The Maiden's Treasure

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Summary

AU fantasy. The story of a maiden, a prince, a treasure, and a destiny.

Summary: At age 18, Prince Fitzwilliam of Pemberlea disguises himself as a soldier in order to defend his country against Auroran invaders. That same year, a young maiden of 12 named Elizabeth receives a magical treasure: four acorns with the power to reveal truth, give courage, bring love, and make peace. The last one, she is told, must be bestowed on the man of honor who is destined to bring peace to the land.

Eight years pass, and the acorns have transformed into brilliant jewels, indicating that their power is at its height. Will Elizabeth be able to find the man of honor? And when she does, will he accept his destiny?
Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, in the kingdom of Pemberlea, the king and queen gave birth to a son, whom they named Fitzwilliam. Young Prince Fitzwilliam was a cheerful boy, and kind to all the servants.

The young prince became good friends with two boys his age, Charles and George, both sons of servants in the castle. The three youngsters would often pretend to be soldiers fighting great battles, turning large sticks into swords. In this way, they became quite good at swordsmanship.

When the prince was fourteen, his mother died, leaving both the boy and his father sad and withdrawn. In his grief, the despondent king seemed like easy prey to his enemies, and the neighboring country of Aurora soon invaded. The vicious soldiers of Aurora burned down entire villages, looting all the gold and any other precious metals they found and killing all the inhabitants except the young women, whom they sent back to Aurora to become wives of the Auroran men.

The war continued for years, and as a result, young men from all the villages and towns of Prince Fitzwilliam's land were sent off to fight. When Charles and George joined the army at age eighteen, the prince asked his father if he could join as well.

The king looked at him sadly. "My son, you are all I have left. If I lose you, how could I go on living?"

"Please, Father," Prince Fitzwilliam begged. "I cannot sit back and do nothing while my people are being slaughtered. I must fight for our country and people!"

Hi father sighed deeply. "I will consult Thumpin."

Fitzwilliam nodded, thinking of the old tailor he had met but once, who was his father's most trusted adviser.

When the letter from Thumpin arrived a few days later, the prince pressed his father, eager to know the response.

The king beheld his son, his eyes etched with sorrow and his lips pressed into a thin line. "He writes that I cannot withhold a young man from his destiny."

Grateful but aware of the pain he was bringing his father, Prince Fitzwilliam embraced him tightly. "May God bring you back to me safely," the king whispered in his ear.

About this time, a young maiden of twelve named Elizabeth lived in a small village in the prince's kingdom. She was the second of five daughters of a farmer and his wife.

Despite the worried talk among the villagers, Elizabeth was a happy young girl, for her village had not yet been invaded and she had no brothers fighting in the war. She enjoyed taking daily walks into the forest, where she would pick wildflowers and watch the small animals scamper. Occasionally she was thrilled to spot the lovely sight of deer.

One day, she heard a whimpering cry among the trees, and she sought out its source. She finally
spotted a young fox kit, caught in a hunter's snare. "Oh, you poor thing," she cried, immediately taking pity on the pup.

She knelt down and gently stroked the kit to calm it, and then carefully pried open the trap in order to release its leg. She removed her apron and soaked it with water she carried in a flask, and then applied it to the kit's leg until it stopped bleeding. Under her tender ministrations, the fox soon seemed to recover its spirits, licking her hands with its small tongue.

She cuddled the young fox to her chest. "Do you know where your home is? I must take you back to your mother!"

She startled when the fox answered her. "I live under the root of a large oak tree," it said. "If you take me there, I will give you a treasure, to thank you for your kindness."

When Elizabeth recovered from her surprise, she stood up with the fox in her arms and followed his directions to his home. When she arrived at the large oak tree, the fox scampered to the ground, where he was warmly welcomed by his mother and brothers and sisters. As the young kit nuzzled his mother, he said, "She is the one, Mother. I have found the young maiden worthy of accepting the treasure."

The mother fox approached Elizabeth. "Thank you for caring for my son. Please, lift the large rock near the base of this tree. Under there you will find the most valuable of treasures."

Elizabeth lifted the rock and saw a small wooden box. She opened the box and saw within it four small acorns. She was puzzled, but decided to accept the gift. Who knows, she thought. Perhaps to a fox, this is indeed treasure.

"Those may look to be ordinary acorns, but appearances can be deceiving," the vixen said, as if reading Elizabeth's thoughts. "Look closely at each one. Do you notice something special?"

As Elizabeth examined the acorns, she noticed that although all were brown, each one had a slightly different tint, especially when held up into the light. One appeared somewhat green, the second red, the third silver, and the fourth gold. "They're different colors," she said.

"Yes," the mother fox replied. "Now I know that you are without doubt worthy to receive this treasure, for an ordinary human could not distinguish between these acorns. Each one has a special purpose. Three of them are for you alone to use, and the fourth you are to bring to a man of greatness. The green acorn is the acorn of courage. When you find yourself afraid, rub it and you will receive bravery without measure."

Elizabeth peered at the green acorn and nodded.

"The red acorn is for discernment," the fox continued. "When you fear you are being deceived, rub it and the truth will become known to you."

Touching the red acorn, Elizabeth nodded again.

"The silver acorn is for love. Rub it when you want love to come to you or your family. And finally, the gold acorn is for peace. This is the only one you cannot use yourself. Instead, you must bring it to a man of honor, the only man capable of bringing about peace."

Elizabeth exhaled, overwhelmed. She could scarce believe that these small acorns could have so much power—but until today, she never would have believed that foxes could talk. If the vixen's words were true, then she truly held the world's most valuable treasure.

"One thing I must caution you," the fox added. "Except for the man to whom you give the gold
acorn, you must never tell anyone about this treasure. And you can only rub each acorn once, so choose the time to use each one with great care."

Elizabeth carefully placed the acorns back in the box, and curtsied to the mother fox and her children. "You have honored me with this treasure. I will use it well."

When she returned home that evening, Elizabeth laid the acorns in a small cloth sachet and tied it firmly. Then she tied the sachet to a string, which she placed around her neck. She knew this was a treasure she must always protect.
A Long War

Eight years later

The sun had barely begun its ascent, not yet high or bright enough to burn off the fog that shrouded a cluster of hide worn tents. As a gentle *whit-whit-whit* sound broke the early morning silence, a tall man lying in one of the tents began to stir.

The birdsong repeated, and the man awoke with a start. Cupping his hands over his mouth, he repeated the call of a quail seeking a mate.

A few seconds later, his song was rewarded by the raindrop-like patter of fingertips against his tent. Opening the fold, he admitted a thin, handsome blond man.

"Captain Darcy," the man saluted.

"Charles," the captain replied. "What news?"

Their voices roused the three other men in the tent, who sat up to hear the report of their company's best spy.

"It's bad, sir," Charles answered. "The last of the southern villages has fallen to the Aurorans. Only the fortified capital city remains."

The men in the room met these words with curses.

The captain exhaled. "And the king?"

"Heartbroken. Word is he has taken ill, and is considering surrender."

More curses followed from the soldiers. Only the captain was silent, his face betraying no emotions.

Charles looked at his friend with sympathy. In the entire army, only he and George knew that this young officer, who had risen in rank quickly as a result of his intelligence and leadership, was the kingdom's prince. Fitzwilliam hadn't wanted special treatment, so he had enlisted under the name William Darcy—William being a common enough name among Pemberlean boys, and Darcy being an old family name on his mother's side. When he begged his friends to keep his secret, Charles had joked that it would be easier to revert to calling him Will, as they had as young children, than it had been to start calling him "Your Highness," when they reached adolescence.

The men in the tent soon grew silent as they waited for word from their commander. Captain Darcy sat on a small wooden stool and tapped his temples with his fingers—a habit he had adopted from his brief meeting with the old tailor Thumpin.

Although the castle employed dozens of tailors, seamstresses and weavers to make the royal family's clothing, the king trusted only one man to stitch his regal sash. Each year he paid a visit to a village in the northlands, where a man known as Thumpin Taylor lived.

Shortly after Fitzwilliam's thirteenth birthday when he was due to receive his first sash, his father brought him to visit the tailor, accompanied by several members of the royal guard. On the carriage ride from the southern capital city, the prince asked his father what made the man's
sashes so special. "It is not the fabric or the thread," the king replied. "It is the stories his sashes
tell."

When Fitzwilliam protested that he didn't understand, his father only said, "You shall see."

When they arrived at the small thatched roof hut in the village of Lambton, the prince's confusion
grew. This man could scarce be but a peasant, he thought. Why would one so grand as the king
pay such a man a visit?

The small man who answered the door and bade them enter appeared ancient, his face so brown
and wrinkled his skin looked like bark, and his head sparsely covered with only a few thin white
hairs. But his green eyes were clear, bright and shining. Although several of his teeth were
missing, his smile was wide and inviting.

The small room was furnished with only a bed, a table with one chair, a cabinet and a loom.
Despite the lack of luxury he was used to, Fitzwilliam was surprised to find himself at ease. A
cackling fire filled the room with warmth, and he inhaled the delicious smells of pine and mutton
stew.

The old man took one of Fitzwilliam's hands in his own, his grip surprisingly strong. He bowed
toward the prince. "At last I meet you, your highness," he said. "You father has told much about
you."

Fitzwilliam could only nod as the man led him to sit on the bed, while the king took the chair.
Feeling strangely comfortable with this funny little man, he asked, "Is Thumpin your real name?"

"Shh, Will!" his father scolded.

The little man merely laughed. "No, it's Thurman. But this…" he paused to tap his fingers against
his temple, "… is how I think."

The prince grinned in understanding. "You thump your head. Thumpin!"

Will smiled slightly, remembering how shortly after that visit he had begun to do the same
whenever he needed to think deeply. He placed his hand in the pocket of his waistcoat and
massaged a small piece of fabric, what little remained of that very first sash Thumpin had sewn for
him. He was supposed to receive a replacement each year, but after his mother's death and the
invasion, his father never again visited the old man. Still, now and then the king would send word
to the tailor when he was in need of advice.

The piece of fabric held one of many images the old tailor had stitched into the sash—a small gold
acorn. This was the one image on the sash the boy had disliked. According to the king, the sash
was to represent not only the royal family, but the prince's character. So the prince had hoped for
images of power like those on his father's sash, such as fierce wolves and soaring falcons.

An acorn was a pitiable substitute for such glorious figures. Although he didn't speak these
thoughts aloud, the old man seemed to recognize his disappointment. "A small object," Thumpin
had said, his finger tracing the tiny nut, "but holding the seed of the mighty oak tree within it. And
a gold acorn is even more special, for it can bring forth the power of peace."

"Peace," Will thought grimly, beginning to thump his temples again. Would surrender bring
peace? After twelve years of fighting, he knew that his soldiers and the people of Pemberlea were
weary of war. But with so many dead, so many villages destroyed, so many young women stolen
from their homes, surrender would mean accepting that fate. He shook his head. His father was
not thinking clearly. There could be no peace in surrender.
"Send word," he said to Charles, "to all the commanders and to the king. We will not surrender! We will come up with new strategies. There must be a way to regain our lands and win this war. And I will find it!"
A Newcomer in the Village

Jenna's anxious bleating greeted Elizabeth as she entered the barn. The speckled goat began to nuzzle her young mistress' apron pockets, searching for food scraps saved from the previous night's soup.

Elizabeth laughed and stroked her rough fur. "Excited as always, aren't you, girl?" She allowed Jenna to eat her fill, and then settled on a stool to milk her swollen teats.

As she tugged in a familiar rhythm, filling a wooden bucket with warm liquid, the young woman found herself sighing. She wished she could rise as eagerly as Jenna. But the days had grown tedious, filled with chores, bad news, and not much else.

Without thinking, Elizabeth's hands reached for the sachet around her neck, causing Jenna to bleat in protest. Her mistress smiled softly and returned to her milking, murmuring an apology to the goat.

The sachet, Elizabeth knew, was a large part of her discontent. From the age of twelve, she had thought herself heir to great destiny, one that would bring peace at last to their war-torn land. Yet she was now twenty years old and here she remained, as did all her sisters, on this farm, tending the gardens and animals and praying that the fighting remained far removed.

Of course, "far removed" only meant that thus far their village had been spared from invasion. No community in Pemberlea was untouched by the war. Metal and fine goods, which traveling traders used to bring, had become scarce. In the place of the traders came couriers, telling of yet another defeat.

Far worse, many young men with whom Elizabeth had grown up had gone off to fight, some never to be seen again. Sadness filled many households, and her mother despaircd ever finding husbands for her daughters.

Jenna's teats now emptied, Elizabeth rose and lifted the bucket in one hand. Her other hand touched the sachet again. In the years since the strange meeting, she had searched the forest repeatedly, but had never again spotted the fox family. She had always been imaginative, and would no doubt have begun to think her encounter with the kit and his mother was merely a dream, were it not for what lay within the soft cloth.

Her family thought her odd for carrying a cluster of acorns with her always. When Elizabeth became distraught one day after bathing to discover that her mother had attempted to discard the acorns, her sisters had laughed at her. But they no longer teased; they had come to accept that for some unknown reason, Elizabeth valued the small, brown nuts. For that is all they appeared to be to her family.

Elizabeth knew better. When she was alone during walks in the woods, she sometimes opened the cloth to gaze within. Over the last eight years, the acorns had changed—but only to her eyes. The faint hints of color had become brilliant shimmers, the nuts now appearing to be rich gems, glimmering stones of emerald, ruby, gold and silver. Their surfaces had become as smooth as the most polished of swords. Yet they were not cold to the touch, as she might expect. Holding the acorns filled her hands with warmth and radiant energy.

Elizabeth had no doubt that the acorns were as magical as the vixen had promised. But what was
she to do with them? At times, she considered disguising herself as a man and traveling to the battlefront. Her sensible mind always quickly discarded that foolish plan. And so she waited, day after day, year after year, for her destiny to begin.

Walking carefully to not slosh the milk, Elizabeth entered her family's cottage to discover the home in uproar, her parents and sisters babbling noisily. "What is it?" she inquired of Jane, her eldest and most levelheaded sister. Perhaps the war is over? she wondered.

"Mama has news," Jane answered. "I think I'll let her tell you."

Elizabeth looked about in curiosity. From her sister's smile, it seemed that for once good news had come to Merrytown. "What is it, Mama?" she asked.

"Oh, Lizzy!" her mother cried, her freckled cheeks pink with excitement. "I brought eggs to the baker this morning, to trade for bread you know—"

"Of course we know, my dear Fanny," her father interrupted. "It's what you do every morning."

"Oh how you vex me!" her mother scolded. "Lizzy must first hear where I heard this news before I tell her what it is!"

Lizzy's father chuckled. "Then please proceed, my dear."

"Lizzy, I have heard that the Widow Burg's field is let at last!" her mother declared triumphantly.

"Her nether field, near the woods?" Lizzy asked. "Who would let a field in a small village like Merrytown during wartime?"

"A single man, that's who!" cried Lydia, Lizzy's youngest sister. She and Kitty, the next youngest, began to giggle in glee.

"That's wonderful for the Widow Burg, but what has that to do with us?"

"Oh, Lizzy, how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of you girls."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! nonsense, how can you talk so!" Her mother shook her head in exasperation. "But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of you, and therefore we must visit him as soon as he settles in."

Elizabeth sighed. "Mama, I am sure this young man, whoever he is, will be very busy replanting the widow's fields that have lay fallow ever since her sons died in the war." She placed the bucket of milk on the table. "Besides, if he is in want of a wife, Caroline or Anne would be more than happy to fill that need."

"Foolish girl! The Widow Burg's daughters are not half as beautiful as my girls!" Her mother sniffed. "Although, you, Lizzy, are not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humored as Lydia. And those silly acorns you carry! I am sure he will find you much too odd to consider in marriage."

"Now, now, my dear, Lizzy has the most quickness of our daughters," her father defended. "But if it is beauty this young man wants, perhaps you should stay away, for as you are as handsome as any of them and this young man might like you the best of the party."
With this comment, the conversation turned away from Elizabeth, much to her relief. She cared nothing about the coming of this stranger. She had a destiny to fulfill.
Arrival in the North

Two steeds snorted in contentment, finally having a chance to eat and rest after a long night of riding. Charles grinned up at his friend as he knelt to refill his flask with water from the nearby stream. "Look how clear the water is, Will! And I do believe that the air is fresher here in the north!"

Will's grunt matched that of the horses. He hadn't spoken since they had dismounted.

His eyes peered around the clearing. The forested northlands were indeed beautiful, but his dark mood prevented him from appreciating their surroundings.

"What's on your mind?" his friend finally asked.

"Is this truly the right plan? I worried before that I was endangering our men. But now… are we putting innocent people at risk, too?"

"Fine time to ask that question, isn't it, now that we have scattered our soldiers far and wide?"

Fitzwilliam exhaled heavily, thumping his forehead. Charles was right. The soldiers had already been sent out to villages all over the northern lands, his grand strategy to defend the north against the invaders. After the loss of the southern lands, he had written to Thumpin, asking desperately for advice. Thumpin had written back, "Observe nature. Neither predators nor prey expose themselves openly. They all use disguise."

The prince had interpreted that as a suggestion to abandon the usual warfare tactics of sending large troops out to battle. Instead, he would disperse his troops around the towns and villages of the north, disguised as traders, farmers and the like, dressed in the clothing of ordinary people, not soldiers. If soldiers were already present in the villages, they could better help the people defend themselves. Indeed, with rapid communication provided by a network of spies led by Charles, the soldiers could easily re-gather to plan sneak attacks on the Aurorans. Will's plan was to slowly retake the southern lands, one village at a time.

He and Charles would be stationed in a small village called Merrytown, ideally placed near the border between the north and south, but obscured by the dense forest that surrounded it. Charles assured him the widow from whom he had let a field in the village was deeply loyal to the Pemberlean cause. Her late husband had been knighted by Will's father for his service to the king many years ago, and her two sons had been killed by the Auroran army.

"You're thinking about that girl, aren't you?" Charles interrupted his rumination.

Will grimaced. Indeed, a young girl had been much on his mind the last few weeks.

After eight years on the battlefront the prince had become hardened to death and suffering. But that hadn't prepared him for the horror he had felt when a peasant man had come to their last encampment, screaming in anguish. "You! You and your men did this to her!" the man cried.

Several of his soldiers restrained the peasant and asked the Will if they should kill the man for his accusations. "No," the prince replied. "He's obviously grieving. Let's find out why."

The bitter man spat out his story. His only daughter, a girl of fifteen, had been violated by one of the soldiers.
"Are you sure it wasn't an Auroran, sir?" Prince Fitzwilliam asked. "Their barbarism is legendary. Our soldiers would never do anything like that!"

"No, it was one of you!" the man screamed. "He wore the coat of the red stripe like your soldiers, not the purple stripe of the Aurorans!"

The prince was deeply disturbed by this news, but certain there must be some explanation. Perhaps an Auroran soldier had stolen the uniform of one of his men and violated the girl in disguise. He asked the peasant to take him to his daughter.

Fitzwilliam's heart was pierced when he saw the young girl, whose name was Georgiana. She was small for her age and beautiful, with golden hair and blue eyes. Yet her expression was filled with sorrow and when she spotted the uniforms worn by the prince, his friend Charles and another soldier who accompanied him, she cowered behind her mother in fear.

"Which one was it, Georgiana?" her father cried. "Which one did this to you?"

Trembling, the girl pointed at the prince. "YOU!" the man snarled, and lunged for him, only to be restrained by Charles and the other soldier.

The girl began shaking her head wildly. She pointed to the prince again and touched her hair, and then ran her forefinger across her right cheek several times. "I think she's saying he looks like the man, but isn't him," the girl's mother said.

The prince's thoughts flew rapidly. Looks like me but isn't? Who would that be? Suddenly he realized what the girl's gesture meant. Like Fitzwilliam, his childhood friend George was tall and had dark, curly hair. Unlike him, he had a scar across his right cheek, borne in battle. His worst fears were realized. It was indeed one of his own men responsible for this outrage.

Charles recognized the truth an instant later. "It was George," he said softly. "But why? There are plenty of girls coming to the camps."

There were. Lacking husbands and often food, many of the young women from the southern villages visited the army camps, offering themselves to the soldiers in exchange for a meal. There was no need for George to cruelly harm a young girl if female companionship was what he wanted. Will burned with anger. "We know the man who did this, and we will make sure he is punished," he vowed to the girl and her parents.

They were too late, however. By the time the prince and Charles returned to camp, George had already fled.

"I would like to think our men have integrity, Charles," he said slowly. "But I was deceived by George. What if there are others in our army like him? I am sending them to live in the towns and homes of people like that peasant family. People with daughters."

"You're doing this to protect their daughters, Will! I know what George did was terrible. But it was an exception. Meanwhile, think of the hundreds of young women who have been stolen by the Aurorans!"

Will's nose flared and his brown eyes darkened in determination. "You're right. We will win this war! The Aurorans—and George—will pay for what they've done!"
Three days after her mother's news, Lizzy returned from milking Jenna to once more find her sisters all aflutter.

"The Widow Burg is throwing a party for her new tenants!" cried Lydia. Two tenants, for indeed, there wasn't just one young man, but two. Apparently, the one who'd let the field had brought a friend with him. Her sisters were excited about the prospect of two single men in the neighborhood, but Lizzy's only thought was that they were smart to come together. The field, fallow for three years now, would be too much work for one man alone.

"Can you imagine, Lizzy?" Kitty added. "We will have feasting and dancing!"

"And just how is the widow to accomplish that?" Lizzy asked, perhaps too sharply.

"We'll all help, of course," said Jane.

"Yes, and Widow Burg will take all the credit." Lizzy knew that most of the village would contribute food to the feast the widow was planning, but she nonetheless would act as if the entire meal resulted from her riches and generosity. Her daughter Caroline would be even more boastful.

Lizzy sighed. She knew she should be compassionate, given what the family had suffered. If the Widow's situation had been different, she wouldn't have needed to let her field in the first place. The Burgs had once been the wealthiest family in their village, Henry Burg having been knighted years ago for some service to the king. He and his sons were strong and hardworking, which was good, since Lady Burg, as she insisted upon being called, had chosen to become a woman of leisure after her husband attained nobility status. Her elder daughter Anne had always been sickly and unable to help on their farm. Her younger daughter Caroline decided she would become just like her mother, certain that she would never be required to do a day's work and that some fine, wealthy man would one day marry her.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck the family three years earlier. The two sons joined the army and both were killed in battle. When the news came to Merrytown, Lord Henry's heart stopped and he died.

The fortune of the widow and her daughters had slowly disappeared, and now they were in dire straits. Yet they continued to act as though they were still the community's leading family. Caroline especially was wont to put on airs. Most of the other villagers tolerated this behavior, concluding that it was the only way Widow Burg and her daughters could handle their grief. Secretly, they slipped food and other goods onto the family's porch at night so that they wouldn't starve.

Remembering this, Lizzy reminded herself to be kind, but sometimes it was hard. The widow and her family weren't the only ones in the village who had lost brothers and sons.

When the day of the party arrived, her household became a flurry of activity. As expected, her mother was screeching for her girls to help with the preparations. "Jane, how is the cheese coming along? Lydia, have you started cutting the onions for the stew? Mary, the cabbage! Lizzy, have you finished skinning that rabbit? Oh, and where is Kitty?"

The dirtiest jobs always went to Lizzy, Mama assuming that her most tomboyish of daughters had
the strongest stomach for it. She did not know that anything to do with killing an animal pained Lizzy to her core. Realizing that rabbit stew would provide a tasty welcome for the newcomers, however, Lizzy suffered through the job without complaining.

Her father busied himself polishing and tuning his fiddle. He was a skilled player, and had hoped to pass on the gift to his sons. Having no sons, he guarded his instrument jealously, although Lizzy suspected that her sister Mary sometimes sneaked a few strums when Papa was out in the field.

When the food was prepared, Mama began rushing around, barking at the girls to get ready. Kitty had picked wildflowers, and four of the girls were threading them into their hair. Kitty turned to Lizzy and offered her a bunch.

Mama slapped Kitty's hand. "Your sister does not need it! She has her acorns to adorn her!"

Kitty looked at Lizzy in apology, but Lizzy just smiled and shook her head. She had no interest in attracting the young men anyway.

The family finished dressing, and carried fiddle and food to the party. Along the way, they met the family of Lucas the Blacksmith, whose daughters, Charlotte and Maria, were good friends of the sisters.

Charlotte stepped in between Lizzy and Jane, looping her arms in their elbows. "I am so eager for this party! Young men at last!"

Jane laughed. "Yes, but there are only two of them, and many of us. They will be exhausted from dancing tonight, I am sure."

"If the mothers do not tear them limb from limb first, each one trying to snatch them for her daughters!" Charlotte quipped. All three young women laughed.

They arrived at the Burg home, the largest in the village, but now fallen somewhat into disrepair. Widow Burg stood by the front door, greeting her guests. To save the widow embarrassment, the mothers and daughters carried their food offerings around back, while hearing Lady Burg cry out, "Ah, Blacksmith Lucas and Farmer Ben, welcome!"

After placing food on the large table just inside the back door, Mama and her sisters returned around front to enter, but Lizzy remained in the kitchen to help set up. She could hear shouts and laughter, and her father beginning to play.

A while later, her mother came into the kitchen. "It's supper time, Lizzy, don't be lazy! Start bringing out plates of food!"

Jane and a few of the other women joined her as they began to serve plates and bowls and carry them to the guests. While the guests of honor sat at the main room's dining table with the Burg family and leading men of the village, most others found seats on chairs, stools or benches.

"Have you seen them yet, Lizzy?" Jane asked when she finally took a seat on a bench between her and Charlotte.

Lizzy looked over at the two young men at the table. One was slender and blond-haired, the other muscular and dark. The Widow Burg's younger daughter Caroline was leaning over the dark-haired one, placing her hand on his arm and shoulder repeatedly. He appeared to be trying to avoid her, but as he was seated beside her at the table, the task was impossible.

Lizzy chuckled. "I assume Caroline is staking out her claim?"
"She's certainly trying," Charlotte noted. "But wait until he and his friend see Jane. Caroline will be no match for our village beauty."

Jane blushed, crying out, "Oh, no!"

Lizzy patted her arm and smiled. "I would not be surprised if one of those men falls in love with you." Jane was indeed the most beautiful young woman in their village, but very modest.

Charlotte went on. "The blonde is named Charles, and the dark-haired one Will. Many have speculated that they are wealthy, but I have heard that their village and farms in the southland were burned. They likely came here with not much more than some coins and the clothes on their backs."

"Ah, but when men are few, scheming mamas will not be choosy," said Lizzy, "as long as they have riches besides money, such as youth and vigor and good looks."

Charlotte grinned. "Of that, these men have riches aplenty!"

When supper was finished, Lizzy and some of the other women gathered the dishes and returned to the kitchen to wash them. She heard her father's fiddle begin again, along with the rhythmic sounds of feet dancing and hands clapping.

A while later, she heard a screeching sound from the fiddle, and the dancing apparently coming to a halt.

Her father entered the kitchen. "Come quickly, Lizzy, you must save us all!"

"What is it, Papa?" she asked.

"I put my fiddle down to take a short break, and your sister Mary picked it up! She is attempting to play and she cannot! The Widow Burg has begun to disparage our family, claiming she could play better had she ever learned!"

"And what am I to do?"

"Sing, Lizzy! You must sing! No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think anything wanting."

Reluctantly, Lizzy nodded and wiped her hands on a towel. When she returned to the main room, he father announced, "My daughter Elizabeth will now grace us with a song!"

Several applauded and Mary, biting her lip, lowered the fiddle and sat down. Lizzy felt awful, seeing her sister's embarrassment. But everyone was looking at her in expectation, so she began to sing.

Winter comes, the seeds find sleep,
Their life seems o'er, but do not weep,
Spring returns and the buds will flower
Harvest comes at its appointed hour.

As she continued to sing about the cycles of nature so familiar to country life, people began to dance again. As she had expected, Jane appeared to have caught the eyes of one of the two newcomers. The blond one was now dancing with her.
The dark-haired man remained seated, however, despite Caroline's tugging at his hand as if to convince him to dance.

He was staring at Lizzy, which made her nervous. Did he dislike her singing? No matter. Her courage always rose with every attempt to intimidate her, so she stood tall to finish her melody.

Everyone clapped and she curtsied. Dishes done, family shame averted, Lizzy decided that it was time to take in some night air. She left the house and began to stroll beneath the stars.
First Impressions

Will and Charles spent their first few days in Merrytown discovering the lay of the land in their new home. The widow's house was the largest in town, on what appeared to have once been fine property. But the yard on which the house stood and the adjoining field had become overgrown with weeds and berry bushes.

Otherwise, the location was ideal. From the back of the widow's house, the yard sloped downward abruptly; someone had accommodated the incline by building a set of stairs leading down to the nether field. A small hut abutted the back of the field that had probably served as a place of rest for tired farmers during harvest season. Charles and Will would live in the hut during their time in the village. Beyond the hut lay a vast forest, an excellent spot to explore and gather wood and stone for weapons. A barn on the property, unused due to the family having sold their animals some time ago, would serve to stockpile weapons as well as to stable their horses.

Land and weapons would not be enough, however. They needed manpower. And thus, as men in the neighborhood began to stop by to introduce themselves, Charles and Will observed each one carefully, trying to determine which of them could be trusted to enlist in protecting the village.

"Welcome, lads," said one, a large man with a bulbous nose and friendly smile. "I'm Lucas, the blacksmith here in the village."

"You find much work these days?" asked Charles.

"No, indeed, for metal is scarce. I make do with mending what my neighbors already have."

Will and Charles exchanged glances. This man might be useful. He had time on his hands and a skill that could help in fashioning arms for battle. Still, they needed to find out more. Although they wanted to assume that everyone was supportive of the war efforts, they realized that they had to be careful.

"My good friend Bennet," Lucas introduced the man who'd come with him. "He's a local farmer. We call him Ben."

Less talkative than his friend, Ben nodded and shook hands with Will and Charles. His fingers were calloused, as expected from his vocation, but his handshake was almost delicate, as though he were protecting his hands from the younger men's grips.

Lucas asked what had brought them to Merrytown, and Charles shared the story he and Will had rehearsed about losing their homes in the southlands. They then asked the two visitors about their families.

Lucas said with pride, "My Margaret and I have been married for a score and a half. We have three strapping boys, ages 10, 12 and 14, and two daughters, who are young ladies now."

Again, Will and Charles looked at one another knowingly. Lucas' sons who would soon be old enough to join the king's army. He would no doubt have great interest in the outcome of the war.

"And you, Ben? Have you a family?" asked Charles.

"A wife and five daughters," Ben answered. "Do you like the fiddle?"
"The fiddle?" echoed Will, wondering at the man's abrupt change of topic.

Lucas laughed heartily. "Oh, yes, Ben is our village musician! He's quite the fiddle player. He's always looking for a new audience. No doubt he wants a chance to share his talents with you!"

Charles chuckled and said he was looking forward to hearing Ben play, but Will just shook his head. Ben was not a promising prospect at all. With only daughters, he had no one to send off to war, and now he was babbling about his fiddle, as if that were his only care in the world.

The young men continued to make new acquaintances during the day, while the widow and her daughters invited them to sup every evening. Charles and Will did not want to refuse their hostesses' hospitality, but it quickly became apparent that the family had not much to share. What little they did have seemed to have been provided by their neighbors.

As such, the two men were very surprised when Widow Burg announced, a few days after their arrival, that she was throwing them a party.

Will's initial reaction was to refuse the offer, but he could see that giving them the feast was a point of pride for the widow. Moreover, it would provide them with an opportunity to scrutinize the entire community.

Yet as the evening of the party drew near, Will's apprehension grew. He had begun to suspect that the community considered this party less about welcoming them to the village, and more about placing them on the local marriage market for the many young women around. He and Charles were the only single men in their twenties in the entire neighborhood who were hale in mind and body. All the rest were married—or dead.

What was worse, the widow's younger daughter, Caroline, seemed to believe that he had come to the village for her sake. She spent every mealtime smiling at him, attempting to touch him, and chatting eagerly about how they would soon dance together. Well, he would end that wishful thinking quickly. He would dance with no one, allowing no speculation about him and any young woman in Merrytown.

Nevertheless, Caroline positioned herself next to him at the party, describing each of the neighbors as they arrived. As much as he wanted to move away from her, her gossip could prove useful in identifying who each person was.

"And that," she was saying, "is Farmer Ben. He and his wife Fanny have five daughters between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two."

Will nodded, remembering. "He's a fiddler, correct?"

"Yes, and a rather talented one actually. It's a good thing his daughters are hard workers, or his farm would be ruined, since he spends so much time practicing."

He almost laughed at the irony of Caroline's statement, given the condition of her own family's field.

"Ah, and those are his wife and daughters. All the silliest girls you will ever meet, except the eldest one, Jane, who is quite sensible."

"You said there are five daughters. I see only four."

Caroline rolled her eyes. "The missing one is Lizzy, the oddest of the bunch. She has for years carried this strange sachet of acorns around her neck. She has a tendency to wander away for hours at a time." She leaned toward him and whispered, "Some suspect her of going off to be a
Will looked at Caroline in shock. "How does a girl like you know about such things?"

Caroline laughed. "I am not a child, you know. My brothers were in the army, and they wrote about those immoral women in their letters. Not that they ever partook, of course."

Will frowned. A camp girl in this community could be a problem.

Caroline's gossip proved right in many ways, as Farmer Ben's daughters proceeded to behave in very silly ways throughout the party, the youngest two coming up to him and Charles repeatedly, giggling and then running away. Worse, the middle one picked up her father's fiddle and attempted to play, but clearly lacked her father's gift.

When Farmer Ben announced that his daughter Elizabeth would sing, he sat up on alert. This must be Lizzy, the odd one Caroline had described. He watched her carefully, trying to determine whether he had seen her visiting any of the men in his company, but she did not look familiar.

As the most beautiful voice he'd ever heard came forth from the young woman's mouth, he continued to stare. How could a dissolute camp girl sing so sweetly?

Caught up in her music, he did not notice that Charles had joined the dance floor, Farmer Ben's eldest daughter in hand. Will spotted the two after Lizzy stopped singing and Farmer Ben returned to playing. The one called Jane was a lovely young woman, and Charles continued to dance with her, song after song. What was that fool thinking?

He fumed as Caroline kept trying to persuade him to dance, and finally snapped, "I have no intention of dancing. Now please excuse me."

Will stormed over to Charles. "I need to talk to you," he said through gritted teeth.

Charles looked at him as though baffled. Reluctantly, he asked Jane to excuse him, and the two men walked through the kitchen and out the back door.

"What are you doing?!!" Will demanded as soon as they were outdoors.

"Enjoying our new neighbors."

Will hissed in frustration, "If I can't trust you, Charles, how can I trust the men I've sent to other villages? You have a mission to complete! You are not here to court the farmers' daughters!"

"Will, there are almost no marriageable men left in this village. Of course these people are going to look at us as potential mates for their daughters! And they will become very suspicious if we act uninterested!"

"Camp girls aren't enough for you?"

Charles was silent for a moment, his expression livid. "That's a rather harsh insult. I'll admit I have enjoyed a few camp girls in my time, but I'm a man. I have needs, and I won't apologize for them. Not everyone is as self-controlled as you are!"

Will glowered back. Charles knew he couldn't risk siring any offspring, creating scandal at best or leverage for his enemies at worst if illegitimate children of the prince were discovered.

Charles sighed. "While I'm here, I fully intend to stay focused on our mission. But I also want to enjoy the company of a beautiful and sweet young woman, one who hasn't given herself away too
freely." He placed his hand on Will's shoulder. "You should, too, Will. It will do you good to relax for once. Why don't you get to know Jane's sister, the singer? She's very pretty."

"You mean the odd one? I've heard she is a camp girl. And I want nothing to do with other men's dregs."

"Ahem," they heard, and turned to see a young woman approach. Lizzy was standing near them. *How long has she been out here?* Will wondered. Had she overheard them talking about their mission?

"I'd like to go indoors, if you'll please allow me to pass," she said quietly.

They stepped aside and she opened the door to the house and entered. Charles shook his head. "Very nice, Will. You're making a fine first impression on this community." He followed the girl into the house, slamming the door behind him.
Charles visited Jane often over the next month, and Lizzy became convinced he was falling in love with her. Jane's feelings were less clear. She tended to closely guard her emotions, even from Lizzy.

Lizzy often wondered whether things might have been different had she never met the foxes. Unable to tell her dearest sister about the treasure, Lizzy knew that Jane suspected her of withholding something important. While as the two eldest girls they continued to spend a lot of time together, they were never as close as they had been before that day eight years ago.

Lizzy had passed the morning spreading manure in the gardens and was returning to the house to wash when she spotted Caroline approaching. Strange, for Caroline had never visited their home as far as Lizzy could remember.

Caroline wrinkled her long, thin nose in disgust when she saw Lizzy. "Aren't you the clean one," she sneered.

Lizzy pursed her lips as she thought of a retort. "Caroline! How lovely to see you! Come, let me give you a hug!" She held out her arms and ran toward her.

Caroline screamed. "Get away from me! Don't touch me with those filthy hands, you misfit!"

Lizzy couldn't help but laugh. "Why not, Caroline? After all, these filthy hands will help ensure an abundant harvest for the entire community."

Caroline glared, catching Lizzy's meaning. "I'm just here to invite Jane to supper tonight."

"Only Jane?"

"Well, we certainly wouldn't invite you! Mama has apparently noticed Charles' fondness for Jane and thought it would be a kindness to our guests to have her over."

"You mean your tenants."

"Our guests. Make sure you let Jane know." With that, Caroline pivoted on her heels and departed.

Shaking her head, Lizzy walked over to the well to draw water. She poured it over her hands, scrubbing them with soap, and then entered the house to tell Jane of the invitation.

That afternoon it began to rain gently, which didn't surprise Lizzy as she had seen the clouds gathering. Soon the rain grew heavier and Mary cried out, "The animals!" She and Lizzy rushed outside to herd the horses, goats and chickens into the barn. Before they had finished, the downpour had turned into a fierce summer storm.

Jenna, stubborn as always, resisted coming in as she had discovered a bush of ripe blackberries that she was thoroughly enjoying. Lizzy had to tug and prod the goat until she finally forced her into the barn. She then ran back into the house, completely soaked.

Only after she had dried off and changed her clothes did she notice that her eldest sister was not there. "Where's Jane?"
"Off to join Charles for supper, of course," her mother said.

"You let her go in this weather?"

"Let her go?" Lydia laughed. "Why, Mama practically forced her out the door."

"Mama, what were you thinking?" Lizzy cried out. She pointed out the window where trees were swaying wildly in the wind. "Look at this! It's a long way to the widow's house. Jane could get hurt!"

"Nonsense!" her mother said. "Jane may not roam about as much as you do, but she certainly knows how to get to Widow Burg's house."

Thunder cracked, and Lizzy looked outside again in trepidation. She had spent far more time outdoors in rough weather than Jane had. "I'm going out to find her."

"How can you be so silly," cried her mother, "as to think of such a thing, in all this rain! You will not be fit to be seen."

"And Jane will be?"

"Why, that's my lucky idea, Lizzy! Jane will arrive soaking wet, and Anne or Caroline will have to give her one of their fancy dresses that the old Lord, rest his soul, purchased in the capital city. When Charles sees her in that finery, he'll be sure to ask her to marry him!" Her mother smiled in satisfaction as if her plan were anything other than absolutely absurd.

"Risk her life on the off chance that she might wear a pretty dress?" Lizzy shook her head in disbelief.

"Well, dear Lizzy," said Papa, "if your sister should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Charles, and under your mother's orders."

Infuriated that her family was so flippant about Jane's safety, Lizzy declared, "I'm going." She grabbed a cloak and set off to find her sister.

Lizzy ran along the road, avoiding the trees but unable to miss the muddy puddles in her path. When she could see the widow's house in the distance, she stopped to catch her breath. There was no sign of Jane.

Worried, she decided to leave the road, crossing into the woods and then through the widow's nether field and arriving at the back door more rapidly than it would take her to follow the winding path to the front.

Despite her desire to reach the house quickly, she stopped short when she arrived at the field. She looked around, stunned. The two men from the south had arrived in late spring, when there was still time to start some planting with starts offered by other farmers. Yet more than five weeks later, they had done nothing. No overgrowth had been pulled, no ground had been plowed, and no crops had been planted. The field looked unchanged from what it had been before they had arrived, except that the weeds had grown higher.

Why had Charles and his friend come to Merrytown? They were no farmers; that was for certain. So who were they and what were they doing here?

Fear suddenly gripped Lizzy's heart. Her sister. Her sister might be in love with a man who was not what he seemed. She had gone to sup with him, as part of Mama's plan to get him to marry
her. She was possibly with him at this very moment. Lizzy started running again. Jane might be in danger, and she had to save her.
A Man with Secrets

Lizzy arrived at the widow's home and banged on the back door in order to be heard above the sounds of the storm.

After a few moments, the dark-haired man, the one who had insulted her so abominably the night of the widow's party, answered the door. He looked over her disheveled appearance with disapprobation. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"I am here to see about my sister."

"She arrived here a short while ago as dripping wet as you, but she had an invitation."

Lizzy looked straight into his eyes to let him know that his glower did not scare her. She knew he thought badly of her, but she did not care; she had no reason to desire his good opinion. "Invitation or no, she should not have gone out in this weather."

"And you should have? Your parents allowed it?"

Before she could answer, she heard Lady Burg call out, "Who is it? I must know who you are talking to!"

Charles' friend sighed and gestured for Lizzy to enter. "Remove your boots," he said before leaving the kitchen, most likely to report her arrival to the widow.

Lizzy stepped into the kitchen gingerly, taking off her boots and placing them just inside the door. She looked up as she heard Caroline enter the room.

"Oh for heaven's sake, Lizzy, look at this mess you're making!" Caroline shrieked. "And your skirt is covered in six inches of mud! What in the world are you doing here?"

"I've come to see Jane."

"For what purpose?"

Lizzy ignored the question. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs with Anne, changing her garments."

At that, Lizzy turned to walk up the rear staircase. Caroline called out after her, "You can't go up there! You'll track mud everywhere! Lizzy!"

Lizzy had never been upstairs in the widow's house before, so she was uncertain which room was Anne's. However, only one room on the upper floor had the door closed, so she knocked.

"Who is it?" she heard Anne say.

"It's Lizzy, Jane's sister," she answered.

Anne opened the door, looking at Lizzy with surprise. "Oh, you're wet, too. Come in, quickly, before you catch cold."

"What are you doing here, Lizzy?" Jane asked.
Lizzy stared at her sister. She was wearing the most beautiful gown she had ever seen, made of a rich red brocade fabric decorated with flecks of golden thread. "Oh, Jane, you look like a princess!" Lizzy exclaimed.

Anne smiled, her thin, wan cheeks brightening a little. "Doesn't she? Goodness knows I have no opportunities to wear this, so I am glad I can give it to Jane."

Lizzy's eyes grew large. "You're giving her this dress?"

"Lizzy, I asked what you're doing here," Jane repeated.

Lizzy turned toward her usually serene sister, puzzled at her angry tone. "I… I was worried about you. Because of the weather."

"I'm fine, as you can see."

"Lizzy," Anne interrupted, "you need to dry off."

She handed her a towel, and Lizzy began to wipe her hair and face. She regarded the elder Burg daughter for a moment. Anne seemed to be to be a kinder person than her sister. She was about five years Lizzy's senior, while Caroline was the same age as Jane. Lizzy had rarely interacted with Anne despite living in the same community their entire lives. Although Caroline had often joined the other children in playing on the village green, Anne always remained indoors, too weak, her mother claimed, to be exposed to the elements.

"Here," Anne said, "try this one on, Lizzy." She handed her a silky gown of emerald green.

Lizzy smiled. "It's beautiful and you're very kind, but I couldn't possibly accept this."

"Please take it. You need to change into something dry before you get sick."

Lizzy nodded. "All right. Thank you." She touched the dress, noting that this gown, too, was adorned with images sewn with gold threads. She caught her breath as she made out the pattern—acorns. Golden acorns.

"I'm going downstairs," Jane stated.

"Wait!" Lizzy looked up with some alarm. She didn't want her sister around Charles unless she was present to observe them. "Will you wait until I have changed, too?"

Jane pressed her lips together for a second, but then seemed to soften. "All right, Lizzy."

Lizzy finished changing into the gown, the finest garment she had ever worn. It was a bit tight in the bodice, but would have to do, as Jane clearly did not want to be kept waiting. All three women then descended the stairs, Lizzy and Jane in their stocking feet.

As they walked down, they could hear the voices of the occupants of the Burg's main room.

"So crude, that family," Caroline was saying, "they let their girls run wild."

"Because they have no heirs, they allow their daughters to act as sons, instead of young ladies," the Widow Burg added. "I have tried to advise Fanny again and again on how to rear them, but she will not listen!"

Anne looked apologetically at Lizzy and Jane. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.
"It's not your fault," Lizzy whispered back.

"And what could Lizzy possible mean by coming here to see her sister? To walk three miles, or four miles, in a thunderstorm, to invade someone’s home uninvited? It shows an abominable sort of conceited independence!" Caroline went on.

"It shows an affection for her sister that is very pleasing," said Charles.

"You observed her, Will, did you not? I am inclined to think that you would not wish to see your sister make such an exhibition."

"Certainly not, but it's a moot point, as I have no sisters."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. Anne looked as though she were dying of embarrassment, and Jane appeared on the verge of tears, so Lizzy took the lead to enter the main room.

"Good evening, Lady Burg, Caroline, and your guests," she announced, curtseying as she walked in.

Charles alone greeted her, standing and bowing and telling her she looked quite lovely. Widow Burg and Caroline appeared apoplectic as they eyed her in the gown, while the dark-haired man's expression was inscrutable.

Charles' smile widened when Jane walked in, which seemed to brighten her sister's mood. He took her by the hand and led her to the seat beside him.

Lizzy watched them carefully. Charles seemed to truly care for Jane. If only she knew who he really was and what he was about!

Anne looked around the room. "Please, let us go to the table and sup."

"We have a quandary, Anne," said Caroline, "for we have only six settings for supper. Perhaps Lizzy should return home, since she was not invited."

"Caroline!" Anne scolded. "Regardless of how she came, Lizzy is now our guest. And she cannot go home in this rain."

"She arrived in the rain; why can she not leave in it?"

"Caroline!"

"If it's all the same," Lizzy said, "I'd rather stay until my sister is ready to depart, but I do not need to eat."

"She may have my meal," said the dark-haired man.

"Oh, no!" Caroline patted his arm. "You have much work to do in the field, Will. You need your strength."

Lizzy looked at the man pointedly. "Yes, I am sure you are working very hard in the field. I insist that you eat." With these words, she had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing.

The man's dark eyes seemed to bore into her. "No, I insist," he said firmly. "I would have no appetite for supper knowing that a young lady goes hungry."

"Then it's settled!" said Anne quickly, as if to defuse the tension. "Lizzy, you will eat here tonight,
and Will, we are all grateful for your generosity."

Supper was a strange affair, with Charles and Jane talking in soft voices to one another, Caroline striving to do the same with Charles' clearly uncomfortable friend, and the Widow Burg opining about all and sundry, while Lizzy and Anne exchanged amused looks with one another. By the time they finished, the rain had stopped, and Charles and his friend offered to walk Lizzy and her sister home. Anne handed them their wet clothing, which she had folded and wrapped in towels.

Charles had hoped to trail behind with Jane, but his friend was as forceful about making them lead the way as he had been about giving up his supper. Charles seemed to defer to the other man, perhaps because he was such a big, tall fellow. Lizzy looked at the man curiously. He appeared to want to keep an eye on the couple as much as she did.

As they walked, she took the opportunity to probe him.
"Your name is Will, is it not?"
"Yes."
"So how is the work in the field going, Will?"
"Well enough."
"I would imagine it would be quite difficult, given how long the field had lain fallow."
"We are managing."
"This is a community of farmers. There are many who would gladly lend you a hand, if you ask."
"I said we are managing," he snapped.
Lizzy pursed her lips. _ Caught you, _ she thought.
"Where are you from?" she went on.
"The southland."
"I know, but where in the southland? What was the name of your village?"
He seemed to hesitate and then said, "Lambton."
"Curious," Lizzy answered, "there is a village in the northland named Lambton."
He paused and stared at her for a few seconds. "There is one in the south, too."
"And that's where your farm was?"
"Yes."
"What did you grow there?"
"You're very inquisitive."
"I'm a farmer's daughter; it's a topic of interest to me. And it's not a difficult question." She scowled at him, having grown rather irritated with this man who was clearly hiding something. She considered rubbing the red acorn, but did not want to waste its power. She would keep trying
to find out the truth on her own.

He continued to ignore her question, pointing instead to the couple ahead of them. "Your sister and my friend seem quite taken with each other."

"Yes, they do. Do you approve?" she asked, suspecting he didn't.

"It's not my place to approve. She seems like a sweet girl."

"But not to your liking? You would prefer Caroline perhaps?"

The man snorted and emitted a sputter of laughter, making Lizzy almost like him. He was still smiling as he asked, "Why all the questions?"

"You're newcomers. Of course we are going to be curious about you. But I can't help but notice that you are having a hard time answering."

He stopped and looked right into her eyes. "Trust me, Lizzy. There are some things you are better off not knowing."

He would not speak to her again except to say goodnight when they arrived at Lizzy's home.
The Enemy Arrives

After the fierce storm, the sun returned bright and hot the next day. Will's mood followed suit, vacillating between gloomy and angry and leading him to quarrel with Charles as a result. Two issues preyed on Will's mind: the lack of enemy action they'd seen since their arrival in Merrytown, and the conversation, if you could call it that, he had had with Lizzy while walking back from the widow's house. He recalled that night with dismay, for her appearance had been distracting—she had looked exquisite in the dress she wore—and he had been unable to respond as nimbly as he should have to her sharp inquisition.

His quarrel with Charles began when he broached the first of these topics with his friend. Although they'd made strides in preparing Merrytown for invasion, Charles' scouting efforts had turned up no sign to date of Auroran soldiers encroaching northward. "I worry," Will said, "that something is afoot that we've missed while hidden away in this remote village."

"Yes, but what a village it is!" Charles answered dreamily. "Where else could I have found such an angel?"

"Charles!" Will chastised him. "You are here to be a fighter, not a lover! Have you forgotten your duty?"

Charles laughed. "You really are itching for a battle, aren't you? I declare that I do not know a more awful object than you when you have nothing to do."

"You forget your place!" Will snapped. "I'm your prince and your commander! This woman you're so fond of could easily become the Aurorans' next victim if you do not keep your focus! Must I forbid you to see her, or are you ready to be a soldier again?"

Charles glared at him for a moment before pressing his lips into a thin line. "You're right," he finally said. "I'd never forgive myself if I weren't ready to defend Jane and these people. The Aurorans are still out there. Let's see what we can do to find them."

Grateful to have Charles' full attention again, Will neglected to ask about Lizzy. He had wanted to ask whether Charles had observed anything unusual about her during his visits to Jane, or if Lizzy's sister had mentioned anything about her that they should know. The girl had raised his suspicions with her questioning, making him wonder whether she threatened to make trouble for them.

Once he and Charles began plotting their tactics, however, Will soon forgot about her. *It is for the best,* he thought when he recalled her again just before falling asleep. If he had asked Charles about Lizzy, his friend's mind would no doubt have turned back to Jane, or worse, he might have assumed that Will's interest in the young woman stemmed from something more than concern that she might interfere with their mission.

By the afternoon of the second day after the heavy rains, conditions had dried out enough that Will had decided to enter the forest again to gather more raw materials for weapons. The solitude of the woods gave him a chance to reflect. His plotting with Charles had been timely, making him much more alert than he had been in recent weeks. His vigilance served him well, as did his good fortune to already be kneeling in the brush when he caught sight of the purple striped uniforms. He crouched into as small a position as he could, holding his breath and watching as two enemy soldiers passed by. Something *was* afoot. After nearly six weeks in Merrytown with no sign of the
adversary, they had finally arrived.

Once the two men were safely past him, he rose and resumed moving. Will crept swiftly but lightly, his eyes rapidly scanning around and down, trying to avoid both obstacles in his path and any additional Auroran spies who might be in the vicinity. He needed to return as fast as possible to the village to warn everyone and prepare for battle. He couldn't be sure how many Aurorans were around, or how soon they planned to attack.

A sudden glow amid a patch of trees caught his eye, as bright as sunlight but much closer to the ground. He lowered himself behind a fallen birch and peered between the leaves to get a better look into what appeared to be a small clearing.

He frowned when he spotted Lizzy sitting on a tree stump, his unanswered questions about her returning with a jolt. Now he had new ones: what was she doing so deeply in the woods, and what was creating that glow? He looked closer. The glow was coming from her hands. He watched her for a moment until she opened her fingers, revealing the contents within. He sucked in his breath.

Gemstones. She held what were clearly gemstones of gold, silver, and if he were not mistaken, ruby and emerald. Yet these gems were more brilliant than any he had ever seen in the castle. His heart began to beat rapidly as he noticed their shape—that of acorns.

And one of them was golden. Like the symbol on his sash. Like the images on the dress she had worn at the Burg home.

How had a simple farmer's daughter acquired such valuable jewels? Had she stolen them? And from where? And what did it mean that one of them was a golden acorn?

His next thought was more practical. He had to hurry back to Merrytown to sound the warning, but couldn't in good conscience leave the girl here. As long as she remained in the woods, she was vulnerable to encountering the Aurorans and whatever nefarious actions they might have in mind. He had to get her to safety.

He slipped as quietly as he could through the brush until he stood only a few feet behind her. Hearing a noise, Lizzy turned and spotted him, a startled look on her face. Before she could speak, Will rushed forward and grabbed her firmly, wrapping his left arm tightly around her torso and covering her mouth with his right hand.

She squirmed ferociously in his grasp. Saliva drooled down his hand from her attempts to bite him. He needed to calm her down, and quickly.

"Please, Lizzy," he whispered, "I intend you no harm. But there are Aurorans in this forest, and I am sure that they do."

She trembled, but ceased to struggle.

Will looked around and noticed a patch of oak trees about twenty feet from them. Turning the girl to face it, he asked softly, "Can you climb that tree, the second one from us?" The tree in question was tall and sturdy, with boughs that branched out enough to allow a climber some leverage. Furthermore, its upper limbs were well-hidden by the neighboring oaks.

She nodded.

"All right. I am going to let you go, but first, you must promise me that you will move fast but neither run nor scream. Then you must climb that tree as high as you can, and I will be right behind you. Do you promise?"
She nodded again.

Will inhaled and released her. Instead of moving immediately toward the tree, she knelt down. He thought that she was in fact planning to run, but no. She had bent over to gather up the gemstones in a cloth that lay on the stump.

Clever girl—not wanting to leave something so valuable behind, especially something that could reveal their presence to the enemy.

Jewels in hand, she moved quickly toward the tree and began to climb. She was limber and fast, and as he watched, he noticed she wore knee-length men's breeches underneath her skirt. Unexpectedly, he blushed, realizing what he might have seen had she not worn trousers.

There was no time to worry about embarrassment. As soon as she reached the upper branches, he too began to climb. He settled into a strong fork between two limbs, slightly below Lizzy.

She stared down at him, her frightened eyes as large and round as saucers. They were hazel, he observed, framed by dark lashes and a few auburn curls that had escaped from the ribbon that held her hair. Her skin was a golden hue from the sun, with freckles lightly dusting her small nose. Her lips were pink and full. A vision of her in the form-fitting emerald ball gown flashed through his mind.

Will tightened his fists. He should not be noticing her this way at a time like this! He turned his attention away from Lizzy, scanning the forest from their high perch, hoping to spot the enemy spies.

Lizzy tapped his arm with her foot. He turned toward her, and she pointed. The spies were nearby, scarcely seventy feet away, and heading in their direction. He placed a finger over his lips, and she nodded. As the men walked closer, their voices became audible.

"...very few young men in this village..."

"...so isolated, we can take it easily..."

The girl gasped and immediately covered her mouth with the hand that held the jewels. As she did so, two of them fell to the ground, making a distinctive plopping sound.

The Aurorans froze and looked around. Sweat began pouring down Will's face. The gold and red gems had fallen in the grass beneath them, and were shining as brightly as if someone had lit a small fire where they lay. His mind frantically raced as he tried to determine how he would fight the two men and protect the girl, since he was certain they would soon be spotted. The spies were already looking in the direction of the gemstones; all they had to do was approach and look up.

A warm summer breeze started to blow, creating whistling sounds as the trees swayed. Several acorns dropped from the tall oak trees around them.

One of the Aurorans chuckled. "Nuts falling, that's all. To be expected when your land is full of forest."

_How had they not noticed the gems?!_

The two men began to walk again. Will and the girl watched until the Aurorans became specks, striding in the direction of the stream.

He waited for some time before he motioned to the girl that it was time to descend the tree.
When Lizzy reached the ground, she exhaled heavily, as if she had been holding her breath all this time. She rested her head against the tree and closed her eyes.

He shifted awkwardly, unsure how to respond to her obvious distress. He finally decided that if he could touch her to restrain her, he certainly could touch her to provide solace. He gently rubbed her back and said softly, "It's all right, Lizzy. You're safe now."

It seemed to help; she lifted her head and re-opened her eyes. Then she bent down and recovered the fallen gems.

The gems! It was time to find out where they had come from. He grabbed her hand that clutched the jewels. "Where did you get these?" he demanded.

"They're acorns," she answered. "Look around, they're everywhere! To be expected when your land is full of forest," she mimicked the Auroran.

Did she think he was a fool? How could she tell such a ludicrous lie! "These aren't acorns, they're the finest jewels I've ever seen! Where did you get them?"

She laughed. "If they were fine jewels, don't you think the Aurorans would have noticed? And don't you think it's more important to return to Merrytown and warn everyone about what we've seen, rather than standing here interrogating me?"

Will wasn't used to dealing with insolence, and his temper flared. "Who are you, a thief?"

"Just what I appear to be, a farmer's daughter who has never been far from my village. The real question is, who are you? And why are you here in Merrytown?"

"Our village and farms in the south were burned, so we fled—"

"That's the story you've told everyone, but it's a lie! You and Charles have never farmed anything in your lives. You're lucky Widow Burg is too old, Anne too sickly and Caroline too lazy to check on you! But everyone will soon know when you produce nothing for the harvest. So why are you really here?"

Will wondered what to say. Tell her the truth? Ha! Trust this odd girl who might not be a camp girl—too far from the battlefront, he reasoned—but most certainly was a thief and a liar?

He suddenly noticed that she had begun to rub one of the gemstones, the red one, between her thumb and forefinger. He watched the gemstone gradually lose its color and shine, and turn into the simple brown acorn she had claimed it was all along. How had she done that? Was she a sorceress, too? A chill swept through him. Who was this girl?

"You're a captain in the king's army, and you've come to protect us!" she declared. "And you're something more, too, but it turned brown before I could see…"

Suddenly her face broke into a huge smile. "I know who you are! That's why you could see the gemstones! You're the one I've been waiting for!"
The Gemstones

Lizzy began to laugh in delight. He had come at last! This was the man who would bring peace! She was surprised that it was Will, especially after their exchange while walking back from the Widow’s house, but it made sense. He was tall; he was strong; he was obviously a leader. Others would listen to him.

She was almost dancing with joy. She had never imagined how the man of honor would be revealed to her, but now she knew. Will could actually see the acorns' gleaming! It had to be him!

He was looking at her strangely. She stifled her laughter, certain that he must think her mad. But he would understand as soon as she explained about the magic.

"This one," she said breathlessly, holding up the now-brown acorn, "it was red before. You saw it, right?"

He continued to gaze at her apprehensively, but nodded.

"This is the acorn of discernment. It showed me who you really are. I can only use it once, that's why its color and shine have disappeared."

He looked bewildered, so she began to explain quickly. "When I was twelve, I rescued a fox kit from a trap and returned him to his mother. The vixen could talk—yes, I see your look, Will, but it's true! She could talk, and she gave me a treasure to thank me. It was these four acorns, all slightly tinted, and over the years they have become brighter and brighter. And no one can see it but me! But you can! That means you're the one! She said I could tell no one except the man who would bring peace, and she didn't say he would be able to see the gems, but it makes sense that the man of peace could see them! Each one has the power to do something special, give truth or love or courage or peace, but the vixen said I could only use them once! And I never used one until today, when the red one showed me who you are! So it's true, it's true, it's TRUE!"

She laughed again gleefully, spinning in a circle.

"You're insane," the man shouted.

She stopped whirling abruptly. "I know it seems like madness, but you have to believe me. Here, the gold one is the acorn of peace." She held out the golden acorn to him, and he jumped back as if she had offered him poison.

"Please take it," she pleaded. "The vixen told me that only the man of honor can use the golden acorn. When you rub it, it will at last bring peace to our land. I can't do it. You are the only one who can."

"This is ridiculous," Will muttered.

"No, it's not. I have known how powerful these acorns are because I watched them grow brighter year after year. And now that I've used one, I am absolutely convinced of their magic. So many people have died, and you have the power to stop it. Please, please take it!"

He shook his head. "That's not possible."

Lizzy was confused. Why wouldn't he take the acorn from her? Wouldn't the man of honor want
to bring peace? Maybe he just doubted that acorns could be magical. She would have to convince him.

She held out the set of gemstones toward him. "Here, look at them. You see them. You called them the finest jewels you'd ever seen. But to everyone else, they are naught but simple acorns. You know this," she emphasized. "You and I both watched the Auroran soldiers overlook them. They wouldn't have if they could see what you and I see."

His look of skepticism suddenly vanished, replaced by something that seemed more like fear. Just as quickly, he hardened his face, banishing the fright from his eyes and replacing it with a more menacing expression.

She swallowed hard, but would not allow him to intimidate her. He was the one; he had to accept it. "These acorns are truly magic, Will. How did I know who you are? Because the red acorn showed me!"

"You're a clever girl. You knew we weren't farmers. You could certainly figure out what we were instead." He paused to glare at her. "Or perhaps you discovered the truth some other way. Maybe all this babbling about magic acorns and talking foxes is a ruse to cover up your sorcery."

Lizzy laughed nervously. "I'm no sorceress. I have no power on my own. Besides, aren't sorceresses evil? Why would I want peace if I were evil?"

"If you want peace with the Aurorans, then yes, you are evil," he spat. "There can be no peace with those barbarians!"

Lizzy bit her lip. Had she misunderstood? This man spoke of peace with contempt, his heart seemingly filled with bitterness. She tried one more time. "The Aurorans are now here, and you have the power to end this before anyone else dies. You're a soldier. Don't you want the war to end?"

"Not until every last Auroran is destroyed. Then and only then will peace come—if such a thing even exists."

She fought to hold back her tears. She didn't understand why Will could see the gemstones, but one thing was clear. He was not the man of honor. Not only that, but she had perhaps ruined any chance to find the true man of peace by telling this charlatan about the acorns. She breathed in to control her heartbreak. "Well, since you're so bent on destruction, let us return to Merrytown to warn my family and neighbors about the soldiers we've seen."

"That's the first wise thing you've said, Lizzy."

In silence, they ran swiftly through the woods back toward the village as the sun, now a bright rose, began dipping in the sky. When they arrived at the beginning of twilight, Lizzy cocked her head to the left. "I will warn everyone who lives in this direction. Please sound the alarm for everyone who lives that way."

"You're brave, I'll give you that, but insane and foolish. You're a girl. These are dangerous times. You need to return to your home and stay there!"

Having lost all respect for him, Lizzy no longer cared to speak politely. "I'm a woman. And this is my village, and these are my neighbors. I will be a part of helping to save them!"

Apparently he realized she wouldn't be swayed, because he nodded. Lizzy ran from house to house, telling everyone about the presence of Auroran spies with plans to take the village. At Charlotte's home, Blacksmith Lucas also admonished her to go home. "You've done well to warn
us, child, but this is men's work now. Go home and be safe, and let the men gather supplies and weapons. We'll alert the rest of the neighborhood."

On another day, Lizzy might have listened to the blacksmith, but today she was still furious at that bitter, dishonorable man. She knew the forest better than anyone, and loved the people of her village, no matter how left out she sometimes felt. There had to be *something* she could do to protect them.
A Fierce Battle

Within two hours, Will's appointed local "officers"—Lucas the Blacksmith, Philip the Miller, and two farmers named Alfred and Jeffrey—had helped him to assemble most of the men in the village at the barn on the widow's property. Word had gone out for all women and children to remain indoors, with windows and doors barricaded. Soon after the group gathered, Charles arrived with about two dozen men. He had ridden to some of the villages farther north, calling in other members of the king's army who had been in hiding, as well some villagers those men had been training.

Since their arrival in Merrytown, Will and Charles had instructed the four men they had identified as leaders to have conversations with their neighbors about the importance of preparing for possible invasion. Those who were receptive met the men at night in the nether field, where they had engaged in war exercises. In this way, about half the men in the village had been trained for battle. For the other half, protecting their families and homes would have to be their motivation.

During the past several weeks, Charles had worked with the sons of the four men, teaching them how to act as spies and lookouts. In the forested community, all were excellent tree climbers, which would come in handy. Charles had taught them how to communicate using various bird calls.

Inside the barn, Will and Charles began to hand out the arms they had been amassing since their arrival: wooden shields, bows and arrows crafted from pieces of timber, crude swords fashioned from rusted tools found abandoned in the barn, spears formed with handles of wood and tips of stone. As they had anticipated, Lucas had indeed proved to be a fine weapons-maker.

Will and Charles also retrieved several swords and daggers made from the finest steel. The entire arsenal was a shock to many of the male villagers, but the latter weapons especially. "Where did those come from?" asked one wide-eyed adolescent, still willing in his youth to admit ignorance before the assembled group.

"They brought them with them," answered Lucas. "These men," he pointed to Will and Charles, "are soldiers in the king's army. This is Captain Darcy and his Lieutenant Charles. They will be our commanders tonight."

Will stepped forward. "As you know, Aurorans were spotted in the forest today. It's possible they are planning to invade tonight. They have used stealth and ruthlessness to capture the southern lands, attacking unprepared villages at night. Their assaults stop here and now!"

He began to give instructions for the plan they'd come up with: each of their officers would lead a "troop" of men to different sections of the village. Everyone would remain in hiding, behind structures or trees, or crouched behind bushes. Eight boys would hide in very tall trees, able to observe any enemy soldiers coming from various directions. The boys had been instructed to provide certain bird calls as alerts. Owl hoots would mean men were entering from the stream; the nightingale's song meant from the south; a warbler call meant east; and robin, from the west. The length and repetition of the bird call would indicate how many enemy soldiers had been spotted, calculated in tens.

Will girded himself with his scabbard and dagger, which he had not worn continually since they had arrived in Merrytown. He strapped a bow and a quiver of arrows across his shoulder. He wished he could carry a sword as well, but it was not possible, as they had to distribute the
weapons so that each man had two.

The night was cloudy as the men set out to take their positions. Will pressed his lips, grateful for the small blessing. The lack of moonlight would make seeing difficult. However, it would be just as hard for the Aurorans and likely harder. The Merrytown men knew their community well; the invaders did not. He just hoped that the lookout boys, the youngest of whom was Lucas' twelve-year-old son John, would be able to correctly identify shapes in the darkness.

Will took his place alongside the barn on the nether field property and waited. He heard a few owl hoots, but they were short in duration; actual birds, he concluded, not the lookouts.

Several hours passed. Before leaving the barn, Will had impressed upon the men that the wait might be long, the invaders might not even arrive that night, and that they must hold their positions despite the uncertainty. Thus far, all was silent; no one seemed to be returning to their homes.

A short while later, he heard it: the sharp whistle of the nightingale. It repeated. Twenty men, from the south.

An owl hooted in the distance, once, twice. Twenty men, from the direction of the stream.

Another sound, the gentle cheep of the warbler. Two times. Twenty more men, from the east. Will waited, but no other sounds came through the night. Sixty were invading this village, from three different directions. With the local men and the soldiers Charles had gathered, the Merrytown defenders had a little more than sixty. They were evenly matched, but stealth and readiness would be their best advantage.

A bright orange light appeared in the distance. Fire in a field, he guessed, one of the Aurorans' tactics. Suddenly he saw them: about a dozen men in Auroran uniform, creeping into the nether field from the forest. Along with Will, there were four other Merrytown men in this field, so each would have to take out two to three men. Silently, he removed an arrow from his quiver, positioned it on his bow, and waited.

An arrow shot into the night, a direct hit in the chest of one of the Auroran men. The man cried out, and his compatriots began firing their own arrows in the direction from which the arrow had come. Will aimed and shot, taking out another Auroran. Arrows began flying from different directions, and soon, all twelve enemy soldiers were dead.

One of the Merrytown men ran out in the field, shouting in celebration, perhaps thinking the fight was won. Will gritted his teeth and aimed an arrow just past the man. The man dropped to the ground as the arrow whizzed by his head. Will ran over to him, kneeling and whispering, "This isn't over yet! If I had been an Auroran, you would have been dead!"

The man looked up at him in fright. Will reached out his hand to help the man stand, and then whispered, "Let's move on." He looked up. The flames he had seen in the distance were gone.

The fighting raged on for the next several hours, with the Merrytown defenders managing to hold off or kill most of the invaders. As he became certain an area was clear, Will moved on to new sections of the village to reinforce the other fighters.

The battle sounds were diminishing. Had they driven the invaders off? Will had begun to sink back toward the widow's barn when he spotted an Auroran soldier climbing a tree. He caught his breath. It was one of the lookout trees, the one in which young John was positioned. Had the soldier spotted the boy?

Not waiting to find out, Will burst from his hiding place, ran and grabbed the man's legs, pulling
him to the ground. The man swung his legs out and side-kicked Will, causing his knees to buckle. The prince held his ground, however, and drew his dagger, aiming it at the man's chest. "Have mercy!" the man shouted. Will grunted and thrust the dagger. He withdrew it, wiped the blood on the grass, and re-sheathed it.

A sound came from the nearby trees. Will knelt down and began to peer around. Another Auroran in hiding? He drew an arrow and began to creep toward the woods. He moved quickly from tree to tree, searching, but saw nothing.

When he was certain no more enemy soldiers were in the vicinity, Will returned to the tree where John had been hiding. He could hear the boy whimpering. He stood below the child, whispering, "You're safe now. Come with me."

John did not move, so Will started to climb. When he reached John, he held his hands out. The boy placed his arms around his neck, clutching him. "Do not tell Luke," his voice quivered. "He will call me a coward."

Will began to descend the tree carefully with the boy in his arms. "I will not tell your brother, but you are no coward. You neither screamed nor ran. There is nothing cowardly about feeling distressed by the death of another. It means you have a heart."

Will carried him until they were well past the corpse of the Auroran, and then asked John if he were ready to walk. The boy nodded, and Will put him down.

Will held the boy's hand to keep him close as they moved quickly back to the widow's barn. John's father was there, along with about twenty Merrytown fighters and Charles. The boy released Will's hand and ran into his father's arms.

"What's happening?" Will asked.

"The Aurorans have retreated," said Charles. "They're heading north."

"Take the soldiers from the other villages and pursue them," Will ordered. "We need to stop them before they reach any other parts of the northlands."

Charles nodded and mounted his horse, setting off into the night.

Slowly the Merrytown men began to regroup in the barn, looking at him uncertainly. Will set aside his bow and arrows and took reports from various men. He announced the outcome to the group. "You've done well. You've saved your village."

A cheer when up from the assembled men.

Will held up his hands to silence them. "Don't start celebrating yet. We have more to do. We have to get rid of the bodies before the women and children come out in the morning. I need as many of you as possible to start digging graves here in the nether field. We may need to work all night."

"And the blood on the ground?" one man asked.

Will shook his head. "Nothing we can do until the next rain."

Some men began to disperse to cart dead bodies back to the field. Others began to dig. A loud cry of anguish went up as one body was brought back. The corpse was that of Philip the Miller, and the cry came from his fifteen-year-old son.

Will pressed his lips together grimly. They'd had casualties.
Lucas placed his hand on Will's shoulder. "I'll go with him to tell his mother." Will nodded his thanks.

Another cry arose, this one from the fiddler, Ben, who came running over to him. "My daughter is missing!" he shouted.

"What?" Will asked, alarmed.

"I just went to check on my family!" Ben cried. "My wife says that Lizzy has not been home all night!"

Will swore, and turned to the grave diggers. "Ben's daughter is missing!" he shouted. "I need at least five of you to start searching!"

Several of the men dropped their shovels and took off in search of her. Ben grabbed Will's arm and pleaded with him. "You have to find her. She is very special to me!"

"Don't worry," he reassured the man. "I'll join them in searching. I promise you, we'll find her."
The Missing Maiden

As Will embarked on his mission to find Lizzy, he asked himself where she would go. From seeing her in the afternoon, he felt certain the forest was a hiding place for her. That's where he'd start. Branches scratched his face as he navigated through the dense woods, wondering if he were on a fool's errand. He thought about their argument and how she'd refused to go home. He was angry at himself for not forcing her to obey him. Lizzy was obviously stubborn, and as Caroline had told him, she had a reputation for wandering off. She was probably already on her way home while everyone was looking for her.

His heart thumped. What if that wasn't the case? What if she'd been spotted by the Aurorans? They might have killed her, or abducted her. He couldn't stop searching, not until he knew she was safe.

He came to a clearing, and could suddenly see. The clouds had floated off, revealing a nearly full moon. He paused, listening. Should he call her name, and risk the possibility that any Aurorans might have remained in the area and could hear him?

A crunching sound came from the nearby brush. He crouched down and froze, his hand on his dagger. Something was moving in the woods. A creature, a man, or was it the girl? He held his breath as a shape began to emerge.

It was only a fox. He exhaled in relief, and rose to continue his search. As he began to walk, the fox ran toward him, stopping a few feet away. It paused, leg lifted and head tilted as if it were studying Will. Strange. Will continued moving, thinking the animal would go on its way. Instead, the fox gave a short, high-pitched bark, making Will stop again. "Do you want something?" he asked, and then realized he was almost expecting the animal to answer. The stress of battle and the girl's madness were now affecting his mind.

The creature, of course, did not speak, so Will walked on. The fox followed and barked again. "What do you want with me?" Will demanded.

The fox ran a few feet in the opposite direction, then turned and ran back again. He repeated this motion two more times. Will had the strangest feeling that the creature was trying to get him to follow him. He shook his head, muttering, "If you know where the girl is, lead the way."

The fox began to run, and Will followed, striving to match the animal's speed. The fox would stop now and then to look back, as if giving Will a chance to catch up. Finally, they arrived at a very large oak tree, and the fox entered through an opening at the base of the trunk.

Will exhaled in frustration. Had he spent all this time chasing a fox only to be led back to its den?

A moment later, the fox re-emerged and barked sharply. He entered and exited three more times in succession. Will almost laughed. The fox was definitely trying to communicate. It wanted him to follow again. "All right," Will said, "but I'm not sure I'll fit in your home."

He knelt down at the base of the tree and shook his head. The opening was too small for him to enter. When he hesitated, the fox nudged his shoulder with its head and began to lick his face.

Will grinned. "All right, all right, I'll go but don't lick me anymore."
He had to lie down on his belly and crawl to enter. Once inside, he reached above his head to see how big the space was. He fingers felt nothing, so he slowly rose to his knees, and then to his feet. He soon found he was able to stand up with room to spare. How was that possible? Was he inside a hollow tree?

He looked around, his eyes struggling to adjust to the dark. He could no longer see the entrance to the den—or the fox. He stumbled around, touching what seemed to be walls on either side of him. The walls felt like damp stone, not tree bark. Where was he, and what foolish thing had he just done?

He breathed in deeply to prevent himself from panicking. There had to be a way out.

He started to walk slowly, holding on to the walls to keep his bearings. A light soon appeared in the distance. Will didn't understand how there could be distance, but apparently he had entered some sort of tunnel. He began to walk toward the light.

As he drew closer, he could make out the form of the one he was searching for, sitting on the ground with her knees raised. Her arms were wrapped around her legs and she had bent her head into them, hiding her face. The light was coming from her lap, partly obscured by the fabric of her skirt.

He called out to her, "Lizzy?"

The girl looked up and stood quickly. "Stay away from me!" she cried out. "I want nothing to do with you!"

He approached anyway. "Everyone is looking for you. Your father is worried. Come, I must take you home."

"I will go nowhere with you!" she shouted.

He paused, confused by the terror in her voice. "Why not?"

"I saw you. I saw you stab that man. He begged for mercy, and you killed him!"

Now he understood the noise he'd heard in the trees. "This is why I told you to go home! A battlefield is no place for a woman!"

"You were supposed to be a man of peace!"

Will felt his temper burn. "I have already told you, I am not that man! I'm a soldier! What do you think soldiers do? We kill our enemies before they can kill us!"

"He asked you for mercy!"

"He wanted to survive! Do you think he would have shown mercy to me? Or to young John, whom he was about to kill before I grabbed him?"

Lizzy gasped.

"That's right; the blacksmith's son was in that tree. The Auroran had his weapon drawn. John is but twelve years old. Should I have allowed the enemy to have his way with him?"

She said nothing, her breathing ragged as she stared at him.

"John is your friend, is he not? A member of your community? Now do you understand why I do
"But where does it end?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"When every last Auroran is dead. Now, come with me so I can take you back to your family. If I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you back, I will."

"No," she said defiantly. "I'll walk." She held out an object in her hand, which revealed the source of the light. It was one of her gemstones, the silver one.

He took a few steps and then stopped. "Uh… do you know the way?"

"I assumed you did, since you're so determined to take me home."

He exhaled loudly. "Where are we, Lizzy?"

Her defiance seemed to wither. "I… I do not know. My friend led me here."

"Your friend?"

"The fox. The one I told you about? I had not seen him for eight years, but I saw him tonight. He asked me to follow him here. Once I was inside, I did not know which way to go."

Will shook his head. "I'm joining you in your insanity."

"It's not insanity, it's true! I saw him!"

"I know," Will said quietly. "He led me here, too."

"I knew it!" Lizzy cried. "I knew you were the man!"

He covered her mouth with his hand. "Speak no more about this, Lizzy. I now believe that there is something to this story you tell, but I am not a man of peace. However, what's important at the moment is that we find our way out of this tunnel and set your father's fears at rest."

Lizzy nodded, and the two began to walk in silence. The stone in her hand was amazingly brilliant, brighter than any torch he'd ever held, and they could easily see their way. Despite the light, however, they continued to wander, not finding anything that looked like an exit to the outside world.

After several hours, Lizzy stopped. "Will, I can't walk anymore. I feel as if we're going in circles."

"That's because you and I were stupid enough to follow a fox into a hole."

"My friend would never lead us into harm!"

"Then why are we stuck here? Why hasn't he reappeared to lead us out?" Will sat down in frustration. The ground beneath him was cold, hard and damp, like well-packed mud.

After a minute, Lizzy sat down beside him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was upset about what I saw, so I ran off. If I hadn't, we wouldn't be here. There are no doubt people worried about you as well."

He glanced at her, his irritation suddenly dissipating due to her genuine tone of regret, and shook his head. "No need to apologize. I became a soldier to protect the subjects of Pemberlea. You're one of them." Whatever else Lizzy might have been, she was one of his people, and he was duty-bound to look after her.
He paused for a moment. "Why were you out tonight anyway? You could have been killed."

"The Aurorans had set fire to my neighbor's field. I was drawing water to put it out."

The fire he'd seen. "A foolhardy action, but a good thing, I suppose. I have seen many fields and villages burned to the ground, leaving the people with nothing." He followed this comment with a very large yawn.

"You're tired."

He nodded. "Exhausted."

"Why don't you sleep? I can keep watch."

"I can't allow you to do that. I'll keep watch while you sleep." He nodded his head toward the stone. "Do you think that will scare animals away?"

"I don't know, since as far as I know, only you and I can see its brightness."

"Your fox friend can."

"That's true. So let us assume the best, that other animals can as well."

He chuckled. "Do you have another? It might be good for me to have a light also."

She reached into the sachet around her neck and retrieved the golden acorn, holding it out to him.

"Not that one."

She frowned but put it back, pulling out the emerald one instead.

"What's this one for?"

"Courage."

"I'll take it." Reaching for the glowing object, he whispered, "Sleep well, Lizzy. I'll be watching."

The young woman rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes.
A Mysterious City

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A Mysterious City

"Will, wake up!" A hand shook Will's shoulder and he jerked awake.

He felt disoriented, unsure where he was or how he had come to be there. "What… what's going on?"

"I think it is morning. I can see a light."

Will blinked. Lizzy's face came into focus and the previous night's events returned to him with a jolt. He grunted as he stretched, attempting to relieve his body's soreness from battle and sleeping on the hard ground. "How long have I been asleep?"

"I don't know. I've only awoken myself."

He slapped his hand against his thigh. "I should not have let myself drift off! Anything could have happened to you!"

"Will, it's all right. You were very tired, and we're safe."

"No, it's NOT all right! I neglected my duty!"

"Well, perhaps you can do your duty now, for I see a way out of here." She pointed to a source of light that was not the gemstones, not very distant from where they were sitting. It indeed appeared to be an opening, letting daylight into the tunnel.

Seeing a possible exit lessened his anger. He stood and offered his hand to Lizzy. To his surprise, she took it as she rose.

Her hand was strong and calloused, no doubt from farm work, but still felt feminine in his. He held on to it as they began to walk. He hated to admit it, but being trapped in the mysterious tunnel had unnerved him, and holding on to her gave him great comfort. If he understood nothing else, he at least knew that Lizzy was real.

As they approached the light, the opening became bigger, and they could hear noises in the distance. "How did we miss this last night?" Will asked. "I know it was dark outside, but the gemstone should have revealed it."

"Maybe it wasn't here last night," Lizzy answered matter-of-factly. "I'm pretty certain this tunnel is magic."

He started to scoff, but stopped himself. So many strange things had happened that he couldn't doubt the existence of magic anymore.

As they drew closer to the opening, Will released her hand. "Here," he handed her the green gemstone, "You should put these away."

She nodded and loosened the string tied to the sachet around her neck, dropping in the emerald and silver acorns, and then tightened it again.
"I'll go first," Will said when they reached the exit. He stepped out and looked around. He had entered what appeared to be an alley of some kind, a narrow passage behind several sandstone buildings. A grayish-brown cat nibbling at a dead rat looked up at him and ran off.

"What's out there, Will?" Lizzy asked, no doubt eager to get home.

He would have to disappoint her. "I don't know, but we're not in Merrytown anymore."

Lizzy gasped and rushed to his side. "I knew the tunnel was magic! But where are we?"

"A city," Will answered, the only thing that was apparent to him.

"Yes, but where? Do you think we are in the capital city of Pemberlea?"

"Perhaps we should walk around. I'll recognize it if we are."

"Of course! You're from the southland. You must have visited the capital dozens of times."

He did not mention that he had grown up there. Lizzy took his hand this time, perchance feeling as apprehensive as he did about what awaited them. They walked out of the alley and found themselves on a busy street. It was still early morning, but signs of the city awakening were everywhere. He inhaled the warm scent of bread baking, mixed with the fetid smell of horse manure. He heard the shouts of vendors beginning to hawk their wares.

Nothing looked familiar. He didn't know every street of the capital city, but this looked like a main one, and he should have recognized it. The buildings also looked different than what he was used to—made of stone rather than brick or wood.

More frightening were the sounds of voices. He recognized the words—it was his language—but the accents were not those of Pemberlea.

"Is this—" Lizzy started to say, but he gave her a warning look that silenced her.

He pulled her over to a doorway, away from others on the street. "Lizzy, I need you to be very quiet. Something is very wrong."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Shh! Whisper only." He dropped his own voice even more. "Lizzy, this isn't the capital of Pemberlea. This isn't Pemberlea at all. I think that we are in the kingdom of Aurora."

"Aurora! But how?"

He tightened his grip on her hand. "How many times do I have to tell you to lower your voice? Do you know what kind of danger we're in?"

"I'm sorry," she said softly, glancing downward. "How do you think we got here?"

"Your blasted magic tunnel, that's how."

"Of course!" she cried, and then covered her mouth. When she spoke again, she whispered, "The magic tunnel led us here, so we must be here for a reason! We are here to bring peace."

"Stop talking of peace! What we need to do is find a way out of here before we are killed!"

He grabbed her hand and started dragging her back toward the alley from whence they came.
When they located the place where they'd first entered the street, Will groaned. The alley had vanished. He spat in frustration, "I knew this was sorcery. Only wickedness could have led us into the den of our enemies, with no way out!"

Lizzy gripped his hand, looking at him sorrowfully. His anger faded, and he squeezed back. He didn't want her to think he considered her to blame. No, she was just a naïve young woman who had believed a talking fox.

"What should we do now?" Lizzy finally asked.

"I don't know, but safety must be our top priority until we can find a way out of here. That means first, that you cannot talk to anyone."

"No one?" Lizzy asked. "But we might need to ask someone for help."

"No one is likely to help us, especially if they realize where we are from. If talking to anyone is needed, allow me to do so. I know how to imitate the Auroran accent."

She looked at him in surprise. "And how do you know that?"

Will hesitated before answering. "My mother… she was a good mimic. And she had a tutor as a child who was from Aurora. She learned the accent from him, and taught it to me."

"Your mother had a tutor? You must be rich," Lizzy smiled.

Will blew out his breath. He had revealed too much. He needed to be more careful. "The other thing, Lizzy, is that we have to blend in. You cannot look around in wonder, like a country rube on her first visit to the city. We must take in our surroundings carefully, but act like we know what we're about and where we are going. Can you do that?"

Lizzy nodded.

"Stay close to me," he said softly. "I don't want you to get lost or hurt."

"I will. I don't want to lose you either."

For some reason, her words made him blush.

They began to walk again, speaking only when necessary to prevent anyone they passed from overhearing their Pemberlean accents. *Lizzy would make a good soldier,* Will observed. She walked purposefully but naturally, and did not act fearful. He could see that she was following his instructions. She kept her head focused on the road in front of them, but her eyes were taking in everything in all directions.

They trudged through the streets for some time, becoming familiar with the layout of roads and alleyways, making notes of which streets were busy and which were not, and which neighborhoods seemed dangerous and which appeared safe. Will hoped they would spot something, anything, that would reveal an opening back to the tunnel, but nothing materialized.

After several hours, Lizzy came to a sudden stop and turned to whisper to him. "I have been trying very hard not to ask this of you, but I am afraid I can wait no longer."

Will did not want to presume what she referred to, yet due to his own urgent need, he was fairly certain he knew. He exhaled. "A vacant alley is likely the best we can do for privacy. Is that acceptable?"
At her nod, he began to look for passages between buildings that appeared to be devoid of people. He encountered one that looked quite filthy, but at that point, his urgency was too great to waste time searching for another. The alleyway smelled foul, no doubt frequently used for their current purpose and many others far uglier. He would steel himself and allow Lizzy to go first, for this would doubtlessly be much more unpleasant for her than for him. He, at least, could stand up. "I will turn my back and block you from view," he told her.

The relief on her face was evident. "Thank you," she murmured.

Lizzy tapped his shoulder when she had concluded her business, and they switched places. Focused on watching the street while she was relieving herself, he had been able to avoid feeling embarrassed, but now that it was his turn, he was extremely aware of her nearby presence. When finished, he walked past her toward the street, saying, "Come," without looking at or touching her. Will gritted his teeth. If the tunnel did not turn up soon, another such stop would be required in a few more hours.

Lizzy resumed her place beside him, and said nothing for some time as they walked along, for which he was grateful. Soon, they came to a busy roadway in which dozens of people seemed to be walking uphill in one direction. Will scanned ahead and saw an elaborate building made not only of stone but also of marble, carved with intricate patterns and surrounded by a rampart on which soldiers were posted.

"The castle?" Lizzy whispered. Will nodded, fury building inside him. They were in the Auroran capital, and this was where his greatest enemy resided. Lizzy seemed to sense his warring emotions. She looked at him with concern and took his hand again, the first time they had touched since their stop at the alley. He squeezed her fingers and blew out his breath, releasing some of his anger.

His rage had subsided by the time they sat down in late afternoon on a bench in a small park to rest. Lizzy removed her boots and rubbed her red, blistered feet. He looked at her in admiration. He knew she had to be greatly fatigued, but she hadn't once complained. "You did well today," he said. He thought of telling her that she had proven to be a good soldier, except that he was entirely too aware of her as a pretty young woman.

"Walking?" Lizzy grinned as she put her boots back on. "Yes, that is quite the skill, one that most people over the age of two have mastered."

Will smiled back. "To walk as much as we did today without complaint does take talent."

"There is little we can do to change our circumstances. Grumbling would not improve anything."

Impressed by her spirit, he remarked, "Would that some of my soldiers had your fortitude." She suddenly lowered her eyes as if bashful, and he felt his face flush. He had not meant for his praise to embarrass her.

They were both quiet for few moments, until Lizzy said softly, "The company was pleasant."

He raised an eyebrow skeptically. "The gruff, silent army captain was pleasant company?"

"We are lost, we are tired, and we are hungry. You have good reason to be gruff and silent." She smiled at him again. "Yet because someone else now knows about the magic, I felt much less alone today than I have in a long time."

Not used to sharing his feelings, Will didn't know how to respond. His heart was stirred that she considered him anything near to agreeable, given how much his temper had been on edge.
Moreover, he too had felt less alone that day than at any time since his mother's death, perhaps because he and Lizzy had had to be so reliant on one another. From the odd intimacy of sharing an alley to relieve themselves—by this time, more than once—to the comforting touch of her hand, Lizzy's presence had created an unusual but not unwelcome feeling of companionship for him. After today, thought Will with a laugh, it's no wonder I feel close to her.

"What are you laughing about?" Lizzy asked.

He started to blush again at the idea of sharing his current thoughts out loud, and by his awareness of how much he liked her. To hide his embarrassment, he shook his head. "Nothing important."

"Well, then. Speaking of hunger, what will we do for food?"

Will realized that his stomach was growling. "I have a few coins with me, but they're all Pemberlean." He thumped his forehead for a moment. "Perhaps we can sell one of your gemstones?"

"No one else can see them, remember? Not that I would ever sell them."

"Point taken," he said. "I suppose that leaves us with only one option: theft."

"Will, we can't steal!"

"Why not? Would you prefer to starve?"

"Because it's wrong!"

"It's not wrong to steal from Aurorans."

"The fact that they're Aurorans doesn't make it right. They're people, too."

"They're not people, they're monsters."

"We've passed hundreds on the streets today, and I have seen no monsters."

"That's because they don't yet know who we are. Let just one of them realize where we are from, and you will see their barbarism revealed."

"Will, I don't understand you," she said. "I may not have been in the army or to the capital city like you have, but I have experienced enough to know that there are good and bad people everywhere. Certainly you've known some bad people in Pemberlea, have you not?"

Thinking of George, he nodded.

"So why is it hard to believe that there might also be good people here in Aurora?"

"The wicked people I've know in Pemberlea are exceptions, but the Aurorans are uniformly corrupt."

"You can't know that. Have you ever met any Aurorans, let alone all of them?"

Her naiveté was maddening. "No, but I don't need to! I've seen the outcomes of their barbarity: men, women and children killed, villages and lives destroyed. You haven't, Lizzy, so do not question me on this."

She went silent. Angry at himself for creating another rift between them, he looked away, and noticed that the sun was starting to set. He knew they should get up and walk again, but his legs
refused to move. As they sat in stillness, Lizzy began to nod off, and he soon felt his own eyes closing.

The next thing he remembered was hearing a gurgling sound coming from Lizzy's throat followed by her scream. He woke up with a start.

Night had fallen, and they were surrounded by four young hooligans. One of them had snatched Lizzy's sachet from her neck and was searching the contents.

The young man threw the pouch down in disgust. "Just a bunch of nuts! Where's your money?"

As Lizzy gripped his arm, he eyed the young men warily. Did they have any weapons? He didn't think so, or they would have shown them already.

He had to move carefully, before they realized what he was doing. He flexed the arm Lizzy clutched, hoping she would feel it and get the message. Smart girl, she did, lowering her hand to free his arm.

In the next instant, he jumped up, drawing his dagger which had been concealed beneath his tunic. The youths turned and fled.

"Come," he took Lizzy's hand to help her stand, "we have to go."

She nodded and quickly recovered the acorns, clutching them in her hand since the string that had held them was now broken.

They walked back out to the street, which Will scanned quickly, looking for a place to hide. After a few blocks, he spotted several barrels in front of a storefront that were big enough to conceal them.

When they had settled behind the barrels, he said, "Lay your head against my shoulder and sleep. I'll keep watch."

"Will, you need sleep more than I do."

He lifted his tunic to reveal the dagger again. "Do you intend to use this?"

"No."

"Then let me to do my duty."

She frowned but rested her head against him. Watching her eyes shut, her face so near to his, brought out every tender feeling in him. He had to protect her. As soon as he was sure she was asleep, he unsheathed the dagger and used it to make a cut in his forearm, not deep enough to bleed out, but enough that the pain would keep him awake. He had already failed Lizzy once that night. He would not fail her again.

Chapter End Notes

I would really love some comments!
New Friends

When Will gently shook Lizzy awake, she was still leaning against him. "How do you feel?" he asked as she opened her eyes and looked around. The gray sky indicated that night had passed but dawn had not yet broken.

"Better," she answered, "not as tired. And you?"

"Satisfied. We made it through the night."

She looked at him with concern. "You didn't sleep at all?"

Will shrugged. "That was the point." He started to rise to his feet. "The sun will be up soon. We should start moving before anyone sees us."

When he offered his right hand to help her stand, she noticed blood on his left forearm. "Will, what happened?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "It's fine."

"I don't think so. That's a pretty bad cut. Sit down and let me have a look."

"Lizzy, we have to go," he said firmly.

"Not until I look at your arm." She watched his face turn severe and angry, just as it had when she first told him about the acorns. She wanted to laugh—didn't he know by now that she wouldn't let him intimidate her? "Will, I can be just as stubborn as you can, and then some. Now, sit!"

Will was still frowning, but she saw amusement flash through his eyes as he sat back down. Lizzy removed her apron, flipping it over to its cleaner side, and began tearing it into strips. "May I see your flask?" she asked.

Will unhooked the flask from his belt and handed it to her. She opened it and began to pour water onto one of the strips of cloth.

"Lizzy, don't!" he scolded. "We don't have much left."

"I have seen cuts like this become quite red and swollen if they are not cleaned, and the bearers of the cuts become very ill soon thereafter. I don't want that to happen to you."

He gave in reluctantly, holding out his arm to her. She took it in hand and pressed the damp cloth against the wound, causing him to wince for a brief moment. Lizzy realized that she felt no awkwardness in tending to him this way. It felt natural.

She had been truthful the day before when she told him she found his company pleasant. As long as she did not allow herself to think of the battle—and reminded herself that at least John's life had been spared—then she could block out the memory of what she had witnessed Will do. When she did so, she found that she actually quite liked him. He was steadfast, determined to look out for her in this peculiar situation in which they found themselves. Because she had felt alone for so long, having someone to rely on was an immense encouragement to her. Furthermore, she had to admit she was charmed by the touches of vulnerability he revealed beneath his tough exterior, such as squeezing her hand now and then as if to reassure himself that she was still with him.
When she had finished removing the blood and dirt from Will's arm, she took a dry strip of her apron and wrapped it snugly around the injury. "How did this happen?" she asked.

He did not look at her as he answered, "I did it to stay awake."

Lizzy peered at him, a little stunned. He had done that for her sake? "Thank you," she said softly.

Before Will could respond, they heard a voice yell, "You two! What are you doing there?" A red-faced middle aged man, probably the owner of the shop with the barrels, had approached and was staring at them.

Will stood up, and the shopkeeper backed a few feet away. Will was a big man, and perhaps scary looking to him. "Our apologies, sir. We'll be on our way."

As he took her hand to lead her into the street, Lizzy thought, *Impressive.* Will was very good with the Auroran accent, sounding not very different at all than the man who had yelled at them.

They began another day of walking, this time much more difficult. They were weak from hunger and their legs felt heavier. Although the Auroran night had been cold, the days were hotter than in Merrytown, and their throats had become quite parched. As Will had warned, the water in his flask was nearly gone.

"We should head for the city's central marketplace," Will said. "That will be the safest place for us. We can get lost in the crowd and not appear suspicious in our wandering."

They reached the area about an hour later. "Will you steal?" Lizzy asked, almost hoping he would say yes, the sight and smell of food in the market lessening her scruples.

"No," he answered. "At this point, I wouldn't be able to run fast if someone saw me, so I'd certainly get caught. I won't put you at risk like that, Lizzy."

As they walked, she tried to ignore the pangs in her belly by looking at the goods of various non-food merchants: a boy selling scarves, a young woman vending flowers, an older woman standing at a cart filled with clay objects. A small old man, his back to Will and Lizzy, was talking with the older woman.

Will halted when they spotted the old man and woman, and watched them carefully for a while. Lizzy found his behavior strange, since he had warned her about acting suspicious in any way. When the woman said her goodbyes, the man turned around, and she heard Will catch his breath. He motioned for her to draw closer to the old man, whose skin was deeply wrinkled and whose head was nearly bald. Suddenly, Will called out, "Thumpin?"

Lizzy watched in amazement. Did Will know this man?

The old man smiled a gap-toothed grin. "Ah, you must mean my cousin, Thurman. If you know him, then you have come from far away. You must be hungry and tired. Come, come and break bread with me today."

He turned and began walking, not looking back, as if he were certain they would follow. Will hesitated, but Lizzy tugged at his hand. "He knows someone you know, Will," Lizzy said. "And I am very hungry."

Will frowned but nodded. The man led them out of the marketplace and through narrow cobblestone roads until finally they came upon a small cottage.
The man smiled and turned toward his guests as he opened the door. "Come in, come in," he said.

Inside, the one-roomed cottage was warm and clean, containing only few pieces of furniture: a bed, a table and chair, a small cabinet, and a loom. "Here, my dear." The old man pulled out the chair at the table and gestured for Lizzy to sit.

"You may sit on the bed, my friend," he said to Will.

When they were settled, the old man walked over to a large pot hanging over the fire. He pulled down two small clay bowls that rested on the mantle, and began to ladle soup into them. Will, she noticed, watched the man's every move warily.

The old man brought the bowls to his guests. His hunger apparently greater than his suspicion, Will ate as ravenously as Lizzy did and accepted a second filling.

"This was delicious, sir," Lizzy said upon finishing. "Thank you."

The old man smiled again. "My pleasure. Anything for friends of my Pemberlean cousin."

"You know that we're from Pemberlea?" she asked.

"Of course. How else would you know Thurman?"

"And you welcomed us into your home anyway?"

"Our countries were not always at war, you know. When I was a boy, Aurorans and Pemberleans traveled freely back and forth across the border. Although my cousin's father was from here, he met Thurman's mother on a trip to your homeland. He stayed with her in Pemberlea, and there Thurman was born. Yet we grew up together because we saw each other during yearly visits."

Lizzy was amazed. She had spent her life hearing how awful Aurorans were, even before the war. She never would have imagined such a time of friendship in her country's history. What interesting stories this man must have to tell!

"Oh!" she suddenly cried, standing and curtseying to the old man, whose name she realized she did not even know. "I have forgotten my manners. My name is Elizabeth, but most people call me Lizzy."

The man's green eyes twinkled. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Lizzy. My name is Truman." He turned toward Will. "And you are?"

"Her husband," Will, who did not stand, replied tersely. "Will."

Lizzy looked at him uneasily. Why was he lying?

"Well, Will and Lizzy, I am honored to have you as my guests. But as you can see, my home is very small. If you are staying the night in our city, I have a good friend with extra room."

"We have a place to stay," Will said quickly.

"No, we don't," Lizzy answered.

"Yes, we do."

"No, we DON'T!" Lizzy turned back to Truman. "We were set upon by thieves last night, and then slept behind barrels on the street. It was frightening."
"I protected you," Will snapped.

"I know you did, but you shouldn't have to, not when a kind man is offering us a safe place to stay!"

Truman chuckled. "Young man, I know how hard it is for men to accept help sometimes. But by allowing my friend to shelter you, you are protecting and caring for your wife. I do not think your lady will find you any less of a man by doing so. Isn't that right, Miss Lizzy?"

Lizzy nodded. "That's right. I already know what a brave man you are, Will. You don't need to scare off ruffians again to prove it."

Will snorted gruffly, but a quick smile crossed his face. "All right, Truman. I'll let you take us to your friend tonight."

"Thank you, my friend, she'll be honored."

Lizzy laughed. "It is we who owe you thanks."

She looked at the loom, and the various fabrics, needles and threads lying about the cottage. "Are you a tailor, Truman?"

"Ay, that I am, and I think I can say a good one. I even sew for the king."

"You're a tailor to the king? How wonderful! But I would have imagined the king's tailor living in the castle."

"The castle does employ many tailors, but I only do one task for the king, sew his royal sash. The rest of my work is for the people of this city."

The presence of clean, dry cloths gave her an idea. "Truman, have you any spirits?"

He appeared a bit puzzled by her request, but answered affirmatively. He walked over to the mantle and reached for a bottle, which he brought to her.

"And would it be possible to have a large piece of your fabric? To keep, that is?"

"Of course, Miss Lizzy." Truman selected a soft piece of cloth for her.

"Now," Lizzy said, turning to Will, "we can really clean that wound of yours."

Will's eyes widened in alarm. "Oh, no, you won't!"

"Are you planning to be a baby about this?"

He glared at her, and she laughed. "And now you are offended because I called you a baby? You, of all people?"

Will tried to maintain his glower, but soon enough his face broke into a smile and his eyes danced with laughter. Lizzy wondered how much of his life he had spent hiding his sense of humor beneath stern expressions.

Will sighed and held out his arm to her, his lips still curved up in amusement. She removed the strip of apron she had applied earlier, making Will hiss softly since it had become stuck to his skin. She then dampened a piece of Truman's cloth with the spirits and used it to thoroughly cleanse Will's cut. He gritted his teeth as it no doubt stung fiercely, but otherwise did not react. She somehow knew that it was a point of pride for him to bear the pain with strength.
When she had bound the wound again with a new piece of fabric, Truman remarked, "She takes good care of you, I see."

"That she does," Will said with a smile. "My own personal physician."

A little embarrassed, Lizzy sat down in the chair again. "Truman, please tell me more about your childhood and your cousin," she requested, eager to learn more about their host and turn the attention away from herself. Truman's voice was deeper than she might have imagined given his short stature, and it rumbled like the patter of raindrops against a house. She liked listening to him.

She continued to chat with the older man for a while until a loud cacophony interrupted them. Will, thoroughly spent by two nearly sleepless nights and lulled by a full belly and warm room, had sprawled across the bed, snoring loudly. She and Truman both laughed.

"Well, young lady," Truman said, "I think that's my signal to get back to work. I'll leave you two here while I deliver goods to some of my customers."

After Truman exited the cottage, Lizzy sat on the chair, watching Will sleep. As his snoring gradually dulled to a minor hum, she studied his face. Two day's worth of black stubble had grown above his lip and on his chin. With his eyes closed, she could see that his dark lashes were very long. His jaw was strong, and he had a dimple in his chin. He was, she thought with a smile, quite handsome.

But he puzzled her. He was a good man in many ways, loyal, giving, and even gentle at times. The fox, the fact that he could see the gemstones—all this suggested he was the man she had been waiting for. Yet he was filled with such anger and hatred for the Aurorans. How could such a man bring peace? She felt down to her bones that that was why they had come, but what did it mean that Will was unwilling?

She suddenly thought about how he had cut himself to stay awake and protect her, an act which had moved her deeply. This was a man willing to sacrifice himself for another. The man of honor was in him somewhere, she just knew it.

Truman returned later in the day as the sun was beginning to set. Lizzy, who had fallen asleep also, woke up with a sore neck from resting her head in her arms on the old man's table. She turned her head from side to side to relieve the stiffness, and then gently nudged Will awake. They each ate another bowl of Truman's delicious soup before joining the small man for the walk to his friend's house.

As they made their way through the narrow streets at twilight, Lizzy finally took the time to enjoy looking around her. The previous day, she had been anxious to follow Will's instructions and not appear the wide-eyed country girl. Yet that was what she was, for this was her first visit ever to a city. The bumpy cobblestone roads were hard on her feet, accustomed as she was to fields and forests, and she missed the variety of animals and plant life. The wide assortment of people, however, fascinated her. She had never seen so many in one place! She wished she could stop each one and learn about his or her life. She smiled to herself as she considered that Will would certainly have a fit were she to do so.

They finally came to a house about the size of Lizzy's own, made of multi-colored stone and surrounded by a fence. Truman opened the gate and led them to the door. He knocked, and the door was answered by the plump, gray-haired woman they had seen Truman talking with in the marketplace earlier in the day. She was elderly, but did not appear to be anywhere near as old as Truman. Her skin looked dry and soft, rather than leathery like his. She was taller than Truman by a few inches. Her eyes were blue, and like her friend's, they were shining and alive.
"Why, good evening, Truman! Come in!" She ushered them in the door, asking, "Who have you brought to visit me this fine evening?"

"These are my friends, Will and his wife Lizzy. They are strangers from out of town, and need a place to spend the night." Truman introduced the woman to them as Dottie.

"Well, of course they can stay here! I have plenty of room. Where are you from, Will and Lizzy?"

"Not from here," Will answered sharply, again in a pitch-perfect Auroran accent.

"Oh," Dottie said softly, perhaps taken aback by Will's abruptness. However, she quickly recovered, and gave them a warm smile. "Welcome to our city! I hope you enjoy your time here."

"Thank you," Lizzy said quickly, wanting to soothe any hurt feelings the woman, who was so generously opening her home to them, might have had.

"I think they're quite tired," said Truman. "I came home this afternoon to find them both sleeping soundly."

"I'm sure you must be. I will go prepare your room now!" Dottie said to her new guests before bustling away.

Truman smiled. "Dottie's daughter is gone and married, and her husband and son are dead. She is lonely in this house by herself. She loves to have guests."

"We're happy to be here," Lizzy said. "But she should know that we're not—"

Will grabbed her hand and squeezed it hard. She glared at him, but said no more.

Dottie soon returned. "This way," she said, leading them down a corridor to a small bedroom. The room was chilly but a fire, likely recently lit by Dottie, had begun to cackle. A bed in the center of the floor was piled high with quilts and pillows.

"I will let you rest," Dottie told them. "Please let me know if you need anything." She exited the room.

Lizzy looked around, burning with anger. "There's only one bed here," she said accusingly.

Will avoided her eyes. "I'll sleep on the floor. There appear to be plenty of blankets."

She pulled several quilts off the bed and threw them at him. "You were rude out there, Will. And why did you say we were married? Why did you lie to them?"

He caught the linens before they hit him. "I don't know whether we can trust these people."

"They're very kind."

"Kindness can be deceptive. And they're Aurorans. None of them can be trusted."

"You still could have been polite, and you should NOT have put us in this situation," she said crossly.

Will began to spread the blankets on the floor. "Lizzy, we just spent the last two nights together. I think we can handle sharing a bedroom. Besides, I want to keep you close, to protect you."

Lizzy didn't answer. She wanted to argue that being together in the discomfort and danger of the
tunnel and street was very different than sleeping side by side in this cozy room, but his words about protecting her held her back. She knew she'd feel more secure with him next to her.

Uncertain what to do next, she sat down and removed the ribbon from her hair.

"You look very pretty with your hair down."

Startled, Lizzy glanced at Will, who was now lying on his makeshift bed.

He started to blush, and stammered, "I mean, I always think you're pretty. But now with your hair… I just…"

Lizzy couldn't help but smile. How could he be so infuriating one second, and so… sweet the next?

To ease both their embarrassment, she changed the subject. "Who is Thumpin? Or is it Thurman?"

"A tailor in the northlands of Pemberlea."

"How do you know him?"

He paused before answering. "When I was thirteen, my father and I traveled to have Thumpin make me … some clothing."

Lizzy grinned. "Now I know for certain you are rich, because who but a rich family could travel to another part of the country to have clothing made?"

"That's humorous to you?" From his position on the floor, he was frowning.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I am only smiling because you don't seem like a rich man."

"How does a rich man seem?"

"Like Caroline or Widow Burg."

"They're not rich."

"They used to be, and they never let anyone forget it. But you—you seem ordinary."

"Ordinary?" he grinned, revealing a dimple in his cheek to match the one in his chin.

She laughed. "No, you're anything but ordinary. But you are not afraid to get your hands dirty, or to work hard. And you do not set yourself up above other people. That's all I meant."

He was gazing at her with a look that made her stomach jump. Nevertheless, she was feeling more at ease. She wanted to continue to get to know him better. Perhaps that was the key to overcoming her discomfort about sharing the room.

"What is your family like, Will?"

He didn't answer. "Will?" she said again after a few moments.

"I don't want to talk about them."

"Why not?"

"Because my mother is dead, my father is ill, and I'm an only child. Now stop asking."
Lizzy exhaled, embarrassed and a little hurt by the break in their camaraderie.

"I didn't mean to snap at you, Lizzy," he apologized a few seconds later. "Why don't you tell me about your family instead?"

"You've met them."

"Yes, but I've never heard about them from you."

She thought for a moment. "My family is loving, but... I am the odd one. I wasn't always, but ever since I met the foxes and received the treasure, they have known something was strange about me. My mother is embarrassed by it, and so she is very critical of me. With so many young men off to war or dead, she and my sisters spend most of their time thinking about how my sisters will ever find husbands, while I am busy wondering how to save the world. My father escapes from all the female madness by playing his fiddle."

"You and Jane seem very close."

"We are... and we aren't. We used to tell each other everything, but she knows I am keeping a secret from her. It has erected a wall between us that I have never been able to bring down. And so, even though I have a large family, I am very lonely."

He was looking at her that way again. "I understand, Lizzy. I have felt isolated for much of my life, even though I too am surrounded by people."

"And you also have secrets."

"Yes."

His admission made her feel sad. His secrets formed another wall, like the one between her and Jane. For some reason, she didn't want any barriers between her and Will.

She immediately chided herself for this thought. No mother, no brothers or sisters, and an ill father. He had far more reason than she did to be lonely, and to keep his feelings to himself. She looked at him to communicate her compassion. As she did, she was struck by the thought, His eyes are very beautiful.

"I was fourteen," he said, startling her out of her musing about his eyes.

"What's that?"

"When my mother died, I was fourteen years old. Nothing was ever the same for my father and me afterward. That's why it's difficult to talk about."

"I'm very sorry. You must miss her a great deal."

"Yes, I do. I am sorry for you as well."

"Whatever for?"

"That you have had to go through such pain with your family. You are much too loving a person, Lizzy. You deserve better."

Lizzy didn't know how to answer. She had never told anyone how solitary her family had made her feel. Her troubles were nothing compared to his, yet to have Will wish for something better for her after what he had been through almost brought tears to her eyes.
The sensation of thirst a few moments later made her realize she was staring at Will, and he at her. She stood up. "I'm going to ask Dottie for some water. May I get you anything?"

Will stroked his chin with his hand. "As a matter of fact, yes. This is becoming quite itchy. Will you ask Dottie, and Truman if he's still here, if either of them has a blade so that I can shave?"

She nodded and left the room. In the corridor as she approached the house's foyer, she heard Dottie and Truman talking.

"...is him?" Dottie was saying.

"Ay, of that I am quite certain," Truman answered.

"I can scarcely believe it, and here in my home! Why have they come? Do you think their intentions are peaceful?"

"I feel very strongly that they are. They have an air of goodness, these two."

They were talking about Will and her, Lizzy presumed. Had Truman just informed Dottie that they were from Pemberlea?

"What shall you do?"

"I have already sent word to King Thomas, requesting a meeting with him. If he answers affirmatively, I will take the young man. That way, he can fulfill his purpose."

Lizzy stopped and placed her hand over her mouth, her heart thumping. Were their hosts planning to hand them over to their king?

"You won't let them come to harm, will you, Tru?"

"I will do everything in my power to protect them. I promise you, Dottie."

Lizzy breathed a sigh of relief. Truman and Dottie were truly their friends. But their talk of a purpose for Will made her wonder. Did they see something special in him, the way she did? They must, she thought. For if they meant them no harm, for what other reason would they take Will to see their king if not to try to make peace between their countries?

Truman began saying his goodnights to Dottie, so Lizzy decided to enter the vestibule.

"Ah, there, love," Dottie said when she spotted her. "Do you need something?"

"Yes, please. I'd like some water, if it's not too much trouble, and Will asks for a blade to shave with."

"No!" Truman shouted. "You must not allow him to shave!"

Lizzy looked at him, mystified at the odd overreaction to her request.

The old man walked toward her and took her hands in his own. "Do you trust me, Miss Lizzy?"

"Yes, I do," Lizzy answered truthfully, remembering his promise to protect them.

"Then please accept that what I am asking is important. He must let his beard grow as full as it can. Will you help me in this way?"

Lizzy nodded, although she was still puzzled. "Of course, but I will miss seeing his handsome
face behind the hair."

Dottie hooted in laughter. "Young love! So beautiful!"

Lizzy found herself blushing. She would soon need to enlighten them that she and Will were not married. But not tonight. She had to return to the room to convince Will that he would not be able to shave.

By the time she arrived at the bedroom, it was unnecessary, at least for that night. Will lay amid the blankets on the floor, fast asleep.
Will awoke well-rested for the first time in days and thus in a good mood, which only increased when he saw Lizzy sitting on the bed nearby. "Good morning," she said with a smile.

He smiled back. "Good morning to you."

"You look happy today," she observed.

*I am*, Will thought with surprise. When had he last experienced genuine happiness? His current state, he knew, had a great deal to do with the young woman looking at him. Not knowing what to say, he wondered whether they would sit and stare at each other as they had the night before. He did not mind, however, for his view was very attractive.

An awareness of his bodily needs put an end to his pleasant reverie. He asked Lizzy if she would step out of the room for a few minutes. She agreed, and offered to come back with a basin of water. When Lizzy returned, Will asked whether she had acquired a blade for him.

"Oh! Truman said no shaving. He said you must let your beard grow long."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, just that you must. Perhaps to blend in?"

Will furrowed his brow. "We have seen plenty of clean shaven men in this city." He bent down to pick up his scabbard from the floor, from which he withdrew his dagger.

Lizzy's eyes grew big as she watched him turn the weapon over in his hand. "What are you doing?"

"Considering whether I can use this to shave."

"Will, no! A dagger can kill you."

"A blade can kill me, too, but I'm very good with a blade and my dagger. I think I can make this work."

Lizzy reached over to touch his arm, withdrawing a little as she eyed the weapon's long, sharp edge. "Please don't. I don't know why it's important to Truman that you not shave, but it is."

"Why should I care what Truman thinks?"

"If you won't do it for him, will you do it for me? Please?"

She was giving him a very earnest look, one he couldn't say no to. He pressed his lips together and re-sheathed the dagger. "All right, Lizzy. For you."

She then asked to check his cut again, to discover that it had scabbed over. "It can remain unwrapped today," she told him.
Watching her tend to him, Will was suddenly filled with emotion. He placed his hand over hers before she removed it from his arm, and she looked up. His heart skipped a beat. He was certainly now no stranger to touching her hand, but this felt different somehow.

He took a deep breath in order to say what he intended to say. "Lizzy, thank you for taking care of me."

"You're welcome. As I told you yesterday, I do not want you to become ill." Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "For selfish reasons, of course. I enjoy having you around."

Emboldened by her smile and her teasing, he began to gently stroke her fingers. "I also apologize for behaving badly yesterday, to you and to Dottie."

A look of—was it surprise or something else?—crossed Lizzy's face. She withdrew her hand and stepped a few feet away from him. "I appreciate that. And now, we should probably join her."

Will nodded, his face flushing as he realized that he had made her uncomfortable.

Soon thereafter, they were seated at a table with Dottie, who had prepared a breakfast of bread, jam and sausage for them. Will greeted her warmly and thanked her. "You do not set yourself up above other people," Lizzy had said. That wasn't true; he had with Dottie. He was determined to show Lizzy he could behave in a more gentleman-like fashion. Auroran she might be, but Dottie was an old woman and most certainly harmless. Moreover, Will had to acknowledge that she had shown great kindness to a pair of complete strangers.

As they broke their fast, Dottie asked about their plans for the day. Will wanted to say they would continue to walk about the city, but before he spoke he concluded that it was a hopeless strategy. The entrance to the tunnel would reappear when it was ready, if at all. Meanwhile, there might be other possibilities to find their way home.

Lizzy watched Will for a moment, and then answered, "We have no plans."

"Good! Will can spend the day helping Truman, and Lizzy, I would love to have your company today."

Lizzy smiled brightly. "I'd like that very much."

Will frowned. Being separated from Lizzy was the last thing he wanted, much less spending the day with Truman. Yet Lizzy was so enthusiastic about the prospect that his resolve seemed to weaken.

Perhaps it was for the best. If Truman, like his cousin, advised as well as sewed for his king, Will might be able to probe for information about the Auroran kingdom. Furthermore, he could keep an eye on the man in case he planned to betray them.

Dottie and Lizzy walked him to Truman's cottage before returning to Dottie's home. The little man seemed excited to see him, escorting him in quickly and asking him to stand beside the chair. The Auroran climbed up on the chair, dangling alongside Will's body a long rope covered in knots tied at even intervals. He then stretched the rope across his back.

Will knew what he was doing—measuring him—but he didn't know why, so he asked.

"I noticed that you and Miss Lizzy came without bags, and your garments are quite soiled. I am going to make you some clothing."

Will blinked in surprise.
The man stepped down from the chair. "Now, how tall would you say Miss Lizzy is, compared to you?"

Will held up his hand just below his shoulder.

"Yes, yes, that seems about right, and she is slender."

Will smiled suddenly, recalling a vision of Lizzy in the emerald gown.

The man sat down at the table where different colored cloths, a cutting knife, needles and thread lay. "Please, sit down on the bed, young man. Talk to me, entertain me! I so rarely have company while I work."

Will sat down, a bit bewildered. The old man wanted him to talk, but the less shared about Lizzy and him, the better. He would ask Truman about himself instead.

"So, you work for the king."

"Just on the sash," he answered, as he set about measuring and cutting cloth. "It is, you might say, a family specialty."

"Is that all you do for him?"

"Yes, that's all. I have not the wisdom of my cousin Thurman. The king would hardly consider me a counselor."

Will regarded him with suspicion. Why had he brought up the possibility of being a royal adviser? He searched around for other questions to ask about his relationship with the king, and came up short since the man claimed not to be his adviser. He asked about a different relationship instead.

"Is Dottie your lady friend?"

Truman smiled as his nimble hands pulled needle and thread through fabric. "Well, let's see. She is a lady, and she is my friend, so I would say yes."

The old man was toying with him, and Will grew annoyed. "That's not what I meant."

Truman chuckled. "I know, young man. But I do not know how to characterize my friendship with Dottie. I asked her to marry me, oh, had to be about thirty years ago, and she rejected my offer."

"Why?"

"It's a long story. Dottie is a gifted potter, and one of the most loving people I have ever known. She and her husband had quite the romance, but he died before their children were grown. Her husband left her with enough that she could survive on her own.

"I knew Dottie and her husband from their business in the marketplace. She was always so happy and lively, even after her husband died, and I misinterpreted her good nature as special regard for me.

"But one day, her smile disappeared. I wanted to know why, and learned that her son had been killed in the war. Her seeming joy after her husband's death had been an effort to stay strong for her children, and now that her boy was gone, she could no longer keep up the ruse."

Something puzzled Will. "Wouldn't her son have been too old to fight in the war?"
"Not this war, young man, the earlier one, started by your King Archibald."

"My—" Will stopped himself before he said the word grandfather. "King Archibald never started a war. He fought back against unprovoked attacks by the Aurorans. And it was short-lived, for he easily repelled them."

Truman arched his eyebrows. "That's what you've learned, eh? I suppose that's not surprising. Each nation is the hero of its own story. I'm certain we don't know the whole truth here in Aurora either."

"What are you talking about?"

"The border conflicts. Aurora and Pemberlea have argued over the lands on your southern and our northern border for generations. King Archibald decided to take matters into his own hands to settle the dispute."

"Are you trying to say that King Archibald invaded Aurora?"

"That he did. In fact, some of the lands seized from Pemberlea in the current war were once a part of Aurora. Although our king Thomas has gotten greedy in his success…"

Will wasn't sure how to respond. Was the man intentionally deceiving him? Or did he just believe a collective lie, that the Aurorans were the heroes? Before he could protest that the man's words were false, Truman went on.

"Where was I? Oh yes, Dottie. She was very sorrowful after the death of her son, and I, still mistaken that her kindness to me was affection, thought I could cheer her by proposing. She let me know just how wrong I was!"

Truman stopped sewing for the first time, as if lost in a memory. "She reproached me for my arrogance, my conceit, and my selfish disdain of the feelings of others. And she was right. I did not care about her grief for her beloved husband, or her sadness about her son. I wanted her to be happy not for her sake but for my own, because that made me feel good."

Truman picked up his work again. "After I finished nursing my wounded pride, I vowed to change. Dottie had showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. I decided that if she allowed me to even be her friend, I would be unselfish and think only of her wishes."

"She merely needed a friend, not a man to care for her?"

Truman waved the air, as if dismissing the idea. "I couldn't possibly compare with the memory of her husband, whom she loved deeply."

Will found himself perplexed, with thoughts of Dottie and Truman, Aurora and Pemberlea swirling in his head.

"Now you, young man," Truman shook his finger at him, "you're much more fortunate than I, for you have found a good woman who also finds you worthy."

Not likely, thought Will, remembering how much he had disappointed Lizzy by his refusal to consider peace. The realization pained him deeply. He wanted her to respect and admire him, but he knew he wasn't the man she wanted him to be.

As if reading his mind, Truman said, "She does, young Will. I see how she looks at you. She finds
you very worthy."

Because of Truman's words, Lizzy never left Will's thoughts the rest of the afternoon, and he was eager to see her when they supped at Dottie's house that evening. Will glanced at her throughout the meal, wondering whether she truly held him in esteem. Yes, she considered him a better person than Caroline, but that was faint praise. She enjoyed his company, but was he more to her than that?

Lizzy was thrilled with the new dusty rose colored tunic and skirt Truman had made for her. She asked Will to step out of the bedroom so she could change before they retired for the night. When she invited him back in, he smiled in admiration. "You look lovely," he told her. "It goes well with your hair." He wanted to work up his courage to reach out and touch her dark reddish brown tresses, but remembering her withdrawing from his touch that morning, he refrained. Lizzy thanked him for his compliment.

As they began settling in, she shared excitedly about her day, describing how Dottie had taught her to use a potter's wheel. "I failed on several attempts, but I finally made a small bowl. She allowed me to bake it in her kiln as well. Approaching that was the hottest heat I'd ever felt, but it was marvelous to create something like that."

Will smiled. Her joy was infectious.

"Best of all, I loved talking with Dottie. I'd always wished I could share my heart with my mother that way."

"I'm glad," he said. Lizzy was such a sweet, vibrant woman, and the description of her loneliness the night before had troubled him a great deal. She deserved a life filled with love and friendship.

She asked about his time with Truman. He was too confused by the conversations of the day to answer, but he brought forth a cloth package and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"Something I made for you. I asked Truman to show me how. It's not very good, I know."

Lizzy grinned as she opened the bundle. "Why don't you let me judge for myself?"

The package contained a cloth belt covered with several pockets. The stitching was uneven, but Will was relieved to discover that it fit her.

"The pockets are for the acorns," he said. "I thought it might be better to carry them around your waist than your neck, after what happened in the park."

"I love it, Will," she said with a smile. To his surprise, she embraced him.

"Wait." She released him. "I have something for you, too."

She turned back to him with her sachet in hand, from which she pulled out the golden acorn. For the first time, he didn't recoil. "Will," she said gently, "I know you have not wanted this, but I believe with all my heart that you were meant to have it. Besides, you can always use it to light your way in the dark."

He smiled and took the acorn from her, its warmth filling his hand. He gazed at the gemstone in wonder, appreciating what it meant that she was still willing to give it to him, after watching him kill an Auroran soldier and hearing him so often disparage the idea of peace. This, he now understood, was the most profound gift Lizzy could bestow, a sign of her faith in him. His heart
swelled with tenderness as he realized that she considered him to be a man of honor.

He looked up and held out his hands to her again, and she came to him. He embraced her tightly for several minutes, savoring the feeling of her in his arms and sensing their hearts beating together. He wanted to see her eyes, so he lifted her chin to gaze into them. They were shining, and filled with warmth and affection. He leaned closer, as though she were drawing him in.

"Are you going to kiss me, Will?" Lizzy asked. "Because I would like that very much."

Hearing those words, his lips instantly met hers. Her mouth was as soft as rose petals and as sweet as honey, and he lost himself in exquisite sensations.

Lizzy suddenly pulled back and giggled. "Forgive me," she said quickly. "I liked it, I really did! But I have never kissed a man, and I did not know your whiskers would tickle."

Shame filled him unexpectedly as a memory returned. "Lizzy, that night of the Widow Burg’s party… what I said… I am so sorry."

She smiled softly. "It's all right. I forgave you a long time ago. You have never treated me like another man's dregs. Even if I were a camp girl, I know you still would treat me with respect."

If his heart hadn't already melted, it would be a puddle right now. He cupped her face with his hand. "You are a most extraordinary woman."

"Not a girl?" she teased.

He laughed. "Not a girl. Most definitely a woman." He could feel his face burning.

"You blush a lot."

"Only around you."

She rose to her toes, pulling his face toward her and kissing his lips tenderly again. "I think it's adorable."

His heart beat wildly. He had to fight every instinct to say his next words. "Lizzy, I think that you and I should go to our separate beds and sleep, before…"

"Before we do something an unmarried man and woman should not do?"

He nodded.

She took his hand and squeezed it. "You are right." She glanced at the bed. "Shall we switch? I can sleep on the floor tonight."

"Absolutely not," he said, more forcefully than he intended. "The floor is mine." The way he was feeling at the moment, he needed the discomfort of the ground to make it through the night.

Lizzy didn't seem to take offense to his tone. Instead, she climbed into the bed, giving him one last smile as she pulled the blankets over her shoulders, and was soon deep in slumber.

He lay down on the floor on his back, his arm resting under his head, listening to the soft sound of her breathing. His body was too full of energy to sleep, alive with the touch and taste and scent of Lizzy.

As a child, his mother had taught him how to dance, telling him that starting at age 16, he would attend balls to meet noblemen's daughters, from whom he would select a wife. After his mother's
death, however, the war had begun and his father had become a near recluse, seeing only his
advisers and the servants. Will had never attended a ball, and so had had very little contact with
women.

In the army, he had avoided the camp girls to protect himself from scandal. That decision was
agonizingly difficult when he was younger. After a few years, he had hardened his heart so much
that he had ceased to think much about women at all. But Lizzy had roused sensations that had
long lay dormant, and he didn't know how he would repress them again. Her presence just a few
feet away augmented every desire he had. She had been right; it had been foolish to think they
could handle sharing the room.

The force of his loneliness suddenly overpowered him, matched only by the depth of affection he
was feeling. He tried to squelch his feelings by mulling over the reasons why a relationship with
Lizzy would be imprudent. They had to find a way back to Pemberlea, and there was still a war
going on. Even if all that were resolved, she was a commoner, one whom he could never marry.
He had to push away these desires, stuff them back inside, before he broke her heart, and his own.

Chapter End Notes

Comments would be most welcome! (And thanks to those who have already commented)
Destiny

Like a princess in a fairy tale, Lizzy was awakened the next morning by a kiss. She opened her eyes to see Will’s beautiful brown eyes and bearded visage beaming at her. A smile crept across her own face as she stretched and said, “Good morning.”

“Good morning, my lovely Lizzy,” he answered. “I told myself last night that I should stay away from you, but I cannot.”

“I’m glad. I want you close to me.”

Lizzy sat up and put her arms around him. He rested his chin in her hair and gently massaged his hands on her back. Her heart beat in wonder as she considered how she had come to be in this man’s arms. Her mother had long ago convinced her that no man would ever marry her, and so Lizzy had concluded that no man would ever love her, either. She had said as much to Dottie the day before.

At Lizzy’s request, Dottie had told her about Henry, her husband. They had met at twelve and fourteen, when Henry had become an apprentice to Dottie’s father, who was also a potter. Their friendship had bloomed instantly, and even at such a young age, they had known they would one day marry, although Dottie’s father made them wait until she was eighteen.

Lizzy sighed as she listened to the tale, delighted by the romance, saddened that Dottie and Henry’s years together were cut short, and, she had to admit, a bit envious. She told Dottie that she was certain she would never experience such love, not with so few men around and her own odd nature.

Dottie looked at her gently. “Odd nature? Perhaps that is just another way of saying that you are unique and special. As is Truman.”

Her comment made Lizzy smile. “Do you love Truman, Dottie?”

Dottie chuckled. “I confess that I do. Henry was a wonderful man, but he saw the world as it is. Truman is different, and he sees the world as it could be. You have the same eyes, Lizzy. You see the possibilities.”

“Does that mean that one day, someone might love me?”

Dottie regarded her tenderly. “Oh, dear Lizzy, someone already does!”

Remembering Dottie’s words, Lizzy lifted her head to look into Will’s eyes, and hopefully, receive a kiss. Will did not disappoint her. She was determined not to pull away again, for yesterday’s kisses had been much too short. They began with their mouths pressed together, but their lips soon softened and parted. When she felt his tongue against hers, a jolt of pleasure went through her. She felt him tremble as they began exploring each other’s mouths. It was Will who finally pulled away, murmuring, “Darling Lizzy,” as he looked at her with glossy eyes and stroked her cheek with his hand.

She lowered her eyes, not wanting to say her next words, but feeling that she must. “Will… Dottie says that Truman has a floor, too.”

“You told her about us?” he asked, a bit harshly.
She bit her lip. “I’m sorry, but I did not like lying to her.” The conversation about Henry had begun, in fact, when Dottie had asked how long Will and Lizzy had been married. She admitted the truth, and then assured Dottie that they had not shared the bed.

“And she allowed me to stay here last night anyway?”

Lizzy nodded. “I told her I felt safer with you beside me. She said she understood.”

Dottie and she had gone on to talk a great deal about Will and all the emotions he was generating within her. Safe was one of many qualities she had said that Will made her feel, along with respected and cared for. “Then he’s a good one,” Dottie had told her. “Hold on to him.” It was with Dottie that she had first realized and then said aloud the words, I love him. It was a conversation she never could have imagined having with her mother.

“Well,” Will smiled, “I for one do not want to spend the night on Truman’s floor. I would much rather spend it here with you in my arms.”

Warmth spread through Lizzy’s entire body as her face flushed with pleasure. ”So would I,” she whispered. She lifted her face to kiss him deeply again. She knew they were playing with fire, but she no longer cared. This man, she decided, would be the one she would marry.

A few minutes later, they were interrupted by a knock on the door. “Make haste, children,” they heard Dottie’s voice. “Truman has important news.”

The young couple paused, unwilling to let go of each other. Finally, Will exhaled resignedly. He kissed her forehead and slowly rose. “He may have found a way for us to go home. I’ll go outside to the well and wash.”

She nodded and watched him leave, frustrated to have her time with Will cut short, but somewhat embarrassed to have been so wanton with him. When she finally felt her emotions begin to settle, she became curious about Truman’s news. Sitting up and running her fingers through her hair, she retrieved her ribbon and tied it. She stood, smoothing out her new tunic and skirt, and searched for her boots beneath the bed. She would follow Will out in a few minutes to wash and make herself presentable.

“Ah, there you are, Miss Lizzy,” Truman said when she entered the dining area. “I could not share my news until you were here, too.”

Will was already sitting at the table. Lizzy joined him, accepting a plate of bread and jam from Dottie.

“As you know,” Truman said when they began to eat, “I am tailor to King Thomas. I only come to him when he summons me, and have never requested an audience with him. Two days ago, however, I did.”

“Did you report us to your king?” Will asked, frowning.

“Oh no, I would never do that, young man. In any case, he has accepted my request to meet with him. I would like you to accompany me, Will.”

Everyone was silent for a moment. Finally, Will asked, “Why?”

“I have suspected since you first arrived that you came here with a purpose. I want to give you a chance to fulfill your destiny.”
Many emotions crossed Will’s face. Lizzy took his hand and squeezed it.

Dottie spoke up. “Truman will not let harm come to you, Will. He will do everything in his power to protect you.”

“How?” Will scoffed. “He’s an old man. What power does he have?”

“Power does not always come with size and swords, my son,” Truman answered. “Think of an acorn. It’s a small object, but it holds the seed of the mighty oak tree within it.”

Lizzy gasped. Of course! The acorn. Will’s time had come!

Will, however, seemed alarmed by the old man’s mention of the acorn, and continued to look at him with concern. “When is this meeting?”

“Today,” Truman replied.

“And what am I to do when I see your king?”

“Whatever you have come to do, young man. I do not have great wisdom. I do not know what that is.”

Again, no one spoke for quite some time. They all knew that this was a decision that Will, and Will alone, would have to make.

“All right,” Will said finally, “I will meet with your king.”

“Should I come, too?” Lizzy asked.

“No!” all three of her breakfast mates shouted in unison.

Will took her hand again. “It is far too dangerous, dearest. Please stay here with Dottie. I cannot go unless I know you are safe.”

Lizzy swallowed. In her excitement, she had not considered the danger involved. “Then it is too dangerous for you also,” she protested.

“Miss Lizzy,” Truman said gently, “this is something Will was meant to do. You know that.”

She nodded, for she did. “The only man capable of bringing about peace,” was how the fox had described the man of honor. Only Will could do this. Somehow Truman knew it, too.

“Before we depart,” Will said, “I would like to say goodbye to Lizzy.”

“Of course,” said Dottie. “We will leave you two alone.”

As soon as Dottie and Truman left the room, Will stood, took Lizzy by the hand, and drew her into his arms. They held each other in silence for some time.

Will pulled back to look at her, taking her face in his hands and stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. Lizzy’s heart beat rapidly in fear. Will was about to enter the very heart of the Aurorans’ power. “I feel like you’re on your way to the lions’ den,” she told him.

“Shh,” Will said softly. “This is the moment you have been waiting for since our encounter in the Merrytown forest, is it not? After all, to bring peace, the Auroran king will have to agree to it.”

“I know,” she replied, “but now I am filled with dread. I do not want to lose you.”
“You will not lose me, Lizzy. I will come back to you. I promise.”

They kissed each other then, clinging to one another.

“Lizzy,” Will finally spoke, “before I go, I have to tell you how much I ardently admire and love you.”

“I love you, too, Will,” she said, her eyes suddenly brimming with water, “with all my heart.”

He wiped a tear that had started to fall down her cheek. “Please don’t cry, Lizzy, or I will cry, too.”

She laughed through her tears. “A brave man like you?”

“I’m only brave right now because you believe in me.” He reached into his pocket. “Here, I have something for you. Something that will remind you of me while I’m gone today.”

He handed her a small piece of worn cloth. When she spread in out in her hand, she caught her breath. The cloth held the image of a golden acorn.

“Where… where did you get this?”

“It was given to me when I was very young. I was even told at the time that this acorn represented peace.”

“Oh Will!” She covered her mouth in excitement, her heart suddenly lifting. The image was a sign, a promise that Will would fulfill his destiny with the power of the gemstone. “I always knew it! You are the man of honor, and you will bring peace to our land.”

“I do not know how, dearest Lizzy, but because you believe in me, I know that it’s true.”

They began to kiss again, until they heard a rap on the wall. Truman was standing there. “I am sorry to interrupt, young man. It’s time to go.”

Will pulled away from their embrace, gripping her hands one final time. “Goodbye, my love,” she whispered, clutching the small piece of cloth in her hand.

After the two men left, Lizzy helped Dottie ready her wares for the market. “I know you must be filled with so many emotions,” Dottie said to her. “Do you want to stay here?”

“No, I’d rather go with you to the marketplace. Staying here alone will give me too much time to worry about Will and miss him.”

As they walked to the center of the city, pushing two cartloads of clay goods, Lizzy asked a question she had wondered about since the previous day. “You told me your son was killed in war with Pemberlea. How is it that you do not hate the Pemberlean people?”

Dottie stopped for a moment. “I did at one time, after my son was killed. For some time afterward, I could not think of Pemberlea without hatred in my heart. But one day, Truman said something that made me reconsider. He asked whether the people of Pemberlea loved their children, too.”

She resumed walking. “I am a mother, Lizzy. I have nursed children at my breasts. I could not imagine any woman birthing and nursing children and not loving them. I knew at that moment that there were women in Pemberlea mourning their dead sons, too. And I knew I had to give up my hate.”
Lizzy nodded thoughtfully. “Will is here to bring peace. That is why we have come,” she told her.

Dottie beamed. “I thought that was the case. I am so happy about it! Our lands have had too much war. I am thankful that I could be a part of helping him to change our future.”

Lizzy smiled. “So am I.”

The marketplace was very crowded, and Lizzy was grateful to spend the day busily showing items, wrapping pots and jars in cloths to protect them, and accepting coins in exchange. She merely smiled and nodded at each customer, allowing Dottie to do all the talking, as she didn’t want to give away her foreign accent. She and Dottie spoke to each other whenever a lull in their customers occurred, such as when Dottie asked Lizzy if she were ready for a midday meal.

“Oh, yes please, that would be wonderful,” Lizzy answered. Dottie stepped away to purchase food for them, and within a short time, Lizzy was surprised to hear someone greet her in the familiar dialect of home.

She looked up to see a young, dark haired man approach. His curly head reminded her of Will, but otherwise, he looked nothing like the man she loved.

“My, you’re a comely young lass,” he said.

His flirtation embarrassed her, but curiosity made her speak. “Are you from Pemberlea?”

He smiled. “Why, yes! And it sounds as if you are, too. What a surprise and honor to meet one of my countrywomen here!”

“How did you come to be here?”

“I fled the violence of our homeland, and found refuge with the good people of this land.” He leaned toward her. “For they are good people, you know, not the fiends we were always taught they were.”

Lizzy smiled and nodded. “I am so happy to meet someone from home who feels this way! I agree.”

“And what brings you here to this fine country?” he asked.

Lizzy hesitated, but then considered that this man seemed like someone who cared about building friendship with Aurora. “My friend Will and I have come to bring peace between our nations. In fact, he has gone today to see the Auroran king and ask for it.”

“My, your friend must be very special!” the man answered. “What is your name, miss?”

“I’m Lizzy.” She curtsied.

“Lizzy! What a lovely name.” He smiled at her. “My name is George.”
The King

As the two men began their journey, the morning sun shone brightly overhead, its cruel beams producing beads of sweat on Will's forehead and mocking his anxious mood. As soon as they had exited Dottie's home, Will found that he could no longer maintain the confidence and sense of purpose he had expressed to Lizzy. Instead, the anger he had lived with for so many years surged within him anew, now mixed with a foreboding sense of confusion and fear.

When they passed Truman's home on the way, the old man stopped and instructed Will to enter. Inside, Truman asked Will to help him move his bed away from the wall. The Auroran man then bent down and lifted one of the floorboards underneath, revealing a small boxlike space. "Your weapon, young man. You need to place it in here."

Will looked at him in disbelief. "You cannot possibly think I will enter your kingdom's castle unarmed!"

Truman shrugged. "The castle guards will search you, and if they find your weapon, they will seize it. If you want to keep it, I suggest you leave it here."

Will exhaled, and reluctantly removed his scabbard and dagger. He handed them to Truman, who set them in the hole and replaced the floorboard. The two men returned the bed to its place.

"I'll have you know that the idea of being without my dagger makes me very uneasy."

"Then you must trust your destiny, young man. If it is in line with what is good, then all will be well."

Filled with pent-up tension, Will suddenly exploded. "It is not my damned destiny! If I were to choose, I would carry my dagger and use it to slaughter every wretched Auroran I encounter!"

"Including me?"

Will looked at the sorrowful expression on the man's face and felt ashamed. "Not you, Truman. You know I don't mean you."

"Why not? After all, I am a wretched Auroran."

"You and Dottie are good people. You are not like the others!"

"How do you know that? How do you know if either is true—that Dottie and I are good, or that we are not like the rest of our countrymen?"

Will suddenly felt weary, and sat down on Truman's chair, running his hands down his face. "Because I've seen it. I've seen both your goodness, and the wickedness perpetuated by your countrymen."

"I see. Of course, many from Aurora could make the same statement about your countrymen. If I were not such as old man—if I had not lived at a time when our nations were at peace, when Pemberleans and Aurorans could call each other brother—then I might feel the same way."
"Your childhood was a long time ago. Everything has changed since then."

Truman sat on the bed facing Will. "Why have you come here, young man?"

"I do not know. I did not come willingly."

"Yet here you are. Miss Lizzy seems to know why you are here."

"She is the one that believes in peace, not me." He wanted so badly to be the man of honor Lizzy considered him, but now, away from her presence, he knew he was not. "I am a soldier, Truman. A man of war. I cannot count the number of Aurorans I have killed."

Truman did not seem shocked by this revelation. "Yet here you are," he repeated.

"I did not choose this destiny."

Truman observed him for a few moments before speaking. "No, but it chose you." He stood up. "Come, young Will. It is time."

They rose again and in silence, made their way to the castle. Will's apprehension grew with each step. He had no idea what he was to do when they arrived.

As they drew near to the slow-moving throngs lined up outside the Auroran seat of power, Truman whispered, "It might be best for you to keep your head lowered, and not speak." Will nodded.

As Truman had warned him, they were searched by the royal guards when they finally reached the gates of the rampart. They had already witnessed the removal of a knife and a sword from others in the crowd ahead of them. A guard inspected the bag Truman carried, which contained several sticks of dried mutton, a flask of water, and two pears. The bag was returned, and they were allowed to pass on and enter the gates.

They endured another long wait before they finally crossed the castle threshold. Once inside, the environment was instantly familiar to Will—walls covered with richly woven tapestries, floors lined with statues sculpted by the finest masters, furniture inlaid with gold, discreet servants about their business, and guards posted at every corridor.

Nonetheless, the milieu also felt distinctly alien, and not simply because this was the castle of a foreign land. Will had spent the last eight years living in crude encampments. He had viewed firsthand the grinding poverty in which many of his subjects dwelt. This display of opulence now somehow seemed wrong to him.

They were led into a large room where a multitude had gathered, each waiting for his or her opportunity to have an audience before the king. The wait again was long, and several hours later, the purpose of Truman's bag became apparent when he opened it up and offered Will something to eat around midday.

Will was about to bite into a mutton stick when he noticed a very thin woman sitting on the floor not far from them. She was holding a child of about four in her lap. The gaunt little boy was eyeing his food.

He walked over to the woman and handed her his mutton sticks and pear. She cried out, "Bless you, sir, bless you!" He nodded to her and walked away.

When he returned to Truman's side, the old man said, "Very good, young Will."
Their turn finally came, and they approached the table outside the king's throne room. "State your name and your business," said the scribe sitting there.

"I am Truman the Tailor, and this is my assistant," the old man said. "We are here to speak to the king about his royal sash."

The scribe checked his scroll and nodded. "You may enter."

A servant pulled at a gold-plated door handle to open the cavernous door. Will and Truman entered, the sound of their boots echoing on the tile floor.

"Truman the Tailor and his assistant," a herald announced, and then departed.

At long last, they were in front of Thomas, King of Aurora, seated on his royal throne. "Your Majesty," Truman greeted him, and he and Will bowed deeply. Will again felt a sensation of strangeness, remembering how at one point in his life, he had been the one bowed to.

The king rose. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with piercing dark eyes, no doubt an imposing figure to his subjects. His hair was completely gray beneath his crown, but he did not look very old—mid to late forties at most, Will guessed.

The man smiled. "Truman! What a surprise. Why have you sought audience with me today?"

"Sire," Truman began, "although it is not my usual time, things are changing rapidly. I thought that changes in your sash might also be in order."

The man's smile broadened. "Right you are!" he shouted with great cheer. "Jerald's armies may have made some inroads of late in regaining their southern lands, but it is a futile effort. We continue to hold the Pemberlean capital under siege, and it will soon fall. At long last, Jerald's kingdom will be no more! Truman, begin making a new sash to honor my greatness!"

This news of the potential fall of his kingdom filled Will with rage, a fury he had no intention of hiding. The king apparently felt the white heat emanating from Will's direction, because he turned his eyes toward him. Will realized that he had also caught the attention of the ten guards stationed about the room.

The king approached Will and stared at him with a fierce gaze that would likely cause most men to tremble in fear. Will, however, was not most men. Thomas was a king, but he was a king's son. So far they were equals; he would neither flinch nor cower before this man.

Their staring competition continued. Will sensed the king's guards standing at alert and ready to strike if needed. Abruptly, the king's expression changed into one of surprise; nay, shock. At once the reason Truman had forbidden Will to shave became blindingly obvious: King Thomas had recognized him. He knew that he was Prince Fitzwilliam of Pemberlea. And Truman, Will now realized, had known all along. He should not have been surprised. As with his cousin, the old man's perception was uncanny.

"What is the meaning of this, Truman?" the king shouted, turning back to the old man.

The small man also stood bravely. "This young man has come a long way to see you, sire. Do you recognize him?"

"Yes, I recognize him. Do not take me for a fool!"

"Who is he, sire?"
Will held his breath, awaiting the king’s pronouncement of him as Jerald’s heir, followed by whatever punishment he considered fitting.

What happened next took him completely by surprise. "Leave us!" the king demanded.

For a moment, no one moved. Truman and the guards, like Will, were probably unsure to whom Thomas was speaking.

"Guards, I said leave us, NOW!" With this, the ten royal soldiers lined up in formation and departed the room obediently.

When they were gone, Truman asked again, "Sire, do you know who this man is?"

The king's demeanor unexpectedly softened. "He is Angelia's son."

"You knew my mother?" The words came forth from Will's mouth before he could stop them.

Thomas turned his severe countenance toward him once more. "Of course I knew your mother. She was my sister."

Chapter End Notes

I would love, love, love to hear what you think of this tale at this point!
Dirt and hay. That was Lizzy's first sensation. Dirt stinging her eyes and filling her nostrils, and hay poking her skin. Where was she?

She tried to move, to sit up. She found she could not. Her entire body ached. Her boots had been removed and her ankles and hands, she realized, were bound with heavy rope. She shivered from the cold and from pain.

How had she come to be here? What had happened? She tried to think, but it was difficult. Her head was throbbing.

The marketplace… Dottie… what had happened? She had been helping Dottie and then…

The Pemberlean man! George! She had met him that day, so excited to find another of her countrymen desiring peace.

Dottie has returned with their food and she'd introduced them. Ever hospitable, Dottie had invited him to sup that evening. He had told them he'd return at the end of the day.

He'd come back, and then what? Something about a friend. George had wanted her to meet a friend; he'd told Dottie that he and Lizzy would be back in a moment.

She was walking with him, telling him about her home in Merrytown, and then… from there all went black. What had happened? Where was Dottie? Where was she?

Will. Had he returned from the castle? Was he safe? Had peace come?

Why was she tied up? Why was she in so much pain?

Her breathing was ragged. She tried to speak, but her voice was hoarse, her mouth dry as ashes. Her heart began racing as panic set in. She'd never been so terrified. Where was she? What had happened to her? Where were her friends?

**Bravery without measure.** The words came to her in that moment and she started to calm. The acorn of courage! Where was it?

She was lying on a dirty floor. She looked around, as much as she could from her cramped, bound position, as much as her aching head would allow it. Wherever she was, it was dark; but she spotted a beam of light. It was coming from a window. She rotated her eyes upward. It was dark out the window, but she could see the moon. Wherever she was, it was night.

She rolled a bit on the floor. Her belt was around her waist and she could feel the acorns in it. Which one was the green one? She thought for a minute, trying to recall how she'd placed them—was it only last night when Will had given her the belt?

Right side. It came to her. The green acorn was on the right. She rolled painfully onto the right side of her body, pressing her waist against the ground. She could feel the acorn poking her side. She continued to roll, trying to force the belt's pocket to expel it. It took some time, but eventually, the acorn popped out and rolled a few feet away from her. Its bright emerald light suddenly lit up everything around her.
Lizzy coughed, dust filling her throat. But at last, she could now see. She was in a room of some kind, she knew not where. The floor seemed to be devoid of any furniture. She could see a double door, like that of a barn. Was that where she was, some sort of barn or stable? If so, it would explain the hay, but the building had apparently been abandoned, the animal smells long dissipated.

Now she had to reach the acorn. She scooted her body along the floor toward it, feeling sharp pokes and scratches as she did. She reached the acorn, but could not grab it with her hands tied behind her back.

She would have to turn her body so that her hands faced the acorn, but then she would be unable to see it. She'd have to feel her way toward it, estimating its location by the brightness around it. Many minutes passed of her scooting and rolling, trying to reach the acorn with her fingers. Several times she'd touch it, but it would slip from her grasp.

Finally she had the acorn in hand. Her fingers rolled along the green gemstone, uncertain what would happen next. Would it be a vision, the way there had been with the red one?

No vision came to her; instead, she heard a voice. "There is no fear in love," it said. And then, "There are rocks in here."

She paused, puzzled. She rubbed the acorn again. Once more, she heard the voice. "There is no fear in love. There are rocks in here."

That was it. The light in the room dimmed, and she knew the acorn's glimmer had gone out. She kept what she was sure was now a simple brown nut in her hand, unwilling to lose it.

She heard a noise, and saw a door open. Feet entered the room, attached to a pair of long legs and a body. She couldn't stretch her painful head enough to look high enough and see the face that went with it. Whoever it was held a candle or torch, because light had returned to the room.

"My, you've been busy! You look as if you've been rolling all over the floor. Didn't your mother teach you not to play in the dirt?"

It was George's voice. Somehow, some way, he was responsible for her condition.

He approached her and knelt beside her, looking into her face.

"Oh my," he said, reaching out to touch her cheek. She flinched at his touch, which was painful. "Sorry about that, my love. I didn't mean to hit you quite so hard, but you did bite me. I'm afraid your punishment knocked you out for some time, and will leave quite a bruise on that pretty face."

No fear in love, Lizzy thought. She thought about those she loved: her family, Dottie and Truman, and Will. Most of all, she thought about Will.

He pulled out a flask and uncorked it, holding it up to her mouth. "I'd take some if I were you, my dear. I'm sure you're thirsty."

Lizzy was dreadfully thirsty, but he provided only a few sips. When he pulled the flask away, he smiled. "No food for you, my love. I'd have to feed you myself, and you bit me before. I can't take that risk."

It is no loss, thought Lizzy. The man's food would sicken her.

"Sorry it's taken me so long to come back to you. I had to do a bit of research. I found no answers this afternoon, but this evening the results were much better. I have quite a few friends among the
king's guard."

He laughed as if he'd made a joke. "Not friends, really, but people who will talk for the right… incentives."

He smiled down at her, his face leering. A jagged scar ran across his cheek, but even without it, his expression was grotesque. "You gave me quite the mystery to solve today, but it was so much fun! Let's see, you came here from Pemberlea seeking peace with a friend named Will. That was my first clue.

"At the castle, I learned that the king had a visitor today, a tall, dark-haired, bearded man. It quite upset him, something that almost never happens with King Thomas."

Lizzy listened without reacting, realizing that she felt no fear. She filled her thoughts with the love she felt for Will.

"I tried to put it all together: Will, Pemberlea, tall, dark hair, important enough that he could upset the king. Now who could that be? I realized, I know someone who fits that description! Yet it seemed impossible to me. The man I know would never seek peace with Aurora."

He sat back on his heels. "Then I remembered, it's all about incentives. What incentive would he have to seek peace?"

He paused, raising his eyebrows and tapping his lips with his forefinger as if he were thinking. "The fact that his kingdom is about to fall, perhaps? Trying to stave off the inevitable? And of course…" he drew closer to her, but she did not flinch, "…the biggest incentive of all for most men, a willing woman."

He waved his hand in front of her face, as if trying to understand her lack of response. She blinked, but did not otherwise react. "You're a brave one. Or perhaps I hit you so hard your mind is no longer functioning?"

_I love you, Will_, she thought. She dreamed of someday being wed to him, of having a life and family together.

"I wonder, though, what were your incentives to come here? Are you just a peace-loving idealist? Or perhaps the chance to engage in carnal knowledge with the prince was incentive enough?"

_Carnal knowledge? The prince?_ thought Lizzy. What was he talking about?

"Hmm, you reacted to that. Did you have big dreams for yourself? Did you imagine he would see your lovely face and overlook your common background? You expected him to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? Were you imagining marriage someday, harboring delusions of becoming a …" he stopped to emphasize the word, _princess?_

Lizzy tried to keep her mind focused on her love for Will, but this man was confusing her.

George smirked at her. "I am rather amazed you snagged him at all. He's always been so careful. I guess every man has his breaking point, even the great Prince Fitzwilliam!"

"What, did you not know?" George said, catching her expression of confusion. "You perhaps only knew him as Captain Darcy? Ah, I see. You're a camp girl who finally caught him in a moment of weakness. Oh, my dear, dear! Wouldn't it be fun if you were with child? I can only imagine the proud, disciplined Fitzwilliam, having a bastard child with a farm girl! What a delicious scandal that would be!"
"I love him," Lizzy unexpectedly said aloud. She knew she should not speak, but she could no longer hold the words back, "and he loves me."

George laughed again, a deep-throated sound made more abhorrent for its near pleasantness. "He loves you? Oh, you are delusional! You really think you're more than a diversion for the prince? Believe me, a woman like you is the last one he could be prevailed upon to love, let alone marry. He despises camp girls."

Lizzy closed her eyes, trying to form the words again that had given her such strength, but she could not; her mind was too clouded. She suddenly heard a loud crack and felt as though her head were splitting in two. George had struck her with the back of his hand. "Keep your eyes on me!" he demanded.

She opened her eyes again, barely able to see as double images floated in front of her face, her head throbbing in agony. He continued to taunt her until he seemed to grow bored, finally exiting the building and leaving her alone to mull over what he'd just told her.

As her mind slowly began to clear, she struggled to understand what was going on. She did not know why George was holding her captive, but she gathered it had something to do with Will. He seemed to know Will, and worse, seemed to hate him. And he had declared that Will was the crown prince of Pemberlea.

Could that be true? She recalled seeing something more than just Will's military position when she had rubbed the red acorn, but the vision had disappeared too fast for her to grasp it. No wonder—the truth she had been searching for at the time was Will's purpose for coming to Merrytown, and that is what the gemstone provided. Yet it had given her a glimpse that there was more to him. Now she knew what she had almost seen. It all made sense—Will's secrecy, his apparent wealthy background, even the air of nobility he carried with him. Most of all, it made sense that he was the only man destined to bring peace.

She could not be angry that he had chosen to withhold his true identity from her and everyone else. She could only imagine the danger he might have been in had his royal status become known. George was proof of that. And she had revealed Will's presence to George. A sharp jolt raced through her belly. If harm came to Will, she would never forgive herself.

As she lay there, a new sensation overwhelmed her: she felt her heart begin to break. In his jeering words, George had spoken truth. If she survived her captivity, there would be no future between her and Will. He was no longer Will at all—he was His Royal Highness, Prince Fitzwilliam, heir to the kingdom of Pemberlea. And she was a commoner.

She could not still the ache that was building inside her as she thought about how they had exchanged words of love and affections with one another. What had that been about? She trusted his integrity enough to know that he would never toy with a woman. His feelings had been sincere, but were they real?

She realized with a shock that it had been scarcely a week since she and the prince had had their first conversation, walking back from the Widow's house. A week of acquaintance was not adequate time to create anything genuine and lasting, even if the differences in their positions in life hadn't existed. The prince had been a lonely man, spending a lot of time in the company of a young woman, during a journey in which their emotions were running high. No wonder he had fancied himself in love with her, but he would soon come to his senses. He would bring peace—she did not doubt that—and return home to marry a nobleman's daughter, or perhaps the princess of another land, who would one day become his queen. That was the duty expected of him. If there was one thing she knew about Will—Prince Fitzwilliam, she corrected herself—it was that he was strongly committed to doing his duty.
As she lay on the floor, she no longer cared about the pain she was in, or the dirt, or her captivity. Bitter tears rolled down her face as she cried herself to sleep.
"Your sister?" Will echoed.

"My twin sister," Thomas stated.

Will looked at him in shock. "How did I not know this?" He searched the man's face for some resemblance to himself or his mother, which he had not to this point perceived. His anger had blinded him during the last several minutes they had stood face to face, but now he saw it: the eyes. They had the same eyes, not only in color but also in shape and intensity. "How is this possible? Was there some sort of alliance between our families?"

"There was no alliance!" Thomas shouted. "Only broken promises and deception and betrayal!"

Will was quiet for some time, unsure he wanted to hear more but desperate to know the truth. "Tell me," he finally said softly. "Please."

Thomas returned to sit on his throne, regarding Will warily, as if skeptical that the younger man was sincere in both his ignorance and his request. At last he sighed. "For many generations, Aurora and Pemberlea have had disputes about the lands along the border between us. Around the time my sister and I turned seventeen, skirmishes among the peoples on both sides of the border were increasing. Hoping to stem the bloodshed, my maternal grandfather, who was one of my father's dukes, asked permission to open negotiations with your grandfather Archibald. He was certain the Pemberlean king was a man of reason and that they could settle this conflict once and for all.

"The old duke was given consent to invite Archibald and his son to our capital city for these talks. Your father, I believe, was in his early twenties at the time. They supped with us each evening during the five-day meeting. That was how your father met my sister.

"My father considered me old enough to join meetings that concerned our country's fate, so I had many opportunities to observe your father, more so than my sister. I considered Jerald arrogant and disdainful, clearly considering himself superior to us."

*My father?* Will thought in disbelief. He had always been a loving man toward his son, and in the last dozen years of grief and hardship, had been anything but arrogant and superior.

"My sister, however, was completely taken in by Jerald, regarding him as handsome and charming and other superficial qualities that seem so appealing at that age.

"On the final day of talks, an agreement was reached: Pemberlea would relinquish all claims to the contested lands. In exchange, Aurora would enforce order, ensuring that our people no longer engaged in cross-border attacks. To seal this agreement, my father would give my sister to your father in marriage."

"So there was an alliance," Will said.

The king's eyes burned at him. "Ignorant fool! Your grandfather had no intention of honoring his side of the treaty, but they would enforce our part of the bargain in blood! Archibald and Jerald
departed for your homeland, while my mother and sister traveled to an area of healing springs in our northlands for a final holiday together before my sister's marriage. Within days, Archibald's armies had invaded our border lands, slaughtering hundreds of our people. Meanwhile, your soldiers abducted my sister during her travels right in front of our mother's eyes. Our mother was injured during the scuffle and died a few weeks later. My father, heartbroken about losing his wife and daughter, was never the same after that, and within two years he followed my mother to the grave."

Will's heart beat rapidly. This couldn't be true! His parents' marriage, which he had always considered one of great affection and respect, had begun in deception and captivity. No, it was not possible!

"So now you understand," Thomas said.

"Understand what?" Will snapped. "That you've lied about my parents, who loved each other? That more than 12,000 Pemberleans have died because of your adolescent dislike of my father?"

"More than 15,000 Aurorans have died in this war and the one your grandfather started!" Thomas shouted. "Do not start counting your dead, for I can more than match you! I restrained myself from avenging them as long as my sister was alive, but once she was gone, I began my revenge! And I will not stop until it is completed, for Pemberlea will never again invade our lands or destroy my family!"

The king stood up and strode toward the room's entrance. "I have other orders of business to attend to. You"—he pointed at Truman—"are to leave immediately."

"You will not harm him!" Will shouted.

The king glared at him. "I would not harm my tailor," he spat. He rapped on the door, and the ten guardsmen returned. "Escort Truman out of the castle," he said to one, who took the old man by the arm.

"Godspeed, Will!" Truman shouted as he was shown out the room.

The king turned back to Will. "You are to stay here until I decide what to do with you. These men will escort you to an upstairs chamber."

Will found himself being led forcefully by three of the king's guards up a flight of stairs to a room at the end of a long corridor. They shoved him inside and slammed the door shut behind him.

There was no handle on the inside of the door. He pushed at the entrance, which did not budge. It was obviously locked, and most certainly guarded on the outside. Will knew that he was now a prisoner. He had no idea what Thomas' plans were for him. Perhaps he intended to hold him as some form of leverage against his father.

He exhaled and looked around. The room was enormous, but practically bare, furnished only with a bed in the center, a chamber pot beside it. The ceiling was high, at least thirty feet above his head, and edged in decorative moldings. Several small windows dotted one of the walls close to the ceiling, letting in sunlight and air. From them, at least, he would be able to tell whether it was night or day.

He walked around the edge of the room, tapping the walls to determine whether there were any openings, any other way out besides the door. There was none.

Unlike the room itself, the walls were completely covered. Huge portraits hung all around of men in uniforms or fine robes, and women in magnificent gowns. The paintings were so large he had
to stand in the center of the room to take them in fully. He turned slowly in a circle, studying each one.

One of the portraits made Will catch his breath, that of a man of about fifty, with dark eyes and hair that was just starting to gray at the temples. The man stood tall and proudly, his expression determined. Will stared for a long time. The man was the very image of himself twenty years' hence. More shocking was the emblem he wore on the breast of his uniform: an acorn. A golden acorn.

He had been standing still for so long that he jumped in surprise when he heard the doors opening. A maidservant entered, accompanied by two guardsmen. "Stay back!" one of the men ordered. Will did not move as he watched the woman place a tray of food on the floor. He waited until she and the guardsmen departed, and then approached to pick it up. Too confused to worry about the possibility of poison, he carried the food to the bed and sat down to eat spiced beef, apples and ale. When finished, he carried the remains of his meal to the door and knocked. He stepped back as two guards entered, swords drawn, while a third one removed the tray. While the guards were still present, another servant entered carrying a flame on a long pole, which he used to relight several torches that rested in wall sconces at least ten feet above the ground.

Time passed. Will could not tell how much, except that the high windows revealed that it was now dark outside. There was nothing to do in this room but think, and so think is what he did, thumping his forehead painfully.

His parents had lied to him. His mother had been the princess of Aurora, and they had never told him. Her Auroran tutor story was a falsehood; she had come by the accent naturally. If their marriage were formed from a willing alliance, there would have been no need to lie, at least not to him. Why the deception unless Thomas' horrific story was true?

A new realization filled his mind. His mother had been Auroran. Because of her, he was half Auroran. Therefore, he had spent a lifetime hating his own blood, and the last eight years killing his own people. He groaned in shame, his headache intensifying.

The door opened again. This time neither servants nor guardsmen entered. Instead, his new visitor was a boy.

The young lad carried two folded blankets in his arms, and to his surprise, walked right up to Will. "For you," he said, offering the blankets. "It gets cold at night."

Will took the blankets from him and placed them on the bed. "Thank you."

The boy did not depart. Instead, he stood there examining Will. His tousled dark hair and round brown eyes reminded him of his own as a child.

Finally, Will spoke, remembering to use the Auroran accent. "Pardon me. Who are you?"

"I'm Lawrence," the lad answered.

"And you were sent to bring me blankets?"

The boy grinned and pointed at the door with his thumb. "That's what I told the guard, so he'd let me in."

Will arched his eyebrows. "You're not supposed to be here?"

The boy's grin broadened. "The castle is buzzing with rumors about a stranger who came today
with the old tailor. My father sent all the guards out of the room to meet with them, and has been acting oddly ever since. I came to see who it was for myself."

His father. Of course. This was Thomas' son. Will shouldn't have been surprised, noting the similarities between himself and Lawrence.

"Who are you?" Lawrence asked.

"Ask your father."

"He won't tell me." The boy pouted his lips. "He always says I'm too young to know things."

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"He's right; you are too young."

The boy scowled, and then returned to studying Will. "You must have done something naughty."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, not very naughty, or you'd be in prison. But naughty enough. This is where they send me when I'm in trouble."

Despite his headache, Will found himself grinning as he looked around. "Fitting punishment. I imagine an empty room like this would drive you mad."

Lawrence rolled his eyes. "It's very boring. All there is to do is to look at paintings of dead people."

Hearing the lad mention the portraits prompted Will to ask a question. "Do you know who that man is?" he said, standing and pointing to the one wearing the acorn insignia.

The boy nodded. "That's Allard, Duke of Darcy. He was one of my great-grandfathers on my father's side."

"What does his emblem mean?"

"The acorn?" Lawrence shrugged. "Something about peace. He tried to make peace with the Pemberlean brutes back during some war we were fighting a long time ago. It was stupid."

"Why?"

"Because Pemberleans are barbarians and can't be trusted. They ended up betraying him and taking a bunch of our lands."

Will didn't know how to respond, so he said nothing.

"Now, me?" Lawrence said, his grin returning, "I wouldn't be so stupid. I'd pretend I was going to make peace, but I'd surprise them and slay them all with my sword!" The boy advanced and lunged toward an unseen enemy, thrusting with an invisible weapon in hand.

Just then they heard a woman's voice yelling outside the door. "You let him go in there by himself with that man? How many times do I have to tell you not to listen to his fibs! You'll be punished for this!"
"That's my mother. I've got to go." Lawrence flashed Will an impish smile. "At least she can't put me in here, since you're here."

The door opened and an elegantly dressed woman entered, accompanied by three guards. She looked at Will with alarm as though she thought he might harm the boy, and then shouted her son's name. Lawrence winked at Will and turned to walk out with her, the door shutting behind them. Will listened as the scolding she was giving him gradually grew less audible, the boy and his mother apparently walking away.

Will sat down on the bed, feeling both delighted and disturbed by the encounter. Growing up with no siblings and no extended family at all except paternal grandparents who died when he was young, it was a peculiar sensation to meet his cousin.

The boy reminded him of himself as a child, pretending with Charles and George to fight Auroran foes. They had been as scornful as Lawrence was of anything related to peace. He thought again of Truman's words, "Each nation is the hero of its own story." Its inverse was that each nation's adversaries were always the villains. At this point, Will no longer had any confidence in who the true heroes or villains were, and he no longer cared. He was tired of deception, tired of lies, and tired of war.

Another sentiment overcame him, that of deep longing. Lawrence looked enough like him that he could be his younger brother, or his son. Would he ever have a son, or a family of his own? He thought of Lizzy and how much she had come to mean to him in just a few days, so much that he could no longer imagine his life without her. A vision came to him of coupling with her and producing children together.

Was it just that morning that he had held her in his arms? It seemed a lifetime ago. He had fallen asleep the previous night considering how foolish and impossible it would be to pursue her. When he awoke and saw Lizzy lying on the bed near him, all rational thought had fled his mind; he desired only her.

By now, Truman should have returned and told her about his meeting with the king. He hoped she was not filled with worry about him, and that she knew how much he was thinking of her and how deeply he missed her. He filled his mind and heart with many of the things he loved about her: her courage and strength; her sweetness and joy; the way her teasing could bring a smile to his face or one look into her fine eyes could take his breath away; and most of all, her faith in him. If he survived this, he vowed, he would marry her, his crown be damned.

Chapter End Notes

Now they're both being held captive. What do you think will happen next?
The Golden Acorn

Will was awakened in the morning when a guardsman entered the room and barked at him to carry his chamber pot to the door and then step back. He obeyed, and soon a servant returned with the emptied pot and his breakfast. He ignored the food, his thoughts preoccupied with more important considerations. Lizzy was again the first and foremost thing on his mind. The prospects of marriage and family with her were now so tantalizing and real that he knew he had to say his next words out loud. "I can no longer go back to the battlefield." Eight years as a soldier and it was finally time to give it all up.

This wasn't just a selfish desire. He thought of Charles, eager for contact with a woman that was more than just an hour of sexual relations; of the parents and daughters of Merrytown eyeing them desperately because there were no other marriageable men; of the heartrending cry of the miller's son, and those of so many others who had buried their dead far too soon. He even thought about a mischievous boy, sharing a connection with a stranger who was supposed to be his enemy, but in actuality was family. All of them deserved a chance at life and love and something other than endless warfare.

These hostilities had gone on far, far too long: three generations and then some. There were no pure heroes in this story, or absolute villains, not in Aurora or Pemberlea, only selfish men carrying out cycles of greed and vengeance to the detriment of tens of thousands. "Where does it end?" Lizzy had asked him the night he had found her in the tunnel. Right here, he decided. It ends right here and right now.

He pulled the golden acorn out of his pocket. Rub it, Lizzy had said. Was that all he had to do? Was he supposed to chant something, too, or perhaps think peaceful thoughts? When she had used the ruby acorn, all she appeared to do was rub it between her fingers. So he took a deep breath and began.

Nothing. The gemstone glowed just as brightly, just as golden as it had before. He closed his eyes and tried again while thinking thoughts of peace. Again, he looked at it. The acorn remained unchanged. He tried once more, this time rubbing it between his palms. Still nothing.

He exhaled in frustration. What was he doing wrong? Maybe it took more time. Bringing an end to an extended war was a far more difficult task than revealing someone's identity, even for a magical acorn. He closed his eyes a second time, determined to keep rubbing the gem until something changed.

With his eyes closed and thoughts focused, he did not realize someone had entered the room until he felt the sharp, cold edge of a sword at this throat.

His eyes snapped open. Three men faced him, each with weapons trained on him. The face of the one whose sword tip pierced his neck was all too familiar to him. "George," he hissed.

"Well, well, well!" George said, a wolfish smile crossing his face. "I never expected to find myself in this position. I imagine you never expected it, either."

"What are you doing here?"
George pressed the sword and he could fill it prick his skin. "Careful. You're in no place to demand anything."

Will swallowed hard, but said nothing, making his face a mask.

George nodded his head at one of the other men, who took his place at Will's neck. George re-sheathed his sword and began to walk around. "Since you're an old friend, I'll answer your question. When I had to leave Pemberlea unexpectedly, I decided to seek refuge in this fine kingdom. King Thomas was quite pleased with the information I was able to provide him about Jerald's army, and has given me great privileges here in his realm."

As George circled the bed, Will didn't turn his head to watch him. Instead, he slowly placed the acorn on the sheet, covering it with his hand.

George leaned toward Will. "It also helps that I grew up in a castle. I learned at a young age how to probe other servants for information, and how to tell which ones are open to bribes." He stood upright again, a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Do you remember the time we were wrestling at nine years old and broke the vase given to your parents by the Duchess of Sandburg?"

"Speak!" George screamed when Will didn't answer.

"I remember," Will said, his nose flaring.

"You were punished for that by being sent to bed without supper. And I… well, I was whipped. For you were just a prince being naughty, but I was a servant who had to pay for that vase. WITH. MY. FLESH."

He leaned toward Will again, his voice low. "I still have the marks."

Will again remained silent, his heart thumping. He had not known about the whipping.

"I came to understand something important that day. I realized that it didn't matter that I was as clever as you, or as strong as you, or as tall as you. I would never be you, for you would one day be king, and I would always be a servant, simply by virtue of our births. Now is that fair?"

"I said, is that FAIR!" George screamed again.

"No."

"I decided that day that if I wanted anything in this life, I would have to take it. I would never be handed anything the way you are, neither a rank in the army nor a crown."

*I was not handed my rank, I earned it*, Will thought, but said nothing.

"That philosophy served me well for some time. But when camp girls are giving you what you want freely, it gets a little boring after a while, so I had to seek other challenges. After one such… challenge, I learned that once more you were planning to take a piece of my hide. I couldn't let that happen again, so I came here."

George stopped pacing and looked closely into Will's eyes. "Now the story really becomes interesting. For the first time, I learned what it was like to no longer be just a servant or a drudge in the army, but a key adviser to the king, one who knew secrets no one else could tell him! And Thomas has rewarded me very handsomely for my knowledge!"
Will could only say a silent prayer of thanksgiving that George had fled before he had formulated his plan for protecting the northlands.

"Keep your eyes on me, Will. I can call you Will, can't I? For here in Aurora, you are no longer Prince Fitzwilliam or Captain Darcy. Here, you're nobody.

"As I was saying, I've been rewarded here in Aurora for helping Thomas. I remain valuable to him as long as the war continues. So imagine my surprise when I met a young woman in the marketplace who recognized my Pemberlean accent! And my even greater surprise when I learned that her friend had come here to seek an end to the war!"

Will's stoic expression began to falter. Lizzy, oh God, Lizzy, he thought.

"Behold the look on your face! She actually means something to you, doesn't she? Shocking—you, who never looked at any woman but to see a blemish!"

George started laughing as drops of sweat began to roll down Will's face. "Oh, this is rich. You've lain with Lizzy, haven't you? At long last! What else but the taste of a woman's sweet juices could convince you of all people to come to Aurora to seek peace?"

He leaned toward him and whispered again. "She was that good, wasn't she, Will?"

"You'd better not touch her!" Will shouted.

"I'll admit she is enticing, but she's a bit too old for my tastes."

"You monster!" Will yelled, almost jumping up until he felt the prick of the henchman's sword once more.

George laughed again and drew his own sword. "You know, I'd almost be tempted to take her just because it upsets you so much. There's only one problem"—he touched the tip of his sword to Will's chest—"It's too late. I've already killed her. After all, I couldn't have her talk of peace stopping my plans."

In that moment, Will felt his heart collapse as though George had sliced through him.

Just then the door opened and King Thomas strode in, accompanied by a half dozen guards. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

George sheathed his sword and bowed. "Your Majesty, this man is a captain in Jerald's army. I learned he was here and decided to question him for information."

The king glared at him. "I was neither consulted nor did I give you permission to take such an action. Do not presume to act without my consent again!"

"Yes, sire," George said, bowing his head. "I beg your pardon."

"Now depart!" George and the two men with him left.

The King kneeled in front of Will, no doubt astounding the guards in the room by taking a position of humility before the mysterious stranger. "Fitzwilliam," he said, using Will's given name for the first time, "are you hurt? You're bleeding." He turned toward the men behind him. "Bring this man some ale and a wet cloth for his neck!"
"Speak to me, Fitzwilliam. What did they do to you?"

In a state of shock, Will could not speak. When a guard returned with the ale, he shook his head and refused it.

His life, his heart, his dreams… everything gone. All turned to ashes in an instant. He wished George had thrust his sword, because he no longer had anything to live for. He closed his eyes. *Not true*, he suddenly thought. There was one last thing he could do, not for himself but for all the people of Pemberlea and Aurora.

The king himself dabbed the wet cloth against the wound on Will's neck. Will watched him for a moment, and then grabbed Thomas' hand and pressed the acorn into it, rubbing it between their two palms. In that instant, he felt his mind transported. He saw everything at once, Archibald betraying the treaty, his mother's capture, his grandmother's death, Archibald's invasion, his mother dying, Thomas' invasion, death and tears, pain and weeping. He saw each man he had ever killed at the moment he slew them, and then he saw the families and loved ones of each of those men. He heard Lizzy's voice over and over, "Where does it end? Where does it end? Where does it end?"

Suddenly, it was over. Will's mind returned to the room, where the guards watched him and King Thomas in hushed silence. The king's face was as white as a ghost, his expression one of horror. "Leave now," the king whispered. "Leave now and never return to my presence."

Will didn't move, couldn't move. "Guards!" Thomas attempted to yell, but his voice was hoarse. "Escort this man out of the castle and see him safely to the home of Truman the Tailor."

Will was barely aware of two guardsmen helping him stand, and walking with him out of the castle and through the streets of the city until they arrived at Truman's cottage. The two men knocked and waited until the old man answered, and then departed.

"Young man!" Truman cried, ushering him inside. "Are you well?"

Dottie, who had been sitting at the table, stood up and came toward him, her face covered in tears. "Oh, Will, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. Lizzy…"

At her words, Will collapsed to the floor. The old couple rushed to his side and wrapped their arms around him as he sobbed in anguish. He had failed. He had failed Lizzy, and he had failed all of the people of two different nations.

The acorn fell from his hand. It was still golden, and it glowed as brightly as ever.

Chapter End Notes

I would love some comments!
Bravery without Measure

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful comments! Now, time to catch up with Lizzy!

Bravery without Measure

When she awoke the next morning, Lizzy had no more tears to shed. The pain in her head had ebbed to a dull throb, and the ache in her heart had transformed into anger. To her surprise, her fearlessness had not diminished. "Bravery without measure," she recalled the fox saying. Well, she had it, and thus she was determined to no longer remain this man's prisoner.

George entered the barn shortly after she woke, provided her with a few sips of water, and then departed again.

After he left, she considered her options. She had to find a way to escape, but how? No fear in love, she heard again. Well, love was now lost to her. Perhaps it was time to concentrate on the other part of the message: There are rocks in here.

Rocks. That might be something she could use to help her escape, but where were they? Although the window revealed that it was day, it was too small to provide much more than the dimmest of light to the stable. She would have to use her body to find them, rolling around again on the ground. It took some time and many more scratches, but eventually she located a few sharp rocks buried beneath the hay. Grasping one in her fingers, she struggled to use it to gnaw against the ropes around her wrists.

After many hours, the ropes around her hands broke. She was parched, drenched with sweat and completely exhausted, but she couldn't stop, not when freedom was so close. She used her free hands to unlash her legs, and then stood to get the blood flowing again. She had returned the now-brown acorn to the pocket in her belt and was preparing to leave when she heard the barn door opening. Quickly, she dropped to the ground again, resuming her position with her hands behind her back and her legs beneath her, the ropes hidden underneath her skirt. The rock remained in her hand behind her body.

George had returned. She prayed he would not look behind her and see her untied hands. "Ah, my dear, who do you suppose I saw today? Your lover. He is a prisoner of King Thomas even as we speak." He paused, pursing his lips sorrowfully. "I'm afraid your hopes for peace have come to naught."

Lizzy remained silent. She would give away nothing. A setback for the prince, but she knew he would find a way through it.

George crouched down in front of Lizzy, his face so close to hers that she could smell his foul breath. "I must say I was surprised to see how much he cares for you. I suppose I was wrong about that. Happens now and then." He sat back and laughed. "However, realizing his affection solved a dilemma I had: what do I do with you? I've left you alone because I like them younger, but you are quite beautiful. And it would be so heartbreaking to Will to hear that I've brought his lover to bliss in a way he never could."
Do not react, Lizzy told herself again. Again, she felt no fear.

"So come, let me take you to places you've never gone."

She clutched the rock tightly as he came toward her. Without thinking, she swung, hitting him in the temple. "Agghhh!" he yelled, and grabbed her wrist, wrenching it backward until she screamed. "I'm going to kill you!" he shouted through gritted teeth as he lunged to throw himself on top of her. Her knee shot out between his legs, causing him to howl in pain and making him loosen his grip on her arm enough that she was able to use the rock again, bashing his head three more times.

He toppled off her. Lizzy wasn't sure whether he was dead or just unconscious, but she didn't wait to find out. She jumped up and raced for the door.

Outside the stable, she found herself not in the city but a more rural area, filled with scraggly shrubs. She had no idea which direction to go; she just wanted to get as far away from her place of imprisonment as she could. The sun was setting as she began to run, and as she had come to expect of the Auroran night, the temperature soon dropped rapidly. She kept moving, her feet freezing and painful from the rocky terrain, but the silver acorn retrieved from her belt lighting her way and protecting her from falling.

After she had traveled some distance, a dark figure appeared from behind a bush, making her stop short. Then she smiled. It was her friend the kit, now an old reynard. He bowed before her and said, "My lady."

"It's good to see you again, my friend!" she said, almost crying with joy.

"I am here to lead you home," the fox told her.

"Oh, no!" she shouted. "I have friends in the city the tunnel led me to. I must go back to them, or they will be worried."

"The tunnel will not take you there, my lady. It will only guide you to where you are most needed. Right now, that place is your home."

Lizzy nodded, trusting him despite her frustration. As if knowing her desperate thirst, the fox led her first to a stream, where she drank. She then followed him behind the bush from which he had emerged. A hole was dug beneath its branches. She kneeled down and crawled in, and soon found herself back inside the magic tunnel, where she stopped in exhaustion to rest. She awoke sometime later, refreshed and ready to begin again. This time, her journey through the maze was easy, and within a few hours she had re-emerged into the familiar woods outside of Merrytown just as dawn was breaking.

As much as she wanted to see Will, Truman, and Dottie again, she was suddenly filled with a deep longing for her family. She limped as fast as her sore body, cramped legs and bleeding feet would carry her, bursting into her house to find them at breakfast.

"Lizzy!" cried Kitty, the first to see her. Within seconds, her family had surrounded her, engulfing her in hugs and kisses.

"How we've missed you, Lizzy!" shouted Mary.

"Dear Lizzy, I thought we'd lost you!" her father said.

"You smell bad but you're alive!" Lydia cried. "That means the Aurorans did not kill you!"
Lizzy laughed. "Yes, I am very much alive! And yes, I do smell bad!"

Her mother wept as she squeezed her. "How you vexed me, child, but I am so glad you're home!"

Swept up in the joy of seeing them again and realizing that one of her greatest fears had been set
to rest—that because of her oddness, her family did not love her—it took her a few minutes to
realize one was missing. "Where is Jane?" she asked.

"She took to her bed the day after you left, Lizzy," said Mary. "She refuses to eat."

"She misses Charles," Kitty chimed in.

"We so thought he would make her an offer of marriage, but he and his friend disappeared the
same night you did. She has not been the same since," said Mama.

"We have feared losing both of you, child," Papa added.

"I must see her," Lizzy said in alarm, turning toward the steps to their upper floor.

"Eat first, Lizzy, you must be hungry!" Papa admonished, but Lizzy was already half way up the
stairs.

When she entered the room she shared with her sisters, Jane lay asleep. Her face was paler and
thinner than Lizzy had ever seen it. Lizzy sat down on the bed next to Jane, taking her hand in her
own. Jane's eyes fluttered open. "Lizzy!" she cried when she saw her sister. "I can't believe you're
really here! We thought you were gone forever!"

"Oh Jane," Lizzy said, tears filling her eyes.

Jane started crying, too. "I've been so miserable since you were gone!"

"And losing Charles, too, must have broken your heart," Lizzy said with compassion.

"What is losing Charles compared to losing my most beloved sister?"

"But you love him," Lizzy said, based on her family's earlier words, although she herself was
uncertain of Jane's affections.

"Not as much as I love you. You're my dearest friend, Lizzy, and I didn't know how I would go
on without you."

The two women embraced, and when they pulled away, Jane took a good look at her sister. She
touched Lizzy's bruised cheeks tenderly. "Oh, Lizzy, what has happened to you? You are hurt!"

Lizzy took Jane's hand in her own. "It's a very long story, and I promise you I will tell you
everything. First, I must get cleaned up." She laughed. "Lydia tells me I smell, and she is right. I
must bathe, and then I must eat, for I am starving."

Lizzy spent the next week being pampered by her family. They helped her bathe, tended her
wounds, and fed her. Her mother was especially doting, wanting to do everything she could for
her "sweet Lizzy" until Lizzy finally had to insist that she stop being so accommodating.

During her time of recuperation, Lizzy shared her story with Jane. "Do you believe me?" she
asked when the tale was half told.

"Of course I believe you, Lizzy! If anyone were worthy of being bestowed with a magical
treasure, it would be you. I have always known you were exceptional. In fact, I was often jealous,
because there was something mysterious and wonderful about you that I was not a part of."

Lizzy took her hand and squeezed it. "Jane, I'm so sorry."

Her sister's eyes filled with tears. "No, it is I who should apologize, for it was I who was wrong. The night I was invited to the widow's home, I was thrilled to be singled out and so excited when Anne gave me her dress. I thought, At last, my chance to be special. Then you arrived, and I was so angry that I wished you were no longer my sister. When you disappeared, I was devastated that somehow I had made that wish come true and I would never see you again. The thought that I caused you harm has made me want to die. Oh, Lizzy, I am so sorry!"

Lizzy looked at her in a bit of shock. She had not realized that her sister had envied her, or that she had ever wished her away, and the initial realization was painful. Yet she could clearly hear Jane's deep remorse, and she knew that what she had always longed for—to be close to her sister again—was now possible. Lizzy reached out to embrace her sister. "Oh, Jane, you are not to blame for what has happened to me! I am here, I am alive, and I forgive you! And I promise you, nothing will come between us again!"

Her words seemed to bring her sister great comfort, and with Lizzy's encouragement, Jane began to eat again. Lizzy continued to share her story, not knowing what telling Jane would do to the power of her last remaining gemstone, the silver one, but decided it did not matter. Love seemed to be in neither of their futures, she concluded as the two sisters discussed the topic.

"I can't believe Charles' friend is really the prince of Pemberlea! And you fell in love! Oh Lizzy, that means that you could one day be a princess!"

Lizzy stiffened; she would not allow herself to hope for something that could never be. "Jane, he and I were together but four days. That's hardly time to create true love. And I am a commoner, so we cannot marry."

Her sister looked at her sympathetically, taking her hand.

Lizzy patted Jane's hand and smiled. "Do not worry about me. I had long ago accepted that I would never marry, so I have been preparing myself to be the ideal aunt to all my nieces and nephews. I will spoil them when they are young, and be the one they confide in when they are older!" Perhaps one day, if the gemstone still had power, she would use it for her younger sisters.

"Well, Lizzy," Jane said with a smile, "I will join you as their other spinster aunt, for Charles is gone, and I will never marry either!"

Both young women laughed. "Oh, Lizzy, I'm so glad you're home!" Jane said.

"So am I, dear Jane, so am I."

Soon enough, both young women's spirits and health revived, and they returned to their chores on the family's farm in time for the start of harvest season. Lizzy was grateful for the chance to absorb herself in hard work again. Thinking of the past, especially of what she had left behind in Aurora, brought her too much pain. She would forget that there were dear friends she had made in that country and a man she had loved. She would remember instead that her nation's prince was the man of honor, and was even now striving to fulfill his destiny. No word of peace had yet come, but her faith in this eventual outcome persisted. She would soon have reason to rejoice with the rest of her people, and thus, she would remain untouched by worry, fear, or heartbreak.

Despite her firm intentions, however, thoughts of Will continued to intrude upon her, as it did one day in which she was working with Kitty, sharing the task of mucking the barn. A thought
suddenly occurred to her, and she turned to leave.

"Where are you going, Lizzy?" Kitty cried. "We're not yet finished!"

"I'm sorry, Kitty, I'll make it up to you!" she shouted back as she started to run.

She traveled quickly to the widow's house. The prince and Charles had arrived on horseback. She did not know whether Charles had departed the same way, but she knew for certain that the prince had not. What had happened to his horse?

She arrived at the widow's barn and opened the door. Inside she saw John, Charlotte's younger brother, brushing down a large brown steed.

"Oh, good day, Lizzy," he smiled when he saw her. "What brings you here?"

"I suddenly remembered the southlanders' horses."

"Charles must have taken his, but I've been caring for this one," John said.

"How did that happen?"

"The widow's daughter, the older one—you know, the one who never comes out? She came to our house about a day or two after the southlanders left. Everyone was so surprised to see her walking up the path to our door. She said that she thought she had heard a horse in her barn and was worried that he was hungry or scared. She couldn't convince her sister to come tell us, so she came instead."

_Good for Anne_, thought Lizzy.

John went on. "She offered to pay us to check on him and look after him. Papa said Tommy is too small to take care of a big horse like this, and Luke said what she was offering was worthless. But I liked it, so I told her I would be glad to help."

"What did she offer you?"

He stopped and pulled a large white object from his pocket, speckled with pink and beige patches and coiled like a snail's shell. Lizzy had seen objects like this sold in the Auroran market. "She said it's a seashell. She gave me a whole bunch of them, all in different shapes. She said her father brought them back to her once after a trip to the sea."

He returned to brushing the horse. "I'm calling him Seashell, even though he's the wrong color, since I don't know his name. He's starting to answer to it. Every time I say it, it makes me believe that one day I'll get to see the sea."

Lizzy smiled and stroked the horse's neck. "Seashell is a fine name, and you appear to be doing an excellent job caring for him. How is he doing?"

"Very well, but I think he misses his master."

Struck with sympathy, she blinked back tears and laid her head against the steed's shoulder, thinking, _I miss him, too._
"Power does not always come with size and swords, my son." No words were ever truer than these as a description of Truman during the days that followed Will's return from the Auroran castle. The small man showed an enormous amount of inner strength, maintaining his business while keeping a man nearly twice his size alive and preventing two people he loved from falling into utter despair.

Will remained in Truman's home for some time, too overcome with sorrow to consider what his next steps in life should be. The old man had to coax him repeatedly to eat. Rest was difficult; sleeping on the tailor's floor reminded Will of his words to Lizzy about holding her instead.

Ironically, it was Dottie's sorrow and guilt that enabled Will to rouse from his own. She was disconsolate about Lizzy's death and blamed herself for trusting George. Will forced himself to stop wallowing in order to comfort her and reassure her that she was not to blame.

About ten days after he had returned to Truman's home, Will was once more summoned to the castle. After being ousted by the king and told never to return, he could not imagine why he was being called back. This time he traveled alone, filled with a combination of curiosity and fear. When he arrived, he was ushered immediately into the king's presence, bypassing many who had been waiting ahead of him.

In the king's throne room, the guards were again dismissed. Thomas looked older than he had the last time Will saw him, with dark circles under his eyes indicating that he had probably had as little sleep as Will. The two men remained in silence for several minutes before Thomas finally spoke. "I want you to know that I sent men to arrest George for what he did. He did not come back to the inn where he was staying for several days, but he finally returned and was captured."

"I thank you, sire, but he deserves prison for far worse than his crimes toward me. In Pemberlea he violated a girl of sixteen. And here—"

"I know that," the king interrupted. "It was … made clear to me, and that was the main reason I ordered his arrest. Fitzwilliam, I would never condone such behavior, and would never have trusted him had I known. I hope you believe me."

Will nodded, his mouth dry. "There's more. I came to Aurora with a woman. He told me he killed her."

The king observed him closely. "This woman… she meant something to you?"

"She meant everything to me."
Thomas folded his hands together. "I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, the man is dead. Apparently he made an enemy rather quickly in prison, who killed him."

News of George's death filled Will with no satisfaction. It would not bring back Lizzy.

"My men told me that he had some rather nasty welts on his head when he was arrested. Perhaps the woman caused it before she died."

"But she's still dead," Will said bitterly.

"I am very sorry," the king repeated. He sounded sincere.

"I have other news for you. After you left I sent couriers with a message to Jerald, letting him know I would be willing to discuss terms of peace. They were refused entrance to your capital city."

Will looked up, surprise breaking through his grief. Thomas had offered peace? But it had been refused? He waited to hear whether the man would say anything further. When the king did not speak, Will asked, "Will you try again?"

"I have made my overture. There is nothing more for me to do. I will not send my men on a fool's errand again."

"So you will continue fighting."

"I have offered peace, and your father has rejected it," Thomas said sternly. "I shall not give in when I hold the advantage. Yes, I will continue my fight."

Will lowered his eyes and nodded, resigned. Indeed, Thomas was no fool. There was no incentive for him to surrender.

"I am sending you home."

At this, Will looked up again.

"I have given instructions for you to be carried back to Pemberlea in one of my royal carriages, accompanied by fifty of my soldiers. They are under strict orders to protect you at all cost. You should be able to travel safely through Aurora and into the Pemberlean territories under my army's control. When you arrive at your capital city, I assume they will grant you entrance."

Will paused for a second before saying, "Thank you, sire."

"It's the least I can do for Angelia's son." King Thomas rose from his throne and approached him. "Fitzwilliam, talk sense into your father. At this point, I will demand nothing less than his absolute surrender. I do not want you to come to harm, but when my armies enter the walls of your city—and they shall—I can no longer protect you."

Will swallowed hard. "I understand."

The man's eyes were strangely soft as he regarded him. "You have a lot of your mother in you. Because of that, you are a better man than your father." He looked away. "You are a better man than I am."

Will reflected on his words for a moment. "Sire, may I request a favor?"

"You may."
"I would like to say goodbye to Truman."

Turning his back to return to his throne, the king said, "Granted. Now depart."

Per the king's orders, the carriage that would transport him back to Pemberlea stopped at Truman's home. Will stepped out to be greeted by the old man, who had heard their approach.

"What news?" the man asked when Will entered his cottage.

"I am being sent home. I have come to say goodbye."

Truman asked Will about his meeting with the king. When Will's story was concluded, he said, "Young man, I am truly sorry. If I could do anything to take away your pain, I would."

Will nodded, his heart feeling like lead.

"I wish Dottie were here. I know she would want to say her goodbyes, also."

"Truman, please give her my farewell. I cannot thank you and Dottie enough for everything you have done for me. I will miss you greatly, and I shall never forget you."

"And I shall miss you. I have never had children; my time with you and Lizzy was the closest I ever came to being a father."

At the mention of Lizzy's name, Will winced in pain.

Truman placed his hand over Will's heart. "She will always be here with you, my son."

Will covered the man's hand with his own. "I know."

"Never forget how much she loved and believed in you, Will. You are a young man yet. You still have time to do much good in the world."

Will embraced Truman for several moments. Unable to speak, he released the old man and turned to depart.

"Wait!" Truman cried. "Do you want to retrieve your dagger?"

Will shook his head. "Keep it. Sell it, or dispose of it if you wish. I do not need it anymore."

The procession traveled for many days, stopping periodically to rest and refresh. Throughout the ride, Will fingered the golden acorn, thinking that perhaps it was a good thing the gemstone had not changed. It was the one thing he had left to remind him of Lizzy.

When they crossed the border into Pemberlea, Will's heart sank as he viewed the widespread destruction to his kingdom. Village after village lay in ruins. Newly homeless families trudged slowly along the roads, carrying what little possessions they had left on their backs.

Soon enough, they arrived outside the fortified walls of the capital city. Will looked out the windows to witness the standoff at the city gates. Auroran soldiers surrounded the city, while Pemberlean soldiers stood ready along the walls, bows and arrows aimed at their adversaries. About one hundred feet from the city gate, the carriage came to a halt.

Will inhaled deeply, realizing that he was very worried about his reception. Would any of the Pemberleans recognize him? He had left home as a smooth-faced adolescent. He was returning eight years older, a bit taller, more muscular, and bearded.
He stepped out of the carriage and began to walk toward the gate. When he was still far enough that the arrows would not reach him, but close enough that his voice could be heard, he stopped. A hush seemed to fill the air as everyone waited.

"I am Prince Fitzwilliam of Pemberlea!" he shouted. "I am here to see my father!"

A buzz went up among both armies’ soldiers, but no one moved from his post. He repeated his words again, and then thrice.

About fifteen minutes later, a new face appeared at the tower above the city's gate. Will recognized Benjamin, the head of his father's royal guard. "We will open the gate for you and you alone!" the man shouted back.

A few seconds later, the city gates began to open, barely enough to let a man through. Will walked slowly, wondering whether both sets of soldiers would remain still while he approached. They did.

He reached the gate and entered, hearing it slam shut behind him. A short distance away, he watched a man draw near, surrounded by a dozen royal guards.

It was his father. Not yet three and fifty, King Jerald walked like an old, frail man. Tears were running down his face. Will strode faster to bridge the distance between them, sweeping his father into his arms.

"My son!" the king whispered, clinging to him. "My son has come home at last!"

Chapter End Notes

In case you are worried, please know that this is a happily ever after story! But a few things need to happen first before I bring our couple back together.
This is the last of the really sad chapters. It gets better after this.

"Let's feast tonight!" Will's father, seemingly reanimated by the presence of his son, shouted when they entered the walls of the castle. Servants began to scurry about to carry out his request.

Will looked at him in alarm. "No, Father. I want no feast!"

"But you've come home, my son! It's time to celebrate!"

"No!" Will shouted. "No celebrations!"

His father stopped suddenly. "Tomorrow, then. After you've had time to rest."

Will shook his head. "Not tomorrow, either. Father, I have not come home to celebrate. I have come home to talk to you. We need to talk, now."

King Jerald stared at him, baffled. Will was struck again by how old his father looked. His light brown hair had gone entirely gray, his face was deeply lined, and his once muscular frame had wasted away.

"Does this have anything to do with you returning home in Thomas' carriage?" the king asked.

"Yes, it does."

His father's eyes flashed with concern. "Have you betrayed me, Fitzwilliam?"

"No, Father. I would never betray you. But I need some answers."

The king pursed his lips, and then summoned a servant. "Call off the feast," he instructed, "and bring a small supper to my chambers. My son and I are not to be disturbed."

"Why did you never tell me my mother was Auroran?" Will demanded, as soon as they were settled in his father's chambers.

"Why did you return home in Thomas' carriage?"

"I asked you first."

His father sighed. "There was a lot of bitter blood between our countries. Our people might not have accepted an Auroran princess and queen."

"I did not ask why you did not tell the people. I asked why you did not tell me."

King Jerald leaned back wearily in his chair. "Your mother and I decided when you were a child that it would be better for you not to know."
"Because the way your marriage came about was so repulsive?"

His father suddenly sat up angrily. "What do you want me to say, Fitzwilliam? Yes? Yes, my father betrayed a treaty with her father? Yes, we had your mother abducted? Would it have made you feel better to have grown up knowing all this?"

"Maybe! Perhaps then I wouldn't have gone off to war and spent eight years killing my own people!"

"I tried to talk you out of it, in case you hadn't forgotten!"

Will swallowed, remembering. His father had not wanted him to go off to war.

"Now, I've answered your question. Will you answer mine?"

Will looked at his father, uncertain at first how to respond. He could hardly tell him about Lizzy, the fox, the tunnel, or the acorns. The overall purpose that led him to Aurora, however, his father needed to know. "I went to Thomas to try to bring peace. Perhaps I made some progress. He sent messengers to you to discuss terms, but you turned them away. Why?"

"Earlier this year, I was prepared to surrender, but you instructed me not to. You sent word that it would make all the Pemberlean deaths and sacrifices worthless."

Will blew out his breath. The war had been prolonged because of him. He had to accept the blame for that. He recalled the first day Lizzy had tried to give him the golden acorn in the Merrytown forest. "You have the power to end this before anyone else dies," she had said. How many people had died because of his stubbornness? Was he any better than his father, or Thomas?

"I was wrong, Father," he admitted, "and because of that, many more people are dead. I will live with that on my conscience forever. But regardless, this war now needs to end."

"No, you were not wrong! The tide is turning. We've regained some of the southlands, and the northlands are holding."

Will shook his head. "But for how long? This city is under siege. Have you been outside the walls of this castle? Our southlands are virtually destroyed."

"You're saying we should just give up?"

"Thomas was offering terms before, but no longer. We had an opportunity for something other than capitulation, but we've missed that chance. At this point, we need to surrender."

His father did not answer for some time. He looked at Will quizzically. "What is that?" he suddenly asked.

"What?" Will said.

"In your hand. What are you holding?"

Will looked down. The golden acorn rested in his palm. He had been fingering it absentmindedly, wanting somehow to maintain his connection to Lizzy.

Will looked up at his father. "What does it look like?" He wanted to know what his father could see.

"An acorn."
"What color?" Will asked.

His father continued to look puzzled, but curious enough—or perhaps relieved enough by the break in their quarrel—to answer. "Brown, as acorns are."

Will nodded. His father could not see the gemstone.

"The acorn Thumpin sewed into your sash… I always wondered why he chose it for you," King Jerald said softly. "Your mother's grandfather … used to wear a similar symbol."

At the king's words, Will looked up in wonder, a thought suddenly occurring to him. Perhaps the golden acorn still had purpose. It had clearly had an effect on Thomas, but had not changed because… because peace was not a one-sided endeavor.

"Give me your hand, Father," he said.

"What?"

"Your hand. Give it to me."

His father hesitated, so Will grabbed his hand and placed the acorn in it, rubbing it between their palms. It began to vibrate, but this time no visions came to Will.

King Jerald abruptly pulled his hand away, his eyes wide with terror. "What is this?" he whispered. "What are you doing to me?" Suddenly enraged, he began screaming. "Traitor! TRAITOR! You have betrayed me! You have betrayed me!"

Shaken by his father's hostility, Will backed away, and turned to leave the room. He looked at no one as he left, walking directly to his own chambers, a room that he had not occupied for more than eight years. The room was not dusty, so apparently servants cleaned it regularly, but otherwise it looked unchanged from its condition when he was eighteen.

He sat down on the bed and tried to calm himself. After inhaling several times, he dared to open his hand and look at the acorn.

It was brown. At long last, the acorn was brown. So, peace would come, but Will felt no joy, only numbness. His father had accused him of treachery, but by withholding the truth, it was he who had betrayed his son. Everyone he had loved most in the world—his mother, Lizzy, and now his father—was gone to him forever.

With the help of servants for the first time in years, he spent that evening caring for himself: eating his fill, bathing, and shaving. He peered at himself in a mirror once the facial hair was gone. He looked much older and more hardened than he remembered, his eyes haunted by shame, guilt and grief.

As the night wore on, Will sat in his chambers staring into space before being disturbed by a knock on his door. He called out, "Enter." His visitor was his father.

King Jerald walked in, carrying a large, polished box made of oakwood. He sat down on a footstool near Fitzwilliam. Will looked at him, but did not speak.

His father handed the box to him. "Open it," he said.

Will took the box from him and unlatched it. It was filled with folded slips of paper, worn and faded from time, each stamped with a wax seal. He recognized the seal; it was his mother's. He lifted one and saw that it was addressed to Thomas. This was not meant for his eyes, so he would
not read it. He placed it back with the others.

"Is this box filled with letters my mother wrote to her brother?"

"Yes."

"But they were never sent."

"I was always afraid that she might send messages to him that would reveal secrets about our kingdom. They were twins. They surely knew covert ways of communication that might seem innocuous on the surface."

"Why would you be afraid if you trusted her?"

His father wrung his hands together, as if from nervousness. Or guilt, Will thought.

"I was two and twenty the first time I saw your mother. She was the most beautiful young woman I had ever seen, with dark, shining hair that hung down her back, and eyes that sparkled when she smiled or laughed. And she dearly loved to laugh.

"My father and I were visiting the Auroran capital to meet with her father and grandfather to settle some border disputes. I knew I was supposed to care about these talks, but once I saw your mother, all I cared about was Angelia. I told my father that I wanted her, and he said, 'I'll get her for you.'"

"You took her, like an object to be possessed," Will seethed.

"It was not like that! Our fathers made an agreement, my marriage to Angelia in exchange for Pemberlea giving up claims to the disputed lands. But those lands had been solely ours one hundred years' earlier, and my father was not willing to cede them so easily."

"And you went along with your father's plans."

"What else should we have done? They had done the same to us a century before!"

"But where," said Will slowly, "does it end?"

His father shook his head, as if resisting Will's censure. "I promise you, son, I did not know that my father planned to betray the treaty. All I cared about was that Angelia would be mine."

"So it wasn't your fault? That's what you're saying, even though you were the reason my mother was stolen?"

"She had agreed to come. She liked me well enough, perhaps even loved me. She had agreed to the marriage contract!"

"But not under those circumstances! She did not agree to be snatched by your soldiers and have her father betrayed!"

King Jerald continued to twist his hands. "I know. But still, she seemed to love me. At least, she behaved as if she did."

Will felt sick inside. "What choice did she have?"

His father looked away from him and did not answer.

After several minutes of tension-filled silence, King Jerald sighed heavily. "You are right. I have
always been selfish, and I know it was my insistence upon having Angelia that led my father to do what he did. I did not know his intentions in advance, yet once I learned of it, I accepted it as my due. But please believe me, Fitzwilliam, I did love your mother. I strove to be kind to her. She lost two babies before she had you. I tried to comfort her, but her grief made me realize that the beautiful young girl with the shining eyes who loved to laugh was gone. And it was my fault."

Will rubbed his forehead. His head was throbbing.

"You were our miracle child, Fitzwilliam, in so many ways. She had a very difficult lying-in, and after you were born, the physicians said she would never bear another. But the child she had given me was perfect! You were such a sweet, happy child, son. We both fell in love with you. In loving you, our love for one another grew. Because of you, the light in your mother's eyes and the laughter in her heart returned."

Will clenched and unclenched his fists to keep from screaming out in anger. His father's love for his mother—was that enough to make up for the travesty that had come before? "You shattered her family." Having lived through those events in his vision, he did not care how cold his voice sounded.

"I know," his father whispered hoarsely. "I saw." Will did not have to ask what he meant.

The acorn.

"I am sending this box to Thomas in the morning." The king cleared his throat, and his voice came out a bit stronger. "It is rightfully his. I cannot make up for anything else I have done, but at least I can give him this. I am including a letter of surrender with it. You are right; the war needs to end."

Surrender will bring peace, Will thought, but the outcome felt bitter and unsatisfying to him. If he hadn't stubbornly persisted in fighting months earlier, the war would have already been over, without the help of the magical acorn.

The king sat in silence for several minutes before speaking again. "More than five hundred years this kingdom has stood, and now it ends with me. My biggest regret is that I will have nothing to leave you."

"It does not matter. I was going to relinquish my crown anyway."

"You despise me that much." It was a statement, not a question.

Will shook his head. "No... it was because of a woman, a commoner with whom I fell in love."

His father nodded. "Well. Now you can be with her."

"She's dead," Will said. He would never lose the bitter taste of those words in his mouth.

His father was silent again. "What will you do now?" he finally asked.

"I do not know. All I know for certain is that I will never be a soldier again."

King Jerald looked at him tenderly before standing. "I have done only two good things in my life. First, I loved your mother. And second, I had you."

He glanced at the acorn, which now rested on the stand beside Will's bed. He placed his hand on Will's shoulder for a few seconds, and then picked up the box and departed.

Will sat there for some time, his breathing heavy as he struggled to control his nausea. He did not know which was more devastating to him, the evil his grandfather and father had committed
against his mother and her family, or what his own pride had wrought against his people in both
nations.

At some point, he knew not when, he fell asleep. His rest would be brief, because he was
awakened shortly thereafter by a buzzing sound. He looked around the darkened room. What was
that noise?

When his eyes caught a flash of light on the stand by the bed, he identified the source of the
sound: the acorn. It was buzzing and jumping, seemingly alive with energy. Color and light
flickered through it, alternating between brown and gold, dull and gleaming, as if the gemstone
were trying to reignite itself, fighting against being extinguished forever. *What could it mean?* Will
wondered.

He sat up and took the pulsating acorn in one hand, thumping his forehead with the other. Finally,
an idea came to him. He summoned a servant, asking him to bring him paper and ink. Will had a
letter to write.
Harvest season had come to Merrytown. It had been a fine spring and summer, Pemberlea's good weather belying the concurrent violence throughout the country. As a result, Merrytown's yield was plentiful, and its people quite busy with reaping the crops.

Plenty to share, Lizzy thought gratefully. Refugees from the devastated southlands were making their way north. The people of Merrytown had opened their homes to many, providing them with food and a place of respite.

Reports from the battlefront continued to be sparse. The northlands held, but the siege of the capital city continued. Thus, when one of the king's royal couriers arrived in their village, announcing that all residents must gather, everyone was eager to hear the news.

When the villagers had assembled, a herald blew his trumpet. He unrolled a scroll and began to read. "On this day in the year of our Lord _, by royal decree of His Majesty, Jerald, King of Pemberlea, and by royal decree of His Majesty, Thomas, King of Aurora, all hostilities between our two nations shall henceforth cease."

A roar went up from the crowd. People began to cheer, to laugh, and to celebrate. Tears flowed as many embraced and started to dance. After nearly thirteen long years, the war was over!

The herald continued to read, and Lizzy drew closer, perhaps the only villager who listened to the entire announcement. Thomas would immediately end his siege of the capital, and withdraw all his armies from Pemberlea. Disputed lands seized by former King Archibald would be returned to Aurora. Representatives of both kingdoms would work together to heal the two nations and create a lasting peace.

Lizzy closed her eyes as she listened to the herald's final words. "Our thanks be to God for His mercy, and to His Royal Highness, Prince Fitzwilliam of Pemberlea, for his efforts in bringing peace to our lands."

Tears rolled down Lizzy's face as her heart swelled with pride and thanksgiving. He had done it. The prince had brought peace, as she had always known he would.

In the days that followed, more changes took place. Refugees continued to stream northward. Some of the Merrytown villagers began to speak resentfully of the poor exiles that were overrunning their homes. Lizzy started to worry that a new form of violence, this aimed at driving away the pitiable newcomers, would begin.

At the village's harvest celebration, she rose to make an announcement. "Good people of Merrytown," she began, "I know many of you are troubled by the newcomers, worried that we not be able maintain our homes with so many coming. But they come because there is nothing left
for them in the southlands. Furthermore, in two short months, winter will set in, making them more desperate.

"I propose that some of us begin to travel south to help rebuild. We have much to spare. We can bring them food and clothing, and seeds, materials and tools. If we start now, we have time before it becomes too cold. We can build new houses and villages for the southlanders, so they will have homes to call their own."

"Lizzy, child!" her father stood up to chide her. "You cannot travel south! It is too dangerous."

"Papa, I've seen great danger and I've overcome it. I am not afraid." The assembled crowd seemed to look at her in understanding. Other than to Jane, she had told no one her story, but she knew everyone assumed that she had been abducted by the Aurorans and somehow had managed to escape. Her visible injuries when she had first returned had lent credence to that rumor.

Lizzy turned back to the rest of the villagers. "I know I cannot do this alone. Is anyone willing to come with me?"

"I will," said Lucas the Blacksmith. "The southlanders are our brothers. We must help them."

Anne, the Widow Burg’s daughter, stood up. "I will join you!"

"Anne!" her mother cried. "You cannot travel to some godforsaken part of the country! Think of your health!"

"I am, Mama," she said, looking at the widow. "I have been taking walks every day and I find they invigorate me, they do not weaken me. I have never done anything in my life for someone else. That ends now. I want to help."

"I will, too!" shouted William, the miller’s son, who had just turned sixteen. His widowed mother also protested about his safety, and like Anne, he also argued back. "If I do this, Mother, my father’s death will not be in vain."

In all, eight villagers agreed to join Lizzy on the journey south. The residents of Merrytown as a whole gathered bushels of grain, crates of vegetables, sacks of dried fruits, jars of oil, wood and seeds, and whatever other items they could spare, loading them onto wagons for the trip.

Anne, Charlotte and Lizzy were among four women who traveled with the party. Several members of the group carried weapons, something Lizzy reluctantly acknowledged was a necessity, given that they might encounter thieves along the way.

After two days of traveling, they arrived at a makeshift camp set up alongside a burnt-out village. More than thirty men, women and children were gathered, sleeping on the ground at night, and eating squirrels they had captured and roasted during the day as their only food.

The people were overjoyed when they told them why they had come. After a few days of good nourishment, the campers were strengthened enough to be able to join the Merrytown delegation in clearing fields and constructing permanent cabins for themselves. Within two weeks, the two groups celebrated the completion of a new village and the Merrytown party departed.

About a week after their arrival at their second such encampment, one of the southlanders from the new site came running up to them. "A carriage has arrived," the man said breathlessly, "carrying an official from the king. He said he needs to see you."

Lucas looked troubled as he lowered a hammer. "I'll go see what this is about."
"I'll come, too," said Lizzy. When Lucas moved to shake his head, Lizzy argued, "This was my idea, sir. If the king is displeased with anything we are doing, I want to take responsibility."

They did not have to travel far, for the carriage, bearing King Jerald's insignia, was coming their way. It stopped in front of a house the group was building, and a slender blond man emerged.

The man's face broke into a huge smile when he saw them. "Why, bless me, if it isn't the inhabitants of Merrytown! I should have known!"

"Charles?" Anne cried out. "Is it really you?"

Charles rushed over to give firm handshakes to the men and to greet the women. "I had heard about a group that was traveling about doing this, and I had to see for myself."

"You're a man of many disguises," Lucas chuckled. "First, you were a farmer from the south; next you were a soldier; and now you are one of the king's officials. What will you be tomorrow, the bishop of the land?" Everyone laughed.

Charles joined the Merrytown party and the southlander community for their midday meal. While they ate, he told them of his purposes for being in this part of the country. "King Jerald and Prince Fitzwilliam have commissioned me to oversee the rebuilding of the southlands. I have been working to organize groups just like yours, but you have beaten me to it."

At his mention of the prince, Lizzy's heart skipped a beat.

Charles continued to discuss his plans with the group and then asked about their own. "We will return to Merrytown after finishing this village," Lucas told him, "because we need to replenish our supplies. I estimate that we can rebuild two more communities before winter sets in."

"I wish you all the best," said Charles. "I will provide whatever support you need that is at the king's disposal."

After the group finished their meal and rose to resume work, Charles asked Lizzy if he could speak with her. "How is your family?" he asked, as they started walking together.

"They are well, thank you."

"And your sisters? Are they all still in Merrytown?"

Lizzy looked at the mixture of eagerness and apprehension on his face, and wondered if he were asking about one specific sister. "Yes, they are."

Charles pressed his lips together, nodding. "I had to leave Merrytown so suddenly, and I have always regretted not being able to say goodbye. Will you give my greetings to your family and let them know I am thinking of them?"

"I will," she replied.

He started to walk away. Lizzy suddenly called his name, and he turned back. "How… how is your friend?" she stammered.

He looked at her as if puzzled. "You mean Will?"

"Yes," she said, feeling breathless.

"He is well."
"Do you see him much?"

"Now and then. He is very busy with responsibilities of his own."

"Will you give him my greetings as well?"

Charles continued to regard her curiously, no doubt because of her forwardness given that she and the prince had interacted very little during his time in Merrytown. But he nodded and said he would pass along her good wishes.

Lizzy could not move for some time after Charles departed. The ache in her heart, which she had successfully repressed for many weeks through her labors in the southlands, had returned. She had been able to endure her separation from Will by pushing him from her mind, or by thinking of him only as Prince Fitzwilliam, a distant ruler whose leadership she greatly admired, but not a man to whom she had opened her heart, touched, and loved.

Noticing her distress, Anne and Charlotte approached her. "Are you well, Lizzy?" Charlotte asked. "Did Charles say something that upset you?"

Lizzy found her voice. "No… he just asked about my family, and about my sisters."

"He made a point to ask about your sisters?" Charlotte said with a smile. "That's sweet. Perhaps he intended to inquire about one sister in particular."

Anne still looked at her with concern. "Does your disquiet have anything to do with Will?" she asked.

"Charles' friend?" said Charlotte in surprise. "What has he to do with Lizzy?" Seeing Lizzy’s pained expression, she added, "Something, obviously."

Anne nodded. "Lizzy, I couldn't help but notice how much he watched you the night you supped at our house. Caroline was trying so hard to get his attention, but he had eyes only for you. I wondered at the time whether there was something between you two. Is there?"

Lizzy swallowed hard and shook her head. "Please… please, can we not talk about this?"

Anne put her arm around Lizzy's shoulder and hugged her. "All right, Lizzy, we will leave you be. Please know that we are here for you, if you do want to confide in us."

Lizzy nodded her thanks, but knew that she had no way of sharing the hurt she was going through. It took her a while to compose herself. She wished she had never asked Charles about him. Suddenly Will—her Will, the man, not the prince—had come back to life in her mind's eye, and she could not shed him from her vision. He had watched her that night at the Widow's home? Why? He had thought her a despised camp girl at the time. He could not possibly have been looking at her with any sort of regard. Two days later, he'd called her insane, reacting in disbelief to her tale of the acorns.

Yet he had come to believe her and almost instantly, had given her his protection, his friendship … and his love. That, too, had happened quickly. She had told herself these many weeks that their love could not have been real, given that it had fired up to such intensity in so short a time. Like a shooting star, its luster would die just as quickly, would it not? Then why hadn't it? Why did the mere mention of his name fill her chest with a pressure so heavy she thought she might stop breathing?

Her love for him was real and enduring, she now realized. Was his? If so, why had Will not come for her? He would have no way of knowing what had happened to her, but would he not have
sought out her home and family, to find out whether they had learned of her whereabouts? He had not, so it must be as she had thought during her captivity—he had come to his senses.

"*He is very busy with responsibilities of his own,*" Charles had said. Of course he was. Lizzy wiped her face, unaware until that moment that she had been crying. How dare she be so selfish? Prince Fitzwilliam had responsibilities toward the entire nation in his hands. Her heart ached for the dozens displaced by the war that she'd seen over the past few weeks. The prince no doubt had seen hundreds, or even thousands, just like them. Knowing his compassion, she could only imagine how deeply he felt the pain of his broken people. Maintaining peace and restoring their country were enormous tasks. She had no right to expect that a silly country girl like her should occupy a minute of his thoughts. He might reflect on their time together with fondness during some rare quiet moment, but even that was unlikely. She would stand tall and exert herself, and no longer allow herself to wish for what was not possible. In this small corner of Pemberlea, people were depending on her.

The Merrytown party returned home about a week later to a hero's welcome, and many others decided to join them for their next venture. They planned to spend a fortnight at home resting and reloading supplies before starting out again.

Lizzy was glad for the break, because she had something important to find out. While she might spend her life unloved and unwed, Jane did not need to share the same fate. When she and her sister had a moment alone together, she told Jane about seeing Charles in the south, and of his regrets for not saying goodbye. Watching the mixture of emotions crossing her sister's face, she asked, "I know you suggested you do not miss Charles. Is that true?"

Her sister closed her eyes and exhaled. "Oh, Lizzy, that was a lie. It was indeed true that I was far more heartbroken about your loss, but I have never stopped thinking about Charles."

Lizzy took her sister's hand. "Come with me."

The two young women donned their cloaks and walked out to the woods together, their boots crunchy the fallen leaves scattered over the ground.

"Lizzy, where are we going?" Jane asked, after they had walked for some distance.

"A special place I often went when I wanted to be alone," she answered.

They arrived at the tree stump where Lizzy used to sit to look at her gemstones and wonder at their purpose. When they were settled, Lizzy retrieved the silver acorn from her belt.

"Is that one of the magical acorns, Lizzy? It looks like an ordinary acorn."

Lizzy smiled. "To your eyes, perhaps. I know it seems odd, but to me, this looks like the finest of silver gems."

She began to rub the stone between her fingers. "This," she said, "is the acorn of love. The fox told me to rub it when I wanted love to come to me or my family."

Jane eyed her skeptically. "Is this meant to bring Charles back to me?"

Lizzy nodded, but her brow began to furrow. Nothing was happening. Had telling Jane about the acorn hindered its power? Or perhaps returning to Jane was not Charles' wish. Would the acorn act against someone's will?

Suddenly she had an idea. "Give me your hand, Jane."
Jane extended her palm, and Lizzy placed the acorn in it and began to rub it.

"What's happening, Lizzy?" Jane asked in wonder. "It feels so warm, as if it's alive!"

Lizzy smiled. The acorn's magic was working.

"Oh, Lizzy, it's so wonderful! I see an image of Charles, as if he's right here walking toward me!"

The acorn's silver color flickered out, and a small brown nut remained in its place. Jane's face looked nearly angelic, she was beaming so. "It is magic!" she cried. "He's coming back to me! Charles is coming back!"

The two sisters stood and began to walk back to their home, Jane practically singing in excitement. Lizzy's own heart leaped wildly in her chest, for she hadn't seen a vision of Charles when she rubbed the acorn.

Instead, she had seen Will.

Chapter End Notes

Comments would be most welcome!
Reunion

Will reclined in his chamber wearily after a long day, rubbing his forehead. The peace treaty with Aurora was a huge beginning, but many issues needed to be resolved. Soldiers needed to be sent home; captives released and repatriated; and the multitudes left homeless and hungry fed, clothed, and re-housed.

To not grow discouraged by the overwhelming responsibilities, he sometimes allowed himself to marvel at how it had all come about. When the acorn had burst back to life, Will had become convinced that the resolution his father and he had accepted, one that would lead to a victor and the vanquished, was not how the war was meant to end. Instead, another option was possible, one that would leave both countries stronger. It would, however, require magnanimity on Thomas' part.

No sooner had he signed and sealed the letter than the acorn dimmed again, confirming his decision, yet he still was in awe that his words had had their intended impact. In his correspondence to his uncle, he had made note of his father's letter of defeat. Will had written, "I know it is your right and privilege to accept my father's surrender, for you are the victor in this war. Nevertheless, I ask that you consider an alternative. For the humiliation of my country will leave many bitter and angry, and perhaps lead to another war in a later generation. I say this not as something I would wish to see, but only in understanding of human nature.

"Truman the Tailor told me of a time when Aurorans and Pemberleans called each other brother. I believe that time can come again. I have the blood of two great nations within me. I am the embodiment of both peoples. You are my uncle, but you are also my brother.

"You told me that I am a better man than you. I believe that there is a better man in you, as well. Right now, you hold the power to make the future different, and better, than the past and present."

He sometimes wondered what Thomas had seen when he rubbed the acorn, recalling the stunned look on the man's face. Will was certain he had seen something of George; the man had hinted as much. Perhaps he had also come to understand the suffering he'd wrought through his thirty-year hatred of Jerald and acts of revenge. Or perhaps reading his sister's letters had softened his heart. Whatever it was, the Auroran king had acted in response to Will's letter, sending a delegation to offer to negotiate a peace treaty once more.

King Jerald was staggered, deeply humbled, and at this point more than willing to accept Thomas' offer. Will knew about the vision the acorn had given his father, for they had discussed it many times. Like Will, his father had come face to face not only with his iniquities, but with the pain and suffering he had caused. As they talked Jerald's contrition had deepened until he was weeping in sorrow and begging his son's forgiveness. "It's not my forgiveness you need, but God's," Will had told him. "Furthermore, we can't change the past. The most important thing we can do is to make amends where we can and to exercise our power more justly going forward."

Since Thomas' overture, Will had made several return trips to Aurora to work out the particulars of the peace settlement, getting to know his aunt, his cousin Lawrence, and Lawrence's two younger sisters in the process. Thomas had shared a few of his sister's letters with him, describing her joy at watching the son she had borne grow from infancy to childhood to young adolescence. Will was deeply moved by reading her words, connecting once more to the mother he had lost so long ago.

During his visits to Aurora, Will had also spent time with Dottie and Truman, who were
overjoyed at his success, although they still grieved for Lizzy. They had become much more than friends to him; they were now family. They were the only ones who could understand how acutely his heart ached. They gave him the strength to endure the pain, helping him to remember that peace had been Lizzy’s dream, and thus his work now her lasting legacy.

A knock at his door interrupted his contemplations, and he granted a servant permission to enter. "Charles is here to see you, Your Highness," the man told him.

Charles entered a moment later, and Will rose to greet his friend. "Tell me what's happening," he said as they sat down.

"It's been wonderful!" Charles said, smiling. Then he frowned. "Well, not wonderful exactly. Many people are still homeless, and winter is coming soon. But the response of the northlanders to helping the southlanders has been heartwarming. Villages have begun to be rebuilt, and we are gathering enough supplies that I believe we can keep people fed and clothed throughout the winter."

"That's good to hear," Will nodded. "Keep at it. I trust you, Charles. There is no one better than you for this job."

Charles inhaled and exhaled several times. "Sire—" he began, and then said no more.

Will smiled. "What do you want, Charles? You only call me sire when you want something."

"I would like your permission to take a few days' holiday."

Will frowned. "Now? This is not a good time. There is so much to be done."

Charles sighed. "I know, but it's very important to me. A team of northlanders had taken upon themselves to begin collecting goods and rebuilding villages in the southlands. I went to visit this group. They were friends of ours, from the village of Merrytown."

Will's eyes snapped to attention, looking at Charles in amazement.

"It's true," Charles said. "Lucas the Blacksmith was there, Philip's son, even Anne."

"Widow Burg's daughter? She is too weak for such an undertaking, is she not?"

"Not anymore. She looked haler and more radiant than I had ever seen her. The point is, seeing them reminded me of Jane. When I left Merrytown in pursuit of the Auroran soldiers, I was unable to say goodbye to her. I do not know what she thinks of me now, but I feel so driven to return and let her know I did not purposely abandon her."

Will thought for a moment. "All right, Charles. You may go."

Charles stood up, smiling broadly. "Thank you, Will, so very much!" He turned to leave, and then stopped. "Oh, I almost forgot! Lizzy was among the group. She sends her greetings."

"Lizzy?" Will felt the blood drain from his face as he stared open-mouthed at Charles.

"Yes, Jane's sister." Charles looked at him intently. "What's going on, Will? She acted very strangely when she asked about you. I thought that perhaps she'd developed an admiration for you when we were in Merrytown, but now you're behaving oddly, too."

"Lizzy's alive?" Will whispered.
"Of course she's alive. I just saw her." Charles sat back down and peered at his friend. "Talk to me, Will. Is there some sort of understanding between you and Lizzy?"

Will could not speak for several moments. Then he said, "It's a very long story. Do you have time?"

Charles raised his brows in anticipation. "For this story? All the time in the world."

Will began to tell him everything, having to stop several times to address Charles' questions or expressions of incredulity. Finally, he shouted in irritation, "Charles, please! Be quiet and listen until I'm finished!"

When he was done, Charles stared at him in silence for a few moments and then remarked, "It's an unbelievable tale, but you are the sanest man I know. I cannot imagine you making it up." In the next second, as if he'd suddenly realized the import of what he'd heard, Charles started laughing, and was soon practically hysterical. "You're in love!" he cried between shortles. "I can't believe it! You're in love with Lizzy!"

Will wanted to glower at him, but couldn't stop the smile that crossed his face. "This is amusing?"

"Yes, it is!" Charles snorted. "I shouldn't laugh, you've been through so much suffering… but I always knew that someday a woman would somehow work her way past the walls around your heart, and you would be completely lost to her power! And that day has come!"

Will's smile grew, and he soon found himself joining in Charles' joyous laughter. There was no more appropriate response to the discovery that his dear, sweet, darling Lizzy was still alive!

Charles stopped laughing to smirk at his friend. "Tell me, Will, did she first catch your eye the night she wore the gown at the widow's? She looked very fetching that evening."

Will sighed happily as he remembered the image of Lizzy in that figure-flattering dress. "That, and when she sang so sweetly at the party." He realized then that he had been drawn to Lizzy from the first moment he'd seen her—and he knew what he needed to do. He had made a vow when he was trapped in the Auroran castle, and it would be his life's greatest pleasure to fulfill it. "I'm going with you to Merrytown," he declared.

"After this revelation, I would have it no other way."

They departed by carriage before daybreak the next morning, Will stopping first at his father's library to check a few records, and then leaving word with the servants to let his father know where they had gone. They arrived in Merrytown by late afternoon, making excellent time, but still taking much too long by Will's estimation.

The time of day was such that many of the good folk of Merrytown were concluding their work, and so were free to come running to the village green as word spread of the carriage's arrival. A footman announced Charles as the king's official when he exited the carriage, to the collective gasp of many of the villagers.

That was nothing compared to the reaction that occurred when Will emerged and was announced as the crown prince to the gathered crowd. He soon found himself surrounded by the people. "Charles," he whispered, eager to see Lizzy as soon as he could, "How are we going to get out of this?"

Charles shrugged. "They're your subjects, not mine." With that, he slipped through the crowd and was gone.
Questions began flying at Will from the astounded villagers, and everyone seemed to be reaching out to try to touch him. He searched the throng for Lizzy, but did not see her. Caroline and Anne approached him, reminding him that he needed to compensate the widow. He and Charles had, after all, used her field and barn for rather unsavory purposes. He would give the funds to Anne, he decided, the most capable in the family of managing them.

"Your Highness, what a surprise!" Anne said, and curtsied. He smiled in greeting at the two women, and to his shock, Caroline swooned. He started to kneel to attend to her, but Anne shook her head. "She'll be fine," she said, holding her sister in her arms. "See to others."

Will rose and began to scan the crowd again, his anxiety growing. Where was Lizzy? Perhaps noticing his distress, the blacksmith yelled out, "Enough! Back up and give him room!"

The crowd listened and backed up in time for Will to see young John approaching him, leading his horse by the reins. Will smiled and the horse whinnied in pleasure at seeing his old master. When they drew near, horse and master nuzzled each other for a moment.

Will turned to look at John. "Have you been caring for him while I was gone?"

"Yes, indeed," his father Lucas said proudly, "And he's done a fine job."

"I can see. Well, John," Will went on, "you deserve a reward for that. How would you like to keep him?"

John's eyes grew huge. "I can have him?"

Will laughed. "Yes, you may, for I now have horses aplenty, and would not be able to give him the attention that you can."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Your Highness!" The boy started to rush off, and then stopped. "Wait, what is his name? I've been calling him Seashell."

"His name is Chestnut, but yours is far more original. Why don't you continue to call him that, for Seashell is a fine name."

John grinned. "Lizzy said the same thing."

Hearing her name, Will bent down and whispered to John. "I know I just gave him to you, but I need to borrow him for a while. Would that be possible?"

"Of course, sire! Anything for you!"

Will stood and turned to Lucas, who was still standing nearby. "Would you please help rid me of this crowd?" he whispered. "I need to see a young lady."

Lucas gave him a knowing grin and nodded. He turned toward the villagers and declared, "Tonight, we throw a feast for our honored guests! Let us begin the preparations!"

This man, thought Will, deserves to be knighted.

The crowd began to disperse, eager to return home to prepare their finest meals for the prince and his official. Will then mounted the steed and rode as swiftly as he could to the fiddler's house, jumping off to dismount and tying the horse to a post.

He knocked on the door, and was admitted by Mary, the middle sister. Jane and Charles sat together in the family's main room, their hands linked together.
"Oh, bless me, it is true!" the farmer's wife cried. "Your friend is indeed the prince of our kingdom!" She stood and curtsied. "Welcome to our home, Your Royal Greatness Majesty!"

The rest of the family rose to their feet. "A prince!" a younger daughter cried. "A prince has come to our house!"

"Greetings to you all," said Will, before looking around wildly. He did not see Lizzy.

Charles walked over to clap Will's shoulder. "Congratulate me, my friend. I am now an engaged man."

"Congratulations," he said. "Where is Lizzy?"

"May we visit your palace someday?" said one of the other daughters. "Perhaps when Jane and Charles marry?"

"Where is she?" Will cried again in desperation.

The family continued to chatter, until someone shouted, "SILENCE!"

Everyone turned in astonishment to see the source of the command: Jane.

"Our prince has asked us a question, and I will now answer. Lizzy is out in the barn," she said. Looking around at the family, most of whom were staring at him with great curiosity, Will mumbled, "Please excuse me." He knew he was being horribly rude, but did not feel capable of anything more mannerly in his current state of distress. He then turned to run out of the house, hearing yet another sister say, "Why does he want Lizzy?" followed by Jane shouting, "Lydia! Do not follow him!"

He arrived at the family's field behind the house, looking eagerly for her. He wondered why she was not with her family on this happy occasion. Did she still feel isolated from them? Or had Charles' return caused her pain, if she did not yet know that Will had accompanied him? In short order, he spotted the barn and ran inside, seeing her there tending to some of the animals.

"Lizzy!" he cried. She turned and looked at him, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. She was the most beautiful sight he had ever beheld. He ran to her and scooped her into his arms, embracing her tightly. When he lowered her to the ground in order to see her face, Lizzy's expression was one of pure joy.

"You are here," she said, her eyes moist as she stared at him. "You are really here."

The sound of her voice filled him with delight. "Yes," he smiled, "and so are you." He placed his hand on her face and gently caressed her check. "I am in rapture right now. I thought I would never see you again."

When he bent his head to kiss her, however, she stepped back and curtsied. "I am happy to see you, Your Highness, and honored to have you visit us."

He was puzzled by her sudden formality, and the way the light in her eyes had so quickly dimmed. He remembered his promise that he would come back to her. Was she hurt that he had broken it? Or had he wounded her by not telling her of his true identity?

"Will you walk with me, Lizzy?" he asked.

She glanced around. "I am very busy..."
He looked at her with concern, trying to understand what was troubling her. "Lizzy, why are you here? Your family is inside celebrating. Are things still difficult with them?"

She shook her head. "No, it's much better with them, sire. I thank you for your concern. We can go in and join them, if you would like."

A pit began to form in his stomach. Why was her behavior toward him so altered? "I'd like some time alone with you first. Please walk with me, Lizzy."

She nodded, wiped her hands on her apron, and stepped out of the barn beside him. As they walked along the outskirts of the family's field, he spoke. "I am sorry it has taken me so long to come to you. I knew that George had taken you, and I did not know what had happened to you after that. He told me you were dead."

"I was so stupid!" she cried. "He seemed to be one that desired peace, and so I told him about you."

"Lizzy, you are not stupid. You are the wisest woman I know. But George is a master of deception, and you are trusting person. That is no discredit to you. The fault is all his."

She pressed her lips together. "I think I killed him," she said quietly, her expression pained.

His heart wrenched. No wonder she seemed filled with sadness. A woman as loving as she would not want to cause harm to anyone, no matter how villainous. "You did not kill him," he assured her.

"He lives?"

"No, he's dead, but you did not kill him. King Thomas had him arrested for his crimes, and he died in prison at the hands of another captive." Will stopped walking and looked at her, unable to prevent the smirk that crossed his face. "He apparently had some welts on his head when he was arrested. Did you do that?"

She nodded. "With a rock. That's how I escaped."

"You're very brave."

"I rubbed the green acorn. It gave me much courage."

"For that, I am ecstatic. I was devastated when I thought I had lost you."

She looked away from him as though his words meant nothing, leaving him confused. Will suddenly stopped short, realizing something that should had occurred to him months ago. The filthy scum had had no injuries when he had lied about killing his beloved. Will was horrified that he had believed the scoundrel's lies and thus abandoned Lizzy for these many months. She must despise him, but could he convince her he was still worthy of her love?

"Lizzy, are you angry with me? I know you must feel forsaken by me after all this time, and lied to, for I did not tell you who I was. I do not deserve your regard, but I will do everything in my power to make it up to you."

"No, sire," she shook her head. "I understand. For the first, you had responsibilities, and for the second, you had enemies. I know that all too well." She turned to look at him. "I was elated to hear of your success in bringing peace, and your efforts to heal our nation. I always knew you were a true man of peace. One day you will be a great king, Your Highness."
"Oh hang it, Lizzy, do not call me Your Highness!" he shouted in anguish and confusion. If she was not angry at him, what was the reason for her strange behavior?

"I… I am not used to being around royalty. What shall I call you instead?"

"Call me Will, like you did before. Please, Lizzy."

"That would hardly be a proper form of address from one of your subjects."

"It would be entirely proper from you. Surely you know that you are much more to me than one of my subjects. You're my dearest friend and the woman I love. You're the woman I want to marry." He sighed as the words left his mouth; he had hoped to tell her of his intentions in a more romantic way.

Lizzy licked her lips and her voice seemed to catch. "Some lucky noblewoman will one day have the privilege of calling you by your given name."

"I don't want a noblewoman. I want you."

She looked around and at the ground, anywhere but at him. "You cannot marry me, sire. It's the law."

"Is that your fear? Believe me, my lovely one, it is not the law, just a custom."

At this, she looked up at him in surprise. "I checked," he said, thinking of his late night run to his father's library. "And if there were such a law, I would give up my crown for you."

She stared at him, her expression flickering between hope and pain, igniting hope in him once more. "Will, we were only together for four days. That's hardly the basis for marriage."

"Lizzy, in those four days, we experienced a lifetime together. It was more than enough time for me to know how much I love you."

He smiled. "And you called me Will."

He saw a flicker of a smile cross her face. "I suppose I did. You have really come … for me."

He could not tell whether her last words were a statement or a question, but he would do whatever he could to reassure her. "Yes, I have come for you, dearest. I have missed you, I have longed for you, and my deepest desire is to spend my life with you."

He paused, swallowing before he said his next words. "If you do not feel the same, however, one word from you will silence me on this subject forever." In this, he would not be like his father. Lizzy would choose.

She stared at him for a few moments, during which he barely breathed. "Will," she began, thrilling his spirit. "I love you with all my heart and I always will. I had just convinced myself that we could never be together."

"Through no fault of your own, but mine," he said gently. "Had I known you still lived, I would have been here in an instant."

"The silver acorn showed me that you would return to me. I should have believed it. I, who has believed in their power since I was twelve, and yet I doubted that love could be mine. Oh, Will, forgive me. I have missed you so much!"

To hear her affirm her love for him made him want to cover her precious face with kisses, but he had something important to say first, and this time he would do it properly. He took her hand and
kneeled before her. "My dearest, loveliest Elizabeth," he said, "there is nothing to forgive, but more important, there is no longer anything to keep us apart. My beloved, will you do me the great honor of accepting my hand in marriage?"

Lizzy eyes were now shining again. "Yes, my darling Will, yes!"

He stood and drew her toward him, and felt her arms wrap about his waist. His joy bubbled over into laughter, and her peals of delight matched his own. Lizzy was alive and she was his. He had never felt so good, so right, or so complete. She lifted her face to look at him, the adoration in her eyes and smile taking his breath away. Their lips met, and they were at long last able to express the depth of their affection for each other.

When they finally stopped for air and stood gazing into each other's eyes, Lizzy caressed his smooth cheeks. "Do you like it?" he asked, realizing that she had never been able to kiss him when he was clean-shaven.

"Very much!" she laughed. She regarded him for a second. "You know, you do not blush anymore."

"That's because I'm no longer shy around you."

She tilted her head. "Shy? A strong leader like you?"

"I was not shy when I was acting as a soldier protecting one of his people. But when I looked at you as a woman, and not just any woman, but the handsomest one of my acquaintance—in those moments, yes, I was very shy."

She smiled. "I will miss it. I did find your blushing very appealing."

He drew closer to her, whispering in her ear, "Then perhaps I need to find other things that appeal to you."

"Yes, indeed!" she whispered back. They began to kiss again until they were both breathless and Lizzy uttered, "Will, I cannot wait until our wedding night!"

He felt the red instantly creeping up his cheeks. Lizzy covered her mouth and cried, "Oh, Will, I'm so sorry! I did not do that on purpose!"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, Lizzy, one of the many things I love about you is that you say exactly what's on your mind! Believe me," he laced his fingers with hers, "you spoke for both of us."

"My sister is going to be a princess!" he heard someone shout, and he turned to see Lizzy's youngest sister, along with the entire family and Charles, gathered along the edge of the field and staring at them. He laughed again, this time in embarrassment, wondering whether they had witnessed the passionate kisses he had shared with Lizzy but a few short moments before.

"I always knew it!" her mother cried. "I always knew Lizzy was the most handsome and good-humored of my daughters, and would one day marry so well."

When Lizzy excused herself to embrace her mother and sisters, he took the opportunity to approach her father. "Sir, I must apologize for my earlier rudeness. I had been too long separated from your daughter, and I had feared her dead."

The fiddler's lips quirked into a smile. "Yes, well, I do not believe I am in any position to question your behavior."
Uncertain of the man's meaning, Will plowed on. "Then may I ask for your consent to marry—"

"Yes, yes, of course, sire," the man interrupted. "You're the prince. I should never dare refuse anything which you condescended to ask."

"I would prefer your willing consent, rather than something inspired by my position."

Ben regarded him for a moment. "Do you love my daughter?"

"Very much. She is the best woman I know."

"And does she love you?"

Will glanced over at Lizzy, his heart filling with joy. "Yes, yes, she does."

The man smiled, this time in genuine pleasure, not sardonic humor. "That is all I need to know. My wholehearted consent is yours. I could not have parted with her to anyone less worthy."
The Maiden's Treasure

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for reading and for your comments! I would love to hear your final thoughts after you finish this tale!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Maiden's Treasure

A great feast was held that evening at the home of Widow Burg and her daughters. After discovering the true identity of the southlanders who had temporarily resided in their village, the people of Merrytown were more than honored to share their bounty with them.

The prince's carriage pulled up in front of the widow's house, with young John, the blacksmith's son, riding ahead on a grand brown steed. The villagers were astounded to see Farmer Ben, his wife, and their three youngest daughters step out of the carriage. Lucas had sent John to retrieve the horse and guide the carriage to the fiddler's home after his daughter Charlotte told him where she suspected the prince and his friend had gone.

After dropping off the fiddler and part of his family, the carriage departed and returned again a short while later. The people were even more surprised when Charles and Prince Fitzwilliam exited, each one with one of the fiddler's two eldest daughters on his arm. The young women were wearing breathtaking gowns of red and emerald green.

Caroline, now recovered from her fainting spell, attempted to lead Will to his seat at the family's table when he entered the house. She frowned when she saw Lizzy remain by his side to accompany him. "Your Highness, you are the guest of honor! She cannot sit with you!" she declared.

"Caroline," Will answered, placing his hand on top of Lizzy's as it rested on his elbow, "Lizzy is my guest of honor."

A mixture of expressions crossed Caroline's face, from bafflement to displeasure to disbelief. At last she sniffed and nodded, then walked away.

"I'm very sorry, dearest," Will said as they sat down.

Lizzy smiled. Caroline's expressions had been amusing and Will's protectiveness quite charming. "Do not worry. She's always treated me this way. Feeling superior is important to her." She laughed a little. "Somehow Anne has persuaded her to join the next journey to the southlands. I am convinced that Caroline only agreed because we received such a great welcome when we returned. She is thinking of the honor, and has no understanding of the work involved."

Will looked thoughtful for a moment. "The trip will be beneficial for her. She will have the chance to see great hardship and to help others. It might change her."

When Lizzy raised her eyebrows skeptically, he reminded her, "I changed. I doubt that she's more stubborn than I was."
Lizzy wanted to protest that beneath his stubbornness lay a tender heart, one that she was unsure Caroline had, but she refrained. Perhaps he was right. A new day of hope had begun, even for Caroline.

During the meal, her sister Mary played the fiddle for the crowd. She strummed a few simple tunes with no false notes, far too slow for dancing but perfect to accompany supper conversation. As Will nodded along in time to the music, Lizzy told him, "My father has been giving her lessons. I insisted."

"It's made a difference," Will said in appreciation.

"It's good for them," Lizzy added. "She wanted to learn to play, and he needs to spend more time with his daughters."

When supper was concluded, Lucas rose to speak on behalf of the community. "We are all very grateful to you, Your Highness, and to Charles. Because of you, our village was spared." The people responded by raising a toast in their honor.

Will rose to acknowledge their tribute. "Charles and I would also like to thank all of you for welcoming us to Merrytown and allowing us to serve you. As to your village being spared, however, the credit is all yours. Many, many around this room were involved in defending this community. It is you yourselves who have saved it."

"Here, here!" a man shouted, and the villagers began to cheer again.

Will waited until the commotion died down, and then spoke again. "There is another here to whom great honor is due. Before I tell you who that is, I have news to share. This village will always be special to Charles and me, for it is here that we met two very special women. Today, Charles asked Jane, daughter of Ben and Fanny, to be his wife, and she has accepted him."

Cries of delight and a round of applause went up around the room. "And I," Will went on, his smile beaming, "asked the bravest and most wonderful woman in the world, her sister Elizabeth, to be my wife, and she has accepted me!"

This time the noise was deafening. Liz felt herself blushing as Will took her hand and helped her stand up beside him. When the clamor finally receded, he placed his hand on her arm and addressed the crowd once more. "This is the woman to whom honor is due. Our nation owes a great debt to Elizabeth. She first spoke to me about making peace with Aurora at a time when I wanted to hear nothing of it. But she led me to think, and to question, and to grow, until peace at last became something that I longed for. I can truly say that it is because of her that the hostilities have ended, that Pemberlea still stands, and that our nation has a great future."

"Long live Elizabeth!" someone shouted and the cheering began again. Lizzy closed her eyes, humbled but also pleased. For so many years, she never would have believed that her community would feel this way about her.

Will turned toward her, taking her hands in his own, and she opened her eyes to see him gazing at her, his own eyes shining in a way that stilled her heart. He spoke to her, but in the hearing of everyone. "My dearest Lizzy," he said, "my love for you is limitless. I am so honored and grateful that you will soon be my wife and my princess."

She could not stop the tears that sprang to her eyes.

Will smiled, his grin a bit mischievous. "And now, my beloved, I have a request. At the very first feast I attended here in Merrytown, I heard the most beautiful woman I had ever seen sing in the
most beautiful voice I had ever heard. Will you sing for us again tonight?"

She leaned toward him as tears started to roll down her face. "Will," she whispered, both laughing and crying, "I cannot sing right now! I am a wreck!"

"Dearest," he whispered back, looking concerned, "I did not mean to cause you distress. I will rescind my request."

The assembled villagers, however, had begun to shout, "Sing, Lizzy, sing!" so she decided to wipe her eyes and pull herself together. She squeezed Will's hands and said, "No, I can do this."

She turned to the people of her village and inhaled deeply. She would sing an old melody of their land, one they were all familiar with, but one to which she had added words of her own.

_In darkest night, when all alone,_

_In found strength to persevere_  

_Twas you who gave me hope to own_  

_For in love, there is no fear._

s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s~s

Will and Charles stayed in Merrytown for two more days, before being required to return to the capital city to resume their official duties and begin preparations for their weddings, which would take place one month hence. None among the two couples wanted to part after being so recently reunited, but in this circumstance, at least, all would be able to bid one another farewell and with the knowledge that they would very soon meet again.

On the day after the feast, Lizzy and Will took a long walk into the woods in order to discuss the many things that had happened in their lives since they were last together. Lizzy began with a pressing question: why had Will made his very public pronouncements the night before?

Will smiled. "I am certain the people of this village are wondering how you and I came together, given that they did not see me court you when I lived here."

Lizzy laughed. "Unfortunately, it's a story we cannot share."

He chuckled. "No, we cannot." Will stopped and gazed at her, gently stroking his hand down her cheek and along her jaw. A feeling of warmth flowed through her, as it did each time he looked at her or touched her this way. "Thus, while they may continue to wonder about our courtship, I wanted everyone present to have no doubts about how much I love you and how worthy you are to be my wife."

His words left Lizzy breathless, as she realized that the sentiments he had expressed were meant not only for her fellow villagers, but also for herself. He wanted her to have no doubts about how deeply he loved and esteemed her. Before she could say this, however, Will spoke again. "Indeed, it is I who am not worthy of you."

"That is not true!" she protested.

"No, Lizzy, it is. I have much to tell you." He began to look around. "Is there a place where we can sit?"

Lizzy led him to her favorite tree stump, the place where he had first seen her with the gemstones,
and they settled themselves. The chilly air became more biting now that they were no longer walking. Will placed his arm around her shoulder and drew her closer for warmth.

He began to tell her about his time with King Thomas, his discoveries about his parents, and his use of the acorn with both warring kings. When he finished, he said, "I am heartily ashamed of myself when I think about how you tried to give me the acorn sooner, and I would not accept it. I could scarcely look Philip's family in the eyes when I met them yesterday."

Lizzy took his hand and squeezed it. "It seems to me that the acorn would not have worked had you tried to use it sooner. Your father, your uncle... they both needed to be involved. And I dare say that the magic would not have been possible until it was your own belief that peace was the right course of action."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Perhaps, but I did not need to be so stubborn about listening to you."

Lizzy touched his face gently. "Allow me to tell you something about Philip's son, who is also called Will. He accompanied our group to the southlands. He told his mother that he wanted to go so that his father's death would not be in vain. He made a choice not to live in anger or hatred for what has happened. That is all any of us can do. We cannot change the past."

"I said something similar to my father," Will told her.

"There, you see!" she smiled. "You realize the truth of what I am saying."

Will still appeared troubled. "My father asked me to forgive him, Lizzy, for what happened with my mother, and perhaps also for his neglect of me after she died. He was lost in his own grief, and I was left on my own to mourn and to grow into manhood. I could not say the words he wanted to hear. I told him it was God's forgiveness he needed, which is true, but I believe he also feels the need for mine."

"And now? Do you feel the same?"

"Perhaps not. I have watched you with your family. Your relationship with them is very different than it was before, is it not?"

She nodded.

"Mine is with my father as well. He has his flaws, but I also have mine. He is changing, and continues to change for the better."

"It sounds as if you do forgive him, and should perhaps tell him when you return."

"You're right; I shall," Will nodded. "I believe I have learned that none of us is beyond redemption." He frowned. "Well, George perhaps. Is it wrong of me to hope that he is now rotting in hell?"

"I share your sentiments, but fortunately that is not for us to determine. Meanwhile here on earth, most people are not so given over to evil as George is. Caroline might put on airs, but there is potential for goodness in her also, as you reminded me last night. I just could not see it before."

He grinned. "Ah, my perfect Lizzy had a blind spot!"

She smacked him lightly on the arm. "Yes, well, now that we are to be married, you will have plenty of time to become well acquainted with my flaws. I hope I do not disappoint you too much."
"You could never disappoint me, Lizzy."

For that, she gave him a kiss, one that quickly became passionate. He finally pulled away and rested his forehead against hers. "Sweet Lizzy, I could kiss you all day. However, I have something I want to share with you, something my uncle gave me."

Will pulled a few folded sheets from his overcoat. Lizzy opened the fragile pages delicately and looked at the markings on them. She could make out part of it, but many words she did not recognize. Her face began burning as she admitted to him, "Will, I do not read well. I have not had many opportunities to learn."

He looked at her with some surprise as if the possibility had never occurred to him. She wondered if he would now consider her inadequate for the role of representing their nation as his wife. Will, however, smiled gently. "We'll have to correct that. I shall hire tutors for you. You are so intelligent that you will learn quickly. I will love being able to share books with you."

"I'd like that very much," she said with relief. It seemed a small thing, given how greatly her life was soon to change, but Will's acceptance of her limited education and his belief that she could overcome it touched her deeply.

He took the folded sheets from her hand. "I'll read it to you." He cleared his throat and began.

My dear Thomas,

I still do not know why you do not write, but I will persist, so that you will at least always know of my life, even if I do not know of yours.

Old Morgan, Jerald's cupbearer, is ever valuable to me, for he listens not only for discussions of politics, but also for the personal news that I care so much more to hear. He tells me that Jerald has recently learned of your marriage. I am so happy for you! I am surprised that it has taken you to the ripe old age of four and thirty to take a wife, since I know how many young women of the court were eager for your hand and I myself have now been an old married woman for seventeen years. The lady who has finally caught you must be special indeed.

Your celebration coincides with my own, for my dear Fitzwilliam has just turned thirteen. He reminds me of you, for he is very intelligent and often serious and quiet. Like you, however, he can still be drawn into mischief by servant boys his age—although I must admit that I was often the biggest creator of your mischief as a child! (Of course, I was punished far less than you, since our parents assumed that you as the boy were the more likely instigator! Have I ever apologized for that?) More important to me, however, is Fitzwilliam's heart, for he is very kind and loving. He has grown so tall in the last year that he has reached my height, and I already see in him the man he will become. I am so very proud of him.

With your new marriage, I know you must be thinking about producing an heir. As a parent, I would like to give you some counsel. I know you are deeply unhappy about my marriage to Jerald. It is the only reason to which I can attribute your many long years of silence. I need you to understand why I have chosen to love him. It is for Fitzwilliam's sake. I want to create a better world for my son, and as a woman, there is little I can do except use my influence with his father. I would like to think I have had some effect, for Jerald is in many ways a good man, who loves our son as much as I do.

My greatest dreams are for Fitzwilliam. Yours will be as well for however many children with whom the Lord blesses you, and you will be in a much better position that I am to create a world in which they can live in peace and happiness. I urge you to use your power for good, for I truly believe that the time we are given on earth is for our children's sake, and not our own.
Again, I beg you to write to me. I miss you dearly. Please give my greetings to your new bride.

With all my love, Angelia

When he lowered the letter, Lizzy, whose eyes were misty, placed her hands on his face and drew him toward her, kissing a tear on his cheek. "I have read this many times already," he told her, "and I am filled with emotion each time. I can't help but wonder how our history might have been different had my father sent this letter and Thomas read it and taken it to heart."

"I understand," she said, "but as we both have said, we can't change the past, only the future. In some ways, it's as if your mother wrote this letter to us and for the children we will have, and the many other children of Pemberlea and Aurora. We can do much to create that world of peace and happiness for them. Perhaps that is our destiny."

"Oh, Lizzy," he whispered. He kissed her lips then, lingering for some time. "I love you so much, my darling. I cannot believe sometimes that I have been so blessed to have you."

She returned his kiss. "And you are my blessing, my beloved Will."

They remained in the woods a while longer, talking about the past and the future, but most of all appreciating their present moment together after so long a separation. Will and Charles were to depart the next day, while Lizzy and Jane would remain on their farm to prepare themselves for leave-taking. So many others in Merrytown had agreed to go on the next journey to help in the southlands—Caroline included—that Lizzy would not be needed. She was a little sad to not rejoin the group, but even more eager to be with Will again. In a fortnight, Will and Charles would return to retrieve them. The sisters would live in the castle for the final two weeks before the wedding ceremony, being fitted for their dresses and preparing for their new lives. Their family would join them for the Christmas holidays, and their weddings would take place shortly thereafter.

On the day of Will and Charles' return, both sisters watched the windows anxiously, and ran outside to greet their carriage when it arrived. Jane and Charles entered the house to bid farewell to the sisters' family, but Lizzy, entwining her fingers with Will's, told him that they had an important task to complete before they departed.

She led her betrothed into the woods, noticing how windy the air was and how bare the trees had become. Winter was almost here.

"On our way back to the capital," Will told her as they walked, "Charles and I paid a visit to the village of Lambton."

Lizzy grinned. "Ah, your so-called farming village."

"That was a falsehood, Lizzy," he admitted, "borne of the nervousness that comes from being interrogated by a beautiful woman."

She laughed. "I concluded as much."

"Nevertheless, it is an important place to me."

"Is it Thumpin's home?" Lizzy asked. "You told me he lived in the northlands."

"Very clever," Will answered, "yes, it is. I had to see the man. I had many questions for him."

"Is he very much like his cousin?"
"He is, in both appearance and personality. More intriguing to me, I now know that he and I share a connection. We are both the children of a Pemberlean and an Auroran parent."

"Hmm," said Lizzy, "and what questions did you have for him?"

"I wanted to know how he had come to make sashes for my family, and why he knew that the golden acorn was meant for me."

Lizzy reached into her belt and removed the small piece of cloth Will had given her. "Did Thumpin make this for you?"

"He did. I confess that I did not like it at thirteen. I wanted warrior images on my sash, not a small nut that he claimed represented peace."

"Why did he choose it for you?"

"He told me he learned his craft of sash-making from his father, a service which they had provided to the royal family of Aurora for many generations. When he reached adulthood, violence was increasing between our countries, which disturbed him a great deal as the son of an Auroran man. He wanted to have an influence on events in Pemberlea. He sought an audience with my grandfather and shared a sash he had made for him. My grandfather was impressed, and commissioned him to keep making them, as did my father after him. During his service, he would gently offer advice without actually seeming to, and eventually, my father especially came to rely on his counsel. Of course, my father did not realize that Thumpin had firsthand knowledge of the kingdom of Aurora that contributed to his wisdom."

"And what of the acorn on your sash?"

"He noticed the resemblance between me and my maternal great-grandfather, an Auroran duke who believed that peace was possible. He wanted to encourage me to have the same heart."

"You do," said Lizzy with a smile.

"I only came to have it thanks to your vision, and Thumpin's, and Truman's."

Lizzy thought about Will helping to hide her from Aurorans in the Merrytown forest, searching for her when she was missing, and cutting himself to protect her—much of this during a time in which he did not have a high opinion of her. He had always been a man of great compassion, now even more so since he had learned to extend it to those he had formerly called enemies. "No," she shook her head firmly, "that heart was in you all along."

He gazed at her for a moment and then lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Thank you."

As they continued to walk, Lizzy felt certain she would find the right place. As she expected, they were soon able to locate the large oak tree under the root of which lay a foxes' den. "The golden acorn," she asked when they arrived at the spot. "Do you still have it?"

"I used it, Lizzy," Will answered.

"Yes, but do you still have it?"

"I do; I somehow could not bring myself to part with it." He reached into his pocket and retrieved the brown nut.

He stared at the nut for a moment, and then looked up at her, mystified. "It was naught but an ordinary acorn as recently as yesterday, but now it appears as if the gold color is returning."
Lizzy smiled. "Indeed. Mine are doing the same." She opened a small box she had carried with her into the woods. Inside, the three brown acorns had recovered the faintest hints of their formerly jeweled appearance.

"What does it mean?" he asked. "Is there more for us to do?"

"No, I do no think so. Place your acorn with mine, and we will wait."

Will dropped his acorn into the box, and they waited. Soon, a young vixen emerged from the den. Lizzy had not seen her before, but somehow knew that she was the granddaughter of the recently departed old reynard.

The vixen bowed her head when she saw them. "The worthy maiden and the man of honor," she said. "I have heard much about you."

"We have come to return your treasure," said Lizzy.

"You have used it well," the vixen replied. "Much of the world has been set right because of you. Please, restore it to its hiding place."

Lizzy bent down, lifting the large rock at the base of the tree to reveal a hole. She placed the box in the hole and returned the stone to its position.

"Thank you, my lady," the fox said. "I will guard it, and my kits, and their kits after them, until such a time as it is needed again."

"Thank you," Lizzy replied as the vixen turned to reenter her den. She stood and returned to Will's side, noticing the look of marvel on his face.

"She spoke," he said. "I heard her speak."

"She did," Lizzy acknowledged. "You and I were entrusted with a great magic, but now it is our time to go out into the world and do good without it. I am ready for a new adventure with you."

He gazed at her in wonder. "You told me I would be a great king, Lizzy, but you will be an extraordinary queen."

"Yes," she said, taking his hand again, "Together, we shall be."

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Epilogue

In two weeks' time, a splendid double ceremony was held in the capital city of Pemberlea, uniting Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth, and Charles and Jane, in the bonds of holy matrimony. The wedding of the kingdom's prince brought much joy to the people, instilling a belief that hope had at last returned to their land. The Pemberlean people were delighted with their new princess, who, along with her husband, would go on to spend much time visiting the communities of the southlands, participating alongside the people in the rebuilding efforts.

The wedding itself was attended by Will's Auroran relations, his three young cousins serving as ringbearer and flower girls. King Thomas and King Jerald greeted each other in civility. Too much had passed between them for them to ever have friendship, but they were united in contrition, in their desire to maintain peace, and in their respect for the young man who shared both their blood.
Among the honored guests were Truman and Thumpin, reunited for the first time in more than thirty years. Truman's joy at seeing his cousin again, and at witnessing the union of his "children," was so great that he worked up the courage to propose to Dottie, who had come with him. This time, she said yes!

In seven years' time, upon Jerald's death, Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth ascended to the Pemberlean throne together. They ruled their nation in peace and wisdom, and maintained close ties with Aurora throughout the reigns of Thomas and his son Lawrence after him. Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth had more than fifty happy years of marriage together, giving birth to four children, whom they named Angelia, Truman, Dottie, and Thurman. Throughout their days, and for many generations thereafter, the people of Pemberlea and Aurora were at peace and called one another brothers and sisters. And they all lived happily ever after.

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In memory of Nelson Mandela, 1918-2013

"Blessed are the peacemakers…"

The End

Chapter End Notes

I wrote the prologue to this tale several years ago, and then abandoned the story because I didn't know where I wanted to take it. My 8-year-old daughter found the prologue in December 2013 and encouraged me to start writing it again.

Something significant happened in December of 2013: Nelson Mandela died. As I read and listened to news stories about Mandela's life, a theme for this story came to me. I wanted to explore how a man grows into the role of becoming a great peacemaker, and how people come to understand the humanity of their enemies.

Prince Fitzwilliam in this story is not meant to represent Mandela, and of course, the Pemberlea/Aurora conflict in no way resembles the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. However, I hope that in a small way, this tale has been able to honor Mandela's legacy of peacemaking. Thank you for reading.

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