



THE THREE WISHES

CHRISTINA VAN STARKENBURG

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For my elementary school teachers who encouraged my creativity.

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The Three Wishes

The wind whispered rumors and lies outside of my cell. It told me that I was responsible for the events that occurred, and that the king had already decided to take my wings because the wood-land fairies convinced him I'd cursed some poor innocent woodcutter. Covering my ears with my hands, I tried to drown out the sounds. None of that had happened. The trial hadn't even occurred yet, and I never cursed a woodsman.

My stomach lurched and spun. The trial might not have occurred yet, but as the last rays of sunlight crept off the floor and out the window, I knew it would be soon. I didn't know what I was going to say yet. Sitting down, I curled myself around my knees and fluttered my wings slowly behind me. The soothing motion sometimes helped me to think.

Time stretched as I tried to conjure up with the right words. What did one say to a king to convince him? He'd been raised up from the woodland fairies. Chances were, he would grant extra weight to whatever they were going to say no matter how outlandish and untruthful it might be. Groaning, I and let my head thump onto my arms. Hopefully, the truth would be enough.

Voices reached me from beyond the jail door, giving me just enough time to stand and brush myself off before the guards opened it. The sliver of moonlight that reached through my window shimmered through them casting a pale-yellow sheen on the floor.

Squashing my trembles, I fluttered to the cell door. I could not let them think I was afraid. Fear was a sign of truth. If they saw anything but serenity, the guards would believe the woodcutters. Even if the king ruled in my favour—which he will because I am not a liar—they would never look at me the same.

The iron bars creaked open. It was time.

* * *

A cacophony of sounds clobbered us as we flew into the court room. About a dozen

woodland fairies were gathered on the right side, chittering with one another. A strained hush fell when they noticed me arrive with my escort. After collectively giving me a glare that might melt a human's courage, they turned back to one another and continued yammering about the woodsman's hardship.

That poor woodsman was quite hard-done by his encounter with me. Apparently, his wife—or him, I'm rather fuzzy on the details since I had nothing to do with it and I'm not stooping to eavesdropping yet—had food magically shoved in her nose, and it could only be freed by a wish. I suppressed an unfairylike snort. If I was going to curse someone, it would not be by shoving a sausage up their nostril.

As the guards shoved me in the box and fastened the chain to it so I couldn't fly away, my insides knotted. Would the king believe it? After all, there are fairies who enjoy tricks like that. Most of them were now wingless and probably dead because they broke the greatest rule of our survival: don't let the humans know we exist.

"Order. Order in the court," called out the clerk in her beautiful voice as she floated down to her station. Her silver wings and hair glowed in the moonlight. She looked more ready to go to a ball than take notes about what was said. But here, appearances mattered, and I was woefully underdressed in my prison garb.

The courtroom doors opened again and King Hadrian and his retinue floated through. Once he landed on the pedestal behind the judge's table, the king's dark brown eyes surveyed the room with what seemed like a bored disinterest. Though, everyone knew he was aware of everything that was going on. The hush in the room deepened as his vision floated over the crowd.

As his vision stopped on me, I couldn't help it. I wilted a bit and fluttered my wings nervously. No one dared scoff though, because there were few who could stand before the king and not feel slightly cowed. The guards on either side of me were either used to it or made of stone, because I noticed that neither one reacted.

A soft sigh slipped between my lips—thankfully inaudible even to the guards beside me—as he ended his assessment of me and continued to take in the rest of the courtroom. Once everyone was quieter than a cloud, he gestured for the clerk to continue.

"We are here today to decide the fate of one, Aurianna Glden." She gestured dismissively towards me. "A gold fairy who has been accused of trespassing in the woodland fairies' realm, cursing a woodsman, and damaging human/fairy relations."

An angry murmur buzzed through the courtroom as she spoke. She held up a small graceful hand to silence them, but I could still feel their anger boring into my back. For the most part, fairies tried to avoid the notice of humans. As a group, we were working towards being thought of as a myth, and we were pretty good at it too. But to be accused of damaging our relations with the humans meant that humans realized we were real and that fairy hunts had begun again. Humans thought our wings were the source of our powers and they believed if

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they ground them into dust they could use them for magic.

It was hard, but I managed to keep my wings folded calmly across my back as she read out the charges against me. No wonder the woodland fairies were angry, but there was no way this was my fault. Who were they trying to protect?

The clerk stopped speaking and King Hadrian gestured for the leader of the woodland fairies to come forward and begin his version of the events.

“Oh most exalted King of the Sun and Stars,” Aire began. His voice squeaked like one of those annoying insects that thinks it can sing by rubbing its legs together.

My face scrunched up in disgust, but I was able to smooth it out before anyone noticed. Luckily for me, they were all intent on his tale of lies and deception.

“And so you see, your majesty,” he continued, “this gold fairy tainted our home by pretending to be of the woods.” Disgusted gasps broke through the quiet.

My wings twitched irritably of their own accord before I could stop them. The absurdity of his statement. Me, a gold fairy, pretend to live in a tree? Not likely. I scoffed. I couldn't help myself. Even though I wasn't the only one who made a sound, the king's gaze darted my way angrily anyway.

The woodland fairy looked at me smugly as well, before continuing. “She then alerted a local woodsman and his wife to our presence when she called out for help after being trapped by a fallen tree. Being the kind and considerate gentleman that he was, he took pity on her. And as a thank-you: she cursed him.”

His tale done, the woodland fairy stood to one side and called forward three other fairies from among his kin. Each of them gave an equally fictitious account of what happened, but clearly they had planned this, because though there were minor differences in their stories, the overall lie was the same. My earlier confidence of the king's assertion of my innocence wavered.

“Aurianna,” the king's voice sent chills through me as he called me forward.

The guard on my right unlatched the chain and then together the three of us lifted off the ground and fluttered down to the box below.

Standing before King Hadrian, I curtsied the best I could given that my hands were chained in front of me.

“How do you answer these accusations set before you?”

I clasped my hands together. The shackles around my wrists dug in as I tightened my grip. But I refused to loosen them and show weakness.

“Exalted King of the Sun and Stars, you have heard Aire's tale of the events that unfolded. However, I must ask you to forget them. If his words are true, then the brassy yellow iron ore used to make these chains, is gold.” The links jingled musically as I shook them.

The woodland fairy snorted as his followers jeered. If I trusted myself to be calm, I would have turned around and given them my best, “don't interrupt me” look, but I didn't think it

would work. And then they would have more fodder to laugh about, but the king and clerk did it for me and the courtroom once again was as quiet as a starless sky.

Taking a deep breath, I launched back into my tale. "I don't live in the woods. I barely even go into them. My home is at the base of Wispwings Peak in the local lord's manor. Lord Bergmann isn't the wealthiest of lords, but he is kind to the men and women who work in the mines for him." And, not that I was going to say this, but he also made sure that his baby girl's doll house was always kept clean for the angel looking over her. "And he always made sure that bits of iron ore and gold were left out so that we fairies could use them without having to dig for them ourselves."

Aire jumped in the air and stabbed his finger at me. "See your majesty, she lets the humans know she's there!"

I shook my head as the rest of the woodland fairies started shouting about my guilt. The king's eyes narrowed, and I thought he was going to pronounce judgement right then. "They've never seen me your majesty," I blurted. "Lord Bergmann tosses the ore into bushes or pushes it into tiny crevices. He never uses the same place, and he never checks to see if the ore is still there." That wasn't entirely true. Sometimes he would reuse a place if he was being showy about his offering, but often times he would drop a few pieces on the ground as he walked away. But he never looked for the ore he left behind.

My gaze met the kings and my mouth stopped working. I waited as he studied me. He nodded and my shoulders relaxed and I found my voice again.

"Several weeks ago, I was sleeping in the doll bed when the bedroom door crashed open. Before anyone entered the room, I was out of the bed and hiding in the basket of Ella's clean clothes."

* * *

"Please," screamed Lady Agna. "She's only a child."

The baby started crying as her mother raced across the floor to the crib. But a large man grabbed Lady Agna before she reached the bed and threw her into the rocking chair. Several of the rungs in the back snapped when it fell to the floor with a bang.

Tears streamed down Lady Agna's cheeks as she stood up and faced the man now holding her screaming child. "Don't take my baby."

"Don't worry milady," said a second man who was standing in the doorway. "As long as your beloved spouse follows through with his end of the deal, your sweet baby girl will be back in your arms before the week is over."

Agna grabbed one of the broken rungs and tried to bludgeon the man in the doorway, but he ripped it from her hands and held her as the other man took the crying child out of the room.

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“Enjoy the rest of your evening, Lady Agna,” said the man from the doorway. “Oh, and should we encounter any trouble on the way out, you must know that accidents happen.” He shoved Lady Agna into the nursery and slammed the door shut behind him.

Agna crawled to the crib and pulled one of the baby blankets out of the crib and hugged it as she sobbed. “Ella’s angel?” Her voice cracked. She gently reached over and righted the tiny doll house chair. “I wish you would bring my baby home safely.”

When she buried her head in the blanket and sobbed harder, I left my hiding place and flew out the window to catch up with the men who took Ella. I didn’t quite know how I was going to bring her home, but I certainly wasn’t going to lose them before I had the chance to make Lady Agna’s wish come true.

Even though they were in a carriage, it wasn’t hard to find them with Ella screaming loudly. I landed on the open carriage window and held on. Ella was crying in a basket on the floor. The two men were sitting on the benches. I didn’t know what else to do, so I hid in the first place I could think of: Ella’s basket.

“This child needs to shut up,” snapped the who grabbed the baby and roughly shoved the basket with his foot. “Lord Raubritter, the next time we need to convince someone to sell, let’s make sure the brat is old enough to understand the words ‘be quiet’.”

“Or we could take the wife too,” said Raubritter. His calm voice was just as chilling in the carriage as it had been in the manor.

But his eyes were so angry. He kicked the basket again and his boot dug into my side. Poor Ella was so scared she cried harder.

I wiggled through the blankets so I was close to her ear and softly hummed the lullaby I always heard Lady Agna sing as I gently rubbed her cheek. Ella settled before the man kicked her basket and scared her again.

When she was quiet, I sank lower into the blankets so there was less of a chance of being seen and tried to figure out how to fulfill Lady Agna’s wish. I couldn’t teleport Ella home, so I would have to wait until they stopped. Then I could find some other fairies and we could carry her and her basket home.

* * *

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I remember is Ella squishing me as she started squirming and crying again.

“Quiet,” snapped the angry man and he kicked the basket with his foot making her cry even louder.

Lord Raubritter sighed. “The brat is probably hungry.” He banged on the front of the carriage. “Stop at the next farm.”

“Yes sir,” came the muffled reply. “There’s one just ahead.”

The jolting motion slowed and stopped. "Boden feed it."

The door clicked open and Ella rolled on me as Boden roughly picked up the basket. Stomping across the path he pounded on the farmer's door.

"Good morning sir," came the farmer's husky voice as the door creaked open. "How can I help you sir?" he called over Ella's frantic cries.

"Feed this." He shoved the basket into the man's hands.

"Of course."

Ella's flailings lessened as the farmer gently bounced her, but no amount of rocking would soothe the hunger from her stomach. He carried the basket over to his wife. "I have a surprise customer for you love."

She looked up from the rocking chair she was sitting in nursing her own child. Her gaze slipped from her husband to Boden. She forced her babe to unlatch and handed her now crying son to her husband. Then she picked Ella up out of the basket and brought her to her breast. Ella gulped down the milk eagerly.

"Shut that thing up," yelled Boden jabbing his finger in the direction of the farmer's babe.

Panic flashed across Senta's face, and I suspected she worried he would hurt her child the same way I worried he would hurt Ella.

"Please," begged the farmer as he bounced his son. "Perhaps you would be more comfortable waiting in the carriage. We'll bring the girl to you as soon as she's done."

Boden snorted. "Be quick about it."

The farmer bowed as the wooden door clattered shut leaving us in relative peace.

"Cort," said Senta softly as she compelled Ella to switch sides, "who is this?" Her voice was barely audible over the cries of her son. I only heard because I was close enough, and Cort must have been expecting her to say something because he had also moved closer. But as long as their baby cried, I doubted Boden would be able to hear anything even if he did try listening.

"Better if we don't know."

"But you know who that is," she shot a meaningful look at the door.

"All the more reason we don't want to know who the baby is."

"What if it was our son?"

"We can't save her love. We'd just end up jailed or worse, and then who would care for Felix?" He hugged his son close as he danced around his wife's chair. "That child is at least important enough for the lord to want her alive and well. Our son is not."

Senta quieted and caressed Ella's cheek. "It isn't right what he's doing."

"I know." Cort leaned over and kissed his wife's hair. His son sobbed softly into his shoulder. Tiny fingers curled tightly around his sleeve and beard. "But there is nothing we can do." He lowered his voice even more and I had to strain to hear him. "With Lord Raubritter raising taxes again, we can barely afford the farm as it is. We do not need him to focus more of his attention on our family. This land is all we have. It's the only way we can afford food for

ourselves.”

“Still,” she said as she knelt on the ground and changed Ella’s diaper, “I wish someone would stop him.”

“It would have to be someone more powerful than us.” He walked over to the cradle and put his son down in it before leaving the room through the back door.

My heart raced as she then lifted the blanket out of the basket. Her eyes remained focused on the little girl before her, but there was no where for me to hide should she turn and look my way. “It’s okay sweetie,” she cooed. “Let me get you all wrapped up.”

She swaddled Ella and my heart felt like it would pound right out of my chest. She would see me the moment she turned to put Ella back into the basket.

The door crashed open, as Senta picked Ella up gently. Boden stormed in. “You’ve had plenty of time to feed the brat. What is taking so long?”

Senta’s gaze focused on the man before her as she lowered Ella safely overtop of me once more. “She’s all already.” Senta stood up and handed Boden the basket. “I’ve fed and changed her, so the motion of the carriage should rock her to sleep once more.”

Her son started squeaking in the background now that his father was no longer bouncing him. Boden eyed him and then turned and left.

I rubbed Ella’s back and whispered a magic spell. She would sleep alright. She would sleep and Boden would have no reason to kick her basket again.

As we climbed into the carriage, Cort ran over from the back of the house. He held up a jar of milk. “Here my lord,” he said with a bow. “If the babe gets thirsty before you reach your manor, she can drink this.”

Lord Raubritter waved his hand at Boden who took the bottle and shoved it roughly into the basket at Ella’s feet. She squirmed a bit, but the spell had already taken hold and she was soundly sleeping. Cort jumped back as Raubritter rapped on the dividing wall and the carriage rolled forward once more.

I leaned against the basket wall and tugged a corner of the blanket loose to hide myself better as I tried to think of a way to fulfill Senta’s wish. I agreed. Lord Raubritter had to be stopped.

* * *

Several hours later, the carriage slowed down again. “We’re approaching the toll booth my lord,” came the driver’s muffled voice.

“Excellent.” Lord Raubritter rubbed his hands together. “Let’s see if they have any new funds for me.”

The carriage clattered to a stop and both men climbed out. I slipped out of the carriage after them. I might not travel this way often, but the number of willows draped along the river’s

edge was more than enough information to for me to know that we were at the Weeping Willow Waterway.

But while the water ran freely, I noticed that the humans had pulled a thick iron chain across the river. The chain was stretched above the water's surface pulled tight between two wooden towers. More humans were lazily leaning against the wooden structures. The leader tipped his hat to Lord Raubritter. "Hello your lordship. We've had many boats come this way since you last visited us."

He glanced over his shoulder and yelled for two men to grab a chest. The chest jangled and clanked as they hefted it over and dumped its contents into a larger one on the back of the carriage. Silver and gold coins spilled out and clattered into the new one. "That ought to buy the missus a nice dress, eh?"

"Indeed," answered Lord Raubritter with an affected regal disinterest. He scooped a few silver and copper coins out and handed them back to the man. "For your efforts."

The man swept his hat off his head and bowed deeply. "Many thanks."

One of the men from the tower stood up suddenly and called out as he pointed upstream.

"Sorry, my lord, but duty calls. Another one of your patrons is on their way." He sauntered back towards the booth, paused briefly, and looked back towards Lord Raubritter. "Would you like to see how it works, sir?"

Raubritter nodded. The headman turned back towards the towers and called out some orders. The men leaning against the towers stood up and pushed against winch which raised the chain higher so the ship could more easily see it, warning them to come to a stop.

The merchant barge slowed. The mules towing it on the far side of the river looked around eagerly for the feedbag that so often marked their breaks.

"Halward, we already paid you when we went downstream," called the captain. Her sharp nasally voice sounded like hooves clattering off cobblestone.

Halward, the man who had been speaking with Lord Raubritter, shrugged. "We got to watch these waters for bandits going both ways. It's dangerous work, and these men and my Lord," he bowed slightly to Raubritter, "deserve to be paid for their dedication to your safety."

She spat in the water. "The only bandits I see are the ones at these toll booths. We need to eat too. But because the Pope has put a limit on how much we can sell for, every time we pass these booths, we lose money. If you really care, you'd let us pass without paying this time or soon there will be no merchants willing to lose money to bring you Southern spices to flavour your food."

Halward laughed. "Just for that, the fee to pass has been doubled." As he spoke all of them men lounging around stood up and raised their weapon of choice menacingly. "If you can't pay it in coin, we can confiscate it out of your wares, and you can spend some time thinking about your decision in prison."

The captain eyed the men on the shore and did a swift assessment of the guards she had

with her. They were badly outnumbered, and Halward's men were closing in on her mules. Her shoulders dipped minutely. "Someday, someone will bring you and your Lord to justice Halward. And by God, I wish I'm there to see it."

Darting over to the base of the winch, I closed my eyes. I could hear a small raft being put out from the barge with the funds for the passage, but I tuned it out and focused on the iron before me. I might usually work with gold and silver from Lord Bergmann, but iron was familiar enough. I held a link in my hands and felt the magic flow through me. The air grew cold, and the iron grew even colder. It was almost too painful to touch, but I didn't stop. The link snapped and I unhooked it from the others and let it fall to the ground. However, since the chain was pulled tight, the coil around the winch held.

I sighed and fluttered closer to the edge of the winch. The water lapped at my feet as I reached out and grabbed one of the links hovering above the river. Again the air cooled as I worked my magic. Tiny sheets of ice formed around my wet feet. One side of the chain snapped, but the pressure from both sides was too great for me to unhook it. Clapping my wings together pointedly, I snapped the opposite side. With a heavy sploosh, the chain sank in the river.

But I wasn't done yet. The poor mules were still on the wrong side of the booth. Before the water settled, I darted across the waves. The sun shining off of the churning water would disguise my motion should anyone happen to look my way.

A large fish burst out of the water. The slimy blackness of its gaping mouth threatened to swallow me whole. I dipped to open side. My wing brushed the surface of the water. Another fish broke the surface and knocked me off balance. This is why fairies don't fly close to the surface of the water. This is why we wait for humans to leave so we can cross well above the height of a fishes' jump. Birds are smarter. They might mistake us for a butterfly or moth from a far, but once they get close they screech in shock and often times crash into the undergrowth or a nearby tree branch as they try to avoid biting us.

* * *

"She admits it, your majesty!" called Aire triumphantly. "There's no way she made it across the water unseen. The people saw her. They know we exist because of her."

"Your majesty," I refused to look over at Aire, and instead focused my pleading gaze on the king's face. "I am aware that crossing close to the water was a mistake. But with the confusion caused by the chain sinking, the fish jumping, and the captain trying to charge the gate to get her beasts through before Lord Raubritter's men could rally, there's no way they recognized me as a fairy. Even if they could spot me over the shimmering of the sun on the water. They had no reason to look my way."

Things had been going so well. Now, I wasn't sure if the king believed me anymore. But, at

least he wasn't looking at me with sheer disbelief or disgust on his face. I wiggled my wings hopefully, there was still a chance he would rule in my favour: my story wasn't finished yet. "I made it across the water, oh Exalted King of the Sun and Stars." Clapping my wings firmly together I launched back into my tale.

* * *

On the far shore the humans from the toll booth and the merchant barge were fighting. Boden had raced across the roving bridge, and was showing everyone why he was Lord Raubritter's favourite. Scoffing, I whispered some magic that made a few sparks snap before his eyes. He stumbled and waved his hands before his face in confusion.

A calloused merchant guard smashed the pommel of her sword into his ear. He cried out in pain as he crumpled to the ground.

With a well-timed flap of my wings, I landed on one of the mule's heads. I cast a sure-footed spell on it and its companion, and then I set it in their minds to cross the bridge without a human to guide them. Instead of risking the fish, I simply rode over and around the roving bridge. With the chain down and the beasts of burden safely across the bridge, the captain called to her people to return to her. Some jumped onto the raft and poled it to the barge in the middle of the water, others dropped down from the roving bridge and landed with a thunk in the middle of the boat. A few of Lord Raubritter's more adventurous men tried to follow, but their battle cries were nearly drowned out by the sound of them splashing into the water on all sides of the boat.

I flew back to the carriage and landed on the back of it by the chest. Murmuring softly, I dried the leather straps firmly holding it in place. They crinkled and peeled with false age.

"Enough" yelled Raubritter as he stormed to the carriage. "She's won this time, but make note of that merchant Halward. She will regret this even if I have to chase her far beyond my borders."

The carriage jolted as it began rumbling down the road. I bounced off my perch and nearly flew from the back of the wagon, but my fingers caught the leather strap at the last moment. Flapping my wings I pulled myself back on board, and carefully worked my way back into the cabin with Ella.

* * *

Hours trickled by as the carriage clattered down road after road. We paused once to feed Ella the rest of the milk. When we did, I risked looking behind the carriage. The chest had fallen off, so I quickly enchanted the space to look like it was still there. The spell would wear off in about an hour, and I could always dispel it if we arrived at our destination sooner.

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I needn't have worried about the length of my spell. But, at last we stopped in front of what I hoped would be Lord Raubritter's home. He stormed out of the carriage and pointed at a plainly dressed young woman in the courtyard. "Make sure the brat is taken care of. She's no good to us if she dies." He chuckled malevolently. "She's no good to us for acquiring the mines if she dies. But I suppose it would convince others not to force me to take such drastic measures." He studied the basket now in the young woman's hand, before spinning and walking up the front stairs to the manor. "Feed her and keep her quiet."

The young woman curtsied and carried me and Ella into the manor using the servant's entrance. We stopped at the end of the long corridor and she pushed open a door with her hip. "I need some milk for the master's young guest, and somewhere for her to play I suppose. Somewhere out of the master's way."

The cook pointed with her spoon. "Uwe can get you some milk, and the child can sit in the pen we use to keep the dogs away from the chickens. Günter has taken the animals hunting so it's empty right now. We'll find somewhere better before he gets back or the master gets angry."

Ella yowled as the basket was set down and the motion that was lulling her to sleep finally stopped. Uwe handed the woman a bowl of milk. "Thanks boy," she muttered as she tried to pour manageable amounts down the squirming babe's throat. Grunting in exasperation as Ella bumped the bowl and upended half of the liquid down her dress, she faced the boy. "Get more, we'll need it." Uwe scurried away to milk another cow or goat or whatever animal he collected the milk from the first time.

Finally, Ella drank enough milk to still her flailing limbs enough for the young woman to pour the rest into her. Then she dried the baby off and left her on the ground as she went back inside to work. She paused on the threshold and pointed at Uwe. "Watch her. Make sure she doesn't choke on a rock or eat something else she shouldn't."

He nodded fervently as the door clicked shut behind her. I wasn't sure how much I trusted this boy to keep Ella safe, but the woman had and as long as he did his job well enough to keep her safe for an hour or so, I knew I should be able to find enough fairies to rescue her. So, as she crawled clumsily over to Uwe and he scrunched up his face in disgust I flew over the manor walls and into the forest.

Evening was beginning to fall as I made my way through the trees. Whistling softly, I called out a greeting to any fairies nearby. Since many of us prefer night to day because there are less humans about, I found a few who were just shaking off their slumber. And together we gathered eleven more fairies before we raced back to Lord Raubritter's manor.

I could hear Ella crying as we approached. Racing over the wall, I reached the dog pen. The animals were back. They barked and snarled at me and the others as we dashed towards the wall before someone looked out to see what was causing the ruckus. Ella cried even louder. Her voice was coming from above us. We flew up the wall and landed on the ledge of a second

story window. The baby was sitting in front of the door bawling. A quick glance showed us that she was alone, so we all flew into the room. Babies are too young to worry about being seen by them. Her basket was flipped over on the far side of the room. I wondered if they had left her in it and she had toppled out when she tried to crawl around. Several of the fairies righted the basket while the rest of us swaddled her and magicked her back into her basket. Once more I cast a sleeping spell on her. Her parents might spend the majority of this night awake with their child who usually spent at least some of the day awake now, but some how I doubted they would care.

Once she was still, two fairies looked out the window to see if there was any danger of being spotted. Long shadows filled the courtyard. Most of the guards had come inside for their supper, and those who were still out, were focusing their attention on the surrounding forest, not a window on the second floor.

Grunting, we lifted up our burden and fluttered out the window. The two watchers flew ahead to warn us of any danger. But after having to hid behind the tower or a tree once or twice, we left the manor and flew through the trees.

I don't know how long it would have taken them to notice their charge was missing, but we made it back to Lord Bergmann's manor. We fluttered up to Ella's window. It was closed by I could hear Lady Agna sobbing within. Shaking my head, I guided us to the master bedroom instead. It was silent as a collapsed mine. We set the basket in front of the bed where Ella couldn't get hurt if she squirmed and I lifted the spell. The baby woke up as the other fairies left and babbled the contented babbles of a child who recognises her home. I pinched her to make her cry and then hid behind the curtain.

"Ella!" Lady Agna tripped over her gown and crashed to the floor beside her child in her rush to gather Ella up in her arms.

Smiling, I fluttered out the window, but not before I heard Agna thank Ella's angel. Then, though I was tired from the flight home and the travel before, I went back to Raubritter's home. Ella might be home now, the toll booth might have fallen, and he may have lost some money, but I wasn't sure that was enough to stop him from coming back for Ella once more. Besides, I still had one more wish to fulfil.

When I arrived the manor was in an uproar. Lord Raubritter noticed Ella's absence. I almost didn't notice him as I surveyed the gathering in the courtyard. He had left his regal robes in the manor and was no dressed in dark browns and greens.

"The fools think they can take her back," he was saying as I slipped in unnoticed and hid in the pouch on Raubritter's hip. It was awful been jammed in there with all of his coins. With each motion, they battered my wings, and I was so worried the motion might break them. And the clanking was too loud for me to catch another word of his speech. But soon I felt us swing up into a saddle and we clattered out of the manor's gates and down the road towards Bergmann's manor.

THE THREE WISHES

It was hard to think as I was being clobbered by the coins, but I knew I had to come up with something. It would be a rather useless spell of safety if Ella was brought home only for them to all be killed in retaliation. I needed to slow them down. It was risky, but I cast a spell making the horse think it stepped in a wasp's nest.

Raubritter's steed screamed and reared up on its hind legs. Raubritter yelled and tried to calm it down, but it bucked and kicked throwing me and lord to the ground. Thankfully, he landed with his coin belt up so I was not smooshed beneath his body. I wiggled out of the bag as he raced after his ride, but the steed was heedless of its training as it disappeared down the lane.

Raubritter swore and threw a rock after the creature, but it bounced and skittered harmlessly across the ground far away from its intended target. I darted into the bushes and flew alongside the road to see if there was any thing else I could do to slow them down while I thought of a plan.

A branch snapped on my right far away from the road. Normally I wouldn't have stopped but a very human voice hissed in frustration over the noise. I flew towards the nearest tree and hid in the leaves.

Below me I saw about a dozen soldiers. Not one of them bore the mark of Lord Raubritter, and as I stared at them, I realized they were actually showing the marks of several different nobles and one of them even wore the same patch that I saw on the merchant's crew earlier.

"Shh boy, we don't want to be seen," hissed the one I took to be the leader due to his age and irritation at the other. "If someone warns Lord Raubritter this whole task is done for, he'll reinforce his walls and probably kill the babe before we get her."

"Whoever is yelling isn't going to hear us anyway," retorted the younger soldier, earning him a swat on the back of the head from an older guard wearing the same mark.

I sank lower so my head was level with the leader's ear, though I remained hidden by the leaves. "That is Lord Raubritter screaming," I whispered. "His horse has fled and he's on foot surrounded by his guards."

His head spun to face me, but the only thing his eyes took in was the tree. "Who said that," he asked tilting his head to see around the trunk. "Is that scout back?"

"I don't see her," whispered another soldier. "But who else would know that?"

The leader nodded and singled the troop to move forward. I followed them from a safe distance as they quietly slipped through the trees. Soon, they had Raubritter and his men surrounded. The soldier's charged. Snapping my fingers, I dazzled Raubritter's eyes like I had done to Boden earlier. He hollered and clamped his hands to his face as he tried to escape the trap. With a wave of my hand, I raised the root before his foot. His toe snagged it and he crashed to the ground and the soldiers tied him up.

Before I flew away, I heard the leader speak. "Well Raubritter, seeing as you wanted a

mine, I hope you like seeing stone and iron all day. Because you are going to be seeing a lot of it. We've got you for kidnapping and running an illegal toll. Say goodbye to your castle."

* * *

My tongue was beginning to stick to the roof of my mouth, and my throat was so dry. I swallowed hard to try and lubricate it. I hoped they didn't ask me any questions, because I wasn't sure how much longer I would be able to talk without a drink.

My gaze drifted over to Aire. Maybe Lord Raubritter escaped from the guards. I didn't stay to find out what happened, so I wouldn't know. Perhaps he ended up as a poor woodsman after all. But, he certainly wasn't one when he and I met. And I certainly didn't curse him or damage our relationship with the humans.

No questions seemed to be coming. The clerk waved her hand at me and my escort guards unhooked the chains so they could lead me back to the upper waiting box while the king his advisers deliberated.

My heart fluttered uselessly around and I rang the iron chain between my hands like a cloth. The cool iron was slick with the moisture from my palms.

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to watch them leaning back and forth as they discussed my story and the forest fairy version of it.

One of the guards nudged me and I opened my eyes to see that I had been summoned back down before the king. King Hadrian looked intently at Aire. My heart sang hopefully as the other fairy wilted before the king. But then, the exalted King of the Sun and Stars turned to me. "Aurianna Glden," he began. His cool and crisp voice felt like a fall evening as it moved through my body. "You have been accused of some terrible crimes. The least of which is trespassing in the home of another. For that crime, you have been found innocent. For while you admit you were there, the woodland fairies knew of your presence. In fact, they helped you fulfil the first wish of returning the child safely."

I stood a little straighter and a wisp of a smile toyed with the corners of my mouth. He believed me. He found me innocent.

"Furthermore, you have been found innocent of cursing a woodsman. For while he might have been dressed as one in the end to disguise his true identity, the truth is he was a noble. And, if we were to speak to the woodland fairies who aided you," he paused and scanned the crowd behind Aire, all of the forest fairies were studying their toes or inspecting the edges of their wings. My smile grew. "I suspect they would change their mind and attest to the fact that you were with a noble at first. Moreover, one of my own advisors saw you arrive at the manor with him."

My toes wanted to dance along the floor, but I restrained them. I could finish this off with dignity.

THE THREE WISHES

“However,” he continued and my spirit crashed into the ground beneath my feet. “You took many risks while fulfilling the three wishes. Too many risks, and in light of the deteriorating situation between us and the humans near Raubritter’s manor, it can be assumed that they either saw you or suspect your presence. You even admitted that Lady and Lord Bergmann refer to you as Ella’s angel. They might not call you a fairy, but they are aware of your presence. Therefore, we have no choice but to find you guilty of damaging our relations with the humans.”

Sinking to the ground, I stared up at him with tears in my eyes. My wings. They fluttered gently behind me and I wondered if this would be the last time I would ever feel the sensation of their gentle breeze tickling my neck again. Tear drops tinkled off of the chains between my hands.

King Hadrian’s gaze never left my face as he pronounced my sentence. “I have decided to take into account that your crime was committed while attempting to fulfil three difficult wishes, as such, you will not lose your wings.”

I gripped the chain tightly.

“Instead, you will help the woodland fairies replant every shrub, flower, and shroom that was trampled by the humans during your adventure. And every one that has been cut down or squished since.”