

When You Dance with
Rabbits

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Dedication



This is dedicated to:

My husband, Steve, and our family for
their love and support,
Our parents and grandparents for showing
us how to live a life of love and
To God, our Father, for seeing us
through all things.

Foreword



I have written this book during sleepless nights after the loss of my father-in-law and mother-in-law, and then my mother, in a nine month time period. It is my hope that those struggling through the pain of loss will be encouraged by connecting with these characters and seeing God's daily blessings in the little things of life. I want whoever reads this to know that, though they are totally wiped out physically and emotionally, there is healing as they let themselves rest in the arms of Jesus, while the world goes on around them. Grieving is a long process. Be patient with yourself and others, and let those around you give you their love. God bless you.

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Thank you all!

Chapter 1

Early morning sunlight filtered through the treetops, scattering the shadows clutching at the simple cottage nestled near the forest east of the horse barns. The golden rays seeped through the small bedroom window then burst into wide streaks, providing stages for the myriad dust flakes dancing in the air. The sun's blanket settled upon Shale's shoulder. She opened her eyes and drew toward its soothing warmth.

Across the room, her younger sister was sleeping peacefully. Piper's strawberry blonde hair surrounded her cherub face like a halo. Her cloth doll nestled securely in her arms, its blonde braids resting against her cheek. Shale's heart filled with love and pain at the same time. Momma had made the doll for Piper, and she was never without it now that Momma was gone. Gone. How could it be true? Yet, it was. Shale closed her eyes until the wave of despair passed. She tried so hard to comfort

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her brother and sister, but nothing seemed to help. Again last night, she had rocked Piper as she wept—deep, heart wrenching sobs that tore at Shale’s heart. Truth be told, she had wept too.

Fighting back new tears, she rose wearily and went to the kitchen. She heard the early morning birdsong welcoming the new day, but she did not join the song. Momma would have been up singing and already have breakfast made. Shale sighed, peered into the cast iron pot filled with fresh water, and set it over the fire to heat. She must remember to thank Samuell for preparing the water and the fire for her. He was a thoughtful brother, despite his tendency for mischief.

Shale hurried back to the bedroom and shed her night gown. They must not be late today! She picked up her brother’s shirt, pushed her arms through the sleeves, and quickly buttoned it. Papa’s brown tunic slipped easily over her head and settled over Samuell’s shirt. She tugged impatiently at the shirttail to straighten it. It was so uncomfortable wearing the layers of clothing to disguise herself as a lad, but Papa insisted. Since the death of their mother, Papa had been adamant. He said he did not want anyone mistaking her for Momma. She did not understand. Momma’s death had been an accident.

Shale leaned down and tucked the hems of her father’s pant legs into her boots. At least Samuell and Piper had not seen the fear and anger in Papa’s eyes when he told her this. They did not need to know how great his concern was for their safety. They needed life to go on as normally as possible. She jerked the laces

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of her boots tighter and vowed to be strong for them again today.

She sat on the edge of Piper's bed and gently touched her shoulder. "Wake up, little bird. Our new day is here."

Piper stirred and sat up rubbing sleepy eyes. "I am still sleepy, Shale," she yawned.

"I know. Kelly will be waiting for you," Shale encouraged. "You are baking today, are you not?"

"Yes." Piper yawned again. She stretched her arms over her head and crawled onto Shale's lap. "I hear the birdsong. Are there carrots for my rabbits?" She looked up at her sister with bright green eyes. Shale nodded and Piper rushed off, her silky hair streaming behind her.

Shale returned to the kitchen, tucking an annoying strand of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. She measured out the oatmeal for their breakfast and added wild blackberries, honey, and walnuts to the bowl.

Bouncing branches of bright blue and pink flowers drew her attention to the window, as Piper parted them and darted toward the lush garden in the side yard. The beauty of the new day did nothing to cheer her. *I must still gather herbs and seeds before the frosts come. Maybe there will be time after the sale is over.* She sighed. *There is so much to do. So much.*

Piper hopped into view, dancing among a troupe of little brown rabbits dotting the lawn. Shale watched as Piper twirled and blessed each little rabbit with a tender touch and delightful smile. Skipping toward Momma's flower bed, she led the playful bunnies on their morning tour of the yard.

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Shale bowed her head with relief and prayed, “Thank you, Father God, that Piper is able to find joy among the creatures you have made. Please help me to take joy in your creation. Let it remind me that you are with us and love us so much. Please help us through this day and bring Papa home soon. We need him, Father God.”

Shale turned resolutely back to the matter of breakfast. She picked up the blue bowl and dumped the oatmeal and seasonings into the boiling water. Her thoughts turned to her father again. He was three weeks late in returning. It was lonely and frightening without him. They were still reeling from the loss of their mother, and his absence was difficult to bear. Perhaps today Papa would return with the new brood mares he was sent to purchase for the farm. He should be here. The sale was tomorrow. Biting her lip, she remembered arguing with him before he went.

“Surely someone else could go this time, Papa,” she had begged.

“You will be fine here. Follow the plans we have made, and look to Eli for help,” he had snapped. “You know that I must go. The foreman insists.”

Her forehead creased at the thought of the foreman. She did not like the man. She did not trust him. He barked orders at the workers like a snarling old dog and did not treat the horses any better.

Angrily, she stirred the oatmeal, sending some of it slopping out into the fire. It hissed at her in protest. She stirred all the harder.

The foreman had no compassion. He had snapped impatiently at Samuell when he asked about the delay

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in Papa's return. He cared for no one, and little for the horses, except what price they would bring. Many of the new stable hands copied his rotten attitude. The original owner of the horses would not have allowed this. He loved the horses as much as Papa did.

Shale brushed her hair back from her face and let a soft smile grow about her lips as she remembered the kind, old man who had owned the farm. She missed his twinkling brown eyes and the laughter they had shared watching his horses learn under the skilled hands of her father. The old man especially loved the newborn colts and fillies that arrived each year. Often, he had appeared at the door of their cottage to take them to meet the new arrivals. This, too, had changed.

He had been taken to live with his family in a village far away, after an illness of man had left him unable to care for himself. How he had begged Papa and Eli to help him stay at the farm. Her mother and Kelly offered to care for him, but his family wanted him near them.

Shale shuddered as she remembered his gaunt face. His lips turned up only on one side, as he gave them a brave smile the day they carried him to his carriage and drove away.

The farm had been sold within a moon of his departure. Of the original workers only Papa and old Eli remained. Eli knew the herd so well, he had made himself indispensable at least for now. He and his wife, Kelly, were their dear friends. *What would we have done without them when Momma died?*

Shoving aside her thoughts, she ladled the bubbling oatmeal into three bowls. While she waited for

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her brother and sister, she hurriedly wrapped slices of Kelly's fresh brown bread and thick chunks of the yellow cheese she had sent for their lunches and tucked them into small woven bags.

"Here!" Piper cried, dropping shiny red apples into each bag. "I shined them with Momma's apron."

Shale's heart constricted at Piper's words and the sight of Momma's apron in her small hand, but she smiled and stooped to hug her. "Thank you, Piper. They are so shiny I can hardly see. Are you ready for your lessons today?"

"She practiced with me and is doing poorly," Samuell answered with mock dismay on his young face. Piper rushed at him, and he scooped her up and swung her in a circle. "You are doing very well indeed, little sister," he laughed.

They sat down at the table and bowed their heads.

Samuell prayed, "Father God, thank you for our food. May it give us strength for today. Help Piper with her studies and us with our horses. Please protect us and help Papa to return soon. And Father God, please teach Shale how to make good jam like Kelly does. Amen." He winked at Piper and reached for his milk.

Shale wrinkled her nose at her brother and quietly began stirring her oatmeal. Her thoughts drifted to the day ahead. Piper would go to be with Kelly, while she and Samuell would be in the south meadow training the weanlings and yearlings. It was her favorite part of the day. For a time, she was able to put aside her fears and concerns. She loved the sweet smells of the grasses and wild flowers growing in the meadow and the woodland

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at its border. Together, she and Samuell would laugh at the antics of the young colts and fillies. They would run hard and stop quickly, only to turn and jump as high as they could for the affections of their trainers.

Slurp! The sound brought her attention back to breakfast. Piper giggled at Samuell, who fixed Shale with a pitiful look of utter innocence.

Choosing to ignore them, she took another bite of oatmeal and let her thoughts wander back to the day. At least they would be away from the stables and the crude men that worked there. She did not want to see which horses would be sold. She loved them all and dreaded their loss. Prospective buyers had been coming to view them for the past two weeks. She and Samuell were praying that their favorites would stay at the farm or go to kind owners who would lovingly care for them.

“You are not eating much, my sister,” Samuell said, nodding at her bowl.

His comment snapped her thoughts back to the kitchen. “It is enough,” she answered sharply.

Samuell’s eyes reflected his hurt. He looked down at his bowl.

“Samuell, I am sorry. Thank you for starting the fire and bringing fresh water this morning. It is a great help to me.” Noting Piper’s worried expression, she added, “Anyway, I am not an old badger stuffing myself for the winter now, am I?” She smiled and raised her light eyebrows at Piper.

Samuell gave her a small smile and took his bowl to the washbasin. Piper did the same and dashed out the door to the garden.

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“I am worried about you, Shale,” Samuell said quietly. “You are not eating. Please take care of yourself. Piper needs you.” He did not wait for her reply. The back door closed quietly behind him.

Shale sat still for a few moments. He was right. She must pay more attention to what she did and said. They did not need more worries.

Samuell entered the kitchen with an armload of firewood and set it by the fireplace.

Shale smiled her thanks and rose to wash the dishes. Peering out the window, she smiled softly. There was Piper, squatted down in the grass, talking earnestly to the cluster of small brown rabbits. Shale began washing and looked out again to see Piper dancing and twirling across the lawn amidst the hopping rabbits.

She blinked and stared out the window. It almost looked like the rabbits were twirling, too. “Samuell,” she said, “look at the rabbits!”

Samuell leaned over the basin just in time to see the dance conclude. “Were they twirling?” he asked with amazement.

“You know Piper and her way with animals.”

“Yes,” Samuell answered. “She is much more gifted than we. Here she comes, and she is not happy.”

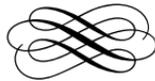
The door to the cottage banged open and Piper stomped in. “Samuell!” she demanded. “That dog wants to come into our yard again. He scares my rabbits. I told him to go home or you would shoot him with your arrows!” She stood before them with her arms folded across her chest and her small mouth in a fierce scowl.

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Samuell struggled not to laugh at the ferocious look on his little sister's face. "I will get my bow and warn him," he said. He took up his bow and cast a wink at Shale.

Shale did not see him. She had turned back to the washbasin. She must not let Piper see the tears of unreleased laughter spilling down her cheeks.

After Samuell had rescued the rabbits, the three children of Connor pulled their headbands down snugly on their heads and left the safety of their home. Shale walked Piper to Kelly's small cottage, then hurried to join Samuell leading the young horses to the meadow.



A few miles away Henicles, the wizard, approached the farm. He laughed heartily as his companion Avian, an elf from Cambria Forest, finished a merry song full of mischief.

Placing his hand on Avian's shoulder he urged, "Sing another one, my friend—then it shall be my turn."

Avian smiled broadly. He was pleased Henicles had arrived before he left on an errand for his father. It was good to have company on the trail, and he was enjoying time with his old friend.

He took a breath to begin his next rhyme, but before he could begin his song, a wagon rounded the corner ahead and sped toward them. The horse pulling it was wide-eyed with fear. Flecks of white foam dotted its rough coat.

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Avian called clearly to it and stepped toward the horse. It stopped and quieted under his gentle murmurings and touch.

“Get away from my horse, elf!” Suspiciously, he glared at Avian.

“Greetings, friend,” Henicles soothed. “We only mean to help.”

Scowling, the man did not reply. He slapped the reins on the tired horse and hurried the poor beast down the road.

Henicles leaned on his staff in thought. He had purposely sought Avian for this quest. His gift of perception was immense, his valor great, and his heart true.

“A gruff fellow,” Henicles spoke at last.

Avian nodded and stood staring grimly after the man. “That poor horse will not survive long under such care.”

“I have noticed many regarding you with unfriendly eyes as our journey has brought us closer to the farm of my friend, Connor,” Henicles said thoughtfully. “This concerns me. Connor is of your race, although he has chosen to live here among men and train horses for a respected breeder. He is highly esteemed for his skill.”

Henicles thrust his staff forward and resumed walking, deep in thought. Avian fell in step beside him.

“You have said that you are concerned by the sudden sale of these horses and their placement throughout the realms. What are these horses like, Henicles, that men would seek them so earnestly?” Avian inquired.

“Not only the horses themselves, who are exceedingly agile, intelligent, and strong. It is their training

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and their trainer, I fear, that is sought. His grandfather knew the Presage. Some believe Connor does as well.” He looked meaningfully at Avian. “It is not only men who seek this.”

“The dance of death. I have heard of it. In a time long past, many were cursed for it. It is banned among my people,” Avian responded, a frown creasing his brow.

“Indeed, my friend,” Henicles shook his head in disgust. “There are rumors it is being practiced again.” He paused, studying the land ahead of him. “I would have you leave me now and travel through these woods to the meadow south of the farm, for it lies ahead. Await me there. I may be returning with some fine horses. Find a safe place to conceal them, should the need arise. Your father’s business may have to wait.” Using his staff to propel him, he strode off down the road.

Avian, too, had felt the disquiet settling upon them. Silently, he moved through the cool woods in search of the meadow.

Henicles approached the gate of the Munson Horse Farm and paused, leaning heavily on his staff. His eyes widened as he read the sale bills posted on the gates. He entered and saw no familiar face.

Across the lane Eli straightened from brushing a tall mare’s sleek coat. He gently patted her withers and blinked in surprise when he heard a familiar voice call his name.

Henicles skirted the busy stable hands and approached Eli with a smile.

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Eli's expression darkened when he saw the foreman staring at them. As he turned and untied the mare, he tossed Henicles a warning glance. "M'lord, did ye wish ta be alookin' this 'un over?" Eli asked. He led the mare toward Henicles.

The brusque foreman approached them and addressed Henicles suspiciously. "You there, what is your business?"

"I am told you have fine horses here, my lord, taught by a skillful horse master. I represent a buyer interested in breeding stock. Also, I am seeking a mount for myself, for I travel far in my journeys. What have you to show me?" Henicles replied eagerly. He examined the mare with a shrewd eye.

The foreman regarded the tall wizard and answered proudly, "It is true that we have the finest horses of any you would find."

"Eli! Show this wizard our best." With a smug look the foreman sauntered off, yelling instructions to another worker.

"Come 'is way, m' lord, and I be a showin' ye our mares first." Eli led Henicles to a beautiful mare tethered furthest from the stables. With his voice low he spoke, "'em children be not safe 'ere."

"What has happened?" Henicles whispered, then called out, "Walk her for me." He studied the mare's movements as they walked her further from the stables.

"Little un's with m' wife. T'others be in the south meadow. Do not be a callin' 'em by name. Shayna be

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dead.” Eli fixed Henicles with a look of grave concern and turned the mare.

“’ey say ’twas a huntin’ accident. I be not believen’ ’em. A strange man come ’ere. ’e were rough lookin’ and mean. ’e and Connor ’ad words. Next day, Shayna be found, shot in ’er’ eart by a arrow while she was arunnin’ in the woods.” The large man’s shoulders slumped. “The younguns, ’ey be a hurtin’ somethin’ awful.”

Eli’s voice became louder as the foreman approached, “Ye can see sir, ’is mare be a fine ’un. She runs like o’wind itself, an she’ll be a bringin’ many fine little ’uns to your ’erd. Some of ’ers be in the south meadow now, m’ lord.”

“There is no time for him to see them. Take that mare to the red barn for the next customer,” the foreman barked impatiently.

“I will buy her now,” Henicles stated firmly. “This is the finest mare I have seen in my travels thus far.”

“Well! Now that you have seen for yourself, you know we have the best.” The foreman’s chest puffed out with pride.

“Indeed you have, and I would see more. Your man here tells me some of her offspring are in a meadow,” Henicles replied, stroking the withers of the mare.

“They will be in soon enough for you to see. Show him the other mares and the geldings,” the smug foreman bellowed at Eli.

Turning to Henicles, the foreman instructed him, “Settle up with me at the house when you are finished.” After a moment’s hesitation, he added, “If you like, stay for the celebration to begin the sale tonight.” He

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left them, strutting like a peacock toward the barn and another prospective buyer.

Henicles turned to Eli, "I need four horses. Which ones are the children's favorites?"

"ey'll be ready for ye." Quietly he added, "Tell me na more. Just keep 'em young 'uns safe. 'ey be not safe 'ere." Quickly, Eli scribbled the names of four horses on a scrap of paper and handed it to Henicles.

Henicles studied the activities and men about him as he approached the main house where preparations for a celebration were in progress. A prim maid showed him to the office where the foreman was in conversation with a tall, well dressed man, whose brown hair was tied back neatly.

As Henicles entered, their conversation abruptly ceased. The foreman peered around the customer, who did not turn to look at Henicles.

"A moment and I will be with you. Wait in the drawing room," the foreman spoke impatiently. He waved his arm for the wizard to leave them.

Henicles nodded and retreated from the room. He studied the customer carefully, but could not see his face. The tension in the man's shoulders alerted Henicles. Had he seen this man before? He settled down on the comfortable sofa and closed his eyes. He listened intently to the conversation, but the well dressed man spoke no more.

Henicles looked up in surprise when he was summoned. The other customer had not passed him.

The foreman was all too eager to take his money. "Come in, come in. You have your papers in order?"

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At a nod from Henicles he continued, "And your money? Good." He greedily took the gold coins from Henicles's hand.

"I do apologize for interrupting you before," Henicles spoke apologetically.

The foreman handed Henicles a bill of sale and turned back to the many papers scattered across his desk. When Henicles didn't leave immediately, he looked up with a scowl and demanded, "What do you want?"

Henicles took a step backwards and answered, "Nothing more, my lord. I was not sure we were finished." He had seen nothing to indicate where the man had gone.

"You have your bill of sale. Leave. Or stay for the celebration, as you please."

"Thank you." Henicles's eyes lit up as if he were anticipating the foreman's good ale. "Alas, I must hasten on. Perhaps another time, when my buyer bids me return. I am sure he will when sees your fine animals."

The foreman turned back to his work, a smirk distorting his grisly face.

Eli waited in the courtyard with the four horses Henicles had purchased. "Leave quickly! Some of 'em was not ta be sold. Godspeed." Eli turned abruptly and returned to his work.

Henicles mounted the tall gelding easily and led the three mares down the road in the opposite direction from which he had come. He traveled five miles before those following him turned back toward the farm. He continued on another mile and paused. He listened carefully and scanned the area before he stealthily entered the

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forest to his left. He led the horses deep into the woods and circled back to approach the meadow.



Avian reached the meadow south of the farm and crouched behind a thick myrtle bush. Two lads were working a group of young horses. He admired the beautiful conformation of the colts and fillies before him.

A magnificent mare watched attentively nearby. The taller lad called upon her to demonstrate new commands to the young horses. Avian watched, enthralled as the mare trotted forward, stopped, backed up three paces, and leapt lightly to the side each time the taller lad signaled with his hands. Avian had never seen a horse stride with such grace and agility. Suddenly, the mare nickered loudly and tossed her head up and down.

Immediately, the lads signaled the colts and fillies to perform simpler tasks. The young horses responded eagerly. They stopped and started with each whistled command.

The mare lowered her head and began to graze on the thick grass. She swished her tail in a lazy manner and ignored the activity beside her.

“Move over, Willow. Hah!” called the shorter of the lads.

The mare lifted her head and slowly sauntered several paces away where she resumed her feast. She appeared unconcerned with her surroundings, but Avian was not deceived. The wise mare was carefully observing the ap-

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proach of a stout, blustery man accompanied by a well dressed man with a sheaf of papers in his hands.

The blustery man shouted to the lads, "Bring them closer, now. Move them on!"

The lads obeyed, and their charges performed the simple skills perfectly. The neatly dressed man agreed to purchase three fillies. Nimble fingers wove red ribbons into their manes, indicating the color of the buyer. The lads continued to work the horses until the men disappeared over the hill on the lane leading back to the barns.

Avian's sharp ears heard the sound of horses walking in the woodland long before Henicles drew near to him. He turned his attention from the bright meadow and hastened silently toward the sound.

"Ah, Henicles, they are truly beautiful." Avian ran his hands over the mare nearest him. He spoke softly in Elvish; the horses lowered their heads and began nibbling at the scant grass growing beneath the thick trees.

"The children, are they here?" Henicles questioned impatiently.

Turning away from the horses, Avian answered, "Two lads, yes. They are very skillful with the horses."

Henicles frowned, "Two lads?"

"Yes. Come, they are near," Avian replied. His long, blonde hair drifted back over his shoulder as he led Henicles through the woods. Holding back a branch, Avian allowed Henicles to pass before him to the large myrtle bush. Kneeling down for a better view, Avian nodded toward the meadow. Shale and Samuell were teaching the young ones to respond to hand signals.

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“They also teach them whistled and verbal commands,” Avian whispered to Henicles.

Henicles nodded but did not take his eyes off the meadow. His frown grew deeper while he contemplated the lads and their methods of instruction.

The training turned to fun and Henicles watched as the two lads stood on the back of the mare. Willow cantered through the meadow with the young horses racing behind her.

Suddenly, the lads dropped into the tall grass. The young horses racing behind the mare followed her example and leapt over their trainers or dodged away from them. The lads sprang up and began running, only to dive out of sight in another spot. The colts and fillies snorted and jumped over them again, tails held high in the air as they leapt. Laughing, the lads praised the young horses with encouraging words and vigorously rubbed their necks.

Henicles’ frown melted to a faint smile. He was sure now. These were the children of Connor and Shayna. The liveness of their movements and the music in their laughter revealed it.

The game ended abruptly. Willow neighed an alarm and Shale swept upon her back, followed quickly by Samuell. The mare cantered forward and the young horses gathered about her.

They resumed the training session with easier commands again. The foreman approached, bringing another customer to the meadow. Willow pawed the ground restlessly.

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Samuell spoke angrily, "I wish Papa were here. He would put a stop to this!"

"Hush, Samuell. There is nothing we can do now. Please do not anger him, or he may not let us work with them any longer." Shale quieted the mare with her hands.

"Put them through their paces, lads!" the foreman bellowed. He smugly crossed his arms over his thick chest and nodded to his customer.

The well dressed man's scowl turned to a sly smile while he watched the yearlings obey Samuell's commands. Shale cringed when he selected several young ones. She reluctantly wove the man's grey ribbons into their manes. The foreman and his customer left, debating price and further training of the yearlings.

"Samuell, work them a little longer, please." Shale sat down in the tall grass and absently picked a few strands, weaving them between her fingers. She removed the wide band from her head and ran her fingers through her short hair, tucking loose strands behind her ears. She fought back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

"She has cut her hair!" Henicles gasped in astonishment. "Things are more amiss here than I feared."

"What do you mean, Henicles?" Avian asked, looking at the two again.

"The slighter one is a maiden, not a lad. The other one is her younger brother and there is a younger sister as well. I must speak with them."

In a specific sequence he made the cry of the whip-poorwill. Shale looked up, but not toward the sound.

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Noting the foreman was out of sight, she carefully signaled back.

“Samuell, run them around the meadow, please, and then take them in. Come home as soon as possible,” Shale quietly spoke.

“Is it Father?” Samuell’s bright, gray eyes were large with hope.

“No, but a friend.” She pulled the wide band down upon her head and leapt up onto the mare.

“Don’t tarry,” Samuell urged. “It is not safe to be alone in the meadow anymore.”

Shale guided the mare to the woodland’s edge. From time to time, she would dismount and look closely at the shrubs. When she drew near the myrtle bush, she dismounted and began picking the abundant wild raspberries.

“Peace, child,” Henicles greeted her from behind the myrtle bush.

“There is only the peace of God in my heart, Henicles. There is no other peace here. My mother...” Shale’s tears choked her words.

“I know, child. I know,” Henicles spoke softly to her.

She turned her face toward them then, and Avian saw her tears and the empty expression of grief pouring from her eyes. His heart was moved to sorrow, for the sadness he had felt coming from them was now magnified before him.

“How ...?” she began.

Henicles cut her off. “You must leave tonight.”

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“But Papa is not here,” she agonized. She stepped toward them and picked more ripe red berries.

“I will leave immediately to search for him. I will find him. Do not fear,” Henicles assured her. “You must flee tonight. You can wait no longer. I have horses for you.”

Shale swallowed the lump in her throat and slowly nodded her head. She continued to study the berry bushes in front of her.

Henicles hurried on. “Cast a glance here. This is Avian of Cambria Forest. He will take you safely from here. Be ready,” he instructed.

Shale’s green eyes grew large. He was an elf. She glanced questioningly at Henicles.

“He is my trusted friend. I would leave you with no other,” he reassured.

Taking a deep breath, she answered, “I will trust you, Henicles, as my father does.”

Shifting her gaze to Avian, her expression changed to one of grim determination. “We will meet you beneath the tall willow tree to the east, three hours after the sun sets.”

“The moon is full this night. Do not delay,” Avian cautioned her.

The mare lifted her head from grazing and nudged Shale’s back. She turned from them and tucked her berries into a cloth pouch tied to her waist. The mare nudged her again. “One moment, Willow.” Shale bent as if to tie her boot laces and gathered her courage. She nodded at Henicles and galloped across the meadow to catch up with Samuell.

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Avian's keen eyes located the reason for her haste. At the top of the knoll a man quickly slipped into the shadows. "They are watched. A man, there in the birch thicket. Henicles, there is much you have not told me." Avian looked questioningly at the wizard as they stealthily made their way back to his horses. His thoughts were on the maiden he had just met. She revealed her grief to them briefly, but beneath that many emotions swirled. She kept them tightly concealed in the depths of her soul. He could not read them.

Henicles' deep brown eyes took in the tall elf before him. He was secure in his decision. Avian would not fail him, and during this task he would learn much—much about his charges, much about himself, much about life. Placing his hand on Avian's shoulder, he instructed him, "Be wary of all. Take them to Pennsylv by whatever path is safest. Their knowledge of this area is great. I have no time to tell you more. Make haste." With a look of warning, he mounted and quietly guided the gelding through the woodland. He prayed for guidance and safety for them all.

Avian spoke briefly to the mares and returned quickly to the myrtle bush. The man was following the children to the stables.

Swiftly Avian ran through the woodland along its northern edge. It led to within twenty feet of the stables. From here he observed the activity of the stable hands. Some spoke eagerly of enjoying the ale supplied for the celebration that night. The less fortunate complained that there would be little ale left for them when they

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had finished stabling the horses readied for the sale tomorrow.

Good. They will be distracted tonight. Avian's keen eyes caught the movement of the man slinking in the shadows of the far stable. From the opposite direction the chatter of a child carried on the breeze. The man straightened and moved into the stable.

At the other end, the lad from the meadow emerged and spoke to an old man leading a fine mare to the grooming area. After a moment, they parted and the lad jogged off hurriedly over a rise where Avian could see the top of a cottage and a short dark chimney. The sound of childish chatter led in that direction. Soon a narrow trail of smoke curled from the chimney.

The man reappeared and slunk along the side of the stable toward the cottage. Avian crept silently past the stables, appearing as a shadow. Spotting the man near a small thicket to the side of the cottage, he crouched, observing.

Dusk thickened about them and another man approached the first. Gesturing casually toward the cottage he spoke, "Why do they have you watching stable boys and children? Will you not miss the celebration this night? I had hoped to arm wrestle you again."

"I will miss nothing. They will sleep as they do each night. I will have my share of ale." The man in the shadows eyed the other. "What do you care?"

"It seems to me foolish to be watching over children when such priceless horses are about," the second man replied, shaking his head.

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“The horses are well guarded. Fear not for that. As to these,” he waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal, “they are the horse master’s and when they are tucked in their beds, I will find you and win back my knife. You caught me off guard is all, Knox.”

“We shall see, my friend. Tonight then.” The man bowed mockingly.

Avian watched as the mocker returned to the main house and the guard settled into the shadows. No one else approached the cottage, and the smells and sounds of cooking reached him.

A small child walked from the cottage to a low rope stretched across the neat yard and hung two towels upon it. She went to the edge of the cottage and looked about the yard. “Come little bunnies,” she called softly. “I have treats for you.”

The maiden stepped to the doorway and called, “Piper, come in now. Supper is ready and I am sure the rabbits are eating theirs.”

Reluctantly, the child turned toward the cottage. “I don’t know why they go home so early in the evenings now,” she lamented.

“Because the darkness comes earlier, now that it is autumn,” the maiden reassured her. They stepped inside and the door closed behind them.

Good. They are presenting the appearance of a normal evening. Avian hastened back to prepare the waiting horses. *At least the older two could ride well. That would not be a problem,* he thought as he ran. The age of the younger child concerned him. How would they manage with such a young child, should they be pursued and

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have need to fly with great haste over the many miles to Pennsylv?

He pictured in his mind the rough terrain they would travel to arrive there. He frowned and searched his sharp memory for places to harbor them from their enemies. Two places came to mind, and he set his thoughts on how best to approach these.

The sun was setting quickly, spreading its golden, rosy colors into the shade of the woodland. It was beautiful and peaceful. He loved the contrast of light and shadow when evening settled into the woods. Avian thought of the beauty of the woodlands of his home as he led the three mares to the large willow tree.

“May the remainder of this night be as peaceful,” he prayed. His gaze searched the area around the willow tree for a secure place to observe the approach of the children.

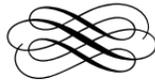


Henicles cantered down the road away from the horse farm until he reached the fertile grasslands northwest of the meadow where he had left Avian. There he urged the horse on, rapidly covering the distance between the farm and the nearest village. The innkeeper here was known for his loose tongue and rich ale, both of which flowed freely among the customers. Here he would seek lodging for the night and begin his quest for information of the whereabouts of Connor.

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Henicles admonished the stable boy, “Guard this horse with great care, lad.” He slipped the lad a silver coin and entered the inn.

Good, he thought. The room was full and noisy. Many tongues would be wagging tonight. He settled himself in a chair near the fireplace and listened intently to the many conversations about him.



In the house of Connor, Shale helped Piper put away the clean dishes. She sensed the presence of the watcher. He had come every evening since Papa left.

Piper chattered happily about her day with Eli’s wife. “We made many loaves of bread today. I stirred and stirred the eggs and butter until they were creamy smooth. Kelly said I am a good helper. The cook needed our help because there will be a celebration tonight.” Piper brushed a wayward lock of strawberry blonde hair back from her face. Her smile faded as she remembered the sale. “Will they sell Willow, Shale? I love Willow, and she loves me.” Her lower lip trembled at the thought.

“No, Piper, of course not.” Shale knelt beside her little sister and wrapped her small frame in a warm hug. “We need Willow for training the little ones. She is very important to the farm. They will not sell her.” Shale tucked the wayward lock under Piper’s headband and smiled reassuringly.

“Good. For I will ride her when Papa comes home,” she announced.

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Samuell grabbed her under her arms and swung her around on his way to the door. Giggling, Piper curled her legs up under her body so she would spin faster. Samuell set her down and reached for the latch.

“Where are you going?” Shale asked with alarm.

“To get my rope from the stable.” Puzzled by her tone of voice, he continued, “I need it to compare with the new rope I am making.” He studied her face then replied, “I will return quickly.”

“See that you do,” Shale replied, turning back to the dishes on the drain board.

Samuell shook his head and winked at Piper.

“May I go with you, Samuell?” Piper asked. She held tightly to his hand.

“No, little one. I will not be visiting the horses tonight,” Samuell assured her. “I must work on my rope.”

Shale watched the pout form on her sister’s lips and soothed, “You need to relax after baking bread all day, little bird. I do not know how Kelly would have managed without your help.”

Shale listened intently and heard what she expected. The watcher followed Samuell. Touching Piper’s nose with her finger she added, “You have flour on your nose.” The pouting lips were quickly replaced with a smile. Rubbing her nose, Piper hurried off to wash her face.

Shale stood by the window and listened intently. The horses at the first stable nickered a friendly welcome. “Good,” she whispered, “Samuell has arrived at the stable safely.” They needed no attention drawn to them tonight.

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A few minutes later the nickering was heard again. “Thank you, God. He has not dallied,” Shale spoke softly to herself.

“What did you say, Shale?” Piper entered the kitchen in her long white nightgown. Her fine hair, freed of its headband, floated wildly about her face.

“I was just thanking God for his gifts of today,” Shale said, scooping Piper up in a hug.

Samuell slipped in the door, a finely braided horsehair rope in his hand. Reaching up, he dropped the latch in place and spoke to his sisters, “Eli thinks the brown mare will foal tonight.” Looking at Shale he added, “There are extra men watching them.”

Stepping closer to his sisters, he tickled Piper, then hurried past them to the fireplace with Piper in hot pursuit. She reached out to tickle him as she ran. The nightly tickle fight began.

“God bless you, Samuell,” Shale murmured gratefully.

When Momma had died, the tickling had stopped. Samuell had renewed the playful ritual for Piper while Papa was gone. Shale dropped her towel and rushed to join the fun. Finally, they collapsed on the floor. Piper’s hair was a mass of tangles.

Samuell placed a small log on the fire. Picking up a brown basket, he sat on a stool near the hearth and began braiding a white horsehair rope.

Shale sat in a chair near him and called, “Come, Piper, let me brush your hair and Samuell will tell us a story.”

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Piper dashed back from their room with her hairbrush. Her delicate face was still flushed from their game. She crawled onto Shale's lap and clasped her small hands in front of her. Her doll rested in her lap.

Shale brushed and nimbly braided Piper's fine hair into one long braid. She smiled with relief when Samuel chose a funny story. Maybe Piper would not cry for their parents tonight. There was much to prepare after she was in bed.

Piper wiggled down from Shale's lap and galloped around the small room imitating the little horse in Samuel's story. Neighing and prancing, she tossed her newly braided hair about. Shale let her play longer than usual, hoping she would fall asleep quickly. Soon Piper settled on the hearth rug near Samuel and drew her little doll to her cheek.

"Come, little horse. You will sleep on warm, sweet grass tonight in a secret meadow with bright stars and a glowing moon above you," Shale said. She lifted Piper, already nearly asleep, and carried her to their bedroom.

"There, little filly, close your weary eyes and dream of shining stars." Shale tucked the light coverlet around her and kissed her forehead.

"Sing my song, Momma," Piper murmured. She curled onto her side with the soft doll snuggled against her. Already her eyes were closed. Her lashes formed twin lines of fringe across her cheeks.

Shale quietly sang, imagining her mother there, singing with them. When she finished, Piper was playing in the meadow of her dreams.

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Shale dried her tears before she went to talk with Samuell. She worried about Piper calling her Momma, but it was only when she was exhausted or very excited. Piper must not lose her memories of Momma. She must not forget.

Samuell had gone to his small room off the kitchen.

“Goodnight, Samuell. Rest well, for tomorrow we must begin the next phase of their teaching. It will be a long day.” She spoke in a normal voice, then whispered, “Tonight, Samuell. Henicles has sent a friend for us. He has horses. Stay in bed. We must not arouse suspicion. What can I bring to you?”

“My knife—I left it on the mantle,” Samuell whispered, barely audible. “I did not get to say goodbye to the horses,” he moaned.

“Nor did I. It may not be for long,” she whispered back hopefully.

Shale retrieved Samuell’s knife and leather bound book from the mantel and sat down in Papa’s chair. She opened the book and bowed her head. She prayed for God’s blessings and protection for all those she loved. She thanked God for sending Henicles to them and the elf who would help them. Surely God had sent him, too. Henicles would not trust them to just anyone. Yet a small doubt disturbed her thoughts, for she had overheard her father tell Eli to be cautious of any elves that came to the farm, as well as the strange men.

Closing her book, she rose and set the kettle near the fire for the morning. She blew out the candles and retired to her room.

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Shale stretched out on her bed and listened intently. The watcher was staying later than usual this night. Why did he not leave? Sliding her hands beneath her pillow, she felt for her mother's ribbons. Her fingertips found the satiny smoothness, and she gathered them in her hands and entwined them through her fingers. They would be late meeting the elf who awaited them, but they could not leave now.

At last, she heard the sound of footsteps moving away from the cottage. She did not move until she heard the nickering of the horses in the nearest stable, telling her the watcher had passed by. He should not return, for she was sure the ale would be flowing freely tonight.

Shale rose and went quickly to the pantry. She removed four bags of dried fruit and the six small loaves of bread Piper had brought home. If only there were more. She packed these and filled three canteens with water.

Returning to her room, she pulled out a vest with many pockets and checked their contents: a slender knife, a small coil of lightweight rope, and a variety of herbs. Quickly she added her barrettes, another headband, more packages of herbs, and her mother's comb.

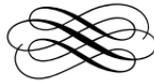
She knelt beside her bed and lifted the mattress. Her searching fingers found the small pouch and drew it out. She opened it reverently. Inside was her mother's wedding necklace. Furiously brushing tears from her eyes, Shale placed the ribbons in the pouch and tucked it securely into her vest.

She opened the lower drawer of the dresser and pulled out a smaller vest identical to hers. Carefully, she slipped Piper's blanket from her loose fist and added it

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to the vest with her barrettes and headbands. Lastly, she fastened the vest on the sleeping child and tucked her little doll securely inside. Carrying Piper, she entered the darkened kitchen lit only by the light of the stoked fire.

Samuell was up with his vest on, quietly packing his treasures: horsehair ropes, his knife, and something Shale did not see. Slipping his quiver and bow on over his vest, he picked up their food supplies and canteens. Nodding at Shale, he silently opened the back door of the cottage.



Avian waited impatiently near the willow tree, ever alert to the sounds and feel of the night. Sounds of revelry drifted down from the farmhouse. No other unusual sounds reached his sharp ears, but there was an ominous feel to the air about him. The horses moved restlessly in the shrubbery a stone's throw from the tree, and the children were late. The full moon would rise above the tree tops soon, illuminating the earth below it.

Disturbed by these things, he left the willow tree and approached the farm. Nearly 30 feet down the path he heard the soft rustle of leaves, followed almost immediately by the whirr of an arrow flying to its mark. His own bow was armed before the thud of the body hit the ground. Swiftly he moved toward the sound. Again he heard the soft rustle of leaves. This time the sound of a body being dragged and hidden in the woods.

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A dozen paces further down the path, Avian watched the children emerge from the woods. The maiden hastened down the path carrying the younger child. The lad ran with his bow drawn. They froze, staring wide-eyed as Avian revealed himself with his bow aimed toward them. Silently, he motioned with his head for them to hide behind him.

After a moment of silence, Shale asked urgently, “Quickly, where are the horses?”

Avian silenced her with a glare and stood listening intently.

Despite the glare from the tall elf, Shale continued, “Please, my lord, we must not delay.”

Avian stood his ground, focusing all his senses on the woods about them. He maintained his silence and demanded theirs.

“My lord,” she began again, her intense eyes challenging his inaction. Killing the strange man was not to their advantage, but there had been no choice. They could not risk being discovered. They must flee now.

“There is no one else. Please, take us to the horses now!” Shale’s whisper was sharp with impatience and growing fear. Her wide eyes pleaded with him to move.

Hearing no one else in the wood, Avian turned and led them swiftly to the clearing. Shale thrust the sleeping child into his arms.

Avian protested, “I cannot defend you with a child in my arms.” He held his arms out for Shale to take back the sleeping child.

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Shale ignored him and rushed to where Samuell was quickly loading their few belongings onto the horses. They were overjoyed to see some of their favorite and swiftest friends.

Piper stirred, reaching her small hand up to pull the collar of Avian's shirt to her cheek.

Shale mounted in one fluid move, then reached out for Piper. Avian impatiently lifted the child up to her. Shale held Piper securely and nodded to Samuell.

He spoke softly in Elvish to the horses and started down a narrow hunting trail to the east.

"We go north," Avian instructed.

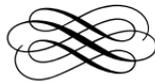
Shale's fear rapidly turned to anger. She whirled around to face him. "East. My brother knows these woods better than anyone, save my father. Do not hinder us."

Furious, she turned and guided her mare through the opening where Samuell had disappeared silently into the woods. They had practiced this countless times with her parents. She would not risk the lives of her brother and sister, nor would he. He had done nothing to help them, except show them where the horses were and slow them down. She stopped fuming long enough to duck beneath a low branch.

Reluctantly, Avian followed. He could not protect them if he was not with them, and he could not risk the noise and time of arguing. What foolishness this would lead to he could only imagine. "Indeed, there is much you have not told me, Henicles," he muttered to himself.

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As the lad led them unwaveringly on the twisting trails throughout the night, Avian pondered his charges. These did not seem to be the same children he had watched in the meadow earlier that day. He had been surprised by their stealth and ability to defend themselves. Their green elven cloaks covering their many pocketed vests, and the surety with which the lad now led them, told him they had been prepared for flight. The maiden's subdued manner had been replaced with a fierceness that reminded him of a she-bear protecting her cubs. Even the young child seemed to sense the urgency of their flight and did not fuss when she awakened during the long ride. Yet, he would set things straight as soon as they had put some distance between themselves and the farm.



Connor settled back against the tree and feigned exhaustion. He carefully noted where the horses were tied, where the sleeping men had laid their weapons, and the position of his one guard. The guard was not concerned about him escaping with his feet and hands bound.

Over confident and arrogant, Connor thought. He maneuvered the pear-sized chunk of rock behind his back to a position where he could rub the old rope binding his wrists. It was tedious work, but effective. He moved his wrists up and down while pushing against the sharp edge of the stone. *He must get home to his children. They must escape.* Again, he lifted his prayers to God.

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The fraying rope loosened against his wrists with each thrust against the sturdy rock. He studied the guard. Yes, his head leaned down and to the side, his jaw slack. Connor freed his hands of the slack ropes encircling them. He leaned forward cautiously and withdrew his knife from his boot. Quickly he cut free his ankles and crept into the trees. The horses turned toward him but made no sound. He sprang upon the fastest one and led them rapidly through the forest.

He was three days of hard riding from his children. He must reach them and warn them to flee, as they had 'played escape' many times before. They would not be playing this time. He would never teach the Presage. After seeing his children were safe, he would go into hiding.