

Songbirds

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The rain was hard, and cold, the village a welcome sight. Reynaldo had been riding for days without seeing any signs of civilization -- and he had thought that good. If he were to find the Songbirds, he believed he would find them in this wilderness at the very edge of the kingdom.

But even the best hunter welcomed a respite after days of unrelenting rain. The village was as dismal as the weather: small hovels with little more than a door, the occasional house, and finally, at the end of town, an inn that looked like it had seen better days.

At least it had a stable. He dismounted and looked for a stablehand. Seeing none, he led Cara to the only stall.

He would have tended her himself even if there had been a stablehand. She was the only pure white horse in the kingdom. He never let anyone else touch her -- only his brushstroke cleaned her coat, only his hand fed her, and he cherished the small nuzzle she would give his shoulder, or her soft sighs of contentment. They were his best reward, and his only real joy.

His life was bleak -- had been since he was a boy -- but he knew no way of improving it. He already lived in the palace, and was the best in his field. He wasn't sure he had the capacity for love, and if he did, he wasn't sure if it would improve his life. The kingdom was a gloomy place, but he'd heard of none better.

He'd only seen better in his dreams -- dreams he could barely remember.

The hay in the stalls was fresh. There was good food, several buckets of rainwater, and surprisingly, a handful of apples. He gave Cara one -- a thank-you for carrying him so far -- and then he stroked her velvet nose.

"If the stablehand shows up and gives you trouble," he said, "call for me. You know I'll hear you."

She whickered and nudged him, as if urging him to go inside the inn, and take care of himself.

He hated to leave her, but he really wanted a warm meal and a soft bed. If there was no room, he'd sleep in the hay. Cara wouldn't like it; she wanted privacy at night. But he would rest easier, knowing she was all right.

She nudged him a second time, and he smiled. "All right, I'll go. Sleep well."

But she wasn't looking at him any longer. Her head was bowed, and she was drinking from one of the buckets he'd set near her. When he walked back into the rain, it seemed as if she had forgotten all about him.

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The inn had one room left, so small that to call it a closet would be to give it dignity. He'd left it almost immediately and headed into the tavern. Locals clustered around the wooden tables, drinking the watered-down ale.

He picked a table in the back corner, close enough to the fire to get warm, but far enough away that no one would notice him. One of his best skills was his ability to disappear into his surroundings, to make those around him comfortable by his quiet.

"We have mutton tonight," the serving wench said. She had noticed him quicker than he liked. He looked up at her with surprise. He hadn't even heard her approach.

She was young and thin, barely big enough to carry trays.

"Mutton is fine," he said.

She nodded, and went away. He leaned back in his chair, legs stretched out before him, ankles crossed. His dark pants, tucked into his scuffed boots, were wet and mud-covered. Only his shirt remained dry, except on the shoulders, where his long black hair dripped.

The tavern was clearly where the innkeeper made his money. Only a handful of the locals were eating, and once his food came he knew why. The mutton was old and gray, leaving a pool of grease in the broth, and the bread had mold on the corners.

Because he hadn't eaten in two days, he picked off the mold and choked down the bread, but the mutton wasn't worth his time. He sent it back with a request for cheese and some more bread.

It took the serving wench only a few moments to bring him a new plate. The food on this one looked appetizing. The bread was still warm. The cheese was a perfect white, soft to the touch. Obviously, the innkeeper here had two kinds of food: the cheap horrible stuff for travelers, and the good food for regulars. By complaining, Reynaldo had put himself in a new category.

He thanked the girl and sighed as she walked away. He wished she were plump and world-wise. He would have loved someone warm in his bed tonight. The road had given him a chill. He hadn't expected to have been traveling for so long.

Prince Tadeo had his heart set on a Songbird for the coronation. He had sent Reynaldo -- and no one else -- after it. Reynaldo was the best magic hunter in the Kingdom, and this trip was meant as an honor -- or perhaps a chance at humiliation.

He knew that the other magic hunters had snuck away surreptitiously, hoping to beat him at the profession he had invented. But they would not. In their entire careers, they only found the easy, obvious creatures. It took Reynaldo's patience, his determination, and his stillness to bring the truly elusive creatures out of hiding.

That, and his ability to find the remote places where the creatures lived in the first place. He had been the only one of Tadeo's hunters to capture creatures like unicorns and sea witches. His triumphs gave him a room in the palace, a favored position at Tadeo's table, and a bit of gold, but not enough to last him through the long dry spells between Tadeo's whims.

Songbirds were proving the most elusive of the magics that Reynaldo had ever sought. Reynaldo had hoped that Tadeo wouldn't learn of them, but he did a year ago when a storyteller visited court. The storyteller told an ancient tale about the Songbirds and the days when their magic filled the kingdom. Then they had served the king and, more than once, saved his crown.

Things had changed in the centuries since. For reasons the storyteller did not explain, the Songbirds rebelled. Most were slaughtered, and the remainder -- it was said -- went into hiding. No one had seen a Songbird in nearly a thousand years.

Reynaldo had tried to tell Tadeo that, but of course the Prince didn't listen. Tadeo had been a magic collector since childhood, and to get a magical creature thought extinct only increased the lure. Tadeo thought it perfect for his coronation, half a year away. He wanted to reveal the greatest magic of all on

that day.

Reynaldo sighed and ate the thick warm bread. It had a freshness that was foreign to his tongue. Not even the bread at the palace was this good. His second mug of ale was not diluted this time, and the cheese was the best he had ever tasted.

He was nearly done eating when the serving wench climbed on a stool in front of the fireplace. Conversation ceased, and Reynaldo pushed back his chair. The girl seemed too young to be the entertainment, but she wrapped her hands around her knee as if she were accustomed to sitting in front of a crowd. She surveyed everyone before her gaze met his. She had very old eyes.

She leaned her head back, and began to sing without accompaniment. The hush in the room grew. Her voice had a richness and depth that he had never heard in a human voice before. It had overtones, undertones, and harmonics all its own.

Her first song had no words, and neither did her second. By the third, he no longer listened for words, only for tonalities and phrasing. The sound of her voice sent shivers through him. The place seemed brighter, the fire warmer, and the girl prettier.

He found himself wondering if he'd had too much to drink, and knowing he hadn't. He was listening to a Songbird.

He had completed his quest.

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Reynaldo knew better than to capture her in public. He had some research to do. He needed to find out if the girl's family were all Songbirds and if the rest of the village knew it. The girl -- young as she was -- might not be the best choice for Tadeo's collection. An older Songbird might serve better and not be as hard to hold.

Magic, Reynaldo knew, was always hard to hold, especially for those who had none. He had captured magic countless times using only his intelligence and his strength. Underestimating magic was always the worst thing a hunter could do.

Reynaldo listened until the girl finished her miraculous concert. The local crowd applauded and then went back to their ale as if the girl had done nothing unusual. He allowed himself to be shocked and pleased, made a point of complimenting her on the beauty of her voice, and got a blush in return as well as a free mug of ale. But he asked no questions, sought no answers, just paid his table with one of his last coins and took the stairs to his tiny room.

And there he collapsed on the bed, determined to have a plan by morning.

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Reynaldo dreamed of colors so bright that they hurt his eyes, scents so pure that they cleared his head, and fabrics so soft that they soothed his skin. He had had dreams like this before. He believed they were moments when he actually touched magic, when he was allowed to enter a world where life was more vivid, each sensation more profound than the one before. He knew if he stayed here long, he would never want to leave. But he also knew that he could not stay.

The colors faded first, then the scents, and finally the softness. He was cold and damp, and the bed smelled of swamp water. He stirred, realized that his face was wet, and opened his eyes.

He was lying face-down in a rut on a muddy road. It was raining so hard that the rut was filling with water. If he'd dreamed much longer, he would have drowned.

Reynaldo sat up and wiped the mud from his face. He was wearing his cloak and boots, even though he had taken them off for bed. The cloak had been stolen from a water elf, and kept his torso dry. But his pants and boots were wet as they had been the night before.

He was in a clearing, and the road continued north into a forest of trees. The same forest he had seen the night before at the edge of the village.

But the village itself was gone. There were no hovels, no small houses, no inn. And no stable.

Cara. He felt his breath catch. He scanned the area, looking for her, hoping she was grazing beneath a tree. He should have seen her white coat even if she were miles away, but he saw nothing except the dark trees, mud, and the greenish gray grass.

She was gone. They had taken her, his prize possession, his heart, and his companion.

It was almost as an afterthought that he patted his cloak, feeling for his purse -- humble as it was -- and couldn't find that either.

The great magic hunter had been robbed by his quarry. They had known from the beginning who he was and what he wanted, and they had toyed with him all night. Then they had left him here, alone, to die.

Although that wasn't accurate. He had clearly been at their mercy. They could have killed him at any point. They let him live as a warning, perhaps to Tadeo, or perhaps to himself.

But they had taken Cara, and no one did that. He had to find her. He couldn't imagine being without her.

Rain splattered around him. The puddle grew deeper, the mud thicker. He got up and shook his hair free of his cloak, and studied the area, looking for signs of magic.

The clearing was an unnatural one, with paths that branched off the road and then stopped. Large patches of dead grass, and even larger patches of mud covered the ground. He saw bits of hay and horse manure where the stable had recently stood.

The village had been here, just as the inn had been here, just as the stable had been here. But it was all gone now.

The wind came up, cold and biting, pushing Reynaldo back toward the palace. He stood his ground.

He had eaten fairy food and had awakened hungry. He was not hungry now. He had slept the sleep of the enchanted and awakened exhausted. He was not exhausted now.

Obviously his meal and dreams had been as real as they had always been. During his sleep, the Songbirds had taken their village and left him behind.

If Reynaldo went back to the palace for help, he would have to admit his failure. His failure would please Tadeo almost as much as success. Tadeo had been giving Reynaldo tougher and tougher assignments, hoping for this day when his great magic hunter would falter.

But Tadeo did not realize that success was all Reynaldo had. No family, no real friends, no wealth, and no home of his own. Since Reynaldo had been forced into this cursed life by his even more accursed talent, he had lost everything except himself.

Now he faced losing even that.

He would not ride back to Tadeo in shame. He would retrieve his horse, at the very least. At the very best, he would clip the wings of a Songbird and carry it home to its own large, beautiful, gilded cage.

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Six days of tracking on foot. It rained the entire time -- although the rain varied from a downpour to drippy mist. The forest seemed empty of life except for Reynaldo, downed branches, and fallen leaves. He managed to scrounge berries, roots, and bark. That and rainwater kept him sated. But he never had a fire, and his feet were never dry.

The rain, he knew, was not natural. Nor was the stillness of the forest. He had to strain to hear his own feet moving through the mud.

And as he walked, he reviewed what the stories had told him about Songbirds.

Songbirds looked human but lacked all human kindness, all human warmth. Their magic lived in their songs. As long as a Songbird sang the same piece -- without starting over -- it could create a world with that music. Or it could persuade, cajole, or change a long held opinion. Some even said that a Songbird's song could make a heartless man fall in love.

On the seventh day Reynaldo found the village beside a raging river. The village looked the same as before. The houses were in the same order: the road went through the center with paths coming off the sides. The inn was at the north end, and the stable was beside it.

He knew that he found the place because they wanted him to. If they could move the village, they could have kept it hidden from him forever. They finally wanted to see him -- for reasons he was sure he would soon discover.

Reynaldo went directly to the stable and pulled open the wooden doors. Lamps hung from pegs on the wall, shedding a soft light on the straw-covered floor. Cara was in the last stall. She whickered when she saw Reynaldo, and his heart leapt. He had missed her; part of him had thought he would never see her again.

He stepped inside. For the first time in a week, water did not hit him in the face. He was cold and numb, unable to absorb the heat.

He started toward Cara when a melodious voice said, "Stop."

Reynaldo sighed. He had known that it wouldn't be this easy.

"Give me my horse and my money," he said, "and I will leave you in peace."

"Of course you will." The voice mocked him. "Until you remember your promise to your prince to clip our wings."

The phrase was not metaphorical. Songbirds had wings, so the stories said, invisible wings that, if clipped properly, would forever trap them in the hand that maimed them.

"You seem to know a lot about me." Reynaldo was still watching Cara. The horse was not nervous around the Songbird, and magical creatures usually made Cara skittish.

"Dreams reveal much about the dreamer."

So they had peered into his sleep. The Songbirds had a greater magic than he had originally thought.

"But dreams do not reveal all," Reynaldo said. "I did not promise Tadeo that I would clip your wings. I promised him a Songbird for his coronation."

"For his collection."

Slowly Reynaldo turned, hands out, showing that he meant no harm. "Tadeo always wants magic for his collection. What he does with the magic I bring back is his choice. I was instructed to bring back a Songbird for the coronation, nothing else."

He could not see the Songbird, but there were shadows near the door that hadn't been there before.

"You tell pretty lies," the Songbird said. "Is that how you capture your prey?"

"No."

"Pity. It would seem the logical thing." The Songbird stepped out of the shadows. It was the girl, the one who had waited on him, who had sang to him. Only she was not a girl. That had been an illusion. She was a small woman whose hair, skin, and eyes were brown. She wore a brown cape over brown clothing. The only spots of color on her were her red lips and rosy cheeks.

She held herself like a human woman would. He had thought Songbirds would move differently to protect their invisible wings.

"My horse," he said softly, "and my money. Then I will leave."

She smiled. "You're exhausted and wet. You haven't eaten properly in a week. We can give you food and shelter."

"Like you did the last time?" he said. "I nearly drowned."

"The food was real enough, and the bed, too. You spent half the night in it."

"You let me know what you were."

"It took you long enough to figure that out."

"I knew the moment you sat on that stool."

"And you did nothing? That's hard to believe." She crossed her arms. Her cloak bunched slightly, unnaturally, in the back.

"You watched me that first time, peered into my dreams when I slept in the forest, and then let me find you." He glanced at Cara. She seemed to be watching with great interest.

The Songbird did not answer his question, but he saw the truth of it in her eyes. That was the only way they would have known his identity. He hunted infrequently, and never the same creatures twice.

"That still doesn't explain," he said into her silence, "why you're treating me this way. You could have killed me that night. Or better, you could have ignored me. There was no reason to let me see your village. But you want something. What is it?"

"We want to give you your life back," she said.

He felt his shoulders stiffen. "My life has never left me. Or are you telling me that I'm dead?"

"You're not dead." Her voice was soft. "You just haven't lived for years."

"Perhaps by your definition." The tension was working its way down his back. "I don't sing pretty songs and laugh as much as some think I should. But I live."

"In service to a boy who believes that beauty should be caged."

Reynaldo took a deep breath. Some of the tension slipped away. "So that's it. You want me to renounce my work."

"More than that," she said. "We want you to free the creatures that Tadeo holds."

"We?" he said. "Do you speak for yourself or your people?"

"The Songbirds listen to me."

"And they want me to destroy Prince Tadeo's collection."

"Yes."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because of your dreams." She took a step toward him. Her voice was mesmerizing, warm, and rich. "I can let you live in the world of your dreams."

He recognized charm when he heard it. Of course Songbirds could entice. Magic lived in their voices.

"Live in the world of my dreams." He made it sound like he was tempted and -- if he told himself the truth -- he was. "The lush beautiful magical world that I see whenever I'm near something unusual?"

She nodded.

"You want me to risk everything, including my life, for a place where the food tastes better and the colors are brighter? A world I can barely remember when I'm awake? A world I'm not even sure exists?"

Those eyes held him. "Are you sure this one exists?"

He laughed. "I am not a philosopher. Questions like that are better contemplated by smarter men than I."

"There are few men smarter than you are," she said. "You simply have chosen a poor way to use your intelligence."

He crossed his arms. "The creatures I've given to Prince Tadeo live in complete luxury."

An emotion flashed across her face too quickly for him to read it -- Disgust? Amusement? -- he wasn't sure.

"You must decide what you want." The vibrancy had left her voice.

"What if I don't do what you want?"

"Then you'll wander the forest until you decide to return empty-handed. You will lose your status as the greatest magic hunter, but you will have your life. Or you could chose to make a new life away from the kingdom. You do not have to do what we want."

The tension had spread through him. "If I do what you ask, Prince Tadeo will have me killed."

"You chose to come after us."

"There are others who are after you."

Her eyes glittered. "But there is only one who can free Tadeo's prisoners."

He was silent for a moment, weighing her words. Then he said, "What if I don't want to live in the land of my dreams? If I do what you ask, what will you give me instead?"

"A miracle," she said quietly.

He had seen miracles all his life -- and had captured them for his prince.

"I'll do as you ask," he said.

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An instant later he was in the rain, on Cara's back, heading toward the palace. A week of riding, vanished in a single moment.

It felt good to touch her. Part of him thought he had lost her forever. He touched her mane for reassurance, and she grunted, as if he had disturbed her rhythm somehow.

The rain seemed even colder, the wind harsher. The drops stung at his cheeks. Cara's hooves threw mud on him, and only the horse's innate grace prevented them from slipping on the washed out roads.

It had rained here too, rained like he had never seen. Tadeo would be displeased. He hated rain -- always longing for sun or snow.

And now Reynaldo was returning without his prize. He had thought he would have time to come up with a story, but he had nothing. It was the same as having failed.

The palace stood alone at the edge of the Great Wood. The Royal City was several miles to the south. The palace, built a thousand years ago, was purposely isolated; the land itself was seen as a protection against rebels who would attack a king.

But for nearly ten years, there had been no king to attack. Tadeo's father had died of a wasting disease. Tadeo's mother, his father's fifth wife and the only one to bear a child, had become Queen Mother, but the kingdom's laws prevented her from ruling despite her son's youth. Since he was eleven, Tadeo had acted as king. On his twenty-first birthday, he would become king officially.

The coronation would be his greatest triumph -- or so he hoped.

Reynaldo reached the palace gates where the guards recognized him and opened the way. He headed straight for the stables. Once Cara was groomed and fed and placed in a comfortable stall, Reynaldo tended to his own needs.

His rooms were large and well furnished. The main room had carved wooden cabinets that were centuries old, couches embroidered by ladies in waiting of nearly two dozen different queens.

Reynaldo did not even look into the bedroom or the small dining room. Instead he ordered a bath, then went to the wardrobe to chose the proper clothes for an audience with Tadeo.

With the bath came food, and a summons from Tadeo.

The bath was heaven, the steaming water soothing to his cold limbs. He felt as if he hadn't been warm in a year; he ate grapes and small cakes, and drank the cool artesian water.

When he was through, he dressed in silk robes over a white shirt, and a pair of velvet riding trousers which he tucked into polished black boots. The outfit was a mixture of court dress and his usual clothing. He was the only member of the court who did not follow Tadeo's strict dress codes.

Reynaldo hated looking tame.

He took back corridors and a secret passage that led to Tadeo's private audience room. Although Reynaldo was not keeping his return a secret, he did not want the news of it to spread too quickly either.

He had the beginnings of a plan.

He knocked on the hidden door, and Tadeo himself opened it. The prince was slight, dark-haired, and smooth-skinned. He hadn't yet matured enough to grow a beard.

"I have not heard of any great triumph," Tadeo said as he stepped aside, allowing Reynaldo into the room. "Where's my Songbird?"

"Elusive," Reynaldo said.

"Elusive or not, you were supposed to find one." Tadeo crossed the hand-woven carpet to the gilt chair that he only used when speaking business. "Have you?"

"I have been following myth, legend, and rumor for weeks." Reynaldo took a simple wooden chair and sat across from Tadeo. "I found a village at the very edge of the kingdom which led me to believe that some of what I heard is true, and some is not. What is clear is that Songbirds are more powerful than the stories let on. That the kingdom held them in thrall once seems almost miraculous to me."

Tadeo waved a hand in dismissal. He did not care about the past, only the present. "If you were close, I don't understand why you came back."

"To offer you a choice." The room was too warm -- a fire burned high, probably to ward off the damp. The windows were shuttered against the rain, but Reynaldo could hear it, beating against the walls as if it were trying to break in.

Tadeo raised his eyebrows. "A choice? There is no choice, Reynaldo. You are to bring me a Songbird."

"At any cost?"

"Yes, at any cost." And then Tadeo frowned. "What aren't you telling me?"

"The price," Reynaldo said. "But if you don't want to hear it...."

"You know that I will not pay you more than we have already agreed." Tadeo crossed his arms. He was getting angry.

"The cost is yours, not mine."

"Whatever does that mean?"

"It means," Reynaldo said, "that magic is powerful, and sometimes not worth the price of capture."

"Nonsense," Tadeo said. "We haven't paid a price before."

Reynaldo stared at him for a moment. Tadeo was so young that his skin was still soft and lined with baby fat. He had no idea how life exacted a price.

"Well, then," Reynaldo said, pushing himself out of the chair. "If you are unconcerned, I will go about my business."

He had almost made it to the door when Tadeo said, "You've never approached me about a price before. What has changed this time?"

Reynaldo did not turn around. Instead, he smiled. He had maneuvered Tadeo into the place that he wanted him. "The only way I can catch a Songbird is to open the cages of your collection."

"My collection!" Tadeo sounded stunned.

Reynaldo slowly faced him. The boy's cheeks were red. He didn't like the idea. He would now have to choose between all his toys and a single great prize.

"Are you certain you will be able to capture a Songbird with this method?" Tadeo asked.

"Yes," Reynaldo said.

Tadeo leaned back in his chair. It was still too large for him. He looked like a child trying to act like an adult. All except his eyes. They were too cold to be a child's. "Can you recapture my collection?"

"Of course, Sire. They have my marks. They should be easier to find this time."

"How do I know that you're not doing this just to create more work for yourself?"

Reynaldo smiled. "Because there is still so much work to do. You only possess a fraction of the magic that exists in this Kingdom. If you want a complete collection, you must hire two others who are as good as I am -- and we both know there are none -- and then the three of us must capture a magical creature once a month."

Tadeo sighed. "Quite a risk you're taking, Reynaldo. I will kill you if you fail."

"Actually," Reynaldo said softly, "It's your risk, Sire. My life is not worth the price of your collection."

"True." Tadeo stood. He took a deep breath. He was clearly uneasy about the decision, but he had made it, as Reynaldo wanted him to. That way, if Tadeo was dissatisfied with the Songbird, he had no one to blame but himself. "You have my permission."

Reynaldo bowed once. "Thank you, Sire," he said, and let himself out.

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The collection was housed in its own tower on the palace grounds. Tadeo had had the tower built special after Reynaldo had caught his first creature. The tower was designed so that the nobles could view the collection, perhaps even see a bit of magic, without harm -- and without fear that the creatures would escape.

Tadeo had dismissed the guards. The rest of the staff had been ordered not to interfere with Reynaldo.

He was dressed all in black. His boots were silver, his gloves so thick that nothing could touch him. His

heart pounded hard. He had caught fifteen creatures, but he had never freed one before. On this day, he would free everything -- even the creatures caught by his imitators.

Reynaldo carried a bucket filled with sea water, and went to the fresh water grotto in the basement to see sea witch, water elf, and mermaid. The grotto was large and deep. The walls and ceiling were made of rock so that they looked like a natural cave. The humid air smelled of dampness and despair.

They hid, as they always did when he came, but he lured them with the salt water's scent. The sea witch rose first, her magnificent face -- once the gray of a stormy ocean, now so pale as to be nearly clear -- flashing with anger.

"What more can you do to us?" she asked, and as she did, he splashed her with the salt water. She sputtered, shocked, and then the gray returned to her face.

"This is a trick," she said.

He shook his head.

She snapped her fingers, rousing her companions, then she cursed Reynaldo and vanished, leaving a small water funnel in her wake. As the water elf rose to the surface, Reynaldo splashed him as well, and then the mermaid. They didn't vanish like the sea witch. The water elf flew away on a rain cloud, and the mermaid climbed to the side of the grotto. She stood for a moment, naked, legs in place of her tail, and then she approached him.

"May you live as I have these past eight years," she said in her throaty voice. Then she slapped him, took his cloak, wrapped it around herself, and walked out of the room.

Reynaldo stared at the fresh water grotto for a moment, stunned at how easy it was to free its prisoners. It had taken him weeks to catch the mermaid, months to capture the water elf, and nearly a year to find the sea witch, let alone outsmart her. All that work, gone, in the space of a few moments.

He poured the remaining sea water out of the bucket. He cleaned the bucket thoroughly and filled it with fresh water. Then he went to the salt water pools to free the nymphs and water sprites.

By mid-morning, half his prizes were gone. He felt their losses as if the collection belonged to him, not Tadeo. For the first time, Reynaldo wondered at the wisdom of his plan.

But he did not stop. He led the troll to the grotto's bridge, gave gold to the dragon, and pocketed the scissors from the life-weaver's room. He placed the mushroom elf on loamy ground, and gave the griffin his tail. He went through every room, reversing each capture spell until he found himself alone in the tower.

The room was round and made of stone. There was no furniture here, no windows, nothing except a pair of gold-flecked wings in a case made of glass.

He stared at them for the longest time, remembering that summer afternoon in the forest, not far from here. He had been a young man then, so young he had not known a woman and had never dreamed of love. He sat in the glade and waited for days, until the call of his soul was answered.

This was what he had feared most -- this room, this reversal. And he hadn't even admitted it to himself.

He opened the case and removed the wings. They were as soft as he remembered, and they smelled faintly of lavender, just as they had all those years ago. He brought them to his face, leaned his cheek into them, remembering that moment, that fleeting moment, when he thought the world could belong to him.

But of course it didn't. Magic was like a sparkle, something that could be ruined by prolonged close contact. And yet, being close was all he had ever wanted.

He sighed, set the bucket down, and tucked the wings under his arm. He went down the circular staircase to the main floor of the empty tower, and let himself out.

The raindrops seemed fatter than before, colder, almost ice. The sky was black. Sometimes, when it rained like this, it felt as if the sun would never shine again.

He crossed the muddy grounds to the stable. The grooms were gone, as he had ordered.

Cara watched him approach. She was strangely motionless. He would have thought that she would have been pacing the stall in anticipation. But her blue eyes were wide, her white coat trembling, her nose quivering. Those were the only things that revealed her emotions. No one else would have seen it, but no one else knew what Reynaldo held in his hands.

There was nothing he could say -- and neither could Cara. She had lost the art of speech long ago. It had been the second thing to go after he took her wings. First her horn, then her speech, and finally the unusual intelligence in those blue eyes.

He opened the stall door and placed the wings on her back, careful to put them on the proper sides. For a moment, he thought it had been too long, that they wouldn't take. Then they slipped into her skin as if they had never left her.

Her eyes grew darker, her coat gained a sprinkling of gold, and with a twist of light, her horn returned. The air sparkled around her, as it had when she had first come to him in the glade all those years ago.

He pulled the stall door back, and stood aside. She turned her head toward him. She was beautiful again -- her eyes so alive he wondered how he had ever been satisfied with what he had made her.

She brushed his face with the tip of her horn. It was soft and warm, and he could feel the magic sloughing off it. The magic burned him, like sparks from a campfire.

"In spite of myself, I am fond of you," she said, her voice as deep and rich as the Songbird's.

He stepped back so that she could not touch him. "You've been with me all this time. You know what I've become."

"And I remember what you were." She tossed her mane. More magic fell around him, burning when it touched his skin. Then she walked out of the stall and disappeared in the rain.

She did not look back, and he could not stop staring after her. It had been an impulse, the first time, a hunch. Somehow he had known that if he took her wings, she would be his forever. She had come to him, and he wanted to tell his friends about it. But he knew if he returned to his friends without her, they wouldn't have believed him. They would have laughed. He brought her with him to prove to them that he had touched magic.

Then Tadeo saw her and demanded one of his own. But Reynaldo had lied. He had said that he was building a reputation, and would not waste his time capturing the same type of creature twice.

For a decade, he had lived up to that vow.

Now Cara was gone, walking away as if they had not spent the last ten years together. He had thought her his only remaining friend.

He had been wrong.

"I did not think you would live up to the bargain." The Songbird was in the stall with him. She seemed brighter too -- shots of gold in her brown hair, a light behind her dark eyes.

Reynaldo slipped his hand in his pocket, his fingers trembling.

"I didn't live up to it," he said, grabbing her and pulling her close. He wrapped one arm around her tiny little neck and held her tightly.

He could feel her heart beating rapidly, and knew he felt her fright. His fingers closed on the handle of the scissors as he took them out of his pocket and held them over her right shoulder -- the very spot where her coat had bunched a few nights before.

"Prince Tadeo let me use his collection to catch you." Reynaldo could hear her breath rasping, feel the fragility of her small bones against his.

"If you clip my wings," she said, "you destroy more than you can imagine."

He could feel the wings now, fluttering against him. Their feathers were sharp, scratching him.

"It's a risk I will take," he said, opening the scissors.

"You'll start the war all over again. This time, your people will know they lost."

His hand was still trembling. It took all of his strength to hold her and keep the scissors open. "What do you mean?"

"You have always been wrong." Her voice wobbled. "You have a magic. It's a bit of vision, nothing more. You can see edges, corners, things that are usually hidden from your people. That was how you hunted. That was how you knew how to cripple Cara."

He flinched at the phrase. It wasn't accurate. Cara had her wings again. She wasn't permanently damaged.

Before he spoke, he made sure his voice held no emotion. "So?"

"So you dream," she said, "and see what is."

His hand slipped and he nicked her. She cried out. A spot of blood welled in the air an inch above her right shoulder. "What does that matter?"

"You're not the first. Your people's powers have been growing."

"Be clearer," he said softly, "or I will cut your wing off."

"Your people's new powers threaten us."

He tightened his grip on her. Her bones felt more fragile than any bones he had ever touched. "We have always threatened you. The fact that we grow stronger should make no difference."

She laughed. The sound was bitter. "Think. How could we, with all our magic, lose a battle against humans?"

"The rebellion?" he asked. "The Songbirds against the king? Are you saying you won?"

"We create worlds with our song. As long as we never repeat a phrase, the world holds. This one has held for a thousand years."

He gripped the scissors tighter. "The rain isn't natural. There hasn't been enough sun."

"You noticed that, but almost no one else did. They just complained." She stirred in his arms. "And there is no rain now."

He strengthened his hold on her, fearing it was a trick. Then he peered beyond her through the open stable door. Weak sunlight illuminated the mud and the standing water. Cara's hoofprints, leading away from the stable, glittered like gold.

"What's changed?" he asked.

"The magic you captured is now free."

"Why would that make a difference?"

"You held it in thrall, diminishing it. We had less to draw on."

"So I was defeating you all by myself." He brought the scissors down again. "I could have destroyed you."

"Only the illusion," she whispered.

"And once the illusion disappeared, we would have had a chance to fight you again."

She was silent.

"The battle must have been close," he said. "You won by a small margin, or you would not imprison us like this. We barely remembered your existence. You would have kept us ignorant forever if you could."

A shiver ran through her.

"What happens now?" he asked. "What if I clip your wings?"

She opened her mouth and sang a song so clear and pure that the hairs on the back of his neck rose. Around him, the stable melted away. He was standing in the middle of a clearing, very much like the one in which he had found Cara.

The air was fresh and smelled of spring, the grass was greener than any he had ever seen, the sunlight so brilliant that it hurt his eyes. He hadn't realized how diminished his world had been.

There were creatures all around him -- in the sky, on the ferns by his feet, on the flowers blooming beneath the trees. In front of him, three Songbirds -- a man and two women -- stood with their arms around each other. They sang in perfect harmony. Another Songbird approached, another man. For a moment, his song blended with theirs, and then one of the women bowed her head, excusing herself, and walked away. The new man took her place.

"This is a trick," Reynaldo whispered.

"I wish it were," his Songbird said. "But now that you see, I can't blind you again."

"If I let you go, you'll let me live here."

"Yes," she said.

"And what of my people? They'll stay in the darkness and rain, prisoners who have no idea that they're imprisoned."

"They aren't unhappy," she said.

"Are you so sure?" he asked. "If I dream of this place, what's to say others don't as well?"

He felt her stiffen beneath him. So others did dream. He wasn't the only threat.

"Your people started the war," the Songbird said softly. "You tried to destroy us. We barely survived."

"That was a thousand years ago." He was growing cold. "None of the people who harmed you live any longer."

"But you collect us as if we were trophies," she said. "We're not."

"No," he said. "We are."

She shuddered once and then went very still. Her heartbeat was just as rapid, just as frightened. It was the only thing that gave her away.

"I have the power to change everything, don't I?" he asked. "To blend our worlds the way they were before."

"You're not ready to live with us again," she said.

"I think we are. Your world is leaching into ours. I have powers I should not have, and your world bleeds into my dreams. Does ours bleed into yours?"

She was leaning against him as if she were having trouble standing on her own. "If you stay here and do not bring the others, you will have more magic than you ever dreamed of, riches beyond your power to imagine, beautiful women -- anything. Anything at all."

His hand was no longer trembling. "And if I refuse?"

"You will stand in both worlds, and live in neither."

"I will control both worlds," he said, "any time I threaten your music. It's a stalemate. One I could end with two snips of these shears."

"Please, don't. The war -- "

"Won't happen. My people will be too confused, too awed by this new world. They've never seen real beauty. They won't know what it is. And because of that, your people will gain power. They won't have to sing all the time, won't have to expend the magic to create an illusion. We -- all of us -- might move forward."

"We might slaughter each other again."

Her blood, warm and sticky, was flowing onto the arm he used to hold her.

"End your illusion," he said, "and keep your wings."

"It'll be chaos."

"Yes," he said softly.

"You can't stand up to us," she said.

"I can."

The other Songbirds were watching as if they knew that everything rested on this moment. She closed her eyes. He could feel her wings pressing against his chest.

"Stop singing," she whispered.

Faces turned toward her, faces he hadn't seen before. Grass elves looked up from their perches on long blades, flower sprites from their petals, acorn fairies from their leaves.

"What?" a thousand voices whispered, as faint as the wind in trees.

She sighed, then said again, "Stop singing."

The Songbirds stared at her as if she had lost her mind. She was pressing against Reynaldo harder now, and he realized that she was growing weaker.

"Stop singing," he said, "or I'll let her die. What does it take? The loss of one wing? Or both? And if you lose her magic, you lose all, don't you? She's more powerful than all the creatures I captured combined."

The male Songbird closed his mouth. The harmony faded, and then the female Songbird stopped, then the other male. Gradually the music stopped.

Reynaldo's ears rang. He hadn't heard silence before -- not once in his entire life.

Then the silence ended. He heard screams and shouts, and a bellow that he recognized. Tadeo stood a few yards away, and screamed Reynaldo's name.

Reynaldo did not answer. He didn't have to. In this place, there was no kingdom, and Tadeo was simply a young, spoiled boy.

The Songbird let out a small sigh. Her heartbeat wasn't as rapid. Reynaldo scooped her in his arms and carried her to the other Songbirds.

He handed her to them, and one of them carried her away through the tall grass. Reynaldo looked toward the trees and saw Cara staring at him, her eyes filled with tears. Her beauty took his breath away. He had tried to capture that beauty and failed. Holding her had nearly destroyed her.

Just as the world he'd been living in had nearly destroyed him.

He reached for her, but she vanished into the trees. He could pursue her, but to what end? She deserved a life, a free life, just like he did.

Tadeo had reached his side. His face was red with the strain of walking, his skin sheened with sweat.

"Reynaldo," he said, "what is the meaning of this?"

"We've lost our home, Tadeo. We're in the world we've always dreamed of."

"I never dreamed of this," Tadeo said.

But Reynaldo had. A world so bright and vivid that it threatened to overwhelm him. He had been right.

His people would be weaker here while they learned to accept the changes. But they would learn -- if the right person taught them.

"What do we do now?" Tadeo asked.

Reynaldo gazed at him for a moment -- the boy who finally knew how it felt to lose everything. Tadeo couldn't lead them here. He lacked the understanding. He lacked the vision.

He lacked the magic.

Reynaldo no longer had to answer him. The world had changed, in more ways than one.