

OWL SONG excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The muffled voices came from outside – so many of them, he found himself shaking in an almost paralyzing fear. The bark he had eaten to stay alive was nearly gone; there were just a few pieces left and, panicking, he stuffed them into a corner on the floor, hoping they'd somehow be hidden. Light sprang through the cracks at the top edges of the crate as they began to pry it open, and his eyes stung from the sight of it. He was so insanely thirsty that the emerging sun seemed to him to be liquid, pouring its way into the small space. He wanted to press his mouth to it, to drink it in, hot as it seemed. He'd been in darkness for so long.

The sound of wood splintering made him shrink back against the rough, wide slats, and the crate swung open. He couldn't see anything, at first - just the pressing light. It closed in around him as if to smother him. And there were the voices, which had changed from conversational to curious to terrified. He held his ears against the sound. It was too much. The sun, and then the loud voices. He had to make them stop.

Their faces emerged, seeping into his vision as he blinked wildly against the brightness behind them, their forms becoming clearer as his eyes adjusted to the light. They stared at him, shocked, some backing away, some still shrieking. "Wait," he said to the faces, strangely aware of his bright voice. "Where am I? How...? Wait..."

They were leaving. Running. Stumbling over themselves to get away from him, when all he wanted was to know why. Why he was here. What had happened to him - to his mind. And how it was he could speak, in their language, of all things. Like a *man*.

But they had gone. They were gone.

He looked down at his hands – paws, really – and was momentarily stunned at the sight of them. They were the same as they'd always been, but looked different to him now. The black

fur still remained, sleek and noble, he thought. They were the same. But inside, he had changed. And this change made everything else different.

No wonder they ran. They didn't know what he was. How could they, when *he* didn't know what he was?

He sank to the floor of the crate, his legs folding beneath him. And looked out at the empty patch of stones and dirt, and trees beyond that.

He was far from home.

#

“Ah, ha, ha! Marvelous!”

“How clever of you! I never would have...”

“Care for some sugared peaches? Or goose liver on walnut biscuits? It's absolutely...”

Sophia stood with her back to the wall, contemplating an escape. The party had been going on for what seemed like hours - days, even - and she felt numb at the thought of another bout of hours still ahead, having to go on and on about food. And the latest gown designs. And her summer plans. And food.

“Sophia!”

The Duke of Raisenfare's son stepped lightly over to her. She remembered him from last year's winter party, the come-as-your-favorite-hibernating-animal one. He had been a chipmunk; she, a bear. The match did not bode well.

He placed his hand on the wall next to her head and took a swig from his silver goblet. His breath smelled like a stale gray cellar.

“And, how are *you*?” he asked, his eyebrows wiggling slightly. “Are you bored, yet, with this crowd? How about you and I find a comfortable place where we can discuss more *important* things?” He sipped again from his drink and leaned forward, looking at her meaningfully.

She watched his eyebrows curiously, as they now seemed to want to fly off his face completely. “Yes and no, Carl,” she said, inching away from his looming arm. “Yes and no. Yes, I'm bored with this crowd. No, I would not like to go to a comfortable place with you.” She glanced at the nearly overflowing room, and then at her feet. She imagined her feet moving, walking away, one in front of the other until she was safely out the door and down the hall,

and...

Carl made an irritated sound, which seemed to come from deep in his throat. He downed the last of the contents of his goblet and looked around the room. "Anyway," he said. "I think this party's a bore."

"I agree with you there," Sophia said. She pictured her hand on the latches of the front doors, saw her fingers unlocking each bolt and opening them at last, imagined the scent of the evening air as she exploded through to let the darkness envelop her.

"Anyway," he said again. His hand remained on the wall next to her head.

Sophia contemplated the word. "Anyway" seemed to be the perfect way to sum up the moment. Anyway. Anyway, the crowd's a bore. Anyway, have some crumpets and ale. Anyway, must be off, now.

"See you later, Carl," she said, and backed away from him. She sidestepped around a group of party-goers, who smiled at her and opened their circle for her to join them. She nodded and held up her hand in a silent refusal, weaving behind and through the various groups of people that had formed, groups shrieking with laughter, drinking, and at times, singing. She spotted her mother talking earnestly to the Duchess of Housenberg, and shrank back to the wall, sliding against the long drapes that hung heavily over the gigantic windows overlooking the front lawn.

She'd have to be very careful.

She made her way amid the drapes and edged through them, the bulk of them falling around her as if she was wearing long robes. She shrugged out of them and looked one last time at the room, then darted into the hallway.

She crept around the corner and into the front hall. The double doors at the entrance were half open to let in the air. So she wouldn't have to unlock them, after all. Good. One less thing to worry about.

The opened doors led to the portico, and outside was a guard keeping watch, as he did every evening. She walked slowly towards the doors and then stopped, allowing herself to gradually peek out. The guard was there, of course. She waited for him to turn. She knew he invariably would. In fact, she knew exactly what he'd do. He'd stand there for awhile, his face turned to the moon. Close his eyes briefly, maybe. And then he'd move along past the windows facing south, looking straight ahead as he went. She peered around the corner to watch him, and

as he turned away from her, she took a hesitant step. She had to plan it right. If she didn't plan it right, he would see her. She looked up again and he was moving, his back to her as he ambled across the hard floor of the portico. As soon as he reached the edge of the side terrace, she could make her move. It was almost time. Almost. She took another small step, her fingers curling in the palm of her hand.

“Yer Highness?”

She jumped.

It was Emlyn. Emlyn, the timid. Emlyn, the groveling. Sophia could handle this.

“Yes. Hello, Emlyn. Well,” she said, much too loudly. “You see, I. Well, I was just waiting to get this particular angle of the moon, you see, because I wanted to paint it in a...in a *painting* I'm doing. You know, the new one? There, in...in the sitting room? Have you seen it? You *must* have seen it. It's...you know. The one of the garden roses. The yellow ones, actually. Roses, I mean. The *yellow roses*.”

Emlyn shrugged. Her curls bobbed meekly beneath her cap. “No'm, I haven't seen yer paintin'. No. I imagine it to be lovely, tho'. Thank ye fer sharin' the thought of it with me. Blessed be both ye and yer paintin', Miss, if ye please.”

She paused and looked into Sophia's face. “I was meant to come and inform ye, Yer Highness,” she went on. “Of course I should have done so earlier, so fergive me, won't ye? Well, I need to inform ye that one o' yer suitors, Lord James Radcliffe of Effenflower is bein' a bit late this evenin'. I was told so by his sister, Lady Duffy, who is already here, ye see. She wishes fer ye to wait fer him, before ye turn in. He seems to be caught in a...in an *unfortunate affair*, the likes of which I don't know the particulars of, ye see, but it has something to do with his mother and her basket. Or, his mother and her brisket. Unfortunately couldn't quite get it all, Miss.”

“Ah, well. He must attend to his mother, then. And her brick set,” Sophia said distractedly, wondering vaguely what Lord James' mother could be doing with building materials. She looked as surreptitiously as she could around Emlyn's curly, bonneted head, trying to get a glimpse of the guard. “Yes,” she said. “All right. Excellent. Well. You may be excused, then, Emlyn. Thank you. You may go. Right. Go on, then. Thanks.”

“Oh, yer welcome, Miss.” Emlyn breathed out as if in relief, curtsying and backing away. Then with a quick smile and a rustle, she was gone, away again down the front hall.

Sophia stood quietly, and when she could no longer hear Emlyn's footsteps, she moved forward again until she was out on the portico floor. She crept behind the nearest column and looked carefully around it to see where the guard had gone. He was there, facing the other end, away from her. His helmet shone yellow in the moonlight. She held her breath and inched toward the steps leading to the lawn, silently, silently. With each step she said the word to herself - "silently," as if with this small mantra she would be invincible against any sound that might cause the guard turn and see her. Her slipper caught a little on the wood panels, and she almost tripped. Bloody hell! She thought heatedly, almost saying the words aloud. And another step. Watching her feet. Watching him. Watching her feet. Watching him. And then all at once he turned and disappeared from sight behind the far wall.

She leaped from the top step and ran.

She was amazed at her speed, actually. Considering she'd had little sleep lately, her perpetual insomnia attending her like a worn-out and unwelcome old sock, she moved quite well and with illimitable energy. She sprung through the grass doe-ishly, she would have liked to imagine - although she suspected she more resembled a bucking goat, stumbling in its silken hooves, her feet clumsily weighing in on one another, her skirts threatening to trip up her feet as she veered with a kind of joyous panic towards the gate, and towards the woods.

She was glad to be out, to be away from It All. It All being mainly the party, and her mother, and her mother's insistence that Sophia maintain her princess duties like a steadfast conformist when Sophia really just felt more like a heretic. Her mother had harped on her fingernails again, yesterday, for example. Her fingernails were often the subject of much debate between them, for whatever reason. Sophia thought too much was made of them, even if they *were* almost always dirty due to the fact that Sophia regularly scrounged around in the dirt planting seeds and studying insects. It was a sore spot with the Queen, who could never quite figure out the reason for, or accept, her daughter's eternally soiled hands. Sophia never spoke to her mother about her fondness of planting and digging, and when the subject of her dirty hands was brought up, she simply looked the other way and pretended not to hear, which seemed to work remarkably well.

Sophia was well aware of the dichotomous quality of the situation. Being within the royal realm and wanting to go trek in the woods were disharmonious, at best, and she couldn't quite make the two things go together in a way that made any sense. Her blasted lack of sleep didn't

help her to sort it out any, and the problem buzzed around in her head until she swatted it out. The fact was there and she couldn't deny it or reason it away. It just wouldn't go. And with her eyes burning and red, she listened resolutely to the voice in the pale of her sleep-deprived brain - the voice that told her to just, for God's sake, just get out. And to be sneaky about it.

So, sneaky she was. She had crept. Tip-toed, even. And then, she ran.

She ran, inhaling the fresh, succulent scents of sweet pea and honeysuckle. She ran, stumbling on the lush grass under her damp slippers, her arms splaying wildly as she steadied herself before she continued on. She ran, slipping across the wet lawn with her mouth slightly open, gulping the air as if it was edible and sweet.

She ran, stopping to unlatch the black gate separating Waywither Palace and the woods, stepping through it nimbly. She looked toward the portico and then hastily latched the gate behind her.

She ran, until the palace was nothing more than a small, gleaming, silver shape in the diminished light, as big as her thumbnail when she stopped to hold her thumb up to it. The lights of Waywither Palace were winking through the darkness, and she could make out other party-goers moving in the shadows of the gardens surrounding the rear portico.

She turned again and ran, holding her skirts up and about her, crossing over a large path with kicked-up dust, and eventually reached a smaller, narrower path with grass burrowing its way up through the soft, brown earth. She slowed to a vigorous walk along this narrower, less traveled path straight into the deep woods. She plodded up a large hill, stumbled down a smaller one, and came to a path so small, one would barely notice it if one happened to be otherwise occupied. Sophia took this path, stopping every once in awhile to listen for footsteps behind her.

The path led to a vast meadow. *This* was the place, a place far removed from the palace and even from the wood itself, so it was neither civilization, nor was it unreasonably wild. She imagined it as an intermediary - a sort of a sanctuary, suspended in empty space. In *this* place there would be no one to find her, no one to tell her what she should wear, or how she should hold her fork, or what new boy she should meet. It was the only place in the world where Sophia knew she could be safe from expectations.

She took off her purple evening cloak and laid it on the ground. She pulled her skirts up around her knees and lay on the cloak, feeling the earth behind her head, the grass covering the back of her neck and sticking up to her ears, filling them with a soft, pleasant, prickly sound. She

looked up at the sky and watched the stars and the patches of wispy clouds as they covered the moon and spiraled and shifted into industrious patterns.

As the clouds made their inconsistent shapes against the gleaming light, Sophia imagined what she might look like from their perspective. She would be a tiny dot in the meadow, a bizarre purple splotch, probably as unfathomable to a cloud as they were to her. “You see,” Sophia explained to the clouds, her eyes closed, “I *could* just be a regular girl, delivering a message to a friend, or journeying into the night to meet a lover. Or a drifter, maybe out to steal some sheep, or the King’s jewels or something. Or I could be one of these flowers down here. A big, ridiculous purple flower. With a large protruding head. Or I might be a human princess. Incognito. An insomniac, deviant escapee from the palace gates. Of course, *that’s* a ludicrous idea, isn’t it?” Sophia’s head sank deeper into the grass. Her closed eyelids felt cool and radiant in the light of the moon.

The sound of giggling pierced through her, and she sat up, rubbing her eyes. She looked toward the sound, her heart in her ears.

There. It was coming from over there, by the sycamore tree.

“Who is it?” she said, her voice high-pitched and hollow in the open air.

Another giggle followed, and her brother, Leo, emerged behind the trees. He was followed by Princess Clara Cartwright, the girl who had come to stay at the palace for a week or so, along with her parents, before their annual trip to the north side of the central lakes. Clara clutched Leo’s arm as if she couldn’t possibly walk without him. She grinned widely, her fingers snaked around his biceps as they stumbled forward. Seeing them there together, Sophia suddenly supposed that Clara was meant to be a love-interest for her older brother. Why this might be a desirable match was anyone’s guess. Although Leo was three years older than Sophia, at nineteen he seemed, to her, much too immature to keep one girl around, let alone get married. She wasn’t sure what her mother was thinking.

“Sophia.” Leo stopped short and folded his arms, which was no small feat considering Clara’s death-grip latch on him. “So. Here we are.”

Sophia just looked at him. She supposed she should get up, but she was comfortable sitting there on her cloak in the grass. “What do you want, Leo?” She asked crossly. She brushed the loose grass off her lap and raised her knees, pulling her arms around them.

“Oh, nothing much. Just wondering what you’re doing here. Is this where you go when you sneak out? Why would you come *here*? And, whom, exactly were you talking to, just now? The moon? An invisible friend? The voices inside your head?”

Clara spurt off in giggles again. She looked up at Leo in glazed adoration. “Oh, Leo,” she said. “You’re just *so* funny.”

“He’s a smash riot,” Sophia said. “We laugh all day long.”

Clara’s eyes flashed at her, and she pouted a little. Her grip on Leo’s arm tightened and she glared up at him as if expecting a rescue in the form of a smart rebuttal.

Leo smiled faintly and inspected his fingernails. “Wouldn’t Mother be interested in knowing where you go,” he said off-handedly. “I’m sure she’d have a little something to say about it.”

“You wouldn’t tell her.”

“Hmm...wouldn’t I? I might. And this is why.” Leo’s dark hair fell into his eyes and he brushed it away. He leaned into the sycamore, his body a long, triumphant bow. Clara leaned with him, still not letting go, and as a result her head tilted at an uncomfortable-looking angle.

“Mother is - quite rightly, I have to say - worried about her only daughter,” Leo said, crossing his ankles as he leaned against the tree. “It seems she’s only just caught you talking to yourself. *Again*. Or were you talking to a bird? Or was it an insect? It doesn’t matter, after all, does it? She’s ready to haul you off somewhere, probably to the chief medical advisor, where it’ll be determined that you’re certifiably insane. Something I’ve already known for years. Ah, ha ha ha!” Leo laughed affectedly, his “ha’s” like bandit mosquitoes circling his head, and then he burst into a coughing fit lasting a few minutes. Sophia suspected, and secretly hoped, that he had swallowed a gigantic gnat.

Clara laughed along with him, even over his coughing, her laughter stinging in Sophia’s ears, a maddening, redundant bell. Sophia stood, and turned without a word, striding back towards the path through the woods. She walked briskly without looking back until she was lifting the latch of the gates, her anger nullifying the worry over who might see her.

Leo followed behind her, stumbling over his feet. “You do sprint about, don’t you?” he breathed, his words coming out in staccato-like reproach. Clara appeared behind them, her hair lop-sided, a section of the braiding having come undone and trailing along behind her. Her face

was red and damp and she breathed hotly through her mouth. She glowered at Leo. Sophia thought she might slap him, but instead she put her hands on her hips and burst into tears.

“Clara,” Leo said, but it was too late. Clara was shooting back to the portico, her hands tight in fists.

“I guess I was walking too fast,” he said after a moment. They moved toward the palace cautiously. Music billowed out into the gardens and filled the night, rising into the starry sky as if it were serenading its vast beauty. Sophia felt rejuvenated, the brisk air filling her and leaving her exuberant.

They reached the garden leading to the side terrace and stopped, Sophia turning to him. He looked back at her somewhat affectionately, a smirk on his lips.

“You are rude and arrogant,” she said, tapping her fingers gently on his cheek. “And if you ever want to get a girl, you’ll need to take a hard look at that. But, just the same, you are always my brother.”

His smirk turned to a grin, and they made their way silently up the steps to the doors, the music filling their ears as they entered the candlelit front hall.

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The next night after dinner, Queen Nora discreetly asked Sophia to meet her in her bower. The Queen sat waiting, holding her embroidery hoop, busy with her calligraphy letters and some small pink flowers that were supposed to be roses – although they looked, at this point, more like small, misshapen, rather unappetizing pink mushrooms. Queen Nora squinted at them in distaste, sighed briefly, and then pushed her reading spectacles further up on her nose and resolutely pushed her needle through the hoop again, breathing through her mouth in quiet concentration as she worked.

She thought of Sophia and what had happened the day before. She’d been nothing less than shocked when she went around the gardens to inspect her prize rose bushes, only to find her daughter alone with what appeared to be a small red insect in her lap, chatting away to it as if it were an old friend.

“Sophia,” the Queen had said sharply. “What are you doing there?” And she peered hard at the small red insect in Sophia’s lap as if hoping that, if she looked fixedly enough, a spell

would be broken and the insect would turn into a handsome prince, or a wizard or something, and then all would be neatly explained in one fell swoop.

Sophia had stammered incomprehensibly, and after carefully placing the insect on the ground beneath the Queen's most particularly beautiful apricot-pink Clytemnestra, had excused herself with a mumble and fled to the library, where she spent the rest of the afternoon.

As Queen Nora waited in her bower, Sophia paced back and forth in her own bedroom chambers, biting the side of her lip and rubbing her hands together before making her way down the candlelit stairs, and then up another set of stairs to the Queen's private rooms. She wasn't exactly sure what her mother was going to say, but had a feeling it was related to the whole insect incident. She wondered what she could say to explain it all away but couldn't quite come up with anything that sounded sensible, so she decided it might be better just to keep her mouth shut about the whole thing until it was brought up, at which point she'd have to figure out a way to evade the issue. As she neared the doorway, she paused, and taking a deep breath, entered the room.

The Queen was sitting on a purple divan facing the doorway. A fire was blazing in the marble fireplace, yet the room felt cold to Sophia. She shivered.

Queen Nora looked at her daughter over her spectacles. "My dear, please sit down," she commanded sweetly, placing her embroidery hoop and needle on a tasseled pillow next to her. Sophia crossed the room and sat on an enormous wing chair covered in chintz with a pattern consisting of various birds and flowers. The chair was so big, it completely engulfed her, and the multitude of silk pillows arranged neatly on the seat didn't help matters any. She tried sitting up as best she could, and then finally gave up and let the pillows besiege her. She shifted around, and then looked questioningly at her mother.

"I'm a bit concerned, Sophia," Queen Nora began after a perfectly timed pause. "I realize you're alone most of the time, and are probably lacking in friends, social interaction, and whatnot. Still, I won't allow you to talk with bees, flies, spiders – *whatever* it is you've deemed reasonable enough to carry on a conversation. My darling girl," the Queen said, repositioning herself on the divan, and fingering her left ear, "you must stop at once. You aren't a small girl, anymore, are you? You are *sixteen years old*. What will people *think*? What will the Cartwrights tell people when they return home? They might *talk*. Think of *that*. And another thing," she went on, her shoulders stiffening as she spoke. "You know you must meet and greet suitors. We have

another young man coming the week after next, Prince Heath of D'Arbonvilla. What will he think, if he hears that you...that you've been... Well, I shudder, my dear. I *shudder*. Please focus on behaviors more befitting to a princess. You are the *Princess* in the Kingdom of Tor. *Tor*, which is the most highly regarded kingdom in the Northeastern realms. You must pull yourself together. Try on your ball gowns. Paint a picture. Practice your harp. And for goodness sake, try not to speak out loud when there is so obviously no one present."

"You see, I..." Sophia began, her voice muffled amidst the mountain of pillows.

The Queen held up her hand sharply, then sighed and raised her eyes to the ceiling, as if she were choosing her words carefully. "As for last night, I can't imagine where you might have gone, but if you decide to retire to your room or take a turn outdoors to view the stars, I wish for you to tell someone. One of your own maids, or Franz, at the very least. It was rude of you to disappear as the party was just getting underway, and I can't begin to describe how humiliated I was trying to explain away your sudden absence to the Duke and Duchess of Raisenfare.

"Anyway," she sniffed, smoothing out her gown deliberately, "I do hope these little issues can be resolved before your father arrives home from Montezola." She sighed again, this time largely, as if the entire matter had worn her out. "He worries about you, you know, and wants you to be content. I would very much dislike him to become aware of these... *episodes*."

Sophia looked down at her hands. She could think of nothing to say.

Queen Nora rose, and walked to her, patting her on the hand. "There, there, my girl," she said. "Chin up. Let's turn in and leave the night to the spirits. And tomorrow we can begin again. A fresh, new start for a whole new you. Yes?" And not waiting for an answer, the Queen walked to the door with a definitive swish of her long, silken skirts.

Sophia rose and followed her, not at all wanting to leave the sweet night behind, as the sky had deepened to indigo, and there was a vast swell of stars and planets clearly visible from the window, and certainly not persuaded that a different young woman would emerge refreshed and changed when the sun came up again.

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Queen Nora walked down the stairway from her chambers and toward the grand stairway of the west wing, which eventually led to her study. She was tired, but had some last-minute

work that needed to be completed before she retired for the evening. She'd been busy. Her time had been taken up with entertaining the Cartwrights, whom she hoped would return home with positive things to say about their stay, particularly since their daughter, Clara, seemed a good prospect for Leonardo. But it was exhausting being the hostess, and she had wished, at times, that their visit would be cut short so she could go back to a more typical routine. Thankfully they were scheduled to leave tomorrow, so she would soon be spared from the exhausting position of solo sovereignty.

Since King Frederick was away, most of the matters of the palace, and of Tor itself, had been left to her, including the annoying task of having to sign a myriad of papers regarding certain issues of the nearby village of Candleton. There was a proposal for the addition of seven new wells – seven! – which were to be built in the area located adjacent to the town square. Queen Nora didn't know what the villagers would do with seven new wells, except perhaps have more water available to drink than any normal human being should ever need. Why can't they simply go to a nearby brook? The Queen thought to herself irritably, her need for sleep causing her to be petulant and unreasonable. Certainly the horses and cows would prefer a clean sip of cold brook water rather than some old, sordid water sitting around in a stagnant, man-made hold in the ground.

Then there was the matter of the school. They wanted a new school. Again, in Candleton. Queen Nora sighed. Her sigh had become a distinct part of her character. The servants, who were sprinkled throughout Waywith Palace at any given moment, could hear her coming before she entered a room, her sighing preceding her on most occasions. She would sigh loudly and often, and it became the mark of the sort of mood she might be in, depending on how vehemently the sigh was emitted. The proposed new school project made her sigh with all she had inside her, a sigh rising from her core. It was a project Queen Nora believed to be a waste – not only of money and resources, but of her increasingly limited time. What on Earth could be wrong with the old school? And why couldn't they do most of their learning from home? And, more to the point, what did they need of learning, anyway? Most of the villagers were farmers, although there were still many who were candle makers, as had been when the village was first incorporated – thus, the name “Candleton.” Actually, the village had been well known for its beautifully colored, well-rendered tapers, and in fact Queen Nora herself had quite a few of them within various rooms of the palace.

What does a candle maker need of a well-rounded education? Queen Nora thought grumbly. Certainly, the only subject they might need to study would be wax-making, and, perhaps, a certain amount of aesthetics in order to make the candles charming. And, no more. Queen Nora slowed her steps, dreading the inevitable organizing-and-prioritizing, and the looking-over-of-the-papers, and the now-I-must-make-a-decision-about-something-I-know-nothing-about.

Her lady-in-waiting attended her, walking a few steps behind. The Queen shook off her inner complaining and quickened her step, reminding herself that a queen must always show proper regal attitude, especially when servants were watching. She didn't want them to think they could take advantage of her, particularly with the King away. *She* was in charge, and must always be prepared for anything, for every possible thing.

Someone was coming toward her. Who was *he*, now? Ah, yes. Pasquale - one of the watchmen.

Queen Nora paused. Pasquale? Was that right? Well, in any case, there he was in front of her. Whatever can he want? She thought, sighing heavily.

"Good evening." She nodded.

"Good evening, Your Highness." He bowed his head, and then stepped toward her conspiratorially. He looked directly at her, his eyes an unusual color of cool yellow-green. His nose, which was long and thin, twitched a little as he spoke. He wore a large, ubiquitous hat with a jaunty green feather poking out of the top, which hid most of his head so his face emerged from it almost leeringly and gave him the disconcerting appearance of being inside a portrait within a frame. He was on the young side, probably no more than twenty-two, the Queen thought. She eyed him suspiciously.

And then she remembered. He was indeed Pasquale, the son of a friend of King Frederick's who was a nobleman in the township of Reichle, located further North. She didn't know the family well at all, or the precise circumstances of how he'd been employed at Waywither, but she did recall it was something unusual. I must remember to ask Frederick, she thought, looking at him with renewed interest, but his face gave away nothing. In fact, he smiled at her strangely, as if he knew something but would not tell, and was encouraging her to take a guess. He held his hands behind his back, which for some reason alarmed her a little.

“Your Highness, I have a matter of some urgency that I wish to discuss,” he said, inching closer to her. “Shall we speak here or in another space, perhaps?”

Queen Nora was startled by his abruptness and clear lack of the proper etiquette. “Must we speak at this moment?” she said pointedly. “I have some important matters to attend to, before turning in for the evening. Couldn’t it wait until morning?”

The watchman smiled only with his mouth. His eyes remained cool. “You may not want to wait, and I say so respectfully, Your Highness,” he said. “I have something...interesting to show you.” He pulled a deep purple cloth from behind him, as if he were a magician suddenly making the object appear with a smart flip, the cloth snapping open with a jerk. He leaned in closer toward Queen Nora, who had no choice but to take a small step backward. Has he no sense of personal space? She thought, crossing her arms. She gave him a well-rehearsed scowl. “Well?” she said, straightening herself up. “Go on.”

“This was found today beyond the woods, in the meadow above the hills,” he said, thrusting the cloth forward, as if to verify its existence. “If I’m not mistaken, and I hope I am, Your Grace, I believe it belongs...” he paused, then, raising his chin. “It belongs...to Princess Sophia.”

Queen Nora stared blankly at the purple cloak in Pasquale’s hands for a few moments. “Let’s not stay here, then” she said lightly. “Follow me.”

She led him to the dining room, the closest room in proximity, which happened to be empty. “Wait for me here,” she commanded to her lady-in-waiting, who curtsied and folded her hands in front of her. Queen Nora entered the dining room and Pasquale followed doggedly behind her, still holding the purple cloak out in front of him as if it were a sacred offering. The Queen moved around him and closed the door quietly behind them. Why doesn’t he back off a bit? She thought crossly, and took a deep breath. “Now,” she said. “What’s this all about? You say the object was found in a meadow? Hand it to me, please.”

Pasquale gingerly placed the cloak onto her open palms.

Queen Nora passed it from one hand to another, pretending to examine it thoroughly. She had, of course, recognized it as Sophia’s evening cloak the minute she laid eyes on it out in the great hall, but she had to be sure. Now as she held it, she knew. But, why? Why had the cloak been found there, in a *meadow* of all places? How had it traveled so far? What explanation could

there be for such a thing? Queen Nora was beginning to have an uneasy feeling deep within her. She couldn't tell what might be coming, but she sensed she would not like it. Not a bit of it.

“Who found it?”

Pasquale raised his head and looked directly at her. “It was rescued by Emlyn, a hand maiden in your court,” he said. “She saw the Princess leaving the palace gates and so she followed her, only intending to make sure she wasn't going to come to any harm, of course. The Princess walked through the woods far beyond the palace, and up into the hills. Apparently, she came to a meadow and there she...she...” Pasquale paused as if searching for just the right words. “She *arranged* herself on the grass and spoke aloud to the sky. And, Your Grace,” Pasquale's voice became lower and more grave. “Prince Leonardo and Princess Clara were also there. They...followed her.”

Queen Nora closed her eyes and sighed – a sigh that was quite a bit more substantial than the school project one had ever aspired to be - and then opened her eyes again. The cloak she'd been holding fell to the floor. It stayed there, looking like a small, wayward animal huddled in a heap. The Queen stared at it warily, as if it were threatening her. “We shall have to take drastic measures, then,” she said distractedly to the cloak. She tugged at her ear. Glancing at Pasquale, she said, “Send Emlyn to me at once.”

Pasquale's face arranged a strange smile again. “Of course, Your Highness,” he said, stooping down to retrieve the fallen cloak. “Of course.”

#

Sophia lay awake the next morning, more restless than usual, and craving a certain something she couldn't quite make sense of. She sprawled out in her large four-poster bed trying to figure out this feeling she had, watching the breeze move the sheer silken drapes hanging from each column, looking around at her sunlit room; the tall imposing wardrobe that held most of her robes, the thick carpets muted with subdued tones, the colorful tapestries, which she herself had chosen, depicting scenes of nature – trees, animals, flowers, plants, rivers - all of this. All of this was there when she opened her eyes in the morning, and all of it she would mull over again as she lay awake with the subtle darkness at night. All of these objects in her room weren't enough to satisfy her, she realized, nor did they amuse her much. They were simply *things*, and she

found herself frustrated with them. They didn't complete her. She was, in fact, resentful, and didn't know where the resentment would go. It might eventually turn to full-out rebellion. Sophia wasn't sure, but she could see it happening. She could very well see herself becoming rampantly rebellious.

She rose from her bed and walked to the open window, looking out on the southern terrace to the courtyard and beyond, and then to the end of the gates and out past the expanse of green lawn to the forest. She tried to feel gratitude for her spot in life. She *was* fortunate, after all. She knew as far as the world was concerned, she was in one of the greatest positions in existence. She was a *princess*, for God's sake. That would be enough, for most people. It should be enough for her. She just had to suppress her sense of excitement and the sweet, quiet urgency she'd been feeling every morning for the past week; the urgency that pressed on her, tackled her to the ground sometimes. I have to squash the rebellion, she thought wearily. But.

But.

She looked out on the green colors glistening, and heard a mourning dove call, its mate responding seconds later.

I'll go today, she thought. Just one more time, once more to the meadow. For just a little while, anyway. Only to satisfy the urgent feeling. Then I won't go at all. Not once.

She looked beyond at the woods again.

"Well, let's just say I won't go for quite some time," she whispered lightly.

She walked to her dressing room and stepped into a morning gown without the usual help from her chambermaid, who was remarkably absent, for whatever reason. Usually the maid could be counted on to turn up at the door when she heard Sophia stumbling around every morning. She would knock once, wait for an answer, and then enter. She'd brush and braid Sophia's long hair or button her gown or bring her a newly cut rose.

Sophia turned to the white china ewer and basin on the washstand and splashed some cool water on her face, then wiped herself dry with a small, velveteen hand towel. She resolutely crossed to the door and pulled the handle.

It was locked.

"Hmm?" She murmured aloud. And she tried again. Yes, locked. From the outside.

"Hello!" she said loudly, rattling the handle. "Please open the door. I'm in here."

Not a sound. She thought she heard sudden steps, and then nothing.

“Hal-lo!” She called louder. “The door? Is locked? Please open it at once.”

Still nothing. She banged on the door with the palm of her hand. “I command you to open this door at once!”

Nothing.

Sophia pounded on the door loudly with both hands. “HELLO!” She bellowed. “I must exit this room at once! Kindly unlock the door and allow me to breakfast!”

Footsteps were unquestionably heard this time, coming closer. Sophia waited, expecting at any moment to hear a key unlatching the door. But instead she heard a voice.

“Excuse me. Um. I...I can’t really unlock yet,” came a voice. A boy’s voice. “Um. Your Highness,” the voice continued, as an afterthought.

“What? I’m sorry. I thought I heard you say that you can’t unlock the door.”

“Yes, Your Highness, you heard me correctly. I’m only following orders from the Queen? Your...your mother? I can’t unlock, but am instead asking what it is you’d like to eat? Um. So I can slide a plate underneath the door for you.”

“Orders from the Queen? Can’t unlock? Slide underneath?” Sophia’s head began to throb slightly. She looked down at the bottom of the door, not quite able to imagine how a plate could possibly fit underneath it.

“Yes. Please, don’t be angry. I’m only following the Queen’s? Your mother’s? Orders. You see. Um. Your Highness.”

“Who are you?”

“Peter. I...I’m just a...a kitchen hand. Um. Your Highness.”

Peter. The young, tall, skinny boy who sometimes cleared her plate after dinner. The one who always smiled at her. “I know you, Peter. Thank you, you may go.” Sophia slid down to the floor and leaned against the door.

“No, thank *you*, Your Highness. And, I’m bowing, now. Just...so you know.” Footsteps sounded down the hall with a stumbling pace, and then all fell silent.

Trapped, without any warning or explanation, Sophia thought. But why? Why? What had she done? What could she possibly have...?

She suddenly sat up.

“Leo!” She said aloud. He must have said something to Mother about her going to the meadow – well, he had *told* her he was - and that, along with the insect incident, along with

leaving the party to begin with, had led to this imprisonment. “How could you, Leo?” she asked dejectedly. And then, realizing she was speaking aloud again to no one in particular, she stopped speaking altogether. And decided it would always be so.

#

Leo strode quickly through the great hall, and then turned toward the south-facing wing, taking the steps two at a time to Sophia’s chambers. He knocked loudly on her door.

“Sophia!” he called, and pressed his ear to the door. Nothing.

“Sophia.” He said again. A shuffling sound came from within.

“Sophia,” he said, leaning against the door. “Listen. Please. I just want you to know I said nothing. I promise. *Nothing*. And neither did Clara. She *swore* to me she didn’t. I don’t know how Mother found out, but I can tell you this. She’s serious, Sophia. She’ll keep you here until you...until she thinks you’ve learned your lesson. If I were you, I’d find a way to be pleasant. Do whatever she asks. Don’t question her.” He sighed and rested his head against the door, pursing his lips to one side as if he had eaten something disgusting and was trying to spit it out. “Can I get you anything? What can I do?”

He waited, listening, his arms folded. And then, exasperated, turned to leave when a small folded slip of parchment shot out from under the door and skidded across the hallway over the oriental carpet runner. He picked it up, unfolded it, and read:

Please bring me my harp.

I won’t speak again.

S.