



# *The Thief and The Knight*

## *Retold*

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Action/adventure, Fable, Retold Fairy Tales

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I placed my cards face-up on the table. “I win.”

The resounding cheer deafened me. My brothers’ faces, tight with their losses against the Queen, broke into triumphant grins. A large crowd had gathered around where we played. My father nodded to me from his position behind his wife, his loud claps echoing over the uproar, his crown tilted atop his head.

My step-mother gathered up her cards. “Well done, Evelyn,” she said, her lips pursed. “It seems the tower failed to dull your wit.”

“On the contrary,” I said, victory making me bold. “It’s sharpened it.”

After our mother’s death over a decade ago, myself and my brothers were placed in a tower for our own wellbeing. It was her final request, our father told us before the funeral. I don’t want to dishonour her, and neither should you. It doesn’t do well to disturb ghosts.

The Queen folded her hands together, the jewels on her fingers catching the candlelight. “My promise stands. As you won, you may request one thing from me. However, first permit me to present my bargain to your brothers.”

Malek and Asher stepped forward, their auburn hair like tendrils of flame, chins raised and backs straight.

“The two of you will bring me the Knight of the Glen’s sacred Steed of Bells. It is the best horse in the kingdom, and therefore befitting the best prince.” She gestured to Badden, who stood with the spectators of the inner ring. “Should you fail, then you’ll lose your heads.”

A hushed silence rippled through the court. The King turned pale as people echoed the ultimatum, though he said nothing.

Malek shrugged, swirling the mulberry wine in his goblet. “Very well. We’ll depart tomorrow and bring you your desired prize.”

A smile pinched the Queen’s thin mouth. She turned to me. “What would you have of me, princess?”

I mulled over my choices. I could leave, renounce the royal title I so despised, and live a simple life in the country. Yet my brothers’ fates were tied, their peril obvious to everyone in the palace; everyone except them.

“Our mother wished that we’d stay together,” I said. “Many have forgotten, but I don’t want to disturb ghosts. I’ll accompany them on their quest and help as best I can.”

The Queen rose from her chair. “Very well.”

“My request” I interjected, “is that you’ll await our return in the highest tower until either the tinkling of bells announces our success, or a messenger brings news of our demise.”

Asher cleared his throat. “You don’t need to do this, Eve.”

The Queen cut me off before I had the chance to form a reply. “I accept. With the assembly as my witness, I pledge to uphold your bargain as you’ll uphold mine. I’ll retire now and pray for your success.” She turned to the crowd. “Continue to feast and make merry!” With her ladies in attendance, she left the hall.

Guests swarmed us, the beloved children of their dead monarch, wishing us well and giving us tips on how to retrieve the Knight's steed. The King and our half-brother became consumed by a sea of lace dresses and embroidered velvet tunics. As I listened to their wisdom, my heart grew heavy with their dire warnings.

When I was finally free, I sought out my brothers. They were lounging on chaise longues in an alcove walled with silver drapes. There was a goblet on the chestnut table, which I drained before signalling for more wine.

"You seem stressed," Malek said. He played a lyre softly, the notes confined to our compartment. The band beyond struck up a magical tune. Guests danced gaily, skirts rustling as they whirled across the floor.

"Didn't you hear them?" I asked.

"I didn't pay much attention to it, and neither should you." Malek raised his grey eyes to mine. "Fear doesn't fester in isolation."

"We aren't in the tower anymore," I pointed out.

Asher pried the goblet from my twitching fingers. "What did they say?"

"Many have tried to steal the Knight of the Glen's horse," I murmured. "All have perished. It's impossible."

"Maybe for most," Malek said.

Asher threw a dirty look towards our brother. "We'll find a way."

The hall overflowed with laughter as the music changed. Asher spied a young lady lingering on the outskirts of the crowd. He excused himself, leaving me alone with Malek.

The misty drapes shifted as a figure loomed in the silk entrance. Badden stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his jaw tight and brown hair dishevelled.

"You're obscuring my view," Malek drawled, not looking up from his lyre.

Badden ignored him and turned his attention to me. "May I join you?"

I waved at the empty couch opposite. The young Prince sat down and poured himself a glass of water. He took

a long sip, watching us both over the rim with eyes the colour of ice, before settling deeper into the cushions and resting one arm over the back of the seat. "You belong at court; you always did. A tower is no place for royalty."

"Yet the Queen remains in one until we return," I said, shifting forward. "She called us back only to send us away. What's her purpose?"

"My mother's reasons are her own," Badden said, his face darkening with festering shadows. "If she schemes, then she does so alone."

A string snapped under Malek's fingertips. "What do you want?"

"I want to come with you," Badden said, all pretence gone.

"Why?" I asked, my nails digging into my palms. "So you can keep track of us?"

The young Prince scoffed. "So that I can prove myself," he said. "My mother has tried to keep me in the castle since I was born. Now that she's out of the way, I can do as I please. I can help."

Malek tipped back his head and laughed.

"Shut up," I snapped. "How could you possibly help if you've never left? Do you know where the Knight lives?"

"I said she tried, not that she was successful. No," Badden sighed, "I don't know where he lives, but I know someone that does. They may help us." He got to his feet and bowed to us in turn. "Evelyn. Malek. I'll see you in the courtyard bright and early."

I turned to my eldest sibling, who watched the young Prince weave through the assembly, his scowl deepening by the second. "What do you think?"

"We don't have a chance."

"Malek, he's our only chance; Badden might be useful," I said.

"Useful to who? Us, himself, or the Queen?" Malek asked. "We'll soon find out."

My brother quitted the great hall also, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

#

My father took my chin between calloused fingers and kissed my brow. "Look after them," the King said. His gaze shifted to Badden. "All of them, Evelyn."

He is not my responsibility, I thought, yet I bit my tongue. I could see the weight of worry descending in my father's eyes. "I'll do my best."

Malek was already mounted, a large broadsword strapped across his back. Badden stood beside his horse wearing a dark cape, the drawn hood concealing his identity from his watchful mother.

I looked up at the figure observing the happenings far below from the tallest tower. Asher lowered his axe and followed my gaze. "Do you think she knows?" he asked.

"No," I said. "She'd fling herself off if she knew."

Asher cocked his head. "Shall I call it up to her then, or do you want the honours?" He chuckled when I glowered at him. "Easy. You're assuming he isn't here at her request, Eve. Keep your guard up. If we get caught, then we're dead. If we return without Badden, then we're dead. If we do manage to get the horse and the Prince doesn't die, then he'll finish us off himself. After all, he must have the throne."

"You think this is about the inheritance?"

"I'd bet a horse on it." Asher winked.

When we were all mounted, the guards atop the battlements blew three long notes from curved horns, and those in attendance waved us off.

"May fortune favour you," the King called. "I pray you return successful from your endeavours. We listen eagerly for the bells."

We rode out of the gate with the eyes of the entire castle boding into our backs. Badden led whilst Malek brought up the rear. The hooves of our horses clotted on the bridge stretching across the moat. We followed

the road, which dipped into a valley and climbed up a hill, ancient woods festering to our left. The great palace was soon lost to the endless wilderness.

“Come on, Badden,” Asher said at last. “What’s the plan?”

For a long while, he did not answer, giving no indication that he had heard. My brothers grew restless behind me. “We are going to find the one person that can help,” he finally said without turning.

“And who might that be?” Malek called.

“You’ll soon find out.”

There was little more to say. We tracked the sun’s progress as the young Prince led us blindly to an unknown destination. For the most part, we were hard pressed, switching from intense gallops to quick trots. I had to dismount several times, along with my brothers, as we were unaccustomed to a saddle; our thighs chafed and the muscles in our legs burned.

During one of the rare walks, I broke the uncomfortable silence. “Badden, what do you know about the Knight of the Glen?”

He regarded me over his shoulder. “Not much,” he said. When Malek snorted, the muscles in his jaw flickered. “I’m almost as clueless as you are.”

“Only almost, though,” Asher pointed out.

Badden jerked on the reins and whirled his horse around. My own beast staggered back, tossing his nose to avoid being hit. “Nobody knows much of the Knight,” he snapped. “He rarely leaves his court, yet his name is spoken in hushed murmurs across the land. Most of the news we hear comes from whispers through the trees, and a terrible stirring carried by the wind.

“The Knight is merciless and blood-thirsty. In years gone by, he terrorized villages, and is ruthless with prisoners. None that enter in chains make it out alive. They say he killed a giant when he was just a boy; pierced its heart at the dinner-table. He took its eye and keeps it in his hall.”

Malek whistled. "He sounds like a barrel of laughs."

Badden closed his eyes and sighed. "You'll soon find out more," he said. "She knows more than I do."

"She?" Asher sat up in his saddle.

Badden turned his stallion around, and, pressing his heels into its sides, took off at a gallop. "They have history. Try to keep up; we're close."

We followed him as best we could, staying hot on his trail. At the side of the road, Badden abandoned the saddle and, pulling back some low-hanging branches, revealed a hidden path. We diverted off the road and became lost in the secluded wood. The land tilted down as the hills rolled and heaved. Our royal company passed through a deep valley and followed the course of small, winding rivers.

"We need a break," Malek said, his voice like lightning in the midst of a raging storm.

Badden pulled up in a clearing littered with animal bones picked clean by circling crows. "Hurry up," he said, pointing to the creek that trickled through the thicket.

Malek led us to the water's edge, and we let the horses drink their fill. I plunged my cupped hands into the river and sipped at the sweet nectar sent from heaven. Asher and Malek poured droplets on their faces and on the back of their necks.

Asher swirled his fingers in the depths and flicked a spray towards me. "He's brought us to the middle of nowhere," he murmured. "Why do you think that is?"

I shook my head. "He wouldn't dare."

"We know nothing about this guy, Eve," Malek said. "What's he been doing whilst we've been locked in that damned tower?"

"What do you propose?" I asked.

“We run,” Asher said. “Hit him around the head; not to kill him, just to knock him out, and use the time to get as far away as possible.”

Looking down into the river, I saw the faces of my brothers shifting on the rippling surface. Crests cut across their throats. Forced to remain together since childhood, with our world centred on that tiny island on which the tower was built, my brothers were now my universe. There was never a day that we were apart. The thought of a veil separating us, of passing into the unknown, was too much to bare. This stranger, classed as family through paternal ties, was no brother to me. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

Asher drew a dagger from its sheath. I followed my brothers back into the clearing, leading my mount by the reins. Badden was sat among upturned roots. He picked apart a leaf, the tips of his fingers tinged by the chlorophyll. With a sideways glance, his eyes slid to the weapon in Asher’s hand.

The foliage in front of us rustled as a woman stepped into the clearing.

She wore a black hat, with midnight curls tumbling down her back. Her brown jerkin was creased, and ink-coloured trousers were tucked into leather boots. Whilst her face was untouched by time, her aged amber eyes regarded them with a hint of amusement.

“Meet our guide,” Badden said.

“They call me the Black Thief,” the girl with midnight locks said. “Not for the colour of my soul; rather my hair.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze flickering to Asher’s dagger. “Call me Maia. Before you try to kill me too, let me indulge you. I’ve been trying to steal the Knight of the Glen’s horse for the past seven years. I’ve never been successful, but I’ve been close. You need me.”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked. “If you’ve been trying to steal it, then why would you help us?”

“Ah,” the Black Thief said. “It’s not the steed I care for, but what it’s clothed in. The horse wears a silk covering with sixty silver bells attached to it. When anyone approaches, it shakes until it chimes, alerting the guards to an unwanted presence. If we succeed, then you keep the horse and I get the bells.” She turned to Badden, who had his eyes closed, shafts of sunlight falling across his face, and prodded him with her foot. “You’ve wasted enough time. We must get there before nightfall. The cover of darkness will be our friend.”

Badden rose and brushed off some stray twigs clinging to his thighs. “If you are going to kill me,” he said, not looking up, “then at least wait until after we’re done.”

#

We tied up the horses in the woods, then made our way to the treeline. Here we waited, concealed by the thicket with the Knight’s castle in view. The evening sky was a sight to behold, though one I could not marvel at. I leaned against a tree, its bark scratching my cape, the fibres snagging as I drew pictures in the dirt then wiped them away with my palm.

Badden crawled over and stretched his legs out. Maia stood some feet away, watching attentively, her gaze focused. My brothers dozed among boulders, resting their heads on pillows of moss, periodically cleaning their weapons and slipping off to check on the horses.

“What are we waiting for?” I whispered so low that only Badden could hear. “The anticipation is torture.”

“Maia says we must wait until total darkness,” Badden whispered back. “She knows the ways of the castle from her many attempts, and thinks our best chance is when the guards are swapping shifts. The Knight doesn’t have many posted; the steed is all he needs. But it’ll help if they’re distracted.”

“You trust her?” I asked.

“Do you trust my opinion?” He raised a brow.

I shifted uneasily and pulled the folds of my cloak closer. “She has failed seven times.”

Badden nodded. "True, but she's also gotten closer than anyone ever before. It can't hurt to have her on our side, can it?"

"I suppose not," I said. "Do you know the plan?"

"When Maia decides it's safe, she'll lead us to a forgotten entrance in the castle wall that she's scouted and used before. From there, one of us will keep guard while the rest go and retrieve the steed." He stood up. "I'd best tell your brothers."

"Wait." I threw out a hand and grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him into a crouch. His chestnut locks fell into his blue eyes. "Won't the horse shake the bells when he hears us coming? How do we make him come willingly?"

"We're the key." At my confused countenance, Badden shrugged. "We have royal blood. When he senses us, he'll submit." With that, he crept over to Malek and Asher and recounted the plan to them.

Darkness finally descended like a blanket across the land, thick fog weaving between the trees and creeping down the hills.

Maia turned to us. "It's time."

As one, the five of us emerged silently from the safety of the woods. We moved quickly as the few guards atop the battlements put down their weapons and momentarily vacated their posts. The Black Thief led us to a wooden door around the castle's side, one that was wide enough for several carts to pass through abreast.

Maia looked at Badden. "Wait here. Hoot like an owl if something goes amiss."

Malek's head snapped up. "Why does he get to wait here?" he asked, suspicion crinkling his forehead.

The Black Thief tutted and hissed, "Do you want to stay?"

Malek swallowed and looked at me and Asher, before turning his gaze to the woods beyond. He glanced up at the walls. "No," he said finally. "I'll come with you."

“Remain in the passage,” Maia said over our heads. Badden nodded. She opened the door and we slipped down the stone tunnel.

The courtyard beyond the walls was wide and empty, a large square that stretched off into alleys that led through the town, each one of them twisting home to the Knight’s Keep. A few guards in glittering chainmail wandered off to one of the taverns located nearby, their shifts done for the day. A rat flanked by a tabby cat scampered across the cobbles. The Thief crouched in the passage’s mouth and scanned the yard. With a small gesture, she darted around the perimeter with myself, Malek, and Asher in hot pursuit.

We stopped under a porch, and she pointed to a dark hut on the far side of the courtyard. The barn was in the shade of a watchtower, though no candles burned in its thin windows. Determination flashed in her eyes. She took off like a wraith, a shadow in human form, having zoned in on her target.

I reached out to stop her, but she slipped through my fingers like the wind. Badden’s words echoed through my mind: we have royal blood. When he senses us, he’ll submit. With the Thief going before us, her smell would reach our prize first.

“Maia,” I whispered, but my warning reached her too late.

She skidded to a halt as the bells rung out. A mass of guards swarmed the stables, their swords drawn. I cursed and turned back to the exit, but it was empty. Maia retreated as the soldiers pressed closer, their shields linked in a scaled barrier. Malek and Asher brandished their own weapons, but we’d lost before we’d even gotten close.

“Give it up,” one of the guards said.

A bowstring twanged on the battlements, and I cowered as the shuddering cord was reloaded. I held up my hands. My brothers looked over at me and threw their sword and axe into the dirt. Maia’s cheeks were bright red, but she surrendered also.

#

We knew we were headed to the furnace room long before we got there.

The air in the corridors started off cool, streams drifting in through the open windows. As we made our way into the heart of the Keep, the scarce scattering of servants disappeared. The air turned warm, like a summer's evening by the coast, but then it became stifling, like the beating waves tearing off the scorched desert. A slick coating of condensation covered the walls, droplets pooling in the crags.

When we reached an iron door, the silver metal glowing orange, one of my guards turned to me and grinned. "Once you go in, you don't come out." He took my hand and thrust my fingers against the blazing panelling. I yelped to a chorus of laughter. The door swung open, and our company was dragged inside.

The Knight was already waiting for us. He had thinning grey hair and deep creases on his forehead, though there were no crinkles around his eyes. He wore a grey tunic, dark trousers, and sandals, with leather gloves up to his elbows.

"We've finally caught you," the Knight said to the Thief. He turned to address us all. "Any attempt to steal my horse is considered treason in my domain." He indicated to the furnace searing behind him. The heat was so intense that I could feel my eyebrows beginning to singe off, an intense sweat breaking out over my body.

"You'll burn," the Knight said, his eyes alight, "just like those who came before you. I'll send you in one at a time, so that you may see what's coming before you enter the inferno." He nodded towards the Thief. "She'll go last." His eyes fell on me. "She'll go first."

Meaty paws grabbed onto my forearms. My brothers cried out, their efforts futile against the soldiers. I struggled as I was herded towards the fire. A rogue tongue licked my shoe, and the stitching smouldered.

"Wait!"

The guards turned around and the Knight held up a gloved hand. He walked over to Maia. "What?" he snarled.

"This is the man you've become?" She turned and spat onto the stones. The glob of spittle fizzled like water on coals. "Why did I bother?"

Even though he had his back to the rest of the room, I could see his skin, flushed from the heat of the furnace,

was turning the colour of soured milk. The ends of my hair smoked, small sparks catching the strands. One of the guards who had yet to break a sweat planted himself behind me. The waves of hot air barrelling through the room subsided.

“What do you mean?” the Knight asked.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten,” Maia said. “You’ve been telling your own version of the tale all these years. Do you still live in that fantasy?”

“I will tell you the truth of that day. I was on my travels when I came into a large, dense forest. I wandered for an age, yet I couldn’t find a way out. It seemed endless. At length I came to a castle, and fatigue obliged me to call. When nobody answered, I made my way inside; I needed sanctuary for the night. I found a young woman in a mighty hall with a child on her knee. She was crying softly into his hair. I asked her what made her so sad, and where was the lord?”

“‘It is well for you,’ she said, ‘that the lord is not at home. He is a monstrous giant with one eye in his forehead, and he feasts on human flesh. He brought me this child and ordered me to make him into a pie; I cannot help but cry.’”

“I told the distressed woman whether or not she knew of any convenient place nearby where I could leave the child safely, rather than see him killed by such a monster. She told me of a house a distance off where he would be taken in without question.

“‘But what will I do for the pie?’ she asked, tears brewing once more.

“‘Cut a finger off,’ I said, ‘and I’ll bring you a wild pig from the forest. Put the finger in a certain place under the pastry so that, if the giant doubts you, you can show it to him.’”

“She agreed and took his finger with a kitchen knife. I soon had him at the house the maid told me of, and I caught a pig and brought it back with me. She then made ready the pie whilst I ate and drank heartily, offering what help I could. When I made to leave, having stood and said my farewells, she froze, her face a picture of fear. At that moment we both heard the giant approach.

“Quick,’ she said, pointing to a side door. ‘Lie among the bodies he keeps in that room and stay silent.’

“I took her advice and laid down amid the corpses, the stench churning my stomach. I first heard him calling for his pie. When she set it down before him, he swore aloud that it stunk of swine flesh. She immediately showed him the finger, and he was content.

“Yet the pie only sharpened his appetite, and he announced that he hungered for a collop or two, for he was not yet satisfied. The giant groped blindly in the storage room where I was hiding, his meaty hand passing over my body before he finally chose a few rotting corpses. Having then eaten his fill, he drank hot liquor in abundance. Soon, he could not hold his head up, and fell into a deep stupor right there at the dinner table.

“When I heard him snoring, I snuck from my hiding spot and took the giant’s spit. I reddened it in the fire, then drove it into his heart.”

The Thief of Sloan fell silent. I blinked, the smoke gathered under the ceiling causing my eyes to water. My brothers shifted uneasily, but the Knight stood dumbfounded. He pulled off the glove on his left hand and revealed a missing finger.

“It’s you,” the Knight said. “I have never told anyone the truth, yet you know it by heart.”

“And this is how you’ll repay me?” the Thief asked. “By condemning me and my friends to death?”

The Knight pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “I must keep up appearances,” he said, “but, as you’re the one who saved me, it seems only fair to repay my debt.”

At that moment, a guard burst through the door. “My lord,” he puffed, his cheeks red, “we found another one making for the woods. We shot him down, sir. He wears the crest of the King. Shall we leave him to die, or bring him here?”

“But,” the Knight stammered, “the Queen only warned me that there would be three.” He waved at me and my brothers. He turned to where I stood in a cluster of men. “Who is this man?”

“It’s Badden,” I panted. The heat was almost too much to bear. “The Queen’s son.”

The Knight cursed and turned to the guard. "Take him to a healer, quick!"

"But sir," one of the soldiers holding me said, "our healer is off getting supplies. She won't be back until morning."

I jerked free and stumbled when the restraints released me. "We must get him back to the castle," I said. "Otherwise he'll never survive, and the Queen's wrath will plague every one of us."

The Knight nodded. "Which of you is the fastest rider?"

"I am," Maia said.

"No." The Knight shuddered. "You must stay here; your place is at my court." Turning his attention to Malek, he said, "Of the rest of you, who is the quickest?"

"Evelyn is," my brother answered.

"Then that's settled," the Knight said. "Evelyn will take the steed, the best beast in the land, and ride him back with the Prince. Consider it an offering to the Queen; her letter heeded no warning of her son's presence."

#

Thank the gods the horse knew the way.

The tinkling of bells marked our journey back to the Keep. I sat in the saddle, clinging on to the reins for dear life. I didn't need to guide my mount. He tore like a bolt of lightning through the woods and across the fields, completely abandoning the path to take the most direct route.

Badden was slumped over in front of me, his forehead resting against the horse's mane. I kept one arm around his waist, praying all the while that he wouldn't fall. Speckles of blood betrayed our passage. The fletching was still protruding from the Prince's chest, and he groaned from the pain, jostling atop the wild mount.

Dawn was rising when we finally galloped onto the road, the moat and the castle looming before a sky stained red, like my skin where Badden's life drained away over my hands. Three horn blasts announced our arrival. The lattice gate opened. I looked up at the tallest tower just in time to see a figure in white drop and shatter on

the rocks.

Then we were swarmed by my father's men, and my brother was borne away.

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