

Scarlet

By: Kimberly Belfer

Part I:

Chapter 1:

Scarlet stood in the open meadow, her fiery hair billowing about her face in the midday breeze, as her emerald eyes sparkled in the sun. There was no one around for miles and her only friend that day was the warmth of the sun. She closed her eyes and spun in a full circle, arms outstretched.

A rumbling sound made her stop in her tracks. She looked up and opened her eyes, thinking she would see thunderclouds rolling in from the east. Instead what she saw were horses, at least a dozen or two, racing towards her. The steed charging her was as black as midnight, as was the billowing hair of the rider.

Before she was able to run, she was encompassed in a circle of stallions and riders. Her head was hung low, afraid to look upon the face that watched her now. Slowly, ever so slowly, Scarlet raised her head and a gasp caught in her throat. The leader, she guessed, of this band of knights, blankly stared her down with stormy sea-green eyes.

“Good morrow, me lady,” he said through a husky voice.

“What do you want?” she asked defensively.

“A word me lady.”

“Aye, and what might that word be?”

“For ye to tell me if there be a village nearby.”

“’Tis no village, me laird, not for a few miles.”

“Then there be no one to hear you scream!” In one swoop of his arm, the rider picked her up and placed her upon his steed beside himself. As she struggled to free herself, his grip became tighter about her waist.

“Let me go!” Scarlet shouted.

“Nay, I will not!” he boasted.

“I swear to you, me Papa will find me and when he does, you’ll all be killed!”

“I hardly doubt that, me lady.” He looked down at her as they rode across the meadow and through the forest to the east.

“Why do you say such things?! You know ye cannot win!” She struggled once again to break herself free.

“But, me lady, I already have,” the rider said with a coy smile.

The rider, Algernon, held her about the waist with one hand while holding the reins with the other. 'Twas impossible for her to fight him and he knew it. He was amazed at himself for the choice he had made. It was not very often for a Scottish warrior to take a maiden from her home unless he won the lands under siege. His horse slowed to a trot, as did the horses behind him, as they entered a clearing. Algernon could see how feisty Scarlet was, so his arm remained secure around her waist even when the steeds were stopped to rest.

“We shall stop here for the remainder of the day. ‘Tis the best place to set up camp for the night. On the morrow we will head for the mountains,” Algernon said, pointing to the east.

“Ye will not get away with this!” Scarlet said, challenging him with a defiant stare into his blue-green eyes.

“But me darlin’,” he answered, a sly smile on his face, “’tis like I said before, I already have!”

Chapter 2:

As the other members of his clan set up camp, Algernon watched Scarlet, sitting under an oak tree, with watchful eyes. She looked like a child sitting there, yet her eyes made her look older, more like her two and twenty years. Just thinking of how it felt to hold her in his arms brought a shiver to his spine. She fascinated him but he did not know why.

“Algernon?” one of the clansmen awakened him from his trance.

“Aye? What is it?”

“The evening meal is being prepared. Is the lady going to join us?”

“Prepare it as ye normally would and ask the lady if she would care to join our company. If she is hungry enough, she will dine with us.”

“Aye, sire.”

As supper was being prepared, Scarlet watched the clansmen as they busied themselves with their work. She was amazed at how fascinated she was at seeing them all at work- like a child satisfying her curiosity.

“Me lady, “ a clansman said, breaking her stare, “would ye care to join us for the evening meal?”

“Nay! I am not hungry!”

“Suit yerself, me lady.” The clansman walked away, leaving Scarlet by the tree in awe. Algernon saw her spitefulness towards the clansman and walked over to where she sat.

“Yer not hungry, me lady?”

“Not hungry for *their* kind of food!”

“Perhaps ye would care to join *me* for supper then. If the likeness of me men does not suit you, then perhaps the likeness of me would be more preferable.”

Scarlet considered this before she answered. “I will join you, if I must, but do *not* expect me to eat. I told you before I was not hungry!” He helped her to her feet and looked deep into her emerald eyes.

“Yer eyes sparkle in the moonlight, me lady.”

“Yer tongue may say sweet things but to me ears ‘tis just devil’s words!”

“Yer words are spiteful but there be a sweeter side to you I have yet to find.” His smile revealed to Scarlet what she could expect from such a clansman.

“And never will!” she shouted, storming off towards the tent.

Algernon watched her as she walked, with her head held high, towards his tent. Reds were always believed to be sly, coy foxes at any time. Perhaps she was just toying with him. He followed her into his tent and sat down beside her, taking his food tray into his lap. Neither one spoke a word to each other during the time Algernon ate. It was not until after he finished his meal that he spoke first.

“Ye watch me eat and yet you do not speak.”

“I do not wish to speak to someone so cold as you!” she spat.

“Come now, have ye ne’er met a man wishing to hear yer voice?” he asked with a smile.

Scarlet said nothing but stared at Algernon and wondered whether this clansman had anything sweet to say to her or whether there was not a kind bone in his body. She could not help but wonder where he had heard such things. Never in her entire life had she heard a man challenge her the way he did.

“You are silent, me lady. Have ye found no words to fight me with?” he taunted.

“I do not wish to fight you, me laird.”

“Are *unable* to fight that is!”

“I do *not* wish to fight!” She jumped up, ready to sprint for the opening of the tent.

Algernon grabbed her arm and pulled her down to a sitting position. Her eyes gleamed with fury as she stared him down. He could do naught but stare back into her eyes, wishing to know more of what she thought behind those eyes.

“Ye dare to leave!” he bellowed.

“I leave when I feel fit to leave!”

“Suit yerself, me lady. But do not come crying to me when the fire is snuffed out and you begin to freeze during the night!”

Scarlet considered his words and crossed her arms over her chest. How could she argue when she knew he was right. She was trapped and there was no way she could escape. Algernon caught her by surprise by reaching his hand up unexpectedly to touch the amulet Scarlet had around her neck.

“Where did you get this charm?” he asked, turning it over in his hand.

“’Twas given to me on me twentieth birthday by me mother,” she said, snatching it back. “She said ‘twas given to her when she came of age, and her mother the same.”

“I’ve ne’er seen such a gem before in me life! Emeralds are one of the hardest gemstones to come by, especially when they are surrounded by the purest of gold.”

“Yer fascinated with gemstones, me laird?”

“Only when they are attached to a woman of surpassing beauty such as yerself.” He did not even realize what he had said until after her eyes met his in an awkward stare. “You are beautiful, me lady.”

He pulled her chin towards his before she could protest and kissed her gently upon the lips. Ne’er in her life had Scarlet ever felt a man’s lips upon hers the way she felt them now. This man, who had ne’er seen her before this day, kissed her with such gentleness and care, making it even harder for her to resist temptation. But resist she did, pushing him away with a force that sent Algernon flying backwards. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, which still tingled from the kiss, and got up.

“Where do you think yer going, me lady?”

“Away from you!”

“Me men have not seen the sight of a Scottish wench for many a day. They could ravage you like a hungry pack of wolves if ye leave. I promise you no harm will beget you if ye decide to remain here for the night.”

“Are ye asking me to stay?”

“All I ask is to consider what I’ve said to you. I doubt ye would get such an offer from the likes of them,” he said, pointing with his head towards the entrance of the tent.

Scarlet considered this and sat back down again. She refused to look at his face but she could tell he was watching her. He was indeed watching her, almost studying her. What he said was true. He would naught lay one hand upon her that night.

“What be yer name, me lady?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“What is it to you?!” she spat.

“I was trying to make conversation, me lady. I would not push yer luck at the moment! “’Twould appear that I have the upper hand about now!”

“Me name be Scarlet,” she said at last, out of pure defeat.

“The name’s Algernon,” he said cheerfully. “Yer silent, me dear,” he mused.

“I have nothing more to say to you!” Scarlet said, turning away from his glare.

“Suit yerself, me lady-- I mean, *Scarlet*. Pleasant dreams.” Algernon turned around and laid on his side, his back towards her.

“What-- what are you doing?” she stuttered.

“Going to sleep, which I suggest ye do also. ‘Tis going to be a long ride to the mountains.”

“Why are we going to the mountains?” she asked, quite confused.

“’Tis where me homeland of Locera is. ‘Twould be the clan’s destination,” he said, turning around to face her.

“And where do I fit into yer little plan?”

“I find out where you belong as soon as we return to Locera.”

Algernon rolled over onto his side, leaving Scarlet staring at nothing. She needed to get out of there, wanted to get away from there. But if she left Algernon’s side, his men would do to her what feared most from any man. If she stayed, there was no telling what Algernon would do.

Chapter 3:

Scarlet awoke the next morning to the smell of food cooking. She slowly opened her eyes and almost forgot where she was. Algernon was not in the tent but his outer tunic lay covering her body. She knew she had to find some way out of her predicament. She knew how to fight, but she also knew there was no way she could battle all of Algernon's men at once. Before she could get up and run, one of Algernon's clansmen entered the tent.

"Good morrow, me lady," he said cheerfully.

"What do you want?" she answered, pulling the tunic up to her chin.

"To invite you to join us for breakfast, me lady."

"By whose invitation?" she asked warily.

"Algernon's, me lady." She was shocked to hear that Algernon requested her presence.

"Do I have a choice in the matter?" she asked.

"Ye do not have to eat, me lady, but you could die of starvation out in the mountains, if you so choose to." Scarlet considered this and pushed the tunic down to her knees.

"Aright, I'll eat, but do *not* expect to eat much!" She got up and stormed past the clansman with a humph.

Algernon looked up when he heard her voice threaten his men, ordering them to bring her this or give her that. Her hair was in disarray and to Algernon she appeared even more beautiful than when he had first laid eyes upon her.

"Good morrow, me lady," he said.

"Good morrow," was Scarlet's only reply.

"Are you going to eat this morning, me lady?"

"Please," she mocked, "call me Scarlet. And aye, I will eat this morning."

Not a word was spoken between them during the morning meal. Algernon ate but watched her every move at the same time. She ate very little, almost as if she was not very hungry, yet she knew she was starving inside. After the meal had ended, both of their plates were taken away by clansmen. Scarlet remained where she was, staring out at the meadow. How she wanted to go home, to her real home. As if he could read her thoughts, Algernon finally broke the silence.

"You wish to go home, do ye not, me lady?"

"Aye, that I do. But apparently you and yer men have no intention of letting me go."

"You read me mind clearly, me dear. I do not intend on letting you go."

"No matter," she shrugged. "Me Papa and his clansmen will find me. And when they do, do not expect to remain alive!" she countered.

“Yer father must be pretty handy with a sword. I’ll wager he has decapitated a pretty plenty of heads, eh?”

“Me Papa does not believe in decapitation as a form of death.”

“Nay? And whyever not, praytell?”

“He believes a formal execution is best,” Scarlet answered with pride.

“Me dear, I hope ye can understand that on the battlefield it is merely life and death. There be no formalities involved. One minute yer alive, the next... well, ye get me point.”

Scarlet bit her lip, knowing she had made a mistake at what she said. He was right, yet again. But what did she know about fighting on the battlefield. She was ne’er taught to fight there. She and her sister were always taught the “formalities” of fighting, naught but that. With this realization came another, more displeasing one. She knew how to pick up a sword and fight in a hand to hand duel, but she had ne’er picked up a sword to fight in a war with death all around her.

“Let me see how well ye can fight,” Algernon said, finally.

“What?!” she exclaimed, shocked.

“If I provided you with a sword, let me see how well ye can fight in hand to hand combat,” he repeated, as he got up from where he sat.

Without saying a word, Scarlet got up and faced Algernon. She had ne’er fought someone of such stature as this man. Before, on her father’s lands, she and her sister would duel with only the squires. When Algernon stood in full length in front of her, she knew she was not dueling against a young, inexperienced squire; she was fighting a man who had killed many men in many battles.

“Byron, get me me sword, and give yers to the lady.” Byron, one of Algernon’s clansmen, looked at him with wide eyes.

“Ye cannot be serious, me laird! Give me sword to a woman?!”

“Ye heard what I said, Byron! Give yer sword to the lady!” Algernon’s face became sinister then and Scarlet knew what she was up against.

Byron handed Algernon his sword and gave his own blade to Scarlet. As soon as she took the sword, its tip dropped to the ground. The clansmen around her began to laugh and chuckle but were quickly silenced by a stern look from Algernon.

“I see you have no experience holding a two-handed battle sword, me lady,” he mocked. To his surprise, as well as everyone else’s, she pulled the sword up to chest length and stared him down.

“Un-guard!” she said, pointing the tip of her blade at his chest.

“Thank you for the warning, me lady,” he countered, crossing her sword with his own.

For at least five minutes, which to Scarlet seemed an eternity, they fought, each time their swords crossed with a spark. After the first few minutes of battle, Scarlet’s arms felt as if they were going to fall

off her torso. She could tell that Algernon fought well and with such valor she could ne'er compete with. Her last breath of victory came when she sliced her sword across the air, ripping his black tunic below his shoulder. He winced in pain as he dropped his sword. His hand went up to his shoulder and when he lifted his hand again, it was covered with blood. The eyes that looked at her were not eyes of vengeance or hate but eyes of pain.

"Ye... have... won... me lady," he said, wincing all the while.

"Nay, yer one of the finest swordsmen I have met. Ye, sire, have won far more than I."

"I have ne'er seen a woman with such skills in combat," he commented.

"'Twould be because most of the women ye have seen are the whores who enter yer tent when you travel, and the mistresses who enter yer bedchamber when you spend time at a local inn!"

"'Tis going to cost you, me lady!" Without warning and through extensive pain, Algernon sliced his sword up, catching the tip of the blade on the strings of her bodice. One by one, the strings were cut, loosening her bodice around her chest.

"Me lady, 'twould appear yer dress has been 'delaced'!" he laughed aloud. Scarlet grabbed at her garment and ran as fast as she could towards the meadow, knowing it could be her only hope of escape.

"Should we go after her, me laird?" Byron asked.

"Nay, I will go alone on foot. She cannot run that fast while clutching her dress about her."

"But me laird, yer arm still bleeds!" exclaimed Byron.

"Forget me arm for now! What matters is that we do not lose what we have rightfully captured."

With that remark he set out after Scarlet.

Though the pain in his upper arm remained constant, Algernon was still able to catch up with Scarlet. He grabbed her arm, bringing her to a halt. With one quick move, he had turned her around to face him. Tears stained her cheeks and both of her eyes were red.

"Why do you weep, me lady?" he asked, gentleness in his voice.

"You ask me to fight in a formal duel, yet ye have the nerve to humiliate me in front of yer men!"

"Is that what this is all about? Come now." He pulled his arm around her shoulders to comfort her and was caught with a surge of pain.

"Yer in pain. Let me see yer arm," she demanded.

"I am fine, really I am," he winced.

"If ye do not let me see the wound, you'll be fine but you'll be dead!" For once in her life, Scarlet knew what she was talking about and she knew she was right. She grabbed his arm, making him cry out in pain.

"'Twill will only hurt for a moment."

“Believe me, Scarlet, I have dealt with pain far more than this and wounds and scars far deeper than this mere scratch.”

She did not care about his war-hero stories. She needed to stop the wound from bleeding any more that it already had or he would surely bleed to death. She tore a strip of fabric from the bottom of her dress and started to wrap his wound, making sure it was tight and enough pressure was applied to the wound.

“Here, this should stop the bleeding for awhile.” She worked with skill and grace as she wrapped the fabric around his arm. When she was finished wrapping his arm, she used a hairpin to fasten it together.

“Where did ye learn such skills?” he asked, inquisitively, after she had bandaged his arm.

“Me mother taught me when I was but sixteen. Me father was at war at the time and me mother and I tended to the men’s wounds.” She sat down as she spoke, unable to hide her sorrow.

“Ye miss yer mother, I see,” was all Algernon could say as he sat next to her.

“I loved me mother,” she said quietly, almost in tears.

“Ye use the word ‘love’ in the past tense. Why is that?”

“Me mother died trying to save me younger brother on the battlefield,” she began.

“Does it hurt to talk about it?” he asked, trying to comfort her.

“Nay, I have not spoken of me mother since she died, some four years past.”

“Tell me about her then,” Algernon stated.

“Whyever do ye care so much for me mother?” she asked defensively.

“If I knew something about yer mother, perhaps I could learn a thing or two about you.”

She looked up at him then, surprise in her eyes. Why did this kidnapper want to know more about her? No words could describe what she felt at that moment. All she could do was stare into his sea-green eyes. As if by a magic force, Algernon reached up his hand to brush Scarlet’s tendrils out of her face. Just his touch made Scarlet shiver. His hand slowly made its way around the back of her neck and he looked deep into her eyes before pulling her chin towards his.

This kiss was more passionate than the first. Scarlet let out a gasp of surprise but soon relaxed her body and wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. She did not know why but she wanted to kiss him, wanted to feel his heart beating in time with hers. Slowly, almost unaware of what was happening, Scarlet was lowered to the ground, all the while being kissed by the gentlest of lips.

He showered her with childish kisses, on her cheeks, on her eyelids, on her ears, on her neck. Another surprised gasp escaped her lips, but was quickly silenced with his mouth over hers, as his callused hand began to linger down her body. At that moment, Scarlet managed to wedge her arms

between them and push him away. He looked at her questionably but pulled his arm away from her. He could tell he had gone too far and knew he had to be careful lest to frighten her.

“I’ve ne’er met a woman as beautiful as you,” he said, brushing her locks behind her shoulder, which she jerked away in response to his touch.

“Ye must say that to all the whores that visit yer bedside at night!” she retorted, getting up and brushing the grass off her dress.

“There be only one wench I see before me bedside tonight!” he countered, getting more aggravated.

“I am *not* yer wench and I will *not* be at yer bedside tonight!” Scarlet turned around in disgust but did not run. She could not run. ‘Twas as if she was paralyzed by his presence.

“Come. We have a long journey ahead of us and I do not wish for there to be any conflict between us. I would hate for you to be left in the mountains to die.”

“Very well,” she answered, not turning around. “I will do as ye ask, but do not expect me to do for you what a mistress does for her master!”

He took a step closer and placed his hands on her shoulders. She shivered as a chill ran down her spine, a reaction from the touch of his cold hands on her warm skin. She wanted to go home, to her sister, to her father. She did not want to be here, with this clansman, and somehow he sensed it.

“You will change yer mind soon enough, me lady,” was his only reply.

She turned around to face him. His words and his face both amazed her and without knowing why, she reached up her hand to lightly touch his face. He kissed her palm, all the while looking into her eyes. He was mesmerized by the way they gleamed in the sun, just as she was paralyzed by his, which glowed through the shadows.

She abruptly pulled her hand away, the warmth of his kiss lingering on her palm. Algernon knew why she pulled away- he had gone too far once again. This maiden was stubborn, he figured, and that was one thing he knew he could not change or try to change about her.

“We must get back to the camp. We have a long journey and we both need our strength.” She nodded her head in agreement.

They walked back to the campsite without saying a word to each other. Scarlet knew what she was getting herself into but she did not have a choice. She was now the possession of this man, as if she was bought and paid for by a slave trader.

Her mind began to wander then to the life she had before Algernon took her away. Her home always felt warm and secure on a cold winter night. Her father would bring her into his lap and her sister would sit on the floor at his feet. They would all sit by the fireplace and drink tea while her father would tell stories of his adventures overseas. She missed his stories; she missed the protection of her home.

“Whatever is wrong, me lady?” Algernon asked, turning her around and grabbing her hands.

Scarlet could sense there were tears forming in her eyes. She could not speak and she could not even look at Algernon. He let go of one hand and pulled her chin up to look into her eyes and make sure she was looking into his.

“I miss me Papa’s stories!” she said in full tears.

Algernon didn’t know what to say. He knew it had been wrong to take this lass from her home. He pulled her into his arms and let her cry. She cried until she had not a tear left, all the while leaning in the comfort of Algernon’s arms. Algernon took a deep breath before he spoke again.

“I will bring you home, Scarlet.”

She looked up at him abruptly, eyes tear-stained and red. She could not believe what he had just said to her. Was he really going to do as he promised, or was it just some clansman trick?

“Ye give me yer word?” she asked suspiciously.

“Aye, I give you me word as a knight.”

Scarlet knew that knights were taught at a very young age that honor was everything. She also knew he would keep his word to take her back to her home, or lose his honor as a knight and warrior.

Just then, out of the clearing, came the sound of thundering hooves. Scarlet turned around to see her father perched atop a black stallion, followed by a troop of knights. For a reason she did not know, instead of running towards her father, she clutched protectively at Algernon’s arm.

“’Tis aright, Scarlet. He will not harm you.”

“’Tis not what I am worried about. He may harm you!”

“Whatever do you mean?” he questioned.

“Algernon, ‘tis me Papa!” She looked up at him then, fear in her eyes.

“Byron!” Algernon commanded, letting go of Scarlet’s hand. “Get me me sword!”

“Algernon, wha-- what are you doing?!” Scarlet gasped.

Algernon pulled the sword from its scabbard and held it up to the light of the sun. The gleam that was once in his eyes had all but vanished and what remained were cold, dark, sinister orbs. She knew at that moment that she had to make a choice. If she chose to stay with Algernon, her father would surely slay him. Scarlet did not want to stay with this kidnapper any longer. She had even told him she had missed her father and wanted to go home.

Her father dismounted his horse as the horses behind him slowed their pace. Behind her and Algernon, the clansmen began to form a squad, preparing themselves for battle. She was in the center of a bad situation and she knew she had to say something, and fast.

“Unhand me daughter!” her father demanded, drawing his sword as he spoke.

“Papa, no!” Scarlet shouted, stepping in front of Algernon.

“Whatever do ye mean, child?! Scarlet, please, do not interfere!” Her father took a step towards them as Scarlet retreated closer to Algernon. “This man has taken me daughter from me home! Now he must pay the price!”

Her father lunged forward with his sword. In one quick step, Algernon pulled Scarlet out of the way and blocked the thrust. The two fought like Scarlet ne’er thought two clansmen could. Every clash of the sword, every grunt of strength, could be heard on the still meadow. She wanted them to stop; she wanted to go home to her sister. Before Scarlet could intervene, Algernon cried out in great pain. Scarlet looked up and saw Algernon on the ground, bleeding from his other shoulder; her father’s blade was pointed at his throat.

“No!” Scarlet shouted as she approached Algernon. “Papa, please!” she pleaded.

“Get out of the way, Scarlet, and let me finish the job!”

“No Papa! I will not let you do this! If ye let this man go, I will return with you unmarred,” she pleaded once again, looking at Algernon’s clansmen approaching the scene of the combat.

Her father did not say a word but moved his sword away from Algernon’s throat. Byron came over and helped Algernon to his feet. Scarlet could feel his pain as he winced when he got up. She looked over at her father who turned away in disgust.

“Let’s go, Scarlet!” was his only words.

Scarlet followed her father across the meadow and saddled her father’s horse. The horse snorted in response to her father mounting behind her. All she could do was stare as the steed was turned around. Algernon turned around from where he was standing, hand on his cut shoulder. Together they stared, sharing a silent but unforgettable farewell. . .

Part II:

Chapter 4:

Scarlet ran through the meadow and collapsed onto the ground. She faced the sky above her and watched the petals of the trees fly around her head. The cool spring breeze made her shiver but somehow inside she was feeling extremely warm.

She looked around her, thinking she had heard a rustle in the trees behind her. She laid back down on the grass and closed her eyes. T'was two years since the last time she had caught a glimpse of the stormy seas she remembered. She could still see his face; she could still picture the way his soft, dark hair sparkled in the sunlight. She could still feel his soft lips against hers. Even now, two years later, she knew she would ne'er feel those same lips again.

"Excuse me, me lady," a voice interrupted her vision. Scarlet turned around and opened her eyes. She came face to face with the man of her daydreams.

"Algernon!" she exclaimed, jumping up and into his arms. Algernon was shocked by her compulsory actions but still was able to wrap his arms around her.

"Ye know me name, me lady, but I do not recall ever knowing yers," he said.

"What? Whatever are you talking about?"

"I was wonderin' if ye could direct me to a lass named Lily, me lady," he said nonchalantly.

"What?! I mean, yes, Lily is me sister," she said solemnly. "I will take you to her, sire."

With a heavy heart, Scarlet followed the worn path through the woods to her home. As Algernon followed in close pursuit she wondered why he had not recognized her. It had only been two years since they last saw each other. What on earth could he possibly want with her sister?

"Why, you ask?" Algernon asked, stopping Scarlet dead in her tracks. For a split second she thought he had read her mind but in fact she had spoken out loud. She turned around to face the man who had once kidnapped her from her home, who had once kissed her lips.

"I am here to call upon a woman named Lily. News of her beauty traveled far and I wished to see for meself what treasures she holds." Trying to hold back tears of sorrow, Scarlet turned away from his quirky smile.

Before they were close enough to see her homeland, Scarlet halted and turned to face him once again. His blank expression meant he still could not remember ever knowing her. She decided there was only one way to refresh his vacant memory.

"Sire," she began politely.

"Please, call me Algernon," he interrupted.

"Algernon," she continued awkwardly, "I was wondering if ye may know something about this."

She took her amulet off from around her neck and handed it to him to admire. He turned it over and over in his hand, studying every detail as closely as possible. He finally lifted his head and gave her back her charm.

“Nay, I have ne’er seen its equal. Emeralds are one of the rarest of gemstones and when they are surrounded by the purest of gold, they become even more priceless.”

He answered her truthfully, but with no sense of recollection. Emeralds were rare and he did show to have some interest and knowledge of them. Unfortunately, he showed no sign of remembering her amulet or how he had admired it before.

“Me darling, there you are!” her father exclaimed, as both her and Algernon come into a clearing.

This was Scarlet’s homeland and had been for some four and twenty years. Her father, Duncan, was the head master of all the lands of the clan McDougall, and was respected by the entire clan as if he were a Scottish king.

“Hello, Papa,” she greeted her father with a kiss on the cheek.

“Who might this young man be?” he asked.

Her father did not even recognize him as the man whom he almost killed trying to save his daughter two years past! Scarlet was hurt that even her father had lost some of his memory during that time. She cleared her throat before she continued.

“This, Papa, is Algernon. He has come to call on Lily.”

“Ah, yes! Let me go in and get me other daughter.”

Duncan went into his home and retrieved his daughter. It seemed as if Scarlet had ne’er met her sister before, she looked so different. Her luscious midnight locks were twined together with a gold-laced ribbon. Her body was tightly fitted into a bodice dress with green lace similar to that of Scarlet’s eyes. Algernon watched intently as she stepped forward into the sunlight. Scarlet watched his eyes become brighter at the sight of her in full light. At the same time, Scarlet backed into the shadows, making it harder for any of them to see her cold, saddened eyes.

“Algernon,” Duncan replied. “’Tis me daughter, Lily. Lily, this be Algernon.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Lily said, bowing with most graceful of curtsies.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Algernon said, picking up her hand and kissing it, looking deep into her eyes.

“Come,” her father interrupted, “yer just in time for the evening meal.” All four entered the fortress of McDougall, where the servants were busy preparing supper for the household.

All through the meal, Algernon shared battle stories with Duncan. This, of course, bored Scarlet immensely but oddly enough, these stories intrigued Lily. She sat, staring, as Algernon told story after

story of his adventures through the mountains and across the great plains. Scarlet was about ready to excuse herself from the meal when her father stood up and raised his goblet into the air.

“A toast, to me daughter, Lily, and her new-found friend, Algernon. May ye both find friendship, companionship, and possibly love together!” Both Algernon and Lily lifted their goblets in unison. Scarlet reluctantly raised her glass so as not to seem unladylike.

After the meal was completed, Lily and Algernon excused themselves and went outside. Scarlet was left to entertain her father, which, at this point, was about the last thing she wanted to do. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked down at the floor.

“Whatever ails you, me lass?” he asked sincerely. Scarlet remained silent. Her father would never understand if she complained about this man. “I know what troubles you,” he said at last. “Yer a wee bit jealous of yer sister because someone has come to call upon her and not you. Is that it, me lass?”

“No! ‘Tis not it at all!” Scarlet said, jumping up from her seat and running upstairs to her room.

She slammed the door shut behind her and sat by the windowsill. From where her room was located, she had a perfect view of the garden below, with an apple tree in its center. Frolicking like children were Lily and Algernon. She watched how happy he seemed and a knot formed in the pit of her stomach.

She watched intently as Algernon chased Lily around the tree. Every muscle of his arms and upper torso could be seen through his dark tunic. Somehow Scarlet began daydreaming of the day she had been kidnapped and how she felt in his presence. It was Algernon who had kidnapped her but twas also him who shared a kiss with her. Had he really won her heart without her knowing it?

Chapter 5:

That night Algernon was asked to stay and a guestroom was prepared for him, down the hall from Scarlet's bedchamber. He lay awake, thinking about his day. He had met a wonderful young lady, with hair as black as night and lips as red as roses. Her eyes, well, there was but one way to describe them—they were piercing and dark, almost as if she could see right through him.

He fell asleep content and happy, only to become restless for the remainder of the night. Along with his visions of Lily came other, more vivid visions. These were of a girl of surpassing beauty, with hair as red as the firelight, and eyes as green as the purest of emeralds. For some reason, he felt he had known her from somewhere and at another time in his life. He tossed and turned all through the night, trying to get the image out of his mind. As he lay there, asleep in a bed that was not his own, he began to remember what had happened some two years ago. . .

As she slept in her bedchamber, Scarlet could only dream of the night she had spent in Algernon's tent. She wished she had told her father to leave without her, so she could go across the mountains to Algernon's homeland. But Algernon did not remember her, could not even fathom ever meeting her. With a heart almost broken, Scarlet wept, as she lay asleep in her bed. That night, as both slept restlessly, the emerald amulet began to glow around her neck. . .

The following morning began just as awkward as the night before. Scarlet awoke with the vision of Algernon still in her head. The amulet still hung from her neck, but this morning it felt heavier than normal. She walked out of her bedchamber and into the hallway where she came face to face with Algernon. He stood there, staring back at her as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Did ye sleep well, Algernon?" she said calmly.

"Aye, I have slept well. But let me ask you where I may find a rare beauty, with hair as red as any firelight and eyes as pure as emeralds."

"Ye speak like a poet, sire, but you also speak of a beauty only found in minstrel's songs," she said, walking past him. Algernon, in turn, grabbed her arm and pulled her around. "Me laird, please," she begged, trying to free herself from his grasp.

"I know that you are the beauty of that song, Scarlet," he whispered into her ear, causing her to shudder.

"Algernon, I --," she began but was silenced by his lips on hers. He pushed her body against the wall, causing her to wrap her arms around his shoulders and deepen the kiss. They were quickly interrupted by footsteps coming towards them.

"Algernon!" Lily called from down the hall. "There you are! I was wondering if ye were planning to sleep all day."

"Good morrow, Lily," he returned.

“Come, Papa is waiting for us to break his morning fast,” she said, linking her arm with his. Together they walked downstairs, leaving Scarlet to watch in awe.

Duncan was already seated in the dining hall, waiting for his family to arrive. As the servants busied themselves in the kitchen, he continued to admire the hall. Decorated in the finest Scottish decor, the great dining hall was aglow with sunlight from the wall-length bay windows.

Algernon entered the great hall and was completely taken aback. He had ne’er seen such exquisite style before, even in his own home of Locera. The fireplace was topped with a wooden mantle trimmed with brass ornaments. On the mantle were various trinkets and two solid brass candleholders. Above the mantelpiece hung a large painting of a beautiful young lass.

“Ye admire that painting, young Algernon?” questioned Duncan.

“Aye, that I do. Tell me, be it one of yer daughters?”

“Nay, ‘tis their mother,” he said, getting up from his chair and walking over to the painting. “When she was but a young lass, and I a young lad like yerself, I married her and brought her here, to the home of the McDougalls for generations.”

Duncan turned away from the picture, unable to look at the painting any longer and sat down at the table. The rest quickly followed his suit. The thought of the last time he had laid eyes upon his wife was in his head. He could no longer bear the untimely loss of his precious wife.

“Papa?” Scarlet consoled, placing a comforting hand upon her father’s arm.

“Nay, me child. I must speak of her.” He turned to Algernon and began his tale.

He told of how she was a loving mother and faithful wife and healer, all the same. He told of how she learned the gentle skills needed to become a nurse during the time of war, and how she passed those same learned skills on to her daughter, Scarlet. He told of how heartbroken she had been when her son, the baby, was old enough to go into battle along side his father.

At this point in the morning meal, he became very silent. Scarlet was almost in tears and he sensed it, but still Duncan proceeded with his story. He told of the one battle that was set in his mind above all others. He told of the day mother and daughter went, on foot, to the battlegrounds to tend to the men’s wounds.

On that solemn day, both Duncan and Scarlet were witness to the greatest loss of their lives. Duncan had turned around on his horse to see his wife and daughter running through the field. He recalled hearing her cry out that her son, their son, had been stabbed. He knew she was trying desperately to find her child so she could tend to his wounds.

As Duncan slid off of his horse, he heard another cry, this time from his daughter. He ran, half blindly, towards the direction of the scream and stopped dead in his tracks. Lying in a heap, were three

bodies- one which belonged to his son, one that belonged to his wife, and the third wearing enemy attire. He had looked down at Scarlet, sitting on the ground, blood on her hands and tears staining her eyes.

Duncan looked up from the table to see Algernon completely in awe of his story. Scarlet could not take another minute listening to her father's tale. She wanted so badly to forget that day, forget how her mother looked as she lay slain over her son. She wanted the pain to stop inside her heart, wanted to get away from the thoughts that haunted her mind. She jumped up from the table and ran, ne'er looking back. Algernon did not say a word but got up also and took off after her.

Scarlet ran until she thought her lungs would burst. She ran down to the creek, where the clansmen would often go to serenade their lovers. The creek ran fast and furious down a hill and became a lake at the bottom. There she perched herself upon a root of an old weeping willow tree. Just like the tree, she herself began to weep.

"Why do you weep, me lady?" Algernon asked.

Scarlet could not speak. All she could manage to do was look up at him through tearful eyes. He leaned over and brushed her cheek with his rough, callused hand. Scarlet turned her face away, not wanting him to touch her.

"Do you not wish to talk?" he inquired.

"I do not think ye would understand what I need to talk about," she finally replied reluctantly.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, got up, and walked down to the bank of the lake, where she finally repositioned herself. She did not need to look up to know that Algernon stood next to her. She could see his shadow on the grass.

"Tell me why you weep, me lady," he pleaded.

"Me mother is dead and ye ask why I weep?!"

She began to cry again, this time full-fledged tears. Scarlet wanted her mother back but there was no way it could possibly be so. Algernon could think of nothing else to do but comfort her as he sat close to her on the edge of the pool of water. Scarlet rested her head on his chest and felt an unusual warmth go through her body. She looked down and noticed it was not the warmth of Algernon's body, but the amulet wrapped around her neck. It appeared to be a brighter shade than normal. Algernon looked down and jumped back.

"What the--?" Algernon looked at it with wide eyes as it began to glow. Scarlet looked down and pulled the amulet over her head. She placed it into her palm, and watched it continue to glow.

"I cannot explain this if that is what ye wish of me."

"Me only explanation for this is that yer a witch and ye have been studying the art of black magic!" At that very instant, the amulet turned dark again.

“I am no such thing!” she shouted. Getting up from where she sat, she flung the amulet into the lake.

“Whatever did ye do that for?” he asked, confusion on his face.

“To prove me point!” Scarlet sat down once again and crossed her arms.

“What point? ‘Twas yer mother’s amulet!”

“Ye remember?” she asked as she looked up at him. He sat down next to her on the grass.

“Of course I remember.”

He leaned over and lightly touched her lips. She deepened the kiss by wrapping her arms around his neck, not wanting him to let her go. He kissed her neck, her shoulders, her collarbone. She knew what she was doing was wrong. She had once made a promise before her father and God Himself that she would not do such things with a man until she was wed. Is this what she wanted- to throw away what she had promised many years ago?! Nay! She pushed his body away from hers with all the strength she had in her.

“We-- we really must be getting back. Lily will worry where you are and Papa will want to know if I am aright.” She looked down at the ground, ashamed to look at him. He pulled her chin up to look into her eyes.

“Must we go so soon. I was just getting to know ye better,” he mocked.

“I think ye’ve gotten to know me quite enough!”

“You feel nothing then?” he asked and leaned over to kiss her again.

“No!” she shouted, turning away. “I have made a promise I intend to keep!” She got up and started to walk away but he walked after her and grabbed her arm.

“A promise to whom?” he challenged. Scarlet could not tell him the truth of her promise for fear of being laughed at, or even worse, taken for a fool.

“To meself,” she lied. She looked up at him, hoping he would believe her lie.

“To yerself, me lady?! Correct me I am wrong but is that not a wee bit childish?” he laughed.

“’Tis *not* childish, me laird!” she tried to defend herself. “And,” she added, “we should be getting back. You are here to call on me sister, not me.”

“I have no desire for yer sister,” he said dryly.

“But what about yesterday, with her in the garden?” she tried to sound convincing.

“I do not know what you are talking about, me lady. I came to yer father’s house last evening because I needed a place to spend the night and rest me horse.”

“But ‘tis impossible! Ye came to court me sister!” she protested.

“Scarlet, please, I honestly do not recall any courting of yer sister! I was passing yer village and me horse needed a rest.”

Scarlet could not fathom why he no longer could remember anything that had previously happened the evening before. One minute Algernon was courting her sister, not remembering who she was, the next, he remember who she was but could not recall courting her sister.

“Ye look perplexed, me lady,” he said, lifting her chin to face him.

“I am,” she admitted soundly. She could not even meet his watchful gaze.

“Tell me yer troubles,” he said.

“Something strange is happening to us,” she began. He looked at her with a coy grin on his face, stretching from ear to ear.

“But of course, me lady. ‘Tis called being wanton!”

He grabbed her about the waist with one swoop of his arm and pulled her chin up to meet his waiting lips. His kiss was bold but she did not want it. Viciously, she pushed him away.

“No, sire, ‘tis not what I meant! I meant that somehow one of us is under some sort of spell or enchantment.” He looked at her with wide eyes but said nothing. He let her continue with her idea before he dared to interrupt. “If ye do not mind me saying so, me laird, but ye seem to remember certain things and not others. Could it be a short memory lapse or something far more powerful than that?” she questioned, quite content with her philosophy.

“Truly, me lady, you have an intriguing intellect. ‘Tis why I have found meself quite fond of you. Yer words have put a spell on me.”

“‘Tis *all* that intrigues you about me?” she challenged.

“Not remotely,” he countered, sizing her up with his eyes.

“‘Twould figure ye would be as pigheaded as any of the Scottish rogues!” she chided.

“‘Twould figure ye would be as comely as some of the finest lasses in all of Scotland,” he retorted back.

“I said once, sire, yer words may seem sweet but to me they be devil’s words!” she spat.

“Devil’s words to some are poet’s words to others,” he countered.

“Whyever do you insist on spiting me with yer words?!”

“Because you insist on challenging every word I say!”

She glared at him with angry Scottish eyes but refused to counter his verbal attack. With a humph she turned around and stood on a root overlooking the lake. Balancing herself, she looked over at Algernon just in time to see him dive into the fresh pool of water.

“Whatever are you doing?” she asked, astounded, when he finally came up for a breath for air.

“Winning back yer heart, me lady,” he said with a smile.

He swam to the shore and stood up on the bank. Scarlet took careful notice to the fact that his clothes lay on the bank and all that was left on his body were a pair leggings. How he had managed to undress that quickly amazed her. In his palm was her emerald amulet.

“Whatever are ye doing with that?!”

Scarlet jumped off the root and ran to the bank. She tripped on a hidden root and fell into Algernon, catching him off guard and causing him to fall back into the lake, taking her with him. Scarlet came up for air, gasping for breath, and flung her long fiery strands out of her face.

Algernon reacted to her stern look with a bellowed laugh. She could not bear to look at him knowing how flushed her cheeks had become. She finally gazed up into his eyes and was paralyzed once again. His eyes were fixated on the thin line that clutched her breasts. Her eyes drifted down as she realized what he was so mesmerized by, and modestly crossed her arms over her chest.

“Ye need not cover yerself, me lady. Whatever it is you are trying to hide, I have most likely already seen.”

With a heavy sigh, Scarlet let her arms down but not until she was submerged in water up to her neck. Algernon gave a slight chuckle to her actions but said nothing. He did, however, swim over to her and hand her the necklace he still held in his hand. She grabbed it without question but he quickly closed his hand over hers. She looked up into his eyes and was caught in a sea of emotions. She could not pull herself from his gaze, and when Algernon closed his eyes and lowered his lips to hers, she did not protest.

“Scarlet!” a voice called from the distance, interrupting their intimate moment.

“Me sister calls me. If she sees me here, she will surely suspect!”

“Suspect what, me lady?”

“That there be something between us!”

“But there is,” he teased. “And ye proved it just now with the seal of a kiss!” he smirked. Scarlet looked down at her hand and the amulet in her palm.

“I really must go before Lily finds me here.”

Without another word, Scarlet ran out of the water and jumped onto the bank. Through her shivers, she painstakingly wrung out her dress. Algernon could not help but notice the dress clinging to every curve of her body. He followed her out of the water and grabbed his shirt to dry himself off.

He saw her shivering and trying to get dry, and quickly grabbed his outer tunic, placing it over her shoulders. Without questioning, Scarlet allowed Algernon to massage her arms with the tunic to keep her warm. She even remained still when his hands lingered on her arms.

“Scarlet-- oh, I did not realize I was interrupting anything,” Lily smiled mischievously.

“Ye were not interrupting anything, Lily!”

Scarlet moved away from Algernon as she spoke. Algernon was quite amused at how vulnerable Scarlet had become in her sister's presence, and decided to use it to his advantage. He remembered something that Scarlet had said about him courting her sister.

"Lily, me darling, how are you?" he asked, kissing her on the cheek. She immediately looked up at him and smiled.

"I am fine, me laird. Come, let us leave me sister to tend to her wet things." She looped her arm within his and lead him away. Algernon turned around to take one more long glance at Scarlet, still shivering from the coldness of her clothes. Her eyes, he knew, reflected hatred and defilement. Algernon walked away with Lily on his arm. He did not want to be there with her. For him, he was more satisfied in the company of the other sister, whether down by the lake or anywhere else.

"Algernon, what praytell were ye doing by the lake with me sister?"

"Naught ye would care to know, me lady. Whyever do ye think I would want anything to do with her?" he lied.

"Good, because Papa would like to speak with you, something about being a suitor."

Algernon practically choked on her words. He was just a passerby on his way home, not a suitor for one of this man's daughters, especially Lily. He was at least five years her elder at the age of a score and ten, and was more eager to go into battle than wed a Scottish lass.

Chapter 6:

He entered the home of the clan of McDougall once again, with no intention of taking to wife Lily, or even Scarlet for that matter. His blood ran hot for a new battle. He knew his first love had been being on the battlefield with his father, and now, that love came back to his heart like the rush of a spring tide. Duncan McDougall was where he had been before, sitting in the dining hall, staring at his beloved wife's painting above the mantle. Algernon cleared his throat as he entered, trying to draw the clansman's attention away from the painting.

"Welcome, me lad," Duncan said, with a smile on his face. "Have ye finally located me missing daughter? Praytell, where is she, if she be not with you?"

"She-- she is down by the lake. Her amulet fell off its chain when she spun around as I startled her with me presence. It fell into the lake and she went in after it, garments and all, before I could stop her. She is there now drying herself off."

For Duncan, Algernon's story was sufficient enough, but for Lily, twas pure lies. She saw them there, together. She knew she had to act fast or twould be too late for her. As luck would have it, twas her that this man courted the evening before, not her sister.

"Papa, did ye not have something you wanted to ask Algernon?" she pressured.

"Aye, that I do. Thank you for reminding me, me darlin'." Algernon gulped for he knew what was going to be asked of him and he knew what he had to say to get himself out of the situation safely.

"Algernon, I would like to ask you what yer plans are for me daughter," he said bluntly.

"And which daughter would that be?" Algernon asked, trying to buy some time for his excuses.

"Well, the one standing before you lad!"

"Oh, well, actually, sire, I do not have any plans for yer daughter Lily." He remained calm while both Duncan and Lily were taken aback by his words.

"Well then what of yer plans for me other daughter, Scarlet?" Duncan asked with some concern.

"Papa, you cannot be serious!" Lily protested, anger rising in her voice.

"Actually," Algernon stated, sensing the anger in Lily's voice, "I was not thinking of Scarlet in me plans, either. Me horse has rested enough and I wish to return to me clan. I heard that another clan wishes to start a war over the lands I keep, so I must uphold me honor and fight."

Duncan knew he could not plead with such an honorable man and he knew what Algernon had decided to do. Without another word, Algernon stepped past Lily's angry stare and walked out towards the stables to fetch his horse. While tying his saddle to his stallion, Scarlet returned. Her heart almost stopped when she saw what he was doing.

"Algernon, what-- what are ye doing?!"

Without looking her way, he answered, "I am leaving, me lady." After saddling his horse he walked his mare out of the stables.

"Leaving?! But where will you go?"

"I am going back to me homeland, Scarlet. 'Tis under siege and I must uphold me honor by going back." He could see that his words hurt her but there was no choice, he had to go back. He quickly added, "Do not worry, Scarlet, when all is well again at Locera, I will return, I promise you that. And when I do, I might just take a wife."

With a smile, he kissed the top of her forehead and mounted his steed. Kicking his feet into its side, he rode off towards the east. He never looked back at her once as the distance between them grew greater and greater. For a third time, Scarlet felt cold and alone; for a third time, the emerald amulet began to glow under her garments. . .

Part III:

Chapter 7:

Algernon had no regrets about leaving the McDougall home. His blood ran hot the day he heard his homeland was being attacked. By letting his horse rest a night, he knew he would be able to get through the mountains safely. He did not understand why Duncan McDougall would want him as a suitor for either one of his daughters. He was just a passerby for the night and he hardly knew either one.

Yet, the fair skinned, fiery hair lass remained in his mind. As he rode through the mountains, his mind wandered to images that he did not or could not remember. He had told her he remembered who she was but now that her presence was gone, so were the memories. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from his body and all that remained were faint pictures of a time long since past.

Algernon rode through the mountains just as dusk fell across the land. He would have to stop in the mountains for the remainder of the night and continue on his way at dawn. He was no stranger to the night, and as he slowed his steed to a steady trot, he surveyed his surroundings.

The path before him stretched up, winding its way through the mountains and sloping down the other side. He hoped he could at least get himself to the peak before complete nightfall, for fear of avalanches or thieves. He knew the mountains extremely well and knew once he had reached its peak, there would be caves he could use for protection.

He decided against riding his horse, with the rough terrain and fear of being attacked overriding his mind. Dismounting, he pulled his sword from its scabbard, shielding him from harm. Slowly and cautiously, he led his horse up the spiral dirt path. Before he had gotten very far up the path, he heard a crack of a twig and pivoted around just in time to see the hilt of a sword crash down upon his head.

* * * *

When Algernon finally awoke, his hands and feet were bound together by an exceptionally strong rope. His horse was chained to a nearby tree and there was a fire crackling at his feet. He knew by his surroundings he was no longer in the mountains, but he could not tell whether he was past the point he had come or he had been somehow backtracked.

His head throbbed from the pain of the hilt but he still managed to remain conscious. His head was bent and his eyes were closed but he could still feel a presence before him, from the shadow created by the firelight. The tip of a sword gently lifted his chin, causing him to open his eyes.

“Well, whatever have we here?” a sinister female voice replied.

Algernon’s eyes finally adjusted to the light of dawn and what stared back at him shocked him completely. Before him stood the most feared sorceress in all of Scotland. She was dressed from head to heel in the finest velvet, fit for a queen. The entire gown she wore was as red as wine, which created a contrast to her dark curls.

“Melinda,” he breathed.

“I see ye have not forgotten me, Algernon,” was her reply.

“How could I forget someone with a heart so cold, Melinda?” She laughed at his remark and drew the blade down his chest.

“I am sure yer heart beats hard and fast under that protective layer of skin,” she smiled. “What would become of you if I split ye from end to end?”

“Ye would not have the courage enough to run me through!”

“Very true,” she said. “But why would I kill you when I could run me sword through an innocent victim?!”

Melinda motioned to one her guards, who pulled someone out from behind a caravan wagon. Algernon gasped at who he saw standing before him, bound by rope at the wrists and ankles.

“Lily!” he exclaimed, trying to free himself from the ropes that bound him. Along with the ropes that bound her ankles and wrists, Lily was also blindfolded as well.

“No matter how hard ye try, Algernon, you cannot free yerself or yer beloved Lily!” Melinda nodded her head and Lily was led away, out of sight from Algernon’s watchful eyes.

“Ye will not ne’er get away with this, Melinda! Me clan will come for me when they see I have not returned!”

“Algernon, you are a stupid fool! At this very moment me army is attacking poor, sweet Locera! If it was not for yer wee rendezvous with yer Scarlet, you would have been there already!”

“How did ye know about that?!” he said, defensively.

“Call it but a hunch, Algernon, just a hunch!” she broke into a harsh laugh after she turned her back on him.

“What about Lily? What part does she play in yer wee little scheme?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Lily will play a most important part in me plan. ‘Twould be in yer best benefit to worry about yer own life not hers!”

With that, the sorceress pivoted on her heels and stormed off. Algernon knew he had to free himself but the ropes that bound him were not only tight, but had a spell possessing them. He had battled Melinda once before and had her banished from all his father’s lands. To repay him for her banishment, she cast a spell upon his land, causing all his loved ones to die sudden deaths. He ne’er forgave her for what she had done and he swore she would pay dearly the next time they met.

It had been almost five years since his family’s untimely death and he ne’er chanced to meet her until this day. He did not understand what the sorceress had planned for Lily, who had nothing to do with the two of them or their conflict.

During the morning hours, Algernon was untied and aloud to roam the campsite, closely watched by one the Melinda's guards. He ate a very hearty meal over the fire and was so intrigued at watching her guards practice their fighting skills that he did not even notice the sorceress sit beside him.

"Do you enjoy watching them fight?" she asked, breaking his silent stare.

"Aye, that I do, me lady," he replied, not wishing to turn away.

"I do not suppose ye would like to hear a story."

"Not at the moment, nay."

"Even if it has something to do with yer mother and father?" Algernon quickly turned his head and stared into the most piercing dark eyes he had ever seen. "I thought 'twould get yer attention," she smiled.

"What about me parents, Melinda?! Have ye not done enough damage to me family?!"

"I have something to show you." Out of her pocket she pulled a tiny black velvet pouch, which, when opened, contained various gemstones of varies shapes and colors. "Look, but do not touch. What you see here are ordinary gemstones-- emeralds, rubies, sapphires, diamonds, amethysts- but in actuality, they possess far more power than just a priceless appearance."

"I do not understand."

"Look carefully," Melinda said.

She spread the gemstones out on the dirt in a specific arrangement. Once the final gem was in place, they *all* began to glow their brilliant colors. As if by some form of magic that Algernon did not comprehend, the colors started to blend together and form a picture.

"Me parents!" Algernon exclaimed. "If this be one of yer tricks, Melinda!"

"I assure you, Algernon, these gems have no tricks in them. 'Tis pure magic, a power I have yet to understand completely," she explained, then quickly added, "Besides, I came to possess these by stealing them from yer homeland."

"What?!"

"'Tis true, Algernon. 'Twould mean that someone in yer family must have studied the black arts before me and in so doing, left behind some clues as to how to use the stones for ultimate power!"

"But 'tis impossible!" Algernon exclaimed, getting up from where he sat. "No one in me family would ever study black magic of *any* kind!"

"Suit yerself, Algernon, but I know there be more magic hiding where these stones came from. And I intend to find them!"

Algernon did not want to hear any more of her nonsense words. He knew he could not stay there and listen to any more from her. He walked away from the place he sat, and quickly came upon a small stream not far from the camp and knelt down to peer into its crystal blue ripples. What he saw staring

back at him nearly took his breath away. The face looking back at him was not just him-- 'twas him as a child!

He tried to close his eyes and shake the images away but they remained when he opened his eyes again. He was there, as a child, living in Locera, his homeland since his birth. He saw himself slowly growing up from a child, to an adolescent, to a young adult. There he saw himself courting his first love, Shannon O'Grady.

The images went away before him and he was left with his present reflection. The memory of Shannon was still great in his mind, for she looked just as pure and innocent in the image as she did when he had left her. The reason he could not ask her to marry him then was because she was betrothed to another man and his father needed him on the battlefield.

"Algernon?" a voice caught him by surprise. He turned around and could not believe his eyes. Before him stood his first love!

"Shannon! Wha-- whatever are ye doing here?!" he stammered.

"Whyever have ye forgotten me, me sweet?" she asked, diverting his question.

"Whatever do ye mean forgotten? I still hold ye close to me heart and soul!"

"Ye left me before we could be wed!"

"But you were betrothed! And me father needed me help in battle!" he tried to protest.

"Yer blood ran hot not for the love of a woman, but for the love of bloodshed and war!" she argued.

"'Tis not true! Ye know I loved you and still love ye now!"

"Nay, Algernon! Ye *loved* me once, aye, but ye still love yer knighthood more! Ye did not leave me because of me betrothal, but because ye wanted to feel more alive on the battlefield than in a woman's arms!"

Shannon turned away and Algernon expected her to begin crying. He took a step closer and she vanished into thin air. Algernon could not believe his eyes. His mind had not fully registered that he just had a conversation with a ghost, or a mirage for that matter. He had a feeling Melinda had something to do with playing the trick of magic on him and he needed to find out what she was really up to.

"Melinda!" he called, searching the campgrounds for her.

"Ye called, me laird?" Melinda came out from behind her caravan dressed in nothing more than the undergarments of her gown.

"'Tis something I would like to ask you. Tell me more about these gemstones ye have come to possess." Melinda's eyes lit up like fire at the sound of his words, knowing she had enticed him enough by her magical mirage.

"Come with me, Algernon. Let me show you some of the *real* power of these gems!"

She led Algernon around the lake, carrying the pouch of stones on her waist-belt. She sat down on the grass, dumping the gemstones out in front of her. Algernon watched her arrange the stones into a certain pattern and place an emerald in the center. As soon as the emerald was set in place, all the gemstones began to glow.

Melinda recited some ancient spell words that Algernon guessed were in Gaelic, and the colors began to blend, forming a clear picture in the air just above the stones. The image was of Algernon asleep in a bed that did not belong to him, but belonged to the home of the clan McDougall. He lay there, sleeping restlessly, trying to ward off some evil spirit that haunted his dreams. Then, the image shifted to his dream, not the of the dark haired maiden, Lily, but the of the fiery haired, emerald eyed Scarlet.

“Whatever do these stones have to do with Scarlet?” Algernon asked, not realizing he remembered her.

“She be the source of the power,” Melinda said.

“Whatever do ye mean, the source?”

“I mean she holds the key! She has the remaining gemstone that can complete the circle of magic! As long as she possesses it, I cannot complete me greatest spell, but so long as she keeps it close to her heart, I can see all, hear all, and empower all, including actions, memories, and even dreams!” She waved her hand over the gems and the image disappeared.

Melinda gathered up the gems and placed them into the pouch, which she tied and slipped around her waist. She knew Algernon watched her every move but she refused to meet his stare. He knew she somehow needed the last gem but he could not fathom what she intended to do with it once she possessed it or what she had planned for Lily. Twas Scarlet who obviously held her attention far more than Lily. As if reading his mind, she looked up at him with a smile on her face.

“Lily is me bait, Algernon. When her sister comes to her rescue, that gem will finally be mine!”

“And what about her father? Did ye think of him in yer wee little plan?” he asked.

“Duncan will assume ye have stolen his daughter, like ye’ve done before. While he is busy dealing with you , I can destroy Scarlet and be off with the stone!”

“Ye seem to have every bit of yer plan worked out, Melinda.”

“Naturally,” she bowed her head to acknowledge his remark. “When have ye ever known me not to have a plan of action?”

“But what if something goes wrong?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“Naught will go wrong,” she answered with confidence. She got up and walked back to the campsite with Algernon at her heels.

Chapter 8:

That night Algernon could not sleep. He did not want Melinda's plan to work and he did not want to see an innocent lass used as bait. Furthermore, he did not wish to see Scarlet killed. He knew he had but one chance to free Lily and escape to the mountains, where he knew she would be safe. Even though he did care for her, he had become her kinsman and would fight to save her life.

He was no longer bound by chains or rope or magic, but what stood in his way now were the guards that remained outside his tent. He needed a way to distract one so he could dispatch the other. As luck would have it, Melinda called one of the guards into her tent.

"Excuse me. Can ye help me here? I seemed to have lost something very important to Melinda and I really do not wish to upset her!" he called out to the remaining guard.

The guard entered the tent unaware that Algernon was waiting for him. With one swoop of his arm, Algernon knocked the guard flat on his stomach, unconscious. Algernon grabbed the guard's sword from its sheath and hurried out of the tent. He had only a short amount of time to find Lily and escape, for the guard would surely emerge from his unconscious slumber.

He crept slowly through the camp until he not only found Lily but his horse as well. Both were tied to separate trees, one by chains, the other by rope. Algernon approached them both with caution so as not to frighten either one.

"Who are you?" Lily whispered, not recognizing him in the darkness.

"Tis no time to explain. We have to get out of here before Melinda finds out we have escaped." He untied the ropes that bound her feet and wrists. "Come on," he said, helping her to her feet.

With the dagger that now hung from his belt, he picked the locks of the chains around his horse's hooves and neck. Trying not to stir the animal, he hoisted himself onto the saddle and bent down his arm to help Lily up. She remained still, unable to move, completely paralyzed with fear.

"Lily, please, I do not think ye wish to stay here any longer," he pleaded.

Algernon looked at her with stern eyes. Lily finally gave in to his stare and reluctantly took his hand. Swiftly and carefully, he pulled her up into the saddle behind him. "Hold on!"

He whipped the horse into a fast gallop that soon awakened the entire camp, including Melinda. She came out of her tent when she heard the commotion outside. Casting an evil look at him, she called out to her guards to go after them and bring them back alive. Soon Algernon could hear the quickening pace of riders behind him. He knew if he went east he would find either the caves of the Eastwick Mountains or his homeland of Locera, whichever came first.

The horses behind them gained speed and quickly closed in on them. As Algernon drew his sword from its sheath, Lily tightened her grip around his body. She kept her eyes closed as she felt the

heavy sword swish the air. A cry to her right made her wince for she knew what his sword made contact with.

Onward Algernon pushed his horse, slashing down to both his left and his right with his blade. Onward he raced, towards the direction the east, not sure where it would take him. He turned around only once to see the number of riders still gaining pursuit before he saw the mountains begin to loom into view ahead of them.

* * * *

Knowing they were safe in the mountains, Algernon dismounted and helped Lily down. She was very light on her toes but she was also very weak from the ride. She stumbled but once and was caught by Algernon's awkward arms.

"We should be safe here for awhile," he said.

All Lily could do was nod in response. Something strange went through her mind as she watched Algernon turn away and investigate the cave further. The closeness she had thought she felt when they were in the garden had disappeared. It felt as if everything that had happened that day had been a dream and not real, and now she was here, in a cold, lonely cave, with a man whom she vaguely remembered ever knowing.

She eventually became tired of watching him, and sat down against the walls of the cave, curling her legs up to her chest and resting her head on her knees. Lily wanted to go home, to her father and sister, whom had not even come to her rescue. She did not want to be there any longer.

Algernon turned to face her, as if reading her thoughts. Nay, he did not want to be there either, she could see it in his eyes. His eyes told a story of a love once lost. How could Melinda have plagued upon his emotions? Shannon O'Grady was his one and only love and he had lost her to another man. More importantly than that, he had lost her to his hot-blooded need to kill. To him Shannon was as good as dead, for he had not spoken to her since the day he had left to a knight.

"Shannon," the name came like a whisper on the wind.

He wished he could find her again before he said his final farewell. Unfortunately, he was in the Eastwick Mountains, a short distance from his home, but at least two or three days worth of travel to her homeland. If he turned back now, he would surely run into the sorceress again. He looked down at Lily, curled into a ball on the ground, and decided he had to get her to the safety of Locera. Once there he would contact her father and explain what had happened to his daughter.

"Rest yerself, Lily. You'll need yer strength for the journey to Locera tomorrow evening."

"Whyever must we travel by nightfall?" she complained.

"So that Melinda will not find us," was his reply.

Without another word, Algernon backed himself into the shadows of the cave and laid down. The floor of the cave was cold and damp but he knew it was going to be a long journey back to Locera and they both needed rest. Slowly and uneasily, Lily lowered herself down to a flat position and cradled her head on her arms. She wanted so much to be home by the fire, snuggled under a warm quilt. Eventually, she drifted into an uneasy slumber. . .

Chapter 9:

Lily was abruptly awakened by Algernon the following evening. At first, she did not know where she was and jumped back against the wall. Algernon's soft blue-green eyes reminded her of where she was and she slowly eased herself off of the wall.

"Lily, 'tis nightfall. If we travel now, we will surely reach Locera by dawn."

"Whatever is Locera?" Lily asked, bewilderment in her voice.

"Locera is me home, Lily, and it is under attack by Melinda's army."

Without looking at her, he packed his supplies and mounted the horse. Lily could not believe her ears. She was not going home to her father and sister, but was going to Algernon's homeland. She quickly stood up and went after him.

"I do not wish to go to Locera! I wish to go home!"

"'Tis a bit to late for that, me lady. We are but half a day's journey to Locera and two and a half days to yer homeland." In one strong swoop of his arm, she had no time to protest before being place on the saddle in front of him.

The ride to Locera was long and tedious. Algernon knew the mountains were a key hideaway for thieves and was ready to take up arms against anyone. He pulled his blade from its scabbard and Lily gave a start. He calmed her nerves by holding her tighter with one arm, at the same time gripping the reins with his hand, not wanting to stir his horse.

On the way through the mountains Algernon began to wonder about the Sorceress' gems. Someone in his family must have studied and in studying had learned a great amount of black magic. He had to remind himself to question that matter after he returned home and battled her army.

Then there was the matter of Scarlet and her necklace. Mayhaps she truly was a witch or sorceress? He did in-fact see her amulet glow just as bright as her emerald eyes. What he would give to see her face once again, for he surely did not see her twin in her sister. But now he was on his way back to his homeland, many a day's journey from the homeland of the McDougalls. A stirring in front of him made him forget his thoughts. Lily looked up into a sea that seemed as calm as a summer's day.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"We have traveled far and it seems we both need to rest," he answered, diverting her question. He stopped his horse, dismounted, and helped her down, but did not look into her eyes.

"Algernon, what purpose do you have for me?" she asked, settling herself down against a tree, for they had now passed safely through the mountains.

"I do not have a purpose, me lady. I have saved ye from the sorceress, 'tis all."

Out of the sky, a black crow flew low and threatening. It landed a few feet away from them and, in a flash of light, was transformed. The creature that stood before them was not a bird, but human, a woman of great beauty far surpassing that of many of the Scottish lasses.

“Melinda!” Algernon exclaimed.

“Ye did not think that I would let you get away from me camp that easily, did you, Algernon?! Tsk, tsk, ye know me better than that, me sweet!”

“I should have known ‘twas too easy to leave yer camp, Melinda. How can ye defend yerself now, without yer guards to protect you?” Algernon shouted, drawing his sword as he spoke.

“Ye fool! Ye choose to threaten me with a sword! ‘Tis no match for the black magic I possess!”

With the last word still on her tongue, she took a stone from her pouch and threw it at Algernon’s feet. In a flash of light the stone exploded and Algernon was forced backward onto the ground. Lily muffled a scream by biting her bottom lip.

“I will fight you to the death if need be, Melinda!” he shouted, getting up.

“To the death then!” she returned, drawing her own blade from its sheath beneath her cloak, which she dropped to the ground.

In a clash of metal against metal, Melinda’s sword crossed Algernon’s. Time and time again their swords clamored with a force Lily had ne’er known in all her years of combat with her sister. Before she could hold her tongue, she cried out, for Algernon had been caught off guard and was now cornered against a tree, Melinda’s sword resting on his chest.

“To the death, Algernon!” she stated. “Ye said it yerself, you pathetic fool!” She drew her blade back to finish the deed.

“No!” Lily shouted, running to his aid only to find it too late.

She could feel the bile rising within her as she looked down in anguish. Melinda’s blade had not pierced Algernon’s heart, but had pierced her own! She pitched forward, unaware of the clamor around her. The pain of the blade shot through her body as her world quickly turned cold and dark. Algernon broke her fall as Melinda wrenched the sword free from Lily’s body.

“‘Tis not over yet, Algernon!” she said, disappearing in a blaze of light.

“No!” bellowed a deep voice from the distance. Algernon looked up to see both Duncan and Scarlet racing towards him.

“Give her to me, you murderer!” bellowed Duncan, anger on his face.

Algernon could do naught but stare at Scarlet as her father cradled Lily in his arms. Scarlet looked at him not with admiration but with disgust. She no longer could look into the sea and find comfort within its currents.

“I am not a murderer!” Algernon protested, his eyes pleading with Scarlet, much to no avail.

“I find that hard to believe! I see no one around here but you and me slain daughter! Is that what yer plan was, to court me daughter and then to murder her?!” Duncan said, drawing his sword.

Algernon needed support from Scarlet, anything to stop her father from pressing the issue farther. But she gave him none. ‘Twas as if Scarlet was in a trance, cradling her dead sister in her arms. He had no choice but to take up arms against Duncan McDougall.

Scarlet blinked once, shaking herself out of her dream. Looking down at the body she cradled in her arms, she knew twas not part of her imagination. Her sister was truly slain, blood still pouring from her wound. She gazed up to see her father and Algernon crossing swords. Duncan clearly had the upper hand as far as fighting skill and experience, yet she also took notice to the skills with which Algernon fought. Her father’s sword sliced downward and cut Algernon’s forearm, creating a red trickle of blood down his arm.

“Nay, Papa, please, no more bloodshed!” Scarlet shouted, laying her sister’s body down and jumping up.

“Whatever do you mean, nay?! This man killed yer sister! Her death must be avenged!” Duncan said, glancing over at Algernon, who held his forearm to stop the blood from flowing.

“Mayhaps he did not kill her!” Scarlet tried to reason.

“Whatever are you saying, child? Yer sister lies dead and her blood stains his hands!”

“Please, Papa, mayhaps he has an alibi!” Scarlet protested, glancing over at Algernon, who acknowledged her glance. “Algernon, please tell us what happened with me sister!” she begged, trying to hold back her tears.

Algernon winced in pain as he began his tale of Melinda, the Sorceress of Scotland. He did not tell them about Shannon or how Melinda destroyed his family. He did, however, tell them of Lily’s kidnapping and Melinda’s attack on the mountains. He told them of their escape and the battle between him and Melinda. He looked up at them, hoping they believed his tale.

He caught eyes with Scarlet and a wave of hope rushed through him. Duncan, on the contrary, was clearly not amused. He did not believe in sorcery and Algernon’s story was but a mockery to him and his family. He wanted this man dead so that he could not hurt yet another one of his daughters.

“Whatever do you intend to do, Algernon, for Melinda is clearly not here?” Scarlet questioned.

Algernon did not look at her as he answered but instead looked directly at Duncan. “I am going back to me homeland as I had intended. Melinda has an army there already attacking the walls of the fortress and ransacking the village.”

“I will go with you,” Scarlet chided.

“Scarlet, nay! I will not allow it!” Duncan protested sternly.

“Papa, I am old enough to make me own decisions! I am going with Algernon!” Scarlet said defiantly.

“I said nay! I am not going to hand over my second daughter to a murderer!”

Duncan lunged forward at Algernon with his bare hands and Algernon was caught off guard. He was thrown down onto the ground, Duncan’s hands clawing for his throat. They struggled for quite some time and then a gurggle rang out through the cool night air.

Duncan rolled onto his back, a dagger lodged in his stomach. Blood spurted from the wound as he stared at his daughter. Scarlet raced to her father, tears already staining her eyes. She refused to lose any more her loved ones this day. She tried painlessly to stop the blood from flowing from the wound, but the dagger had been driven too deep. She clawed aimlessly at Duncan’s shirt but to no avail.

“Scarlet,” he whispered, “take care of yer homeland, me darlin’. Do not let this man hurt you as he has hurt yer family!” Her father winced once and was silent. Scarlet knew she had lost another family member and a wave of loneliness swept over her. Algernon came over to comfort her but she shrugged him away.

“Let me be!” she sobbed.

“Fine. I am going to Locera to see what trouble Melinda has caused. I will not see her murder any more of me people!”

He stepped away from her and moved over to where his horse stood. Scarlet could not stay there, not knowing where she was or how she would get home. She gave her father one final farewell and got up.

“Algernon?” Algernon looked up at her, and a wave of sincerity swept over him.

“Aye, me lady?”

“Can ye help me bury me father and sister?” she asked, quite ashamed of her inquiry.

“Aye, that I will. If ye will come with me to Locera.” Scarlet looked up then, shock on her face. “Whatever is the matter? Do ye not want to go with me?”

Scarlet knew the truth-- she had fallen for Algernon yet again. Not having him by her side for two years was torture enough, but to not have him by her side now was even more torturous, especially since she was completely alone.

“Aye, that I do,” was her only reply. . .

Part IV:

Chapter 10:

Algernon and Scarlet rode side by side through the forest and thick brush until they reached the highlands called Locera. Yet it was Locera no longer. The once cheerful atmosphere had turned to gloom and a ring of smoke lay heavily over the village and fortress.

“Captain! Ye have returned to us at last!” a knight shouted as he ran towards them.

“Byron!” Algernon shouted back, leaping off his horse. Scarlet was left unattended upon her horse, watching the two men embrace and speak in a tone she could not hear.

“Where be Melinda now?” she heard Algernon say.

“Her army is trying unsuccessfully to scale the east wall, but I am afraid she is nowhere to be found.”

“She must be found,” he said sternly, “and she must be destroyed!”

Scarlet gasped and both men looked up at her. She had been around wars before but she was a nurse, a healer, and not a warrior. Algernon came over to her and helped her down off her steed. She was weak in the knees from the ride and collapsed into his arms. He pulled up her chin with his delicate fingers and looked deep into her emerald eyes.

“Are you afraid?” he asked, sincerely.

“Nay, not any longer,” was all she could say before he pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss only lasted for a moment or two before they were interrupted by a shout in the distance. All three lifted their heads just in time to see a cottage burst into flames. Before she knew what was happening, she was being pulled towards the fortress walls. Algernon had her by one hand and a sword outstretched in the other, ready to strike out at anyone who dared cross their path.

“Byron!” Algernon shouted. “Watch our backs until we have safely reached the tunnel channels! Make sure no one follows us!”

“Aye, Captain!”

Scarlet was plummeted into darkness, unable to see even the hands in front of her face. It took her eyes many minutes to adjust to the dark, tunnel-like caverns underneath the fortress. Each was lined, intermittently along cobblestone walls, with lit torches, to guide the way. She pulled abruptly on Algernon’s arm and he stopped obediently in his tracks.

“Where are we?” she demanded.

“We are in the tunnel channels of the fortress of Locera. Nothing can penetrate them and we will be safe until we reach our destination.” He spoke without a trace of fear in his voice.

“What exactly *is* our destination?”

“The tunnels empty out into the great hall. There, ye will be safe until this battle has ended.” Scarlet understood and simply nodded in response.

Upon entering the great hall, awe waded through Scarlet’s mind. She was amazed at how impressive the great hall of Locera was. Unlike the great hall in her own home, Locera did not contain any paintings of women of the house. Algernon broke the silence with his voice echoing through the empty hall.

“Ye shall stay here and you shall be safe.”

Scarlet tried to protest, “But what about you? Ye will not stay here also?!”

“I must fight alongside me army. Melinda and her army must be stopped and eventually destroyed!”

Algernon turned to leave and was quickly stopped by a gentle hand upon his arm. He looked down at Scarlet, tears gleaming in her eyes. Algernon knew the battle he was about to fight could very well leave him dead on the battlefield. If he could look upon her face but once more, twould not have been enough.

“Be still, lady,” he soothed. “I shall return to you. ‘Tis a promise I intend to keep.”

Algernon left then and a shudder came over Scarlet’s body. She was alone in the great hall- alone and scared. The great hall was exactly that- a great hall. There stood a single throne, obviously belonging to Algernon, shrouded in embroidered cloth. Unlike her own home, this great hall was much larger in size and contained many more tables for the knights and their ladies.

She found herself wandering about the hall, touching a trinket here or there. Most of the collectibles were obviously taken from war raids and the like. She began to wonder what she had gotten herself into by coming here with Algernon. Would he treat her with the highest respect, or we treat her as he had once before, like a possession or property?

“Scarlet,” she heard her name being whispered on the wind. “Scarlet.”

“Mother?” she recognized the voice.

“Scarlet, whatever have you done?” An image of Scarlet’s mother appeared at one of the far ends of the great hall. “Whatever have you done, me darlin’?”

“Whatever do you mean, what have I done?! I have done naught!” Scarlet tried to protest.

“Ye have become yer worst fear! Ye have killed and you will kill again!”

“Nay, you are wrong Mother! I have killed no one and never will!”

“Where be yer sister, Lily, then? And yer father? Whatever has become of him? Ye have left them for dead and you shall pay for yer sins!”

Her mother threw out her arm and a ball of lightning shot out at Scarlet. Scarlet was thrown back against a wall, hitting her back before falling to the floor. Shaking her head, she looked up and the figure

that stood before her became her mother no longer. The figure was of a woman of surpassing beauty, much like herself, yet her face recalled a sinister smile.

“Who-- who are you? You are not me mother!”

“Aye, that I am not!” The figure extended her arm and another flash of lightning was shot out at Scarlet. This time Scarlet was prepared and easily dodged the death spark.

“What do ye want from me?!” she shouted at the figure.

“What I want from you is that charm around yer neck!”

“But it belonged to me mother!” Scarlet protested.

“And now it will belong to me!” the sorceress said, lunging towards her.

Scarlet was forced down to the floor, trying desperately to save her mother’s heirloom trinket. They fought for some time until Scarlet was able to push the sorceress away and scramble across the hall. A crack to her left told her that the Sorceress was using her powers and had missed. She had to get herself out of there, for next time, she would not miss. She needed to find Algernon, and some form of weapon to protect herself. Footsteps behind her told her that this person remained in close pursuit of her.

Another crack to her right shattered some of the wall and caused Scarlet to jump out of the way of the falling rock. She wished she could scream out but no sound was heard. Her voice was lodged in her throat and she could feel the bile rising in her stomach.

“I said stop!” the voice called from behind her and she stopped, by the hand of an unknown force. “’Tis more like it!”

Scarlet could not move-- she was paralyzed where she stood. She had to break free from her capture and find a way to fight back. She felt a warmth around her body and looked down to see the amulet glowing a brilliant green.

“Give me the amulet!” Melinda cried out, stepping in front of her.

“No!”

Scarlet took a step back but that did not stop Melinda from throwing another bolt of lightning at her heart. The amulet, in return, cast a green ray of light against that of the bolt. Scarlet was shocked at what she saw but was relieved she was still alive. The amulet had saved her life. She looked up just in time to see Algernon charging from behind Melinda, sword outstretched. Melinda saw where Scarlet was looking and caught a glimpse of the fire in Algernon’s eyes. He meant to kill her and he needed to be stopped. With a flick of her arm, her magic had caught him in a human-sized bubble.

“Well, well, if it isn’t me long lost brother out to save his new whore!” she cackled.

“Long lost brother?” Scarlet questioned. Melinda spun around on her heels to face her, eyes gleaming red.

“Ye dare to question me words?! Once I have that trinket you wear, ye can watch poor Algernon as I finish him off!”

Melinda glared at Scarlet one last time before she threw a bolt of lightning at her body. Both Scarlet and her amulet were caught off guard and she was thrown backward against the wall of the great hall. Another bolt sent Scarlet flailing out of harm’s way. She looked up slowly and caught a glimpse of Algernon, still frozen in his bubble, his sword lay on the floor.

She could hear Melinda’s footsteps behind her. Another flick of her hand and a ball of bright light was formed. The sphere of electricity floated just above the Sorceress’ palm, ready to strike out at Scarlet at any moment.

“Prepare to meet yer family, Scarlet! Prepare to meet them in hell!”

The sphere was thrust towards her with such a force that made Scarlet think quick. In the blink of an eye, Scarlet grabbed the blade and blocked the sphere, causing it to ricochet and fly back towards Melinda. The Sorceress was taken by surprise by the valiant act and was thrown back by the force of her own magic.

Scarlet scrambled to her feet, sword in hand, and slowly crept to where the Sorceress lay. Melinda looked as if she slept, a deep sleep of death. Scarlet bent over the body, hoping she did not hear a heartbeat. Yet Melinda’s eyes suddenly opened and flared red-hot.

As soon as Melinda was on her feet, Scarlet was prepared, a stance she intended to hold on to. The Sorceress charged her, arms outstretched ready to strangle on contact. Scarlet held the blade up just as Melinda leapt at her, causing it to become lodged in her stomach. The Sorceress fell, bone shattering, on the floor of the great hall, the blade slicing through her body. Scarlet looked away as Melinda gurgled on her own blood.

Chapter 11:

With Melinda dead, her spell on Algernon was broken. Scarlet ran to him and embraced him with all the love she could possibly give. Algernon returned her embrace and could feel the wetness of her tears beginning to soak his outer tunic.

“Melinda,” he whispered into the air.

“She is dead,” she sobbed against him.

“All is well, then. Once her army hears the news of her death, they will make a hasty retreat,” he spoke without fear and with a great sense of confidence.

“Algernon, something still troubles me,” she said looking up at him, tears staining her cheeks.

“What, me lady?”

“When Melinda cast her spell on you, she said ye were her long lost brother. Whatever did she mean by that?” she asked inquisitively. Algernon was taken aback by her words but did not show his concern. He took a step away from Scarlet and glanced over at Melinda’s body lying limp on the floor.

“Melinda was a young lass living at Locera when I first laid eyes upon her,” he began his tale. “Her beauty surpassed that of many of the other lasses on the manor.” He paused only once to capture her eyes with his own.

“At the age of sixteen, me father had placed me under the care of the knights and their squires. ‘Twas the last time I had laid eyes on that beauty until I had become a knight. After me first crusade, I returned to find me home in chaos. Melinda had taken up learning black magic and was therefore arrested for witchery and treason. She had escaped her jail sentence prior to me return and used her newfound magic to cast a plague upon me house and family. She fled Locera, hiding in the forests for protection.

“Before me mother died from her evil curse, she bade me to come into her bedchamber one night, where she lay. She told me a shocking tale that not even me father knew of: ‘Twas before me mother married me father when her homeland was besieged by another laird. Me mother was but a young lass, ripe for the taking.

“And taken she was. One night, whilst her parents slept soundly, she was raped by one of the knights of the opposing laird. When her parents found out she was with child, they bade her marry the next laird who came to call, for fear of being haunted by the treachery wrought upon them. Before me mother was to give birth, she married me father, making it seem that ‘twas his babe she bore.”

“And that babe was you,” Scarlet stated.

“Nay, ‘twas not me at all. I had not been born for another near two years. That babe was Melinda-- a healthy infant, but a bastard child she was.”

Scarlet could not believe her ears. What Melinda had said was true! She was indeed the sister of Algernon. Something still did not click in her mind, though. Inquisitively, but cautiously, she averted her question.

“Whyever was Melinda so intent on getting me amulet?”

Algernon looked at her with confusion. He had yet to uncover the secret to the gemstones the Sorceress had kept in her pouch. He knew they had possessed some sort of great power when placed in a special pattern, but he had yet to discover their true worth.

“I have not found the remaining pieces to that puzzle,” he said solemnly.

“Captain!” Both of them spun around to see Byron running across the great hall. “Captain!” he repeated, semi out-of-breath. “Melinda’s army has been pushed back and her forces have called a retreat!”

“We have won!” Algernon shouted in response, joy in his voice. He turned to face Scarlet, who looked more disappointed than relieved.

“Whatever is wrong, me lady?”

“I still do not understand what she wanted with me amulet!”

“Scarlet, the battle is over! Let it rest!” He came over to her to try and comfort her.

“I do not care! I am not going to rest until I find out why!”

“Be rational, Scarlet! Where will ye begin yer journey? How will ye go about searching for answers? Do you even have protection so as not to get yerself killed?!”

“I am old enough to take care of meself, Algernon, and I *will* find answers!” Scarlet pivoted on her heels and stormed out of the great hall, her footsteps echoing behind her.

“Scarlet!” Algernon called after her.

“Let her go, Algernon. She be naught but a Scottish wench who does not need anyone to tell her how to run her life, especially from the like of you,” his friend joked. Algernon looked at his friend blankly.

“I do not believe you, Byron. I will not believe you because I know what ye think of all Scottish wenches. That lass has compassion in her blood, I have seen it. Perhaps she may have love pulsing through her veins as well!”

Algernon stormed out of the great hall, leaving Byron to take care of the disposing of Melinda’s body. As Algernon had thought, Scarlet stood just outside the fortress gates. Her head was bent and he could tell she was in tears or had been crying. She stiffened as he came nearer to her but refused to turn around.

“I am truly sorry, me lady,” he said, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“Please,” she begged, “call me by me name.”

“Scarlet,” he breathed into her ear. A shiver ran through her body. “If ye would have it, I would like to help you find yer answers.”

She turned around to look into the calm storm in his eyes. “I would have it no other way.”

THE END