

PROLOGUE

*"In every end, there is also a beginning."
Libba Bray, 'A Great and Terrible Beauty'*

She'd never thought magic would be the death of her.

Skeletal trees hemmed her in on every side, dark beseeching branches stretching skyward. She wished the moon would hurry and rise. Only the black walls of the surrounding forest were visible.

Viola staggered ahead, panting as she gulped the chill night air. Her precious bundle dragged at her aching arms.

She stopped and closed her eyes, forcing her weary mind to focus. She concentrated on letting her senses seek the dogs behind her, hoping to send a confusion of messages to the lead hounds.

I can make them attack each other. A cold, dark voice deep inside tempted. Or they can overwhelm their handlers.

She shuddered, appalled.

With fierce urgency, she pressed the bewildered dogs to overlook her scent, sending them chasing false trails instead. It would buy time, and she'd need every precious second.

A frigid wind slipped icy fingers through the thin fabric of her dress, and her teeth chattered. Her sense of direction had deserted her, leaving only 'away'. Away from the hunter's angry thoughts, away from the single-minded dogs.

The semi-frozen forest vegetation battered her shoeless, bleeding feet, but as she plunged blindly into the night, her mental distress outweighed the physical.

Did I just contemplate deliberately hurting another living creature? I'm an Empath!

A random memory took her back to the Citadel in Galahar, during her Apprentice Witch training. She and the other Novices,

huddled together in front of the fireplace on winter evenings, sharing tales of Healer Empaths who'd gone to war.

They scared each other with whispered innuendoes recounting how those Empaths suffered anguish and death along with their patients.

What would it be like to suffer their pain? To share their last gasp for air? To experience their lives slowly ebbing and fading from my consciousness?

To imagine such things... worse, giving them serious consideration, went against everything she thought she believed.

As if in response, a brutal protectiveness filled her. She clutched the sleeping baby tighter, the intensity of her feelings shocking her. She'd never loved anyone as much, or so deeply... not even his father.

I'd do anything to save him. Her thoughts faltered as an echo of her brother's voice murmured. *Anything?*

... But my son... What can I do? My beautiful boy... There must be something... everything hurts... so tired... can't think... Saints and shards, I need to rest...

Fatigue was stealing what little strength she had left.

She staggered on through the unfamiliar woods, shaking with cold and exhaustion, barely able to feel the hem of her dress brush the tops of her scratched, bloody feet.

Though it was her they wanted to catch, she sensed her newborn son's potential. Compared to him, she was a spluttering candle next to a blazing bonfire. Murder him now, or execute him when he came into his power; did it matter? Either way, they were both dead if she didn't lose the trackers, or find the means to hide him from them.

Hunger scratched at her stomach with sharp stabs, like kitten claws. *How long since I've eaten?* It was becoming harder to focus... *Even water would be a blessing...* They'd started

running the previous night, so she'd been awake for over two days, and her energy levels were almost gone.

... *The last thing I ate*... A piece of dried fruit, she decided, just before her labor pains grew undeniable.

Viola shivered in the chill spring air, flinching as branches clutched at her, scratching her face and arms as she pushed her way deeper into the dark forest. Except for the boy, it would almost be a relief to be hunted openly. She'd lived in fear of discovery for months.

A woman's cry pierced her mind, cutting through her fragile protection and making her wince. She instinctively turned towards the source.

[*The problem with being an Empath,*] she whispered in her sleeping infant's thoughts, [*is that when you feel their misery, you're drawn to fix the hurt of others.*]

Yet this pain was familiar.

With her own baby less than a day old, she recognized the haunting pangs of an imminent birthing.

The attitudes of those around the woman made it clear she was someone important. Viola stretched her senses, scanning the minds hovering about the bed.

Blessed Saints and crystal shards! It's their Queen... it's Amabel!

A weird, absurd, unthinkable idea leapt fully formed into her thoughts. Was this the answer? She hopped from foot to foot, wiggling her toes, trying to warm them. Her bare feet were wet and numb with cold; a blessing as it deadened the pain, but how much damage was she causing herself unaware? How she longed for a fire.

If I could only spare the energy for a warming spell.

Torn by indecision, she glanced down at her son. Sensing her uneasiness, he woke and stared up at her. His eyes held too

much wisdom for a newborn, and his untrained mind tried to reach out and ease her troubled spirit.

Viola marveled at the power already evident in him. *HE* was all that mattered. Every Warlock was precious, yet his strength made him unique. He had to get home to Galahar. Her country needed him. Aware she was using her kingdom's needs to justify her actions, still she pressed forward.

A light touch proved almost everyone in the fortress slept. She worked her way closer, through the tangled underbrush, earning a few more scratches. The few guards on patrol were drowsy. With carefully inserted control, she marched them away from this side of the castle.

If she remembered their briefing, there were walled terraces on this side. The frosty spring air was too cold for lover's trysts, and this late at night, it should be deserted.

Fortunately, these pleasure gardens had little security, and she found an overlooked growth beside the wall.

It was difficult climbing the slender tree with wounded feet and an infant in her arms. Yet she managed with only one or two additional bruises. As the sapling thinned near the top, it bent under her weight until it overhung the wide stone wall. She fell clumsily atop the decorative barrier.

As she dropped to the ground inside the garden, she landed badly, twisting and falling on her back, so the baby landed on top of her.

She groaned with effort as she struggled to stand, then crept through the gardens on unsteady legs until she stood beneath the Queen's rooms. The windows remained open, despite the frost. Even two stories below, she heard the women's fussing above the birthing woman's squalls.

Her son's face puckered, and his bottom lip quivered as he reacted to the cries. She soothed him with a thought, blocking the

sounds from his mind until he relaxed. His eyelids fluttered as he fought sleep, closing as he surrendered to her urging.

Above her, one voice gave sharp orders to the others. *That must be the midwife.* As she listened, the woman announced, “It’s a boy!”

The Witch’s mouth tightened.

Viola drew on her dwindling reserves, muttering a spell under her breath. She rose from the foot of the wall, slow but steady, and floated up to the open window. Her dark, blood-red gown and sable hair blended into the shadows. Only the white of her face and the baby’s blanket might betray her presence to possible watchers, and she was careful to stay facing the castle wall.

Closing her eyes, Viola swept an outstretched hand in front of her, shooting a sharp blast at the minds within; stunning them unconscious. Voices in the chamber stilled, followed by thuds as bodies dropped on wooden floors. One by the table; another near the window; and the third laying by the foot of the bed.

Belatedly, she hoped none of them were holding the newborn.

Viola peered around as she landed on the deep window ledge. Polished wood surfaces gleamed, reflecting the fire and candlelight illuminating the apartment. Needlework tapestries with stunning designs of delicate birds and flowers hid the stone walls, and plush fur rugs from wild animals covered oak planks. It was large and impressive, befitting a Queen.

She held out her hand, and one of the newborn Prince’s thick blankets floated to her. With her son bundled in the fresh, warmer covering, she tore his thin blanket to strips, which she tied around her aching feet. She must leave no sign of her presence behind, and bloody footprints would be hard to ignore.

As she stepped from the window ledge, she was relieved

to see the Prince laying in a basinet. He fussed, and with unconscious reflex, she sent a soothing tendril of comfort his way. He yawned and went back to sleep.

Viola approached the bed, and the pale blonde mother. A smile of wonder ghosted across her weary face. Tall bedposts, as thick around as her thigh, stood sentinel at each corner of the massive bedframe.

They rose as high as she could reach, supporting an arched canopy thickly covered with the most realistic carving she’d ever seen. Vines and flowers circled up each support, to flow across the arch and spiral down the opposite bedpost. Heavy woven curtains, embroidered with swirls of delicate butterflies, enclosed all sides, allowing the bed’s occupant to create a warm bubble in the vast, chilly room.

She pushed open the side panels and moved closer to the slumbering Queen.

Lifting one lid, she checked the woman’s eye color.

Blue, excellent. Lighter than her son’s, but still blue.

The Prince had brown hair, though not as dark as her own boy’s black curls. So his father—the King—must be darker, which would help him pass as their youngling. There’d be no whispered questions about his parentage.

She stooped to check on the women sprawled on the floor. They’d been fortunate in both their long, cumbersome skirts and the thick fur rugs. With no time for delicacy, the padding softened their falls and prevented hard-to-explain injuries.

The effort to control so many at once taxed Viola’s waning strength. She wanted to curl up in front of the fire and sleep for hours; but that was impossible.

She stared dully at the women, shaking her head. How different Dumont’s inhabitants were from her own people in Galahar. It wasn’t just their fear of magic, but fundamental things,

such as their level of cleanliness. These women wore elegant, expensive clothing. Yet the smell of them showed only a nodding acquaintance with soap and water.

Layers of perfume added on top of days of sweat did NOT improve one's odor.

With a disgusted sniff, she wrinkled her nose and moved away.

A large chair stood near the fireplace, away from their joint stench. She limped over, dropping heavily into it. If this was her last chance to hold her baby, she mustn't waste a moment.

Viola nestled the sleeping infant close, his face pressed into her neck, his solid little body warm in her arms. She laid her head back against the chair, her throbbing feet soaking up the heat from the flames. Her heavy eyelids drooped, drifting closed.

I won't fall asleep, I just need to rest my eyes...

... The narrow track they hiked along forced them to walk single-file.

Their current path led them up a small mountain, with a precipitous incline above and a steep, angled slope below. She leaned into the rock face as the ridge narrowed once again.

She couldn't stop smiling. They were having a baby! As she turned to call to her mate, a rumbling crack sounded far above them.

August shouted. "WATCH OUT!"

He shoved her from behind and she skittered along the ledge, trying to keep her balance... when the trail under her foot broke away.

Her scream cut off as her back slammed into the ground, knocking the wind out of her. She struggled to breathe as she slid feet-first down the mountainside, picking up speed. Her tunic rode up. Rocks and gravel scraped her spine, and she yelped with pain

as she struggled to breathe.

Around her, stones rolled and bounced. One crashed into the slope where her head had been moments before.

[AUGUST!] She reached for his mind, but heard no reply.

[The baby!] Was her last conscious thought. She flipped sideways and her skull hit something solid...

Viola awoke with a jerk, her breath catching on a sob. Her son stirred, and she shifted him into the crook of her arm, where she could see his sweet face.

He was awake again, and she smiled, staring at him through a haze of unshed tears. As she shook off the remnants of her dream, she sensed his unformed thoughts reaching out to touch her mind.

Only hours old, and he's already a telepath. She marveled. Most don't even manifest till their eleventh or twelfth Feast Day.

She spoke to him mind-to-mind, knowing he'd absorb the emotion, if not the words.

[It may appear that I'm abandoning you, but it's the best I can do to keep you safe. I only hope our people will find you.] She choked back tears.

[I wish August had met you. He'd have loved you so much, and he'd have been a wonderful father.]

There was no time for mourning, and she pushed her ever-present grief aside.

She touched his soft cheek, running greedy eyes over his face. Desperate to memorize every detail and delay their parting, she cradled her youngling one last time.

Viola looked over at the sleeping Queen and spoke softly. "My son MUST live."

Part apology for what was to happen, it was almost a plea for understanding. But above that, it was a declaration of her

resolve.

As she gazed down at her baby, her straight black hair fell around his face, blending with his own dark curls. The leaping flames brought answering glimmers of deep blue from those matching ebony depths.

Again, she sensed his mind reach out, disturbed by the turmoil in hers.

[You have a powerful gift.] She frowned. *[Much too powerful. You must be one of them until we come for you, and you cannot frighten them. I'll do the best I can to suppress your abilities, but you're going to be so strong... nothing I do will contain you altogether.]*

She placed her hand on his small head, closed her eyes and channeled her energy into building a wall in his mind. The boy made fussy little sounds of protest.

[It'll hold for a few years before it dissolves. By then, you should have learned what they fear. I only hope you'll know how to hide what you are.] She forced a smile. *[Perhaps we'll rescue you before then, and hiding won't be necessary.]*

The baby grew agitated at being cut off from her. Knowing it was unwise but unable to stand his distress, she chipped a minor breach into the wall. As their bond leaked through the tiny opening, the infant quieted.

[It's time, my son, my heart, my all. Be well.] She rose, ignoring the tears on her cheeks, and without hesitation laid him next to the dreaming Queen.

"Can you care for him as I would? Protect him and teach him? Will you love him?"

Her voice broke.

As she turned away, dizziness made her grab hold of a bedpost to keep from falling. Young and strong as she was, if she didn't soon rest, she might pass out at a critical moment, and

they'd catch her for sure. She had no intention of making things easier for them.

Viola shivered, wrapping her hands around her elbows to quiet her trembling arms. Thick embroidered tapestries hid the dark stone walls, but cold seeped through them, fresh as ice through a glass on a hot summer day.

She shook her head at the contradictory habits of royalty. Wasting fuel in this vast fireplace, yet the windows were wide uncovered holes. Though shutters stood ready to close out inclement weather, she shuddered, thinking what a poor job they'd do.

Still, she needn't remain cold. A quick visit to the dressing room provided an older cloak hidden in a back corner. It was worn, but lined with warm fleece.

She gazed regretfully at rows of shoes. It was unfortunate that the Queen's dainty foot was smaller than hers... and she wanted nothing suspicious to lead the hunters back to the castle. Resigned to the scant protection the cloth strips gave her frozen feet, she returned to the bedroom, and stared down at the sleeping Prince.

This was wrong... she understood how unfair it was, yet saw no other choice. Frustration stirred her anger, burning away hesitation. This Queen ruled those who would kill her baby if they caught them together. Perhaps Viola couldn't deliberately cause harm, but what cruel irony if she was captured and this woman's son killed instead of her own.

That possibility dampened her rage. It was not part of her plan for any baby to die. But she'd made her decision. Even knowing she risked the Prince's life, she chose to save her son's.

She wrapped the newborn in two thick wool blankets with a sigh. The least she could do was keep him warm. She fingered the monogrammed crests.

I should do something about those. The thought flitted past and was gone.

The infant slept on as she lifted him, unaware of the momentous changes taking place in his life. She faced the Queen.

“I promise to take care of him.”

Guilt ate into her as she lied. She had no idea what would happen to the boy.

She shrugged. “I’ll try. If I escape, I’ll come for my son, and you’ll have yours back.” She sighed again. “It’s the best I can do.”

As she turned away, she remembered something undone. She laid her hand upon the Queen’s forehead. In a clear, firm voice of command, Viola said. “He will be called Milo.”

No one else would name her son!

She moved to the window. In her depleted state, it was an effort to climb onto the deep ledge. With a last fleeting look, she whispered. “I’ll return for you, Milo.”

Though honesty compelled her to add, “If I can.”

The pain of separation tore at her.

On the verge of leaving, still she hesitated. The temptation to remain with her baby was strong. *If I rested, I’d have enough strength to plant the memory of my arrival as nursemaid to the new Prince. The Queen can keep her son, and I’ll have Milo.*

With faint hope, she sought the relentless minds in the distance.

It was her own fault they were so persistent. They felt betrayed. When they’d found her after the accident, they’d taken her to their village and cared for her. She’d broken both legs and her arm, and her head injury made it hard to focus for several weeks.

But she also overheard them boasting about a young Warlock they killed. It had been horrible, living in constant fear

that those... those... murderers would discover who she was and kill her and her baby too. Circumstances had forced her to endure almost a full year among them.

She gathered her wandering thoughts and focused on the hunter’s minds. They were closer than before. Too close. Viola lingered over that curious blank space, which marked the Prior’s presence. He was one of the few who could shield himself naturally. She sighed again. There was no time to rest.

She had to go. Now. There was no other way.

As she floated downwards from the tall tower, her eyes remained fastened on the dim light from the window. She waved her hand, releasing the women from her thrall. They’d be on their feet before becoming fully aware, and remember nothing.

With a humorless smile, Viola wondered what the midwife would think of the baby’s darker, curly hair. Perhaps she wouldn’t notice.

Though it ate at her remaining vitality, her feet didn’t touch the ground until she’d floated a league from the fortress. She landed cat-soft on the trail she wanted the hunters to follow. The important thing now was to lead them away from her son.

Part of the energy used to hold the women snapped back to her, and with renewed strength she even ran a short distance. As she scrambled deeper into the forest, the weight of the small bundle grew heavier, and her arms trembled as she fought not to drop him.

The black night hid roots which tripped her frozen feet and snagged her long skirts. She stumbled often, almost falling several times. The noise of her passage caused the woodlands to quiet, though once or twice she heard something frightened scrambling into the underbrush. Anything being afraid of her was laughable. But she hadn’t the energy to waste on a smile.

A callous wind flirted with her hair and caressed her face

like a brutal lover. She shivered, pulling the cloak tighter and blessing its warmth.

Deep in the forest, she stumbled onto a narrow track which led into an unexpected clearing. A squat, thatched woodcutter's hovel stood on one side. Hesitant as a deer stepping out of the sheltering forest, she paused, senses alert for danger.

She reassured herself, hurrying towards the dubious safety of trees across the clearing.

It's late. The occupants are asleep. It ought to be easy to slip past unseen.

Thinking she was alone in the woods, she hadn't wasted precious energy maintaining her usual protection against invading minds. An oversight she paid for as she drew level with the cottage.

Without warning, a woman's grief tore at her abused psyche, and she swayed, a leaf caught by the wind. Unable to deny the mother's sorrow, for a moment, their thoughts melded.

[The babe was born dead.] She/they mourned. *[My son is dead.]*

Useless as it was to waste precious time and pity on someone she didn't know, the pain cut through, touching her own agony and loss. She couldn't resist soothing it any more than she could stop breathing.

Viola reached for the couple's minds as she moved closer. The husband was asleep... drunk, but who would blame him if he'd lost a youngling? The wife was half-awake, plagued by dreams.

Another impulsive idea occurred to her. She looked at the infant in her arms. It was dangerous, but she'd promised. She paused before tapping lightly on the door. It was better this way. She'd no strength left to implant memories, and if she claimed the boy back, she wouldn't have to explain. The woman would know

why.

The door cracked open. A hand holding a candle lit a panicked face. Sad eyes barely acknowledged Viola, before dropping to the bundle in her arms and locking on the baby.

Good, this might be easier than I'd hoped.

"Please, I need your help." It took no effort to sound desperate. "They're chasing me." The shocked woman looked up at her.

"We can't hide you!"

"No, not me, the boy." She thrust the Prince forward, pushing the door wider. The goodwife swung the candle aside to avoid burning the infant and caught the bundle in her other arm.

"He's innocent." Viola implored. "I'll lead them away from here. If they catch me, I'll tell them he died, and I buried him." *[The baby, remember your baby...]*

The woman stared hungrily down at the infant, then raised fearful eyes. "Why are they hunting you? Are... are you a Witch?" Magic use was the worst offense in Dumont.

Viola was afraid she'd return the newborn and turned to go.

"Does it matter? The boy is innocent." *[Please, remember your dead baby...]*

"Wait!"

Viola stopped, her shoulders drooping as she slowly looked back. Clutching the bundle closer, the woman backed away and held the candle higher.

"In the cradle." A sob slipped out before she tightened her lips and swallowed hard. "My babe is dead. Take him. Then you'll have a body to show."

Good, if she thinks it's her idea, it makes her part of the conspiracy. Viola rushed over to gather up the poor, sad lump. She winced as her fingers accidentally brushed the cool, still

flesh.

Tension lines disappeared from the woman's forehead as she gazed at her new son. A smile curled her lips, and her exultant face showed traces of the youthful charm which once drew the sleeping man to his wife.

Then Viola was out the door and gone, sparing no backward glance for the second infant she'd abandoned to his fate.

She retraced her steps to a branching in the track. Then she dragged a heavy yew bough over the trail leading to the cottage, hoping its thick odor would mask her trace in that direction from the dogs. To set a new scent trail, she wiped her bloody feet on the side path.

With both boys safe, her heart grew lighter. Filled with fresh energy, she raced on through the night, experiencing a twinge of regret. If she'd known of the woodcutter's wife, Milo would have been safe here, and the Queen would have kept her son.

But there was no time for recriminations. And no chance to fix things. Now she had to lure the hunters from both castle and cottage.

A short while later, she sensed a brief flash of contentment as the former Prince suckled at his new mother's breast. Envy broke her concentration, and she reeled as the mind-link faded.

Just then, the full moon pushed through the covering clouds, illuminating her path. Grateful for this small mercy, her long legs covered ground as swiftly as her weakened condition allowed.

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The woman squinted furtively at her husband, whose intoxicated snores continued unabated, then blew out the candle.

By dim firelight, she pulled a blanket from the cradle and

rewrapped the sleeping baby. He protested the loss of his warm coverings for these colder ones, but, dry and fed, soon sank back into contented sleep.

She crouched, examining the bold navy emblems on the blankets. Absently, her hands stoked the stitching on the luxurious fabric, wondering what the designs meant.

Perhaps her new son was a nobleman! She considered dropping them in the fire, but hesitated. Her unseeing eyes drifted upwards as she sank back on her heels, frowning in thought.

After a time, she reached a decision. She stood and unhooked a leather satchel from the wall. Her husband would complain about the loss when he woke, but she'd convince him he'd mislaid it on his drunken journey home from the tavern.

She stuffed the blankets into the bag, lit a lantern, and slipped outside, making her way to the shack that served as their barn.

Under the watchful eyes of their scrawny goat, she pried up a corner floorboard. She shoved her bundle into the opening under the floor. A rock hammered the plank into place.

You never know... One day, they might be useful.

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Miles away, breathless and winded, Viola sank to the ground at the base of a large spreading tree to catch her breath. She placed the lifeless body beside her, wiping her hands on her skirts. Too vivid imagination made her feel icy flesh through the thin wool of the dead baby's blanket.

For a while she remained motionless, necessity demanding she rest her aching muscles. Wearily, she pulled her knees up to her chest and tucked the Queen's warm cloak under her glacial feet with a moan of pain and relief. Sleep dragged at her heavy eyelids, making her afraid to close them, in case it overwhelmed her again.

Viola longed to reach out to her baby... and curiosity tempted her to seek the inhabitants of the cottage. Knowing both would waste power she could ill-afford, she stubbornly refused both impulses.

Maybe she'd return for her boy one day; maybe he'd even remember her...

Maybe, maybe, maybe. She mocked herself. *I should have left the village. My time was growing near, and I just wanted to go home. Of course, I didn't tell them I was from Galahar, no point making them even more suspicious of me... no, they thought I was from the coast. They didn't want me to leave until I gave birth, and like a fool, I agreed. I should have escaped on my own.*

Viola shifted on the hard ground, shivering as the night air caressed her sweaty skin. *A Queen, a woodcutter's wife, and myself... it seems the entire world gave birth on the same day.*

A shattered snort of laughter escaped her.

As if in reply, the echo of baying hounds sounded in the distance.

Viola jerked, lifting her head. Her brief spurt of humor evaporated with the speed of water on a hot stove.

"Shards!"

The coming night hadn't slowed them, as she'd hoped. Would they never stop? She dragged herself to her feet, snatched up the sad bundle, and staggered onward, exhausted and cursing her growing infirmity.

As the excited dogs drew closer, she panicked. Wild-eyed, she glared backwards. She stopped to reach for the hounds' minds, to confuse them, and throw them off the track again.

It didn't work.

Noses locked on her scent, they ignored her faint buzzing in their heads.

With a feeble cry of frustration, she stumbled into a

shambling run. Spots danced before her eyes, and she fought dizziness.

Her only choice was to turn and fight. Viola knew, weak as she was, it would be a brief skirmish. She needed to get her back against a tree or cliff, so they didn't surround her. Her desperate search for a place to make a stand ended when the trail suddenly widened.

This time, there was no clearing.

This time, the land dropped away in a sheer cliff. She realized she'd been hearing the pounding of waves against the rocks below, without noticing it.

A proximate howl jerked her around. The dogs were almost upon her.

If she didn't try something—anything—it would be too late. This close to exhaustion, the effort might burn out her abilities. It didn't matter; she had no choice. She closed her eyes, clasped the dead infant to her chest, and dug deep into reserves she'd never dared tap.

Her sluggish heels lifted. Her toes dragged across the grass to the rim of the cliff. For a moment she hovered there, then she was hanging in the open air.

The descent was slow, far too slow. She was afraid to rush, in case she lost her fragile hold on her residual power. In her mind's eye, she pictured energy pouring from a jug. Farther and farther, the vessel tipped. Soon it would be empty.

Only a little further...

Behind her, the dogs broke into the clearing. They ran back and forth along the cliff's edge, baying their dismay and outrage at their prey's escape. One backed up, preparing to run and leap, but the arriving men grabbed it before it made that fatal mistake.

"She IS a Witch!"

“The witch FLIES!”

“If she escapes, no one will be safe!”

She heard their cries, knew they were close, but dared move no faster. She concentrated on floating to safety.

Just a bit further...

A hard thud jolted her back. Agony radiated through her chest, and she cried out, her eyes widening in alarm. She stared down, shocked to discover an arrow’s tip sticking out of her ribs.

It became painful to breathe. The arrow missed her heart, but punctured a lung. Warm fluid trickled down the curve of her spine, and she knew there must be internal bleeding. Her control slipped, and she plummeted towards the jagged rocks.

In those final seconds, as her lungs filled, and she drowned in her own blood, Viola threw her thoughts outward. Her people must know she’d hidden Milo. They had to rescue him.

Pouring her remaining strength into a desperate call, she sent the strongest pulse she’d ever attempted. And in Galahar, she touched her twin’s mind... felt his startled response. [*Viola?*]

[*My son...*] She mouthed, as everything went black.

She was dead before she struck the rocks, still clutching the woodcutter’s lifeless infant. Waves crashed over the barren stone and washed their broken bodies out to sea.

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The thin, dark Prior walked to the cliff edge alone. Moonlight gleamed off his shaved head as he watched the water claim the Witch.

It was a shame about the baby, of course. A son, the midwife said. He’d heard that abominations often had normal offspring, and he would have been responsible for raising the boy to abhor his mother. An obligation he’d have enjoyed.

The men annoyed him with their restless murmuring. *Cowards. If I can manage the hunt at my age, they should have*

no complaints. Why, without my insistence, they’d have given up their pursuit, allowing her to escape.

It was his command that let the arrow fly.

“We have cleansed the abomination.” He announced, turning to face them. “Our duty is done. All Praise.”

“All Praise.” Their obedient reply was muted, but he ignored it, busy rehearsing his version of events for his superiors. If handled correctly, this should bolster his stalled career.

*

In the castle, the new Prince’s eyes flew wide in distress. As life drained from Viola’s body, he began to cry.

He was inconsolable for hours.

Jo Gatenby, 2021