

A Medieval Tale—First Lessons

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Prelude

What does it mean to be happy?

Aliya stood on the train platform waiting for her parents. Her suitcase, full of presents for them, was pleasantly heavy in her hand. She didn't care that she'd had to work nights as a janitor in a supermarket in order to earn money to buy those presents. Any job was a good job, even if it didn't pay much. For Aliya, happiness was going home to the small town where she grew up. That might not be enough for some people, but it was enough for her.

Aliya's father was an officer in the army, and her mother was a nurse. They had traveled from base to base, raised Aliya, and finally settled in the small town she called home. Aliya's mother, Tatiana, put her heart into her profession and taught her daughter to love it, as well. Aliya had chosen to go to medical school and was in her fifth year of training to be a surgeon specializing in abdominal surgery. When she finished, she planned to live and work at the military base where her father was posted. Her goal was to graduate and gain some experience before returning to her hometown. She liked it there. She also liked Alex, a handsome officer she was looking forward to spending the rest of her life with.

Aliya had a printout of her grades—all A's—folded in her purse, and she had just recently assisted with her first operation. According to the rules, she wasn't far enough along in her program to operate, but the surgeon kept a close eye on her, and the operation was a success. It was just a case of appendicitis, but she was proud of herself and couldn't wait to tell her parents.

She kept an anxious eye out for her father's old car, which soon enough came around the corner and parked. Her parents jumped out, and Aliya was hit with a wave of familiar joy. She was alive and healthy, and with the two people she loved best of all, and they were alive and healthy, too.



A quarter of an hour flew by before Vladimir was able to get his wife and daughter back in the car and turn the wheel toward home. Their overwhelming joy was interrupted halfway home when a large truck came roaring over a hill in the middle of their lane. Vladimir swung the wheel to avoid a collision and would have managed it if another driver hadn't stopped in the same spot on the shoulder to send a text just two hours before. That car left behind a large puddle of oil that sent their car skidding. It flipped several times before hitting a tree.

A last, despairing thought shot through Aliya's mind, *Is this it? I don't want to die! I want to live!* Then everything went dark.



With only the full moon for light, an elderly woman picked her way through the strangely quiet forest. She wore roughly made wooden shoes and carried a large basket.

In the moonlight, tree branches seemed like monstrous claws, and an owls' hooting filled her with blind fear. But the darkness did not dissuade her; she knew where she was going.

Finally, she reached a small hut in the center of a clearing. Cheery in the daytime but in the moonlight, the stream running by the hut became the river of the dead, and the garden seemed bare and empty. To the woman's eyes, the door to the hut looked like the jaws of a beast.

She took a step forward. *There is no way back*, she thought, scratching at the door.

Several minutes passed before it opened, and an old crone—like a fairytale witch—appeared in the doorway. Her gray hair fell uncombed around her shoulders, and a wart sat on her chin. Her once-white nightgown was dirty and patched. But it was her black eyes that distracted the old woman. They were bright, intelligent and surprisingly youthful, *Like the eyes of a young girl*, she thought.

“What do you want?”

The woman offered her the basket. “This is for you.”

“I asked what you wanted.” The crone made no move to take the basket. From out of nowhere, a large, white cat appeared at her feet, rubbing against her legs. It looked up at the woman with red eyes. In the wavering light from the hut, the cat seemed like an evil spirit that had come from hell to take her soul.

She did not retreat. “I want you to help My Lady.”

“Help her? How?”

“You know all about it, Moraga. Lady Lilian has been in a bad way for three days now. Her childbed fever will take her to her grave. The doctor came and gave her a cleansing and let her blood, but the fever won't let go. I don't want her to die.”

The old witch shrugged. “But what does your lady wish for?”

“She wants to die.” The woman looked down. “I know she does, but I...”

The witch's face softened. “I understand. Even with all her faults, she's like a daughter to you. You love her. Let's see that basket.”

“Yes. And this.” As the woman took a purse from her belt, something in it jingled. “This is also for you.”

“Good.”

The witch didn't bother to look at her fee. She put her hand under the woman's chin and lifted her face so she could see her eyes.

“I will give you something—something strong. You will mix it with milk and give it to her to drink. Then, you'll need to sit by her bed and call her by name or call her by the name you used for her when she was small. Talk to her about anything, but keep talking. If she decides to live, she will come back to you.”

“What if she doesn't?”

The corner of the witch's mouth twitched. “My remedy can bring a soul back into the body, but it won't work if the soul doesn't want to stay. Do you understand?”

The woman nodded.

“It all depends on you. If you get through to her, she'll come back. Otherwise, she'll be gone forever, and nothing will help.”

The woman nodded again. “I will do it.”

“Then wait here; I'll bring you the remedy.”

The witch disappeared back into her hut, leaving the woman on the step. She was still afraid of the forest noises and the trees stretching out their claws to her, but she waited for the medicine, thinking of the walk back through the forest.

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When I get home, I will do everything as the witch instructed. I don't want to lose my girl. I will call her name—Lilian, Lily, Baby. She'll come back to her old nanny. She just has to.

Chapter 1

Secrets and Lies

The first thing Aliya felt was pain.

And the second.

And the third.

Then she opened her eyes. The face hanging over her gave little cause for optimism. *She doesn't look like a nurse.* Aliya closed her eyes. She remembered the car flipping, the sound of her neck snapping. *I ought to be in the hospital,* she thought, knowing it would take at least a year of rehab to get back on her feet.

That means putting off my residency. She had been looking forward to it, especially since they had promised her a rotation in trauma. *I'm probably in the trauma department now—as a patient.*

She opened her eyes again. *Why is there a dusty pink rag hanging over my head? And who is the lady with no teeth who keeps bending down over me? Is she asking me something?*

“Has My Lady come around?”

The woman's breath was so vile that Aliya groaned and lost consciousness again.



She felt a little better the second time she opened her eyes. She still hurt all over, but the pain was less. Aliya couldn't understand why her pelvis ached so badly after the car accident. She remembered hitting her head but nothing that would have caused injury to her lower half. *But who knows? Maybe I have a fractured pelvis. It hurts, for sure.*

The dirty pink rag was back above her head. The room stank of smoke and feces, but she didn't feel like fainting again...yet.

Aliya looked around the room, and what she saw made her doubt she was in her right mind. She must have hit her head so hard that she was hallucinating.

She lay on an enormous bed in the center of a large room that had to be at least as big as her parent's entire apartment. On one side of the room, a window showed her the forest beyond. On the other side, stood a massive set of wooden wardrobes, and in front of her bed, she saw a magnificent gilded door. Everything was pink. The walls were covered with fabric in a sickly pink color with huge gold flowers the size of cabbages. The curtains were a happy shade of piglet. The wardrobes had been clumsily painted the same shade of pink with gold accents. The room was furnished with a writing table the color of a robin's breast with roses painted up the legs, as well as several armchairs, upholstered in the same fabric that was on the walls, and a couple of large vases full of live roses. Topping it all off—literally—was a dusty pink canopy, complete with gold bows hanging over the bed.

It's the perfect room for an unhinged Barbie doll. Aliya saw pink circles swimming in front of her eyes, but fainting wouldn't be so easy this time.

“My Lady!” The same face appeared again.

Aliya pulled together what strength she had left and breathed out a question. “Where am I?”

The words came out like “E... a... I?” It was a terrible attempt, but it was all she could manage.

Apparently, the nurse’s aide (*Who else could she be?*) took that as permission to speak, and burst out, “My Lady, how glad I am that you’ve come around! You’ve been lying here three days. The healer came and said not to touch you. She said that your body would fight off death if it could. Otherwise, it would be your fate to follow your little one. Childbed fever has taken many women. We were afraid that the malady would get you, but we prayed hourly. With the Lord’s help, you’ll be back on your feet in no time. Would you like a sip of water?”

A giant cup made of a yellowish metal appeared under her nose. Could it be gold? Red stones glittered around the edge of the cup.

Aliya felt like a malfunctioning computer. Without thinking, she put her lips to the cold metal and took a sip. The water was delicious, and it was cold. *Tasty, clean water without a hint of chlorine.* It seemed to have been mixed with something like a cheap, boxed wine.

What is happening to me? Aliya was afraid to ask questions. As a doctor in training, she knew there were times that demanded action and times that required silence. Holding your tongue was always a good idea; she knew that for a fact. *You’re never sorry for the things you don’t say.*

Instead, she closed her eyes and frantically tried to think. *Whatever else they have done to me, the gods have not deprived me of my ability to think.*

She pushed to remember more of the accident. The truck was the last thing she saw. Her father yelled, then something hit her head, and her neck snapped. Then everything went black.

There was something in the darkness with me, but what was it? She didn’t know. So, she began analyzing what she had learned from the nurse’s assistant.

My Lady. She was obviously talking to Aliya, but ladies were all done away with in 1917, which was a mistake in Aliya’s opinion. She would have to think about that later. For now, she was a Lady. *Where in the world do people still talk like that?* She had no idea.

She refocused. *You’ve been lying here three days.* After an accident like that, Aliya wouldn’t be surprised if she’d been lying on her back in a coma for twenty years.

The healer had been there. What the hell kind of facility has healers instead of doctors and nurses? Even if I were in Africa, there would be Red Cross doctors, and this doesn’t look like Africa. It’s too cold, and the sky outside is gray. Healers aside, why did they wait for me to fight off my “malady” in the age of antibiotics? You just give your patient a mega-dose and watch the bacteria die off.

And what did the woman say about a little one? Did she mean a baby? Aliya had only slept with Alex a few times over the holidays, and they had been extremely careful. She wanted to finish medical school, and he was expecting to be promoted to major, so they wouldn’t get married until they reached those targets. Plus, she had had her period several times since then, right on schedule. *I would know if I were pregnant. So what “little one” is the woman talking about?*

However, if she’d given birth that would explain the severe pain around her pelvis. *But how is that possible?*

Aliya had two imaginable explanations for everything. The first was simple. She walked away from the accident, got married, got pregnant and gave birth, and now, because of the stress of postpartum fever and clinical death, she had forgotten everything since the accident and would have to start all over again.

There was a second explanation, but it seemed beyond belief... Her roommate at medical school was a Tolkien freak. She was into role-playing games and believed in parallel worlds, and her half of their room was littered with fantasy books and posters. Aliya knew how Ella would have explained these strange circumstances.

She would say I'm in a parallel world and have to find my way back. Aliyah shuddered at the thought. It defied all the logic instilled within her. *And besides, if I am, indeed, in another world, I'll probably never find my way back! I'm much more likely to die a rapid death without antibiotics. Everything in this room is a potential germ factory—by the looks of it, the fancy cup I just drank out of has never been washed, and the old woman hasn't seen a bath in her lifetime.*

In the end, Aliya decided not to say anything. That seemed the safest course of action. She remembered the Inquisition. *Those priests would have known exactly what to do with visitors from other worlds.* They'd test her to see if she was an associate of the devil, and that meant going for a swim with a heavy rock tied around her neck. If she managed not to drown, then she was guilty, and the devil had helped her. And if she did drown, they'd say, "Too bad, she must have been innocent. Let's pray for her soul and thank God for knowing best." *Fun times all around.*

What if this is all a bad dream? Aliya didn't want to drown or be burned at the stake, even in a dream—even as an act of faith. She didn't care what world she was in or what planet it was or what century. *Judging by the fact that there are no mirrors, it has to be no later than the 15th century.* She didn't care about anything but her health. She needed to sleep and get her strength back.

Sleep. Aliya gave a deep sigh and started counting sheep. She was asleep by the time the sixteenth sheep jumped the fence.



Aliya got her second shock when she woke again. After she opened her eyes, she drank some water and realized she needed to pee. Her trusty nurse, who stank worse than ever, pulled back the blanket and stuck some kind of medieval pot under her patient.

Aliya was about to protest until she caught sight of her body. *That. is. not. my. body.* Her whole life, Aliya had had dark hair, olive skin, and gray eyes, and she'd never been over a size 8. *Which is a perfectly average size when you're five and a half feet tall.* But instead, lying on the sheet, which should have been washed a month ago, was a doughy, fair-skinned body that looked like it took a size 16 or more. The body's dirty nightgown had ridden up, and she saw that she was a natural blonde.

Aliya fainted dead away, but that didn't keep her from peeing in the pot.



When she opened her eyes again, the sun was up. She still felt awful. Her mouth was dry, and her head ached. She felt nauseous. And she preferred not to think about her perineum. If she had, in fact, given birth recently, the baby must have been a giant porcupine.

Someone was holding her hand and talking. "...Visa Hadson's ewe threw a two-headed lamb. The medicus, the same one who came to see you, went to look at it and said that he would stuff it and send it to the King's Museum of Curiosities. By the way, he promised to check on you today. Oh, please don't die, my girl! Just don't leave me! I nursed you and carried you in my arms and raised you, and I raised your father,

too! You're all he has, his only flesh and blood. And you're all I have. I know you want to go back to the earth like your mother did, but he won't survive without you. Your husband may be an earl, but he's a villain! Here his poor wife is on her deathbed after trying to give him a child, and he's back in the capital carousing with whores. I steeped a piece of gold in holy water for you so that you'd be even more beautiful after giving birth. Please get better, my precious angel! I can't stay here without you! Who would look out for me if you weren't here?"

The woman's words dissolved into unintelligible muttering.

Aliya didn't know anything about a Visa Hadson, but she assumed it was a person. *She (or he) has a sheep, which makes her (or him) a person, right? The medicus (Is that a colleague? Why "medicus" instead of "doctor"?) is planning to stuff it and send it to the King's Museum of Curiosities, which makes no sense because if I'm still in Russia where I belong, there have always been tsars instead of kings.*

"I raised you" (she must be a nanny or a wet nurse) "and I raised your father, too." Aliya was sure that her father had never had a nanny. He had grown up in an orphanage. *"You want to go back to the earth like your mother did."* *But my mother is alive, and my father is just fine.* At least, as far as she remembered after the accident.

In an instant, it all came together. She was in someone else's body in a completely different world. *Apparently, I have a husband who is an earl and a royal jerk. Just what I need. So, my job was to give birth, and he doesn't care too much whether I live or not. He could find a new wife; earls are always in demand.*

There wasn't much more she could deduce from what she had heard. Aliya made a decision. She could stay in bed as long as she liked, but judging from the sound of crying, there was at least one person in this world who loved her. If she got up, she could make this woman happy and perhaps learn some more about where she was.

Strangely enough, with that decision, her head was completely clear. Aliya opened her eyes and whispered, "Nanny."

That was enough. The old woman leaped from her stool like someone had poked her with a needle. She smiled with all eight of her teeth.

"Lily! My baby! How do you feel?"

Aliya dropped her eyelashes a bit. "It hurts. Talking hurts. Give me something to drink."

"Of course, right away, my dear," the woman began puttering around. "Right this minute, I'll mix you some water and wine. Or would you rather have milk? We have fresh milk from this morning."

"Just water," Aliya said. She felt like she hadn't eaten in a while, and milk might upset her empty stomach. Buttermilk would be just the thing, so she asked for some.

The woman smoothed the hair back from Aliya's face. "I'll start some buttermilk for you this very day! It will be ready tomorrow. For now, take a sip of this."

Aliya saw the gold cup with rubies flash in front of her eyes. She obediently drank the water with wine. Just a little, to keep it from going to her head. She looked up at the woman who handed it to her.

"Nanny, what happened to me? I can't remember. My mind is in a fog. Tell me what happened."

The woman looked away. "You're too weak still to hear the whole story."

I don't see how suspense will make me feel better, Aliya thought. Then she made a sad face. "Please tell me. Please."

She couldn't force a tear, but the woman was touched anyway. She looked down and said quietly, "You

lost the baby. It was a boy.”

It wasn't clear what kind of reaction she expected, but Aliya kept her eyes down and asked another question. “I see. What else?”

“You had childbed fever for three days. The medicus came and let your bad blood and gave you a cleansing remedy. Nothing helped.”

Aliya's eyes flashed in anger. “Don't let that fool in here to see me again. I'll rip his legs off.”

The nanny almost choked when she heard that. “But child, how can you say that? Your husband sent him all the way from Lavery when he heard you were unwell.”

“Perhaps he hoped that idiot would do me in,” Aliya grumbled.

“Whatever do you mean?” the nanny burst out. “Medicus Craybey is one of the best physicians in Lavery. Even the king has deigned to use his services.”

“That's the king's problem. Why did I lose the baby?”

The nanny shrugged. “Medicus Craybey said that you fell on the stairs.”

“Is that so?”

“We found you at the bottom of the stairs. There was a lot of blood. I was afraid you wouldn't make it.” The nanny sniffled and hid her face in her apron.

“Not a chance of that,” Aliya whispered to herself. The woman didn't hear her and continued to sniffle.

Aliya studied the woman. She was short and looked to be about sixty years old, with a tired but pleasant face. She had something like a little cap pinned to her hair. Aliya had only seen things like that in movies, but she was pretty sure that the sleazy fabric covering half the woman's hair was intended to be a cap.

Her dress was made of what looked like homespun fabric in a grayish-brown color. It was plain, without bows or ruffles. The apron was as dirty as the dress. She couldn't see what the woman had on her feet because the dress went all the way to the floor. *It must function like a prehistoric vacuum cleaner when she walks.*

Aliya sighed and spoke again, making her voice as sweet as possible, “Nanny, I need your help. I'm alive, and I want to get my health back. It's going to take a lot of effort.”

The old woman dropped the apron from her face. Her gray eyes shone with fire, and Aliya realized that the woman loved her just as fiercely as her parents did back in her own world. This was a person who would do anything for her.

Anything at all. Whatever I ask for. A person like that is valuable. She could be useful.

Aliya kept her face neutral. She put on a small smile and said, “I want to try to stand up. I need to wash.”

“How can you stand up, child? The medicus said that you should stay in bed another tennight!¹

“It's all right,” Aliya gasped as she struggled to sit, ignoring the pain in her lower abdomen. “I can do it. And I really need to take a bath!”

“But washing is so unhealthy! That is what Father Vopler says.”

“He's welcome to have all the lice he can handle,” Aliya said, her patience wearing thin. When she saw the disappointment on the woman's face, she changed her tone to something between whining and begging.

¹ A tennight is ten days, and a month is forty days. A year has nine months and three extra days, the length of which depends on the phase of the moon. New Year's is celebrated during those three days.

“Nanny, please help me.”

The nanny (*it would be nice to know her name*) sighed and shook her head. “But Lily dear, it’s so bad for you.”

“Please!”

“Oh, all right. You lie here while I order some hot water. When I come back, I’ll help you stand up.”

Aliya nodded in agreement.

Thoughtfully, Aliya watched her leave. Then she began studying the room again. Unfortunately, all of the pink décors was still there. Looking closer this time, she began to suspect that the fabric on the walls was pretty expensive. Aliya was sure that the curtains would cost a fortune in her own world. She had a friend who moonlighted as a seamstress and was always trying to teach Aliya about armsyces, darts, gussets, inserts, cross-stitch, machine embroidery and all the different kinds of seams. There was too much to remember, but Aliya could tell hand stitching from machine stitching, even at a distance.

She turned to study the furniture. The wardrobes were huge, pink monstrosities. And who thought it was a good idea to make a table out of heavy marble? It was impossible to move, and if it fell over it would put a hole in the floor. The chairs looked like they had been carved from whole pieces of pine.

One of the chairs looked more like a wooden chest that someone had nailed an uncomfortable back to before covering the whole thing in fabric—pink fabric, covered with ugly gold roses.

She hated this kind of stuff.

The pink canopy over her head needed to be shaken out before the dust completely obscured its gold roses.

Aliya plucked up her courage and looked down at her bed. The bedspread was an expensive brocade, but it was filthy—and pink. It was obviously handmade. The sheets were pink silk. They were dirty and stank. Aliya gritted her teeth and pulled the sheets to the side. She had to have a look at herself. She was dirty; she smelled bad; and she was covered in fat like a big, pink whale. Offhand, she figured she weighed 200-230 pounds. She almost cried; it was the worst reincarnation imaginable. She took a deep breath. *I can deal with this. I’ll just watch what I eat and start exercising.*

The floorboards outside her door creaked. Aliya pulled the bedspread back over her body. Just as three men came in dragging a large metal washtub. When they let it down, it hit the floor with a boom that made Aliya jump. The men went out and returned ten minutes later with buckets of boiling water, which they poured into the washtub. After emptying three buckets of boiling water and three buckets of cold water, they put two more buckets of hot water on the floor by the tub. Aliya watched their preparations in surprise.

The youngest of the three men looked to be eighteen. The oldest of them was way past fifty. The third looked to be about thirty-five or forty, no more. All of them were wearing tunics and strange leggings that had once been white. The tunics were pink. *Of course.* The two older men had beards, and the youngest was working hard to grow out some hairs on his chin. Their heads were uncovered, but they had sprinkled them with some kind of powder. Their hair was tied back with dirty pink ribbons. On their feet, they wore felt shoes that had apparently been designed to make the wearer look dumpy.

They looked awful. She wondered if all the men in this world dressed like that.

Aliya noticed that none of their clothes had buttons. The tunics closed with ties. Her nanny’s dress was the same way. She wondered if buttons had yet to be invented. If not, she would have to invent them and get the patent...if they had patents in this world. And if they didn’t, she would find a partner and open a button-

making workshop.

Stop. My mind is wandering too far. I need to stay in the here and now, at least until I've had my bath.

The men left, and her nanny came back to her bedside. "Let's get up, Lily, dear."

Aliya tried to stand. She almost groaned in pain. Every muscle and cell of her body was in agony. She gritted her teeth. She was used to standing for hours at a time and knew how to deal with pain.

Her nanny helped her up. It became clear that the woman intended to put her into the bath in her nightgown. Aliya stared at her. "Nanny, I won't wear this nightgown again. Help me take it off and have someone wash it. Then tell me if I have a clean one I can wear."

"You do, but Lily..."

"I'm begging you, Nanny! I feel so awful. Do you want me to trip on this nightgown and fall again?"

Her nanny was horrified. She helped Aliya get the disgusting sack over her head.

Aliya almost broke down in tears when she saw the rolls of fat on her body, but she kept it together.

"If only I had a mirror," she mumbled.

"You ordered one, remember? Let me help you, my pretty butterfly."

Aliya nodded. Her nanny led her to one of the wardrobes and opened the door. Aliya gasped. The wardrobe held a full-length mirror, which was just a sheet of polished metal, and Aliya could finally see what had happened to her.

She had to admit that she had her good points as well as her bad ones. While her legs, hips, and butt were very large, and her waist was obscured by four rolls of fat, she had small, high breasts and a long neck (even if it was partially hidden behind three chins). Her hands were elegant, and her legs were well proportioned. All she needed to do was lose about a hundred pounds.

Aliya was also pleased to see that she had a heavy braid of hair that fell almost to her knees instead of the rat's tail she was used to. *It must be all the organic food you eat in a place like this.* She studied her face and liked it. Large cheeks got in the way, but her eyes were big and green. Her nose wasn't hooked or turned up; it was just a plain, straight nose. Her ears were fine, too. Best of all, she didn't see any acne, warts or other spots on her smooth skin. Thank goodness, she didn't see any of the pits left by smallpox, either. There was just a small birthmark at the corner of her lip. Her teeth were all there, and she could tell that her wisdom teeth hadn't come in yet.

So she had a good foundation, and everything else could be fixed. While she was getting in shape, she'd have time to assimilate. Aliya thought of herself as a pragmatist. She wouldn't try to change everything around her all at once. *Why bother, when all I really want is a convenient, easygoing lifestyle?*

She would start at the beginning by finding out what was going on in the outside world. Aliya turned to her nanny and flashed her a babyish smile. "Come help me wash and tell me all the things that happened while I was ill."

The old woman smiled broadly. "Whatever you want, Lily."

The clever schemer hiding behind Lily's eyes grinned; she knew exactly what she wanted.



"Anna! Sweetheart! Open the door!"

The man kept his voice down and glanced from side to side as if he was afraid of something. He didn't have to wait long. The door opened, and someone pulled him inside before the lock clicked shut.

“Have you lost your mind?”

The woman who posed the question had passionate, southern features, with dark hair falling in waves over her round shoulders, and a sensual, full figure, with an innocently round face. Her forehead was high, and her hair had been plucked according to the latest fashion so that it formed a triangle above her face. Her thin, arched eyebrows framed large, brown eyes, and she had a small nose and heart-shaped lips above a round chin with a dimple.

“What are you doing here? My father is here today!”

“He won’t be singing you to sleep tonight, and I have my rights as your husband!”

The girl’s face was tight with fear. “Be quiet! You’ll get us both killed!”

“Maybe I’ll save us. You’re already sixteen, and you’ve been my wife for a year. Come here and stop stringing me along!” The man caught the girl by a lock of hair and pulled her to him. Anna cried out quietly, but he had no intention of stopping. He knew she liked a little bit of rough play.



A short time later, they continued the conversation where they had left off, only this time they were in bed, and the sheets were crumpled.

“How much longer will we keep hiding?”

“Lons, you know my father is in charge of my fate until I turn eighteen. After that, I’ll be free. There won’t be any dowry, but at least we can announce our wedding. Just wait a little longer.”

“Two years is a little longer? You want me to hide in the corner for two more years? Two more years of catching your every glance like it’s a favor. Two more years...”

A soft hand covered his mouth. “My father controls my life. With just a word from him, I’d be sent to a convent for knowing you like this. He could have our marriage annulled. The Holy Throne already looks askance at him. You don’t want to have your head on the block for seducing the king’s daughter, do you?”

That subdued him.

“And I don’t want to lose you. You’re my husband. I love you. Everything will be fine. Just have patience.”

“I see you’re a teacher as well as an aristocrat.”

“People will say that you took advantage of my youth and inexperience. Would it be so hard for you to stay away from me when His Majesty and his entourage are here? We can be together again after he leaves. I promise!”

Lons sighed. “Anna, love of my life, I never could refuse you. I promise. I’ll wait a tennight. But tonight, you’re mine!”

There was a predatory light in his eyes as he pulled the girl to him. Anna moaned and ran her fingers through his dark hair. Now, she knew for certain that he wouldn’t be leaving until morning.

And she didn’t want him to.



His Majesty, the King of Ativerna, Edward VIII, shuffled papers around on his desk. The life of a king was hard labor from dawn to dusk, dirty work for no gratitude or appreciation after he was gone. *Nobody thinks about the king when things are going well, but any problems always end up in the king’s lap. He is,*

after all, the favorite of the gods. His Majesty.

It could take a toll on a king's personality, and in the end, have the historians say, "King Edward was a tyrant and a despot." He wondered how the historians would fare if they had to do his job. Maybe they would behave like Radiant Ones², but he doubted it.

King Edward was no tyrant or a despot either. He was almost unnaturally lucky for a king; he was loved and had friends.



Thirty-six years before, Edward had married the Princess of Avesterra in an arranged marriage to further his country's diplomatic aims, but the day of his wedding was also the first time he laid eyes on Aloysius Earton's daughter, the sister of Jyce Earton. Jessamine was her brother's younger twin, born half an hour after him. She was charming, beautiful and intelligent and had everything the Princess of Avesterra lacked, but Edward knew he would have fallen in love with her regardless. Love at first sight really happens, he knew. *You see a person and realize that you're looking at your other half. Nothing else matters. That's true love.*

Jessamine had fallen in love with the young prince, too. She was crazy with love, and Edward's new wife never stood a chance. Her husband was calm and indifferent to her both day and night. His eyes often wandered to the dark-haired figure of Jessie. His gray eyes would find her blue eyes, and their hands would meet when they danced.

"Why are you a prince?" the blue eyes whispered.

"Why aren't you a princess? I would make you my queen, my goddess," the gray eyes answered.

The storm broke during a royal hunt. Jessamine's horse threw her and trotted back to rejoin the others. Several of the men spread out to look for her, but it was Edward who found her. They spent the night together in a woodsman's cabin. By morning, the prince had an official mistress.

It was an awful scandal. Princess Imogene of Avesterra screamed and cried. She threw dishes. She fainted. The old king shook his head in disappointment. Members of his court gossiped with the outraged members of the clergy.

Edward never hid his relationship with Jessie. The old earl and the old king disapproved but said nothing in public. The lovers did, however, have the support of Jessamine's brother.

Jyce, Viscount of Earton, adored his twin sister. If she needed the prince in order to be happy, then he figured she should have the prince. Edward knew that, in Jyce, he had gained a true friend. After all, they both loved Jessie.



Two years into their marriage, the Princess of Avesterra gave birth to her first child. The following year, Jessie had a daughter. When Jessie was pregnant for the first time, it was Jyce who helped them decide what to do. He knew that he was impotent, a consequence of the edematous fever³ he had suffered as a young man. He would have no children of his own, but that was no reason to let the line of the Earls of Earton die

² Radiant Ones are similar to angels in the local religion.

³ Edematous fever was an old name for mumps.

out. It would be easy enough to marry some girl and send her away, supposedly to give birth, so that he could claim Jessie's daughter as his own. And when she bore the king a son, Jyce would announce the birth of his heir.

On the surface, everything was fine, but things were not quite so simple behind the doors of the family home. Jessie's mother decided that she could not live down the shame of her daughter's illicit affair and left to live in Earton, the ancestral estate. The earl, on the other hand, loved his daughter and, seeing that she couldn't live without Edward, found no reason to go against his son's plan. There was also the future to think of. By providing assistance now, he would gain the good graces of the future king, who would be sure to provide for all of his children, both legitimate and illegitimate. The Earton family would do well in the end.



Jyce's bride was chosen by a secret council. Alicia Weeks was no longer young, she wasn't much to look at, and she had little property, but she had a long list of illustrious ancestors and family pride to help her keep her head up. Jyce's offer of his hand was like a gift from heaven to her. She listened to the unique terms of the arrangement without batting an eyelash and put forward a term of her own: that she wouldn't actually have to give birth. Doctors had told her that her hips were too narrow. If Jyce could be satisfied by a life where they only saw each other on occasion, it was all right by her. They would each lead their own private lives without interference from the other. She was happy to claim Jessie's offspring as her own, and Jyce was welcome to take lovers as long as he did nothing to shame her publicly.

Jyce agreed to the bargain and never looked back. Over twenty years of married life, he "fathered" two children: first Amalia and then Jerrison, called Jess, five years later. Alicia had no interest in the children, but for propriety's sake, she appeared in public with them once a year so that she could be seen petting them, after which she went back to her own affairs.

She shone in high society, flirting, gossiping and behaving like any other lady at court with the assistance of her husband. Jyce was so pleased that his wife provided cover for Jessie's children and otherwise left him alone that he would have done anything for her. Alicia had all the money and social position she could possibly want.

Amalia and Jess lived with their "father" and a whole host of nannies. The house next door belonged to the king's official mistress, whom he visited eight times a tennight. During those years, Edward's wife, Princess Imogene, gave birth to another son, and two years later, she died of a fever.



After his wife's death, Edward asked for permission to marry Jessie; the old king just shrugged and gave his consent. So, Jessie married a prince and became a queen one year later when Edward ascended the throne. For the next twenty years, the royal family lived in peace and harmony and welcomed two more beautiful daughters.

Then, Jessamine died of a fever and was mourned by the king and the entire nation. The people had always loved their kind queen, and wandering minstrels composed songs about the romantic tale of Jessie and Edward.

There was, however, a dark side to the story. Edward's younger son with Imogene of Avesterra,

Richard, adored his loving stepmother, who sang him songs and told him stories in an attempt to take the place of his dead mother. But his oldest son by the princess, Edmund, was an exact copy of his mother and had inherited her hatred of Jessie and the rest of the Earton family. He tried to avoid showing his true feelings in public, but his father knew.

The oldest son was first in line for the throne, and Edward would have liked to find a wife for Edmund when his son turned thirty, but Jessie's death was followed by a two-year period of mourning. Edmund seemed to be in no hurry, and his father never forced him to do anything. Sadly, a year and a half after Jessie's death, Jyce, Earl of Earton, and prince Edmund were found dead in Edmund's sitting room. Both had been poisoned, and questions abounded. Had Edmund tried to poison his father's oldest friend? Or had Jyce decided that it was too risky for his family and his sister's children to let Edmund come to power? Edward didn't want to know the truth. Jess took up Jyce's position as Earl, and a friend to the king and to Richard. Edward never told the boys that they were brothers, but they were best friends anyway.



Richard, like his father, was a tall blonde with gray eyes, and Jess was a soldier. Just as his father, the Earl, had been a marshal under King Edward, Jess would serve someday under King Richard. If Jess was lucky, his son would serve under Richard's son.

That was, if he had a son. Jyce had already married his son off three times, the first time when the boy was eight. His bride-to-be was the daughter of the Earl of Errolston, but young Eliza died at the age of twelve, and Jyce found his son another wife. Magdalena Yerby, daughter of the Barron of Yerby, died giving her young husband a daughter. After that, it became harder to find a wife for Jess. People were superstitious and felt he brought his wives bad luck.

Then August Broklend offered to help. He had a single daughter named Lilian. She was ten years younger than Jess, but that made no difference. She was old enough to have a child, and she had a nice dowry. Jess and Lilian were married, and the house of Broklend joined the house of Earton, greatly expanding their land holdings and giving Jess access to the Broklend family boatyards.

Lilian was August's only child, despite the fact that the old man had been married three times. He hadn't wanted to leave his boatyards to a woman, so he was pleased to have Jess for a son-in-law. Jess was not a born sailor, but he set out to learn the boatbuilding business from the ground up with August's help.

The king was proud of his son's ambition. Lilian, however, was another story. His Majesty saw her just once—at the wedding—and realized that his first wife, Imogene, could have been worse. At the very least, he could take her to bed without shuddering.

Lilian was dim-witted and overweight. The king couldn't think of any other way to put it. He quietly held out hope that she would die in childbirth or that Jess would find a lover, as he had found Jessie. His son had already seduced half of the women at court, and the king felt that the love of a good woman would settle him down. It was about time.



Speak of the devil... The king's musings were interrupted as the door to his chambers creaked.

"Is that you, Jess?"

"Yes." The man stepped from the shadows into the light.

Edward pointed to a chair. “So, you’ve returned.”

“I have, Your Majesty. I am prepared to give all my attention to government affairs.”

“Jess, I don’t like it when you use that title with me.”

“All right, Uncle Ed.”

To the world, the Earl of Earton was the king’s nephew by his second marriage, and the king preferred to hear his own son call him “Uncle Ed” instead of “Your Majesty.”

The young man’s face took on a roguish expression. The king shook his head. “Forget the government. I wish you’d pay some attention to your family.”

“Government affairs happen to be my family affairs,” the young man answered impudently.

“How wrong you are. The government’s business concerns me alone,” Edward grumbled. “Stop avoiding the subject. You should have given me at least a pair of nephews by now.”

“One may be on the way.” Jess sighed. Then his voice scaled up a notch. “I can’t do it, Uncle! Just look at her. She’s stupid, she throws fits all the time, and she’s ugly! If you saw her in a dream, you’d die in your sleep. You wouldn’t touch her with a barge pole!”

“No one’s asking you to fall in love with her. Just give her a baby, that’s all. You can cover her face with a handkerchief during the act if you like.”

“Or hold a pillow over her face,” Jess spit out. “I’m telling you; she’s pregnant already.”

“How many months?”

Jess thought for a minute. “About three months. Or four.”

“Will you bring her to court after the birth?”

Jess made a face. “I’m sorry, Uncle, but I’d rather not.”

“Think about it. You won’t have to see her often, and…”

“No. She can stay in Earton, so I don’t have to see her ever. I sent her a physician and some money. That’s more than enough!”

Edward shook his head. He had given up trying to raise his son. The boy was already a man, and the king had problems of his own. “What other news is there?”

“I have some reports from the boatyard. We can build very good boats using the drawings we borrowed from Fereiry. The shipwrights want to build one as a trial to see how it turns out.”

“And you agree with them?”

“Of course! August is curious to see the result, as well. I’ve brought the drawings to show you. Would you like to take a look?”

“I have some reports from the treasury to go over. Do you have any idea how much they stole this month?”

“I don’t. I want to build the boat using my own money. It will have two decks, with—”

“Tell me about it later. Have you seen Richard?”

“Not yet. Should I?”

“Yes. I have decided it is time for him to marry. Keep an eye on him. Make sure he doesn’t do anything scandalous in the meantime. Is that clear?”

Jess grinned. Edward’s heart skipped a beat. *How he looks like his mother!*

“Of course, Uncle. I’ll watch him. Who is he going to marry?”

“Marry? I don’t know. There are two princesses that I know of who are the right age. It will be either

Anna of Wellster or Lidia of Ivernea.”

“But—”

“Both girls’ families want to be chosen. The Wellsters have five other daughters, so they’d like to get rid of one. Anna is the right age, and my contacts tell me she is attractive.”

“That’s good. At least Richard wouldn’t need a handkerchief in order to sleep with her. What about Lidia?”

“She’s the only unmarried daughter in Ivernea. She’s never been married or even engaged. They say she’s plain as a wool sock⁴.”

“That bad?”

“Anna is certainly the more handsome of the two.”

“Then why not choose Anna?”

“Beauty isn’t everything. And I want Richard to have a choice; I was never allowed to choose.”

“You made your choice later,” Jess winked. “I think you did the right thing. My aunt was still beautiful at forty.”

“Like I said, beauty isn’t everything. Jessie was kind and intelligent. Those are much more important qualities in a wife.”

Jess’s face fell. Then he shook himself and smiled again. “I’m no king, so my wife can have as many children as she wants. I’ll find kindness and intelligence somewhere else. They say Lady Wells has returned. She needs someone to console her after the death of her old, awful husband.”

Edward shook his head. “How is your daughter?”

Jerrison’s face lit up with a smile. “Miranda is sharp as a tack. Her teachers are pleased with her. But I can’t take her with me.”

“Send her to the country.”

“To be with Lilian?”

“Do you have another choice? Send governesses and nannies with her. People you trust.”

“I may have to do that.”

“What if you send her to your sister?”

“There’s no point trying. You should have seen how Miranda screamed and cried after her last visit. She refuses to see Amalia, and I haven’t the slightest idea why.”

“Fine. You’ll figure out what to do with her. Give it some thought. Now, leave me those drawings and run off. Just don’t let Richard get into trouble. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jess replied. He gave a military salute and disappeared out the door.

The king shook his head as he watched him go. *Good-for-nothing pup*. Nobody could claim that the young man was especially talented. He didn’t win all his games of squares⁵, he didn’t command the best regiment in Ativerna, and he didn’t get up extra early to get a jump on his affairs. He didn’t have a hard body with muscles of steel under his courtly clothing, and he probably wasn’t prepared to give his life for his country and his brother.

No, Jess was just a typical courtier. He liked to play with expensive toys and gilded weapons. He was

⁴ Wool sock—local slang for an old maid

⁵ A local variation of chess.

just like all the rest of them. None the less, Edward thought that he and Jessie had made a wonderful child. *Perfect in every way.*

His Majesty sighed and turned back to the Treasury reports. He knew his duty.



Lady Adelaide Wells was overjoyed. She kept it under wraps, of course; a lady was not supposed to be in high spirits just three months after her husband’s passing—even if that husband was fifty-two years her senior and the bane of her existence, constantly blowing his nose, coughing, and sweating. Even if he was a source of daily torment, a widowed lady was supposed to mourn.

So, Adelaide mourned. She did a beautiful job of it. Other women were welcome to sob until the paint came off their faces. Adelaide would mourn in her own way, with just one diamond-like tear lingering in the corner of her eye. And she would have the most wonderful mourning clothes.

With her black hair and dark-brown eyes, green⁶ looked good on her, especially with the right powder and blush. She knew how to use makeup; she had suffered a bout of smallpox five years before and had learned to conceal the few scars remaining on her cheeks. They didn’t mar her beauty in the least.

She was sure to find another husband, but she didn’t want to find him right away. Society was permissive with young widows. They could get away with a lot, as long as they observed certain proprieties, and Adelaide was an expert. She had learned to be cautious at the tender age of fourteen.



“That’s enough, Richard. Let’s go. Camelia is putting on a fantastic show this evening.”

Adelaide started when she heard the man’s voice. She knew that she wasn’t the type of woman that interested Richard, and she had heard that he would be marrying soon. She wouldn’t waste her time or risk her reputation. She felt she was more attractive as a widow in mourning than as the prince’s abandoned lover. The man walking next to Richard, however, aroused her serious interest. Adelaide noticed his broad shoulders, the cut and cloth of his tunic, and the expensive weapons he carried. This was a man worth her time.

He looks like he could do more than snore in bed, and he’d send me expensive gifts afterward. Adelaide was not feeling particularly wealthy on her own. Her husband had left her a sizeable sum, but a house in the capital, a carriage, expensive gowns and jewelry—it all added up. The stranger was just what she needed.

She went into action, unhooking the brooch from the light shawl she wore around her shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. The brooch, an aromatic sphere made just for such purposes, rolled obediently across the floor in just the right direction. This was the key moment. “I apologize, My Lord. My brooch!”

She fell to her knees to retrieve the golden sphere and looked up into the eyes of the man, who had also bent down to pick it up. She blushed deeply and looked him in the eye before dropping her lashes. Her silk shawl slid from her shoulders, revealing her full breasts in a low-cut décolleté.

The man was composed as he gave her one hand and carefully replaced the shawl with the other. As he took his hand from her shoulder, his fingers ran lightly over her breast. Adelaide knew this was a test. If she made the wrong move, the man would visit her bed, but he wouldn’t stay, and she wanted him to stay.

⁶ Green is the color of mourning in Ativerna. Pastors also wear green to remind people that life is short.

She took a step back and blushed even brighter before lowering her eyes and whispering, “Thank you, My Lord. Forgive me, Your Highness.” Then she got out of the room as fast as she could so that Richard could tell his friend all he knew about her.

She would use her time to find out more about the man. *Hunting season is open.* There was something exquisite about hunting while pretending to be the prey. The only thing that worried Adelaide was the thick wedding bracelet on the man’s wrist. A wife, however, was less of an obstacle than a husband.

She needed to find out who he was right away.

Chapter 2

Growing and Learning

Despite her best intentions, Aliya remained in bed and in a trance the first ten days. And she had a cold.

In Ella's books, when characters found themselves in a parallel world, they just shrugged their shoulders and marched off to change it however they wanted. *They made it look easy.* Aliya didn't believe life worked that way. And she didn't really read Ella's fantasy books; she just flipped through them at night when she wanted to fall asleep. It helped. Now, however, she was sorry she hadn't read more about time travelers *Those unfortunate wretches.* If she had, she would at least know where to start.

As it was, she was clueless, and her inability to find a starting point left her in a dark depression. Besides, she couldn't stop worrying about lice and fleas. Somewhere, she had read that French women used to use gold tweezers to catch fleas; just the thought made her nauseous. So, her only demands were hot water for a bath every day and a daily change of sheets. Close inspections of her hair revealed no insects; that was good news.

Aliya wanted to stay in bed as long as she could. She usually didn't allow herself to fall to pieces like this, but her body hurt like nothing she had experienced before. Just getting out of bed to take a bath was an ordeal; her muscles shook, sweat stood out on her skin, and she felt dizzy. She was in the wrong world in the wrong body, and those two things came with side effects—muscle spasms, for example, or sudden fits of hysterical crying. Common sense told her that there was nothing to cry about, but the tears just streamed down her face.

She had strange nightmares... in bright colors... about a little girl.

She sat at a table while an oddly familiar woman pleaded with her.

"Eat a spoonful for Mama, eat a spoonful for Papa."

"I don't want to!" she complained. "Leave me alone, Nanny!"

Porridge and spoon fly off the table, but, instead of boxing her ears like Aliya would have been tempted to do, the nanny picks her up and continues to plead with her.

"Lily, my dear, my angel..."

Then the picture changes.

Grown-up Lilian is watching a dream as if it were a movie on television. She sees the same girl at five, at seven, at ten... She throws tantrums, tries on new dresses, argues,

demands something, hits a servant in the face, screams at a tired old man.

Somehow, Aliya knew that the old man is Lilian's father. The dream was unpleasant, but Aliya couldn't turn it off. Then the picture changed, swimming up out of a dark pool of memories.

"Daughter, the Earl of Earton has asked for your hand in marriage."

"The earl?"

"Yes. I have decided to give my consent."

"Didn't it occur to you to ask my opinion? Is he old and horrible?"

"The earl is young and very handsome."

That doesn't stop her; she yells and throws something that looks like a vase. Her father holds firm. The picture changed again.

An engagement party. She saw a handsome young man with long, dark hair, bright blue eyes, and a hard, muscular body... She also saw distaste in his eyes. He bent down to hand her a bouquet of flowers. He said something to her. Her heart is racing so fast she's afraid he can hear it.

Is this really my husband? To have and to hold, for better and for worse...

The young man's lips touched her plump hand. Her cheeks grew suspiciously warm. But his eyes remained cold and unemotional. He just didn't care about any of this. He was indifferent, and that scared her.

She was also scared of the wedding night. When the time came, she blew out all the candles. Her young husband stubbed his toe on a piece of furniture and cursed. Then he lights a candle.

"Please don't," she begged him.

"Why? Do you think being in the dark will give me feelings for you?"

She froze. Her husband went on, his tone lethal. "I'm not attracted to you in the least, but I have to have an heir. Your job is to lie still and keep your mouth shut. Maybe that way, I won't feel so nauseous."

She couldn't remember what came next. She just remembered the humiliation... and the sharp pain between her legs that she felt after each visit from her husband.

She was like a second-rate purebred mare—not a person, not a lover, not even a wife.

She was just a vessel he would use to obtain an heir.

Icy, black despair rolled over her.

At first, Aliya didn't understand what the dreams were. Then it hit her. Her mind was her

own, but she still had Lilian's memories, knowledge, habits, reflexes... Two people had merged into one. Aliya was the stronger of the two, and she was used to assimilating large amounts of information, so she simply assimilated Lilian Earton's memory.

It was the memory of an unhappy young woman who simply wanted a family and children and to be loved by her husband, but was met with cold contempt instead.

On the tenth night, Aliya dreamed about her accident in shocking clarity. She heard the crunch and saw the column of flames rising into the sky from the wreckage. Then, she saw her parents. Her father was wearing his dress uniform, and her mother was young and beautiful. They looked at her with reproach, displeased with her. Aliya was upset, wondering what she had done.

Then she understood. They hadn't raised her to just give up and die; they wanted more for her. They were dead, but she was alive.

She was finally truly convinced that she could do this. The woman who had gotten in bed the night before had been confused, trying to figure out what had happened to her and where she was, but the woman who woke up in the morning was decisive. She put her feet firmly on the floor and launched a mission to change her life.



Aliya began by studying her new world. At night, she wandered through the house to discover where everything was, hiding whenever she heard servants near. In the early morning, she slept and watched Lilian Earton's dreams. She had fewer of them now, and they had lost their bright colors and drifted away from her, just like Lilian was drifting away. In the evening, Aliya listened to her nanny, Martha, tell stories.

Through her wanderings, Aliya learned that Earton Castle was built in the shape of a letter H lying on its back. The center bar of the H was the largest part of the castle. The first floor had an enormous hall, a ballroom, a smaller hall and a dining room. The upper right end of the castle held a library, the earl's study, a music room for the ladies, and a game room for when the weather was bad. This part of the castle was obviously for guests and had a door that led to a porch overlooking the garden.

The kitchen was on the lower right end of the castle. On the first floor were the rooms where the servants did their work, as well as the entrance to the cellar and storerooms, where valuables, such as fabric and furniture, were kept. The servants' bedrooms were on the second floor.

The lower left arm was divided into a portrait gallery, a knight's hall and armory on the first floor, and rooms for guests on the first and second floors. The upper left arm of the castle belonged entirely to the family. The castle's four arms were only connected through its center, with gorgeous, massive wooden staircases leading to the second floor of each arm.

The whole place needed a good cleaning, in her opinion. The curtains hadn't been washed in ages, there was dust everywhere, and spiders had taken over all the quiet corners.

So what if the ceilings are fifteen feet high? Haven't they invented ladders yet? She would have to see about that.

Several centuries' worth of soot had accumulated on those high ceilings, and there were rooms in the castle where the corners smelled suspiciously of urine. *Do they not make it to the toilet in time, or do they just not care? What an aristocratic pigsty!*

When Aliya finally found the actual privy, she almost vomited. She located it by following the smell, which was strong enough to knock out a fly. She opened the door and saw a room with a hole in the floor. No running water, no nothing. Whatever went into the hole ran through a stone pipe into a ditch outside. Aliya decided she would have to do something about that, too.

She noticed that most of the doors in the castle were unlocked and that the few locks being used were primitive. The lock on the door leading to the storerooms was an ancient hunk of metal, but after studying it, Aliya figured any ten-year-old with the nerve could open it using a pen. The only danger was the lock's weight; if you dropped it on your foot, you'd need crutches the rest of your life.

She wasn't interested in the storerooms behind the locked door; she wanted to find the library. Aliya had always valued a good education, and she would need to know how to write and count according to local custom in order to avoid being taken advantage of. She had things to accomplish, so she was relieved when she finally found what she sought.

Her relief didn't last long. She reached for a book and gasped in horror. She reached for a second book, and then a third. They were all manuscripts written on parchment. She opened as many books as she could; first on one shelf, then the next, as far up as she could reach. A stash of unused parchment got her hopes up, but they fell again when she found a goose feather dipped in ink. One more item hit her to-do list: *find a blacksmith and get some pens made.*

The best thing she discovered in the library was that she could read the local language. She was as slow as a first-grader, but she could read. That was important.

The next book she laid her hands on had an intriguing title: "A Detailed Description of the Lands, People and Customs of the World, Made by the Humble Kalerius of Ativerna." *That sounds useful.* She hoped the book wasn't a work of fiction, like *Gulliver's Travels*. And she hoped Lilian's brain was capable of reading a whole book.

Aliya could tell that her host didn't like to study. Lilian preferred embroidering with gold thread. Taking a deep breath, Aliya set the geography book aside. She would read it later. She also slipped a few pieces of parchment into the book, but not too many, so that no one would notice.

Further digging on the same shelf failed to turn up anything else useful, but Aliya decided she had enough for now. The book would teach her things she couldn't find out from her nanny's stories. She would make this new brain of hers work harder than it ever had before. After spending so much time in close study of Lilian Earton's lazy, half-empty mind,

Aliya decided that she couldn't really blame the woman's husband for staying away.

There was no sign that the woman had ever read anything—books, newspapers, or even letters. She knew some prayers by heart, but that was it. *I wonder how her husband stays awake when she talks to him.*

She stopped. The unfairness of the situation was obvious. Lilian never had a chance to get even a basic education. Family and custom kept her at home working on her embroidery, so it was no surprise if people found her boring. From her nanny's conversation, Aliya knew that the Earl felt that way; he stayed well away from his ancestral home and his wife. Aliya felt her hands clench into fists. She didn't care if that Earl husband of hers held all the titles in the kingdom; he'd need a dentist after she got in a room with him. And then she'd divorce him.

But for the time being, she had work to do.

The stove in Aliya's room was always fired up, keeping the room hot as a greenhouse. She decided that pieces of coal would make better writing tools than feathers that always needed sharpening. *Note to self: invent pencil.*



Aliya lived like that for two weeks. The book she had found turned out to be a treasure chest of information. Good old Kalerius gave a thorough run-down of all the countries in her new world and described the people who lived in them. Some of it was probably lies, but she was grateful to at least have the geography under her belt.

It became clear that her fears were justified; this world was stuck in the Middle Ages. They hadn't even invented gunpowder. Aliya knew that gunpowder was made of sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate. She also knew how to prepare nitroglycerine, but she decided to keep that information to herself. *A little less civilization would mean a much healthier planet; that's a fact.* In her previous life, Aliya had read somewhere that technology should never be allowed to outrun morality. Otherwise, the clock will strike Armageddon, and both God and the Devil will turn tail and run.

Reading further in her new geography book, Aliya realized that glass was so expensive that no one had ever tried making mirrors out of it. They didn't even have tools for cutting glass properly. She smiled to herself. Not all progress led to war and destruction, and not all inventions could be used for murder. She would have to be careful what she shared with this world. She couldn't do everything for them, but she did have medicine on her side. They didn't have surgeons in her new world, and without her help, it might be another five hundred (or more) years before they learned how to operate on the human body.

She read on. Wars were fought the old-fashioned way, with bows and arrows and catapults. Soldiers were wounded by the cartload, and most of them died, even if their wounds could have been treated easily on Earth. That was sad, but it meant that a good doctor would always be popular. Aliya didn't plan to stick with the Earl of Earton long, so it was

nice to know that she could earn money treating patients.

Industry was non-existent, and most people were subsistence farmers. She liked that because it meant that there were no factories or pollution. When people traveled by sea, they used sailboats. When they traveled by land, they rode horses. They had wagons and carriages, judging by the drawings in her book, but Aliya thought they looked like coffins on wheels. *Shock absorbers? Not invented yet.* There wasn't much she could do about that. Medical school was great for learning how to stitch people up, but Aliya wasn't even sure what shock absorbers should look like.

Backwardness wasn't always a good thing. There were no factories, but there were also no schools. Most people were illiterate. Aliya decided to work on opening schools for the children of Earton—or at least preschools that would teach them to read and count. Her schools would run in the winter since the farm families would need their children to help in the fields in the summer. Those same farm families, she read, had to spend two out of every ten days working in their lord's fields.

House servants were a different caste. Aliya's castle had eight of them. Martha was both her nanny and her servant, and apparently, she had served Lilian since she was born. Martha loved her like a daughter, and Aliya appreciated her for it. The three housemaids, Mary, Sara, and Ilona, bustled around cleaning all day, but the castle never seemed to get any cleaner. There were three manservants, Jean, Peter, and Alex, and three grooms who lived in the stables. One of them—Jacques—was a brother of Jean. The other two were Claus and Rene.

Then, there was the cook, Tara. She was the estate Comptroller's wife, and she made awful food. Her husband's name was Etor. It seemed like a small crew for such a big castle and estate. Aliya would reform how the estate was run once she got her bearings. For the time being, she stuck to her reading.

Kalerius, the geographer, hadn't thought to put a map in his book, but Aliya was able to deduce some important facts from the text. The mainland (of which there was only one because this particular world was flat) was made up of eight nations.

Ativerna was where Aliya now lived. She felt almost patriotic about it. Her nearest neighbors were Wellster and Ivernea. Avesterra was next to Ivernea, and Elvana shared borders with Wellster and Avesterra. There were no elves in Elvana, as far as she could tell. Darcom bordered on Avesterra and Elvana. Not far from the shores of Ativerna, was the island nation of Virma. Aliya thought the people of Virma sounded like Vikings from back home. The local climate was interesting. Virma bore the brunt of the cold, but even in Ativerna, they had a long, four-month winter and a short summer. Wellster and Ivernea had slightly better weather. Elvana and Avesterra were the warmest countries. Aliya wondered why. The weather left the soil poor.

At the far end of the large continent, was the Vari Desert, which was governed by the Vari Khandanat. The Vari people were nomads since nothing grew in the desert.

Kalerius had never visited the eighth nation, which was on the other side of a steep

mountain range. He simply stated that Elvana was bordered to its west by high mountains. There were rumors, he wrote, of people living beyond the mountains, but most rumors were lies *Kalerius would know*. He also hinted that there might be a large island somewhere past the Vari Desert, but the details were sketchy. Aliya longed for some satellite images.



Once she finished the book on geography, Aliya visited the library again and chose some religious literature. *I need to know what these people believe*. The huge book, bound in a red velvet cover and entitled, *The Book of Radiance*, turned out to be very much like the Bible. Aliya wondered at that for a while but then decided that people who don't want to believe that their fate is in their own hands come up with tales of a kind, heavenly father who hands out candy and spankings, depending on what you've done. *That's no surprise. Nobody wants to admit to their own mistakes, so they say that they've been punished by God for their sins*. The tales in the *Book of Radiance* reminded Aliya of the Old Testament, with an avenging God and his eternal antagonist. The god was called Aldonai, and his opponent was Maldonaya. Maldonaya happened to be female. *Of course. Women are always the source of evil, right?*

In this world, women held a position somewhere between horses and cows. Aristocratic women were slightly better off. They were still treated like property, but they were allowed to handle their own lands and servants. That suited Aliya just fine.

There were just four things a woman could be (five at most): daughter, wife, mother, widow, and slut. That was it. There were no other roles for them—no free and independent women, no feminism, no self-sufficiency. If you didn't like it, you could be branded a witch and executed. Witches existed, but they weren't respected. Aliya ran across a couple of stories about how people dealt with witches, who were thought to be servants of Maldonaya and were summarily drowned or burned at the stake.

She particularly enjoyed the story about how women were ruled to be humans. One prophet was having a trouble with his wife, so he complained to Aldonai about her stupidity and evil temper. He asked Aldonai if it would be possible to categorize women as animals. *Rats, perhaps?* Aldonai thought for a while and answered, "Have patience, my son. If we categorize women as animals, then you and all the other men will be guilty of bestiality. You would be born from animals and live in sin with animals, and there would be chaos and disorder in the world." The prophet shut his mouth, and women were allowed to remain human. Aliya rolled her eyes. *What a mental asylum.*⁷

Aliya felt she had mastered the fundamentals of their religion. She now knew not to make the sign of the cross, but to trace a circle—the sign of the Sun—in front of her face and

⁷ Something similar happened at the Vatican in the Middle Ages, when a papal conclave was asked to decide whether women were humans or animals

then touch her lips and forehead. She memorized the local prayers and read all the biographies of saints that she could find in the library.

Knowledge was the best weapon in any fight, Aliya knew, and she knew herself. There was no way she would sit at home and work on embroidery. She wanted to bring new inventions to this world, if only for her own convenience. Doing so would put her on the wrong side of accepted female behavior, so she had to be prepared.

If the priest said, “My child, women do not do these things. Are you perchance a witch?” she could reply, “Father, have you forgotten that Saint Marilda healed people with laying on of hands? Saint Yevgrastia traveled. Saint Ridalina preached in brothels. So, refrain from your rebukes, for I have been touched by the Holy Spirit. If you don’t believe me, I can call down the heaviest of the spirits to fall on your head. Then you’ll really see radiance!”

There was one other thing Aliya loved about the stories of the saints’ lives—they were written on weighty parchment scrolls. She could easily use the reverse side to practice writing. She knew that it would be a while before she was ready to go out into the world, and she wanted to copy down what she already knew about medicine before she began forgetting things.

She didn’t want to start writing yet—there was a lot of other more pressing work to do—but she made note of where the scrolls were. She would rather have a good text on pharmacology than the life of Saint Ridalina. Her new world had saintly fools on every corner, but it would be a long while before they discovered anticholinergics.

She would write out all the muscles and nerves and make a detailed drawing of the human skeleton. *Anatomy alone will take up so much paper.* Aliya sighed. *We know so much, and yet so little.*

She also knew—and could probably copy out from memory—all of the classic novels, from Gogol to Dostoyevsky, but there was no paper for her to do it on. She would have given anything for a piece of paper—even toilet paper or maybe some leaves. Aliya was grateful for her profession as never before. *All those lawyers, economists, and sales managers do well for themselves in our world, but how would they like it here, where half the people can’t even read? More than half! I bet ninety percent of them sign their name with an X. Fights are decided by who has the heavier fist or the sharper knife. They probably think that double-entry bookkeeping means that your estate Comptroller is a thief.*

Now that she thought about it, her estate Comptroller probably was a thief.

Aliya continued studying the castle at night. She stayed inside for practical reasons. *I don’t want to run into a guard dog in the yard.* She needed to lose some weight, but getting bitten by the castle guard dog was not how she planned to do it.

In her nocturnal walks through the castle, she decided that all the servants were on the take. Everything was too old and run-down. True, there was little reason for Lily to use large sections of the castle—she never had guests, so she only used six of the many rooms—but according to Martha’s stories...

I'll deal with the crooked servants later.



Food was another problem. Aliya wasn't just hungry, she wanted to eat everything in sight. Her new body had lost weight during its illness and demanded food. During her illness, she had been given chicken broth, red wine and something like toast, which wasn't bad at all. Once she got out of bed, however, the food seemed to Aliya like something Ivan the Terrible might have had on his table: roasted hare's kidneys, head of pike with garlic and other modest dishes. On her first day out of bed, her breakfast was brought in on a tray. She counted at least ten eggs that had been hardboiled, chopped and mixed with what looked like wine. There were two types of porridge: oatmeal with mushrooms and wheat porridge with berries. Off to the side, lay a piece of ham that looked like it weighed at least a pound, and a piece of cheese the same size. There was a large loaf of wheat bread, accompanied by at least a half-pound each of butter, honey and jam, all in dishes the size of large plates. She was expected to wash all of this down with beer, wine or cider.

Her stomach grumbled happily. Aliya grumbled not so happily. "What is all of this?"
"Your breakfast, My Lady."

There's no way I can eat all of this! Or can I? In her previous life, Aliya would have needed a week to plow through the food on the table, and she would have shared with friends. She wrinkled her nose at the eggs in wine, but her stomach was raring and ready to go.

She felt nauseous just looking at the unsalted sheep's milk cheese, but her hand reached out with a spoon to scoop out a chunk of it.

The drinks on the table made her teeth clench shut, but her fingers held onto the pitcher of wine. *What if I'm an alcoholic in this life? That's the last thing I need.*

Aliya pushed away everything but the two dishes of porridge. "Martha, I only want porridge for breakfast from now on. Nothing else."

"But Lily, you'll starve like that."

"It's not up for discussion."

It was obvious Martha heard the steel in Aliya's voice. She nodded in assent.

Aliya did the same at lunch. Of the twelve dishes offered to her, she kept just two. Soup and a meat of some kind. Nothing heavy and nothing fried. She was just as strict at dinner. She instructed the cook to serve her only vegetables—any kind of vegetable—but no meat, cheese or bread. Wine was off the table, but they could leave the cider

I'll teach you to make fruit juice and wash the pots before you use them, but until then, I'll stick to cider. The alcohol kills bacteria, so there's less chance of dying of dysentery. Based on what she knew of healers in her new world, Aliya suspected that there was no treatment for something like dysentery.



She was fed up with her forced isolation but prevented by irrational fear from going outside. She argued with herself and called herself a coward, but nothing helped. She was afraid that as soon as she left the castle grounds, she'd be recognized for what she was: a woman from another world. The people would cry, "Seize the witch!" or something just as bad. So, she put off going outside. *I can study this world perfectly well using books.* Then reality crash-landed on her.

Martha scratched timidly at the door, slipped into the room and announced, "Lily, dear, Doctor Craybey is here to see you."

"So what?" Aliya had told her Nanny never to let him near her again, and she had no intention of getting out of bed, but she decided she couldn't send him away

"He can't examine you like that! You need to get dressed."

Aliya stayed right where she was. She was comfortable in bed, and she also had a book hidden under her blanket. She couldn't get up without exposing her source of knowledge.

"Nanny, when I was sick, did I get dressed for doctor visits?"

"No, my dear."

"So let him in. He's already seen it all."

Unable to argue, Martha went out. Aliya quickly hid the book under her bed. Judging by the quantity of dust, it had been twenty years since anyone even looked under the bed, and it would be another twenty before they peeked under there again. It seemed like a safe hiding place.

She was nervous about talking to the doctor. He couldn't know much about real medicine, but he wouldn't be a complete fool, either. This would be harder than talking to Martha, who was so happy to have her favorite little girl back that she ignored the strange things she said and did.

Aliya pulled the piglet-pink blanket up to her chin. The door flew open. *Jerk. Didn't even knock.*

Medicus Craybey presented himself to Aliya-Lilian in an outfit of tight brown pants, a carrot-colored tunic, and a short brown cape. His high boots were made of pale blue leather and were filthy, and he had a large bag strung over one shoulder. Aliya concluded that this was the typical male garb for that world. She glanced at the doctor's long hair. It was pulled back in a ponytail, tied with an orange ribbon and sprinkled liberally with something that looked like powder. Some of the powder had fallen on the man's shoulders. *So much for local fashion.*

"Good day, Countess," he greeted her.

"Good day," Aliya nodded.

She did not extend her hand to be kissed; he could stay right where he was. She wondered if he would climb up on her bed in those dirty boots to do the exam.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine." Aliya wanted to send him packing, but she exercised self-control.

“Do you have any pain? Bleeding? Sharp or burning sensations? Has the fever returned?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

Aliya tried to stay calm and keep her replies brief. This was her first test. If the doctor noticed anything strange about her...

But Craybey (*Is that his first name or his last name?*) gave a broad grin. “I’m very pleased. I knew your body could defeat the illness. I simply followed my teacher’s instructions by letting out the bad blood and giving you cleansing treatments. You’ll be fine. I always knew that my teacher was a source of wisdom.”

Aliya’s eyes were opened. Under all the power and show of importance, she saw a kid who was just twenty or twenty-five years old—a loser like many of the guys she went to school with.

“Do you mean your teacher told you to treat miscarriage by letting a woman’s blood and then giving her emetics and enemas?” She spoke quietly to keep from screaming. Her self-control had abandoned her. It was the satisfied smile on the kid’s face that did her in.

“But you’re alive! I did everything correctly. If...”

Poof!

A pillow hit him in the face and landed on the floor. Another pillow followed, but it hit the foot of the bed and exploded, covering the doctor in a cloud of feathers.

“If you come back here, I’ll have them set the dogs on you! Get out, fool!” Aliya had forgotten all about being cautious and keeping a low profile. *To hell with it all! I’ll bury this idiot!*

By the time Martha came running in, Aliya had regained her calm demeanor.

“Take that away,” she said, pointing at the feather-covered doctor. “Don’t let him in here again.”

Martha didn’t bother arguing. She simply dragged the doctor out of the room. Ten minutes later, two snickering servant girls came in to clean up the feathers.

Aliya gave them a cannibalistic smile. Still riding high on her bad mood, she issued more orders: wash the windows, take down the curtains and the bed canopy and wash them, dust the shelves and under the bed.

The girls followed her orders to the letter. For a while, she sat back and watched them. She decided that the time had come to get up and go outside. Her nanny didn’t see anything too outrageous in her behavior, and the servant girls obeyed her.

But since her heart was still racing from the doctor’s visit and it looked to be about five in the evening, judging by the sun, and she believed mornings were the best time to start important projects (except for Monday morning), Aliya decided to start her new life the next day.

For the moment, she would put the book back and think about where to begin.



Anna Wellster went to the mirror. She fixed her hair and checked the folds of her dress where it stretched across her chest.

“Wait a moment, my dear.” Her elderly lady’s maid pinned up a lock of hair and pushed her toward the door. “Your father won’t want to wait.”

Anna shivered, but she wasted no time. She feared and hated her father, and for a good reason. He was Gardwig the Twelfth, his Majesty the King of Wellster. Gardwig had ruled for over a decade and was known for his hot temper, cruelty and shrewd opportunism. He’d been married seven times and had no intention of stopping there. The Holy Throne disapproved of divorce, but they had to bend the rules for Gardwig. If a priest had ever dared to inform him that divorce went against God’s law, Gardwig would have answered, “As king, I am no less than a god. I have my own laws.” Any priest who tried to excommunicate him would have found himself facing a death sentence.

Gardwig won all the fights he started and most of the ones he didn’t. Other countries criticized him freely, but at home in Wellster, they tried not to annoy him. As a rule, people didn’t want to die just so they could present a list of their complaints to Aldonai.

In the end, Gardwig married, divorced and executed his wives whenever he saw fit. He paid his soldiers on time so they would remain loyal, and the simple folk were proud of his powerful image without caring much what he did. They were too busy planting and harvesting their crops.

Anna’s mother was his second wife. She had been executed. He divorced his first wife because she was too old, but he executed his second wife for cheating on him. Despite that, he recognized Anna as his lawful daughter and sent her into the country to be educated. He divorced his third wife for giving birth to too many girls. Anna had four sisters who were raised alongside her. None of them could stand the others.

Gardwig’s fourth wife died in childbirth along with the child. It was a girl, so Gardwig didn’t feel too bad. His fifth wife was caught cheating and put to death before he could get her pregnant. The sixth tried for two years to give the king an heir. In the end, she threw herself at the king’s feet and begged for a divorce. If she couldn’t give him a son, she felt it would be a sin to deprive him of the love he deserved and the kingdom of its heir. Gardwig met her halfway, and they put the petition to the Holy Throne in her name just to keep things interesting. The religious leaders grumbled a bit, but they felt sorry for the poor woman and finally approved the divorce.

Gardwig’s seventh wife proved once and for all that seven is a lucky number. Mila of Shelt, the quiet, gray-eyed daughter of a baron, with a long, thick braid of dark hair, loved her tyrant husband sincerely. She surrounded the aging Gardwig with loving care, making sure that he ate well and giving him two sons. To top it off, she was pregnant again. Gardwig seemed to enjoy his last marriage with no thought of divorce or execution.

Anna was sure of one thing—if her father learned of her dalliance with her teacher, he

would have her put to death, and even Mila wouldn't be able to dissuade him.



Anna knocked at the door and waited before going in. His Majesty was sitting by the fireplace with a glass of wine and a plate of food. His faithful jester was on the rug in front of him. Anna had never seen her father without his jester, a small man with extremely intelligent eyes and a wrinkled face.

"Your Majesty," Anna curtsied.

"Come on in. No need to sweep the floor." He nodded at a bench by his feet. She sat down on it—bringing her down to the jester's level—and kept her eyes on the floor.

"Look me in the face." Her father's hard fingers pushed her chin up. Anna fought the desire to close her eyes. "She's not bad at all, is she Harvey?"

"She has nice breasts."

"Men like breasts."

"You can't keep a man with nothing but that."

"Who knows? Richard is just a boy. He may fall for it."

Richard? Who is Richard? Thoughts fluttered like frightened birds in Anna's head. Gardwig must have noticed, for he explained, "Richard of Ativerna. He's coming here with his ambassador. His father wants to marry him off, and you're the right age. You're not bad. You look like your mother; she was dark like you."

Gardwig had a thick mane of golden hair and gray eyes, but Anna had dark hair and eyes like her mother, whom she had only seen in portraits.

"As long as she's not a fool. Have you gotten mixed up with anyone?" The jester's voice was calm, but he glared at her.

Anna flushed. She knew that this man could have her killed, but she was angry. Almost without thinking, she burst out, "Who needs me without a penny of a dowry? I have to alter my own dresses!"

"Idiot!" Gardwig spat out, his eyes flashing. "Do you think that coins and rags make up your dowry?"

Anna recoiled. She slipped from the bench and fell on the floor, but Gardwig continued to thunder away at her. "You are a princess! You may even be queen someday! Your dowry isn't dresses. Its connections, land, and treaties! If Richard takes a liking to you, you'll be the one handing out dresses and jewelry to others. Ativerna is wealthy, and I need Edward as an ally. Richard will be my ally after him. If you marry him, I won't forget you. You can have the province of Bali as your dowry."

Anna smoothed her skirt and sat back down under the jester's mocking eyes. In a calmer voice, she asked, "Your Majesty, am I supposed to charm him?"

"Yes. After he comes here, he's going to Ivernea. You're the first one he's going to see, and your job is to be the only one he thinks of."

A MEDIEVAL TALE—FIRST LESSONS

Anna nodded. She saw visions of balls, diamonds, and knights in armor, and above all, she saw herself with an elegant crown on her head—the crown of a princess, the future queen.

Oh, hell! Why did I get mixed up with Lons?

Gardwig looked at her for a minute and then nodded. “Go calm down. Speak to Mila tomorrow. She’ll fit you with dresses that will make you shine. I’ll tell her. You may go.”

Anna managed to curtsy again and left the room.

Once she had gone, the king’s jester shook his head and said, “I don’t know about this. She’s selfish and stupid.”

“Just like her mother.”

“Do we have anyone else we can use?”

“No. The next oldest is just twelve. This one is sixteen. Edward wants his son married in the next year or two.”

“True. And there’s Lidia in Ivernea.”

“She’s plain as can be. Eighteen years old and thinks about nothing but books—an old maid.”

“Mila was over twenty, wasn’t she?”

“She was a widow; I got lucky with her.”

The jester nodded. He didn’t have the least respect for Gardwig’s wife, but he valued her. He saw how she loved the king and did her best to care for him. She was like a little hen on her nest, but she was just what the aging king needed. She wasn’t vengeful or sly. All she wanted was a home and children, and she gave birth to boys, which was a good thing. Gardwig would have lost his mind without the boys.

“Fine. If you think he’ll go for that snotty little girl, then I’ll have a talk with her. Will you permit it?”

“When have I ever told you not to do something?”

Few people knew that the jester and the king had been raised by the same nurse. They were childhood friends who considered themselves brothers. The violent, capricious Gardwig loved no one in the world like he loved his brother, and his brother worked hard to deserve that trust. *Why is he a jester? Why not? He needed a day job when he wasn’t busy stirring up intrigue.*



Anna danced back to her room.

A princess! She would finally be treated like a real princess! And if she played her cards right, she would be queen someday.

She knew that she was beautiful and intelligent. She was educated, as well, thanks to Lons’ hard work. She grimaced at the thought of him. *Maldonaya take him, why didn’t I wait a few years? Because I always have to have what I want right away. Money, dancing, love,*

life!

Lons was poor as a church mouse so he couldn't give her money and dancing, but in love... Anna shivered when she thought of Lons' hands, his lips, his body. Suddenly, she froze. She was already married; that was a big problem. One thing was clear: she could never tell her father the truth.



Jess Earton—true earl, handsome devil, and warrior to boot—looked down at his sobbing child. He was lost as to what to do.

“Precious, don't cry. Sweetheart...”

The little girl cried even harder.

“Miranda Catherine Earton, stop the bawling this instant!”

It didn't help. In between blowing her nose and sobbing, the girl managed to say, “You're leaving me here, abandoning me.”

Jess passed his hand through his hair. He adored his daughter. The six-year-old knew it and had him wrapped around her little finger. He had no choice, though. He couldn't take her with him. He would be busy with work, balls, tournaments, and intrigue. *How can I take a child with me if I don't even know where I'll be sleeping at night?*

When he suggested she stay with Lilian, Miranda became hysterical. It sounded like she might be choking. Jess was afraid, so he gave in. “Sweetie, you just have to stay at Earton over the winter. I'll come get you in the spring, all right?”

He didn't mention that at that moment, it was only the end of summer. Miranda kept crying, anyway. It took a long time to calm her down.

While he held her, in his mind, he composed a letter to Lilian. He had no love for his wife and considered her stupid and unpredictable, but he knew she wouldn't hurt the girl. His letter would warn her and maybe even frighten her a little. In the meantime, he tried to soothe his daughter.