

## Valentina Jett Originals The Tale of Tercio

### The Tale of Tercio

By Valentina Jett

Once, long ago, there lived a family, noble in name but poor in everything but children. Indeed, some said the lady of the house had done her duty by her lord too virtuously, for she had given him no fewer than seven children, and every one but the last a boy. But the family did not heed foolish talk, and lived happily, poor in money but rich in love.

The first son of the family was well-favored and wise, and knew secret arts beyond the cunning of an ordinary man, such as how to find hidden treasures of gold, and how to charm the heart of even the loveliest lady. The second son was strong and well-made, and instead of fighting dragons, as many knights did in those days, he lived alongside them and learned their secrets, feeding them sheep and cattle in the mountains so that they did not venture into the valleys to eat humans. The third son... but more of him anon.

After these first three children came a pair of boys born within the same hour, and with temperaments as alike as their faces. They were tricksters and jokesters, and no man was safe around them. Their next brother was valiant and strong, if a trifle hot-headed at times, and fiercely protective of the last child of the family, a lovely girl, as brave as she was beautiful, and as intelligent as she was brave.

The third son of this family, Tercio, was the different one. He was very studious, even as a boy, and a strong believer in the law. When his brothers would play outdoors, battling with mock weapons or trying to snatch a ball from one another, he would most often be found in his bedroom, poring over an ancient treatise. He had even been known to shout at his brothers when their games disturbed his studies.

And so it happened one night, when Tercio was nineteen and a man grown, that a visitor came to their home one night. He said nothing of the house, which was not in perfect repair, nor of the clothes of his hosts, which were not of the latest fashion, as his own were. Instead, he spoke of his work learning of the customs of other lands, and regulating the goods that passed from one country to another. After supper, the parents dismissed their elder two sons, who were eager to be off to their own work, and the younger four children, who wished to be playing, but Tercio stayed to hear the visitor speak.

"I travel in search of an apprentice," said the visitor. "An intelligent young man, willing to work and work hard, who wants to rise quickly and go far."

"Such is my wish," said Tercio, "and I will work for no wage, only my board and keep, and enough for a new set of clothes so that I do not shame you in my rags." His mother grew angry at this, for her children's clothes might not be new, but rags they had never been. But the father raised his hand, and the mother held her peace.

"So we shall start," said the visitor, "and if your work gives satisfaction, a wage you shall soon receive. Pack your things, for we depart in the morning."

And so it was done. Tercio followed his new master to the master's own castle and began to learn his work. For a year, all was well. But then a great scandal divided the families of the land, and it fell out that Tercio's family was on one side of the divide, while his new master was on the other. Tercio's first inclination was to return to his family, but his master spoke to him gently.

"I will be sad to lose such a fine worker, surely," he said. "But it is not only that. Even so short a time as I have known you, I have come to think of you, Tercio, almost as my own son, the child I never had."

Tercio looked around him, at the comfortable room in which he stood, the fine clothes which now he wore, and thought of his home, how the winds sometimes whistled not only around the walls but through them, how his clothes had often been shabby and out of date. And he thought that perhaps his master's perspective on the matter was not so difficult to understand after all. He had the law on his side, surely

"I shall stay with you, sir," he said.

His master smiled. "Excellent."

Tercio stayed another year in his place, refraining from all contact with his parents, sending only brief letters to those of his younger siblings who, in his opinion, might yet be brought to his master's side of the conflict. But at the end of that year, he began to be uneasy. The scandal in the land, far from healing, was growing worse. Open war was surely soon to be on them. Should he not reconcile with his family, to be at peace, should any of them die?

"War? Certainly not!" his master told him. "This will never come to war. A few hotheads with foolish ideas, that is all." He frowned. "One thing does trouble me, though. Should some of those hotheads come here, all those who belong to this castle are protected by the law. But your lawful allegiance is still to your home. You have never changed it."

"I will do so now, sir, and gladly," said Tercio, grateful for something he could do to restore his master's good opinion of him.

But he soon had reason to regret it. He had not been two months bound to the castle before open war was declared – but the two sides which had so long been quarrelling were not the enemies here. Indeed, they had hastily made alliance against this new power, which sought to invade their country and take all by force. Keep after keep fell to the deadly weapons, and the castle of Tercio's master was not spared.

And, as Tercio learned to his horror, anyone bound to the castle as he had been bound could not legally be ransomed. It was the reverse of the protection his master had promised, for his master was dead, and Tercio was a slave. He was not mistreated, for his new masters knew the worth of a slave who could read and write and figure, but he was regarded by them as no more than an intelligent dog or horse, worthy of only an absent nod and a wave of dismissal once his work was done.

What truly galled his spirit, though, was the collar which all the slaves were forced to wear. A thin ring of iron, it was enchanted – for the new master of this castle was an enchanter – with a spell which would make it heat to the point of pain, and farther, if the wearer went too far from the place where the enchantment had been cast. Tercio could go no more than two miles from the castle unless the collar were removed, and only the enchanter held the key to its lock.

What was more, no man could leave the castle, for it was guarded by three creatures of magic. The closest to the castle was a man with a face like stone, who never took his eyes away from the castle gate, and who knew by magic all whom his master allowed to enter or depart, and would strike dead on the spot any who were not so allowed. Next was a fierce dragon, which would eat any who escaped the watcher, and finally was a wood nymph, a creature like a human woman, but so beautiful that any man would be instantly captivated by her. Her forest surrounded the castle, and she, like the dragon, was bound by magic to seek out those who escaped and lure them to herself, keeping them until the enchanter came for them.

These three safeguards were not only to keep the slaves in, Tercio knew, but to keep the unwanted out. The enchanter also had spells to tell him when folk crossed into the lands he claimed, and a magical mirror which would show him what happened to them. Tercio grew to hate the enchanter's laughter, for it meant another hapless peasant or young, ambitious knight had run afoul of the wood nymph and been lured either to her lair, where she would keep him until she grew tired of him and released him, or into the purview of the dragon.

But there was a day the enchanter did not laugh. Tercio looked up from the castle's accounts on that chill, cloudy day to see his master brooding over what he saw in the mirror. "The man must be an enchanter himself," he muttered. "That or simply too stupid to understand what she is, and what she means."

Tercio dared a look into the mirror. There stood a tall, handsome knight, and for a moment Tercio thought he recognized his oldest brother – but no. His brother, like all his family, had hair of plain, ordinary brown, and this knight had hair red as flame. Two other knights stood behind him, and a pair of servants behind them, one holding the bridle of a saddle horse upon which rode a lady. All of them, knights, servants, and lady, shared the fiery hair. The knight who stood in the foreground was speaking earnestly to the wood nymph, who seemed distressed.

Tercio quickly returned to his books as his master glanced his way. But his heart was racing. Perhaps, could many succeed where one had always failed, and find their way to the castle, to liberate it from the enchanter?

His master's curse told the story. "Blast them! Blast *him!* How in the name of Hades did he turn her that quickly? But it matters not. The dragon will eat them all, and I be rid of them – ah, and here it is now!"

Tercio risked another look. The dragon was speeding towards the small group. Smaller than it had been – only the shortest of the knights was left, fighting with all his strength to control a fear-stricken horse. Had it thrown the lady? If not, where had she gone?

The dragon shot flame from its mouth. The knight dived out of the way. The horse was not so lucky. The dragon began to dine.

As it did, the knight climbed to his feet and waved his hand. Other figures emerged from the edge of the forest.

The enchanter cursed again. Tercio stifled an exclamation of joy. They had known that the dragon would not attack them when it had food close at hand, so they had sacrificed the lady's horse in order to allow them to pass.

"The watcher will never let them through," said the enchanter surely. "He never sleeps, never weeps, never blinks. His eyes never leave that gate, and his sword is always ready to smite any who try to pass it without my allowance."

The two servants took the lead as the group approached the castle. They looked very much alike, Tercio noted, almost identical, and his thoughts went again to his own family. He wondered if they lived, and how they had fared in the war.

The servants placed themselves where the watcher could see them, but not close enough that he would strike, and began to speak to one another, idly, as if passing the time. Tercio wondered what they were doing, until he noticed the other members of the group smiling, gasping, laughing. They were joking, telling funny stories.

And then the servants began to tumble, tripping and pushing one another, managing to make their movements at once graceful and clumsy, balanced and unsteady at the same time. Tercio had to look away twice lest he betray himself by laughing at their antics. Finally he fixed his eyes on the watcher.

The watcher, seemingly in spite of himself, was watching the tumblers instead of the gate, and although his face was as stony as it had ever been, his eyes were beginning to water. Finally, he had to raise a hand to wipe them.

And as he did, the third knight and the lady dashed through the gate, so swift that Tercio could barely follow them with his eyes. The enchanter screamed in fury and dashed the magical mirror to the floor.

"I challenge you!" shouted a voice from the other end of the hall. There stood the knight, tall and strong and all in chain mail, naked sword in his hand. Tercio caught just a glimpse of the lady as she darted behind a pillar, on the other side of the hall from where he stood himself. "Steel against steel, the winner to rule this castle!"

The enchanter drew his own sword and saluted the young man, then came to the center of the hall to meet his adversary. Sword clashed on sword, and the battle was begun.

The knight was indeed young, Tercio saw as he watched. Younger than he was himself, too young to be a true knight, he must be only a squire yet. But he was a fine fighter, strong and balanced and well versed in the ways of the sword – both men bled from small cuts, but neither was yet shown the master –

The young knight disarmed his opponent and placed the point of his sword against his opponent's chest. "Yield," he ordered.

The enchanter laughed. "I will not," he taunted. "For you cannot kill me by piercing my chest – nay, nor by cutting off my head! My magic will keep me alive unless you find the one place on my body where I may be slain, and you will never find it, never!"

The young knight took a step back, confused. The enchanter whistled, and his sword leapt into his hand –

"His feet!" shouted Tercio. "Strike at his feet!" For he had not lived all these weary months as a slave without learning one secret of value.

The enchanter turned, his face contorted in rage, and made a sign in the air – Tercio screamed as his slave's collar heated to the point of pain –

His master screamed as well, as a dagger seemed to materialize in his back. Tercio gasped with the ending of his pain and stared across the hall, to the place where the lady stood, her face half proud, half horrified, her hand still lifted with the end of her throw.

The young knight raised his sword and struck at the enchanter's feet, slicing them off at the ankles.

The castle shook on its foundations with the enchanter's last scream, as his body dissolved into fog, a fog that spread and filled the room. Tercio could see nothing, hear nothing, only feel, and what he felt was joy, as his collar fell away from him. He was free.

When he could see again, he stood alone in the hall. Where his master had lain, there now lay a scroll. He picked it up.

"Whosoever finds this," it read, "if you be of noble blood and birth, you be the new lord of this castle and all its lands. Tend it well, and come to Court to pay your respects to the new King as soon as you are able."

Tercio had never imagined himself as a lord, being only the third son of a poor family, but he knew how to tend a castle. Under his direction, the keep and its lands were soon prospering, and he had news of the outside world. The war was over, the enemy's generals slain and its armies scattered. A new King indeed sat on the throne, but reports of his name were difficult to come by, and contradictory at that, and Tercio had his own concerns keeping the castle running well. It was another year before he could be spared to travel to Court.

At Court, he knelt before the King, and rose at his sovereign's command.

"And do you know me yet?" asked the King.

Tercio raised his eyes to his King's face and looked, truly looked, as he had not dared yet to do – for something about the voice, he thought he knew. But what he saw, he almost did not believe.

"Perhaps you will know me better," said the Queen, laughing. "Look at me, foolish child."

Tercio turned his eyes to the Queen, and knelt again at her feet, of his own will – for the Queen was his own mother, and the King his father, and as the greatest lords of the Court came forth, he knew them for his own brothers, and the Queen's chief lady-in-waiting his sister.

He had not known them at first, he explained when they were alone, because they were strangely changed. All of them, every one, had hair of a bright and flaming red.

They had been struck by an enemy's spell, explained his eldest brother, for the enchanter who had enslaved Tercio was not the only one working for their foes. It had been meant to set the family afire. He had been lucky to turn it as he had, and even so its effects were two-fold. Not only the family's hair, but their temperaments, had been affected.

"Change my hair and my temper as well, then," said Tercio, "for I would have the world know the family I belong to, and how much I value them."

"It is a powerful spell," his brother warned. "It will affect not only us, but our children, and our children's children, and thus down through time, as long as I can see. All of our descendants will be red-haired, and have quicker tempers than the common run of men."

"All?" asked the sister.

"All," said the eldest. "Unless one of our line shall marry another whose deeds and bravery rival our own."

"This is no bad thing, perchance," said Tercio. "So be it."

And so it was, and so it is, and so it shall be ever.

The End



## Valentina Jett Originals A Tale of Two Tales

### A Tale of Two Tales

By Valentina Jett

Stories change from place to place and from time to time, depending on who is telling them and from whence they came. Here, then, are two versions of a folk tale. Both were collected from people who swore their version was the authentic one. Which is true? You decide...

#### Version One

Long ago there lived a young king, who ruled his land strongly and well, refusing to be manipulated by counselors who merely wanted power for themselves. He made his own decisions, and his name was spoken with respect in every corner of the land.

One day there appeared at his court a lovely maiden of about the king's own age, one he had never met before. She was an ornament to the court, with wit to complement her obvious beauty, for despite being brown rather than golden or black, her hair hung in curls to her waist, and her features were pleasing when she was somber and lovely when she smiled. As well, she was skilled in any number of accomplishments, reading and writing two languages besides her own, singing and playing upon the lute. Greatest among her skills, though, was her hunting, for she could send arrow from bow to any target one could name. She told stories of hawking expeditions in the fields of her home, but politely refused the loan of a bird from the king's mews, saying that no bird could ever match the hawk she had left behind.

The king watched her from the corner of his eye for many months, and found his heart ensnared by her beauty and his mind entangled in her wit. He began to create excuses to be where she was, which was often in the Royal Library, reading books, writing letters, or gazing out the windows. One day, he spoke to her, asking what she gazed towards.

"My home," she said. "I love it dearly."

"Yet you left it to come here," he said.

She looked at him through her eyelashes. "A woman may do many things for love, Your Majesty," she said coyly.

The king began to believe that he loved the maiden, and that she loved him in return. More and more often he found himself in her company, and she did not send him away. Finally, one day, he suggested that they ride together.

"Where shall we ride?" she asked.

"Half a day outward and half a day back," said he, "in any direction you like."

"Half a day is so short, Your Majesty," she said sadly. "Could it not be longer?"

"Not if we wish to return to the palace in one day," he said, and then looked again. The maiden's eyes were lowered demurely, but he had caught the flicker of her lashes as she glanced sideways at him. "Your reputation would be terribly damaged if we rode forth as you seem to suggest," he said.

"Reputations are not everything, Majesty," she said. "But since you insist, half a day outward and half a day back it shall be."

And so it was. But with every day that passed, the king became more enraptured by the mysterious beauty. Finally, he called his counselors together and declared that he planned to wed the girl.

"Wed her?" gasped an old lord. "A girl from heaven knows where, with no family and no dowry?"

"She might be a peasant," objected another, "or a merchant's daughter, schooled to act like a lady! Your Majesty cannot wed so below your station!"

"She could even be from one of your enemies," said an old general of the armies, "sent here to spy on you and gather information in your palace, or to assassinate you."

"And there is one other possibility." All eyes turned to the speaker, a man with a small beard who wore a long robe trimmed with fur. He had been a tutor to the young prince, and proved his intelligence so thoroughly that the young king had appointed him to the council. "She could be an uncanny creature, something not of this world, a snare to bring you low not only in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God."

"What then would you suggest I do?" asked the king, shaken by this thought. Now that he recalled it, the maiden had indeed appeared at his court

from nowhere, but everyone had taken her for granted, as if she had always been there. It smacked of magic, black sorcery and villainous evil.

"If she is not what I suggest, far be it from me to besmirch the honor of Your Majesty's future bride," the tutor continued. "But if she is... it strikes me that the easiest way to know is to ask if she will take you to visit her family. They may well be some obscure branch of a noble house, or the royalty of one of our neutral neighbors, not wishing to draw attention to themselves. If this is so, then all is well. But if she refuses to take you to them..."

"I understand," said the king, and for once, took his tutor's advice. He left the council chamber and was soon in the library, where he found the maiden at her endless gazing through the windows. "My dear," he said to her, "would you like to take a journey with me?"

"I would journey with you to the end of the world, my king," she said. "Where do you wish to go?"

"I would meet your family," the king said. "I would meet the father and mother of the lady I wish to wed, if they live, and ask for your hand as is proper. And I would see if you have brothers and sisters, that I may bring them to court and give them advancement."

"Brothers and sisters I have, Your Majesty," said the maiden, smiling at him. "And my father and mother both live, as does my father's brother and my mother's sister. My father is a wise man, and he will not refuse you my hand if there are no other impediments. I hope that you will like my family as well as you like me."

And so they set out immediately. It was not too long a journey, for the king's fine black mare and the maiden's carriage covered the distance in two days, staying the night between at an inn. The king was careful to stay far from the maiden's rooms, lest some whisper of impropriety besmirch her whom he wished to make his bride.

On the afternoon of the second day, the maiden leaned from her window and called for the coachman to stop. "We are here, my king," she said.

"Here?" The king looked about him. They had halted in the middle of a vast forest, with no crossroads or building in sight.

"It is not far," she reassured him. "But we must walk there, together and alone. The coach and your horse can wait here until your return."

Hand in hand, they left the road and walked through the thick brush. An owl's hoot sounded overhead, which troubled the king somewhat, for it was still full daylight and owls hunt at night. A rustling as of moving leaves seemed to follow them for a long time, but the king could see nothing in the trees which could have made the sound, and this worried him more. A doe deer and a wild cat both came into their path and stared at them boldly, even suffering the maiden to lay her hand on them before they ran off, and the king was more disturbed than ever. No natural maid could have done such a thing.

A few more steps brought them to a clearing, and now the king knew that he should never have come – for in this clearing stood four great wolves, one white, one black, one brown, and one gray. "These are my brothers and my mother and my father," said the maiden, and her smile was bright and chill. "They wish to meet the man who dared to think he might have me for his own. And the doe deer and the wild cat were my sisters, come to look upon you and see what a proud and foolish creature a king can be. And also another wishes to meet you, O king, and meet in more ways than one – for he has a score to settle with the one who would claim his promised bride!"

With a scream, a hawk of more than natural size dove at the king, red feathers flashing on its wings and tail. The king drew his sword and menaced the creature, driving it back, then turned and ran as quickly as he could, back towards the road – he could hear the baying of the wolves and the scream of the hawk behind him –

He burst onto the road and scrambled onto his horse just in time. The creature needed no urging forward, not when a great white wolf sprang from the underbrush towards its flank – indeed, within a few seconds of finding his seat, the king lost it again, and fell from his saddle, sure that he was about to be killed –

But the wolves passed him by, and chased his horse instead, chivying it off the road and into the woods, and the king thought as they passed him that there were five now instead of four, that another black one ran with them, but he could never be truly certain. He walked from those woods, emerging beneath the bright full moon, and found his coach and coachman at the nearest inn, horses and driver both near-mad with fear.

The king returned to his city. He married a lady of his own land and never spoke of the uncanny maid again. Sometimes, though, as the years went by, he would be found gazing out the library windows towards the distant forest, and when any asked him why, he would shake his head and refuse to answer.

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## Version Two

Long ago there lived a young king, who ruled his land through force that some called tyrannical, refusing to listen to any counsel from his elders. Once he made up his mind, there was no changing it, and his name was spoken with fear throughout the land.

One day there appeared at his court a maiden of about his own age, who had few connections and none of note. Despite this, her charm and fresh loveliness won her companions and even friends. She could read and write three languages, sing and play upon the lute, but hunting was her true love. She hunted better than any lady of the court, and most of the men as well. She watched eagerly as the king and his friends flew their hawks, and spoke fondly of hawking at home, but shook her head to the offer of a loaned bird. "For none," she said, "could match the hawk who waits for me at home."

Though she did nothing to catch his eye, the king began to look upon her with lust, and often found excuses to be in her company. She loved to read, and spent much time in the Royal Library, perusing books and scrolls or writing letters to her beloved family and friends. When she would finish one of these, she would gaze out the windows of the library towards her home, wondering when she would see it again. She had come to the

court of her own will, it was true, she needed to know more about it. Once they knew enough, she could return home once more, so she sent her letters often, then gazed into the distance, thinking of the people to whom she wrote.

“What do you gaze at so often from these windows?” the king asked her one day.

“My home,” she said truthfully. “I love it dearly.”

“Yet you left it to come here,” he said.

She half-closed her eyes to hide her tears. “A woman may do many things for love, Your Majesty,” she said softly, to keep the king from seeing that she cried from homesickness.

To her dismay, the king believed this meant she was enamored of him, and spent more and more time in her company. She dared not send him away, and so it was that one afternoon he asked her, “Will you ride with me tomorrow?”

“Where shall we ride?” she asked.

“Anywhere you wish, and for as long as you wish,” he said.

“Half a day outward and half a day back,” said she, “or we shall not return to the palace in the same day.”

The king was silent, and the maiden began to feel true fear. “My reputation, Your Majesty,” she said diffidently, looking at him from the side of her eye. “It would be terribly damaged if we rode forth as you seem to suggest.”

“Reputations are not everything, lady,” he said. “But since you insist, half a day outward and half a day back it shall be.”

Now the maiden feared for her honor, and it was with mingled relief and horror that she heard the gossip in the palace that the king wished to wed her. Relief came first – for surely he would not harm her if he meant to wed her? Horror came after – for marriages were sometimes celebrated after the man involved made sure that the woman would no longer protest...

“My ministers dislike my wishes,” the king told her when he found her in the library that evening. “They say you may be a peasant trained to act as a lady and embarrass me, or a spy here to gather my secrets. One even claimed you were a devil come to steal my soul away. But I will hear none of their complaints. I will wed you whatever they may say, and to that end I ask you to take me to your family, that I may ask your father for your hand.”

The maiden gathered her courage. “Your Majesty, I cannot,” she said. “You would never wed me if you saw where it is that I come from. And I would not wed you even were I of birth and place equal to yours. I am promised to another.”

“Promises can be broken,” said the king, anger beginning to gather in his face.

“But it is no wish of mine that the promise be broken,” said she. “For I do not love you, Your Majesty, and even were my betrothed dead this very minute, I would not wed with you.”

The king grew truly angry at this. “We shall ride out to the end of the world together, until you show me where your family lies hid!” he thundered, and ordered his horse and a carriage for the maiden.

They traveled for two days, staying at an inn overnight. The maiden trembled in her bed, and felt for the gift her mother’s sister had given to her before she left, but the king came not to her chamber.

On the afternoon of the second day, the king called for the coachman to stop. The maiden leaned from her window and looked about her in wonder and joy, then sprang lightly down from the coach. “What is this, O king?” she said teasingly. “You led me to believe you were taking me to a fate unknown, and yet you bring me to my family’s home!”

The king frowned, for he did not understand.

“Come, and I will show you where my family lives,” said the maiden. “Come with me, it is not far. Your horse and the coach can wait for your return.”

The king scowled, but followed her. His scowl deepened at the hoot of the owl to which the maiden waved, and at the rustle of some leaves at which the maiden, laughing, tossed a handful of twigs. He glowered still more as the maiden stopped to greet two of her beloved family. “Why does a deer stand so close by a wild cat?” he asked. “And why do they let you stroke them so?”

“A deer?” asked the maiden in confusion. “A cat?” Then she laughed as she recalled. “Look again, O king, and look harder. They are my sisters, come to see you.”

The king looked, and to his astonishment, what he had thought were animals were revealed to be slender girls verging on womanhood, one dark and supple, one lithe with hair like flame. They curtsied to him gracefully and vanished into the underbrush.

“My people hide themselves well,” said the maiden as she led him onward. “For there are those who call us demons or black sorcerers, and would strike us down for being what we cannot help. So we dwell within the wood, harming none and helping whom we can.”

The king seemed to think of running, but two steps more brought him into the main hall of the maiden’s home, and he stopped where he stood. “Wolves,” he breathed. “White and black, gray and brown, and greater than any I have ever seen...”

“No, Your Majesty, no,” the maiden said urgently. “Look again, as you did with my sisters. Look beneath what you see at first. They will not harm you

if you offer no harm. They are my family and my kin.”

The king looked, and for a moment saw two young men, one fair and the other dark, smiling joyously at their sister as she came to embrace them – for a moment saw a man and woman in the prime of their lives, hand in hand and watching their children benevolently. For a moment he saw this, but then he saw once more the maiden kneeling among four great wolves, who fawned upon her as if she were one of them.

And then the maiden rose and held out her arm, and with a scream a hawk descended from above to land on her wrist as lightly as a feather, its talons closing about her flesh without bruising it in the least, and its red-feathered wings stirring her long brown hair gently.

“Here is my betrothed, O king,” she said. “He would meet you, and speak with you, for, he says, you have looked with favor upon the same lady, and that makes you brothers in the spirit.” And as the king watched, the hawk flew from the maiden’s wrist and became a tall and well-favored knight, with hair as red as the hawk’s wing feathers, who advanced towards the king, his hand outstretched in fellowship.

The king never grasped that hand. Instead, he turned and ran, back to the road and to his horse, but no horse stood there. Instead, a woman with stern eyes and a warrior’s build looked upon him, frowning. “Go from here, if you will,” she said. “Go, and never return, for the beauties of our land are not for those who fear them.” And the wolves appeared behind him, five now instead of four, for another black one had appeared among them.

The king leapt into the coach and called on the coachman to start, and the coachman did so, rather wondering at his sovereign’s tone, for all he had seen coming from the forest was a group of people – four gentlemen, two older and two younger, and a lady with them. But the king was the king, and entitled to his own ways, thought the coachman unconcernedly.

The king returned to his city. He married a lady of his own land and never spoke of the strange maiden again. Still, as the years went by, he sometimes found himself gazing at the forest from the windows of his library, and even he could not understand why.