



In the dead dark of a moonless night, a young girl climbed the palace walls.

The palace stood on an ancient rock that rose high above the city of Rivven. Its walls were well made, of smooth grey stone with few handholds, but the girl moved confidently, ignoring the drop below her. Finding a crack between two bricks, she pulled herself up and placed her feet against a thin ledge. She reached for the next gap.



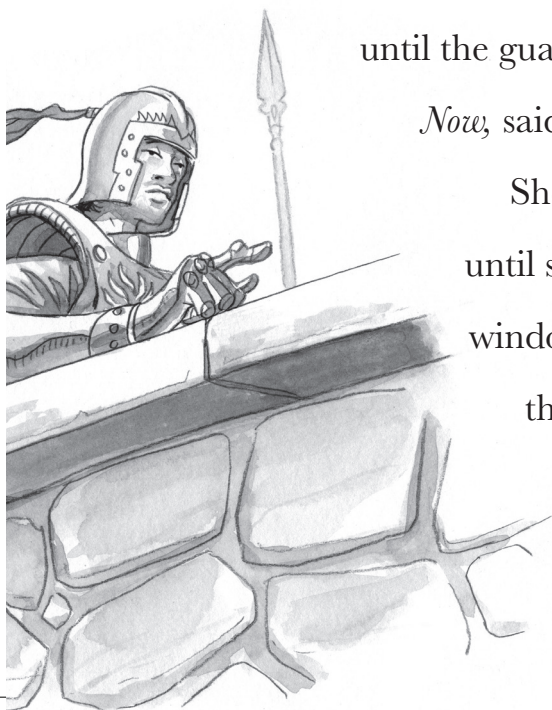
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Wait.

The voice came from inside her head. She didn't know how, or whose voice it was, but she'd heard it her whole life. It was her only friend, and she trusted it. She stopped. Above her, a guard leaned out over the edge of the wall and gazed down, bored. The figure waited, hidden in a grey cloak that perfectly matched the stonework, until the guard wandered away.

Now, said the voice.

She continued climbing until she came to a narrow window about halfway up, then squeezed through and into a corridor,



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landing in a crouch. No one was around.

Faint torchlight flickered at one end, and a solid wooden door blocked the other.

She removed her cloak and tucked it into her backpack. Underneath, she was a small, thin girl, with silver-blond hair and a pinched, serious face. She wore dark colours, mottled like shadows. She crept towards the door and listened for a moment, and then slowly lifted the latch and entered.

Beyond were more corridors, some dark, some lit by torchlight. She moved cautiously. At one point she stopped and sank into the shadows as a servant scurried past. The floor had rich-red carpet now, and torches burned in alcoves.






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On the left, said the voice.

The girl paused. The patch of wall to her left seemed different, the stonework slightly pale. She felt round the edges until she was sure, then pushed at one brick ...

... and the wall swung outwards, revealing a hidden entrance.



The girl's face didn't change. She crept into the darkness along a narrow passageway, feeling her way until she reached another doorway, opened it, and entered a room.



Inside it was bright, and shimmering with lamplight, and *rich*. Every inch shone with precious metal, dark polished wood, crystal. Beautiful embroideries covered the walls, shimmering with golden thread. In the

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middle of the room sat a huge four-poster bed.

This is it, said the voice. King Godfic's royal quarters!

The girl stared around, her mouth open.

Come on, we'd better be quick.

She nodded, and tiptoed across to a grand dressing table in front of an enormous mirror.

He likes looking at himself, doesn't he?

The girl grinned and checked the drawers. One was full of little jars of powder and perfume; one held a display of embroidered lace handkerchiefs. One had papers, and wax, and the king's official stamp.

One was locked. The girl pulled two pins from her hair and carefully used them to feel



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inside the lock. Then she *twisted*, and the lock clicked. She slid the drawer open ... and gasped.

The inside was lined with dark-red velvet, and its contents shimmered. There were gold and silver rings, a heavy gold link necklace, a chain of pearls. Beautiful, ornate pins carved into the shapes of animals, inlaid with precious stones. Coins lay scattered at the base. And in the centre, on its own stand, sat a large golden brooch with an enormous diamond.

That's it!

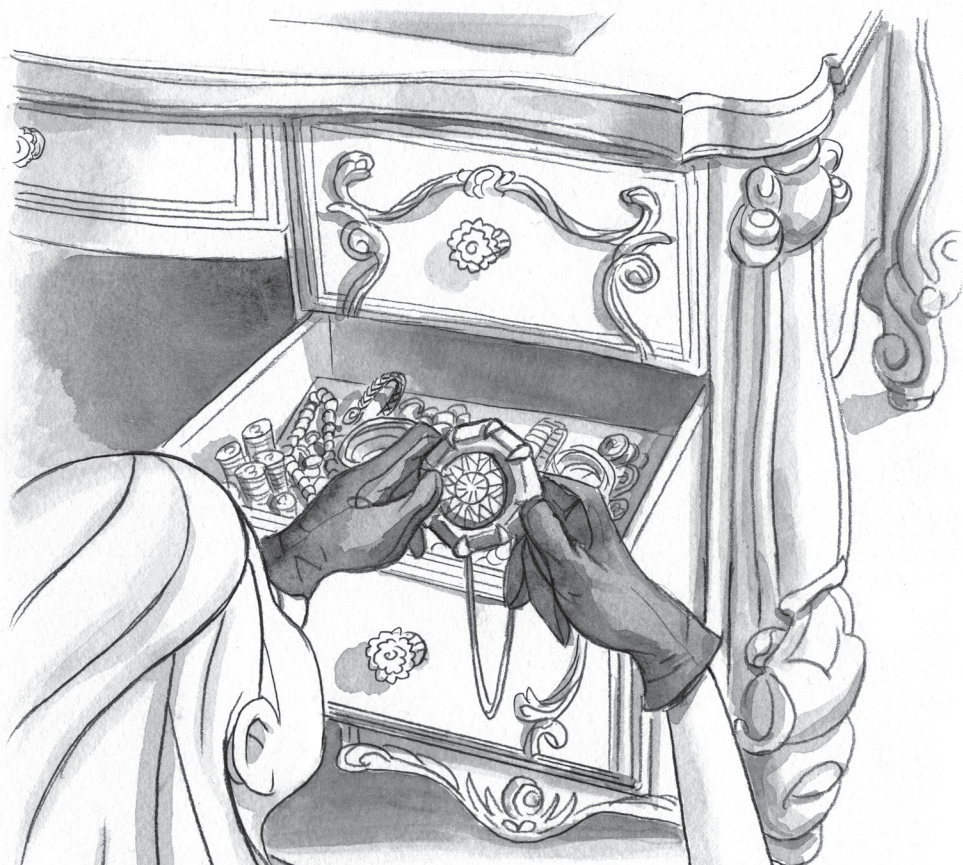
Carefully, the girl picked up the brooch and peered at it. Its base was an octagon, with eight ornate golden sides, framing a



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diamond that shone like a star. There was something in the diamond's heart – perhaps painted underneath? Peering inside, she made out an eye, beautifully drawn, fierce, and somehow cruel. Not a human eye; more like a cat's, or a wolf's, or...

I don't like that.



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“What?” The girl was surprised. “It’s just a picture.”

It’s creepy.

She shrugged, and looked back – and the eye moved.

“Argh!” she yelled, dropping it. The eye glanced around, and then straight at her, and blinked! And suddenly a bell started tolling from the corridor outside, hard and fast and sharp.

You’ve triggered an alarm!

“It moved!” she hissed.

I know! Forget it! Come on!

There were other noises now, shouts and running footsteps. The girl ran back to the far wall and the secret passage, closing it

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behind her just as she heard someone at the main door.

She fumbled through the black corridor, trying to stay quiet. Would they know about the hidden entrance? She reached the end of the passage and pushed the door open a crack. The corridor was empty, and she hurried back to where she'd come in, dragging her cloak and a grappling rope from her bag. She poked her head through the slit window, then pulled it back sharply and cursed. There were guards all along the top of the wall now, holding lanterns and staring hard.

We can't go that way – they'll see us!

The girl felt panic rise inside her.

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Boots thundered behind her. More guards! She raced towards the brighter end of the corridor, back into the depths of the palace.

What are we going to do?

She kept moving, glancing around. There were rooms on either side – could she sneak into one of them? The alarm bells clanged and a guard shouted, “You check that way!”

What are we going to DO, Cara?

And then a black-gloved hand reached from a doorway, covered her mouth, and dragged her backwards. The door closed behind her and someone pinned her arms and whispered harshly in her ear.

“Be quiet.”

