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BARON

Dragon's Reach

Fairy Rose

Baron of Dragon's Reach
by Shereen Vedam

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

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Praise for Shereen Vedam

Spellbound from the beginning, I could not put this story down.

~Krista

Reviewer for Coffee Time Romance

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"Elena, Lord Giles is coming!"

Elena, who'd been reading in peace by the hearth in the castle's library, looked up as alarm stomped into the room alongside her jubilant father.

"Child, he'll be here tonight." Her father's voice rang with a joy, tinged with relief.

In his words, Elena heard all his hopes and wishes from this past year.

Such a marriage will lessen the likelihood of war between our two baronial states. My family and my people will gain a powerful neighboring ally. And I can rest assured that my beautiful Elena will remain a wealthy and respectable lady long after I'm dead and gone.

But with those same words, Elena's safe world crashed around her.

Where her father saw great things taking place with her marriage to Lord John William Giles, she saw nothing but ruin. The moment her betrothed discovered her shameful secret, her father would have to mount for war, blood would be shed in the streets, and peace and prosperity would only be distant memory.

Elena stared at the volume clutched in her trembling hands. The sermons written in small scraggly script blurred. What use were sermons and prayers to her now?

"Have you nothing to say, my dear?" the baron asked.

She took a deep breath and looked at his eager face.

"Elena, why are you perturbed? This is excellent news. Surely you're not frightened of married life? Have I not

impressed upon you the joys of making such a union? The years your mother and I were married were the happiest of my life."

Kneeling before her, he took her limp hands in his large warm ones. "I promise you, Elena, this young man will please you." He chuckled gleefully. "Giles is a handsome lad, my girl. There'll be wailing in the streets when news goes out that he is all yours."

She clamped her mouth shut. Every word he spoke made her feel worse.

"Elena, my dear, do not fret so," he said, voice gentling. "I have met this man myself. Unlike his father, Lord Giles is honorable. In his eyes, I saw kindness. I would never have agreed to this match had I not felt it to be in your best interest."

Elena shut her eyes, but a tear escaped to slide down one cheek. How could she have let him down?

"It's at times like these that I wish your mother were still alive." Reaching up with a rough thumb, he wiped away her tear. "I am not a boorish father, Elena. Your happiness means more to me than my life. If this union is truly distasteful to you, I will find a way to free you, no matter the cost. But first, meet him. You will see that all I say is true. You will love him at first sight, I am assured of it."

Elena reached out and hugged him. "All I want is to make you happy, father."

He hugged her back with a fierce grip. "My lovely girl, since the day of your birth, you have made me the happiest

father in the land. All will work out, wait and see. Your father has seen your future and it is good."

Rising, he kissed the top of her head and sailed out of the room to rouse the rest of the household. "Make ready!" his voice boomed, rumbling through the corridors of the castle, shaking the foundation of her world. "Elena's husband-to-be is expected here this very day."

She shut the volume on her lap, tossed it onto the side table, and stood. Striding across the room and back, hands clenched at her sides, Elena prayed fervently for a solution to her dilemma to descend on her before her bridegroom arrived.

How could she go through with this marriage? Her betrothed expected a virginal bride. If, on his marriage bed, he discovered he had gained less than what he expected, he would surely throw her out. Perhaps even kill her. And then wage war with her father, as his father had before him.

Oh, God, what had she done!

The library door opened and Camilla, Elena's cousin, stood in the doorway.

Gowned in silk and lace, she appeared as beautiful as ever. A lightweight veil barely concealed her golden hair that trailed down to her waist. She embodied the perfect woman, though one Elena did not particularly care for. Whenever Camilla entered a room, Elena felt as if a snake had just slithered in through a crack in the walls.

Nevertheless, Elena wondered if she should confide in her now. Could her worldly cousin, twice married, be able to advise her on what to do?

Camilla's soft, delicate features wore an expression of avid curiosity. "This is where you hide," she said in her low, sultry voice. "Have you seen your father, yet? He has news."

"He was just here." Elena clasped her hands to hide their trembling.

"A year late, but he's coming for you after all. Lucky girl. He's a handsome devil. Headstrong. But with his father dead, he's unbelievably wealthy. Well worth the marriage price uncle paid for him." She gave Elena a look filled with derision. "Do you really think a simpering little virgin like you can truly satisfy a passionate, hot-blooded man such as Lord Giles?"

Elena frowned at the insult. But that description of her husband-to-be brought back the memory of the traveling minstrel she had met by a secluded lake so long ago. A man who had surprised her while she bathed in the lake.

Though the dear angles of his clean-shaven face had faded from her memory over the past months, their time together, their oddly companionable conversation, and his blazing caresses that had made her yearn to yield to all his sensual enticements, remained as vivid as if the encounter had happened just this morn instead of a year ago this day.

Yes, Camilla, she answered silently, I know how to ignite passion and be consumed by it.

"What blushes!" Camilla strolled by and flicked at Elena's head veil that covered her carefully coffered blond hair. "Such an innocent. You are in for a surprise." Her gaze was scornful.

"I think I shall do fine, cousin."

Camilla laughed, but there was a harsh edge to it. "My dear, with your mother passed away, I feel it is my role to

school you in these matters. And you would be wise to listen to me. A virile man will have little patience with a woman who is unable or afraid to please him."

Though disliking her cousin's derisive tone, Elena genuinely considered the offer of counsel. For she was in desperate straits. Could Camilla help her?

"Your second husband," she said, tentatively, "he ... he did not mind that you were not a virgin?"

Dark color spread across her cousin's cheeks.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you," Elena said, speaking quickly. "I was just curious, as you said, about what Lord Giles might expect of a wife."

"You hardly need worry about the matter, for this will be your first coupling." Her cousin's forehead narrowed with suspicion. "This is not a problem for you, is it, Elena?"

"No! I was merely curious." Suddenly nervous about having let slip that telling bit to this dangerous woman, she couldn't get away from Camilla fast enough. "Pray, excuse me, cousin. This news has quite upset me. I'm tired and wish to rest."

She scuttled out of the room before her clever cousin guessed at her problem.

In her bedchamber, Elena threw herself on the bed and hugged her pillow. She should be ashamed of what she had done, but no matter how often her conscience pricked her, the memory of her encounter by the lake always delighted Elena.

She had initially stormed away in a rush after accusing the man who disturbed her privacy of not being a gentleman, of

deliberately spying on her bathing. But then, having waited an hour for him to move off, she had returned. She'd left her head veil by the lakeshore.

He'd chuckled at her surprise at finding him still there, leaning against an ash tree.

Picking up the missing veil, she had hesitated before leaving, for she no longer felt frightened by him.

"Why do you laugh?" she'd asked.

"I knew you'd come back."

"Because you saw I'd left behind my veil?"

"Because I desperately wanted you to."

"Why should our meeting mean so much to you? We do not know each other."

He had remained silent a moment and then sat down by the lake edge. "Stay a moment and I shall tell you why."

"Tell me your name and I might agree," she'd countered.

"If you listen to my tale, you might win the right to claim my name."

Accepting the bargain, Elena had sat and listened. He told her of his father, who was a hard man with little sympathy for anyone, even his wife and child. She'd expected to hear him say that his mother had suffered under such a marriage, but he said that she thrived on it, having as many lovers as the number of battles fought by her husband.

"As a child," he said, "one day I walked in on my mother and her lover in the laundry room, another time in the kitchen, even in my father's bed once, when the old man was away. I swore then that I would never marry a woman as unfaithful as my mother."

As soon as he was old enough, he had left that house, and made his way around the country, earning a living as a minstrel. When he heard of Elena in the village, of her beauty and her kindness, he had not believed either could be true.

Now it was Elena's turn to chuckle.

His side-glance was filled with irony. "At least until I met you," he admitted.

"How so? All I did was run away."

"You didn't run home and send your guard to arrest me or have me flogged for trespassing on your privacy. And you didn't try to seduce me for your entertainment."

Intrigued by his assessment of her character, Elena had asked him to tell her more. She liked his soft voice and his honesty and willingness to share his life's tale. In the back of her mind she'd thought that if this minstrel sought out an honorable woman, he must himself be honorable.

"Honor is important to you," she said.

"I've learned that without honor, life is not worth living."

Lying back, basking in the fading sunlight, they had talked late into the evening, of every inconsequential thing.

She had told him of how her closest friend was her maid Anna, with whom she shared all her woes. And that Anna always wept so loudly at any family tragedy that Elena was surprised the horrible Baron of Dragon's Reach did not hear it fifteen leagues away.

Oddly, he laughed loud and hard at that, as if the image had struck his fancy. Perhaps because he was originally from Dragon's Reach. She had heard that many had felt the strike of the Baron's lash when their master was displeased.

"I'm to be married," she blurted out.

"You were born to be married," he said. "You will gift your husband with a piece of heaven every day he is in your presence." And he had leaned over to kiss her.

One chaste kiss led to another more intimate caress and then a more dangerous touching of hidden spaces and exploring forbidden places. Elena melted into his embrace as if the sun had risen back up onto the sky and burned away all her inhibitions.

She helped him disrobe, anxious to please him as he did her. And when he finally claimed her as his own, she cried out in triumph.

When it came time to part, he gave her an ardent kiss, straightening her gown, tying strings, tucking in laces. All the while, he promised to return the next day.

"Will you give me your name then?" she asked in a teasing voice. "For I believe I've won that right."

"I promise," he vowed.

"I plan to introduce you to my father," she added. "I intend to insist that my betrothal be called off and that I be allowed to marry the man I have bonded with heart and soul."

He had chuckled at her fervor and swore again that he would come back.

That conversation with her father never materialized, for the minstrel did not return.

Not the next day.

Or the one after that.

And the days passed.

Though she knew she was a soiled woman, no longer acceptable as a suitable bride to the new Baron of Dragon's Reach, she did not call off the betrothal. Nor did Lord Giles take up her father's offer to come and claim his bride. Elena began to hope. Could he have changed his mind? No longer want her? That would certainly save her having to confess her disgrace.

Everyday she visited the lake, and came home despondent, thinking, tomorrow, I will speak with father. Until it was too late to say anything. For her betrothed had sent word.

He was coming for Elena today.

Her bedroom door opened and her maid, Anna, rushed in. "My lady," she said. "I've just heard the news. You are to be married during the solstice ceremony."

Elena burst into tears.

Anna immediately held and rocked her mistress and wept with her. The young maid's lamentations became so loud that Elena, despite herself, chuckled. She pulled back and smiled at Anna.

The maid wiped her tears with the back of her hand and returned the smile.

"You are a good girl, Anna." Elena swung her legs to the floor. "What am I to do?"

"About what, my lady?"

Elena took a deep shaky breath and spoke aloud what she had kept secret for twelve long months. "Anna, I am no longer a virgin."

Anna sucked in her breath.

Elena held her hand up. "Do not ask how."

"My lady, I'm so sorry."

"Thank you." Elena wiped away her tears. "When Lord Giles finds out, he may blame my father for tricking him into marrying a sullied wife. It could ignite another war between our states. I cannot allow that. Father is old. He does not have a son to lead his men into battle."

"There must be something we can do," Anna said.

Elena did not hold much hope of that. She'd had a year to consider this problem and had discarded one solution after another.

"Wait," her maid said. "There's a witch who lives outside the village."

"And what can a witch do for me?" Elena asked. "I do not have a cold that needs a cure or a field that needs a blessing."

"I've heard she is no ordinary village witch."

Elena glanced at the girl, mild interest stirring. "How so?"

"She may be a sorceress," Anna whispered.

"They do not mix easily with humans," Elena said. "My father has tried many times to entice a sorcerer to work for him." She'd heard that Lord Giles had acquired the services of one recently. That explained why his standing among the other barons had increased. Who would oppose a baron with a sorcerer at his command?

"Mistress," Anna said, reclaiming Elena's attention, "if she is a sorceress, then she might be able to cast a spell to disguise your, well, your loss of innocence. Perhaps she can even make you a virgin again."

Elena touched her neck where her pulse pounded in response to this wild suggestion. "Is such a thing possible?"

"What can we lose by asking?" Anna said. "It will be expensive. We will need to bring gold."

"I can do that," Elena said. "I have been collecting the bits of gold my father gave me to celebrate my day of birth. I thought to use it to buy a gift for my future husband." She smiled at the irony of her plan. "What better gift could I give him than a virgin bride?"

"Lord Giles is expected this evening. The witch's house is more than an hour's walk away. Can we go there and return in time to greet him?"

"We must try." Elena scrambled up and hugged Anna. "If this solves my problem, I promise you, Anna, I shall treasure you for the rest of my life."

The young girl laughed. "Oh, my lady, if this succeeds, then there are many maidens I know of who can also benefit from it."

* * * *

Worry gnawed at Elena's heels as she stood gazing at the unrelenting barricade of trees that grew where the path to the witch's house should have branched off. "Are you sure you took down the right directions from that baker?"

"Yes, my lady. I memorized what he said word for word." Anna looked as upset as Elena. Her maid's mop cap had slid half down the back of her head, her white cotton sleeves were badly torn, and the hem of her gown was caked in mud.

Elena suspected she hadn't fared much better. But then none of that mattered as much as them failing on this quest. The safety of their whole kingdom could depend on their successfully completing this one venture.

"Perhaps the witch doesn't want us to find her," Anna suggested.

"Her wants are irrelevant." Elena pushed thick bushes and brambles aside. Her long velvet gown with its bell sleeves and underskirts protected most of her, but her face and neck, bare to the elements had received several painful thorn scratches. And her long blond hair, despite the veil covering it, was tangled with bits of twigs and leaves. She wanted to trudge back home to drown her sorrows in a hot steaming bath. But she couldn't give up.

"I need her, Anna," she muttered, that ever-present feeling of desperation eating away at her insides. "She's my only hope. The path must be here somewhere. Keep looking."

After another exhausting search through prickly holly, bruised and scratched, the two women re-grouped.

Anna leaned against the split wide trunk of a giant yew. "My lady, I'm tired. Can we not return home? I've heard that Lord Giles is a man of good heart. Surely, if you explain the circumstances of what happened, he would understand."

Elena avoided her maid's inquiring glance and slouched on the dirt ground. She didn't want to discuss the circumstance of her encounter by the lake.

She mustn't think of that stranger again and what they'd done. She was promised to Lord John William Giles, the Baron

of Dragon's Reach. If she had been taught one thing in life, it was the duty to live up to one's promises.

If only she'd remembered that lesson a year ago more clearly. She rubbed her forehead where a pounding continued since her morning meeting with her father.

Looking thoroughly exhausted, Anna slid down the yew trunk to sit beside Elena. It seemed her servant had no further suggestions of what they could do next. Elena appreciated the silence broken only by a golden-crested wren chirping on a branch above them.

"Churl! Misbegotten son of a scullion! Ye be no more than a soggy weed infested moat. Give me back my broom!"

Elena started at the loud, violent swearing that followed. She frowned at Anna.

"A man's voice, my lady," Anna whispered the obvious. "And nearby." But a quick scan confirmed no one else on the shaded forest path. Anna's eyes narrowed with confusion.

Elena scrambled to her feet, excitement banishing her gloom. "Through there." She pointed to the left of the yew where they had already searched and found nothing more than oaks, briars, and holly. "There must be a hidden path!" She took Anna's hand. "Close your eyes, Anna. We're going to walk by following that voice."

The man still shouted and cursed. With eyes shut tight, Elena strode forward, pulling Anna behind her. On and on she strode. Incredibly, no branches or trunks halted her steps until sunlight kissed her face. The feel of the hot rays on her cheeks surprised her, since the forest canopy had only allowed dappled light through.

She opened her eyes and found herself in a clearing by a cottage. A young man, leaning over, was swearing down into a well.

"Good morrow," Elena said.

He straightened and swung around, apparently as surprised to see them, as they were to see him. "How did you get here?"

Elena gestured behind her. "Through there." She found herself pointing to a thick strand of trees and brush. She turned back slowly trying to ignore the impossibility of what they had just done. "We've come to see the witch. I have need of a spell."

He came forward and bowed. "Good day, mistress. My name is Smedley. I'm the witch's, um, apprentice. The witch, Badora, is away on an errand. She won't be back for another week."

"Oh," Elena said, thoroughly disheartened.

Smedley waved to the woods behind Elena. "That's why she put that spell to hide the entrance to the cottage." He eyed the two women with keen interest. "How did you manage to make your way through?"

Elena shrugged. What did it matter? Her last chance for redemption was gone.

"My mistress is in need of Badora's help," Anna said. "Is there a way to summon her?" She shook their bag of gold, jingling the coins. "We can pay."

Smedley fastened his gaze on the bag as he shook his head with regret. "Badora took her familiar with her, her seagull, or I could have sent him."

Elena spotted a large fallen log by the well. Her spirit depleted, she sank onto it.

Anna tucked the bag of gold back safely inside her dress.

"Now that you've broken through her spell," Smedley said, "perhaps Badora will sense that and return home."

That sounds like wishful thinking, Elena thought.

"If she does, how soon will she be back?" Anna asked.

He shrugged. "I surmise it would take at least three days for her to return."

"We don't have three days," Elena said in a defeated voice. "We only have *this* day."

Smedley came to sit beside Elena on the log, stretching his long legs out and crossing them at the ankles.

Oh, why couldn't she have had faith in her father's choice? What if finding the witch gone was a sign? One that meant she should confess all to her father and bravely accept the repercussions. At least that would give her father time to prepare his people for an attack. In case he were mistaken in his future son-in-law's character, and Lord John William Giles did take after his cruel, vindictive father and declared war on them.

Smedley sat up suddenly, rolling the log and unbalancing Elena. "I've an idea."

"What?" Anna asked, sounding hopeful.

"Why don't I cast the spell for you instead?"

Anna and Elena exchanged worried looks.

"I'm a wizard in training. Badora has been teaching me since the spring equinox when she first took me on as her apprentice. I'm sure I could do a simple spell. And it wouldn't

cost you as much as it would with Badora. I'll only charge you half her price."

Neither of the women spoke.

"What was it that you wanted the witch to do for you?" Smedley asked.

Elena looked toward the forest, uncomfortable about sharing her secret with a strange male.

"We've come about a very delicate matter," Anna said. "Something only a real witch could resolve."

Smedley jumped up. "You think I'm not good enough to do a spell? I am. Badora said I learn quickly and am very bright."

"It's getting late." Elena stood too. "If we're to return home before Lord Giles arrives, we'd best leave now."

"Wait, I can prove it." Smedley clapped his hands in the direction the women had come from, and where once there had been a strand of trees, a winding path now opened up.

Anna gasped.

Despite herself, Elena was impressed. Could it be possible that this young man had magic in him? She glanced at him again, this time with more interest. He seemed like an ordinary youth, tall, slender, narrow-faced, but with eager eyes.

"Come." He gestured to the cottage. "I know where she keeps her spell book." He ran inside before either Elena or Anna could speak.

"What choice do we have, my lady?" Anna asked, beginning to follow him. "If he can help, we must try."

With a nod, Elena trailed indoors after Anna.

Elena was surprised to find the inside of the cottage much larger than what the outside had promised. There were several rooms when she had expected to find but one. Smedley rushed to a door on the left and Anna hurried after him. As their feet crushed the herbs strewn on the floor, pungent scents of sweet fennel and sage were released into the air.

Elena followed at a slower pace, taking note of the house and its lush decorations. She finally entered a tall circular domed room painted blue with colorful tapestries on the high walls. At the room's center, Smedley and Anna poured over a tome resting on a pedestal.

"She has some marvelous spells," Anna said. "I cannot read the script but the drawn pictures are wonderful." She glanced at Elena and added, "I told him the type of spell we are looking for, my lady. He thinks he knows of one."

Elena's cheeks heated. Thankfully, the apprentice seemed more interested in finding the spell than looking at her.

"Here it is!" the young man shouted in triumph.

Anna peered at the tome over his shoulder. "This one has no pictures. What does it say?"

"Are you sure it will do what I need it to?" Elena asked.

"The book says this spell will hide what you wish to keep secret."

That sounded appropriate. Now that the moment had arrived, she found herself both nervous about having this spell cast and yet anxious for it to be over.

How sweet it would be to fulfill her father's dream. To not disappoint him. To take a husband without shame.

"Is it a difficult spell to perform?" she asked.

"Not at all, mistress." Smedley already ran around the room collecting the herbs and articles he would need. He brought what he'd gathered and dropped it all by Elena's feet. The sight of rolling eyeballs, frog's feet, and jars of tiny pickled animals and insects agitated Elena's already tender stomach. He then spread out a silk patterned scarf and arranged the items on top of it.

He extended his hand to Anna. "This spell will cost two gold pieces. Half what Badora charges."

Anna shook her head. "Payment *after* the spell."

With a sigh he nodded. "Don't move," he ordered Elena.

Elena stood still. What exactly was Smedley doing? Anna's frowning face mirrored Elena's own uncertainty. The apprentice worked with confidence, as if he'd done this many times before. Or had he only watched the witch perform such rituals? Suddenly, a plume of yellow smoke erupted by her feet.

Smedley recited a musical chant.

Make her whole

Change her life

Give her back her virgin stance.

Make her new

Change her flesh

Let her problems vanish!

Could this spell work? Elena repeated those words like a mantra, wondering what life would be like if the world never learned what she had done. Could the spell truly hide her mistake?

The yellow smoke, stinking of sulfur, encompassed Elena so she couldn't see. The chant cut off.

"What's happening?" she said.

Silence.

"Anna? Smedley? Can you hear me, where are you?"

No response.

She waved her arms to dispel the smoke, to see where the young apprentice and Anna were. The air simply grew thicker. The foul stench stung her nose and the back of her throat, and tasted sour, making her want to gag. She coughed but that just meant she sucked in more of the foul air. Her chest throbbed.

"Smedley!" she shouted and stepped back. A flash of energy spiked through her. Every inch of her skin tingled painfully and she screamed and tumbled backwards.

Elena lay still on the floor, glad to be out of that smoke. Slowly, the room cleared and she saw the witch's apprentice and Anna. Both wore an expression of shock. She checked around the room to see what had upset them. The doorway stood empty, no one in the room but the three of them. She checked herself. She seemed fine. Her dress wasn't torn. No blood gushing from any body part. No second head or extra bits. She sniffed at herself. A faint odor of lingering sulfur overlay the lilac water she had sprayed herself with that morning, but nothing untoward, though her body did ache.

Had the spell really worked? Elena was contemplating a delicate way of checking herself when Anna spoke.

"My lady?" The maid stepped forward, her arms extended.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Smedley said in a worried tone.

Anna swung back and grabbed the apprentice by his tunic. "What have you done with my mistress?"

Elena stood up, brushing dirt and herbs off her dress. "He's done nothing." She should have known better than to rely on an apprentice to do a witch's job.

"Who said that?" Anna looked blindly around the room.

"I did," Elena said. "Anna, what's the matter with you?"

"Uh oh," Smedley muttered.

Her maid screamed and sank to the floor.

Elena knelt beside the girl. "What's wrong with her?"

"It's not her, Mistress," Smedley said. "It's you. You're not there."

"What?" Fear overwhelmed Elena and her stomach contacted painfully. Bile rose up her throat, reminding her vaguely of last night's roast duck. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. This was no time to panic.

"I can't see you," Smedley said, "and neither can Anna. That's why she's fainted. All we can do is hear you."

Elena shivered feeling as if she'd been drenched in ice water. In turns, her body first felt cold and then burning hot. She sat down on the floor and leaned her head against her knees to keep the spinning sensation under control.

"The spell, my lady," Smedley said with a quiver in his voice, "it's made your problem disappear."

"Along with the rest of me!"

Smedley paused and looked from the maid to the general direction from which Elena's voice came. "Does this mean you won't pay me?" he asked in a concerned voice.

Anna groaned.

"Explain to her what's happened," Elena said.

Smedley helped Anna sit up and gently relayed the facts.

At the end of the explanation, Anna said, "My lady, are you really here?"

Elena took Anna's extended hands.

The girl cried out, "Oh, what has the fool done?"

"No time for recriminations," Elena said. "We must undo this catastrophe."

They scoured through the spell book for a reverse spell. Smedley tried every one that seemed plausible, his voice cracking, hands shaking.

None worked.

Sunset threatened.

After Smedley's last attempt, the three of them walked outside and sat on the log by the well and watched the sky turn shades of red.

"What are we to do, my lady?" Anna asked in a wail.

Elena shook her head and then realized neither of her companions could see it. "I don't know, Anna."

"I'll bet Badora can break this spell," Smedley said.

"But she's not expected for days!" Anna said. "My lady, you are to meet Lord Giles tonight. He's probably already arrived at the castle."

Elena cringed at that reminder. "We must return home."

"And then what?" her maid asked. "Confess all to your father? At least, he can't beat you if he can't see you. I won't be so lucky."

"No one's going to beat you, Anna," Elena said. "Maybe you could tell my father and Lord Giles that I'm not well and mustn't be disturbed?"

"He'll send for a healer and then what would we do?"

"I know." Elena looked thoughtfully at the young man who had stood up to pace worriedly before them. "Perhaps Smedley can accompany us and pretend he's a healer."

"Who's going to believe I'm a healer?" he asked.

"We believed you were a witch's apprentice," Anna said, warming up to the plan. "And this mess is your fault."

"We'll say that I have something that others can catch," Elena said. "That I'm not to be disturbed for a few days. By then, Badora may have returned." She sighed. "And once I'm visible again, I'll do what I should have done all along, confess to my wrongdoing. At least then, Lord Giles won't think I'm trying to make a fool of him. He might not want to marry me and might still want to wage war with my father, but it won't be because I lied to him."

Anna pointed at Smedley. "You will leave a note for Badora about what's happened. Ask her to come to the castle the moment she returns."

That done, they sped toward the castle. As they passed by the secluded lake where she had met her minstrel, Elena's steps faltered, as she remembered their parting.

I intend to insist that my betrothal be called off and that I be allowed to marry you, she had said as she dressed. For now, we are bonded heart and soul.

He had chuckled at her fervor as she adjusted the circlet over her veil. Then, hand held to heart, he swore on his honor, *I will come back for you, my love. I promise. Please believe in me.* And kissed her goodbye.

Every day for a year Elena had returned to this spot, pressed her cheeks to the grass and waited, her heart full of hope, pulse hammering in anticipation of seeing her minstrel again. But every day she had got up to go back home, despondent, thinking, *tomorrow, I must speak with father. And confess what I have done.*

Until this morning, when her father announced that Lord Giles was coming, and it was too late for her to say anything. Her eyes filling with tears, Elena turned her head to the side as she walked by, so she wouldn't have to see where she and her lover had lain together, made such blissful, abandoned love, and promised to be true to each other.

* * * *

As they approached the castle, Anna turned as if worried Elena was no longer there. So Elena took her maid's hand to reassure her that she wouldn't have to face the Baron of Hawk's End's wrath alone.

By chance, the castle gates were still open even though it was after sunset. The daily ritual of closing all entrances to the castle had been delayed because the baron's honored guest and his entourage had recently arrived. Guards in red

and green, Dragon's Reach colors, loitered in the compound. Some stragglers were still entering through the gates. Were they letting the wolf into the sheep's pen?

Elena stole up to her room, careful to move quietly.

Soon, Anna and Smedley joined her. "My lady, are you here?"

"Yes." Elena fluttered the bed curtains to attract their attention. She then stuffed pillows and bolsters under the covers and pulled a sheet up so it looked as if she slept beneath it with her head covered.

Smedley and Anna watched her handiwork with interest.

"My lady, what are you doing?" Anna asked.

"If anyone asks," Elena said, "tell them I am resting. That Smedley, as the healer, has given me a potion to sleep and watches over me."

"What do you plan to do, my lady?" Her maid sounded worried.

"In the corridors, I heard servants and courtiers chatter about Lord Giles. Their talk has made me curious, Anna. It occurred to me that in my invisible state, I'm in a perfect position to find out what kind of man my betrothed is. My father assures me that, unlike his father, the current Baron of Dragon's Reach is honorable. I want to see this for myself."

"No, my lady, you mustn't. I, too, have heard talk. Lord Giles did not arrive alone."

"I know, I know," Elena said. "He has his guards with him. We saw them in the courtyard."

"They are not all he brought," Anna said. "He has his sorcerer with him."

"Sorcerer!" Smedley's voice spiked with fear. "We're doomed." He crossed himself. "Saint Thaddeus preserve us from this desperate situation."

Elena's heart thudded in alarm. Lord Giles had brought his sorcerer? To meet his bride? Why? Then she recalled the rumors about her father's hand in Lord Giles's father's death a year ago. For months, Elena's father had been anxious to know if Lord Giles would wage war with them because of it. Yet, when no battle cry had gone up from Dragon's Reach, her father had begun to hope that Lord Giles trusted in his neighbor's innocence. Could her father have been mistaken in that? Or did Lord Giles hold misgivings about *her*?

Had he brought this sorcerer to ascertain if Elena were indeed the virgin bride promised him?

Elena paced the length of the room, trying to ignore Smedley cracking his knuckles in agitation. Still, the urge to meet their honored guest tugged.

"My lady?" Anna said.

"I'm here."

"With the sorcerer at Lord Giles's side, it's too dangerous for you to go near him. Promise me you will not go below?"

Elena sat on the bed. "Anna, if I have to remain here, you and Smedley must act as my eyes and ears within the castle."

"I shall do anything you ask, my lady. But Smedley should remain with you, to keep anyone from coming in here."

"Yes," Smedley said. "They must all think you are resting. I will bar the doors." He ran to stand with his back to the door, arms out-stretched.

"Very well," Elena said. "Anna, go downstairs and tell my father of my indisposition and the healer's presence. Assure him that by morning I shall be fine. Come the morrow, we shall make up another excuse to keep everyone away. Meanwhile, I think I shall rest. I'm very tired."

"A good idea," Anna said.

Elena yawned loudly and pushed down on the bed as if she were about to lie down, then pulled the heavy bed curtains closed.

"Will you be all right?" Anna whispered to Smedley.

Elena could understand Anna's worry, for the young man appeared jumpy.

"You won't be too long, will you?" Smedley asked.

"I'll be as quick as I can. While I'm gone, bar the door with some chairs and that chest." Anna touched his arm. "Else your arms will tire before I return."

Once he did that, if Elena tried to leave, Smedley would know immediately. So Elena followed Anna closely and slipped out the door behind her. She made her own way down to the great hall and listened as Anna spoke to her father.

Two guests were present, their backs to the door.

Her cousin Camilla was there too. Gowned in silk and lace, she appeared as beautiful as ever. From her cousin's interested glance at one of the strangers, Elena guessed the tall man must be Lord Giles.

From the back he looked solid and strong, wearing a green tunic richly embroidered with gold thread. He was tall but more solidly muscular than her minstrel. And where her lover had had soft dark hair, Lord Giles's was a bright, light blond.

His sword was strapped to his belt and his hand rested casually over the hilt.

She liked the way he stood, as if he were comfortable with himself and his world, and confident of handling any situation with assurance.

The shorter man to his right must be his sorcerer. Though she'd not seen any of his kind before, she would have pictured a sorcerer to have long white hair and to wear colorful flowing robes. But the slender man beside Lord Giles was dressed in shades of brown and had ebony hair.

She moved to the other side of the sorcerer, so she could get a better glance, past him, at Lord Giles.

The sorcerer swung his gaze in her direction. She held her breath and stood still.

Lord Giles turned to face his mage and his face came into view. Beneath a wide forehead, he had dark blue eyes, and the bottom half of his face was covered by a long mustache and beard. She had a partiality for blue eyes. Her minstrel had had blue eyes, too, that smiled at her whenever he spoke.

"What troubles you, Markham?" Lord Giles asked the sorcerer.

Noticing the mage still staring in her direction, Elena felt alarm intrude on her curiosity about Lord Giles. Surely the sorcerer couldn't possibly know she was here. No one else had noticed her presence.

"The wind, perhaps," the sorcerer said, finally moving his attention back to the group.

Elena's father chuckled, though she heard nervousness behind the laugh. She wished she could hug him and reassure him that everything would be all right. Unfortunately, everything wasn't.

"My lord," Camilla said, "as my cousin is indisposed, I would be happy to show you around the castle."

Elena stiffened at the suggestion. She didn't like her cousin's sensually suggestive tone. Camilla's predatory behavior irked. This man was Elena's betrothed, not Camilla's.

"Thank you for the offer, my lady. However, it is late and we have had a long journey this day." Lord Giles bowed to his host. "I shall retire for the night."

Elena nodded approval of that dismissal of Camilla and stepped aside for the men to walk by. Just in time, for the sorcerer's hand lashed out to the very spot where she had been standing. When his fist clenched thin air, he appeared disappointed. Lord Giles raised his eyebrow.

The sorcerer shrugged and the two men left the great hall. A servant guided Lord Giles and Markham to their quarters, accompanied by two of their guards.

Elena stayed at a distance behind them.

At the doorway to Lord Giles's room, the men stopped and the two guards moved to stand at attention on either side of the door.

Again, the sorcerer looked behind at the empty corridor with suspicion. "I think it might be best if I stayed with you," Markham said. "There's something not right in this house."

"What isn't right is that my bride-to-be refuses to see me." Lord Giles sounded angry.

Elena stepped back a pace. He'd been calm enough in accepting her absence downstairs. Had that been an act?

"I'm in no mood for company. And despite your worries, I am perfectly capable of defending myself. Good night, Markham." He entered his room.

She wished to follow him but the sorcerer stood so close she was frightened to approach. At the last moment, she overcame her fear and dashed in before the door closed.

A loud thumping on the door followed. Lord Giles sighed and opened it. Elena, not taking any chances, ran to the side of the bed and slid under. The sorcerer shouldn't be able to see her but somehow he always seemed to discern her movement.

"What is it now?" he asked Markham.

From under the bed, she watched the sorcerer push his way inside. "Someone is in here with you."

Lord Giles laughed, but to placate the sorcerer, he made a show of opening up large empty chests, the side door to the dressing room, and then knelt to look under the bed.

Elena was shocked to find Lord Giles's face so close that his breath brushed her cheek. He smelled of crushed grass and sunshine. Her heart skipped a beat as her fingers itched to reach out and touch his beautiful lips.

She decided then that she didn't care for his thick beard and mustache. What did he look like under all that hair? Unlike the custom of most men of her acquaintance, her minstrel had been clean-shaven and she'd enjoyed the feel of his smooth skin rubbing against her cheeks.

Lord Giles frowned, gaze flicking at the empty space beneath the bed and his strong, straight nose wrinkling a little as if a scent disturbed him, but then he shook his head and stood.

"Satisfied?" he asked the sorcerer in a deep, resonant voice. Listening to him speak, he sounded familiar to Elena, as if she knew him from somewhere. Had she heard his voice in her dreams?

"You're allowing your suspicions about this family to distort reality, Markham. We've had a long journey. So and go rest, my friend." He escorted the sorcerer back outside the room and, despite Markham's protests, he firmly shut the door.

Elena slid out from under the bed and stood. A male servant scratched at the door before entering to offer to assist the baron. Lord Giles dismissed him, saying he could see to his own needs. As the door closed, he undid his sword belt and tossed it onto a chair. Then he pulled off his tunic and threw it over the sword.

Elena gulped, her eyes widening with appreciation at the sight of his bare torso. She had seen many men in her father's courtyard, guards stripped to the waist, practicing with wooden sword and lance. And her minstrel had appeared thin and youthful when he'd stripped off his clothing, as if he had never picked up a sword in his life.

Lord Giles, on the other hand, was broad of chest and shoulders and had strong arms and a flat rippling abdomen. He had two old scars on his back and one long angry line on his right side that looked recently acquired. He must have

been in combat or at least involved in regular practice fights. That would explain his fit condition.

She felt hot and fluttery watching him like this, without his knowledge. She moved closer, unable to contain a smile of pleasure at his handsome appearance. If only she could touch him, but then he would know he wasn't alone. And how could she explain her invisible presence here?

Circling him, her fists clenched and unclenched in anticipation of the moment when Badora would return to reverse the spell Elena was under and her father could properly present her to her husband-to-be. She began looking forward to—instead of dreading—the night this man would look at her with the same ardent desire with which she now studied him.

He walked over to a side table and bent to wash his face in a basin of water.

Elena followed, thinking he did indeed seem tired. She regretted that her absence had added disappointment to his long journey. What might this night have been like if she had never returned to the lake that fateful day so long ago?

Something about her mysterious minstrel had made her shed all her inhibitions as no other noble or knight who ever courted her had. His touch had sent her emotions soaring. And she had thrilled at the way his body reacted pleasurably to her every tentative exploration.

The crash of porcelain against the wall shocked her back into the present. Lord Giles stood staring at the destruction he'd caused, his fists bunched and his face stiff with fury. The water basin lay in shards, obviously having been thrown with

great force. Water dripped down the wall and formed a puddle on the stone floor.

A knock startled them both.

"Go away, Markham," he shouted and wiped his face with his wet hands.

The knock came again.

He strode to the door and swung it open. Elena wasn't sure if she or Lord Giles were more surprised to see Camilla on the other side.

"As I am not Markham," her cousin said, "may I come in?"

Elena noted how the guards who were supposed to be outside were absent. Had Camilla bribed them away, perhaps with the promise of food? What was she doing here?

Camilla slipped inside and shut the door, posing seductively against it.

Lord Giles folded his arms across his bare chest and tilted his head to consider his guest. His leisurely glance slid the length of her cousin.

Elena ground her teeth, not liking the appreciation in his blue eyes any more than she did her cousin's covetous look at him.

Recently widowed for the second time in less than three years, was the woman so lonely that she needed to poach on Elena's man? Had she no decency?

Camilla stepped forward and raising her arms, boldly trailed tantalizing fingers down his biceps. "In my cousin's absence, may I amuse you, my lord?" she whispered, her hips swaying suggestively against his. "Trust me when I say

that after one night of bedding Elena, you will be begging for something wilder. I'm the spiced wine to her syrupy mead."

Elena's mouth hung open. She snapped her jaw closed. Camilla was seducing Lord Giles! She seethed at her cousin's wanton behavior, fury building. If that water basin had still been intact, she would have thrown it at the two of them.

His hands came to rest at Camilla's hips, stilling their movement. "Do you know why Elena was absent tonight? I didn't believe for a moment that story of her being unwell."

Elena heard the hard note in his silky voice and shivered in fear. Did her cousin hear it too?

Camilla smiled.

Apparently not.

"She's probably frightened by the thought of laying down with you," Camilla said.

Elena's cheeks heated. Oh, how could she say such a thing?

"Or it could be something worse." Her cousin ran her thumb along his moist lips.

"Such as?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

"Well, when I spoke to her this morning she seemed quite hale and hearty." She leaned in to lick a droplet off his wet beard and Elena turned away, unable to watch any more. Her heart ached. Did the man have no discerning taste? If the door had been left open, she would have run out and left them to their pleasures.

"Though she did ask me a strange question," Camilla added.

"What question?"

Dread crept up Elena's spine. Camilla couldn't betray her like that! She had spoken to her in confidence.

"She asked me how my second husband accepted me as his wife, knowing I was no longer a virgin. It made me wonder if you might not be getting the virtuous bride you expect to."

The words burned in Elena's ears. With a silent cry she dashed out the door, no longer caring what anyone might think of a door opening and closing on its own and of footsteps pounding down the corridor.

Behind her, Lord Giles shouted for Markham. Elena sped down the stairs and out the front doors. She couldn't go to her room. They would seek her there first. And if the sorcerer came with them, they would find her. She wasn't ready to face Lord Giles yet. She couldn't. Her shame overwhelmed her.

With her tears blinding her, she ran into the courtyard and headed for the gatehouse.

Shouts came from the keep as she raised the portcullis, straining to get the counter weights, pulleys, and rope to turn. A guard tried to stop the wheel and she picked up a nearby mallet and hit him on the head. She tied the wheel in place and sprinted back down to the castle entrance.

Guards formed a line to prevent anyone from coming in.

Elena slipped between two and raced down the drawbridge.

* * * *

After a restless night's sleep, shouts from the other room brought Elena awake with a start. She had come to the witch's house to find privacy and peace, knowing it would be empty. But obviously others had come here too. But what upset them that they created such uproar?

She crept out of the room, following the raised voices. The noise came from the circular blue room where Smedley had performed the vanishing spell yesterday. Had it only been yesterday?

She stood in the doorway, shocked to see several people she recognized. Confronting her maid Anna and the apprentice Smedley were Lord Giles, Markham, Elena's father, and Camilla.

"You said she would be here." Lord Giles pointed accusingly at Anna.

"I thought this is where she would have come," Anna said.

An imposing woman in a black dress held her arms apart to separate the combatants. A gull, surely the familiar, sat on the woman's right shoulder.

Badora was back!

Did that please her? At this point, Elena was unsure if she even wanted to become visible ever again. Luckily, no one seemed to have noticed her entrance. So the spell must still be in effect.

As if to contradict that, the bird looked straight at Elena and then turned to coo in the witch's ear. Just then, Markham turned around and looked at the doorway, right at Elena.

She sighed. How did he always know she was nearby?

Badora too looked in Elena's direction. She and Markham nodded to each other, as if silently communicating and then the sorcerer turned his back to Elena as if he'd not sensed her presence.

"All this shouting won't solve anything," Badora said.

Elena wondered how the witch had returned to her house so quickly. Perhaps she really was a powerful sorceress and not simply a village witch.

Badora faced Smedley. "It might help matters if you were to tell me exactly what happened. Your note said no more than to come to the castle, a disaster had happened. I was about to leave when everyone descended on my cottage. Now, what disaster did you mean? And I want the truth, Smedley."

The apprentice gazed at his feet, his shoulders drooping. "I performed a spell."

"On my daughter?" Elena's father demanded, his face going pale.

The young man shuffled behind Anna.

"We asked him to, my lord," Anna said, standing protectively in front of Smedley. "Lady Elena and I."

"What kind of spell?" Badora asked.

Anna and Smedley glanced at each other, not responding.

"Something to do with her lost virginity, wasn't it?" Lord Giles asked.

Elena winced. She should step up and admit to all but she couldn't get her feet to move forward or her lips to mouth any words. Humiliation overwhelmed her.

Anna nodded.

Elena's father sighed.

Camilla trilled a laugh.

"Why didn't she come to me if she was in trouble?" Elena's father asked in a soft, disappointed voice.

"Too ashamed," Camilla said. "The silly fool."

Elena was glad the witch or Markham hadn't yet told Lord Giles and the others that she stood in the doorway. She felt sure they both knew. She couldn't stand having anyone see her, not now that all of her secrets were spilling out. And she wasn't the one doing the telling.

"Go on," Badora said to Smedley. "Tell us the rest."

Smedley glanced tentatively at the tall intimidating form of Lord Giles and then at Badora. "Her husband-to-be was arriving, so she came here looking for you, mistress, to cast a spell that might hide the fact that she'd, well, you know."

"And..." Badora prompted.

"And ... I said I would do it for half the cost."

The witch sighed. "This, despite the fact that you've never cast a spell in your life? That your job here is to do no more than keep my house clean? And I notice you've lost my broom in the process."

"It fell down the well while I was washing it," Smedley protested. "I was cursing at the well when they heard my voice and found their way here." He shrugged. "Besides, I've seen you do spells hundreds of times. I was sure I could mimic it. I'd planned to buy you a new broom with some of the money."

"What went wrong?" the witch asked.

"Instead of hiding her loss of virtue," Smedley said, "it made her invisible."

"Of course," Lord Giles said, as if finally understanding something he'd wondered about. "She must have been in my room when—" he stopped abruptly, and swore.

"She saw us," Camilla said with triumph. "Good. Now you know I'm right about her. She's too dull for you. Probably shocked that you were about to kiss me."

Elena's cheeks warmed at the insult.

"I wasn't," Lord Giles ground out, sending Camilla a glare.

He wasn't? Elena looked at him again. She was beginning to understand why women apparently found him so appealing. Why couldn't she have stayed faithful to him? She was a coward for running away. She should have stayed and fought Elena for him. She took a step closer.

"Camilla, what were you doing in Lord Giles's room?" Elena's father asked.

"Merely comforting him, uncle, after Elena's sad desertion."

"Wait a moment," Lord Giles said. "If Elena is still invisible, could she be here? Now?" He swung around, peering in every corner of the room. "Markham. You could sense her presence last night. Is she here? And can you or the witch make her visible to us?"

"For Elena to become visible again," Badora said, "she must first want to be seen."

"Oh, I don't know about that, mistress," Smedley said in a despondent voice. "We tried everything to reverse that spell. Nothing worked."

Anna slapped him lightly on the back of the head and told him to shush.

"How can I make her want that?" Lord Giles asked, sounding adoringly frustrated.

Did he still want to see her? Even after all the horrible revelations? And what could the witch mean by her words? Elena didn't possess any magical abilities to change what had happened. Surely only the witch or perhaps the sorcerer could cast a spell to change her back.

"If what upset her last night was your—" Badora waved to Camilla, "—interaction with this one, it might help to explain exactly what took place after Elena left."

"And why you waited a year to seek her out," Markham added.

Lord Giles frowned. "Are you saying that she is here?" He glanced around the room. "Elena?"

Camilla placed her hand on his arm. "As I've told you, she is but a child. So she hides in fear. What you need is a woman. Why not let her be and come back to the castle with me? If you wish, you can still arrange a marriage with our house, for I, too, am of Hawk's blood."

"Camilla!" Elena's father said in a shocked voice.

"Uncle, admit it. You love your precious daughter too much to let her go. And if Elena is soiled, then his lordship should find me an equal if not a better match for his needs. At least, he can be sure I won't ever sleep out of wedlock."

Elena covered her mouth to keep from crying out.

"Speak quickly, my lord, or you will lose her," Markham warned.

"Elena, please don't leave me," Lord Giles said to the room at large. "We've been parted a year and that has already been far too long."

"What are you saying?" Elena's father asked. "You've never met my daughter."

"I met a maiden a year ago, by the lake behind the castle. A beautiful nymph. I wanted to marry her. But news of my father's murder had me rushing home."

He looked at Markham who pointed to the doorway.

Shocked, Elena stood still. Was he suggesting that *he* was her loving minstrel?

Lord Giles approached, looking vaguely in her direction, and spoke in a deep voice that struck a chord with her memory. "I wanted to meet the woman whom my father had arranged for me to wed. I didn't want to end up in a marriage like his, with a wife who would betray me as easily as she breathed. So I disguised myself by shaving my face, coloring my hair, and dressing as a minstrel before coming to meet my betrothed."

Elena gasped, her heart racing, and eyes tearing with joy. Yes, that voice, and those blue eyes. How could she have not guessed? *He was her minstrel!* In a flash she remembered every moment of that auspicious meeting by the lake, the delightful exchange of stories of their lives, the laughter, the kisses, and then the intimate loving.

Her body grew hot as every heated emotion she'd felt at that beautiful coupling returned, but this time without the accompanying chill of guilt. For now she knew she *hadn't*

betrayed her betrothed. She had lain with *this* man, the one she had been promised to.

"My lovely Elena," Lord Giles said, reaching out blindly, "after I saw you, spoke with you, I knew that by some fortunate chance, my father had finally done something good. I fell in love with you by that lake, Elena. And I believed you loved me back wholly."

She sucked in her breath. Her lover had come back, just as he promised he would. Her body shuddered, releasing the weight of disillusionment.

"I meant to come to see your father the very next day as we planned, to claim you as my bride, but then I received news of my father's untimely death. And rumors began that he died by your father's hand."

"I had nothing to do with it," Elena's father protested.

Lord Giles turned to the older man and nodded. "I know that now, my lord. But every indication at the time suggested that someone from your household had paid to have my father killed."

"That isn't possible," her father said, looking affronted.

Lord Giles glanced at Camilla who paled under his scrutiny.

"Since you're foolish enough to fall in love with Elena," Camilla said in a harsh tone, "I see no reason to stay. Besides, talk of Elena and death bores me. Uncle, I'm going home."

She brushed by Lord Giles, who let her pass. Her cousin would have run into her, if Elena hadn't moved aside. Camilla sprinted out of the witch's cottage as if the executioner were at her heels.

Elena watched her disappear in shock. Could Camilla have been behind the murder? Then she remembered the sudden deaths of Camilla's two husbands, both within months of marrying her.

"I sought out a sorcerer to help me find my father's murderer," Lord Giles continued, drawing Elena's attention back to him. "It took me a year to acquire Markham's services. He assures me your father is innocent of the charge, Elena. But not your cousin."

"Why would Camilla do this?" Elena's father asked.

"For power," Markham said. "By marrying his lordship, she could acquire that, but only if his father were dead."

"But my daughter..." he began, sounding nonplused.

"She no doubt felt confident she could entice me away from Elena," Lord Giles said. "She was wrong. Camilla is like my mother, exactly the type of woman I've spent my life avoiding."

Elena hoped Camilla's hasty retreat meant she intended to run far away. If she had played a part in the murder of the late Baron of Dragon's Reach, her life would be forfeit.

Lord Giles turned back to the doorway. "The moment I knew the truth about Camilla, I sent word that I would be coming to claim you, Elena. Then to find you unwilling to see me," he shook his head, "I thought I would lose my mind." He held out his arms again. "My love, will you forgive me for my year of silence and the pain I've put you through?"

Elena took a shaky breath. Her minstrel and Lord Giles were one and the same. There was no longer any reason to hide from him. She tentatively stepped forward, into his

arms. He hugged her, a smile breaking out on his face at feeling her presence.

Reaching up, she kissed him. And immediately knew with complete certainty that she held her one and true love. With her kiss, she tried to show him how much she'd missed him and how desperately she wanted to be his bride.

Lord Giles returned her kiss with a passion she well remembered. His hands tenderly circled her, caressing her shoulders and then skimming all down her back, as if he meant to see her by touch if not by vision. Every bit of her that he stroked and brushed, tingled and sparked to life.

"My beloved," he whispered.

She pulled back, surprised to find his blue eyes smiling delightfully, directly, at her.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Nothing to be sorry for," he whispered, kissing her eyelids and cheeks and lips. "It's I who let you down. Do you think you can trust in my promises again? For I promise to love you for the rest of my life."

"My minstrel, my heart, I never once stopped believing you would come to claim me. Every day I went to the lake waiting for you to find me again. And you have."

"My lady," Anna whispered in awe. "The spell's broken. We can all see you."

"Of course," Badora said. "Only Elena could break that spell, for it was she who cast it."

"I did?" Elena asked turning within Lord Giles's embrace to look at her.

Badora nodded. "You were ashamed of what you thought you'd done. You wanted to hide from the world. Smedley is my house cleaner. All he did was aid you in casting your own spell."

"Wishing," Markham said, "is the most powerful of all magic. I suggest you both remember that."

Elena laughed, for with the man she loved holding her tight, as if he never intended to let her slip away again, visible or not, she knew she would have no more need for wishes or spells.

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by Shereen Vedam

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