All she could hear was the sound of the forest. She had shooed the horses away, and they seemed to pick their own way through the trees back to civilization. Two ruts were cut into the forest floor where she had recklessly steered past trees too close together, but she had managed not to crash or to kill herself. It was time to walk even further into the woods; while it would be merely a matter of time before the constables followed her carriage-trail of chaos to their spot, they would be impossible to follow if they were on foot once they reached her own territory.

She put her hand on her sword. A hard breath out to steel herself. She was shaking with adrenaline as she threw open the door of the carriage.

The Princess had her head propped up in her hand. She didn't bother to move anything but her eyes to glance over at the figure at her carriage door. She wouldn't be the one to speak first. So she waited and stared.

The moment was getting awkward.

"I am the Dark Lord of these Woods!" she announced with quavering voice.

"Hmph," went the Princess. "Well first off you're a Lady."

"What?"

"I'm no Prince, am I? Your cheeks are full, your hips are wide, and I detect some sign of a bust under that armored plate of yours." The Princess grabbed her own bosoms with both hands, shook and squeezed. "These are signs of a womanly folk, you poor girl. If you're a Dark LORD then I'm the King of Heaven."

The Princess stepped out of the carriage and hiked up her elaborate dress. "Come on, then." Her tone turned sarcastically demure as she continued: "I presume My Dark Lord has a citadel in yonder woods where I'm to be held, gasp, captive, BUT NOT IF THOSE DAMN'D CONSTABLES REACH US FIRST."

The Dark Lord's mouth hung open. "Ah, uh," she squeaked out, "you're coming with me? Willingly?"

"Fortune falls on you this day, My Dark Lord. As poor of a villain you may be I am as reluctant of a princess. I'm sure that my father's hounds have caught the trail and his constables are on the way. Do you want to spend the next year in the stocks?"

The Dark Lord's head shook. "No."

"And I am not going back to the castle. Let's move."

* * *

They were in the thickest part of the woods. Everything seemed covered in shadow and the trees took on frightful forms in the haze. It was a place that amplified dark magic and stirred wickedness.

"This wood favors Evil, I perceive," observed the Princess. "So what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing is the matter with me," the Dark Lord asserted.

"You've the bravery of a knight's youngest apprentice, I'll grant you that. You did hijack my carriage, after all, but only while my coachman was busy wetting the base of a tree. I doubt you'd be mean enough to kick a puppy, let alone seriously threaten the King's Daughter."

"I will show you ... evil, if you continue to run that Devil's Mouth of yours."

"Good try, good try, My Dark Lord. Now threaten me with violence."

"N... No. Just ... keep walking."

"Oh I have no intention of stopping. Either the walking or the talking." The Princess stepped over a branch. "We're about the same age, I'd guess."

"Yes, actually. My father always told me that you and I share birthdays."

"Oooh, your father! A True Dark Lord in these woods, perhaps? Is he a manish sort of Lord? Will I get to meet him?"

"...No."

The Princess stopped, both the walking and the talking, for a moment. "You're new at this, aren't you, My Dark Lord?"

"I've not seen my father in several months, and, so yes. I am new to this." The Princess had pressed in a tender spot, she got honesty in return. "My tower-house is on the other side of that clump of trees. Let's keep going."

* * *

The Princess came up to the heavy door set in a rough timber frame. She reached out and took hold of the handle, and the door yanked her forward without yielding so much as a shiver.

"Here," the Dark Lord scooted in, "it won't open unless..." She made a motion that was sort of up and her hands contorted as if she was exchanging a secret handshake with another member of her feminine fraternity. She and the door were obviously acquainted, as it swung open smoothly, inviting the pair inside.

The Princess pushed past to go first. "Home sweet home!" she announced, "such as it is. A little gloomy, isn't it?"

"I don't--"

"Larder, larder, yes." in a room crammed with shelves and jars and boxes of nearly innumerable sorts, the Princess somehow and immediately honed in on the one containing food. "Don't worry, I'm quite used to serving myself. I steal from the Cook all of the time." She went over to the low cabinet and threw it open. "Oh."

"Well..." The Dark Lord seemed to want to explain.

"What's this?" The Princess held up a strip of dried meat.

"Jerky, made from game."

"That seems to be all that's in here. Well what about here?" The Princess threw open another set of doors. A large set of crockery faced her. She pulled out one of the few that wasn't empty and sniffed, and then added, "Sauerkraut?"

"Ah, my father and I simply call it pickled cabbage."

"Do you have any other food? Peas, potatoes, parsnips, perhaps? Anything?"

The Dark Lord shook her head.

"Did you prepare at all for me to be here? You did perpetrate a kidnapping."

"I ... didn't expect you to be here."

The Princess took on that same funny look as when they first met at the carriage door. "Then what the Devil did you expect, My Dark Lord?"

The Dark Lord pulled over a chair from the desk. "I had hoped to rob you. Take your jewelry, pilfer your luggage for valuables. My modest food is, was, still enough for a journey to Port Town. A brooch made of gold would be ample to buy my apprenticeship to a trade, or to board ship for an easier country."

"And instead I came with you." She put the sauerkraut back. "You poor girl, you poor poor girl."

"You may eat what I have, dear Princess. Whether it lasts me a week or a day is of no great difference now, I suppose."

"Oh no. Do not believe for a moment that I am going back to the castle. Nor are you going to Port Town. We will fend for ourselves here, in the Wood."

"I have no gold, no silver, not even a copper. And neither one of us can show face in the villages; I'm unknown and you're far too known."

The Princess thought for a moment, and then went over to the desk where sat a few sheets of paper. She drew a sheet from a stack and took hold of the quill nearby.

"Um, Princess, that's really quite valuable--""

"--By my reckoning, we're nearly dead in the center of the Melancholy Wood, and I do see now why it earns its name. It is shaped like a bean, like so." The Princess drew out a bean in the middle of the sheet. "Now on three sides, to the north, west, and south," she drew a fuzzy outline " you are surrounded by my father's Kingdom, and to the east the River Redford divides this forest and my father's land from the neighboring Dukedom, both."

"Well, yes. We're about as far from the River as we are from any edge of the Wood."

"Now you kidnapped me, well. Now I kidnapped myself here" she pushed quill down on a spot at the bottom curve of the bean "where the road comes alongside the forest to the south. Now, here" and she put another spot at the top of the bean "is a large expanse of farmland."

"... Do you think they would sell to strangers? My father always warned me that your father's subjects--"

"We're going to take from the fields directly."

"Stealing?"

"Yes, theft! The taking of goods without rendering payment! We shall stuff as much as we can carry in bags and then run like foxes."

The Dark Lord looked uncomfortable. "I was able to settle my conscience concerning a theft from you, it does you no real harm. But from simple farmers who are already taxed so heavily--"

"My Dark Lord, you are as dark as a fresh morning's snow. It is a necessity that we eat and that should be enough. Should it soothe your villainy you may know that the lands to the north are Royal and I, being the Princess, would be entitled to the crop in any case."

"Yes, that does help, actually."

"Oh you are nearly impossible! But I will make you into something, yet. At least a Ivory Lord, and perhaps Medium-Grey after we've practiced a few times. At nightfall, agreed? We go out. But for now I need to rest these tired legs and your food will cure hunger if nothing else. Come, eat."

The Dark Lord accepted the invitation in her own house to her own table to eat her own food with the Princess.

* * *

They split the largest piece of jerky between them. The Dark Lord looked like she was considering a bit of the sauerkraut but then recalled her guest's scrunched nose at the smell of it and took the dry meat alone.

"Are we in danger?" the Dark Lord asked.

The Princess finished her bite and swallowed. "You know this Wood far better than I. Are we?"

"I mean, from your Father. Do you think he will try to find us here?" She stood to dip a cup in a barrel of water, and handed it to the Princess before taking another for herself.

"No. I considered it as we were walking here. I assess the situation thusly: you drove my carriage recklessly with no real skill or grace, which is the most I would be able to accomplish myself. He'll think I escaped alone. We abandoned my carriage at the border between the Outer Forest and the Heart of these Woods. And the Heart of the Melancholy Wood is infamous for its confusing mist and mire, the fact that one cannot make or follow a trail, and dense canopy that denies even a glimpse of the stars."

"My father was the only man capable of navigating this place, and he taught me." The Dark Lord looked around seeing her father's effects, but missing the man himself. "Now I seem to be the last of the Wood's secret-keepers."

"Right, that," the Princess continued. "The King will think his Princess skirted around the Outer Forest to meet the River Redford, to stay away from the roads. From there I would follow the river either North or South, naturally. I'd wager that his fast riders are headed to Snowfield and Port Town by now, with charge to make inquiries and threats and bribe inn-keepers to betray me. He'll think me mad to attempt an escape from him, but to depend on the Wood for sanctuary would be suicide. He will not believe I am here."

The Princess and the Dark Lord chewed for a little while, each working on the tough meat.

The Dark Lord pushed her plate to the center of the table. "Such a day of exertion I have never experienced. I need rest if I'm to court trouble again tonight. I must answer this fatigue." She stood up. "A word of warning, Princess: only my father knew the purpose of each of these materials and substances various, some of them may be quite dangerous. Please be careful."

"I take you at your word, My Pale Lord. I'll restrain my curiosity."

The Dark Lord trudged up the set of stairs. The Princess soon heard the thunk-thunk of armor hitting the floor above and then, inelegantly, snoring.

* * *

"Time to get up." The Princess shook the shoulder of her slumbering roommate. "Arise, My Milky Lord. The day gives way to dusk and the Moon will be up by the time we reach Royal farmland."

The Dark Lord opened her eyes and rolled over to sight the voice. It was the Princess's voice and face, but instead of her elegant dress of purple, pink, and green, familiar clothes hung on her frame.

"I took the liberty of choosing from your wardrobe. Normally I'd consider a closet full of black to be unfashionable, but, something about you needs to be Dark and it suits our evening's endeavor as well."

The Dark Lord looked the Princess over. "We seem to be of sim'lar size."

"It continues the theme of your unintentional usefulness to me. Now, up and out of bed. Gather yourself. You've to lead us out of this forest to the north along the river. Your jerky sits in my stomach like a stone so I'm keen to gather up at least a potato. But we'll be doing better than that."

Before too long they were back outside. The dense forest blocked the moonlight, but it seemed as if the Dark Lord had a map of the Wood printed inside her eyelids. She led them without hesitation or faltering; they kept the silence as to avoid alerting either man or beast.

* * *

The trees thinned out and then came to an abrupt halt in a line. The river babbled to their right, and in front of two dark-clad maidens was a garden royal, rich in the early fall's produce.

"Melons, peas, and peppers. Potatoes and okra," the Princess couldn't help but whisper, "I can practically taste it already."

"O-kra?" the Dark Lord asked.

"You will savor it tomorrow. If it weren't so foolish I'd make a dash for the storehouse and we'd have bacon and ham but we'd be caught for sure. The field will do. See that shack?" The Princess pointed to an open shed. "A two-wheeled cart should be in that shack. With that we might double or triple our take, a risk well worth taking."

The Dark Lord rubbed the cloth of her sack. "If you say so."

"Let's get on with it."

They snuck under the waxing moon to the little shed. As expected, the cart was inside.

"There's a bucket of tallow somewhere here, do you see it?" the Princess asked.

"I think I smell it, yes. Over by you I'd say," the Dark Lord answered.

She saw it.

"Is something the matter?" the Dark Lord whispered.

"No." The Princess hesitated. "Ah damn it, then," and she plunged her hand into the bucket and then set it by the Dark Lord. "Slop up these axles to suppress their noise. The cart will be easier to push as well."

"The cart would be best at the edge of the Wood, I think," said the Dark Lord as she greased the axles. "We fill our bags and empty the bags into the cart. It's more movement, to be sure, but should fortune turn we drop our bags and run for the cart, and get away with something."

The Princess was surprised by the tactical consideration, but it wasn't unwelcome. "Excellent planning, My Linen Lord. We'll do as you prescribe."

Silence again as the cart and two women moved under the three-quarters moon, first just inside the forest, and then back out again.

They gathered like starving men, which they practically were. The Princess took her bag first, having picked aboveground produce; the Dark Lord occupied herself with digging up but soon had a sack that was not too full to carry.

They ran back to the field a second time, having gained confidence from the first try. The Princess was pulling okra off of the plant, and the Dark Lord stripping peas when--

"OY! OY YOU! IN THE NAME OF THE KING, HALT!"

"Damnation!" the Princess cursed.

"I SAID HALT IN THE NAME OF THE KING!"

The Princess came beside the Dark Lord. "Trouble is upon us and its name is Ulyss. What he lacks in speech he makes up for with skill at the bow."

"We run?"

"Hang on to your bag if you can ... and ... RUN!"

"OY YOU HALT OR I'LL SHOOT, SWEAR ON THE KING, I'LL SHOOT."

Ulyss saw two dark figures pop up. He had done his obligation to words and was satisfied to resort to his proficiency, the bow. He wanted better light but it would do--

PONK

It rattled the Dark Lord's teeth but her armor did its job. They were almost to the treeline.

Ulyss drew another shot, it would be a long one but--

TWHIP

The Princess fell.

The Dark Lord skidded to a halt and turned around.

An arrow was in the Princess' shoulder, entered from the back.

The Dark Lord hauled up the Princess on her good arm and they hobbled to the treeline.

Ulyss relaxed his bow. The Night Captain had come out from the storehouse.

"Ay, Ulyss. What's the commotion?"

"Another pair of robbers!"

"Third time this month. The Duke must be squeezing them hard if they're fording the river to come 'ere," the Captain figured.

"Poor bastards, I'd say. If the King wouldn't string us up, I'd let the poor bastards eat, I would."

"And that, Ulyss, is why you should mind your mouth and shoot your bow," reprimanded the Captain.

"M'pologies, m'pologies, m'lord."

"Nevermind, you did well." The Captain turned to go back into the storehouse. "Keep the watch."

"Ay."

* * *

The arrow pulsed with the Princess' heartbeat, it had punctured a vital spot, and even on black cloth under moonlight, one could tell that it the wound was seeping blood.

The Princess kept her wits about her. "Don't you dare abandon any of this food or my wound is in vain. But do help me onto that cart. I may lack the strength soon to make my way on my own legs."

The Dark Lord helped the Princess onto the cart, where she laid uncomfortably on potatoes and melons.

The Dark Lord raced as fast as she dared into the Heart of the Melancholy Wood, back to her tower-house.

"Do not go to sleep, My Princess. Stay awake or I may lose you..."

* * *

Making way overcountry was miserable in the extreme.

Anatomy was hardly the Dark Lord's strong suit, but her awareness of arteries was enough to know that Ulyss's narrow arrowhead had lodged in one. In the forest she lacked the means of removing its barbed form from the Princess's shoulder. To remove the arrowshaft would remove the head's anchor in tissue, and if the head went any deeper it might turn the arterial nick into something more immediately fatal. So the whole thing stayed.

"Stay awake, Princess. You've -- unf --"

"--AHHHH--"

"--an important task to accomplish. You're to cook okra for our breakfast."

The Princess managed a little "huh" in place of a laugh. "I didn't think you capable of humor," she added in a weak voice.

"Only when I am terrified."

It was a brutal game they had to play with the rough forest floor: the Princess forced to hold the arrow in place with as little pressure as possible; the head, though point-sharp, was solid and did stem the blood-loss; the Dark Lord was forced to commit both of her arms to operating the cart, wincing as bumps and drops drew cries of pain from the Princess awkwardly propped on her side.

* * *

"Princess, we're here ... Princess, answer me!" The Dark Lord gently set the cart down to work the door. "Princess!" she cried over her shoulder.

"... My Lily Lord does call for me. I am here."

The door swung open, the healthy light from the fireplace spilling outside. The Dark Lord wheeled everything inside and slammed the door shut. She grabbed a candle and touched it to flame, bringing the light over to the stricken Princess.

The Princess was pale, her unnatural color made all the more stark by the black clothes she wore. Her hand was clamped in place around the arrowshaft. The Dark Lord pried fingers away. As she gently set the arm aside, she saw that a frightening amount of blood had pooled at the bottom of the cart, wetting the tubers and the onions. Her vision filled with stars but she shook them off.

"I need you out of the cart, Princess. Can you manage it?"

"... I will try." Her eyes were droopy.

The Dark Lord maneuvered herself under the Princess's uninjured side, pulled legs over the edge of the cart and let feet touch the floor.

"Ready - and - UP"

The Princess gave one heavy push and her legs immediately gave way. It was all the Dark Lord could do to guide her fall away from the injured shoulder. She heaped front-first.

"You treat Princesses roughly." The side of her face was mashed up against the floor, facing the injured side. "I am trying to stay awake ... it is hard."

The Dark Lord set down the lit candle, and went to grab another. "The angels will stay away but only if you continue speaking, My Princess."

"...hhh. It is hard."

She took the second lit candle to her father's desk, with the Princess's map was still on top. She went around to the back of it, and pulled a small white book from the uppermost shelf and opened it. It was written in her own hand, with notes made by her father. They had prepared the little book exactly for this circumstance: a dire injury where he would not be able to help.

FIRST: CLEAR AWAY ANY CLOTHING OR ARMOR - HEALING IS DONE TO FLESH, NOT CLOTH, HIDE, OR METAL.

A sharp knife made quick work of the dark tunic and the chemise underneath.

SECOND: TAKE DRY WHITE PREPARATION "LEO" AND SPILL LIBERALLY AROUND THE INJURY.

Her father's organization was her advantage. Everything in order, the Dark Lord was able to quickly move to the collection of L's, and she took a full jar of "LEO" over to the Princess. She pulled the stopper with her teeth and spilled it all around the arrow. It turned pink as it soaked up blood.

THIRD: CALM DOWN. REMEMBER THAT YOU HAVE DONE THIS BEFORE. YOUR MIND MUST BE STEADY.

The Dark Lord struggled to comply. She clapped her hands together, and in the manner her father taught her, she breathed in and out as deliberately as she could. Her fears danced. She wished her father was with her, she wished her own hands less clumsy, she wished her mind more disciplined, and doubt--

"Your medicine ... seems ineffective ..." came the weak, small voice from the floor.

The Dark Lord clapped her hands together again. "Your friend will die if you do not steady yourself," she whispered mouse-quiet, "and if you do nothing, she will die ... I have the ability to intervene."

The Dark Lord found her bedrock.

FOURTH: APPLY THE HEALING.

She knelt by the Princess and placed her hands around the arrow, her fingers sinking into the dry white powder mixing with blood. She took pace with her own heartbeat, and focused her mind's eye on a single image: the arrow coming out of the flesh.

"Come out, come out, come out," she chanted.

Her hands started to feel hot though they made no physical heat. And the arrow began to rise.

"Come out…"

The Dark Lord's eyes snapped open as the arrow clattered to the floor. She felt real heat on her hands, now, the blood flowed freely.

"... I'm ... so tired ..." whispered the Princess. Her eyes were only slits. "... trouble ... seeing you ..."

The Dark Lord pushed the wound shut. The mind's image was harder this time, so she imagined the Princess's flesh whole without scar or blemish.

"Heal ... heal ... please ..."

Blood still pushed out.

Closing the wound wouldn't be enough, and a healing spell that left the injured dead was no spell at all. The blood itself would have to be replaced. She could think of only one way.

"Either you will be with me," she said to the Princess, "or I will be with you." Having decided it, she set her mind to a more dangerous idea: her own force of life spilling like a waterfall into her hands, and into the Princess.

Her hands grew hot again.

She felt the Princess's pulse grow under her fingers, and the edges of the wound began to close in.

Her vision narrowed, her hearing ceased, her arms felt hot as forged iron and as heavy, but this had the curious effect of sharpening her concentration by way of removing distraction, and the waterfall turned into a deluge --

And the Dark Lord collapsed.

* * *

"Time to get up." The Princess shook the shoulder of her slumbering roommate. "It's nearly noon-time and My Grey Lady's meal won't be breakfast after-noon."

The Dark Lord blinked her eyes. She felt sore all over and her mind was full of a fantastic, impossible memory. "Wait," she turned to face the voice, "Grey Lady?"

"You're innocent as a lamb. But the fact remains, never mind it is forbidden by heaven and man, ignoring the fact that it was forgotten if not regarded as mythical, setting aside the humor that must have been in heaven to assign one such as you such a gift: You. Used. Magic."

It wasn't a dream.

The Princess went on. "Real magic. As a practitioner of a proscribed art I must grant you the title of Dark Lord. But there's the matter of your unsullied soul, recklessly and hopelessly generous to the point of nearly sacrificing yourself for a stranger." The Princess stopped for a moment, blinking rapidly. "I offer to meet you in the middle, My Grey Lady."

She decided to try it out. "I am the Grey Lady of the Melancholy Wood."

"But do not think the jesting will cease. I enjoy the jests and they come easy to me as I think of you." Suddenly, the Princess leaned and embraced the Grey Lady. "Thank you."

The Grey Lady put her hands on the Princess's arm where it crossed her collarbone and held it for a moment, and the Princess pulled away. "Come and eat, as promised, I've prepared okra and peppers and potatoes. Do not think me a poor chef because I am also a Princess. I am a better chef than Princess. I shall await you at the table downstairs."

* * *

The Grey Lady followed down after a few minutes, her hunger asserting itself suddenly and with force. The previous day's herculean efforts were asking their due, and even rocks would have appeared appetizing. Instead before her was as fine food as she had ever seen. She tucked into it without delay.

"Good to see you hungry, you frightened me tremendously last night."

The food was exotic, delicious. "What happened?"

"My own recollection fades as I attempt to recall our flight into the forest. Only dimly do I remember, the light from the fireplace as you threw open the door, the dull pain of meeting the floor." The Princess pulled up one of her legs and held 'round it. "And it was

a dull peace as I expended the last of my will to stay awake for you. Then I broke through the fog and you were heavy against me, shivering like a frozen man and gasping for air in great gulps, such a thing I've never seen. I came out from under you and hardly had time to be fascinated at my own recovery before I feared for your demise. I was gathering myself as to what to do with you when your commotion stopped and you began to snore." The Princess giggled at the detail, and the Grey Lady brought the bowl up to her own face. "I could not rouse you, even as I dragged you up those stairs to place you in your bed, but I knew you would come back to me."

"This food is very fine."

"Having to wash one's own blood off of garden produce is not anything that I'd recommend. So I am glad that you like it. Speaking of which, I used up the water in those barrels."

"There's a spring-head nearby." The Grey Lady took two more quick bites. "Let us fetch water."

* * *

The Grey Lady led them to the spring, still in view of the house.

"Do all of your spells end in such a manner?" asked the Princess.

"I have much to learn."

"Pity, that. Power such as yours could turn back an Army, if it were sharpened."

"I'm no Merlin, I'm afraid."

"Merlin! I remember the stories. Although I'd gather that they are not stories."

"My father spoke of that, actually. He thought Merlin was an idea, magic writ large."

"Your father was a practitioner?"

"Far better than I," answered the Grey Lady. "Here's the stream."

They filled the water-barrels with the clear, cool water, and were mostly quiet as they made the haul back to the tower-house, the effort made more difficult by the muscle-weariness left over from the yesterday's work. The Princess, as usual, pushed ahead, and manipulated the door in the same manner as she had saw the day before. The door swung open easily and she was pleased.

"I am a quick study--"

The Grey Lady's hand shot out and grabbed the Princess's wrist. The Princess jerked it away.

"Why do you apprehend me so?" The Princess softened her face. "I am not used to being handled in such a manner--"

"How did you do that?" The Grey Lady's voice was assertive.

"Do what?"

"Open that door."

"It is a door, I opened it. Shall you try me for the crime of it?"

"My Princess." The Grey Lady reached out for the Princess's hand, gently this time, as if to study it. "That door is magically actuated. It is a seal to keep residents of the tower-house safe."

The Princess looked at her own hands, and then back up at the door.

"My father could open that door. He taught me to open that door. And it should seem that you can open that door. Let's put the water inside and explore this further."

* * *

"Now, as you did before, open the door."

The Princess took hold of the door with both hands. She was surprised to find her palms moist. She made the motion. Nothing happened.

"Nothing is happening." The door felt as solid as stone.

"What are you thinking?"

"Thinking?"

"The Beginning of Magic is in the Mind," the Grey Lady quoted.

"I was remembering the first time I was chided by a Knight-Lord for some mischief at the castle, my palms were moist ... as they are now," she admitted.

"Try again. This time, see the door opening in your mind. Expect it. Think of nothing else."

The Princess found it difficult to clear her thoughts. She was used to following them wherever they led her, she fancied it, she adopted a certain unsettledness as part of her personality, that train of consciousness--

"The Door, Princess. Nothing else."

"The door and nothing else. The door and nothing else. The door," the Princess took the door, "and nothing else."

The door opened in her mind, and it opened before her.

They walked in and took to the table.

"It could be residual. I poured a great deal of myself into you to save you, you may have gained a measure of Ability as a result."

"Even if it is temporary, it may be an advantage."

"An advantage?"

"My Grey Lady ... you know I fled the castle."

"Yes."

"My father, the King, is an evil man. He makes pretense of being a steady if strict ruler, but I assure you: his designs are evil. That evil was the reason for my flight."

"I shall assume that because you are here that what you say is true."

"Take me as you apprentice."

The Grey Lady laughed. "I'm hardly a master!"

"Hear me, I insist. Apprentice me to the dark art. Teach me your ways. You said it 'could be' residual. What if it is not?"

"... The Ability is familial." They each considered it. "Some blood-line would connect us."

"Teach me magic," the Princess asked again, "and I will tutor you in the evil ways of the King. With what you learn from me, and with what I learn from you, and with your own sure progress, we may be able to free this land."

"... The greater chance is that we will accomplish none of this, that your power will fade, and it will be all that I can do to preserve the art for at least one more generation, as my father did." The Grey Lady met the Princess's eyes. "Would you leave me alone, here, if that were the outcome?"

"Never." It was a sure answer, free of hesitation. The Princess offered out out her hand. "My name is Isabella."

The Grey Lady looked at it and then grasped it in her own. "I am called Ingrid."

"Our first duty, sister Ingrid, is to fortify ourselves for the winter."

End of Chapter 1