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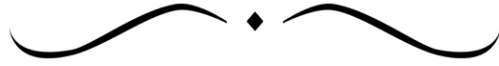
A person's true powers doesn't lay within might,  
possessions or status.

A person's true power lays within the connection  
he has with others. Their love, their friendship,  
their trust.

- Alex V. Knights



# AUTHOR'S NOTE



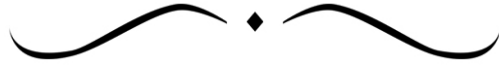
**T**hank you for checking out my first written book as an author. I wanted to put good use to my daily inspirational moments and creative mind, so I created this book in which some of my creations will come to life.

I had the desire to develop fun characters which are relatable and realistic to the readers. With that idea in mind, I created a few characters with complex feelings and personalities. No one is always happy, no one is always sombre.

I wanted the story to be told in the early Middle Ages, since the style of living really brings the story to life. Sometimes certain technology will be used ahead of their time, but that is what separates our world from theirs. And the magical touch, of course.



# WHAT TO EXPECT



This book is about two young women with a completely different background. The two grow up without knowing each other's existence, until one day they meet up and become close friends. They don't know their true connection and just spend their days hanging out.

One day, they trigger a prophesy and receive mind-blowing powers which complement their unique personalities. This also reveals their true connection, making their bond indestructible.

The activation of the prophesy also caused an ancient being to awake from his slumber. This being hunted the locked powers for himself, so that he could rule the valley and beyond.

Now that the powers are unlocked and the monster is released, the girls must train their abilities to defeat the ancient and protect the valley from further destruction.

During their adventure, the girls get serious help from their close friend, Michael. As a servant inside the castle, Michael has access to important items and has knowledge they might need during their trip.





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# CH 1

## EMILY & NATASHA

### TWO SEPARATE LIVES



Four December

Erik got out of the carriage first. The wooden steps helped him get of easily, without help from one of his servants. His left feet landed on the fresh grass and sunk in a little. Barely out, he extended his arm towards the inside of the carriage, offering support to his wife to exit the vehicle.

Raising her dress and leaning on his hand, she was able to get of safely. She would have handled it without his help, but some help was always welcome and kind.

King Erik and his wife, Elizabeth, walked on towards the spot under the tree, a little further up the hill. Elizabeth halted when she realised someone wasn't following.

"Honey, will you be joining us?" she questioned in a calm and proper way.

"Are you sure it's not too cold?" a high voice stuttered from the carriage.

"It's fine, Emily. Just come out and enjoy this day." Erik's words did not offer a choice.

“You have to use the sign, dad,” the small voice replied confidently.

Queen Elizabeth tried to hide her laugh with her hand when he looked her way. Erik rolled his eyes.

“Oh, it is so hot today, I can barely stand it,” Erik acted very poorly.

“Completely dad,” it sounded.

King Erik turned around to request his wife’s opinion, but she simply nodded.

He puffed, knowing he had to do it. Erik waved his hand in effort to create some slight breeze to his face. “Just unbearable.”

Some staff grinned with the king’s acting.

A small hand appeared on the door of the carriage, covered in a tiny woollen want. Emily stepped in the doorway, revealing herself to the rest of the people around. The small, young girl wore thick leather boots, a fluffy pair of winter pants and a woollen sweater. Together with woollen wants and furry bonnet covering her cute face. She tried stepping from the step, but her thick layer of clothing prevented any movement, making her fall face first in the grass. Elizabeth slightly chuckled.

“Ok, I’m ready,” she yelled. Immediately, staff surrounded her, covering her with large folding screens. Seconds later, she jumped through one of them, making her father roll his eyes, again. She had changed her outfit in a few seconds, and was now wearing a simple pink top and white short. Sandals to play in the grass, no socks of course and a flower in her hair.

Quickly, Emily rushed past the pair, enjoying the smell of warm air and refreshing grass. She ran towards the big tree on top of the hill. She got a fast start but had to slow down quickly, having small legs made this climb seem much harder. When she arrived at the top, she stopped right before reaching the tree. Trees create shadow. Big trees create even bigger ones. Right at the edge of it, she halted and got seated.

“I’m staying in the sun,” she announced to her parents who had caught up with her and now passed by.

“Food is at the tree,” Elizabeth claimed without even turning her head.

Emily thought of using her pout-move, but it wouldn’t work this time, definitely not on her mother. Obediently, she had to follow into the shadow. Entering it felt like going through a snowstorm in the middle of December. She could almost see the snowflakes fly past her head, until she noticed they were petals. That cheered her up. She followed the petals to the high peak of the mountain. Right on the edge she paused. Her eyes almost teared up.

She saw a large field of tall flowers at the other side of the hill, right behind the high peak. She wanted to run towards it, never return and just live between the bees and caterpillars.

Her father halted her by grabbing her skinny wrist. “Those aren’t ours, Emily. We can’t just let you run through and destroy half of the man’s property.”

Emily felt disappointed but understood his point. “One flower then?” she suggested.

“We’ll see, after supper, deal?”  
Em smiled slightly while agreeing. “Deal.”

The staff had started to prepare the picnic while the royals searched for an enjoyable spot to sit. Emily found an interesting spot with a root crawling over the surface. Some ants were walking over it in rows, transporting a piece of crumb they found further. Queen ordered staff to put down the floor-cloth a bit further, away from the ants.

Four servants came with the picnicking floor and stretched it almost perfectly straight by each pulling on one corner. Other staff quickly followed, dressing the floor with a variety of delicious looking fruits and meat. A small boy brought a bowl of cold potatoes to the blanket. He slightly stepped on the cover, making the servants gasp in chorus. Queen Elizabeth opened her eyes wildly as if something awful had happened. One man of the main staff called out for the boy:

“Michael, get your feet off the cloth, now!”

Erik hushed the man with a superior gesture:

“It’s ok. He still has to learn.” He turned and faced the little boy. “Hey little dude,” Erik spoke out with his heavy voice. The little boy showed a slight form of fear, which made the queen slightly amused.

“Don’t be scared,” he now whispered, “I’m here for you.” Erik used his big hand and brought the child closer to himself. “Listen. That lady does not like if you stand on this piece of cloth with your shoes.” The kid showed a sign of confusion and offered to take off his shoes. Erik laughed silently. “No Michael, just, stay in the grass, you can do that right?”

“Yes, sir,” Michael saluted him.

Before heading back to his responsible adult staff, he turned to Erik and gave him a quick hug.

“Thank you,” the boy nearly cried. Erik’s heart almost broke.

“I’ll be there for you Michael. Remember that.”

Elizabeth now rolled her eyes and saw how Emily was staring at them, laying on her stomach, elbows rested on the cloth, hands supporting her face. She wasn’t the only person staring. All staffs were gasping at the play with their King Erik.

Queen Elizabeth snapped her fingers and in an instant the staff broke free from their stare and continued cleaning, preparing and serving.

After the meal, Emily was rolling down on her side on the hill. The slightly wet grass left stains on her white shorts. Michael silently followed Emily down the hill, by foot. Erik had ordered him to keep an eye on her. At the end of the descent, Emily noticed him ‘stalking’ her and confronted him like a criminal.

“What do you think you are doing mister?”

“I- I was told to -”

“To stalk me wherever I go? I think stalking royalty has a special penalty.”

Michael grabbed his throat, knowing exactly what she meant.

“Heeey, Michael, I’m just messing with ya. Come here!” she grabbed his shirt tightly and rubbed her knuckles through his hair. “It’s just too easy.”

Rubbing his head, Michael announced something important: “Emily, I got something for you.”

Emily’s face clearly showed surprise. “Really?”

“Well, since it’s your birthday, I figured I should get you something, as a gift.”

“Michael, I know you don’t have much as a servant, you shouldn’t  
ha-”

Michael presented his dark pink, perfect rose right before her. “It’s one of the roses from the field nearby. I searched for the best one.” Small scratches on his legs proved he had actually wandered through the field in a search for the perfect gift.

“I even took of the thorns for you, so you wouldn’t get hurt.”

Emily almost started to cry. “That’s so sweet, Michael. You’re the best.” She quickly took the rose from his hand and gave it quick sniff. “Perfect!” She returned her look to Michael and got closer. Unsure of what to do, she gave him a quick and small kiss on the cheek. “You deserve that.”

Michael got all red and rubbed his cheek with his hand. He got bumped on the shoulder not long after.

“Thanks buddy,” Emily laughed and ran off. Michael got one step closer to her heart.



Emily ran towards Olivia. Olivia, a kind and calm lady, was the servant in charge of raising the young lady. “Olivia, look what I got from him!” She told everything to her personal caretaker.

“Isn’t that wonderful? You’ll be perfect for each other.”

“What, you mean like, together? Ugh, no, not yet. He has to earn me, Olivia. He has to prove his courage and save me in battle to show his love. Oh, and riding a white horse as well.”

“Your fantasy is endless, sweetie. Where did you learn that?”

“In a book...”

“You do you, but don’t play with his feelings, ok?”

“I guess...”

“Great, now, go on, I believe your parents have something for you. They are waiting.”

“Ok, *mom*,” Emily laughed ironically as she ran away. Olivia watched her from a distance.

On top of the hill, King Erik leaned against the side of the tree. His wife stood next to him, her arm around his slim body and she seemed to be comforting the man. Emily got closer and could hear his quiet sobbing. Mother wasn’t in the best of mood either.

“I really miss her, Eliza”

“I know Erik, me too. Me too”

“Miss who, mom?” Emily pulled on the dress of her mother. Both wiped the tears from their face, still being red around the eyes.

“Nobody, darling. We missed you.”

“Right, right,” Erik added, “We still have your gift.”

“My gift!”

In front of Erik’s feet stood a large picnic-basket. “Here you go,” they offered her in choir. At first, she gave them a disappointing look, thinking her gift is a simple basket with red and white cover.

“Open it up, darling.”

With hesitation, she opened the basket which emitted a squeaky noise. Once the lid rose, she stared right back at herself. The basket, filled with small square mirrors, reflected her face and some indirect sunlight. Her smile widened. “Really? Can I -?”

“For you only, ok?”

Emily nodded and hugged her parents after which she left the basket behind in excitement. “I’m gonna have a mirror room!” she shouted while running down the hill, nearly falling forward on every step.

The queen saw her little child run down in joy. “They grow up rather quickly, don’t they?”

Erik looked at her with anger: “Don’t say they!” After these words he started walking downwards. On his own.

The carriage moved over the hardened road that ran through the colourful fields. The fields were filled with unbelievably large flowers. Roses, like the one she got from Michael. Tulips, red and yellow. Sunflowers, beautiful sunflowers. They weren’t the only vehicle on the road though. In front and behind them, two carriages drove as some kind of buffer. King and queen Cwellan were more careful after the accident several years back.

The carriage slowed down and halted. King Cwellan put his head through the triangular door-window: "What's the matter?!" he shouted unprofessional. Queen Cwellan pulled on the sleeve of his outfit to get him back inside the vehicle. "Manners, Erik." They started a little argument which allowed Emily to escape in a haste.

"Emily, no! It's dangerous." Elizabeth shouted but was too late to stop her.

Emily sneaked past the other carriage and arrived at the gate of a local farm. The farmer was holding the gate open for his cows, so they could move from the field to their stall.

Once the animals had passed, Emily ran up to the simple man in poor clothing and confronted him:

"My mother thinks you are dangerous. I don't believe her, you look ...friendly." The farmer recognized her as royalty and knew his time with her was limited.

"You ain't bad yourself, missy. Make your own decisions in life." He smiled and gave her the sunflower that was stuck to his hat. The moment Emily received the flower, guards noticed her and ran up to the man, almost arresting him instantly.

"Sir, keep away from the little girl." The man took several steps back, raising his hands. "I'm off, I'm off."

Emily waved at the man goodbye and thanked him for the gorgeous flower, after which she returned to her carriage, where she found a furious mother. Elizabeth gave her the silent treatment. Emily wasn't affected, she was too fascinated by her new flower. Erik had also left the vehicle and was now communicating with the local

farmer. Apologizing for the rude behaviour. Elizabeth couldn't help but slap herself in the face from anger.

That night, Emily gets put to bed by Olivia. "Did you hear anything from Michael, dear?"

"No, I was in my room all evening, designing my new room outside. He isn't allowed here. No idea why."

"Everything has its purpose," Olivia preached.

"Right." Emily got the pink rose from under her pillow. "It's wonderful isn't it?"

"It sure is dear. You should stick it between the pages of a book, dry it, it will last longer."

"Really?" Emily wondered while yawning.

"I'll do it for you. I'll be right back."

A few minutes later, Olivia returned with a book in her hands. Emily was already fast asleep. So, the maiden bound the book together with a decorative bow and left it next to her bed, hoping to inspire the little girl.

"Begin early, end strong," the roman read.

At night, Emily dreams of being free. She dreams about going on an adventure with a single backpack and discovering the secrets of the world. Seeing the beauty the planet has to offer.

During the years, Emily grew up creating her own strong and independent character. With a strong attraction towards breaking the rules of her parents, she gets herself in trouble nearly every day.

Michael and she were known as the weeds of the palace, since they always bundled their powers to create distractions, to disobey Emily's father and escape together in the process. Michael mostly supports her in effort to win her trust and most importantly, her heart. If they do get caught by guards or their parents, Emily gets off with her millionth warning, while Michael gets pardoned. They never figured out why her father liked Michael that much, or why he got away with so much. But if they could abuse it slightly, they surely would.

The next challenge was for Michael. It was written on a small piece of paper that stuck to his pillow. "Your challenge: Ruin a guard's meal with salt, in the canteen." Michael already felt the difficulty tingle in his bones. "Ruin a guard's meal, in the canteen."

Guards had their own canteen, just like staff had. Royals dined in one of the great dining halls, of course. Guards were allowed to enter the staff canteen, for safety, but staff were forbidden to enter guard's canteen, except for two. Those two cleaned the room and had to leave directly after.

Anyway, Michael wasn't one of those two. If he would enter it, he'd get thrown out immediately. Still, he had to get in if he wanted to win the bet with Emily. He and she often got in bets testing each other to the limit. The one that gave up, lost something precious.

Before starting his challenge, he inspected the plans in his room, searching for the easiest way inside the canteen. Any shafts or small entrances would be his ticket in. What would he do if they found him? Take a run, or accept defeat? "That's for then," he thought.

Michael took the shortest route to the dry storage room, where he would find brundingsalt. A small bundle would be enough. On the way to the dedicated canteen, Michael wondered about his plan. Just run in and spray salt in one plate without him noticing? Or pre-spray one before they'd even get it? The latter seemed to be the best option. Instead of running in and making his plan known, he could just mix some salt in the dish and ruin it before they even get it the plate.

The small door to the side kitchen stood slightly open, perfect for eavesdropping. Michael rested his ear on the wooden planks and listened carefully. "Only two cooks. Perfect," he informed himself. He pushed the door slowly, just to be able to see their position. One was standing behind the counter, one stood at the stove. Both with their back to the door, Michael took his chance to slip inside and hide behind one of the wooden counters.

The smell of seasoned snobbles filled the kitchen. The small veggies released a strong smell when cooked, a sour one if done wrong. These chefs knew what they were up to and made the difficult dish worth it's work.

The cook behind the counter had a small and high posture. He could barely fit inside the smaller side kitchen and had to go through his knees to go under the deeper structural beams. He seemed to be preparing a specific dish. Maybe a high rank officer had required a more interesting dish than the standard plate. His knife skilfully moved over the plate, cutting the ingredients at high pace.

The cook behind the stove was a larger, more masculine guy, perfectly for scaring the newer, younger guards. Anybody who dared

to criticize the quality of his meal had him to deal with. He called out for his younger chef, to which the guy almost dropped his knife. He left the room, nearly stumbling over Michael's foot.

This was his chance. Michael sneaked up to where the chef had prepared the special dish and found a salad with the snobbles that Michael predicted before. He tossed a small hand of brundingsalt in the bowl to which the moist ingredients hissed. Barely peaking his head above the counter, he used both hands to mix in the dark brown salt through the entire dish. When done, he quickly wiped his hands on his shirt, since they started to tingle from the salt.

Leaving no traces behind, Michael dove back to a hiding spot that would hide him from the younger chef, when he would return. Getting out from the front was no option, since he would have to go through the canteen, which was impossible without being noticed. He either had to wait for that chef to return or climb through the high window. That wasn't an option either.

The younger chef ran in with a dusty bottle of wine and presented it to his chief who took it out of his hands with great haste. Instead of being praised by his superior for achieving his order, he got send back to his post to finish the dish he started. It must be important. When the young chef passed by, he could read his nametag: "Frederich."

"Must be a newbie," Michael thought. Being out of sight, he was able to escape the kitchen, smoothly. He had to warn Emily it was going to happen, fast. He knew a way that he, normally, wasn't allowed to use. Whispering waves, it was called. Long before this

castle settled, an elder woman mastered the ways of magic and invented whispering waves.

By blowing a special whistle that made no sound and whispering shortly after, people were able communicate to anyone they wanted, if those also wore a whistle. Emily wore hers constantly for emergencies, so she should be able to receive Michael's message, if he decided to use the system. The number of whistles became scarce a few years after the woman disappeared, so they were reserved for the royals only. Michael managed to find one in the personal storage room of Mrs. Cwellan.

Having no time to doubt his decision, Michael blew on the whistle that created no sound aside from a soft flow of air. After counting to three, he whispered: "It's happening, look in guard's canteen. Michael." The technology was old and didn't function as it used to, so he kept it short and clear.

In his own hurry, Michael ran outside to one of the coloured glass panels and peeked inside. Next to him, a ton with raised lid also pointed in that direction. He knew it was her, she was sneaky and fast, faster than he would ever be. The glass panel blurred the view, but it was their only option to look inside without being seen themselves.

The hall was divided in two sections. One larger section with standard wooden benches and tables, one smaller section with stone seats and pillows. Main guards would dine here. There were several main guards since they were divided into teams. Outside castle walls and scouting, gardens and gates, inside patrols and personal royal



protection. Each team had two main guards, of which one who reported to his superior.

Another one joined the table, having a fancy plate in his hands, teasing his friends with it. Once he found his spot he impatiently started eating his food in large chunks. It didn't take long for him to pause. His hands were waving, his head wobbling. Flipping backwards on his no-back seat, the man got on hands and knees and started puking. A lot.

"Brundingsalt isn't used for meals," Michael proudly announced, "It's for cleaning."

"Must have drunk a lot of beer on duty," the barrel whispered to which it moved and rolled away. Michael almost felt bad for the man, until another guard got up to help him, but just slipped on the mess and got grounded as well.

Michael followed his rolling friends to a safer place where she crawled out of it uncomfortably. "You did great, Michael," she declared while dusting off her suit. "You succeeded at your task."

He smiled proudly. "It's my turn now, right?"

"Only if you catch me," she declared while giggling. Quickly, Emily turned around and ran her heart out.

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## Ten June

The fields were blossoming. Every flower properly taken care of, every crop growing on its full potential. It would take some time for the crops to grow into large and decent veggies, but she had time. Natasha would make sure that this year, her pride potato would win the contest. Having that feeling in her head made her smile.

Her hands were al dirty from picking up weeds and trimming the extra plants Her special care for the crops surely did help. Each year they grew higher, stronger and even tastier. Something her parents, and most locals, appreciated.

A month ago, she found a strange rock in the river while fetching water. It's unnatural silver colour and perfectly smooth surface made it stand out from afar. The odd thing was: shaking the stone made it hot. Natasha didn't know what to think of it, so she simply carried it with her. Surprisingly, the crops she worked on, with the stone in her pockets, seemed to grow faster than others. She figured its magical power must come from the ancient times, where magic was still used.

Natasha heard a high voice in the distance. Her younger brother called out to her. "No need in trying to understand the words," Nat thought, "It's dinner time."

Before entering, Natasha took of her dirty shoes, preventing a mess inside. With some hard movements, she hit off the dirt from her knees and bottom.

"Hey mom," she announced happily around the corner of the kitchen.

“Natasha, you’re here.” Her mother replied nervously, dropping the lid of her pot on the stove. “Guys, she’s here all right! Come down!”

Several boys and girls stormed down the stairs holding small gifts in their hands. Some were barely wrapped or were just decorated with a single piece of rope. Natasha smiled. “Seriously mom?”

“We have to do what we can on our little girl’s birthday, so sit and enjoy ok?”

“Ok, sorry.”

The children lined up behind one another, ready to serve her presents one by one. The first present was from the brother she was closest with, slightly older than her. His present was neatly wrapped in paper and had a little bow on the top. A little card read: “Congrats Tasha, you’ll grow up just fine.” It didn’t seem very considerate but the real meaning behind it was their little secret.

“Thanx Peter.” She opened her present quickly after thanking him and revealed a small book about nature.

“Nature’s way,” it read.

Books were very rare on a farm, since barely any person could read. Luckily her father could, so he taught Peter, which then taught her.

The second child presented her gift. The little girl was about two years older than her, but Natasha looked way more mature. Nobody, not even the two of them, had any weird thoughts about it. It was just the way it was. The gift was small but appreciated. A pair of her favourite cute socks. She won them last year on the farmers market, when receiving a prize for being last. This was probably one of her

most loved possessions, but she was prepared to donate it to her beloved sister.

“Only on special days, ok?” the girl asked. Natasha answered her question with a warm hug.

Other children gave her flowers from the field or a drawing they made with a sharp stone on another one. One of them offered her a new oil-lamp so she could go to her room in more comfort. Clearly that was a gift that had passed on from her parents.

Jamie, the oldest of the nest, gave her a practical gift. He would take over her chores for the rest of the week.

“Lucky me, it’s only Tuesday,” Natasha smiled.

Her dad entered the house and noticed Natasha at the table. Without removing his shoes, he walked on to congratulate her, making dirty smudges on the floor of the hall. Mother almost lost her sanity.

In the evening, the handsome and rich lady from town came to visit her. Tasha did not know her personally, neither did her parents, but still, the lady came by from time to time, supporting their farm, remembering their birthdays and checking up with their medical needs.

“Tasha, how nice to see you again!”

“Hello, Madam,” Natasha reacted uncomfortably.

“There, there,” the lady responded with a flair in her voice, “No need to be so formal to me, you know that. I prefer Betty.”

“Betty,” Tasha corrected quietly.

After that, Betty's attention mostly went to her parents, asking them about the farm. "Is everything going alright?" "Which crops are you growing at the moment?" "Do you need any support at all? Maybe some tools?" It went on for quite some time until they ended the conversation and Betty put her focus on the person she actually visited for.

"I remember someone aged a little," Betty presented with a loud voice. Facing Natasha, she whispered into her ear: "And my favourite child it is."

Natasha had to smile, knowing she was Betty's favourite.

"I believe I owe you some kind of reward for being so helpful out here." The lady took a seat on one of the wonky chairs and presented a thin but decorated walking stick from under her cloak. The in gold covered, slightly curved stick even had a comfortable ending, offering a steady grip and support for every step taken.

"Is that - "

"Yes, yes it is. Take it. You can take it for a spin tomorrow."

"You mean, I can keep it?" Natasha almost shouted out in excitement.

"It's all yours, Natasha. Keep it with you, and stay safe." With these words the lady took a stand and thanked her mom and dad for letting her visit. Nat looked up to the woman and initiated a hug without any warning.

"Thank you, ma'am."

The lady nodded and stepped outside where she left her horse, tied to the front fence. Betty put on her hood and disappeared into the dark night, towards the richer part of town.

That night, Natasha returned to her humble room in the outside barn. It wasn't very cold outside, so she managed to go out in her pyjamas. The pyjamas were just old boy clothes, but they did just fine in keeping her warm and covered. She used the new oil-lamp she got from her sister, or her parents, but they didn't want her to feel bad, since she had no present of her own. Natasha also brought the book with her, the one she got from Peter. She had already peaked before leaving outside and found a page about bees. So interesting.

Around the corner between two heavy wooden pillars, she found her bed. Her bed, made of blocks of hay and left-over wool, was being kept warm by four cats, who happily welcomed her for the night. Smiling, Nat took a seat and placed the oil-lamp carefully on its wooden support next to the bed. "I'll give the book a look tomorrow," she thoughtfully suggested herself. "It's late, we should get some sleep and give it our all in the morning," she preached while petting the white kitty.

After finding a spot to get under the cover, Nat turned off the light and had one last thought before falling asleep. "This is nice and all, but, to be honest... I do hope they remember me, one day."

The next morning Natasha had some time off from work at the farm and decided to go hiking in the woods. Even though she had spent most her life out here on these flat lands, she felt attracted to the green and messy life a forest has to offer. Unpredictable events with wildlife and adventurous nights, trying to survive; something she would choose for in another life.

Her improvised backpack carried some bread and the Peters book. In her hand, she carried the half golden walking stick that she would protect with her life.

“On we go,” Tasha motivated herself as she stepped outside in the burning sun.

She had two options: Either go to the forests where citizens were allowed, the Brothern or Logern forest, or enter the forbidden ‘magical’ forest. She read about it in her book. The closed forest was inhabited by magical creatures from the time Magadej, the elder woman who enchanted the city to make advancements in society, still experimented on creatures.

Some experiments and animals turned out dangerous. Enchanted horses and bears turned into what seemed to be deadly beasts. When Magadej passed away, the creatures were left behind uncontrolled, which scared citizens. In order of the king, they started building a huge wooden wall to protect the city.

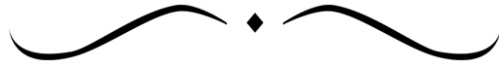
Dangerous or not, Tasha was ready to explore the magical forest on her own. The only thing she had to do was find an entrance through the massive ‘wall of protection’.





# CH 2

## MEET AND GREET KEY STONES



Emily observed herself in the mirror, evaluating the disguise she had sewed out of old cloth. This was the perfect way to blend in with the locals.

Now all she had to do was get out of the castle, get beyond the gates and surrounding walls. Unfortunately, those were constantly being watched by bodyguards. She was known for trying to escape, so her father had to take measures.

The city itself was so much more interesting than the palace. Random, friendly people and all kinds of ‘dangerous’ food. Even though the cook warned her for eating outside the palace, of catching a disease, but it didn’t stop her from trying those delicious flavours.

Starting from her bedroom hall, she took the servants hall to get closer to the main gate. No guards would find her there, probably since they were all too big in their armour to even try entering them. On of the castle’s huge flaws.

Nearly outside, Em checked her creation in her hand. She folded it neatly, put it underneath her dress and walked outside, casually.

Some garden-guards noticed her but saw nothing suspicious about her, even though Em wasn’t the best in hiding she was up to

something. Nearing the defensive wall that surrounded the castle, some guards did seem to have an eye on her.

She arrived at the smaller gate where her friend Michael was conveniently waiting. Michael was one of the staffs but did have garden duty today, so he was just 'picking weeds near the gate'. She took a seat close to him and got handed a book by her friend. The book was small and light.

"As promised," he winked and continued plucking grass between the stones at his feet.

Of course, this was a set-up. They were smart, smart enough to scheme out this plan, weeks before executing it. Having a small friend at staff was handy for every situation, even gaining a spare master key from the store room, which was only accessible via a thin passage.

She opened the book. The pages were hollowed with a knife, leaving room for one precious key. She smiled.

"Perfect!" Emily looked at Michael and nodded.

He understood his part of the plan and walked off to one of the gardeners. He grabbed one of his big scissor things and started cutting a big chunk of dark-green plant. He looked around and shouted when he dropped the scissors to the ground:

"OH NO! I cut myself, help me! Help!" Doing his theatrics, he winked at her, again. She barely noticed it and stuck to the plan. His distraction would cause the guards to lose her out of sight, allowing her to use the master key and leave through the small staff gate. Just as planned, several guards ran for Michael. Even though Michael was just staff, he was important to the king. That's likely why he got away with so much devilment. Not only *his* devilment though.

It didn't take long for the guards to notice Michael was faking and realised it was a distraction. Emily struggled with the door, which seemed to refuse the key she offered it. At last, the lock turned. Relief. She looked behind and found out how guards had already noticed her and were sprinting towards her position. Not that they were fast in the armour, but it was still quite stressing.

She pulled the door to open. It seemed like it was sabotaging her to get out. First denying her turning the lock, now being stubborn about opening. It did not move an inch. While shaking the door in frustration, it turned away from her. "Oh, I'm so stupid," she admitted.

The iron gate made an uncomfortable noise in her ears upon rotating, but that didn't matter now. Squeezing through the barely opened door made the moment even more exciting after which she fell to the other side. She used her foot to push it back into the lock, right before the guards gathered around it. They surrounded the gate, shouting at each other in effort to find the main guard who carried the side-gate key. This gate was barely opened, so only one guard, main guard, carried it with him. He was stationed at the other side of the castle, at the west-gate. "Just as planned," Em thought.

She struck a pose for them and waved: "Bye guys, see ya!" Quickly she ran towards town and disappeared from their view into an ally. There Emily would change into her camouflage clothing. The ensemble with hood should make her incognito for citizens, as well as to the guards who patrol the city and the ones who would soon

chase her. They would catch up to her, so she had to be careful. The market was big, and she had to visit lots of people. The delicious oily smell of roasted chicken passed by, carried by a breeze. “Time to go,” she whispered to herself.

The buildings around her seemed decent, at least, to her standards, but the further she went, the more primitive they got, the less attention to detail had been implied. The castle was surrounded by villa’s and rich men while the city centre itself mostly existed out of scrappy one-level buildings. But that’s where the farmer’s market was, so that where she headed.

The streets were pumped with poor people from or on their way to the market. At least, it wasn’t hard to find the way. Nonetheless, she didn’t need directions of any kind. She had been here several times and had even studied the city plans from her father’s office. Ok, some things had changed since the plans were drawn, but that’s fine. She even discovered some cool passages between housings, where it would be easy to shake off guards in a chase.

Finally, she arrived at the first stall. An iron smith. Not really her favourite of them all, but she liked seeing him work. She loved his way of handling smoking, hot metals, bending it into whatever he wants. Often, he would imply jewels into the frame, making it extra special to look at. The time she passed his stall, he was heating up a long piece of thin iron, already holding a hammer in his hand.

“Hello George, working on something?”

“Oh, hello . . .,” he hesitated, “Jasmine,” he completed.

“Nice one,” she replied and smiled.

“Well, in fact I have to work on a sword for the ceremony of knighting one of your guards.”

“Oh yeah, one of the main guards. He stopped an attack from protestors the other day. I don’t even know his name, but I’m glad to have him. The guards maybe holding me from coming here, but they do keep us safe.”

“They just do what they’re ordered to, just like that one.” He clearly and intentionally pointed with his eyes towards a guard patrolling the market. Emily quickly tightened her hood, covering her eyes to outsiders.

“Thanks George, you’re the best.”

“See ya around, kiddo, stay safe.”

Emily ran off, away from the guard, towards one of her favourite stalls. She did not need any directions, the smell would lead her. Grilled chicken. It made her mouth water. She passed by it, determined to buy some.

Having a hard time to pick one, the male staff called her out: “Oy, girl, what do you want?”

“I-, I don’t know yet, I’m just picking -”

“Don’t try an’ trick me girl, lots of thieves around here. Wouldn’t want to cut of the hand of such a young ‘n pretty girl.”

His wife finished her order and turned to him, recognising her. “I’ll take this one, Ludo,” she forced him and turned to her. “The usual, Alice?”

Emily couldn’t help but smile. So many people here knew her and even helped her along the way. Giving her new names for

anonymity was clever, especially for local town inhabitants. The lady gave her a little, but heavy bag. Em gave it a quick sniff.

“Mmm, just perfect.”

She gave the lady a golden coin in return, which made the male salesman drop his jaw.

Golden coins were the currency from the royalty. Staff from the castle would go in groups to visit farmers privately. They would make a deal with them and eventually pay them with one or more golden coins, depending on the order. Golden currency was only used between royals or as a token of cooperation with them.

Once a week a small but fortified building close to the castle opened for the public. The locals called it: “The bank,” while Emily just went with “trading centre”.

Here, locals could trade in their golden currency for local currency. It seems like lots of work, but it’s worth it. Picture this: Receiving golden currency is a token of respect. The status of it is worth a lot which makes you gain some extra value for your deeds. So, farmers surely liked working with the royal kitchen, but of course, only the best ones could. And above that they would only buy unprocessed food, like potatoes, carrots and living animals. They wouldn’t even think to work with someone that prepare the chicken for them.

“It could be manipulated or poisoned,” the words of chef Frederich flew through her head.

“Sure, sure,” she comforted her thoughts, while she took a new sniff of the freshly grilled meat.