

The Hidden Gem

The night was black as charcoal, but the full moon shone plenty of light on the path. The only thing louder than the sound of the horse's hooves on the soft ground was the beating of the witch's heart. She had to keep riding; she had to get the stone as far away from the castle as possible.

The day began like every other day before, but then she had the awful vision of the Opal of Vitae. She had tried to warn the King of her vision but he would listen to none of her explanations or visions and banished her from the Kingdom.

She had to keep the Opal from the boy's hands.

Now, she was riding for her life, the King's guards close behind. She knew she could not let the Opal, with its powers over the weakening and strengthening of life energy, be taken back to the castle. The stone was meant as an object of good, to keep livestock healthy and crops plentiful, but as with all magic, the stone could be used with dark intentions as well.

She cut the horse sharp to the left and rode deep into the forest. Once she was sure she was deep enough to be hidden, she stopped.

Odelette knelt on the ground and pulled the Opal from her satchel. The gem danced in the moonlight with a swirling of colors against a milky background. Her family had worked for the royal family for generations. Now, she was banished and a thief. Her hands trembled as she wrapped the stone in a blanket and began to chant, "*Hoc praesidio magicae, Hoc praesidio magicae...*" A cry pierced the air. Odelette looked down and unwrapped the blanket. There laid a beautiful baby with pink skin, green eyes, and milky white skin.

Odelette knew this was the only way to keep the stone hidden. She wrapped the baby back in the blanket and got back on the horse. As she exited the forest, she saw the lights of a farm house not far up the road. She rode up to the house and laid the baby on the step outside the door.

"Good luck, little one." She whispered.

Odelette got back on her horse and threw a rock at the window of the house. As she rode away she heard the couple opening the door.

“Oh my goodness, Richard, look! Our prayers have been answered.”



Thea awoke just before the sun was up. She knew normally mother would be in the kitchen and father preparing to head for the field, but today she heard nothing.

It must be Dilly!

She ran outside, the lantern light shone out the barn door and she heard voices inside.

“It’s alright, Dilly.” She heard her father say. She saw both of her parents in the stall with the family cow lying in the hay.

“Father?”

“Thea,” Her father looked up. “I had hoped we wouldn’t wake you.”

“No, you didn’t.” Thea said as she knelt next to the cow. “Is the baby coming?”

“Well, we had thought so, but so far, nothing. I can’t even feel movement anymore. It’s like old Dilly has just given up.”

Thea ran her hand along the smooth, brown fur of the cow’s head. She could feel what her father was saying, Dilly was giving up. She lay down on her side so that she was face to face with the cow and continued to stroke her head.

Seconds later, as if on command, Dilly was alert and things were moving forward again. Thea opened her eyes as her father ran to the back of the cow. Within a matter of minutes Dilly’s new calf had arrived and was doing well.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Her father said as they were cleaning up, “You’re my lucky charm, Thea.”

Thea smiled and hugged her father.

About an hour later as the family was sitting down to breakfast, there was a knock at the door. Thea’s father got up to answer the it. Two young soldiers stood on their front step.

“Good morning, Sir. I do apologize for the intrusion, but we come on royal business.”

The young soldier handed her father a gold embossed envelope, “Good day, Sir.”

Thea’s father shut the door and turned to face his eagerly awaiting wife and daughter.

“It appears to be some sort of invitation,” her father replied. “King Edmund is inviting all eligible maidens to the castle so that he may look for a bride.”

“He expects all the young ladies in the kingdom to round up like sheep?” Thea rolled her eyes.

“Like sheep?” her mother cried, “It would be a great honor to be the next Queen of Clearhaven.”

“You can’t seriously expect me to go?”

“And why not?” Her father looked offended by her surprise. “My daughter is just as capable and worthy of being queen as anyone else!”

“But...I...” Thea started.

“No buts!” her mother interrupted. “You will go.”

Thea knew there was no winning this. Her mother had always dreamed of a better life for her, despite her loving the life she already lived.

The next few days were spent in a blur of preparation and flew by. Thea’s mother had sewn her new dresses from the finest fabrics they could afford. Her mother sewed the loveliest dress from pale pink fabric adorned with tiny red roses for her to wear. Thea’s hair was long and so pale of a blonde that it gave off iridescent shimmers in the sun. Her mother brushed and braided it and added a red ribbon to it to match the dress. Thea looked in the mirror and other than her same bright green eyes, she had never seen herself look this way before, so ladylike and pretty.

Soon, her belongings were packed into the wagon and she waved goodbye to her mother as she and her father set off. A half hour later, they arrived at center of Clearhaven. Up ahead of them she saw

the tallest, whitest castle that she could have ever imagined. Her father stopped at the gate where several other carriages and buggies had gathered and young women were milling around and chatting excitedly.

“Father, I can’t do this!” Thea blurted out, her heart pounding in her ears, “I...I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to leave the farm. I thought I could do this, but I can’t.”

“Thea, your mother has worked herself to exhaustion to prepare you for this. She wants nothing but the best life for you. You made her a promise. You made us a promise.”

Thea closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt childish and now guilty.

Thea exited the buggy and stepped back to retrieve her trunk only to realize it was already being unloaded by a couple of royal guards. She kissed her father goodbye and went to join the other ladies at the gate. Thea looked around at the rest of the girls. There appeared to be about twenty to twenty-five girls in total.

“Please stand for His Royal Highness Prince Sebastian.”

Prince Sebastian made his way to the stage. Thea had seen him before, but he was much more private than his older brother, the King. She knew very little about him. Although she now knew he was attractive with brown hair and bright blue eyes.

“Good morning,” he said, “My brother sends his regards and deepest regrets at not being able to greet you personally. I stand in his place to welcome you and help you all to get settled in to the quarters that my brother has had specially built for all of you in the castle garden. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to let the Archduke or castle staff know.”

The group of women were led around to the back of the castle to the garden. There stood what appeared to be twelve small cottages surrounded by the lush greenery and colorful flowers of the garden. Thea saw her trunk setting outside one of the cottages.

She entered the small building to see two beds, desks, and a fireplace. Sitting on one of the beds was a pretty red-haired girl.

“Hello!” The girl leaped up to shake Thea’s hand. “I’m Gwendolyn. I believe we’ll be sharing these quarters.”

“Alright,” Thea said, “Well, it’s lovely to meet you.”

“I just know we will be the very best of friends.”

Thea smiled at the girl’s enthusiasm and excitement.

The ladies all settled in and rested until they were called for dinner. Thea watched as her cottage mate Gwendolyn primed and powdered and prepared to meet the King. Thea had changed dresses and brushed her hair. She felt like she was ready enough.

“I think I’ll get a breath of air.” Thea said, but Gwendolyn continued fretting over her hair and didn’t hear.

Thea liked the atmosphere the King had created. The cottages together seemed to make a small village all of its own. Thea reached up to touch the bricks of the cottage, they were smoother than those that her father had used to build the farmhouse.

“Interested in masonry?”

Thea turned toward the voice behind her. It was Prince Sebastian.

“I’m sorry if I startled you.”

“No, no, Your Highness. You didn’t.” Thea curtsied to the prince.

“Now, now,” he smiled, “None of that. In fact, just call me Sebastian.”

“Oh, no, Your Highness, I couldn’t.” Thea’s cheeks flushed pink.

“Of course you can!” He laughed, “In fact, call my brother Eddie as well.”

Thea smiled, “You’re teasing me.”

“Maybe a little. But I’m serious about my name...just Sebastian.”

Thea looked at him skeptically. He didn’t even know her name, but was ready to be on such informal terms.

“And you would be?”

“Just Thea.”

The prince let out a raucous but charming laugh, “Now who’s teasing? Well, ‘Just Thea’. You are a guest in my home. No one, but no one, calls me ‘Prince Sebastian’ or ‘Your Highness’ unless my brother is in the room.”

“That was a really rousing welcome you gave earlier.” Thea said.

Sebastian shook his head, “I don’t care for being my brother’s stand-in. To know that all of these girls are here for the money and the title; it’s hard to get excited.”

Thea raised an eyebrow at this statement.

The prince caught her look and realized he had insulted her.

“No, no. Not all! I just meant...I’m sorry...”

BONG, BONG... A deafening bell chimed from the castle tower.

“Ah, dinner!” Sebastian said. “Allow me to escort you to make up for my error?”

Sebastian held out his arm for Thea to take. She place her hand on his and let him escort her to dinner.

Thea and Sebastian entered the grand dining room. The ceiling seemed to be twenty feet high. The tall, skinny windows that lined the room were spotlessly polished and adorned with gold draperies. The long dining table was set for thirty with crystal and gold.

“A little overwhelmed?” Sebastian whispered.

“My entire house could fit in this one room.” Thea said.

Once all the ladies were seated, the heralds sounded their horns to announce the King. The ladies all stood and turned to the door. Out stepped the King, a tall man with reddish brown hair. He looked serious, but not unfriendly. He took his place at the head of the table.

“Please, be seated. I am King Edmund of Clearhaven. I look forward to meeting each of you over the next few days. Please enjoy your meal. We will hold a small reception after.” With that, the King sat and the food began to arrive. Thea hadn’t stopped long enough today to even realize how hungry she was.

The food was delicious but much richer than Thea was used to on the farm. Her stomach began to feel a bit queasy on top of the butterflies she was already feeling. The reception was held in a ballroom in the castle’s east wing. Thea had expected a bit more casual feel, but instead found the room quite cold. The King took his place on a throne on the front of the room while the girls mingled with each other.

“How odd.” Thea thought to herself. How would he get to know anyone if he never even interacts with them?

“Enjoying yourself?” Sebastian had found her again.

“Oh yes, everything is quite lovely.”

“You look puzzled.”

“Well, I mean no disrespect, but how is the King to pick a wife if he never even speaks to any of us?”

“Excellent point. My brother isn’t exactly social, but I’m sure once the right girl is spotted, we’ll know.” Sebastian shrugged.

“I feel like a heifer at a cattle sale.” Thea muttered.

“Well, let’s change that.” Sebastian took her by the hand and led her through the room to the King’s throne.

“No, no, please. I’m not ready to…” Thea was cut off by Sebastian.

“Brother,” Sebastian began, “Please meet Miss Thea…um…”

As Thea began to speak up and offer her family name, she felt a lurch in her stomach and before she had time to even move, the rich dinner made an unpleasant reappearance…all over the King’s lap. Thea slapped her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, your majesty, I’m…I’m…so sorry. I…”

The King sat in shock with a flush of anger reddening his face.

He shouted, “Someone find the maids!”

Mortified, Thea ran from the ballroom and out into the garden. She hadn’t wanted to marry the King, but she didn’t want to humiliate herself and shame her family either.

“Thea?” It was Sebastian.

“Please, leave me alone.” Thea reached up to wipe her tears.

“Oh, come now. It’s not all that bad.”

Thea looked incredulously at Sebastian. Had he lost his mind?

Sebastian smiled. “Okay, so, it was pretty bad. But, my brother is getting cleaned up and will live to see another day. And I, for one, thought it was fantastic! You’re definitely a front-runner in my opinion.”

Thea allowed herself a small giggle. “Stop, you’re teasing me again!”

“Well, I’m going to leave you to your thoughts, but please don’t fret. Tomorrow will be a whole new day.”

The next morning, the ladies and the King were to go horseback riding. Thea felt a slight bit of relief knowing this was something she could do. She was careful to eat lightly at breakfast.

As the ladies all gathered near the castle gate, Thea saw the King approach her from the corner of her eye. She groaned inwardly at the thought of seeing him.

“Miss Thea,” the King began, “I want to apologize for my behavior last night. I’m afraid I was as nervous as everyone else and I was rude. I do hope you’re feeling better?”

“Oh, yes, your majesty.” Thea smiled with relief.

“Wonderful.” The King replied with a warm smile.

Riding through the meadow was the most relaxed Thea had been since arriving. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to get lost in the motion of the horse and the wind in her face. Suddenly, a piercing scream tore her from her moment of serenity. Thea looked back to see Gwendolyn on the ground.

“I think she’s dead!” a blond girl screamed as Thea arrived. Sebastian and the King were already off of their horses and tending to Gwendolyn. Thea jumped off her horse to join them.

“She isn’t dead,” Sebastian said, “but she isn’t far from it. I’m not sure we can get her back to the castle.”

Thea took Gwendolyn’s hand and closed her eyes. Seconds later, Gwendolyn gasped. Thea opened her eyes to see her cottage mate looking at her, startled and scared, but alert and everyone else staring at her.

“What, what happened?” Gwendolyn asked.

“You got quite a knock on the head.” Sebastian replied, still looking at Thea, “Let’s get you back to the castle and have the court physician take a look at you.”

The girls all began to cheer as Sebastian put Gwendolyn on his horse to ride back to the castle. As Thea turned to get her horse, she found herself face to face with the King.

“That was quite impressive, Thea.” The King said.

“What was, your majesty?”

“The way you saved that girl, of course.”

Thea smiled, “Oh no, I didn’t do anything. Just prayers and positive thoughts.”

“I really must have you pray for me one day.” The King smiled.

Thea blushed. She could never explain her ability, and downplayed it when possible, but it was always nice to be appreciated.

“Thea, I’d like you to have dinner in my private dining room with me tonight.” The King said, “That is, if you would like to.”

Thea nodded. Words had completely escaped her.

Later that evening, Thea was escorted to the King’s private dining room. It was much smaller of an area than the main dining hall, but was still rather large.

“Thea!” The King rushed to the door to greet her, “Please come in.”

Thea thought the King’s behavior was a complete turn from how he had been before. Dinner came and went with the two of them making small talk.

“So, Thea, tell me about your family.” King Thomas said, “Do you have any siblings?”

“No siblings,” Thea said, “My mother and father were never able to have children. I was left on their doorstep as an infant. My mother says I was a miracle from God.”

The King smiled, “That’s unfortunate. My brother Sebastian was a great comfort to me after the loss of our father. Have you had a chance to meet him? My brother, I mean.”

“Yes, he’s been very kind.” Thea replied.

“Sebastian has always been more charming than I am, I’m afraid.”

Thea wanted to disagree, but knew he wasn’t wrong. Sebastian had a roguish quality about him whereas the King was very formal.

“I’m sure it’s hard to be charming with the country’s fate in your hands.” Thea said.

“You’re not wrong. When I was young, I wanted to be the court jester.” King Edmund chuckled. Thea admired his smile. She hadn’t seen much of it before.

“A jester? Really?” Thea giggled.

“Oh yes, I even learned to juggle!”

“You must show me sometime!” Thea said, delighted that the King had begun to relax with her.

“Promise.” He said.

The rest of the evening went by quickly with pleasant conversation and laughter.

“This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time. I do hope we can do it again. I’d still like to learn more about those prayers of yours.” The King said.

“Of course, your Majesty.” Thea said.

“Please, Thea, call me Edmund.”

The next morning Thea slept in while the other ladies were taken on a tour of the countryside. She was sure this would cause some sort of disruption, but she was too tired to care. She was awakened by a sudden and loud knock at the door.

Thea stumbled, half asleep, to answer the door. Standing there was an old woman, clothes in rags and her hair matted, dirt was smudged on her face. She charged into the cottage.

“Excuse me,” Thea started, “May I help you with something?”

“I had to see for myself.” The old lady wheezed, “I had to know it was you.”

“And who are you?”

“I am Odelette. I am the witch who stole the Opal of Vitae from the royal family and turned it into a human child to protect it. I am the witch who left that child on the front step of a farm house. I am the witch that was tracked down, locked up, and tortured until I revealed where the stone had been hidden. And now, I am the witch who will die knowing that he has found you and can never forgive myself.”

Thea looked at the old woman in disbelief. She was a stone?

“You needn’t doubt me, dearie. Every word is true. Have you ever brought an animal or a human back from the verge of death with just a touch of your hand? Have you ever relieved the pain of a dying creature just by holding it in your arms?”

Thea nodded slowly.

“The Opal of Vitae was a strong, magical stone that could strengthen or weaken the life force of anything. You possess those same powers. That is why he has brought you here. He forced me to reveal that I had turned the stone human, but had no way of knowing who you were. Now he has found you and just as my vision foretold years ago, he will use your powers to weaken his enemies until they are all under his control.”

Thea sat staring at the old woman. She knew she was telling the truth.

Suddenly, several of the King's guards knocks violently on the door.

"They've come for me!" Odelette said just as the guards busted the door.

"That's enough from you, you old loon." The guard said as he dragged her from the cottage.

Thea quickly dressed. She had to stop Edmund and could think of only one person to help her.

"Sebastian!"

Thea ran all through the castle calling his name and finally found him at the stables.

Sebastian turned and ran to her when he saw the look of panic on her face. "What is it? Are you ill?"

"No, Sebastian, I need your help."

Sebastian led Thea to a hay bale and sat her down. He reached up to smooth the hair from her face.

"Anything." He said.

Thea began to tell Sebastian the old witch's story. His face grew graver and graver as she spoke.

"She told you that you are the Opal of Vitae?"

"Yes."

"And my brother is going to use you to destroy Clearhaven and surrounding kingdoms?"

"Yes."

"This is a lot to take in. My whole life I had heard the story of the castle witch who ran away with the Opal of Vitae, but I just never imagined them true. What do we do now?"

"You'll help me?" Thea asked.

Sebastian nodded.

“We have to stop Edmund.”

Edmund proved far easier to find than Sebastian. Thea walked into the throne room and saw him standing out on the balcony. Edmund turned at the sound of Thea’s steps.

“Thea.” He said as his face brightened. He began to walk toward her.

“Stop, Edmund.” Thea held up her hand, “I know your plan and I’ve come to stop you.”

“My plan?”

“Yes. Your plan to use me and my powers to destroy the surrounding countries and take control for yourself.”

“What?” Edmund said, “Thea, what on earth are you talking about?”

“She’s talking about MY plan.”

Thea whirled around to see Sebastian holding his sword in her direction.

“Sebastian?”

“Yes, so sorry, Thea. But this is why you should never get your information from an old hag who has been tortured for several years. They tend to omit details.” Sebastian said with a wicked smile.

“Sebastian,” Edmund spoke up, “What is happening? What are you doing?”

“Oh, dear brother. I’m claiming what is mine, starting with your title.” Sebastian began to move forward, pushing Thea toward Edmund. “See, I knew if I could get the right girl here, I could use her to murder you and rise to the throne. I hadn’t planned on it being quite so quickly, but that old hag saw to that.”

“But why?” Edmund asked as he pushed Thea behind him to protect her. “We’re brothers.”

“It’s not personal. It’s about power. I knew since we were children that I would be the superior king. Some men are born for greatness and I am one of those men.”

Sebastian lunged toward them, knocking Edmund out of the way and grabbing Thea.

“Now, like a good girl, grab onto him and drain his life!” Sebastian held the sword on Edmund.

“As you wish.” Thea said.

While Sebastian’s guard was down, Thea reached back and grabbed onto his face with all her might. When he finally knocked her away and she fell against the wall.

“You witch!” Sebastian screamed as he fell to the ground, his face was aged and wrinkled, his body weakened.

Edmund leaped forward and grabbed Sebastian’s sword and held it on him. “Do not make me use this, brother!”

“You fool!” Sebastian screamed as he struggled to stand. “You protect her? She is just a thing! An object that some old witch disguised!”

Edmund looked at Thea and then back at his brother.

“No, brother. She is more human than you have proven to be.”

Sebastian charged toward Edmund, knocking the sword from his hand, and the two wrestled around the room.

Thea began to rouse and saw the two brothers locked in a battle. She noticed the sword laying, unguarded, across the room. She slowly began to make her way to it, but before she reached it, Sebastian saw her.

With one hard shove, he threw his brother to the ground and grabbed the sword. He turned on Edmund and held the sword above his head, ready to strike his brother down.

“NO!” Thea screamed as she charged toward Sebastian, knocking him off balance. Sebastian stumbled back against the balcony railing. Thea reached out to grab him, but was not quick enough. He fell several stories down and landed twisted on the ground.

Thea sat shaking and panting. Edmund came over to her.

“Are you alright?”

Thea shook her head and began to cry.

“I know it was an accident, Thea. I know you weren’t trying to kill him. You saved my life.”

Edmund pulled Thea into a hug to both thank her and comfort her.

The next day, Thea returned home to the farm. Sebastian was given a royal funeral and his death was never questioned. Odelette was freed and went to live on Thea’s family’s farm to recuperate and help Thea learn to use and control her powers. After a month, things began to return to normal.

One morning over breakfast, there was a knock at the door. Thea jumped up to answer it.

“Good morning, Miss.” It was Edmund.

“Your Majesty!” Thea was shocked to see him.

“Edmund, please. I hope I’m not disturbing you.” Edmund smiled, “I’ve come on official, royal business.”

“Oh?”

“You see, as King, I take my word very seriously.”

“Your word?”

“Yes, it seems I made a promise to share my juggling abilities with a wonderful young lady, but was unable to keep that promise.”

Thea smiled. "You've come to juggle for me?"

"I have." Edmund said as he pulled two red balls and a small red velvet box from behind his back.

Thea gasped, "Edmund?"

Edmund knelt down and opened the velvet box revealing a shimmering opal ring.

"I can still juggle it, if you want."

Thea took the delicate ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. She looked at Edmund, concerned.

"Would you be marrying the girl or the stone?" She asked.

Edmund stood up and pulled her to him.

"I'd be marrying you."