jingling, leather slapping. A wood beam knocked against the ground. Another resounded with a loud crack. The team's shaft? I'd watched our stablemen unfetter horses for my whole life—well, as much of it as I could remember. So when I heard a dull thud with a muted clink, I knew they'd just released horses from the carriage. The “why,” however, befuddled me. Leather bands slapped horse hide and more than one horse thundered down the road.

Closer to me, near the rear of the carriage, a bare hand slapped a meaty horse hide.

The horse's footfalls, heavy at first, grew quieter. *Wait. Did Ari just leave?*

Swords rang, drawn from their sheaths.

Then, silence.

My heart pounded like a stampeding herd. *Don't let anything bad happen to Father.* I expelled a breath. Father had survived bandit attacks in the past. *He's strong. His men are with him.*

Silence stretched.

The lull unnerved me.

And then the ground reverberated. The vehicle vibrated. *A rock slide? No, that made no*

*sense*. The soldiers at the front of the conveyance shouted. *Horses*, I realized. Too many to decipher. Battle cries bellowed from the bandits, growing louder as they stormed toward us.

My heart lurched. I fisted the fabric of my father's cloak, inhaling his musk.

A dark sky vanquished the dim light I'd acclimated to.

Saddles squeaked. Heavy footfalls impacted the earth. Metal belled as sword collided with sword. Men grunted. A scream tore through all the other sound. A heavy bulk hit the carriage, rocking me.

*No, please no.*

Thunder rumbled.

"For Gerry!" Father shouted. A weapon sliced.

A pungent, rusty smell assaulted my small space.

Feet shuffled. Men muttered intelligible words. Metal clanked. A sword slashed. These sounds carried on for what seemed like a lifetime.

A man near the carriage gasped for air. A mass impacted the ground.

No disguised assurances followed. *Father? Father!*

I bit into father's cloak and released a silent scream.

Thunder peeled. Lightning illuminated the world for a flash. Clouds unleashed the rain.

Men murmured. Far fewer horsemen departed than those who's arrived. Yet, their easy departure meant the battle had concluded.

The carriage door creaked and the body wobbled. Heavy, unfamiliar footsteps moved about within. The lid of the bench rattled.

I stiffened. My pulse galloped. Tears soaked my face. Rain pelting the earth splashed through the cracks in the undercarriage.

I couldn't keep air in my lungs. *Calm down.*

Snot and tears mingled together. The slime slid into my mouth. I squeezed my eyes closed and bit harder into the cloak. *Father, please come back!*

Within an arm's reach of my hiding space, the wooden lid of the jewelry box cracked open. "Looky here."

The carriage rocked. The man grunted and groaned. A loud thud followed.

“That’s not happening,” said a gruff voice.

Metal jangled. Fabric swished. The box lid slammed. The conveyance tipped upon a third person’s entry. “Mighty wet out there,” said a nasally voice. “What happened ta ‘im?”

“He got tired. Took a nap.”

Both men guffawed.

“This coach’ll be just the thing we need ta move our goods.”

“How bad is the tack?” the gruff voice asked.

“Them scoundrels messed it up bad. Cracked shaft. Harnesses are a tangled, muddy mess, sliced to bits. All but two horses scattered. And there’s no way dem two beasts can manage the carriage up ‘at hill by demselves in dis muck.”

“Well, there’s no way anyone ‘ll be takin’ this coach for a ride in this weather or with broken tack. Let’s go dry off, celebrate our victory and come back early tomorrow.” He paused. “Help me grab Tiny.”

The floor sprung as the men jumped out. Horse hooves receded into the distance.

Silence, but for the thunderstorm. Lonely, frightening silence.

Rain drummed on the roof of the carriage like a thousand tiny mallets in never-ending timpani solo.

Adrenaline rolled through me in waves. A damp cold seeped into my coffin-sized hiding place. I shivered.

I wrestled myself for Father’s cloak, lifting hips and feet in turn until the heavy fabric weighed down on me like a blanket. I punched the sides of the blanket beneath my head to fluff up my pillow, with more anger and less finesse than Gertrude.

*Gertrude.* Could I return to her? Surely I would be welcome at my parents’ estate. After all I was their heiress.

*I love you. You are mine. There is something you must do—that only you can do. And we are out of time.*

*Father?*

*For always, love.*

Benjamin and Madelyn were and always would be my parents. For my father’s sake, I

would speak with the king of Sardis. After that, I would return home. Maybe Ari would be waiting there for me.

*Ari. I'm glad you are safe, wherever you are. I shall miss you, too.*

Tears rolled over my nose and cheek and dripped onto my makeshift pillow. I wept ...

*Remain quiet at all costs.*

... Without making a sound.

The lurching conveyance rammed me into the wooden wall, jolting me awake. Pitch darkness confronted my eyes as they flew open. My heart hammered. After a brief, laborious pace, the wheels stopped rolling. I strained my ears, waiting for footsteps, for shouts. Any minute the vehicle would sway with the weight of another human.

Birds chirped. Cicadas buzzed.

*The horses probably just tired of standing still.*

My eyes adjusted to dawn's light, bullying through the slim spaces between the boards of the storage compartment.

*I need to leave before those men return.* Two horses—not strong enough to ferry the carriage, but perfect for one person to ride. *That's why father's men buried the saddle.*

Convinced the horses had moved of their own accord, I fingered each of the five latches and eased the lid open.

I lumbered to my feet brought the lantern flame to life.

A boy's face appeared through the door's window.

I gasped. The lantern handle slipped from my fingers.

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