

“Two people want the answers to the puzzle, but only one will find the secret to the...”

Gemstones of Magic

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**Part I:**

**Prologue:**

Someone was following her, but she dared not turn around to see. Someone had known she had come for the secret and did not want her to find it. And why should the secret not be given over to her? After all, she had rightfully taken possession of the gemstones after the Sorceress of Scotland had been killed.

Britney knew her life was in danger but she kept her head straight and her legs running. The pouch of gems dangled heavily from her waistbelt and she could feel the true weight of their worth as her legs picked up speed. She had to find shelter and quickly, for the person who pursued her gained ever so slightly and the sky looked as if a great storm would rip it apart at any moment.

She tripped but once on a rock covered by moss, but quickly regained her speed. Unfortunately, the person gained greatly by her faltered step. She held the pouch in her hand now, so as to try and make her feet lighter. She knew she had the ability to make herself disappear, if she could only remember the spell she had been taught.

“Got ya!!” the person in pursuit cried as her cloak was grabbed from behind.

As the cloak slumped in the pursuer’s hand, Britney knew her spell had worked and she had remembered the correct words. She silently chuckled to herself as she watched the pursuer look around, bewildered, at what had just happened. She knew her spell would not last long so she could not stay where she was for much longer.

Britney ran, undetected, through the Scottish highlands, until she came upon a small cottage set far back in the forest. By this time her disappearing spell was lifting and her slender form appeared once again, this time shaded by the canopy of trees. Out of breath and grateful for her knowledge of the arts, she slumped down to the floor of the cottage, still clutching the pouch of gemstones to her chest. Trying to regain her breath, she surveyed her surroundings.

To her right, a kitchen of sorts, with a small stove and short countertop with every nook and cranny covered with cobwebs and the like. To her left, a large room with a worn circular bear-skinned rug on the wooden floor. The rug was surrounded neatly by three single-cushioned chairs. From the look of the cottage, Britney assumed it had been unoccupied for years, perhaps decades.

She made due with the little knowledge of housekeeping she had learned during childhood, and tidied up the house as best she could. She took a log from the pile stacked neatly next to the hearth and carefully placed it onto the spit. With a simple spell, recited in Gaelic, the log was ablaze and almost immediately warmed the room. Still grasping the gemstone pouch for protection, Britney curled herself up on the bear-skinned rug in front of the fireplace and quickly dozed off into a peaceful slumber. While she slept, the gems began to glow one by one, still secluded in their tiny pouch.

## Chapter 1:

“What about this one?”

“That one does not look like yer necklace, Scarlet,” Algernon said, flipping frantically through ancient scrolls, much to no avail.

Both Algernon and Scarlet sat at the far end of Locer’s library. It had been nearly two years since the death of the Sorceress of Scotland; Scarlet had become the Lady of Locera, and Algernon’s wife. For two years, her quest for the answers to her puzzle had come up empty, and finally led her here, to the old library of Locera.

“I cannot believe we have not found anything!” Scarlet threw her hands up in disgust.

“All in due time, Scarlet, all in due time,” her husband tried to console her.

Even though he loved his wife, he had not wished for this to exceed into the quest it had become. He felt it was naught but nonsense and knew he had other, more important obligations as Laird of Locera to attend to. But, upon Scarlet’s insistence, he was forced to neglect his honorable duties and join her on her quest for the secrets of the gemstones.

“Me dear, whyever can we not quit this nonsense? We have not found *any* of the information we seek!”

“Nay, you are wrong, me husband. The answers are here, I can feel it!” Scarlet said, pulling yet another book from the shelf, its binding broken and pages extremely worn. Algernon sighed but continued to look through the volumes that lay in front of Scarlet.

He had ne’er known anyone like Scarlet. Aye, she was extremely headstrong and determined—two characteristics that drew him to her like a moth drawn to a firelight. Unfortunately, there be one thing that lay heavily upon his heart. They had been husband and wife for a near two years and yet he could ne’er remember ever professing his love for her. For some reason, he found it quite difficult to do. He ne’er questioned her love for him, he had no need. But being that her mind was averted to this quest for so long, he now seemed to somehow question her devotion and perhaps even her love for him.

“Scarlet, may I ask ye a question?” Algernon asked as if he was a young, shy lad.

“Wait, Algernon, I may have found something!” she cried out, leaping from the floor.

“Whatever is it? ‘Tis cannot be!” he stammered.

“But it is! ‘Tis me amulet! ‘Twas here, among all these volumes after all!” Scarlet cried with great joy.

Algernon peered at the pages of the book to which Scarlet had opened. There, upon an ancient piece of parchment paper, was Scarlet’s amulet. The answer was clearly in front of his face and yet somehow he felt disappointed that Scarlet’s “quest” would end. She always seemed at her happiest when

a new lead took her somewhere else. Before he could speak, Algernon's eyes grew wide with fear. The volume he was holding dropped to the floor, his mouth went dry and he gulped several times before he attempted to speak.

"Algernon, whatever is wrong?" Scarlet asked, puzzled.

"The pages... they be blank!" Algernon stammered.

"But 'tis cannot be! The picture was right here a moment ago!" Scarlet cried, grabbing the book and rummaging through the pages. Every one was completely blank.

Algernon began to console his wife who had begun to weep. The book slowly fell from her hands as she wrapped her arms around him. As soon as the volume hit the floor, it disintegrated into naught but a pile of ashes. Both were taken aback and jumped away just in time to see the ashes catch fire, an obvious act of magic. As quickly as they were aflame, they were snuffed out, leaving naught behind but a darkened spot upon the floor.

"'Tis someone's idea of a joke?!" Scarlet cried out.

"I believe 'tis someone's idea of black magic!" answered Algernon.

"No! 'Tis cannot be! The Sorceress of Scotland be dead, I killed her meself!"

"Apparently her magic be still hidden within these walls," Algernon concluded.

Scarlet became more and more frustrated as the day progressed into afternoon. She was being mocked, ridiculed, but her foolish acts. Something or someone did not wish for her to find the information she sought.

"Scarlet, ye've done so much searching this day. Why do we not go inside and have some tea?" Algernon tried to comfort her once again.

"Nay! I will stay here as long as it will take! If ye will permit it, I will have me tea her, in the library," she answered defiantly.

"As ye wish, me lass."

Scarlet could not believe her ears. For the first time in over four years, Algernon called her by a maiden's name, a peasant girl. Even when he had kidnapped her and held her captive, she still retained her nobility when he called her a lady, one of higher stature than a poor tavern wench. Before she could question him on his use of Scottish brogue, he had retreated from the library. She was alone and saddened once again. Instead of continuing her search, she quietly stepped out the back door of the grand library and tiptoed across the meadow, so as not to be seen by any servants.

In the two years she had adopted Locera as her home, her favorite pastime had been to visit the ocean. Located in the highlands of Scotland, the closest thing to the ocean was a cliff overlooking a cove that led out to the North Sea to the east. She would race through the meadows, trying not to be heard,

and sit at the edge of the cliffs, sometimes reading a book she had stolen from the library, sometimes just staring at the jugged rocks below.

This day was no different from the others. She sat, where she had always sat before, perched on a rock overlooking the steep cliff. For a winter's day, the weather was incredibly mild, and the sun shown brightly overhead. The wind quietly billowed her fiery locks and skin-toned chemise as she sat, motionless, upon the rock.

She closed her eyes and let her senses and her mind's eye guide her. The smell of salty air emanated up into her nostrils, tickling her throat; the waves crashed against the rocks, splashing up, and causing a light mist to fall upon her cheeks. The winter birds had begun to sing for their midday meal, causing a slight smile to appear on Scarlet's face. She opened her eyes and peered over the cliff once more- the white-crested waves crashed down on the rocks. It truly was a paradise in itself.

"Well, well, what have we here? I see a trespasser to me cove!" a voice growled behind her.

Scarlet looked up, surprise and fear on her face. The face that stared her down belonged to her brother, Eric. His face had grown older with age, yet his pale blue eyes seemed to retain their youth. The eyes were what caught Scarlet's attention, for they were always said to be as bright as her mother's.

"Eric! How can this be? How can ye be before me and yet have died many years ago?!" Scarlet jumped up and embraced her brother endearingly.

"I did not die that day, Scarlet! I was left for dead on the battlefield and nursed meself back to health! Ye did not help me and neither did Papa!"

"We tried Eric, I swear to you! We tried to get to you but there be too many men on the field!" she tried to protest.

"Ye left me to die, Scarlet! Ye left me to rot in hell!" he shouted, pulling himself away from her.

"Nay, Eric! Please, let me explain!"

"Nay, there be naught to explain! Ye killed me, Scarlet, as ye did the rest of our family!"

"What?!" she exclaimed, puzzled.

"I watched you, Scarlet! I watched ye from the shadows as ye buried Papa and Lily. And I watched ye ride off into the sunset that day with the man who destroyed our family!"

"He did *not* destroy our family! And neither did I!"

"If it 'twere not for you, Papa, Lily, even Mama would still be alive! Yer foolishness and poor judgment has caused the death of three of our family members! And not just any deaths, unrequited, unlawful slaughters! Now, ye will cause one more death- yer own!" Eric finished, pushing her body off the cliff, sending her plummeting to the rocks below.

As she felt herself falling, she saw her life flash before her eyes. She saw her mother and her brother lying dead on the battlefield; she saw her sister lying in a pool of blood; she saw her father gurgling on his own blood; she saw her husband taking his vows at the altar. Suddenly, a hand grabbed a hold of her wrist, pulling her mind back into reality and saving her from death. She closed her eyes tight as her body was being pulled up to the safety of the ground of the cliff.

“Honestly, Scarlet, ye need to be more careful around this cliff! Ye could get yerself killed and then where would I be- without a wife is where I’d be!” a man’s voice said.

Scarlet opened her eyes as her feet were planted on firm ground and she gazed into Algernon’s stern face. She knew she had done wrong and had been caught, but she also knew ‘twas not her fault. She had been pushed by her- her head shot past Algernon as she searched for the culprit of her fall. Her brother was no where to be found.

“Scarlet, whatever is the matter?” Algernon asked, quite concerned.

“Me brother, he was just here, pushed me off the cliff,” she stuttered.

“Come now, Scarlet. ‘Twould appear to me that ye be the only one here. ‘Twas yer carelessness that caused ye to fall from the cliff! Lucky for you, I went back to the library and saw ye run out towards the meadow!” he scolded.

“But ‘tis true, Algernon! He was here, talking to me! Then he shoved me off the edge of the cliff!”

“Honestly, Scarlet, do ye think I am going to believe that someone pushed you? Because of yer carelessness, I have been frantically looking for you, and I now have neglected me duties!”

Scarlet knew he was cross with her. His scolding tone told her she could no longer argue her point. He did not believe her words and her brother had somehow disappeared like- like magic! The realization came upon her too quickly and she almost stopped in her tracks.

“And furthermore,” she heard him continue his scorn, “You are ne’er allowed to come here to this point again! Do I make meself clear?!”

His words shot through her like a knife through her heart. ‘Twas her special place to go- a place where she had gone when she wished to be alone. Her most prized possession, her time alone, had now been taken away from her. Algernon walked away from her without turning around. He regarded her like a child, scolding her for her foolish actions.

“Algernon?” she finally broke the silence by grabbing a hold of his arm.

Without a word, he stopped walking and turned to face her. His face was stern and his eyes were naught but cold, hard orbs. He had lost the love he had felt for her, lost any feeling of hope for her quest, and he could no longer let these feelings be hid.

“Aye?” his voice shot through her entire body.

Scarlet did not have to say anything to make Algernon’s eyes turn soft. He had a right to be angry yet he did not have the right to treat her like a common peasant. As the hurtful tears began to form in her eyes, he felt he had been wrong in scolding her the way he did, like a child. Yet, he remembered, she had disobeyed his order not to wander past the meadows and had almost gotten herself killed.

“No!” he said, sternly. “Ye disobeyed me order! Now come inside, ‘tis going to rain!”

He quickly turned away and walked towards the library, disappearing among the shadows. Scarlet was hurt by his words, more than she’d even been before. She wished she *had* fallen from the cliff, ‘twould have definitely made her life easier. Without argument, she followed in close pursuit of her husband towards the fortress, as the rains began to fall from the sky.

Scarlet followed Algernon into the fortress of Locera without speaking a word to anyone. She felt that Algernon was a changed man- changed in a way Scarlet did not seem to understand. Without speaking directly to her, he went straight to her maidservant and gave her orders.

“Take yer mistress up to her bedchamber. Give her some tea and make sure she gets some rest. I will have supper sent up with you when it be served.”

“Aye, me Laird,” was all her maidservant replied and curtsied as she guided a bewildered Scarlet away.

Once stowed away in her bedchamber, Scarlet was stripped down to her bedgown and hurried into bed. She did not wish to sleep and was puzzled by Algernon’s actions and harsh words.

“Come now, me Lady. What be the problem in yer mind? Ye look troubled by somethin’. Why don’t ye talk to Sera, me Lady?” she tried to comfort.

“Sera, ye’ve been too kind to me already. I cannot trouble ye with me problems.”

“Scarlet, I look on ye as a daughter, like one of me own. Now, tell Sera what troubles ya.”

“’Tis Algernon,” Scarlet reluctantly replied. “He has changed, Sera!”

“What, how, me Lady? He seems like the Laird we’ve always known.”

“To you and the people of Locera he has not changed. To me he be not the same man I once knew!” she began to cry at her own words.

“Do ye love him, me Lady?”

“What?!”

“Do ye love him?”

“Of course I love him!”

“Then does he love you in return?” Sera questioned.

“Scarlet could not answer that question truthfully. She was puzzled by Sera’s inquisition and could do naught but curl up in her bed, with the covers up to her chin. As soon as Scarlet’s head hit the pillow, she was asleep. Sera kissed her forehead before walking away.

Just before she closed the door she whispered into the room, “Get some rest, me Lady. All will be well soon.”

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Scarlet’s dream was more a nightmare than a dream. She was again there, racing through the meadow; she was again sitting on the edge of the cliff, watching the rocks below. Again, her brother appeared to her, speaking to her as he had before, yet this time his words were different.

“Scarlet, what have ye done?”

“Whatever do ye mean?”

“Ye have killed the Sorceress! Ye have killed her in cold blood!”

“Aye, what of it?”

“Ye have killed her but not her power! Her power lives within someone close to yer heart!”

“Nay, you are wrong, me brother! Her power is gone! It left when the blade pierced her heart!”

“You are wrong, me sister! Her power lives, and only I and one other knows where and how! Ye may search all of Scotland for the answers ye seek yet the answers ye will not find!”

“How can ye be so sure?! I will find me answers!”

“Nay, Scarlet, because there be two of us who hold the secrets well hidden and the only way ye will get to them is if we be dead!”

“But ‘tis impossible! You are already dead! I saw ye meself on the battlefield!”

“As I told you, Scarlet, ye left me for dead, but, nay, I was not! I be alive, well, and rejuvenated!”

“I do not understand you!”

“Melinda, the Sorceress of Scotland, still lives!”

“Ye do not make sense, me brother! The Sorceress of Scotland be dead! I killed her meself!”

“Her power lives within me! I hold the secret of the gemstones, which, if ye look carefully, have stolen from under yer feet!”

“What?!”

“‘Tis true, me sister! Britney, yer lady-in-waiting, has stolen yer precious gemstones and has fled the fortress undetected!”

“But ‘tis impossible!” Scarlet shouted, becoming more frustrated.



“Oh but nothing is impossible when magic and sorcery is involved!” her brother laughed, a sound that echoed through her mind for the remainder of the time she slept.

## Chapter 2:

A knock at the door awoke Britney from a comfortable slumber. She got up from her place on the bear-skinned rug and walked clumsily to the door. She did not even bother to ask who it was but opened the door immediately.

“Hello?” She was caught by surprise when a dagger was pointed at her throat and a black-robed figure stepped out of the shadows.

“Don’t ye know not to open doors for strangers, me lass?”

“Wha- whatever do ye want?” she stuttered.

“Ye have something I want!” the figure replied, stepping further into the room.

“I do not know who you are or what ye could possibly want. Please, leave!”

“I will leave only when the gems are in me hands!”

“But-but they be mine! I stole them and they now belong to me!”

“Wrong, me lass! Ye do not even how to harvest their power--!”

“But I can learn!”

“Ye wish to learn more of the arts, eh?” the stranger asked, quite surprised.

“Aye, that I do, but--.”

“And ye hold the gemstones in yer possession?”

“Aye, that I do. But what does that have to do with you?!”

“I can teach ye the arts as well as the power behind the stones! I know their secret!”

“How do I know ye be not sayin’ this to gain control of the gemstones?” Britney questioned.

“I know who ye be Britney!” was the figure’s reply.

She gasped but did not answer. Instead, she sat down on one of the chairs and looked at the ground. Immediately, the robed figure replaced his dagger and pulled the hood back and away from his dagger.

“Allow me to introduce meself. Me name be Eric. I am Scarlet’s brother.” With the sound of her once forgotten mistress’ name, Britney gave a start. “I see ye remember her?” he continued.

“Aye, that I do. I was secretly studying the Sorceress’ black magic and the ancient scrolls whilst I was a lady-in-waiting at her court. As soon as I heard the Sorceress had been killed and the gemstones were free from her grasp, I knew I had gain possession of them so that I may learn their true power.”

“Where be the ancient scrolls now?” Eric asks, inquisitively.

“I have put a spell on them so that the pages, at first glance, would appear completely blank. By forming the right spell, the words come back into view.”

“Incredible! I would ne’er have thought up such ingenious ideas!”

“So what be ye want with me?” Britney asked fear still in her voice.

“I want to share the secret of the gemstones with you. The Sorceress herself taught me before me sister killed her. Together, all of Scotland could be under our command!” he lied.

“I do not know,” she said suspiciously.

“Come now, me lass,” Eric coaxed. “I highly doubt ye have a choice! Ye may have known enough of the black arts ye’ve studied to escape me in the forest, but those gemstones ye possess hold enough power to erase you from this earth!”

“Since ye put it so kindly,” she mocked but quickly changed her expression when she saw that he was neither amused nor satisfied with her sarcasm. “A’right, I’ll do as ye ask,” she said reluctantly.

“Good, I thought ye’d see it my way!”

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Scarlet awoke abruptly from her nightmare only to find her bedchamber dark and cold. She knew not what time of evening it was but she knew ‘twas not late because her maidservant had not yet brought up the evening meal. She was sweating, her dream having placed fear into her mind, and a chill ran up her spine when the door to her bedchamber was slowly opened.

“Scarlet?” a husky voice asked, the figure remaining in the doorway.

“Aye?” her voice barely above a whisper.

“Supper has been served and me Laird wishes for ye to join the court for the meal.”

Scarlet knew then that the voice belonged to her kinsman, a man who vowed to keep her safe when her Laird was unable to. She had respect for this man, not only because of his vow but also because he was her Laird’s commander-in-chief of his army and one of his best knights.

“Byron, tell me Laird I wish to sup here, in me bedchamber,” she replied.

“Me Lady, I was told to stay here and make sure ye’ve gotten yerself up and dressed for the meal.”

“A’right, I’ll be up but Byron, please turn away so that I may be dressed.”

“Aye, me Lady,” Byron turned away obediently.

As quickly as she knew how, Scarlet leapt out of bed and dressed herself. Since her main-servant was not there to tend to her, ‘twas extremely difficult for her to tie her bodice from the back. She wished Byron would see her struggling and fetch Sera, but he did not. Instead, to her astonishment, he came over to help her.

Without a word, Byron closed his hands over hers, which were wrapped tightly around the laces of her bodice. She felt extremely uncomfortable with Byron there and wished Sera would come in and

intervene. But she did not and Scarlet was forced into an awkward predicament. She let her hands drop to her sides as Byron held and tied the laces.

“There, me Lady,” he smiled when the task was completed.

She turned around to show her gratitude and was caught in a trance. Byron’s eyes were not at all like her Laird’s, but were more gentle and soft and kind. She could not speak for his gaze had taken every last breath away.

“I- I thank ye, me lord,” she stammered, looking down at the floor.

Without warning or excuse, Byron pulled up her chin with his fingers. He wanted her to kiss him, but he dared not make any lest he frighten her. She could do naught but stare and was eventually forced to look away.

“I- I should go now. Me Laird will be wonderin’ where I be,” she replied uncomfortably.

“Aye, that ye should,” Byron said, unshaken by the silent liaison between them.

Scarlet whisked past him so she could find her shoes and don her slippers. Byron grabbed her arm, causing her to lose her balance and fall into him. She felt more awkward than before and refused to let herself look into his eyes again. This time Byron did not pull her head up, but instead whispered into her ear.

“That ye should,” he repeated softly, lightly kissing her ear.

A shutter went through her entire body, forcing her to move away and pace towards the door. She did not want to look back but something made her turn her head. What met her eyes was the gaze of a man whose crystal blue orbs twinkled with lust. She turned away, the look in his eyes unbearable, and walked down to the great hall.

Her Laird met her on the bottom step of the grand, winding staircase, and quickly took her arm in his. He seemed to be more proud of having her by his side than he had before. The gleam in his eyes proved she had naught to fear, so she became more relaxed when he helped her to her seat.

“Sires and ladies,” he said finally, raising his goblet and standing. “I have pleasant and comforting news! Me Lady has ordered a quest to be undertaken in her name! Five of me best knights will set out on this quest immediately following the sunrise of the morrow. The one who completes the quest will become me Lady’s champion!”

Scarlet’s face went pale at the thought of someone else continuing her quest. She did not understand why Algernon was doing this or for what purpose, but she waited intently for the applause to die down and him to continue his speech. Algernon raised his goblet once more, as did everyone else in the hall, and he continued.

“Will the five knights please step forward!” At that moment, five of the knights of his court stepped forward, one of them happening to be Byron. All five bowed on one knee in front of the table where Scarlet and Algernon sat.

“All five of you are me best knights! Go forth and find the Secret me Lady seeks! I wish all of you the best of luck and godspeed!”

Another applause send Scarlet’s mind into a whirlwind. How could Algernon want her to give up her own quest for the secrets of the gems! ‘Twas *her* quest, and now he was giving these five men, who had no idea what they were searching for, permission to seek their secrets. Yet to her amazement, she realized she also had no idea.

“What are ye doing?!” she whispered, grabbing a hold of his arm as soon as he was seated again.

“I am turning yer quest into theirs,” he said with a smile.

“But why?!” Scarlet was almost in tears as she spoke to him.

“Because I want you by me side as me Lady, not fancyin’ yerself after this nonsense of a quest!” he answered her.

“But ‘tis not fancy! ‘Tis me wish to pursue this quest and I do not wish for anyone else to be involved!”

“Lady, please, do ye not want a champion?” her husband said with another smile.

“I do not *need* a champion! I need me answers!” Scarlet jumped up and walked out of the great hall.

Much to her dismay, Byron followed her out. Scarlet quickened her step, thinking Algernon was the one in pursuit. She ran, or rather walked steadily, out to the garden, where she no longer felt confined. The winter crispness in the air had set in but she still knelt down in the grass—and wept. She wept until she thought she could weep no more and picked her head up with a start when she heard footsteps in the grass behind her.

“Me Lady?” asked a familiar gentle voice.

“Go away!” she replied.

“Me Lady, please, let me help,” the voice pleaded.

“I do not need yer help!”

“Well, if I am to become yer champion, there must be *something* I may do?”

Scarlet turned around just as Byron sat in the grass beside her. She refused to look at him and began to busy herself with other things like running strands of grass through her fingers. Silently and carefully, Byron placed his hand over hers, causing her to look up at his face.

“There must be something I can do,” he repeated softly, lightly caressing his thumb across her hand.

“Ye just do not understand!” she replied, hurt, unable to tear her eyes from him.

“Help me to understand, me Lady. I wish to help you, not hurt you,” Byron pleaded, reaching up to caress her cheek with his free hand.

“I do not wish for you and the other knights to subject yerselves to a quest that does not pertain to you!”

“I do not understand.”

“This quest, my quest, is not made for these knights. ‘Tis very dangerous and peril,” she tried to explain.

“Me Lady, we knights are trained for any dangerous task set before us. ‘Tis our duty to obey the task at hand.”

“I cannot and will not allow ye to risk yer lives on behalf of a quest ‘twas meant for me!”

“Please, me Lady, tell me the truth. Yer secret will be safe with me,” Byron countered, pulling her chin up to meet his watchful eyes.

“Aright Byron, but I am only telling you because I trust ye will keep me secret hidden,” she replied. “Me amulet, with its shimmery gold and green, is only but a part of many more jewels. When the Sorceress was here, in Locera, she carried with her a pouch filled with many gemstones. Each stone contained great power and ‘twas through these that she gained her strength.”

“So, where be these stones now?” Byron asked as inquisitive as a child.

“The stones I believe have been stolen right out from beneath me face!”

“What do ye mean? Where could they have gone?”

“Do ye remember a young maid of mine by the name of Britney?” she asked.

“Aye, that I do! And what a pretty li’l Princess she was too!” Byron said admirably. Scarlet said nothing and ignored his comment by continuing.

“I believe she be the one who stole me jewels,” she stated flatly.

“Britney?! But she was such a good, quiet lass!” Byron protested.

“Ye only say these things because ye courted her time and again!” she mocked.

“Nay, Lady, the one I could not love then, I still cannot seem to love now,” Byron said, pulling himself closer to her, so that no one would hear them. “Ye still have not told me what be yer purpose for the gems, me Lady.”

Scarlet took a deep breath before she continued. “The stones be used for a power greater than I have e’er seen before. Me purpose for these stones is not to use that power, but rather to destroy it!”

“’Tis all?” Byron asked confused. “That cannot be the *only* reason ye wish to seek their power?”

“How can ye accuse me of wishing for powers greater than me own human abilities! All I ask for is the answer to why the Sorceress possessed them and what purpose she had for me own amulet!”

“I am sorry, me Lady. I did not mean to pass insult upon you. Forgive me.”

“You are forgiven, Byron, but I must ask ye a question now,” she said, looking directly and deliberately into his eyes.

“Aye, me Lady?”

“Will ye not leave on the morrow with the rest of me Laird’s nights?”

“Will ye not let me help you on yer quest, me Lady?” Byron asked, innocently answering her question with one of his own.

“Nay, Byron! I cannot let ye help!” Scarlet exclaimed, not realizing she placed her hand on his lower arm to reassure her words.

“Am I to believe me wife has been courting one of me knights?” a voice sounded behind them.

“Algernon!” Scarlet exclaimed.

“The one and only, me lass,” he said and bowed sarcastically.

“Algernon, how long have ye been standing there?”

“Long enough to see Byron will no longer be a part of me Lady’s quest!”

“Algernon, that quest does not exist!” Scarlet said.

“On the morrow, *four* of me knights will begin to search for the secret to the Sorceress’ gems!” Algernon continued, ignoring her outburst.

“Nay! I will *not* have these men risk their lives for a quest they know nothing about!”

“Aye, the same quest *ye* should not be a part of, me lass!” Algernon retorted. Byron gasped at Algernon’s use of common brogue. He turned to Scarlet who seemed to be about to burst into tears. But she surprised both Byron and Algernon by expressing her thoughts openly.

“Nay, Algernon! That quest be mine and mine alone! No knight of yers needs to know the secret or the power behind the gemstones of the Sorceress! ‘Tis a secret that holds far too much power behind it!”

“You are a silly lass!”

“Aye! I may be a silly lass, but I will *not* let innocent men die trying to find the answers I know they cannot find!”

“Or you cannot find! Scarlet, yer quest will get ye nowhere! I wish with all me heart ye would decide to call off this crazed quest and be the wife I’ve wanted for the past two years!”

“I am sorry Algernon,” Scarlet said defiantly. “I am not giving up me quest.”

“Then I have one choice left, me lass,” Algernon said with a heavy heart.

“And what be that one choice?” she challenged.

“Me wife does not exist!” he stated. “Until yer quest has been completed, you are no longer me wife or Lady of this fortress!”

Scarlet could not believe her ears. Her husband, the man she had grown to love and respect, was sentencing her to a life of her quest, in complete solitude! She took one look at him and began to weep. Algernon refused to look at her and walked back towards the fortress, leaving Scarlet to be consoled by Byron, her “champion”.



### Chapter 3:

“What would ye have me do, sire?” Britney asked, fear still in her voice.

‘Twas already mid-afternoon and Britney sat on the floor of the cottage she had found the evening before. Eric, the new “Sorcerer” of Scotland, sat opposite her, knowing all he need do was ask, and she would do as he said. He had but one thing to ask her.

“Ye must get the secret scrolls,” he stated.

“But ‘twould mean going back to Locera!” she exclaimed.

“Aye, it would, me dear, but think of the possibilities! Once ye place yer reversal spell on the scrolls and bring them here, I will be more than will be more than willing to begin yer lessons of the *true* arts!” Eric said with a sly smile set from ear to ear.

“Ye would be willing to teach me all that ye know?” she asked, still unsure of his proposition.

“I will be willing to do that plus more,” he said, brushing his had across her cheek, making her blush. Being the age of only twenty-four, Britney was not yet accustomed to the touch of a man’s hand. She had been a lady-in-waiting of Scarlet’s own choosing for five long years and only once allowed a man to touch her. She quickly moved away.

Averting his conversation away from the uncomfortable situation, he quickly added, “I must have those scrolls! They be very important in me plan to gain control!”

“Gain control over what?”

“Over Locera, and possibly over Scotland!” he stated with a sly smile, almost sinister.

“I do not think ‘twould be right to go back,” Britney argued. “I mean, if I go back, me mistress will most likely lock me in a dungeon and throw away the key!”

“How can she lock away what she cannot see?” he countered.

“What do ye mean?”

“Yer trick spell of disappearance yesterday worked wonderfully against me. I am quite sure ‘twill be easy as pie to steal those scrolls once ye’ve infiltrated the library without anyone noticing you at all!”

“But me spell only works for a short while! I do not believe I could get into the library, steal the scrolls, and escape successfully without the spell being broken.”

“If I increase yer spell’s power, ye will be able to complete yer task.”

“And what do I get in return?” Britney asked defiantly.

“Ye get to live a long life! Besides, is it not rewarding enough to have the scrolls in yer hands?!” he stated.

“Ye act like the scrolls be the only thing of importance! Do ye not care what ye do to yer sister?”

“Me sister is of no concern to me! And aye, the scrolls be the only thing of importance to me!”

The gleam in Eric’s eyes burned like fire and Britney knew she had no choice but to either follow his orders or die trying to escape. But what he did not know was that Britney had her own plan up her sleeve.

“Aright, I will help ya with yer plan,” she agreed reluctantly.

“Good, now, go out and collect for me three cloves of bayberry, a flower or two of sassafras, and a handful of sage grass.”

“Why do ye need those herbs?” she asked, childishly.

“I am going to make a potion for you to drink to make yer spell of disappearance stronger and last longer.”

“I understand,” she said and got up to leave the cottage. “But I do not have me cloak. I left it when I disappeared yesterday.”

“Fear not, me lass. I believe yer cloak is behind the chair there. I kept it, I knew we would surely meet again.”

Britney went over to the chair and discovered her cloak was there, as he had said. She grabbed the cloak, threw it on, and reached for a basket she had found in the kitchen, to collect the herbs Eric needed to complete his spell. Once outside her thoughts began to wander, back to her first and only love—a man whom she thought could ne’er love her in return—Byron, the greatest knight to have lived at Locera.

“Me lady?” a voice shook her out of her daydream and made her turn around.

A man, a stranger he was to her, offered his hand to help her with her task. His body towered over hers and his eyes were shielded from her gaze by a dark, black-hooded cloak.

“Who are you?” she asked defensively.

“Ah, Britney, ye know me well enough! ‘Tis a shame you are no longer in service at Locera,” the figure answered her, removing the hood from his head.

“Byron?” she asked, astounded.

“Aye, in the flesh!” he said, opening his arms to her.

“But how did ye find me? How did ye know where to look?” she asked, letting herself be embraced by the loving arms she remembered. “I followed yer tracks in the mud,” he replied. “‘Twas easy enough to know which tracks were yers—ye always had small feet. But whose tracks be the others?” he asked, pulling her away and looking into her eyes.

“A—A friend,” Britney stammered. “They belonged to a friend.”

“A friend? And who be this friend?” Byron asked.

“Just a friend. ‘Tis all ye need to know,” she answered. She knew if Byron found out about Eric’s plan for the scrolls she would be sentenced to death for treason. She finally decided to use Byron as bait to get herself back into the fortress without being arrested.

“Byron?” she asked, changing her attitude from scared to seductive.

“Aye?” he answered, succumbing all too easily to her seduction.

“Can ye help me get back to the fortress?”

“You mean ye *want* to go back?!” he asked, confused.

“Well, I miss it a lot and I should ne’er have gone astray,” she concluded, moving closer to him. “Plus,” she added, “I miss you most of all.”

She leaned over to kiss him, eyes closed tight. Yet he did not kiss her back. She opened her eyes and Byron was no where to be found. Britney looked around, frantically searching for any sign of where he could have gone. In a blinding flash of light, a figure stood before her, shrouded in black, and with eyes flaming red.

“Ye li’l witch!” the figure swore. “How dare ye use that man to get into the fortress! I told ye once I would get you there without anyone seeing you! I had a feelin’ ye would somehow betray me!”

“Eric, please believe I did not mean anything by it!” Britney tried to plead, unsuccessfully.

“’Twas a *very* good thing I created the image of yer beloved Byron!”

“He wasn’t real?!” Britney asked, astounded.

“Of course he was not! I used yer thoughts of him to create me mirage! Ye were very unfortunate to try to plot against me, me lass!” Eric exclaimed as he grabbed her arm and pushed her backwards towards a tree.

Being caught off guard, Britney forced herself to brace her body with her hands as she crashed into the tree. Falling to the ground, she could feel the blood staining her hands and the tears staining her cheeks. She felt pain sear through her as Eric grabbed her by her hair and pulled her to her feet.

“How good are yer powers now, me lass!” he shouted at her, shoving her away with a force that sent her plummeting onto her back. He sat next to her on the grass, hand raised over her, ready to strike.

“This will teach you to toy with me!” Eric said, striking her across the face with the back of his hand. Her scream of pain rang out through the entire forest for all to hear.

“Ye have no idea how easy ‘twould be to destroy you! But no, I will let ye live, yer life be too valuable to waste—for now!”

“Britney!” a voice shouted in the distance. “Britney, is that you?”

Britney looked around her to see where the voice came from. When she turned back, Eric had disappeared. *Where could Eric have gone to?* she thought to herself as she tried to stand. A black stallion came into view just as she stood successfully without collapsing onto the ground.

“Britney! Are ye hurt?” the rider asked, leaping from his steed and racing towards her. Britney slowly lifted her head, a red hand mark still across her cheek and her hair in disarray. “Good God, what has happened to you?!”

Without answering him, Britney wept, both tears of fear and tears of pain. She did not even protest when the knight embraced her to keep her from falling over. She continued to weep as the knight tried to calm her by stroking her soft auburn locks.

“There now, me Princess. Everything will be fine now that Byron is here,” he comforted.

“Byron?” Britney looked up questionably through tear-stained eyes.

“Aye, ‘tis me.”

Britney could not tell whether he was real or whether he was yet another mirage created by Eric. She reached out her hand and gently touched his face, to prove to herself that he was real. She found that not only were her fingers quite cold, but his skin quite warm.

“Byron,” she breathed, before he embraced her once more.

“How badly ye be hurt?” he asked pulling her away and cupping her chin in his palms.

“Not badly,” she shook her head.

“Come on. I will take ye back to Locera. They have sent out a search party for you and I am sure Scarlet will be pleased to see ye return,” Byron said cheerfully, carefully lifting her up into his arms so she could be placed upon his horse’s saddle.

“Byron?” Britney asked rather sleepily.

“Aye?”

“Why did Scarlet send a scouting party after me?”

“Because, me Princess, she missed having you as a lady-in-waiting, and also there be some knights who quite oft grew lonesome without seeing you around,” he stated.

“Oh,” was her only reply before resting her head on his chest while they rode back to Locera.

Britney knew her plan would work—how could it not? She was not being back to Locera, and, if Byron told her the truth, back with open arms. She knew she could easily penetrate the walls of the library and steal the scrolls. Her only hope was that her spell of disappearance would work long enough for her to escape, once again, this time with the ancient scrolls. With a sly smile upon her face, and her eyes tightly closed, she recited a silent telepathic message sent to the only one who could hear through the mind—*Eric, if ye can hear me, listen. I will not fail ye now and ne’er will. I will get yer scrolls and*

*escape successfully. Please, wait for me at the cottage and on the evening of the morrow, ye shall have yer ancient scrolls!...*

## **Part II:**

### **Chapter 4:**

Britney ne'er made it back to the cottage the following day on her own accord. She was indeed welcomed back to Locera with open arms, yet there was no time for her to even sneak into the library. From the moment she stepped foot onto the fortress, Britney was hustled here and hustled there. Scarlet was the first person to greet her upon her return but Britney noticed a slight awkward glance shared between her and Byron, when she arrived.

"Thank you, Byron, for retrieving me lady-in-waiting. I trust ye will not decide to leave us again, Britney?"

"Nay, me Lady. I am truly sorry for leaving you. I swear to you I will *ne'er* leave again!"

"Good. Now come along. We have prepared a feast to honor yer return!"

Scarlet pivoted on her heels and walked into the fortress without turning around once. She knew she had to find some way of getting Britney alone so she could make her talk about where she hid the stones. That night, she decided, she would make her move. But until then, she would enjoy the evening, without her husband by her side.

Algernon had become very distant these last few days, ne'er speaking to her at the evening meal, ne'er asking her to take a stroll with him through the garden anymore. He ne'er even touched her when they lay in the same bed at night! Scarlet was quite sure the other knights and their ladies noticed his silence towards his wife but could not and would not speak up against his actions. Byron's presence next to her broke her thought and made her turn around.

"Me Lady, if ye do not mind me saying so, ye look as if you could use some rest," he replied.

"I am fine, Byron, really, I do not need rest," Scarlet answered. But her legs gave way underneath her and she collapsed into him.

"Scarlet, ye *need* rest," he repeated, picking her up and cradling her in his arms.

"Byron, what be wrong with me mistress?" Britney asked. Byron gave a start when she spoke, forgetting she was there beside him.

"Yer mistress is very tired," he explained, "and she needs to be taken to her bedchamber to rest."

"Well, I can fetch Algernon for--."

"Twill not be necessary, Britney. I will bring her meself."

Britney was taken aback and also hurt by his forceful words. She had ne'er known Byron to be harsh and also had ne'er known her mistress to be alone with any knight save her husband, whom she noticed was nowhere to be found at the moment. *Something very strange is going on here*, she finally

concluded to herself. She watched somewhat broken-hearted, as her beloved knight carried her mistress up to her bedchamber.

He carried her carefully to her bedchamber and placed her gently on the bed. She stirred once when she was laid down but he soothed her back to sleep by caressing her locks, the same technique he had used on Britney. He pulled the blanket up to her chin and was about to leave when her voice made him halt in his tracks.

“Must... find... answers,” she breathed very sleepily. “Must... destroy... power of... gems.”

Byron did not understand the reason behind her words but he sat next to her on the bed anyway. He lightly pressed his lips to her forehead—she felt warm to the touch. He carefully brushed her hair away from her face. She stirred and slid her hand up to meet his, kissing his palm as she did so. He pulled his hand away, not wanting her to believe he was someone else, and she opened her eyes in response.

“Byron!” she exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Aye?”

“Where be me husband?” she demanded.

“He is not here, me Lady,” Byron answered, lowering his eyes to the floor. This time ‘twas he who could not look into her eyes.

“How did I get here?” she questioned, looking around at her surroundings.

“Ye fainted me Lady. I carried you here.” He remained still and unyielding, not wanting to catch a glimpse of her eyes yet again, for fear he would not be able to pull away.

“Byron, look at me,” she demanded. Byron obeyed and slowly turned his head up to look at her. “Thank you, me ‘champion’,” she said.

Without warning, Scarlet leaned up to kiss Byron’s unsuspecting lips. Byron could do naught but return the kiss, for fear of disrespecting his mistress. Byron wanted to break away from this dangerous liaison but something held him back. ‘Twas Scarlet who ended what she had begun.

“Nay!” she said, pushing him away from her. “This should not be!”

“But me Lady,” Byron pleaded innocently.

“Nay!” she returned sternly. “’Tis naught more than mystical fancy!”

“I ashore ye, me Lady, ‘tis no mysticism here, but not pure love neither.”

“Love?” she questioned. “What care ye for love? Ye who would claim to be *any* lass’ champion in order to bed her! Ye know naught of love!”

“Me Lady, I have loved more that life itself!” Byron countered.

“And who be this so-called love?” she questioned.

“I—I cannot say,” he stammered. “Forgive me, me Lady, but I—I have other tasks at hand to attend to.” Byron quickly got up from where he sat, bowed once, and left the bedchamber without another word.

\* \* \* \*

Britney had no time to steal away into the library that day. From the moment she stepped foot onto Locerian grounds, she was whisked into the hands of fellow maids. Her tattered clothes were taken away, her body was cleaned, and a fresh new bodice was cleaned for her to don.

“Ye look lovely, me lass,” Sera commented, making her twirl around where she stood. All the other maids stood there watching her, scrutinizing her every move.

“Um, Sera, if you are finished, may I excuse meself?” Britney asked, wanting to get away from the situation.

“Nay, Britney, you are to stay here, with us. Me Laird has proclaimed a feast in yer honor this evening so we must prepare for yer grand entrance!” Sera exclaimed.

Britney sighed once but ne’er complained or asked to leave again. She was a prisoner among these women, not a friend, and would remain so until she could find a way to disappear. If only she had cast a spell over Byron when she had the chance. Then, he would be under her command, and he would do as she asked.

“I need to speak with Britney!” a masculine voice with a heavy Scottish tongue broke her thought. Britney turned and came face to face with the Laird of Locera.

“Me Laird, what be ye want with me?” Britney answered, not looking into his eyes.

“Leave us!” he commanded the other maids. Without saying a word, they all bowed and left the room.

“What do ye want?” Britney spat as soon as the door was shut behind the last maid.

“Britney, I know what you are and why ye’ve come back to Locera!” his rage overcame him.

“What are ye talking about, me Laird?” she questioned, biting her lower lip.

“I saw the same look of yer eyes when me sister returned to Locera many years ago!”

“What?!” Britney exclaimed, stumbling backwards.

“You are the same as me sister—a sorceress out to get revenge against me wife!” With a lunge, his powerful arm cracked a slap across her face, causing her to fall to the floor and cry out in pain. When she finally looked at him, Algernon was no longer there and Eric stood in his place.

“Eric, how did you--?” she exclaimed.



“Quite easily actually!” he commented. “’Twas easy enough to copy an exact image of ‘his-high-and-mighty’ and enter the fortress! And ye being the li’l fool that you are, ye fell for the trick of mirages once again!” Eric’s laugh was harsh and painful, almost unbearable for Britney to hear.

There was a knock at the door and a shout from the other side; Eric was gone. Britney tried to stand but found she was too weak. She finally crawled to the door, unlocked and opened it, and collapsed into the arms of whomever was there at the door.

“Britney, what has happened?!” exclaimed a female voice. Britney looked up, tears staining her eyes, and was caught by surprise.

“Scarlet!” she said.

“What has happened? And why ye be cryin’?” she asked her, bringing her to her feet.

A tiny voice whispered into Britney’s ear, “If ye tell her, ye will pay! If she finds out yer plans, ye will die!”

“’Tis naught, me Lady. I—I just stumbled and hit me foot,” she replied and lowered her head to face the floor.

“Are ye sure?” Scarlet questioned, suspiciously.

“Aye, that I am,” Britney said, not wanting her to see the fear in her eyes.

“Aright, Britney, I believe you. Now, before I leave, I have one more question for you,” she said.

“Aye?”

“Where be the gemstones?!” Scarlet demanded flatly.

## Chapter 5:

Byron hated the situation he was in. He was supposed to be on a quest for the Lady of Locera, with the others, yet he was forced to remain behind. He alone wished to be the Lady's champion, yet he knew he had already silently proclaimed himself the champion of another. As he left Scarlet's bedchamber he wandered the corridors of the fortress remembering back to the day when he was a knight fighting in tournaments. There was one day in particular that stood out in his mind...

'Twas a glorious spring day when he was but a score and five. The sun shone brightly overhead, and the entire village came to view the jousting that was to take place, even the young maid he had his eyes on for quite some time. He had caught a glimpse of this fairy-child but once, before 'twas his turn to joust. Her hair, golden with a touch of red, was tied back loosely with a blue ribbon; her body was fitted into a bodice that expressed every curve.

He had caught her eye, yes, how it twinkled in the sun! He had approached her with the essence of appeal and when he stood close, her beauty nearly took his breath away. They spoke quietly to each other among the shadows, careful to make certain no one saw or suspected their rendezvous. He had accepted from her a token of affection, a symbol of their attraction, which he fastened under his armor before his joust. By this action, Byron had fought for her and her alone...

He was awakened from his daydream with a very clear realization in his mind—he still had possession of that trinket, a lace-fabric handkerchief, kept tucked away in his bedchamber. He quickly raced to his bedchamber only to be caught by surprise. Someone, he heard from behind the door, was rummaging through his belongings.

He opened the door and drew his sword, ready to strike. What awaited him on the other side of the door shocked Byron completely. Before him stood a man a little younger than he, searching his room for something. The latter spoke first.

“Ye have it, do ye not?!” he shouted. “Where be it?!”

“I have what? What be ye looking for?” Byron answered.

“The handkerchief! The handkerchief!” the younger man shouted, throwing his arms up in disgust.

“First of all, how did ye get into me room? Secondly, what on earth would ye want with a handkerchief?!”

“The handkerchief given you by yer lady the day of yer tournament, some five years past! That handkerchief was not hers to give!” the figure said.

“What do ye mean? Who are you?” Byron countered.

“Forgive me, sire, let me introduce meself,” he said, more with a softer tone, but with a hit of a sinister laugh. “The name be Eric,” he added, bowing with the highest grace.

“Are ye one of the servant boys?” Byron asked.

“Nay! I am engaged to one of the ladies,” Eric lied.

“Oh?” Byron questioned. “And who be the lucky lass?”

“Her name cannot be revealed. But I am afraid ye hold her token in yer possession.”

“You, sir, are invading me bedchamber!” Byron exclaimed, his impatience growing. “Kindly remove yerself or I will be forced to remove ye meself!” he stated.

“Not until I get what I came for!” Eric retorted.

“What be going on her?!” asked a simple feminine voice. Both men looked up at who the voice belonged to.

“Britney!” Byron exclaimed, shocked at who stood before him. Britney could hold her sorrow no longer and collapsed into his arms, tears already streaming down her cheeks. “Britney, what be wrong?”

“Byron, ye be the only one left I can turn to,” she wept, unaware of the presence behind Byron.

“Tell me, Princess, what be wrong?” At the sound of his precious nickname, Eric gave a start. He knew Byron could easily be his demise and needed a plan of action, and quickly. He quietly eased his way into the shadows, listening intently to their words.

“’Tis Scarlet! She claims that I be the one who stole her precious gemstones! She threatened to have me executed if I did not hand them over to her!” she exclaimed.

“And this be not true?” questioned Eric, moving away from the shadows.

“Eric!” Britney said, moving closer to Byron.

“Ye know this man?” Byron asked.

“Aye, that I do. He is—he is me--,” she stuttered.

“Her betrothed, sire,” Eric finished her sentence.

Britney’s eyes became wide with fear. She knew from the gleam in his eyes that Eric would surely raise a hand against her if she did not comply. She slowly lowered her head and stepped away from Byron. She refused to see the look of confusion and hate on his face but she could still feel him watching her every move.

“Aye, that I am,” Britney said solemnly not raising her head.

Byron could not take another word. “Get out of me bedchamber, both of you, get out!”

Eric brushed past Britney, a smile upon his face, and walked out of the room. Britney attempted to leave but Byron caught her arm in a firm grasp. She lifted her head and glanced back at the sternest eyes she had ever seen.

“Britney, why? Why did ye not tell me?!” he asked, clearly hurt by Eric’s lies.

“Tell ye what?” she countered.

“That ye be betrothed to that man! That yer token of love was naught more than another man’s trinket for his own love!”

“Nay, Byron, that be not true! There be nothing between us, not even a betrothal!” Britney said, choosing her words carefully.

“Lies!” Byron spat. “Why did ye give me that handkerchief if it belonged to another?!”

“Nay, it did not! That handkerchief belonged to me and no other! What Eric may say is nothing but lies!” she tried to protest, unsuccessfully.

“Nay, ye lied to me from the very beginning! Ye were betrothed to that man even before that tournament day! Now, get out of me sight!” he bellowed. Britney broke into tears once again and raced out of the room.

Byron walked over to the trunk that lay at the foot of his bed. Inside, he took out a single rectangular, wooden box. Carved into the top was his clan’s emblem, a shield with a crossbow and two slithering serpents intertwining around them both. He sat down at the foot of the bed and slowly opened the box, hands shaking all the while. Inside the box lay a single piece of fabric. He took it out of the box and opened it in his palm. The color was a pale pink, and as Byron had recalled, the fair texture of the lass’s skin. The lettering of her name, as well as the lace that trimmed it, was of the reddest hue, much like that of her lips.

How could she have hurt him so? He had left her the day of the tournament feeling flighty. Not only did he win his joust, but he had won the heart of a beautiful Scottish “Princess”. Or had he? Had someone else also won her before he claimed her, or was this some trick of fancy? This Eric character would indeed have to be questioned.

## Chapter 6:

As soon as Britney ran from the room, she was caught by surprise when someone reached out, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her into a room. Another hand was clamped over her mouth so she could not scream or alarm anyone passing by. She tried to struggle against her capturer yet 'twas impossible for her to free herself.

“Britney, 'twould not pay for ye to struggle,” the voice said into her ear. “Listen to me and listen well!” the figure demanded. “What did me sister say to you about the gemstones?”

“Eric, please,” she tried to plead.

“Do not beg, Britney, 'twould do you no good! Tell me what she said and remember this, yer life be at stake!”

“She—she demanded to know where I hid the gemstones and would not rest until they were brought back to her. She acted as if she knew I had stolen them, as if someone had told her!”

“'Tis quite possible she found out in a dream,” Eric replied, letting loose his grip on her arm and turning her around to face his sly smile.

“What do ye mean ‘a dream’?” she questioned.

“A vision, a prophecy! Mayhaps somehow someone told her ye had the gemstones,” he answered her.

“Perhaps,” she concluded.

“What else did she say?” he asked, ignoring her bewildered look.

“She asked me if there be anyone else who knows about the gems and what me plan was to do with them,” she answered solemnly, bowing her head.

“Britney!” she heard her name being called outside the door. She could not hide fast enough before the door was opened and Scarlet stood in the doorway. Her face became distraught as her eyes shot past her lady-in-waiting to her brother. “Eric!” she exclaimed. “But 'tis cannot be! Then—then Britney spoke the truth! Ye be alive!”

“Aye, me sister! I live and the Sorceress' power lives within me!” Eric shouted as he stretched out his hand and threw a bolt of lightning at her heart, sending her backwards onto the floor.

Britney screamed and hid behind the bed. Scarlet tried to move but was paralyzed where she lay, the bolt weakening her muscles greatly. Byron was the first to arrive after he heard the scream and quickly helped Scarlet to her feet. Catching Britney's eye before he spoke, Byron turned violently towards Eric.

“What is the meaning of this!” he demanded.

“Whatever do you mean, sire?” Eric said, in the gentlest of voices.

Without answering him, Byron turned to face Scarlet. "Are ye aright, me Lady?"

"Aye, just a bit of a shock, 'tis all," she replied.

"What be going on here?! Scarlet, are ye hurt?" Algernon bellowed, racing to his beloved's side, cradling her in his arms. 'Twas the first time in what seemed like years that Algernon had laid a hand upon her.

"Algernon?" she said weakly, looking up into the calm storm she had remembered.

"Aye, me darlin', 'tis I," he replied, lifting her up into his arms.

"Britney, are you aright?" Byron asked, turning his attention back to her.

Without answering him she came out of her hiding place and walked towards him. Without warning, Eric grabbed her arm and pointed the tip of a dagger to her throat. Britney winced and tightly shut her eyes, for fear of catching sight of any blood.

"Let her go Eric!"

"Not a chance, Byron, she be mine! Too bad this time yer knight in shining armor cannot save you!" he said into Britney's ear.

In a flash of light more blinding than before, Eric and Britney both disappeared. Algernon held Scarlet close to him, trying to shield his eyes. Byron hid his eyes behind his arm, drawing his sword with the other.

"Byron, what be going on?!" Algernon demanded, carefully standing his wife on her feet.

"Let me try to explain," he stammered.

"Nay, Byron, let me explain," Scarlet intervened.

"But, me Lady," Byron pleaded.

"Nay! Algernon listen to me. Me brother be still alive! He has lived and breathed off of yer sister's power for many years. Now he has come here to avenge her death, against me!"

"And where does Britney fit into yer story?" Byron asked.

"She be the one who stole the gemstones that belonged to yer sister, Algernon. He be using her to find the spells he needs to gain the true power of the gems! Do ye not see! The answers have been here all along!" Scarlet shouted, racing towards the library. Following in close pursuit were Byron and Algernon, swords outstretched, ready for anything.

When the doors to the library were finally flung open, Scarlet was caught by surprise. Both Eric and Britney were caught in the act of gathering the ancient scrolls Scarlet had been studying the other day.

"You be too late, me sister!" Eric shouted. "The gems be mine and now the scrolls be mine too!"

“No!” Scarlet shouted, racing after them. In another flash of light, both disappeared, leaving Scarlet on her knees, tears filling her eyes. “No!” she repeated.

Algernon raced to her side, gathering her up in his arms and letting her cry until she could cry no more. He could not stand to see his wife so, and he knew what had to be done.

“Byron,” he said finally. “Round up yer men. Find our two stowaways and bring them here!” He looked down at Scarlet and quickly added, “Make sure the scrolls as well as the gems are returned to Locera at once!”

“Aye, Captain!” Byron said, bowing and heading for the door.

“Do not worry, me love,” he soothed. “Yer answers will be found, I will make sure of it!” he said, though his smile revealed he had other plans for her precious gems.

\* \* \* \*

“Why did ye tell Byron we were betrothed?!” Britney exclaimed, after she and Eric had escaped Locera and made their way undetected back to the cottage.

“I had no choice, Britney. ‘Twas for yer own good! If yer beloved Byron suspected foul play, we would have both been executed for treason!” Eric declared, carefully spreading the scrolls out on the floor.

“Whatever ye be doing?” she asked inquisitively.

“Nothing!” he answered, quickly covering the scrolls. “‘Tis not for yer eyes to see!”

“Fine!” she pouted like a child and walked away from him.

Without another word, Eric threw himself headlong into reading, reciting, and studying the scrolls. He neither looked at Britney nor turned his head to acknowledge her presence in the room. He worked well into the evening hours, only stopping once to light a candle or two. When he finally decided to finish for the evening, he lifted his head and discovered Britney was nowhere to be found.

“Damn that lass! Where has she run off to now?”

He searched the entire cottage, room by room, but Britney was not there. He knew she could not have gone far because the woods were thick and her bodice would easily be caught in the brush. He searched the entire grounds for Britney, but she was not there either. A rustle in the trees to his left made him turn around. There Britney stood, a strong arm around her waist and a dagger to her throat.

“Let her go!” Eric shouted, shining a candle up so he could see more clearly.

“Not a chance Eric! Ye promised me me reward!” the figure said.

“I said I’d be giving you a reward, but ‘tis not her!” Eric retorted.

“Well too bad for you! I have just taken me reward by force, and I am not about to give her up!”

“Could we not make an arrangement or an even exchange, so to speak?” Eric pleaded.

“No money in all of Scotland could keep me from taking her!” the figure replied.

“Then what be yer purpose for her, old friend?”

“Friend I am not! Ye hired me to kill yer sister! That be no friend indeed! And furthermore, what happens to this lass be no concern of yers!”

“Be reasonable, Connor! Do ye honestly think I be willing to give her up without a fight?!” Eric said, drawing his sword from his waist.

“Please, Eric, I do not wish to fight you. I only came for me reward.”

“Yer not going anywhere until an agreement can be made!” Eric shouted into the darkness.

“Eric, please, I am not willing to fight you! For now, or until I return to speak of agreements, yer wee fairy comes with me!” He jumped swiftly onto his stallion and quickly picked Britney up, placing her in front of him on the saddle.

“Let me go!” Britney shouted as they rode off into the night. Eric was left to ponder how he was going to get this valuable “jewel” back.

“Who are you?!” Britney squirmed.

“Do not worry, me lass. I am taking you to me Captain.”

“Captain who?”

“Captain Byron of course,” Connor replied.

Britney was taken aback at the mention of his name. “I thought ye worked for Eric?” she questioned.

“I did until I finally turned meself in to me Laird. I have been working off me debt as a spy ever since,” Connor said.

“Oh. So, where ye be taking me now?”

“Captain Byron has plans for you!” Connor said with a soft chuckle. Then he added, “But not until the morning hours!”



## Chapter 7:

“No! Let me go!” Scarlet shouted as she was pulled to her feet by two guards.

“’Tis for yer own good, me lass,” Algernon replied as he snapped his fingers, ordering the guards to hold her.

“But why, whatever have I done?” Scarlet replied, almost in tears.

“Ye must be sheltered from yerself!” Algernon stated. “Bring her to the dungeons before she plagues our fortress with more of her magic!”

“But Algernon--!”

“No more, Scarlet! Ye have been too involved in this ‘search’ that ye’ve neglected yer duties as Lady of Locera! Until ye can reason and stop continuing with these answers ye seek, you will remain in the dungeons!”

“Algernon, please,” Scarlet begged. “’Tis not magic at all! I just wish to find me brother!”

“And find him we will! He will be brought here and he will be executed for treason as was me sister’s sentence! The scrolls will be burned and yer precious gems will be destroyed!”

“No, Algernon, please! Ye do not know the power they hold! I must speak with me brother in person! I must know the secret of the gems!” she exclaimed, whilst her body was dragged from the library. “Algernon!”

“Captain?!” a soldier burst into the library out of breath and exasperated.

“Aye, report at once!” Algernon demanded.

“Byron has sent word he has found Britney but there be no sign of Eric,” he commented.

“Excellent! Continue the search for Eric,” he commanded. “He must be brought here dead or alive! Preferably alive, for ‘twill be so much better to watch him hang!”

“Aye, Captain!” The soldier saluted and was gone.

Algernon was left alone in the library. He began to pick up the remaining volumes that lay on the floor and place them back on the shelves. One volume in particular caught his eye: a maroon-colored cover with no words, pages worn from age that practically crumbled in his hands.

As he flipped slowly and carefully through the pages, he felt a gust of wind billow from behind him, causing him to drop the book to the floor. The pages began to turn of their own accord, one by one, until they finally stopped. Algernon looked down at the book and the picture that stared back at him was none other that...

“Scarlet’s amulet,” he heard a voice behind him say. Algernon whirled around and came face to face with his arch nemesis.

“Melinda!” he exclaimed in absolute horror.

“In the flesh, Brother! Ye did not think you could kill me that easily, did you? ‘Tis a shame ye had put all yer faith in yer beloved whore to end me life! By the way,” she added purposefully, “where be yer, wife I presume, now?”

“I have locked her away and thrown away the key!” he replied.

“Awe, what a pity she has escaped,” Melinda replied.

“What?! But how can that be?! I just had me guards bring her down to the dungeons!”

“Aye, that ye did. But ye do not believe that I would let them keep her there do you?!”

“Whatever have ye done to her, Melinda?!” he demanded.

“Oh, she is good hands, I assure you! But let me warn you here and now, if I do not receive me just reward I ask for, ye will ne’er see yer beloved Scarlet again!”

“I will give naught to you, Melinda!” Algernon declared.

“Suit yerself, Brother! But do not come looking for yer bride—ye will not find her!” With a burst of laughter and a blaze of light, Melinda was gone.

“No!” shouted Algernon, knowing full well his options.

If he rounded the clan and formed an army to hunt the Sorceress down, she would surely place Scarlet in the way, using her as bait. If he opted to face Melinda alone, he could save Scarlet but he himself may not live to see her escape. He knew, as a honorable knight, he would risk his own life for his lady fair, but then Melinda would still retain her power and might very well use Scarlet as a slave, bowing to her every whim.

Nay! He would ne’er let the Sorceress lay a finger on his beloved Scarlet. He needed to form an army, and a strong one at that, one that could withstand her evil powers. Yet one more fleeting thought intoxicated his mind—he had sent his four best knights on his Lady’s quest. If Melinda somehow knew of their whereabouts, she would surely destroy each and every one!

\* \* \* \*

“Let me go!” Britney shouted, trying to escape the clutches of Byron’s men. She had fallen asleep in Connor’s arms during the ride back and did not awaken until the following morning, when Byron’s men brutally aroused her from her slumber.

“Let her be!” Byron demanded his men. At once his men acknowledged his authority and stepped away from Britney. “Well, whatever have we here?” he asked mockingly.

“Byron, please, have mercy on me!” she sobbed.

“Mercy?” he chuckled. “Ye want mercy from a man who be not worthy of yer love?! Who gave his heart to a Scottish lass he believed to be pure in spirit?! Yet, ho, before him stands a Scottish wench,

a whore, who let him be fooled by her kindred spirit, let him believe she could love!” A burst of laughter came from every mouth of Byron’s men, including their Captain.

“Byron, please, I do love--!”

“Ye love naught, least of all me! Yer love for power and the black arts has overpowered and intoxicated yer mind, making yer heart grow cold and yer blood run fierce! ‘Twill be so much enjoyment to see ye pay for the crimes ye have committed!” he bellowed.

“No!” she cried out, tears already flowing down her cheeks. “Byron, please believe me! I have loved and do love more than anyone has been known to give!”

With a force he ne’er intended to use, Byron slapped Britney clear across her face, causing her to fall down to the ground, crying out in pain. Byron mumbled under his breath and stormed off, leaving her to cry away her pain.

“Captain?” a shy voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Aye, Connor, what is it?” Byron asked, not looking up but rather away, towards the horizons.

“May I offer some words of wisdom, sire?”

“Aye, but I do not think they will help,” Byron confided.

“Ye love her, do ye not?” Connor questioned.

“Aye, that I do, Connor,” he admitted sadly.

“Then let her go,” he said.

“Whatever do ye mean?”

“Let her go, sire. If ‘twas meant to be love, she will come back,” he concluded.

“I hope you are right, Connor, I hope you are right,” Byron said, looking over at Britney, sitting on the ground, weeping, with her knees pulled up to her chest.

\* \* \* \*

“Let me go, Brother!” Scarlet shouted, her arms bound behind her, as she faced the thrown room from where Eric sat. She had somehow been freed from one capturer only to be captured by another.

“On the contrary, Scarlet! ‘Tis yer new home! Welcome to Castle Baroche!” Eric said, presenting the great hall with his arm.

“I have ne’er heard of this place! Why did Papa ne’er tell us tales about it?” she questioned, surveying the room with her eyes.

“Because it has ne’er been seen!” he commented. “‘Twould seem that this castle has been erected in yer honor!”

“My honor?! But ‘tis not me home! I be the Lady of Locera! ‘Twas me home for many years and will be for many more!” Scarlet argued.

“Nay, ye be wrong, me sister! Castle Baroche be yer home now! Do not expect to escape from its walls or to have yer beloved Algernon come to yer rescue! He be in good hands, I assure you!” he chuckled to himself.

“Whatever have ye done to me husband?” she demanded.

“Do not worry too much for yer love. Melinda will take good care of him.”

“The Sorceress?!” she exclaimed. “But I thought she be dead! I killed her meself!”

“Oh, but ye be wrong again, me sister! By the use of the knowledge from the scrolls, I have brought her power back to her, breathing life back into her body! Now, her blood runs thick and fierce, rejuvenated by the powers of the gems!”

“No!” Scarlet shouted, trying to free herself from the ropes that had begun to cut into her wrists. “She will perish, mark me words! She *will* be destroyed, as will the gemstones that harvest her power!”

“On the contrary, Scarlet!” her brother countered. “Ye will perish long before ye see the Sorceress die! But,” he quickly added to his threat, “not before ye see the greatest Sorceress and Sorcerer concur all of Scotland! Take her away!” he commanded his guards.

“No, Eric, please! Ye cannot do this to me!” she begged as two guards, both heavily armed, hauled her away.

“Eric!” a feminine voice bellowed, causing an enormous echo to fill the great hall of the castle.

“Aye, me lady?” he bowed, low and graceful.

“Prepare the dungeons for four new occupants!”

“Who be these prisoners, me lady?” Eric questioned.

“They be four lowly knights, bearing the shield of the Fortress of Locera,” she smiled. “One was captured mumbling something about his Lady’s quest. ‘Twould be yer best benefit to question that one,” the Sorceress demanded. Then she added, “If he gives ye trouble, kill him!”

## Chapter 8:

Algernon's eyes glared fierce and furious as he called his clan together early the following morn. The calm seas of his eyes blew a storm that no clansman had ever seen before. His motif for the fire in his eyes was not the rescue of his lady fair but the ultimate destruction of the Sorceress and her power. He knew once the gemstones and the scrolls were gone, her power would be reduced to naught, and his lady fair would be returned to him. She would no longer fancy to find answers that did not exist and focus more on her life at Locera, and their life together.

"Captain?" His thoughts were interrupted when his commander in chief entered the great hall and kneeled before the throne.

"Aye, what is it?" he asked sternly.

"We have been informed by a messenger of the Sorceress that all four of our best knights are being held for ransom. She holds them in her own fortress dungeons, me Laird."

"Her own fortress?!" he bellowed. "Wherever did she gain a fortress?!"

"I do not know but I have heard she resides in a Castle Baroche," Byron said, rising up to face his Laird.

"No! 'Tis cannot be!" Algernon exclaimed, almost leaping from his throne.

"Ye know of this place, Captain?" Byron questioned.

"Aye, that I do! But I only thought it existed in fanciful minstrel's tales!"

"Me Laird?"

"Byron, round up the clan immediately! If this castle be the one I have heard of, it alone can harvest powers greater than any Scotsman has ever seen!"

"Aye, me Laird," Byron bowed once and exited the great hall. Algernon was about to leave when a guard came in and bowed in front of him.

"Ah, Connor, rise and report."

"We—we have a—a prisoner, me Laird," he stuttered.

"Who be this captive?" Algernon questioned.

"She be Britney, me Laird," he answered.

"Excellent!" Algernon hissed. "Bring her here so that I may look upon her pitiful face!" he commanded.

"Aye, me Laird," Connor said signaling another guard.

Britney was pushed forcefully into the great hall where she dropped to her knees and hung her head in shame. Her clothes had been reduced to rags and her body bruised and dirty from the trek to the

fortress, which she had made on foot. Because Byron had refused her plea for mercy, she was forced to walk instead of ride.

“Please, me Laird, have mercy on me!” she pleaded.

“Whyever should I give you mercy, me lass?” Algernon asked. “Ye have been a servant lass at Locera for many years, aye?”

“Aye, me Laird,” she whispered.

“And when Scarlet became the Lady of Locera I ne’er argued when she chose you as her lady-in-waiting, aye?”

“Aye,” she sobbed.

“Britney, look at me,” Algernon demanded and Britney quickly obeyed. “Let me ask you one question.”

“Aye, me Laird?”

“Whatever compelled you to steal the gemstones from yer Lady?”

“I—I have no use for the gemstones, me Laird,” Britney stuttered nervously.

“Ye lie!” Algernon shouted, pounding his fist down against the throne, causing Britney to jump back. “Ye intended to give them to a sorcerer who could very well eradicate yer very existence!” he accused, pointing a threatening finger at her.

“Nay! I swear to you on me life! I ne’er intended to give Eric anything!”

“Ye lie again!” a voice shouted from behind her, causing both to turn in surprise.

“Byron!” Britney gasped.

“Ye lie, Britney!” he repeated.

“Nay! Byron, ye know I cannot lie about something that be not true!”

“Algernon, do not tell me ye believe this lying wench!” Byron exclaimed.

“Nay, I do not!” Algernon answered.

“But—but!” Britney tried to protest.

“But naught!” Byron argued. “You are a traitor to this clan! Ye should hang from the gallows for yer crimes!” he exclaimed viciously.

Britney could not believe her ears. Her one true love, the man she thought loved in return, was sentencing her to death. Yet she did not care. If she was to die, she would die alone for their love had also died some time ago. She could not bear her sorrow any longer and burst into tears, dropping heavily to her knees and weeping in defeat. Byron could bear the pain in his heart no longer and finally pivoted and left the great hall.

“Britney,” Algernon said in a more calmer tone.

“Nay!” she shouted. “Ye do not believe me words, Scarlet does not believe me words, and now me own love does not believe me words! If I am to be sentenced to death, then so be it, for I have surely died already!” she cried.

“Who be yer love?” Algernon questioned. Britney bet her lip for she knew she had let her emotions get the best of her and let her tongue slip.

“I—I cannot say,” she stammered.

“You are in no position to not speak! Now, answer me question! Who be yer love?” he bellowed.

“Byron, me Laird! Byron be me love!” she sobbed.

“Nay, ‘tis cannot be!” he exclaimed in shock. “Ye cannot love a man who treats women like whores and cares for them not! Ye must have mistaken love with lust.”

“Nay, I have not! I loved Byron with all me heart! But now all be lost, all be gone!” Britney sobbed. “He had loved in return, yet he loves not now! His blood runs cold and wicked, blinded by fury and hate! Eric be the evil one, not I, and yet Byron believes me not! ‘Tis why I say I have already died. The loss of a great love be more powerful than death itself!”

“I see,” Algernon answered, knowing full well how she felt. “Connor!” he shouted.

“Aye, me Laird?”

“Bring Britney down to the dungeon-room. We cannot have her escape to try to warn her sweet Eric!” he mocked. Connor snapped his fingers and obediently a guard took Britney by the arm and took her away.

“No, Algernon, please! Ye cannot do this to me! I am telling the truth!”

Byron slowly stepped forward from the shadows. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair as he approached Algernon. When he finally reached his captain, he was practically in tears. He could not bear the weight on his heart any more and knew Algernon sensed it. ‘Twould be in his best benefit to forget her and think only of war and battles. Yet, for some reason, he could not keep his mind from wandering back to his “Scottish Princess”...

## Chapter 9:

“Scarlet, ye know why I have brought you to me home, do ye not?” the Sorceress said the evening of her capture.

“Nay,” Scarlet replied solemnly. For the second time in her life, she was a prisoner without any chance of escape. This time, instead of her father, another man in her life must come to her aid.

“I have brought you here because you have something I want. Now, ye can give it to me peacefully, or ye can die trying to escape. ‘Tis yer choice and yers alone!”

“Ye do not leave me much of a choice, eh?” Scarlet tried to make light of the subject at hand.

“Do not toy with me, whore! ‘Tis what you are, ye know. Naught but me brother’s whore!” she countered, her words piercing through Scarlet’s ears.

“I will ne’er give you what ye wish! Unless you tell me for what purpose ye have for it!”

“And why should I tell you what me purpose be! ‘Tis for me to know and me alone! Consider yer precious ‘quest’ over, Scarlet!”

“How can it be over? The answers be here, within these walls!”

“Aye, that they are!” Melinda commented. “And I will make you an offer that ye may not wish to refuse!”

“What be this offer?” Scarlet challenged, defiantly.

“If you give me yer amulet, I will gladly give you the scrolls. That is what you wish for, is it not?” the Sorceress glared at her.

“I will *not* give you me amulet! ‘Tis an heirloom that has been in me family for generations!” Scarlet shouted back.

“Ye will be sorry you have made the wrong choice!” Melinda spat.

“Ye cannot hurt me!” Scarlet challenged.

“I can make ye suffer more than you have ever suffered before!”

“I have been put through more pain than anyone could ever wish upon someone else!”

“Ye have lost loved ones, aye, but the pain you will suffer now will overpower that pain tenfold!”

Scarlet could challenge the Sorceress no longer. Instead of using her mouth as her defense, this time she needed to use her head. She could not rely on Algernon to save her—she did not even know if he knew she was gone. At that moment, he was also dead to her. For the fourth time in her life, she was completely on her own.

“I see you favor silence over argument, Scarlet. ‘Twould be a pity, for I would love to hear yer screams!” Melinda mused.



“You will hear naught from me, least of all me screams!”

“Suit yerself! But I will still get yer precious heirloom and you will still be dead!”

Melinda laughed loudly and pivoted around on her heels. Scarlet was left down in the dungeons, until someone would come to her rescue, or until Melinda decided to kill her. And yet, the pain she felt in her heart ran deeper than any scar Melinda could cut. Her Algernon was lost to her and she barely knew if he knew if she was still alive.

\* \* \* \*

“Byron, please!” Britney begged from behind the bars of her cell that evening.

“I will not let you go, if that be what ye ask of me!” Byron said sternly.

“Nay, I do not wish to be let free!”

“What? Whyever would ye not want to be free?!” Byron asked, quite confused.

“Even if I be let free, I would still be dead,” Britney concluded.

“Whatever do you mean by these words?”

“Ye ask me what it is that I wish, aye?” she questioned.

“Aye, that I do.”

“I wish for you to admit ye love!” she proclaimed.

“What?!” he exclaimed, the shock clearly expressed on his face.

“Admit to me that ye have loved more than life itself!” Britney shouted, the beginning of tears falling from the corners of her eyes.

“I—I admit naught,” Byron said, turning away from her hurt stare.

“Fine!” she concluded, trying to remain calm. “Then ye have sentenced me to death! Even if I be freed from this prison, me heart will grow cold and I will ne’er love again, for I have been betrayed! I thought ye loved me but I be wrong! Ye have betrayed everything we have shared together since that first tournament day!”

“Ye remember?” Byron asked, turning to look at her. Britney had sat herself down and had buried her head in her hands.

“Of course I remember!” she sobbed. “I gave you me handkerchief!”

“Nay! Ye gave me Eric’s token of *his* love for you!” Byron accused.

“Ye still insist that it be his trinket, yet I tell you the truth! It be mine and mine alone!”

“I am truly sorry I do not believe yer lies!” he mocked.

“Just leave!” she shouted.

“What?!”

“Leave me be! Let me die if I must, but let me die alone!” Britney turned her back on him and wept.

Without saying a word, Byron left the dungeon-room, the sound of Britney’s tears behind him. He ne’er stopped when Algernon called his name from the great hall; he ne’er stopped even when Connor called his name down one of the corridors. He did not stop until he had reached his own bedchamber, locked the door, and collapsed onto his bed, tears falling from his eyes.

### **Part III:**

#### **Chapter 10:**

Algernon could stand it no longer. Every minute that he did not make a plan of action, the Sorceress' power grew stronger. Every minute he waited to attack, meant more time for Melinda to cast her spells. His plan of action, he knew, must be one that would not and could not fall apart at the flick of Melinda's arm.

He called for his best clansmen, aside from the four Melinda had graciously stolen. He told them they were to surround this fortress, this Castle Baroche, until there was not a space left for Melinda to escape. He told them to be prepared for just about anything, from fire to monsters to fire-breathing dragons—there was no telling what Melinda had up her sleeves.

And so on that evening, Algernon rode out to the place that he thought only existed in minstrel's tales. He rode out, on that dark-descending crisp winter's night, to destroy the evils of Scotland and reclaim his Lady Fair. His clan followed in close pursuit, eager for a battle, yet still fearful as to what to expect for Melinda. Yet what they saw just after they reached the ridge overlooking the valley shocked them all, even Algernon.

The castle was indeed in the heart of the valley, where Algernon had often been told it was as a child. Even its outer walls possessed a darkness about them, their bricks a heavy shade of gray. Four large towers stretched high into the sky, which too seemed to be covered in a thick blanket of mist. Sitting atop each tower were four gargoyle statues, each with its own menacing look to it, ready to attack any trespassers.

Guarding the front gates were two cement statues of great hounds, almost as menacing as the gargoyles. They too seemed as though they could come alive at a moment's notice. Algernon spoke quietly to his chief in command, who seemed more distant today than in any other battle.

“Byron!” Algernon repeated sharply.

“Aye?” Byron shook himself out of his trance, his mind obviously on other things.

“Byron, pay attention! If ye misunderstand me order, it could mean the lives of yer clansmen!”

“I am sorry. ‘Tis just that me mind be somewhere else today,” Byron said solemnly.

“We shall get her back to you safely, as we will also have our Lady back to our homeland safely. Now, pay attention!” Algernon stated.

“Aye, Captain,” Byron replied.

“Now, take half the clan and bring them down into the valley to the west. Make sure that yer men cover the entire south and west walls. I will take the rest and cover the walls to the north and east.

Tell yer men to leave their horses and travel on foot. ‘Twill be less of a chance of being heard,” he ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”

“And, Byron?” Algernon stretched out his arm.

“Aye?”

“Good luck, godspeed, and I will see you when this battle has ended, on either side.” Byron grasped his arm, reassuring his pledge and rode off to instruct his men.

Algernon dismounted and spoke softly to the remaining clansmen. He tried to keep his voice steady and demanding, yet he knew that half of these men would not return from this battle alive. Before he went into battle, he always made the clan speak a silent prayer. After the prayer, he quietly led the clan down into the valley.

\* \* \* \*

“How sweet!” Melinda mused from where she sat atop her throne in the great hall of Castle Baroche. “Me precious brother has decided to attack me fortress and rescue his whore!” she said looking over at Scarlet, who had been led into the hall earlier, and was now chained at her wrists and ankles.

“He *will* come to me rescue!” Scarlet cried, struggling against her bondage.

“But only after he sees me take possession of yer heirloom and you lying dead before me feet!” Melinda retorted, getting up from where she sat and walking over to where her other captive stood.

“And we shall see how much love yer precious Byron has left for you!”

“He has no love for me anymore,” her captive sobbed sadly, lowering her head to face the ground.

“Than I believe he has left ye to die!” Melinda cackled, a sound echoing through the great hall.

“So be it,” her captive whispered, on the brink of tears.

“Have faith, Britney,” Scarlet whispered to her.

“I do not think I gave you permission to speak!” Melinda raised her eyes to Scarlet.

“Do ye think I care whether I have permission or not to speak?!” Scarlet challenged.

Melinda tried to counter her remark but found she could not. She attempted to grab at the amulet tied around her neck, but was caught by surprise. The emerald began to glow bright and sent a shock directly to Melinda’s fingertips, causing her to jump back from Scarlet.

“Ye li’l witch!” she cried out. “Ye shall pay for that! Mark me words well! Ye shall pay dearly!”

Melinda stormed back up to the throne and peered down into what seemed to be a cauldron of sorts. As she peered into the water, she could see Algernon encircling one side of her castle, Byron on

the other. She chuckled slightly to herself as she watched intently as both parties merged silently toward her domain, unbeknownst that she followed their every move.

“Me Lady!” a voice broke her concentrated stare.

“Ah, Eric, just the man I wanted to see!”

“Aye, me Lady? Whatever would ye wish of me?” he questioned.

“Escort yer lovely bride to the grand bedchamber,” she commanded. “I am quite sure ‘twill be a fitting place for ye both!” she smirked.

“Aye, me Lady,” Eric answered, also with a smile on his face, from ear to ear. He went over to Britney and grabbed the chains that bound her wrists. “With pleasure!” he added more quietly than before.

“No!” Britney shouted, struggling without success as Eric pulled her away.

“’Tis a pity yer beloved is not here to save you!” Melinda called after her, laughing all the while.

“Why must ye torture her so?” Scarlet intervened. “’Tis me you want, not her!”

“Quiet whore! I am the Sorceress of Scotland and I will torture whomever I please! Now, how can I torture you? Aye, by making ye watch yer family perish, one by one!”

“But me family has already perished!” Scarlet tried to protest.

“Aye, but ‘twill be so much of an enjoyment to watch them die again!” the Sorceress said as she waved her arm over the cauldron, creating an image above, for all to see.

Scarlet was taken aback by the image she saw. She was again transformed back to the hideous battle in which she lost both mother and brother to the spoils of war. She was again brought back to the pain she felt when she turned around and both bodies were lying limp. The pain in her heart, more unbearable now than before, shot through her body like an arrow immersed in poison.

Melinda watched with joy as Scarlet’s knees grew weak and her body began to lose its strong stance. With a flick of her wrist, the image changed, from the battlefield to the open meadow, with the mountains behind it. She watched as Scarlet forced her eyes to remain open as she watched her sister and her father both die painful deaths.

“Have you had enough, Scarlet?” the Sorceress replied, quite satisfied with her feat of magic.

“Nothing ye may do to me can hurt me!” Scarlet declared defiantly.

“Then I have one more image for you to see, but let me warn you, ‘twill seem too real to believe!”

Melinda flicked her wrist one more time and a new image came into focus. This time the mirage was not of any family member but of Algernon and his clan. All were approaching the castle, silently

creeping towards its walls. With another flick of her wrist, the Sorceress shot a bolt of lightning *into* the image, causing some of Algernon's men to fall out of the way.

Scarlet could not believe her eyes. The last death she would witness would be Algernon's! And one by one, Melinda was slowly killing off his men, right before her very eyes! She struggled now even more against her bondage, but much to no avail. The chains were too tight and began to cut into her wrists, causing blood to trickle down to the floor. Time and time again, the Sorceress would flick her wrists, making another group of clansmen fall the ground, dead.

"Me Lady!" Eric's voice interrupted Melinda's concentration.

Melinda turned her attention to Eric before she spoke. "What be wrong now?! And where be yer 'bride'?" she bellowed.

"'Tis what I wish to speak to you of," he replied, somewhat childishly.

"Whatever is the problem?"

"I do not know exactly how to put this, but--."

"Just tell me!" she shouted.

"Well, when I unlocked her—chains—she—tried to escape out the door. I—grabbed her arm and threw her down onto the bed. She slipped past me, but I—cornered her by the windowsill."

"Get to the point, Eric!" Melinda said sternly, her impatience growing.

"Well, she—fell out of the window," he said solemnly, casting a glance at Scarlet, who gasped in horror.

"Excellent!" the Sorceress hissed. "One less prisoner to worry about!" she said looking at Eric. "Come now, Eric, do not be glum! 'Twould seem ye had a thing for this wench!"

"Nay, I did not!" he protested.

"Good! Now back to destroying--." Melinda's sentence was cut short when the door to the great hall was flung open and her brother stood in its place.

"Good evening, me sister!" Algernon replied.

"Algernon!" Scarlet shouted.

"Eric, take care of her! I will deal with me brother!" Melinda commanded. Without a word, Eric grabbed Scarlet about the waist and hoisted her over his shoulders.

"Put me down!"

"I am truly sorry I must do this, Sister, but I must follow orders," he replied.

"Algernon!" Scarlet shouted.

"Byron!" he replied. "You go after Eric! The rest of the clan and I will take care of Melinda!"

"Aye, Captain!" Byron replied. Then he quickly added, "But what about Britney?"

“Connor will stay with her until help can be reached! Now go!” Without another argument, Byron left in pursuit of Eric.

“Now, Melinda,” Algernon turned his attention to her, “prepare to die one last time!” he said, drawing his sword.

“You are such a fool, Brother! Do ye not know that I have foreseen the future?! Do ye not know that I be not the one who dies this day?!” she shouted, at the same time casting a bolt of electricity towards his men.

## Chapter 11:

“Eric, put me down!” Scarlet shouted, struggling to get free of his grasp.

“Not a chance, Scarlet!” Eric said, racing up the stairs towards one of the towers.

“Eric, put her down!” a masculine voice shouted from behind them.

“Ye’d have to kill me first!” Eric shouted back.

“So be it!” Byron said, slashing the air with his sword. Unfortunately, because of the darkness of the stairwell, he missed entirely and hit nothing but air.

He followed Eric the entire length of the tower, until it opened into a brightly candlelit room. Byron opened the door cautiously and was caught by surprise. Scarlet was chained to the far wall, a piece of cloth covered her eyes, and the tip of a dagger touched her throat. He took one small step into the room, trying not to make Eric flinch his arm.

“Now is this not sweet?” Eric mused. “Me sister’s ‘champion’ has come to her rescue!”

“Let her go, Eric!” Byron stated, ignoring his remark.

“Whyever should I? She has tried to find and steal the secret to which the Sorceress and I feed upon!”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“She wanted and searched long and hard for the secret to the gemstones even when the answers she sought were beneath her nose all this time!” Eric explained.

“What?!” Scarlet exclaimed, but closed her mouth soon after when she felt the dagger tighten at her throat.

“You are in no position to question me, Sister!” Eric said. “Listen to me, and listen well! I have read the scrolls, I have studied them, and they have shown me where the answers ye seek lie!” he continued. As Eric spoke, Byron continued to move closer, sword outstretched, ready to strike again.

“Yer amulet, Scarlet,” he continued, not noticing Byron had closed the distance between them, “can harvest power in itself!” he said, trailing the dagger down her neck towards the charm that hung from its chain.

“But this trinket you wear only contains good power! The scrolls tell us how to change the power from good to evil. Now, if you were clever enough, ye would have had the answers to yer questions! But now, ye will be dead, the scrolls will be mine, and yer amulet will be no ones!” he exclaimed, flicking the dagger outward, causing the chain to break and her amulet to fall to the ground and shatter.

“No!” Scarlet shouted as she heard her gem crash to the floor.



In the blink of an eye more quick than Eric could have anticipated, Byron used that moment to run his blade clear through his body. Eric looked up at Byron, then looked down at the blade. He gurgled once and his body pitched over, dead. Byron leaned down and picked up the dagger that Eric so conveniently dropped on the floor, using it to carefully pick the locks of Scarlet's chains.

Without even an exclamation of gratitude, Scarlet pulled the cloth from her eyes and dropper to her knees, clawing at the pieces of gold and emerald on the floor. Byron could do naught to stop the tears from flowing from her eyes as she clawed at the remaining gems, much to no avail.

"No! Byron, please!" she begged.

"I am truly sorry, me Lady. 'Tis naught I can do."

"No!" she sobbed, as Byron helped her to her feet. "Please!"

"Come, me Lady. Yer brother is dead. 'Tis naught left here but darkness," Byron concluded, leading her away from the room.

\* \* \* \*

Time and time again, Melinda shot her bolts of electricity at Algernon's men. Time and again Melinda would destroy the clan, one by one. Algernon could not stand to see his clan disappear any longer and finally stepped forward.

"Melinda, stop!" he bellowed. "'Tis me ye want, not them! 'Twould be a waste of lives to kill the innocent when all ye want is me!"

"Ye should know, Brother, that I live to destroy the innocent!" she shouted back.

"'Tis high time you learned to take orders other than yer own!" Algernon said, raising his sword above his head ready to strike.

Before Algernon could strike out against his sister, both were caught by surprise. Algernon turned away in disgust as Melinda looked down at her chest, which had begun to bleed. She turned her head to see Scarlet standing before her, her hands still grasping the hilt of the blade.

"Ye li'l witch!" she screamed, easily pulling the blade from her back, and dropping it to the floor. "Do ye not know 'tis not easy to kill me!" Before everyone's watchful eyes, Melinda's scar disappeared. Then, like a flash of lightning, Melinda shot out her wrist at Scarlet, causing her to fall backwards into Byron, who stood behind her.

"No!" Algernon cried out, striking down blindly at Melinda. Melinda, in turn, shot a bolt of lightning at her brother.

Algernon could not move a muscle. He was paralyzed where he lay. He knew he could do naught to stop Melinda's rein of terror this time. 'Twas now up to his beloved wife. Dear god—the shock reached his heart and mind almost too quickly. He had proclaimed he had no wife to love, had no

Lady to care for his fortress. If she should die in any attempt to rid Scotland of its most feared villain he would surely take his own life for not professing his love sooner.

“Melinda, I have killed you once and I will surely kill you again! And this time me brother be not alive to bring ye back!” Scarlet challenged, more defiantly than before.

“Yer words be a challenge that I have yet to see be put into action!” the Sorceress spat. “Do not challenge me unless you are willing to fight back with more than just words!”

“So be it!” Scarlet countered, turning around and grabbing Byron’s sword too quickly for him to protest.

Melinda pulled a large two-handed battle sword from underneath her long black cape, and held it up in front of her. Scarlet crossed Byron’s sword over Melinda’s, ready to begin a battle that would surely leave one of them dead this night. Byron could do naught but help his captain to his feet and watch from afar as the greatest battle in all of Scotland began to unfold before their very eyes.

Time and again, the Sorceress crossed her blade with Scarlet’s, each time with more force than the last. Scarlet could not imagine what she had begun but she knew she could not back down unless she wanted to admit defeat, which most definitely meant death. This time she truly was on her own, and Algernon could do naught to help her.

“Have ye given up, Scarlet? ‘Twould seem that this battle has ended, for ye cannot defeat me!” the Sorceress cackled, placing her blade to Scarlet’s throat after knocking her off-balance.

Scarlet had to think and think quickly. What harvested the Sorceress’ primary power? What were the two main sources for her power? The ancient scrolls and the gemstones of magic! The realization came upon her like a violent storm. Scarlet took one look over at Algernon and Byron and then looked up at Melinda.

“I will ask you again, Scarlet!” the Sorceress repeated, lowering her blade to the floor. “Have ye given up?!”

“Never!” Scarlet shouted back. Without another word, she took off down the corridors of Castle Baroche, searching for the one thing she sought after.

Scarlet raced from room to room, but neither the scrolls nor the gems were found. The Sorceress kept in close pursuit of her but for some reason Melinda did not dare strike out against her—‘Twas as if she toyed with her. Scarlet did not seem to care—she knew she must find the two things that would destroy the Sorceress forever, and fast.

“Whatever is the matter, me dear?” Melinda said, cornering Scarlet down one of the corridors. “Have ye lost yer way?”

Scarlet turned around just in time to see the Sorceress loom in on her. From the corner of her eye, Scarlet saw what she had been looking for all along—in the center of the room to her right lay the ancient scrolls, opened atop a dais. Sitting next to the scrolls, on a square tabletop, were spread the gemstones Scarlet had not laid eyes upon in what seemed like ages. She had to destroy them both and with haste, for she knew not what plans the Sorceress had for them, or even her, for that matter.

“I have not lost me way!” Scarlet said, defiantly raising her head to acknowledge Melinda’s presence. “In actuality, I believe there be something *you* will lose!” she challenged.

Without another word, Scarlet sideswiped one of Melinda’s slashes of her blade and ran for the room, grabbing for the table containing the gems. She heard Melinda gasp but she knew it was too late. The entire table came crashing down to the floor, gemstones and all.

“No!” Melinda shouted, running to try to save her gems from shattering. “No!” she repeated.

Scarlet knew she had one more chance to destroy the Sorceress once and for all. She grabbed a candle and flung it into the dais where the scrolls were laid out, causing the entire ensemble to become engulfed in flames. Scarlet backed away just in time to see the Sorceress’ power collapse. Melinda grabbed blindly at the scrolls, trying to save the one source of her ultimate power.

Scarlet shielded her eyes as the Sorceress’ arms caught fire and spread down to her feet. She watched painfully as Melinda’s body fell to the floor, writhing and convulsing with pain. This time, Scarlet knew, the Sorceress and all her powers would be lost forever and there was no chance of her unfortunate reappearance on the Scottish Highlands again.

## Chapter 12:

Scarlet raced down the corridors and entered the great hall of Castle Baroche one last time, just as night slowly became morn. Her bodice had been turned to rags, her hair was in disarray, and her arms sagged heavily at her sides. She felt more like the cinder girl of the stories of her youth this day than all others.

Byron was the first to approach her when she entered the hall. He neither laid a hand upon her nor spoke a single word but just his presence so near to her brought a warmth to her entire body. He led her silently over to Algernon, who sat, unconscious against the far wall of the great hall.

“Whatever happened to him?” she asked, gently caressing his brow with her hand.

“When ye raced after Melinda, he attempted to go after you but was caught off guard. One of the ceiling boards was loose and came crashing down onto him.”

“We must get him and the rest of the clan out of here!” she exclaimed, just as another ceiling board came down near them. “Before this whole fortress crumbles to pieces before us!” she added, jumping to her feet.

“Aye, me Lady,” Byron said, pulling Algernon to his feet and resting his arm around his shoulders.

“Please,” she begged, looking deep into his eyes, “Call me Scarlet.”

“Aye, Scarlet,” he breathed, almost completely taking her own breath away, making her remember the fleeting liaison between them.

Scarlet shook herself out of her trance and helped Algernon’s clansmen to their feet, one by one. She knew she could not rescue every clan member, especially those that had not survived the wrath of Melinda’s torture, but she tried her best to revive a vast majority. Those that had survived were quickly brought outside the castle gates where Connor and a few others were standing guard.

“How be the others, Connor?” Scarlet asked, presumably taking charge of the situation.

“They be well, me Lady,” he replied.

“Good, now get them out of harm’s way!” she commanded, looking up at the Castle. “This fortress will fall far sooner than we can expect! We must be clear of its walls before it turns to naught but rubble.”

Every able and capable man that could walk on his own was made to walk, run, or escape in some way before the fortress of Castle Baroche collapsed. Scarlet had no time to worry about her husband or even her own life for that matter. What mattered to her now was the lives of her fellow clansmen. When everyone was finally far enough away from the fortress, Scarlet’s body clamored down onto the grassy meadow, as she watched Castle Baroche slowly burn to the ground.

“Scarlet!” a voice called to her, breaking her concentrated stare.

She looked up into Byron’s saddened eyes. In his arms he carried Britney’s limp body. She could still see Britney’s chest rising and falling in short breaths but she knew her fall from the tower had caused severe bodily harm.

“Scarlet,” Byron repeated, “is there naught we can do?”

Scarlet looked up at Britney then looked over at Byron. She tried to restrain her eyes from tearing but all Byron had to do was look at her and he knew what was going through her mind. He cradled Britney close to him, unable to bear any more pain this day. He looked up at Scarlet once, a startled look upon his face, then looked down at Britney.

“Byron?” she whispered softly.

“Aye, me Princess?” he answered, practically reduced to tears.

“Admit to me now ye love,” she breathed.

“I—I,” he stuttered, his arms and legs shaking with fear.

“Please!” Britney breathed in deeply, gasping for air.

Scarlet pressed her palm over Britney’s chest before she spoke. “Byron, her lungs are filling with water! They have been severed by her ribs from the fall! She will not survive this day unless the fluid can be removed!”

“Do we have the capabilities to do so?” Byron asked, very skeptical.

“Nay, Byron, I am afraid we do not,” Scarlet said, looking away.

“Byron, please!” Britney’s voice cut through the silence.

“Aye, Princess, I do love!” he said, holding her close and letting the tears run down his cheeks.

“I love with all me heart and soul!” At his declaration of love, Britney took her last breath of life.

## Epilogue:

The following morn became a solemn one for more than one person. After the fire at Castle Baroche was snuffed by its own accord, Connor and Algernon searched the rubble for any clansmen they could find. Between the two, they recovered a total of twelve bodies, burned or otherwise marred, including the four knights Melinda had kept in her dungeons.

“Scarlet?” Algernon said, moving closer to her.

“Aye?” her response being cold.

“Connor and I, we—we have found yer brother’s body among the rubble,” he said solemnly.

Without answering him, Scarlet got up and walked away from where she sat. She re-sat herself down on a large root of a willow tree nearby, curling her knees up to her chest and resting her head on her knees. Without her consent, Algernon sat beside her and silently stroked her fiery locks with the gentlest of caresses.

“I’m sorry,” he said and kissed her forehead.

Scarlet could not contain her emotions any longer and wept. She wrapped her arms around Algernon and cried. Algernon could do naught but comfort her. She clung to him as if he was the only thing left to hold onto and did not let go until he finally pushed her body away and looked deep into her emerald eyes.

“We will give yer brother a proper Scottish burial, as we will give to the other clansmen that have perished this morn,” he declared.

“What about yer sister?” she asked innocently.

“What about her?” Algernon asked defensively.

Scarlet swallowed hard before she answered. “Will ye be giving her a proper Scottish burial as well?”

“With me sister ‘tis different! She will *not* be buried with the rest, but instead be left for the vultures to feed upon her seared flesh!” he replied.

Scarlet was taken aback by his harsh words but remained silent. She knew she could ne’er question his authority, even if she be the Lady of Locera. Or was she? The thought came fleeting through her mind and shocked her down to her bones. Was she still the Lady of Locera or had Algernon truly banished her from her title?

“Algernon?” she attempted to question sheepishly.

“Aye?” He looked over at her, his eyes still held a storm that Scarlet feared even now.

“Am I still--?” she began but was interrupted when Connor stepped forward.

“Aye, Connor, what is it?” Algernon asked sternly.

“’Tis Byron, me Laird.”

“What of him?”

“He—he cannot seem to part with Britney, me Laird. And he—he refuses to let any of us lay a hand upon her.”

Algernon chuckled softly to himself before he spoke. “So ‘twould seem our gallant knight has a soft heart after all!”

“Mayhaps he truly did love her, me Laird,” Scarlet intervened, breaking his comical slander.

Algernon looked sharply towards her, his eyes no longer held a storm yet somehow there was a slight mist in his sea-green orbs. He regarded her words nonchalantly but somehow noticed a hidden double meaning to them. He pulled her chin up with his fingertips so that he could speak into her eyes, the green gems he had fallen in love with since their first encounter.

“As I you,” he said softly enough for only her ears to hear. “Come, Lady, we must get back to Locera,” he said more boisterously for all to hear. Then he quickly added, “To *our* homeland!” Together they rode, side by side, to Locera, stopping once to kiss their fears away. Scarlet ne’er found the secret she so long sought after and the ashes of the ancient parchment papers were buried with the remains of Castle Baroche.

THE END