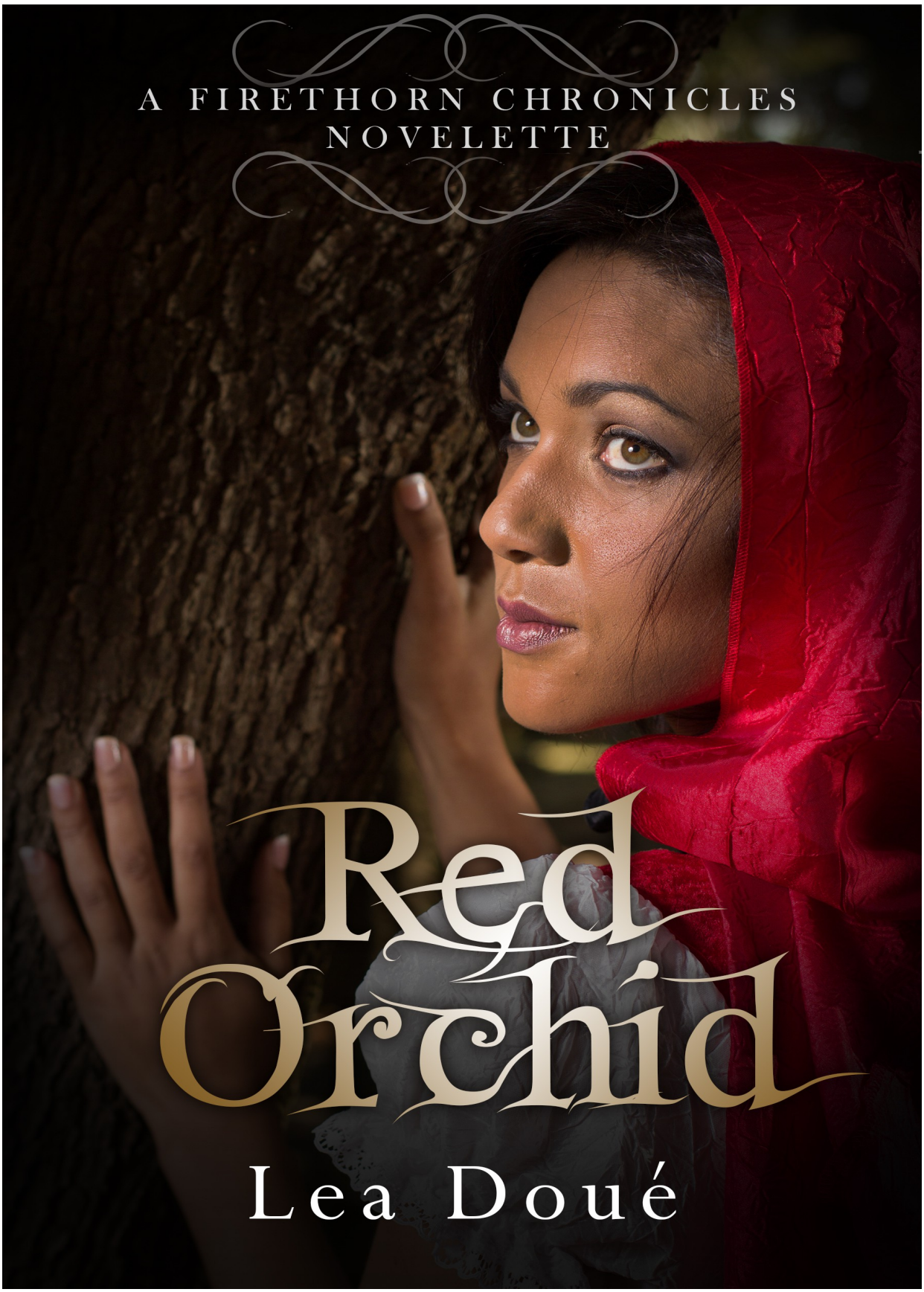
A FIRETHORN CHRONICLES
NOVELETTE
Red Orchid
Lea Doué

Red Orchid: A Firethorn Chronicles Novelette

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Author's Note:

Red Orchid was inspired by Little Red Riding Hood by Charles Perrault. It was originally intended as a stand-alone story, but it morphed into a prologue for The Red Dragon Girl (Firethorn Chronicles 3). As such, the ending is a bit of a cliffhanger. The events take place about one year before The Firethorn Crown (Firethorn Chronicles 1). You will see these characters again, and their fates will be revealed.

Red Orchid

The red orchid teased her from an out-of-reach hollow high in the ancient tree. Vanda's toes dug into the rough bark, steadying her as she stretched to grasp the next branch. She should have worn her leggings, but she'd never expected to find one of the elusive plants this late in the summer.

The villagers called this area the Deep Green, a rocky expanse of woods at the base of the mountains. Vanda lived with her father on the outskirts of the village in a shack set too far into the woods to be respectable. But she didn't call it home.

She hauled herself onto the next branch, and the next. Four feet above her, the orchid peeked out of its tiny nest, a shallow bowl where three branches met, filled with dirt and debris. No doubt some weaver dragon had coveted the plant and moved it up to their colony—their stout webs clouded the canopy overhead.

She needed to move faster if she were going to get this plant to the market in time. Grasping the back hem of her dress, she pulled it through her legs to the front and tucked the brown fabric tightly into her belt. That would have to do.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her foot high and placed it on a small knob on the trunk. Two more bumps, each smoother than the last, lifted her high enough to remove the flower. She wrapped one leg and one arm around as much of the tree as she could and then dug into the bit of soil until the roots loosened.

Now what? She couldn't climb back down with the plant in her hand. She'd left her basket on the ground, but she glanced around as if another might weave itself out of the tree branches for her convenience. Gram could have helped, but she was snug in her cottage; and she would have just laughed, anyway. She didn't understand why someone would pay such high

prices for something so fleeting, but the Prince of Mazereon was said to care for the orchids as much as some men cared for hunting. Plus, Gram had no desire to move again.

But Vanda was determined to get Gram away from the villagers, an assortment of folks who'd fled their sorcerer-loving king. Hiding her deeper in the forest could only work for so long. Da agreed, otherwise Vanda wouldn't have the time to go flower-picking instead of doing chores.

Lacking any better options, she upended the contents of her belt pouch—two withered apples and a handful of hazelnuts—and gently tucked the orchid inside, dirt and all. It was a tight fit, and the deep red petals poking out of the top shivered in protest as she slid the pouch around to hang at the back of her belt with her dagger.

Now to get down.

She couldn't see the knobs with the dress bunched around her legs, so she slid her toes along the trunk until they found the first foothold. Her dress snagged on the scabby bark, and she paused several times to free it. When the hem finally pulled loose from the belt, she'd made it halfway down. The limbs were larger here, and she sped up, hoping to get the plant to the market before the merchant left town. If she missed Greenly, the plant would die—she was no green thumb—and they would have to stay another winter in the woods.

Once she reached the bottommost limb, she lowered herself onto her stomach and prepared to drop down to the forest floor; but in her haste, her fingers slipped, and she fell, landing on her backside with her foot twisted painfully underneath.

Not the first time that had happened. Her hands stung, and she brushed them off on her dress.

The orchid!

She jumped up, hissed at the pain in her ankle, and craned her neck around to get a glimpse of the red petals.

Someone chuckled, and Vanda froze. She grabbed her dagger and held it in front of her, scanning the shadows, but she saw no one. Unwilling to move farther until she found the source of the laugh, she hobbled in a circle in the leaf litter.

A moment later, a young man walked into the clearing, brown-skinned, broad-

shouldered, and dressed for riding. But there was no horse in sight.

"Nice landing." His grin revealed a crooked front tooth. "Are you all right?"

She backed up a step but stood straight and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm just passing through, and I've lost my horse."

Her eyebrows rose. He lost his horse?

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not my fault. He's a scaredy-cat bag of bones, and he spooked at nothing. Have you seen him? He's black. About this big." He held his hand at eye level, then raised it a few more inches.

Who was this man? "I haven't seen your horse."

She needed to see her flower, though, make sure it was intact after the fall.

She fixed her gaze on him while feeling along her belt until she found the pouch. She slid it to the front and glanced down to see most of the petals still attached and the roots firmly buried in the bag.

The man's gaze followed her own, and his eyes widened in surprise when he saw the flower.

Maybe he'd hit his head when he'd lost his horse.

"I'm going to go." She took a step back.

The man seemed not to notice, so intent was he on the orchid and on her face. His gaze darted between the two, his lips parted in a smile.

She took another step back.

"Wait," he said and held his hands out as if approaching a skittish horse. "Don't go. I need your help."

"Who *are* you?"

"Oh. You can call me . . . Baz. And it's not just my horse that's lost. I have no idea where I am or how to get back to the village."

The village. He was new in town, or just passing through.

"Can you help me?"

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she crossed her arms, careful not to bump the orchid, and studied him from head to toe. Black hair, close-cropped in a style not favored by

the villagers, dark brown, plainly-tailored trousers and tunic, and knee boots that fit like a second skin over his muscular legs. He was unarmed. Did he not know there were dragons in these woods? She'd never *seen* a razor-tail, but there were others just as dangerous in their own way. He was definitely just passing through—but for what purpose?

"You're not what I expected," he said.

She refused to ask what he meant. "Tell me who you are, and I'll get you to the village."

He looked taken aback. "I told you."

"You told me your name, which tells me nothing."

He frowned. "I'm here with a . . . friend. He's a healer, looking for rare plants. I see you've found one yourself."

She cupped a hand around the orchid protectively. "You know what this is?"

"It's a red orchid. They don't grow on the other side of the mountain."

"You're from Mazereon?"

"Aren't you?"

Technically, yes—at present. But the village lay so close to the border, with the mountains dividing it from every other town in the kingdom, that it concerned itself more with Maglyn, from which most of the villagers had fled.

She didn't answer his question. "And, where's your healer friend who's looking for rare plants?"

"I lost him, too." His lips twitched as if he wanted to grin again.

She crossed her arms. He was hiding something. She'd already wasted too much time, but she wasn't taking him anywhere until he explained.

She waited.

"You're stubborn. I like that." He shifted a step closer.

Raising the dagger, she hopped backwards on her good foot.

"Whoa." He held his hands up as he'd done before. "Nothing to worry about. I'm just relieved to see you. And surprised. I was told no one came into these woods."

She didn't respond. Let him see just how stubborn she could be.

"My friend went after my horse. I thought I could keep up, but these stupid boots . . ."

He shifted his feet. “I found a path, and it took me here.”

The path to Gram's house. She needed to get him off it before he got any farther. “The village is that way.” She pointed with the dagger. “I'll take you as far as I can.”

“Thank you, um . . .”

“Vanda.” She fetched her scarf from where she'd dropped it on the other side of the tree. “Most people call me Red.”

He watched as she shook out the long crimson scarf Gram had given her. She draped it over her head and wrapped the ends around her neck and shoulders.

“Vanda. It suits you.” He fell into step beside her.

Why did she get the feeling that he knew her somehow?

*

When Vanda woke the next morning, her gaze went to the orchid in its cracked clay pot on the windowsill. Baz had chatted pleasantly as they walked, but he had moved slower than she'd liked, even with her twisted ankle. Once she got him on the path to the village, she'd said goodbye. She would catch Greenly at the market today.

A crash sounded from the kitchen, followed by an exclamation she couldn't make out. She sniffed and then grimaced. Mint tea and burnt porridge. Again.

She pulled on her black leggings and sleeveless tunic—the dress needed a wash after her climb yesterday—and joined Da in the kitchen.

“Smells good.” She poured a mug of tea from the kettle and took a seat.

“It smells awful, and you know it.” Da finished sweeping broken crockery into the corner and then plopped two bowls of gloppy porridge onto the table. “But we'll eat it, same as always.”

She ate quickly, washing down the last bite with a grateful gulp of tea.

“The wood's loaded,” Da said. “You taking that flower in?”

“Yes.” She hadn't told him about Baz. She'd likely never see him again, as no one ever stayed in the area for long. His friend would find the plants he needed, and they would go back east to Mazereon. She hoped one day to do the same. Not to Mazereon, but somewhere Gram wouldn't be hated because of her past. Somewhere safe. Maybe even as far south as Ituria.

She'd heard that summer actually felt like summer there. She could go barefoot all year.

Da stood. “I'm off to hitch up the team.”

The team. They only had one mule, but Da continued to use the term that had made her laugh when she was four. She watched him out the window, his stride slow but sure as he disappeared into the barn.

She went to her room and tied her hair back with a ribbon before draping the scarf around her head. The light brown locks, almost the same shade as her skin, had grown back to her shoulders. By next summer, she would be able to sell another braid, if she hadn't gotten Da and Gram out before then. If Greenly paid as much for this orchid as he did for the last, she might have enough to get them settled somewhere new before winter.

Da sighed as she climbed into the cart.

“Go ahead and say it.”

“Do you have to wear that into the village?”

“Always.” Gram didn't have much, but she'd given Vanda the scarf two years ago on her sixteenth birthday. She'd cut it from the silk lining of her own cloak, patched a couple spots, and embroidered tiny weaver dragons all around the edges in black, each short snout joined to the long tail of the one in front, stubby wings outstretched. Da disliked the way the drab villagers stared at her since she'd started wearing it.

He didn't argue, though. He never did. He snapped the reins, and the mule trudged obediently towards the village.

Vanda kept quiet; Da was in a remembering mood. Once they cleared the forest, she steered his thoughts towards the hill flowers and wildlife that reminded him of home. His real home. After marrying her mother, he'd left and not looked back. He'd never blamed Gram for their nomadic ways, but she knew he missed it.

The market was full and flowing when they pulled up near the square. Vanda stood and shaded her eyes, searching the crowd. A knot of ladies in walnut brown stood near a wagon of cabbages and turnips. A grey-haired man stood in a narrow alley between the baker's shop and the chandler's. With his pale skin, he stood out even in the shadows. A young woman with a child on her hip haggled over prices at the butcher's stall.

Where was Greenly? The Mazereon merchant paid good prices for the red orchids. Better than good, and she always took the coins gratefully. She hoped he hadn't left already; this was her last chance to sell before fall stole all the blooms.

She tucked the plant under the seat and jumped down from the cart.

Greenly wasn't an easy man to miss. Even among the dark-skinned Mazereon, his black skin and bulky frame set him apart. Still, she wandered around the small marketplace, down a few side streets, hoping to spot him around each corner. She didn't even know his real name. The villagers called him Greenly after the woods he traveled through, just as they called her Red after her scarf.

With a sigh, she pulled the silk low over her head and trudged back to the cart. Maybe she could sell the orchid to a housewife for a few coins. It wouldn't be enough.

“Good afternoon, miss.”

Startled, Vanda stopped and looked up. The old man from the shadows stood in her path. She'd nearly walked into him and had to tilt her head back to look him in the eyes. The scarf puddled around her shoulders.

“Excuse me, sir.” She had no interest in small talk. The villagers avoided her except to conduct business, and outsiders, all but Greenly, did not seek her out. She had nothing to offer. She tried to step around the man, but he shifted and placed himself in her path again.

“They tell me your name is Red.” His voice was deep and strong. His lips curled into a smile, small lines appearing at the corners. It was difficult to tell his age. Long, ash-grey hair fell loose around his face, the skin smooth, except for deep wrinkles around the eyes.

She glanced around the marketplace but saw no sign of Da.

“You're looking for someone.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Maybe.”

“You wish to leave.”

“Yes. If you'll excuse me.” She tried to step around him again, but he blocked her escape.

“I can help you.”

Doubtful. If anything, he was getting in her way.

"You want to leave this place. Take your father with you, and . . . someone else." He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side as if guessing a secret.

She looked him over again. How did he know that? Not the leaving part—most people knew she wanted to leave. But *no one* knew about Gram. No one. Anyone suspected of aiding a sorceress would be stripped of everything and banished from the village. The sorceress herself . . . . Vanda clenched her fists, refusing to think of it. It didn't matter that Gram had only taken the apprentice's tattoo two weeks before her master died. She was no sorceress, but if the villagers saw the mark, the sentence would be carried out. No trial. No appeal.

Not every place they'd settled had been so unwelcoming—sorcery wasn't against the law—but neither had they been friendly. And so Vanda and Da made sure no one knew about Gram. Her cottage lay on the far side of the Deep Green, nestled near the forested foothills of the Burnt River Mountains. This was supposed to be their last stop, their safe haven.

What did this man know?

Not sure she wanted to find out, she pushed forward. He moved aside this time, but his next words stopped her.

"You've caught the prince's interest, and he would dearly love to meet you."

The prince? She turned, crossing her arms. "What do *you* know about the prince?"

"I know he wants to meet you."

This was the second man in two days who thought he knew her. "Are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

A breeze stirred the man's hair, revealing a scar across his cheek. Vanda shivered, although the breeze was warm.

"You sell the red flowers?" he said.

She nodded. Everyone knew that.

"Then you are the one the prince wants to meet."

"Why? And how do you know? And who *are* you?"

"My name is Idris."

She sighed. "That tells me *nothing*." Could this man be Baz's healer friend?

He grinned. "Good."

“What?”

“I'm not important. Getting you out of here is.”

She couldn't understand why this stranger wanted to help her, and she had a feeling that asking him would get her nowhere. She'd play his game for now and see where it led.

“Okay. Yes, I want to get out of here. Tell me how you or the prince have anything to do with that, or I'm walking away.”

“The prince wants to meet you. I want to meet the prince. Taking you to him will gain me an audience. Everyone's happy.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I hadn't planned on going over the mountains.”

“All travel expenses will be covered.”

“How do I know we'll be welcome?” He must know about Gram, so she added, “*All* of us?”

“The prince can offer you protection.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He's already inclined to be pleased with you.”

Perhaps he was, but only because of the orchids. Idris's offer was tempting, but she disliked his boldness.

“I have to talk to my father.” And she needed to know if anyone else knew about Gram.

“I'll be in town for two more days. If you don't let me help you now, it could be years before you have another chance to leave. Longer, if the prince's passion for flowers wanes.” He walked away.

Da found her before she wasted the orchid on a housewife. Greenly had just left the village a few hours earlier. He would camp in the woods, so she could likely catch up with him in the morning. She would get the coins she needed and get Gram away before anyone else got nosey. No need to accept help from a stranger.

Just before sundown, Da had them back on the road, their cart loaded with flour and vegetables in place of wood. The mule clopped along at a good pace, and Vanda breathed deeply the sweet scent of hill grasses. And raisins. Da had splurged on a small bag so she could make Gram's favorite cookies.

Darkness pressed close on the last stretch home. Da lit the lantern, which carved a narrow path in the gloom and sent shadows dancing on either side of the track. Creatures stayed clear of the orange glow, but he carried his bow and quiver ready, as always. He had once crafted her a bow light enough for her small arms; but after years of practice, they had both given up on her aim. Instead, she carried the dagger and had never needed anything more.

She mulled over what to tell him about Idris's offer. After years of distrusting the villagers, she didn't understand his desire to help. Surely he could seek an audience with the prince on his own. He was old, not addled.

“Penny?” Da said.

“Huh?”

“For your thoughts.”

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “Just thinking about the stranger in the village today. Did you see him?”

Da grinned and looked at her sideways. “Yup. Handsome fellow.”

Not the words she would have used. She told Da about her conversation with the man.

Da's grin disappeared.

“Do you think he could help us?” she asked.

Da shifted on the hard seat. “Don't know.”

Vanda gave him time to think. She wrapped the scarf snug around her neck and watched the shadows skitter across the leaves, listening to the forest's night sounds: rustling grass, an owl fluttering in the treetops, the creak and clop of the mule and the cart. One minute turned into ten. Da's brows drew down into a *V,* and he sighed deeply. He'd talk when they were safely home.

Sometime later, a wolf howled in the distance, and Vanda startled. Da seemed not to hear, but he sat up straight a moment later at the sound of branches breaking and twigs snapping, followed by a gruff voice growling something unintelligible. The mule stopped and pricked its ears forward.

Vanda tensed and pulled out her dagger.

“A rider,” Da whispered. He handed her the reins and readied his bow.

A horse meant another stranger in the woods. He certainly wasn't trying to hide his presence.

“Who goes?” Da said, and the wolf echoed his call.

No answer. More crashing underbrush, and then a horseman emerged from the shadows ahead and blocked their path.

“Stupid excuse for a horse.” The man struggled to keep his mount from bolting. “That wolf is miles away. Whoa!”

The horse had unseated his rider, after a fashion. The man perched *behind* the saddle on the horse's bare and boney rump, his arms outstretched, trying to keep hold of the reins. He hadn't noticed the cart, but Da kept his bow ready.

“Baz?” Was this the horse he'd lost yesterday? She laughed, and the mule jerked its head back, startled. “What are you riding!”

Da kept his gaze on Baz. “That's not Idris?” he whispered.

“What? No,” she said. “You can put your bow away.” Da had met *Baz* in the village, not Idris. That explained the “handsome fellow” comment.

“Red. Flower girl,” Baz said in a strained voice. “Vanda! Help a guy out here?”

Da glanced at her and then put his bow away and climbed from the cart. Baz regained his seat by himself, but Da grabbed the reins so he could dismount properly.

“Thanks.” He took a few respectful steps away from the horse and glared at her. She put her dagger away and hid a grin behind a fold of her scarf.

“What'd you do to this horse?” Da soothed the animal.

“Nothing! He came that way.” Baz gave the horse a leery look and took another few steps back.

“Care to explain?” Da asked her.

She told him about her meeting with Baz the day before, leaving out the part where she fell from the tree.

Da tied the horse to the cart. A sword hung from the saddle, which meant Baz wasn't as clueless as she'd thought. “You'd best stay with us. I'll not be holding your hand back to the village tonight. Up you go.” He nodded towards the back.

Baz climbed eagerly into the cart and settled himself among the potatoes. “Thank you! I'll see that you're compensated for your hospitality.”

Da grunted. “Too many big words, boy. 'Thanks' is enough.”

She pursed her lips to hide another grin and turned to hand Da the reins. He clucked to the mule, and they continued down the path.

“Did you find your healer friend?” she said.

“I did find him, yes.”

“You seem to have lost him again.”

Baz chuckled. “It's the horse, remember, not me.”

“Of course.”

Silence fell. Baz watched the woods and tapped a marching rhythm on the potatoes and flour sacks.

“If he's not the one from the village,” Da whispered, and she leaned closer to hear him, “what did the stranger look like?”

“An older man, tall with long grey hair.” Too many strangers for her liking.

“You think our horseman here really has a healer friend?”

She glanced at Baz. “You think he's lying.”

“No. But I want you to stay close tomorrow.”

“But I have to . . . check on Gram.” She'd almost said “find Greenly,” but she didn't want to get Da's hopes up in case she couldn't find him.

Da drew in a deep breath and then released it with a gust, startling the skittish horse. He wrinkled his nose at the animal. “Fine. *After* you walk Baz and his horse back to the village. And no more talking to strangers.”

She pulled her scarf forward to hide her frown. Baz had already shown himself to be a pleasant companion for a walk, but he would slow her down. Unless they *rode* his horse. She smiled at her own cleverness.

“Fine,” she said. They would make quick time, and riding would give her ankle a rest.

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They ate a quick bite of bread and cheese, and then Vanda started on Gram's cookies.

She had the house to herself while Da unloaded the cart and tended the mule. Baz eagerly jumped in to help him with the chores, fine clothes and all. He'd changed his boots—the soft, well-aged leather looked made for tromping through the woods.

She set the first pan of cookies on the table as the two men stepped through the door. Da had his hands behind his back.

“Keep that dirty harness out of the kitchen,” she said.

“It's not dirty,” he said, defending the well-used bit of leather, “only needs a bit of mending.” Stretching casually as he passed the table, he snatched a cookie and then settled in his chair by the fire.

“I saw that, and you'd best let it cool.”

Too late. He hissed, and she could imagine the sting of hot raisins scalding the roof of his mouth.

She nodded at Baz. “You might as well take one, too.”

He smiled as if she'd just offered him a steak and snatched two, winking at her. He dropped into the other chair.

She could get used to that smile. A sudden thought caused a tickle in her stomach, the kind she got when she fell from a tree. Baz lived on the other side of the mountains. Whether she accepted Idris's offer or used Greenly's money for the trip, she might see him again after he and his healer friend had gone home.

After sharing a small meal and a fire with Baz, Da gave their guest a blanket and showed him to the hayloft for the night. His caution overrode his graciousness, and he locked the doors and windows when he returned.

In the morning, Vanda packed the orchid into a basket and layered Gram's cookies and a few other supplies around the clay pot. She tucked a cloth carefully over the top, draped herself with the red scarf, and then waited outside the barn for Baz to saddle his horse.

“Does he have a name?” she asked.

“'Scaredy-cat Bag of Bones' isn't good enough?”

Her lips twitched.

“Ha. I'll get a real one out of you, yet.” He grinned big enough for both of them. “His

name's Fleet. And he is, I'll give him that."

She glanced around for Da, but he was still in the house. "You'll want to be sure that girth is tight enough," she said softly.

Baz's eyes lit up, and he glanced around, too. "Care to tell me why?"

"We're riding today."

He tightened the girth.

After Da bid them goodbye, they walked along the path for a couple of minutes—long enough that they could mount Fleet without him seeing. Baz mounted first and then helped Vanda swing up behind with the basket. She wrapped one arm around his waist to steady herself, and they rode on.

"I see you brought the orchid. Are you going to look for Greenly in the village?"

"He left yesterday."

"You don't say," Baz muttered.

"I'll take you so far, and then I'll meet up with him in the woods."

He frowned and shook his head. "That won't work."

"Why?"

"I'm looking for him myself. We'll go together."

"Are you sure?" Her heart fluttered with hope. Riding Fleet, she was sure to catch up with Greenly. "Da said to get you to the village."

"And you can, after I find Greenly." His voice lowered. "He has something of mine, and I intend to get it back."

She didn't ask questions. Once they found Greenly, she would sell the orchid, lead Baz back to the village, and then go to Gram's. She might even stay overnight and tell Gram about her idea of traveling over the mountains.

"All right," she said. "Take that deer path just up there." She pointed, and the end of her scarf fluttered off her shoulder. A breeze caught it and waved it like a flag.

Fleet spooked. He lurched forward, almost past the deer path, and then turned at the last second. The basket flew from her hand. She slid sideways and gripped Baz's belt tightly to steady herself, but it didn't help. She brought them both down.

Baz landed beside her with a thump.

“You *worthless* piece of flesh!” Baz yelled as he scrambled to his feet and then held out his hand to her.

For a moment, she thought he'd spoken to *her*, but he'd addressed Fleet, whose reins were snarled in a holly bush.

She sat in the dirt, ignoring his offer of help, and stared at a spot near the bush. Baz's gaze followed hers.

The basket lay on its side, trampled, crumbs and broken pottery spilling out.

No. She tried to crawl over to the mess, but her hands tangled in the ends of her scarf. She unwound it from her neck and threw it to the side.

“Where is it?” She dug through the debris feverishly, slinging bits of broken twigs and raisin cookies, until she found it. The red orchid. She cradled the mangled roots in her lap, and a tear splashed onto the bruised and broken petals in her hands. She couldn't let Gram go through another winter here, but she'd never be able to get another flower to Greenly in time, assuming she could find one.

Baz crouched beside her and draped her scarf over her shoulders. “Hey, there. You all right?”

She sniffed and leaned her cheek into the soft red fabric. Nodding her head, she tried to say “yes,” but it came out as a hiccup. More tears fell.

He took a corner of the scarf and blotted her eyes. “It's just a flower. With a little care, it wouldn't be so hard to regrow from what's left.”

“What do you know of flowers?” she whispered and let the pieces fall through her fingers. “This was our way out. Gram's safety. What else can I do that's honorable to get her out of here?”

“I don't understand.” He sat back on his heels. “Who's Gram? Is she in danger? And what do these orchids have to do with anything?”

“These orchids are everything. They got me the notice of a prince.” And his money. But maybe she didn't need it, anymore: Idris had offered to take them over the mountains for free. Could she trust him, though? Could she afford not to?

She studied Baz's face. His brows were raised, forming little furrows on his forehead, and dirt speckled his skin like freckles. His black eyes reflected genuine concern. Although he'd never offered any help, she decided to do something she hadn't done in years.

She decided to trust a stranger.

“I'll get you to Greenly, but first, follow me.” She stood and brushed off her leggings.

Baz obeyed. He untangled Fleet's reins from the bush and then followed her further along the path. The horse bumped her shoulder with his nose as if in apology, unconcerned with her scarf now that it wasn't chasing him.

“Can I ask where we're going?” Baz said.

“Nowhere important. At least, not anymore.” She didn't mean to be cryptic, but she needed time to put her thoughts in order well enough to get them out as complete ideas. She'd never talked to anyone about these things before.

He snorted, and Fleet echoed him.

She sighed and glanced at Baz. “I'm not good at this.”

“At what?”

“Talking.”

“You're doing fine.”

“No, I'm—”

“You're fine.” He smiled, this time without the teasing glint in his eyes. “I want to know what's upset you. Please.”

She took another deep breath. “The villagers. They hate sorcerers.”

“They're not generally well-liked.”

“Gram, my mother's mother, apprenticed herself to a sorcerer as a teenager. He died two weeks later and never taught her anything, but nobody cares. She has the sorcerer's tattoo on her cheek where everyone can see it, and that's *all* they see. She's too old to keep running from place to place, hoping to find somewhere to fit in. I thought this village would be perfect, so far from the cities. But, Baz, these people *hate* sorcerers. Me and Da have kept her hidden in the woods until we can scrape together the money to start somewhere new again—Da's too old to be building houses. If we don't get out soon, someone will find her eventually. Someone

already has."

There. Now he knew. Her hands shook, and she waited, fearful that he might decide to ride off and tell everyone about the sorceress in the woods.

"So, that's why you sold the orchids. If I'd known . . ." His fist tightened around the reins. "Wait. Who's found her?"

She heard her own worry echoed in his voice, and she gulped back a sob. He wasn't going to run and tell.

"A man from the village."

"He knew about your Gram?"

"He knew I wanted to leave with my family. He never said anything about Gram, but he knew. And he offered to help us leave if I could arrange for him to meet the prince."

"Why would a villager want to meet the prince?"

"He's not from the village. His name is Idris."

Baz stopped abruptly, and Fleet pulled his head up in surprise. "I will *not* see that man. How dare he."

She jerked back as if she'd been slapped. Cold seeped from her core into her limbs. The prince. Baz was the prince. Prince Sebastian of Mazereon, who'd bought the orchids. Of course he knew about flowers! What was he doing here? And how could he not tell her the truth? She'd trusted him!

Ignoring the impulse to bow or curtsy or drop to her knees, Vanda pulled the scarf onto her head and draped the edges around her face. She limped away, her ankle throbbing after the fall, leaving Baz—the prince—to follow. Or not.

"Vanda, wait! I'm sorry. I should have told you, but Keir only agreed to bring me along if I promised not to say a word. I just wanted to meet you—the red orchid girl. I thought . . ."

She didn't slow down. She didn't care what he thought. He'd lied. What would Da think? He'd made the Prince of Mazereon sleep in their *barn*.

Baz's voice rose in desperation. "I thought I'd finally found someone who might understand me. Someone after more than money. Someone I could care about."

I only wanted the money. She almost said it out loud.

Baz whispered, “And I do.”

She spun to face him. “What?”

“I said I do care about you. About what happens to you and your family.” He frowned. “You need to stay away from Idris.”

Idris was a sorcerer. She backed up a few steps until her shoulder thumped against a tree, and she let its strength hold her up. She'd almost accepted help from a sorcerer. For the first time, she understood the villagers' fear of Gram.

“Not all sorcerers are like Idris,” Baz said, his voice gentle. “He's . . . exceptional. If I'd known he was on my lands, I would've had him run off. You understand, don't you?”

She nodded. If the villagers found him, they wouldn't be so kind.

“So, can we continue on to 'nowhere important'?” He grinned, just a slight turning of his lips, as if he were testing her response.

She tried to convince herself that it didn't matter that he was a prince. *The* prince. He'd already helped her by buying the orchids. Maybe he cared enough to help her get Gram to safety. She'd rather trust him than Idris, if she had to trust anyone; and it was beginning to look like she had no choice.

She pushed away from the tree and let the scarf fall around her shoulders. Fleet lifted his head from where he'd been nibbling grass, and she patted his nose.

The clearing lay around a few more bends in the path, like a stretched-out *S* through the trees.

“Keep a good hold on the horse.”

Baz nodded without question. She liked that about him. He wasn't nosey like so many of the villagers.

They emerged from the trees into a desolate clearing with a pole sunk into the ground in the middle. A frayed bit of rope hung from a rusty ring set in the side of the pole. The trees at the edges of the clearing showed signs of razor-tail dragons: slash marks on the trunks and splinters of wood scattered around the roots. Gashes still showed in places underneath the grass, especially around the pole.

“I told you they hate sorcerers,” she said. Judging by the look of horror on Baz's face,

she didn't need to explain the rumors.

His nose wrinkled in disgust, and anger flashed in his eyes. “You'd better take me to Greenly now.”

She couldn't blame him for wanting to leave, and she wouldn't ask for his help. She'd take him to Greenly, let him recover his belongings, and then send him on his way to the village. No doubt he had people there waiting to escort him back over the mountains. She would help Gram pack, gather every coin she had, and they would leave for Ituria within the week.

Baz turned Fleet around. “We have to get—”

A thundering crash sounded from the woods on the opposite side of the clearing. Fleet jerked out of Baz's hands and bolted down the deer path.

Another horse, almost as black as the man who rode him, shot out from the trees and raced across the scarred grass. Greenly! A brown-cloaked figure sat sideways in front of him, swathed and facing away from them.

“Keir!” Baz shouted as the horse rushed past and disappeared into the trees behind Fleet.

Was the cloaked figure Baz's healer friend?

She didn't have a chance to ask, and she didn't care at the moment. Greenly had come from the direction of Gram's house, and that was all that mattered.

She exchanged a look with Baz, hoping he might follow her; but he took off after Greenly and the horses.

She lurched towards the trees. It didn't matter that Baz had left her. She could handle this alone. She didn't need anyone, least of all Prince Sebastian of Mazereon. Of course, he wouldn't follow her—she didn't even have the orchid anymore.

Da was right about trusting strangers.

She fell twice over unseen roots, and pain shot up her leg. The second time, she unwound the scarf from her neck and wrapped it tightly around her ankle, tying off the ends. As she bent over to catch her breath, hands on her knees, her gaze fell on a tiny speck of red peeking from behind the base of a beech tree. She limped over.

A red orchid. She ran her fingers along the petals. She'd never even shown one to Gram.

She left it and forced her feet into a run. Gram mattered more than a flower, more than coins. They could live in a cave, if they had to, as long as they were safe.

As she neared the cottage, she slowed and tried to settle her breathing. It was too quiet. Something had scared off the colony of weaver dragons that lived in the trees nearby.

“Gram?” she whispered hoarsely. She could use a drink from the well, but that would have to wait. The yard was empty.

Something fluttered and thrashed near the door. A weaver dragon, stubby wings outstretched, tangled and stuck to the porch by his own webs. How did that happen? She approached slowly, cooing his name. Gram had tamed this particular dragon, raised him from an egg, which should be proof enough to people that she was no sorceress. Dragons didn't tolerate sorcery.

“Hush now, Jak.” He grumbled in his throat, poking at her fingers with his green snout as she loosened the webs. When the first leg was freed, he slashed through the remaining cords as if they were yarn. Most knives couldn't have done the work as quickly. Jak jumped onto her shoulder and wrapped his tail around her neck to keep his cat-sized body steady. She reached a hand up to stroke his shoulder, and he grasped a finger with the long toes of both front feet and held on tight.

“Where's Gram?” she whispered as she nudged the door open.

The front room was empty, though embers smoldered in the fireplace. She checked the kitchen and looked into the corners of the storage room. Nothing.

“Gram?”

A cough came from the bedroom, so faint she would have missed it if she weren't listening. She rushed to the door and threw it open, not knowing whether Gram would be in bed or on the floor.

Gram wasn't in the room at all. The blankets lay smooth on the bed, the rocking chair sat still and empty. Jak flapped his wings, scraping her ear and catching her hair in his pinions. She pulled him from her shoulder and tucked him into her side.

Where was Gram?

Another cough. Or was it a laugh? Jak launched into the air, his talons leaving red

furrows on her arm, and then landed on the back of the rocking chair. His wings fanned the air as he struggled to balance.

Someone chuckled behind her.

She spun around. A hooded figure stood in the shadows just behind the door. He stepped into the light.

“Idris.” Her breathing quickened. “What have you done with Gram?”

“I came to present my offer to her.” His deep voice, slow and smooth, carried a tone of reassurance. “You seemed . . . hesitant, and it is so very important.”

“Why? I don't understand why you want to help us. To help *her*.”

“Don't you?” He moved closer.

She backed up. Jak hissed, and the chair creaked.

“I won't harm you. I only want you to see.”

He lowered his hood and watched her expectantly, but she didn't see anything. He'd tied his hair back, which exposed his high cheekbones. His skin was paler than most in Mazereon—and Maglyn, too—but it was nothing remarkable. He took another step forward and turned his head towards the door.

And then she saw it. The scar faded, and dark lines appeared on his cheek like ink bleeding through paper. The sorcerer's mark. Her legs shook. He shouldn't have been able to hide it. She put her hand to her belt, meaning to pull her dagger out for comfort, if nothing else, but it was gone. She must have lost it when she fell from the horse.

“You see,” Idris said, his tone still soothing, “we sorcerers need to stick together.”

“Gram's not a sorceress.”

Idris continued as if she hadn't spoken. “I tried to save her from the dark man, but he'd already taken her.”

Did he mean Greenly? Why would Greenly want to harm Gram?

Backing towards the door, Idris held out his hand. “Come. We'll find the prince together. It's not too late to save her.”

Jak dove for the outstretched hand; but Idris swatted him away with surprising speed, and the little dragon smacked into the wall.

Vanda ran and scooped him up. She loosened the scarf from her ankle and retied it into a sling across her body before placing Jak's limp form inside.

Idris watched, his face emotionless.

She wouldn't go with him, and she wouldn't tell him that she'd already met the prince. If Greenly had taken Gram away, he had good reason for it. And Baz had run after them.

No, Baz had run after Keir.

Greenly was Keir, the healer friend, and he had Gram. Wherever they were, they would be safe. For now.

And she was in a room with a sorcerer standing between her and the door.

“I think I'll wait for Gram to come home,” she said, “but thank you for the offer.”

Idris blinked. He stepped towards her.

Before she could move out of his way, the front door slammed open.

“Vanda, get out! He's here!” Baz burst across the threshold of the small room but stopped abruptly when he saw Idris.

Idris turned to face him, taking a few slow steps backwards.

“Indeed, I am here. And so are you.” He sounded pleased.

“Let her go.”

Idris didn't even look at her. “I don't think I will.”

“What about Gram?” she said.

“I don't care about that old woman. I have what I want right here,” Idris said, still watching Baz.

Baz said something in return, but she didn't hear.

She clenched her fists, and anger boiled under her skin. Idris had lied. She shouldn't be surprised, but it stung. Neither she nor Baz were armed, but she had to get out. She looked at her arms, one of them scratched and bleeding. She looked at her hands. She looked at the two men standing between her and the door.

She raised her arms and slammed her fists down on Idris's back as hard as she could. He staggered a small step forward, but then he spun just as fast as he had with Jak and grabbed her around the throat. His other hand brought a dagger to her side and twisted it against her tunic

until she felt the point bite into her skin.

She froze and glanced down to see *her* dagger in his hand. He must have taken it when she'd first entered the room, when her back was turned to him.

Baz took a step back. “Let her go.”

“I don't think I will,” Idris said again.

She felt his voice vibrate through her back.

“What do you want?” Baz asked.

“I want the ear of the prince who will be king.”

“Anyone can seek an audience with me or my father.” Baz frowned and shook his head. “What do you really want?”

Idris scoffed. “This isn't a story from a book. I'm not going to wrap up my thoughts in a neat little paragraph for you to read.” He pushed the dagger into Vanda's side, and she sucked in a quick breath.

“Okay! You have my ear—I'll listen to whatever you want.” He gazed at her with an intensity in his eyes as if trying to say something important.

Idris chuckled, and then it turned into a surprised laugh. “You have feelings for her!” He sighed, and his voice lost all mirth. “I had a true love once. She betrayed me.”

“It's me you want. Let her go.”

Jak stirred in his sling. She winced as a talon poked her stomach.

“You love her? Come and get her.”

Baz frowned. “Just like that? You'll let her go.”

“Just like that.”

“No! Don't listen to him.” She squeaked as Idris twisted the dagger against her skin. Gram's teaching came back to her, words every child learned. “Never take anything from a sorcerer's hand.”

“What?” Baz said.

She whispered, not daring to breathe deeply, “He'll curse you.” Sorcerers could only curse someone who was willing, someone who trusted them enough to accept their help or take something from them. Weird sorcery logic she didn't understand.

“Oh, she's a quick one, isn't she,” Idris said.

Baz ignored him. “You're not a *thing,* Vanda.”

“Are you willing to take a chance on that?”

“For you, yes. There's no other choice.”

He meant it, but she couldn't let anyone do that for her, let alone a prince. “There's always a choice. You're the Prince of Mazereon. Just walk away, forget you ever met me. I'm nobody.”

“I can't do that.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I won't.”

“You have to!”

“Don't tell me what I have to do.”

Jak stirred again in the sling. He was definitely awake now. A leg poked out the side as he struggled to free himself.

Baz glanced down at the dragon but returned his gaze quickly to Idris.

“Are you two finished? Good. Now take her from my hands.”

Idris's grip tightened around her throat, and then too many things happened all at once.

Jak burst from the sling and fell to the floor. After righting himself, he took to the air and attacked Idris, who dropped the dagger. Jak's talons and teeth caught Vanda, too, and she raised her hands to guard her face.

Baz went after the dagger.

The front door slammed open, and Keir stomped into the room, his cloak fanning behind him. He paused for a second to glance around, his eyes fierce, and then walked straight up to Idris and yanked Vanda from his hands.

“No!” Baz grabbed Keir's arm at the same time, and for a moment, they all formed a line, with the angry weaver dragon tearing at faces and hair.

And then she was in the front yard standing between Baz and Keir, who had been Greenly a few hours before, with no memory of getting there.

Something dripped into her eyes, blood or sweat or both, and she swiped it away with

her hand. The scarf must have fallen off in the cottage. She needed to get away, to find Gram and Da. Keir's horse stood tied to the porch. She'd never ridden one so tall, but she limped over and fumbled with the reins.

"Here, what are you doing?" Baz came over and took her hands in his. They were just as bloody.

She snatched them away. "I have to find Gram."

"She's safe. Keir left her with your father. He got her away as soon as he found out about Idris."

"I want to see for myself."

"You don't believe me?"

"You lied to me! Both of you!"

"I didn't—"

Jak burst through an open window, shredding curtains on his way. He headed straight for Baz and the horse, still trying to protect her.

Baz swatted at the angry dragon and dragged her away.

She let him, but only because she didn't want the horse to get hurt.

"Where's the sorcerer?" Keir asked.

Vanda glanced around the yard.

Baz had a hopeful look on his face. "You think that little dragon . . . took care of him?"

Keir huffed. "Not a chance."

Jak flew low over their heads and disappeared into the trees. A few moments later, Fleet exploded into the yard carrying Da and Gram. Jak circled the trio before landing on Gram's outstretched arm.

"You. Help me down." Gram pointed at Keir, and he obeyed. "Where is he?"

"Gram, what are you doing here?" Vanda took Fleet's reins as Da dismounted.

"Tell me what happened," Gram said.

Vanda explained as best she could, with help from Baz. Keir stood to the side, arms folded, eyes glancing between the cottage and his prince like he was some sort of bodyguard. Maybe he was.

Gram's pale face flushed and her brows drew down. She put her hand flat on her cheek, just where the sorcerer's tattoo marred the skin, and her jaw tightened.

A scream erupted from within the cottage.

“Stop, woman!” Idris roared as he tore open the door and stomped onto the porch. His cloak hung in tatters around his shoulders, and blood stained his hair. He held the red scarf to his head, the other hand pressed to his tattoo.

Jak twitched as Gram approached Idris.

Vanda stayed with Da. Her heart thundered against her ribs, and she wanted to bury her face in Fleet's neck. What was Gram doing?

“Tell them,” Gram said. She stopped about two yards away from the sorcerer. “Tell them truth.”

Idris sneered. “Make me.”

Gram's small shoulders straightened, and she pressed her hand harder against her cheek.

Idris roared but held his ground.

Gram lifted the arm Jak clung to, sending him into the air. He flew straight at the sorcerer.

“Tell them truth.” Her whole frame shook.

Baz rushed over and wrapped an arm around Gram's waist. She leaned heavily against him.

Idris swatted uselessly at the dragon with the red scarf. “Call it off!”

“Tell them truth!”

“Free your red dragon girl, and you free yourself! Now get it *off*!” Idris threw down the scarf and lunged for the black horse. He untied it, hauled himself into the saddle, and then disappeared into the trees.

“My horse!” Baz shouted.

Fleet stamped his hooves. Vanda tightened her hold on the reins, her hands shaking. “What just happened?”

Gram turned around, with Baz still supporting her. “A sorcerer has to tell how to break his curse, but only if you ask. I wish I knew what the curse was.”

“What curse?” Keir said.

Gram studied him before answering. “He's cursed you all. I think my dragon's part of it, too, somehow.”

“How do you know all this?” Vanda asked.

“You can learn a lot in two weeks.” She touched her cheek gingerly where the tattoo glowed an angry red.

Da spoke for the first time. “We need to get you inside, get that looked after.” He took the reins from Vanda and nodded for her to go ahead.

She took three steps and then smacked into an invisible barrier and landed in the dirt.

“Are you all right?” Baz said from Gram's side.

Keir rushed over, and the same thing happened to him before he reached her, but he caught himself before he fell.

“Gram?” Her voice came out as a whisper.

Gram shook her head. “I don't know. Part of the curse, maybe.” She stepped away from Baz, who watched with a blank expression, his eyes wide. Holding her hand out, she approached the spot where Keir patted the air.

“It's not . . . solid,” he said.

Gram tested the barrier. “It's not glass.” She tried to send Jak to Vanda, but he wouldn't go near where the invisible wall seemed to be.

“Ouch!” Vanda stood quickly. Something had pushed against her foot, putting pressure on her sore ankle. And now it pushed slowly against her body with the strength of a gust of wind. She beat her hands against it and pushed back, but nothing happened.

Keir ran back and forth, testing different spots. The barrier ran all the way to the treeline and into the forest. He returned with a scowl on his face. “He's separated us. That's the curse.”

No! She had to get Gram out of here, but the barrier pushed her farther away every second.

Baz—Prince Sebastian—watched her as she backed slowly away. He'd picked up her mangled scarf. His jaw clenched, and he cleared his throat. “Go. Both of you. Take the horse and pack what you can before the wall gets to your house. We don't know how far it will send

you, so hurry."

"We can't just leave!" Tears spilled down her cheeks and dripped from her chin.

"I'll take care of your grandmother as if she were my own. I promise. She'll have everything you wanted her to have, and more."

The barrier bumped her back a few more feet. "I'm sorry about your flower."

"It's you I came looking for. I'll find you again, Vanda."

"We should go," Da said. He mounted and helped her into the saddle behind him, then spurred the horse into the trees.

Despite the heaviness in her chest, a small smile flickered through her tears. No matter where she ended up, at least her grandmother wouldn't have to run anymore. She'd found her safe place.

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