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Part One: Meeting the Gray Wolf

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

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Part One: Meeting The Grey Wolf

The Lady Margaret Mellis sat at the window of her tall tower and gazed out over the countryside. But her thoughts were as far from the traditional thoughts of maidens in towers as could be imagined.

For Lady Margaret was no fainting damosel to be rescued by a knight in shining armor. She was no longer young, and had never considered herself beautiful. Her hair was black instead of gold, and she had honestly earned the shining threads of silver in it. She had lived most of her life here, at the castle of her uncle, Lord Albert Mellis, and it was likely that she would finish her days here.

But she was happy, for Lady Margaret and Lord Albert shared a passion for learning, and this occupied her days. Together, they taught most of the high-blooded children of Britain, and the brightest and best of the peasants' children as well.

Of course, not everyone agreed with Lord Albert's stand that peasants' children deserved education as well, and there were always those who opposed him. But Lord Albert was one of the most influential men in Britain – he had the ear of King Linus – and so peasants' children continued to enter the great Castle of Mellis to be taught.

Those who opposed Lord Albert often, mysteriously, came to grief through their own faults, Lady Margaret mused. And it was nothing of her uncle's doing, either – it was simply that they had been foolish enough not to heed his advice.

Just a few years earlier, for instance, Lord Lucifer Devovi, one of the most highly regarded men in the land and one of her uncle's most outspoken critics, had been arrested on the testimony of his wife, the Lady Delilah, that both he and she had committed horrific and unforgivable crimes. Lord Lucifer languished now in the prison of Kabaz, from which none returned. Lady Delilah had poisoned herself.

Polite society wondered in quiet tones of horror why Lady Delilah would do such a thing. But, as the proverb says, "He who knows most says least," and Lady Margaret was no exception. Lord Lucifer and Lady Delilah had sought power in evil ways, ways that had included drugs, torture, even killings. Probably, Lady Margaret thought, the woman's heart had finally revolted at exposing her child to such filth.

For the pair had had a child. A boy, Daniel. Lord Daniel, now, if only he could be found. Lady Delilah, before she had died, had said she had provided for the child. It was widely feared that this meant she had killed him, and that the line of Devovi, one of the oldest in England, was ended.

Lady Margaret's mind wandered away from this insoluble puzzle, back to Lord Lucifer, and his prison. It was, perhaps, untrue to say that none returned from the prison of Kabaz. One man had escaped from it. One whose name was feared through the land. It was spoken in whispers, where it was spoken at all.

Samuel Niger. The Black Dog.

He was the most dreaded pirate who sailed these waters. Nothing moved upon the sea without his knowledge, and no merchant ever watched a ship go out without wondering, in his heart, if the cargo would arrive at its destination. The Black Dog seemed able to appear from nowhere, take what he wanted, and vanish again.

But he was accounted a very gentlemanly man, who never killed unless in open battle or in self-defense, and who robbed only those who could afford some loss. Some tales called him a notorious rake, while others gave him a wife, the Lady Drazah, dark-skinned and statuesque, his equal in most ways and his better in some. Some tales even spoke of children aboard his nimble vessel, the *Marauder* – but no two tales were ever alike, for some spoke of one child and some of two or more, some of boys and some of girls, and Lady Margaret was inclined to dismiss these follies all together.

The Black Dog's counterpart upon land was a gallant highwayman, known only as the Grey Wolf. He was best known, perhaps, for the polite way in which he robbed, and the fact that he took only what his victims told him themselves that they could spare – but woe to the man who tried to hold out, for the Grey Wolf, in his own way, could be merciless. He did not kill, but he was a master of making life miserable in a million small and untraceable ways.

His secret fortress in the hills was known as the Wolf's Den. There, the Grey Wolf and his band of followers, the Wolf's Pack, laired and lived, counting their spoils, eating and drinking, and waiting for the next carriage to rob. But the Grey Wolf did not reign supreme in his own Den – his wife, the Lady Morta, ruled him and all his Pack with him, and her tyranny was absolute.

Tales abounded from those who said they had been there, invited by the Grey Wolf to dine with him and Lady Morta, but again, those tales never matched. Some said the Grey Wolf had no children, while some claimed he had a scholarly daughter who resembled her mother, and some that he had a musical son who resembled neither parent. Others spoke of a dusky dancing girl, stolen no doubt from some noble household where she had been a servant, and one man would swear by anything you chose that he had seen Henry Lutum in the Wolf's Den.

Lady Margaret sighed. Henry Lutum. One of the great puzzles of their time.

The Lutum family had been well-known to Lady Margaret and her uncle, for they were not only wealthy and well-born, but scholars as well. Lord Jonathan Lutum and his red-haired wife, Lady Violet, had studied under her uncle and herself for several years, and she had grown very fond of them.

Of course, Violet had not been Lady Violet then – she had been only Violet Thomas, the daughter of a peasant and his wife. She was proud of her blood and family, and determined to have nothing to do with the arrogant Lord Lutum, or his friends, Viscount Samuel Niger and Sir John Lobos. She would occasionally smile at the timid Paul Caudalis, Esquire, but that was as close as she would get to the four boys.

Violet did find a friend at the great Castle, though, in one of the girls who was studying with Lord Albert at the time. She was peasant-born like Violet, her name was Alison Bertad, and a lovelier lady, in face or in deeds, no one could imagine. The dark head and the red could be seen bent over one book, the dark face and the pale in one mirror, at almost any time of the day.

Jonathan Lutum had been determined to attract the attention of Violet Thomas, and Samuel Niger equally determined to make Alison Bertad notice him. Once both boys grew up a bit and lost some of their adolescent foolishness, both quests were successful, and Violet became Lady Violet Lutum not long after leaving the great Castle. Samuel and Alison served as best man and maid of honor, and Samuel was named godfather to the couple's first child, a sturdy boy named Henry.

But times had grown dark. A band of murderers roamed the countryside, masked and cloaked, killing peasants and aristocracy alike, seemingly randomly and untraceably, but Lord Albert Mellis knew better. All those aristocrats killed had been peasant-born, or sympathetic to the peasants. The killers were interested in keeping the peasants in their place. Their leader was known as Lord Praecad, and he would not rest until he had power over all of England, peasants and aristocracy alike. From there, he planned to conquer the world.

And for some insane reason, he had decided that killing Lord and Lady Lutum, and their son, would serve him in this quest.

"Maggie," said a voice from behind her. She turned.

"Septimus," she acknowledged her dark-haired cousin, while biting back chagrin at the hated nickname. He was rather younger than she – the age of Jonathan Lutum and Samuel Niger, as it happened. They had been enemies while they studied together, and she rather thought Septimus had been pleased when Jonathan had died and Samuel been imprisoned.

"Uncle wishes to know if you are ready to leave."

"Give me one moment." Of course, the Court banquet – how could she have forgotten? Quickly, Margaret checked herself in the mirror, making sure that her hair remained in its usual tight coil on top of her head and that her face was, if not pretty, presentable. She had donned her best gown before she began her musing, so she needed only to take up her cloak from its place by the door. "Lead on, cousin."

Lord Albert awaited them in the courtyard, where the carriage was drawn up. "Niece," he greeted Margaret, his blue eyes twinkling. "Nephew. You both look quite fine this afternoon. I am glad. First impressions are so important."

"First impressions, Uncle?" Septimus asked sourly. "We have met the King on many occasions."

"Indeed, but there will be many present at the Court who have never met you."

Privately, Margaret doubted this. She had taught most of the present courtiers, and those whom she had not were her contemporaries, with whom she had attended classes herself. But good manners forbade her to contradict her uncle. Septimus, who had few manners, glowered but did not speak. He considered Court functions a waste of time better spent studying.

Lord Albert assisted Margaret into the carriage, then climbed in himself, quite nimbly for a man of his great age. Septimus entered behind them, the footman shut the door, and they were on their way.

Margaret idly watched the countryside pass by, and returned to her musing.

Lord and Lady Lutum had hidden themselves in a secret castle, to which only one man held the key. Jonathan's best friend, Samuel, had been the logical choice.

But Samuel, unknown to anyone, had been a traitor. He had delivered the key to Lord Praecad, who had invaded the castle on his mission of death. But not all had gone as he planned.

Jonathan and Violet had indeed died by his hand – but their son had not. Henry, then a child barely over a year of age, had been found alive in his nursery, trying to wake his dead mother. There had been no sign of Lord Praecad, and he had not been seen since that night, now some twelve years distant.

Samuel Niger, as the man responsible for the deaths, had been taken prisoner and transported immediately to the prison of Kabaz, but not before killing Paul Caudalis and twelve innocent peasants. Henry had been sent to his mother's sister, Daisy, a peasant like her parents, and mistrustful of aristocracy. And Alison Bertad and Sir John Lobos had mourned themselves into a decline.

Lady Margaret and Lord Albert had tried to help their students, but it all came to naught. The Lutums had died in the late fall – by the following spring, both John and Alison had vanished, abandoning all their worldly goods, and Margaret feared the worst. Either suicide, or murder, at the hand of Samuel Niger.

For Samuel Niger had done what no other man ever had. He had escaped from the prison of Kabaz. Henry Lutum had vanished from his aunt's home soon after, and it was an accepted fact that Niger had taken the boy. And probably killed him, finishing what his master had started, Margaret thought sadly...

The carriage lurched to a halt. A babble of confused voices erupted outside.

"What the devil –" Septimus began, when the door of the carriage was pulled open.

"My lords," said the masked figure holding the handle. "My lady. If it would please you to step out."

Margaret stared. Brown hair streaked with gray, a gray cloth veiling the top half of his face except for the eyeholes, a polite manner, dressed as a well-to-do peasant might be – oh, she knew who this must be.

The Grey Wolf.

"It does not please me to step out," Septimus said in a mocking tone, leaning back in his seat.

The Grey Wolf moved so fast Margaret had no time even to gasp. One moment he was standing beside the carriage, and the next he was inside, kneeling on the seat beside Septimus, a dagger at her cousin's throat. "Does it please you now?" he asked in the same pleasant voice.

Septimus stared up at the other man with hatred and did not reply.

"We will disembark," said Lord Albert as politely as the Wolf, "if you will allow it."

"Certainly, my lord." The Wolf sheathed his dagger and leapt lightly from the carriage, offering Margaret his hand. "My lady."

Margaret scorned his help, choosing instead to leap from the carriage as he had done. It was a trifle more difficult in her long skirts and heeled shoes, but she managed it. Lord Albert stepped to the ground behind her, and Septimus emerged last, looking as sulky as he ever had when Jonathan or Samuel had bested him in one of their endless status games.

"My lady, it grieves me, but that necklace you wear must come off," the Wolf said, extending his hand. "My lords, your watches as well, and any gold in your pockets."

Margaret fumbled for the catch of her necklace, glad she was wearing one she wasn't particularly attached to. The Wolf accepted it and Septimus' watch, but Lord Albert's he returned after a glance at it. "Wise of you, sir, to carry a timepiece which only you can read," he said with a smile. "Tell me, have you anywhere urgent to be tonight, or can you spare the night to dine with me and a few friends?"

"I believe we can disappoint the King, this once," Lord Albert said with an answering smile. "Margaret, Septimus, what say you?"

"Uncle – you cannot be serious," Septimus said in amazement. "Us, dine with a highwayman?"

The Wolf held up his hand. "A highwayman and a pirate," he said lightly. "My friend the Black Dog joins us at table."

Margaret held her head up. *He tries to intimidate us. But I will not be intimidated.* "Will I be the only lady at table, sir?" she asked frostily.

"Oh, no indeed, madame. I would never place a lady in such a situation. My own wife dines with us, as well as Samuel Niger's lady and several others."

So the Black Dog has a wife indeed, does he. "Uncle, I confess I am intrigued by this far more than by the prospect of another evening at Court," Margaret said frankly.

"I as well, Margaret, I as well. Septimus, I believe you are overruled." Lord Albert turned to the Grey Wolf. "Lead on, sir," he said. "We are at your service."

The Grey Wolf bowed. "And I at yours, sir. If you will instruct your coachman to follow me."

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Part Two: Discovery at Sea

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Part Two: Discovery at Sea

Hogan L. Yelrud I sat in his cabin aboard the good ship *Brace*, going over his books with satisfaction. He did love to see his numbers lining up in perfect rows. Especially when those rows involved a gratifying number of zeroes.

Hogan was one of the foremost merchants dealing in wrought iron in the south of England. With the new craze for mechanization, iron implements were much in demand. The business had been good to him, very good, and to his wife, his incomparable Daisy, and to their handsome son, Hogan L. Yelrud II..

The boy had made a fuss about coming on this voyage, but Hogan had been firm with his son. A man had to learn what he would be doing with his life, and the business would belong to the boy one day... thirteen wasn't too young to learn, not at all. Daisy, of course, simply adored ocean voyages, especially since every ship in the Yelrud fleet (only three at the moment, but he hoped someday there would be more) had a luxury cabin for the owner and his wife built into its design...

Suddenly there was a loud noise, almost like a gunshot. Simultaneously, shouts and screams erupted on deck. He put his books aside in surprise. *What on earth?*

"Father!" shouted Hogan II, appearing in the doorway. His face was flushed and fearful. "Father, come quickly! It's the *Marauder*, the Black Dog, he means to board us!"

Hogan followed his son out of the cabin and up onto deck at a run, his mind racing.

Pirates? Here? Now? But why? We have nothing of great value, no gold or jewels here...

He arrived on deck, panting, just in time to catch his wife as she swooned. The captain of the ship, a rather diminutive man named Flythe, stood nearby, his face worried. "Why did you not sail away?" Hogan raged at him. "Why stop?"

"The Black Dog's a gentleman, sir," the captain said. "He lives by his code. Once he flies his colors, he fires a warning shot. If you're wise, you furl your sails then and there and allow him to board. If not, he'll fight you – and the *Marauder* being so small, it's difficult to target."

"A small ship means small guns. What have you to be afraid of, man? This ship has thick sides, strong walls. What do you fear?"

"A raft with barrels of gunpowder strapped to it, such as he did to the *Walnut*. Or some of his men coming aboard in secret by night to steal and terrorize, as happened aboard the *Independence*. The Black Dog knows a thousand ways to fight, and the stories say he's never lost a battle or a man. I'm a practical man, sir, and I'd rather lose you some of your merchandise and me some of my pay than either of our lives or the ship." The captain looked up. "Here comes his boat."

A small boat was indeed approaching, with six men rowing and one sitting in the stern. "The Black Dog himself," the captain muttered. "They say he can smell a ship a mile away."

"Father, look," said Hogan II, pointing toward the boat. "He has boys with him."

Hogan looked, and saw. Two smaller figures sat in the bow of the boat, and two more in the stern beside the Black Dog, who passed his hand affectionately over the black head of one. The other beside him had red hair, and the two in the front were pale blond and brown-haired respectively. All four wore masks over the top halves of their faces.

Every man in that boat is masked, except for the Black Dog himself, Hogan realized as the boat came so close to the ship as to be hidden by the rail. *Why should that be?*

"Ahoy the ship!" came a loud shout from the water. "Lower your ladder, we're coming aboard!"

The captain nodded at one of his men who was standing nearby.

Hogan fumed. "First you stop for this pirate, now you help him aboard?"

"The Black Dog treats men with the same courtesy they show him," the captain replied stiffly. "And I've a wish to see tomorrow."

Hogan ground his teeth as a man appeared at the entry port.

The man was a giant. Nearly seven feet tall, well-muscled arms folded across a barrel-like chest, he stared around at the assembled sailors from

behind a dark strip of cloth hiding the upper half of his face. "We'll harm none if no harm is offered," he rumbled through a thatch of black beard. "And we'll take naught but what yeh can spare. We rob only to live, an' we take no pleasure in killin'. I give yeh Captain Samuel Niger of the *Marauder*, known to some as the Black Dog."

And to others as a thieving rat who has no right to live...

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The ship he was boarding was called the *Brace*, Samuel noted as he climbed the ladder. A familiar sight awaited him at the top.

"Captain Flythe," he said, bowing to the captain. "You were commanding the *Stormcrows* some years ago when I boarded her in the Channel."

"I'm flattered that you remember, sir."

"It's seldom that I meet a man so wise in the ways of the world."

"It's seldom that I meet a pirate who, in exchange for my crew staying out of his way, keeps his hands out of my belongings and theirs."

"Shall we come to a similar arrangement today, then?"

"I would be amenable, certainly."

"Very well."

The captains shook hands on the agreement.

"Pass the word," Flythe said aloud to the men in the vicinity. "Our... visitors... are not to be molested or disturbed." Two or three of them vanished below decks instantly, no doubt to pass the word that the Black Dog had come, and anyone who wished it could come up to the deck and get a look at him.

Samuel turned to his own crew, who had been boarding as he talked with Flythe. "Cargo only, my friends. And only as much as we need. To work with you."

The boarding party – Rufus, their "greeter," Samuel's own lovely Alison, the intelligent (and inseparable) Sera Jameson and Tricia Bush, and Patrick Mustela and his sons Alex and Richard, along with the three other boys Richard's age – made their way towards the hatches into the holds.

"You *dare!*" screeched the horribly overdressed woman, recovering from her swoon. "You *dare* steal what my Hogan has worked his fingers to the bone to gain! You *dare* enrich yourselves with *our* goods!"

"Madame, as the good Rufus has said, we steal only to live. And to better the lives of others. And if you will forgive my saying so, your Hogan does not appear to be worked to the bone..."

Samuel trailed off, studying the woman. *Twelve years older, certainly no prettier, but I think she may be...*

"Daisy Thomas," he said slowly. "By all that's holy, you're Daisy Thomas – aren't you?"

"I am Mrs. Daisy Yelrud now, and you will address me as such, pirate," the woman snapped, fiddling with one of the many necklaces she was wearing. "My first name is not for the likes of you."

"As you like, Mrs. Yelrud." Samuel bowed slightly to her. "I thought perhaps you would like news of your nephew, Henry."

"I care nothing for the brat, whether he lives or dies," the woman said sneeringly. "Though I am sure he is dead at your hand long since."

A surge of anger swept over Samuel. "Do not insult me," he said in a very controlled voice. "It was you who would have killed him, had he not been taken from your so-called care."

"You have no call to insult my wife, sir," the fat man, who must be Mr. Yelrud, blustered. "In fact, you have no call to be speaking to her at all. Leave us in peace, and go help your crew steal what I have worked for."

"I believe I shall," Samuel said, beginning to smile. "Help my crew, that is. But not in the way you mean." He took a step closer to them, enjoying, in a terrible kind of way, the power he felt as they shrank back from him, but at the same time wishing they wouldn't. "Mrs. Yelrud, what lovely necklaces you have."

And howvery many of them you have. If you fell overboard, the crew could never save you in time – all that weight around your neck would be as good as a millstone... so in all honesty, I'll be doing you a favor...

"Show me to your cabin, madame, if you would be so kind," Samuel said, waving toward the hatch. "You, too, sir," he gestured to Mr. Yelrud, "and this young man as well. Rufus!" he shouted toward the stern.

"Aye, sir?" replied the huge man, head and shoulders appearing above deck.

"Send Richard and Dominic, and their two friends, forward to the owner's cabin. I have a special job for them." *Not the best of ideas to be shouting Henry and Daniel's names about.*

"Aye, sir." Rufus disappeared below deck again.

"I take it this is your son," Samuel said conversationally as they made their way to the cabin. "A fine looking boy." *Or might be, if he weren't carrying enough fat for a young whale.*

"Yes," Yelrud said tightly.

"May I inquire his name?"

"Hogan II," said Mrs. Yelrud proudly. "After his father, Hogan I. Thirteen years old, and our pride and joy."

"I have four sons his age," Samuel remarked casually.

"Four?" Yelrud sputtered.

Samuel hid a smile. "Perhaps I should say four young men whom I consider sons. I think of all my crew as my sons or brothers. Excepting, of course, those I must think of as daughters or sisters."

Yelrud stopped dead, staring at him. "You have *women* aboard your ship?"

Oh, this is great fun. Not very nice, but great fun. "A good half of my adult crew this voyage is women," Samuel confirmed. "Most of them are peasant-born and have been working all their lives, so it's no great hardship for them. The ladies among our company tend to stay on land – except for the girls, of course. *They* wish to prove that they can go anywhere and do anything which the boys can, and so they pester to come aboard ship, even with the extra work they know it means..."

He sat down at the table in the cabin, placed his pistol on the table in plain sight, and sighed. "I despair of turning my Pearl into a proper young lady when this is over."

"Pearl?" asked Mrs. Yelrud, a trifle shrilly, standing against the far wall of the cabin, as far from him as she could get, her husband more or less between her and Samuel, as if hoping to shield her. "Is that your child?"

Samuel leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out on the floor. "My only blood heir, born at sea and named for the gem of the ocean. Ten years old and wild as a gypsy. A pirate's daughter is all she's ever been, and all she ever hopes to be. Her greatest ambition is to captain the *Marauder* herself one day."

A knock at the door of the cabin cut off further conversation. "Enter," Samuel called.

The four boys entered, each bowing slightly to their captain. Rich, the last one in, closed the door behind him. "You wanted to see us, Captain?" asked Henry.

"Yes. My boys, I would like you to meet Mr. Hogan Yelrud and his wife Daisy, and their son Hogan II." With a rush of pride, Samuel compared his own confident pirate boys to the Yelrud's fat fop of a son, who was backed into the corner of the cabin, not quite whimpering in fear, but surely close to it.

The boys all bowed, with only a trace of mockery, Samuel noted with approval.

"Mrs. Yelrud, if you would remove those lovely necklaces from that slender, white neck of yours."

The woman seemed unsure of whether to be affronted by his order or flattered by his compliments. The boys smirked at each other behind their hands, for they knew, as she did not, that Samuel was actually being rather rude, in his way – his preference for feminine beauty in its larger, better-padded, and darker forms was well documented.

"I'll help you, darling," Yelrud said, casting a wary glance at the pistol. "Here, let me open the catches."

After nearly three minutes of fumbling, all the necklaces were removed. Thirteen chains, strings, and torques lay on the tabletop.

"Now, this is what we shall do," Samuel said, allowing his voice to become very gently dangerous. "All of these fine boys have a sweetheart waiting for them at home. Each of them will come forward and choose a necklace for his lady. I will permit you to reclaim one piece, Mrs. Yelrud, as not to be touched. But all else on this table is fair to claim. When each of them has one, you will have nine left, which I think is a sensible amount of jewelry. Is this agreeable to you?"

The woman's face was contorted in anger, but she nodded stiffly.

"Then choose the piece which you would least care to lose."

She snatched a chain of interlinked rubies and sapphires from the table. "There," she said, tight-lipped and furious. "Take your pick, and may they choke your *sweethearts'* little lives out!"

"No need to be rude," Samuel said mildly, allowing his hand to drift over his pistol. "Dominic, you may choose first."

As Dominic Portop, a round-faced boy with brown hair, examined the twelve necklaces remaining, Henry drifted over to Samuel. "Captain, I noticed something odd," he murmured, his mouth close to Samuel's ear and his lips barely moving. "One of the sailors has a finger missing on his right

hand.”

Samuel stiffened. “Describe him,” he answered in the same tones.

“A small man, not much taller than I am. Losing his hair. He has a nervous look to him.”

No surprise, if he is who I think he might be... oh, God, what if he isn't... please let him be... Samuel realized he was clutching the edge of the table and forced himself to release it.

“I told Drazah, and she thinks I'm right. She's watching him to make sure he doesn't get away.”

Samuel relaxed all over. “Good!” he said aloud. “Good work, my boy. I'll go and handle that myself in just a moment.” *My Alison could take care of that little rat any day of the week. We've time to finish here.*

Dominic had chosen a long and patterned string of pearls, three white ones and a black, three white and a black, repeating all along the string. “You, sir, you're next,” Samuel said to Daniel, waving him forward. He knew the boy understood why his name couldn't be used in public.

Daniel took only a few moments to select a silver chain with a moonstone pendant. Henry went next, choosing a string of gleaming tiger's-eyes, and Richard, the last to choose, picked up a slim torque of gold, with a ruby and a sapphire set in it on either side of a diamond.

“The rest are yours, madame,” Samuel said, nodding courteously to the Yelruds as the boys left. “On behalf of the ladies of our crew, we thank you.” He backed out of the cabin, covering them all the way – he didn't think any of them would have the backbone to pull a weapon on him, much less use it, but overconfident pirates quickly became dead pirates.

And I am not going to die now. Not when I'm so close to finally being out of this forever.

His lovely Alison, also known as Lady Drazah, the Teroress of the Tides, was waiting at the top of the stairs, with a very satisfied smile on her face. “Henry told you?” she asked.

Samuel nodded.

“He got suspicious and tried to run,” Alison said, waving her hand astern. “Rufus caught him before he'd gone more than a few yards.”

Samuel looked in the direction of her wave and saw Rufus busily trussing something up, using what appeared to be an entire coil of rope. “You're sure, then.”

“Positive. We've found him at last.” Alison's smile lit up the area brighter than the sun beating down, and Samuel returned it with interest, embracing his wife tightly, his entire being suffused with joy.

We've found Paul Caudalis – the true traitor behind the crimes I was charged with. My name can be cleared. I can leave this life behind me – we all can – the stealing, the fear – and return to society, and perhaps further our other goal by so doing...

“Foolish of him to go to sea, where he knew you were,” Alison mused. “Perhaps he wanted to be caught, secretly.”

“And he has.” Samuel lifted Alison off her feet and twirled her around, laughing. “Been caught secretly, that is. We'll have to give some thought to how to bring him in without being arrested instantly ourselves...”

“John and Morta can help us with that, and Lord Albert as well, I've no doubt. For now, we have a cargo to sell and a ship to reprovision. I suggest we make for France, take on supplies and sell to our usual friends, then homewards.”

“Aye, Captain,” Samuel said teasingly. “Whatever you say.” He bent her backwards in a kiss, drawing whistles and hoots from the crew of the *Marauder* and that of the *Brace* alike.

Though there are some very fine aspects to the pirating life. I will be sorry to leave it. I wonder howmany of the Pack feel the same?

Inwardly, he shook his head (doing so outwardly would have been a problem at the moment). *Time enough to deal with that when it comes. For now, to France, and then home – the Den, and a dinner made by Mary and Morta, and perhaps Lord Albert can be persuaded to come for a visit...*

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Part Three: The Wolf's Den

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From Part One: Meeting The Grey Wolf:

Lord Albert turned to the Grey Wolf. "Lead on, sir," he said. "We are at your service."

The Grey Wolf bowed. "And I at yours, sir. If you will instruct your coachman to follow me."

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Part Three: The Wolf's Den

At the mention of their coachman, Margaret suddenly wondered why the man had bothered to stop. The Grey Wolf carried no weapons that she could see other than his sword and dagger – certainly no guns, unless they were hidden in his coat...

She turned to look, and sighed at her own stupidity. The Wolf had not come alone. A young man – a very young man – a boy, in fact, no older than fifteen – held a pistol aimed at the coachman. He, like the Wolf, was masked in grey, but his hair was flaming red.

"Come, Margaret," said her uncle, and Margaret shook herself from her reverie and stepped into the carriage. Septimus was already there, and as the door closed behind her, she got a good look at his face. He hadn't spoken since the Grey Wolf had mentioned that the Black Dog would join them for dinner. She realized why as she regarded him.

Septimus was absolutely furious.

Of course he was. He and Samuel Niger had been the bitterest of enemies in their school days. Placing them at the same dinner table would lead only to disaster. She took a breath to mention this to her uncle, before recalling that he knew it as well as she, and would take whatever steps were necessary to ensure that neither man killed the other in the course of the evening.

She rather hoped, though, that her detestable cousin would do something stupid, such as insulting the Black Dog's wife, and that Niger would react appropriately. Septimus had been getting quite full of himself lately. It would be good for him to recall that he was neither the most intelligent nor the most important man in the world.

The carriage jerked into motion. Margaret peered out the window and got a glimpse of the Wolf's young helper, riding alongside. The Wolf himself rode ahead on the road, on a handsome, jet-black mare.

Margaret felt a curious sense of unreality, as if the carriage were bumping its way into a dream. Five minutes before, they had been on their way to the royal palace, to have a banquet with King Linus, a small, pompous, sometimes deeply annoying man, and his Queen, Bylla, a wispy, fluttery woman who wore far too many scarves, and whom Margaret frankly could not stand. Now, they were on their way to have dinner with hunted outlaws, one of whom was an old enemy of her cousin's...

"Uncle," Septimus said in a quiet voice, but one filled with rage. "How can you possibly agree to sit at table with the man who betrayed the Lutums, who murdered Paul Caudalis?"

Margaret paled. How had she not thought of that? Niger was a traitor, a killer, no matter what the stories said, or what she remembered of him...

"There are more things in heaven and on earth, Septimus, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," her uncle said placidly.

"Well quoted, sir," Septimus shot back, "and completely uninformative."

"Indeed. Would you like me to be more specific?"

"Yes. I would like that very much."

"Margaret?"

She nodded, feeling more than ever the dream-like nature of her situation. She would wake up any moment now, she was sure of it...

But she did not, and Lord Albert proceeded to tell them a story that left them both shocked and gasping. It seemed that in secret, Paul Caudalis, not Samuel Niger, had been entrusted with the key to the Lutums' castle. Caudalis, not Niger, had been the traitor among the friends. And Caudalis, not Niger, had caused the carnage at the scene of Niger's capture, falsifying his own death and escaping, leaving Niger to take the blame.

"And Caudalis has been in hiding all this time?" Margaret asked.

"So Samuel hopes. If Caudalis can be found, alive, Samuel's name can be cleared, and he can return to a respectable life."

"Or whatever *he* calls respectable," muttered Septimus.

Margaret smiled. Clearly, Septimus would not be forgiving Samuel any time soon. For her own part, she was heartily glad of the news. She had always liked Samuel Niger, although he and Jonathan Lutum had plagued her life out many a time... they and John Lobos, he was almost always with them...

She looked out the window, seeing the figure of the boy in the dusky light. So young to be marauding along the highways, she pondered.

She turned to look out the other window, just for a bit of variety, and stifled a gasp. There, too, a young man rode – completely identical to the one on her own side. She looked back and forth, almost wildly, but could see no difference. Flaming red hair, grey masks, freckled cheeks, plain clothes, brown horses...

Magic. It must be magic. The Wolf must be a wizard...

"Margaret, what is it?" Lord Albert asked gently.

"Nothing, Uncle," she said automatically, forcing herself to calm. *There is no such thing as magic. There must be another explanation...*

Of course. She felt like a fool. *Twins. Identical twins, on similar horses. That is all.*

I am far too jumpy. I must be calm. Relaxed. A lady never shows signs of distress.

"My lady," said the Wolf's voice.

She looked up with what she hoped was good grace. The Grey Wolf rode alongside their carriage, and he was smiling at her. "Do not be frightened. No harm will come to you this night unless you seek it out. Certainly none who are welcome within my walls would willingly harm you." He extended his hand through the window and laid it gently on her arm. "You will be an honored guest while you stay. And your stay shall be only as long as you wish it to be."

"Leave her alone," Septimus growled, leaning forward and shoving the Wolf's hand away. "Filthy hedge-robber. She'll have none of you."

"Protective, my lord?" The Wolf's voice held a note of mockery on the honorific, if Margaret heard right. "Your cousin seems quite able to deal with me herself. And you misunderstand my intentions. I am a married man, after all."

"Yes, we've all heard the stories of your Lady Morta," Septimus said with a sneer. "An odd name for a woman, that."

"She has it by her own choice," the Wolf rejoined. "It was by that name that she was first introduced to me."

"So you say." Septimus leaned back in his seat, smirking. "Pardon me if I am skeptical that the Lady Morta we will be meeting tonight is the same Lady Morta you had when you began this career of yours, or the same one you will have in a year's time."

"I fail to understand you, sir."

"Then let me put it more plainly. The female we will meet tonight at your side is not your wife, but your – in deference to my cousin, I call her your flunky. And you have had many such flunkies over the years. But you call them all by the name of Morta. Why? Of course, so that your reputation as the valiant and upright outlaw with his noble wife is unbesmirched, and perhaps because you are too lazy to bother learning a new name to call when you take a new woman to your..."

Septimus trailed off. Margaret didn't blame him. The carriage had halted, and the Wolf was leaning on the sill of the carriage window, looking directly at him. Margaret could not see the Wolf's eyes, but she knew what they would be like – the cold blue of steel, or of ice, oddly like her uncle's when he was angered.

Howcan I knowthat? she wondered vaguely.

She glanced over at her uncle. He seemed quite amused by the interchange.

"When we reach the Den," the Wolf said coldly, "you shall meet my wife. And you may judge for yourself whether she is, or has ever been, my, as you say, flunky."

The Wolf's young henchmen were both stifling laughter, Margaret noticed. Clearly, they knew something of this.

Septimus matched the Wolf's stare for a few moments before he dropped his eyes. The Wolf withdrew from the window, and the carriage moved on.

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It took only an hour to reach the stony, mostly untraveled road which apparently led to the Wolf's Den. Full dark had fallen, and the two young henchmen both unveiled lanterns from their saddlebags and lit them, riding ahead so that the coachman could see where he was going.

After a few minutes on the bumpy road, the carriage halted. "Who goes there?" Margaret heard someone shout.

Friends," the Wolf's voice called back. "And guests for the night."

"Give the password."

The answer was a long, mournful howl that Margaret would have thought impossible for a human to make.

"Enter and welcome, sir," the first voice cried respectfully.

The carriage moved forward with a bone-rattling thump, went perhaps a hundred yards, then stopped in a brightly lit area. "My lady, my lords, we have arrived," the Wolf's voice said. "Be welcome in this, my Den. If it will please you to step out."

This time, Margaret took the offered hand, and almost missed her step anyway, so busy she was staring about her.

She stood in the middle of a log palisade. There were several large wooden buildings scattered about, and poles with lanterns hanging from them dotted the place, lighting it almost as well as day. The gate they had entered through was even now being swung closed by the Wolf's two young henchmen –

No, her eyes were deceiving her. There were *three* young men pushing that door closed. She had missed the third because he, too, had red hair.

"Lance," the Wolf called when the door was shut.

"Yes, sir," the new boy said respectfully, coming forward. Margaret sized him up. He appeared about seventeen and could easily have been the twins' elder brother. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and a look of purpose, as if all in his world was right, and if it wasn't, he would know the reason why.

"What's the news? Has the caravan from *Marauder* been sighted?"

"Ten minutes behind you, sir. My lady mother Mary requests your presence in the kitchen when you have a moment."

"Tell her I'll be in as soon as I possibly can. Where's Carl? Carl!" he shouted as Lance hurried toward the largest of the buildings.

"Here, sir," said another red-haired young man, appearing around the side of another of the buildings. This one looked to be about twenty, and was fairly well-muscled.

"Two extra horses for you tonight, my friend. Think you can manage?"

"Oh, I'll find time somehow," the young man said with a laugh. "With an extra pair of hands, should be no trouble."

He waved at the slim, young coachman on the seat of Margaret's own carriage, whom Margaret had really not noticed as of yet.

How odd. I had thought I knew everyone in the household. But I do not know him...

"Come on, then," Carl called to the coachman, "let's get them stabled." He began to lead the horses the Wolf and his two henchmen had ridden toward the building which was apparently the stable.

"That young man is in for a surprise," Lord Albert said as the carriage followed the stablehand.

"Oh? How so?" the Wolf asked.

"Has he ever spoken to you of the lady he left behind to come adventuring with you?"

"Only briefly."

"Has he mentioned her hobby?"

"Yes, he said she was fond of dressing—" The Wolf broke off, following the carriage around the corner with his eyes. "I see," he said speculatively. "So you're telling me I shouldn't be too surprised if I find the hayloft in use tonight, milord."

Lord Albert smiled. "It may not go that far, but I believe the lady will wish a change of garments before she comes to table."

"We're well-supplied in that area, never fear."

"Disgusting," Septimus spat. "How dare you discuss that vile act in front of my cousin. Apologize at once."

"Which vile act would that be, my lord?" the Wolf asked mildly.

"I refer to your comment about the hayloft," Septimus said venomously. "But, if you insist on knowing—"

"Which I didn't," the Wolf murmured.

"If you insist on knowing," Septimus repeated louder, "I also find the idea of a woman dressed as a man highly disturbing. And our coachman, no less. Uncle, how could you let that continue?"

"Young Lady Theodora was quite insistent that she must find the Wolf's Pack," Lord Albert said reasonably. "And I was a trifle averse to letting any

of our regular servants find out where I planned to spend this night. Servants do gossip terribly.”

“Where you *planned* –” Septimus was goggling at his uncle. “This was *planned*?”

“Oh, of course it was planned,” the Wolf said. “Allow me to return this to you, my lady.” He reached into his pocket and retrieved Margaret’s necklace.

“No,” she demurred. “You keep it. I’ve never liked it much.”

“Are you certain?”

“Positive. You have more need of it than I do, I’m sure, with your Pack to feed and clothe.”

“You speak only the truth,” the Wolf sighed, returning the necklace to his pocket. Margaret noticed, with a certain mean thrill, that he did not offer to return Septimus’ watch. “Though, of course, you help us a great deal, milord,” he said to Lord Albert.

“You *help* him?” Margaret wished she had a pin – she was certain that if she stuck it into Septimus at this moment, he would explode. “You help this – this–”

“Outlaw,” the Wolf supplied helpfully. “And yes, he does.”

“Show your face,” Septimus demanded. “Stop hiding behind that damned mask. Show me your face and tell me who you are. If you’re going to haul me off here, you at least owe me that much.”

“If you insist,” the Wolf said lightly. He reached up and pulled the strip of cloth away from his face.

Margaret bit down on a laugh.

I should have known. I truly should have known.

Septimus was positively apoplectic. He looked as if he wanted to say a dozen things, but only one word emerged from his mouth.

“Lobos...”

Sir John Lobos bowed. “At your service, sir.”

Septimus opened and shut his mouth, looking, Margaret thought, rather like a turtle. She stifled another laugh.

“Gideon,” Lobos called. “Fabian.”

The twins appeared, seemingly from nowhere. “Yes, sir,” they said together.

“Take Lord Septimus indoors, will you? Give him a room where he will... feel at home.”

The twins grinned identically. “Yes, *sir*,” they said, still in chorus.

“And what does that mean?” Margaret asked Lobos as the twins each took one of Septimus’ arms and steered him away, Septimus apparently still too stunned to resist.

“Are not your charming cousin’s personal rooms in Mellis Castle in the dungeons?” Lobos asked affably.

This time Margaret did laugh.

“Of course, here we have no dungeons,” Lobos said. “But a good stout cellar will serve well. Have no fear, Lady Margaret,” he added, seeing the concern which she could not help feeling. “He will not be mistreated. But no more of him. Will you and Lord Albert pardon me for a moment? I must to the kitchens to keep my promise to Dame Mary – I am sure she wants to scold me for bringing home an extra gentleman, for you see, Lord Albert forgot to mention your cousin would be joining us tonight.”

“So I did,” her uncle said. “Leaving you no choice but to doom my poor nephew to a solitary night, for to allow him to join us at table would unbalance the ratio of gentlemen to ladies, and quite ruin Dame Mary’s seating arrangement.”

“You understand perfectly, sir. I shall return in a moment.” The Wolf betook himself to the building, and Margaret was finally free to ask her uncle the question that had been burning in her mind ever since Lobos had revealed that their meeting had not been by chance.

“Uncle.”

“Yes, niece?”

“How long have you known of this?”

“Since the beginning, my dear. You recall, of course, the occasions over the past few years when I have been from home at the holidays?”

“I do.”

I have spent those occasions here, with the Wolf's Pack and the crew of the *Marauder*. And in fact, I should not speak of those as separate entities, for they are truly all the same – the *Marauder* is merely the seaward extension of the Pack. Many of the young men you saw here have crewed the *Marauder* in the past, and the Black Dog's current crew have ridden with the Grey Wolf many times.”

Margaret laughed again. “What the King would say if he could hear you now – you, Lord Albert Mellis, admitting to easy companionship, friendship even, with a notorious highwayman and an even more notorious pirate!”

“Ah, I shall admit to far more scandalous things than that before this evening ends,” Lord Albert said with a twinkle in his eye. “Even you, my unflappable Margaret, shall be surprised.”

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Part Four: The Black Dog Arrives

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

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Part Four: The Black Dog Arrives

Sir John was as good as his word, returning only a moment later. “The ladies are eager to see you, milord, and to meet you, Lady Margaret. Will you accompany me?” He offered Margaret his arm graciously, and she accepted.

The building seemed to be all one large room, until Margaret noticed the doorway in the back. “This is our eating and gathering hall,” Sir John said, “and the kitchens are through there.” He waved toward the doorway. “The ladies will be out in a moment—”

“Sir!” One of the red-haired young men, the one with glasses, burst through the door they had entered by. “Sir, there’s something amiss – I think you should see it.”

“Now?” Sir John asked with a sigh.

“Yes, sir. Now.”

“Very well. My apologies, milord, my lady. Lord Albert, can I throw the burden of introducing Lady Margaret around onto you?”

“Certainly, John.”

“Then, I take my leave.” Sir John followed the young man, whom Margaret now remembered as Lance, out the door. The boy seemed to serve the function of a steward, she thought, a sort of second in command.

“Your lordship,” said a quiet voice from the corner, making her start.

A girl of about twelve stepped forward into the light and curtsied. She was pretty in a dreamy sort of way, with long hair an indeterminate color between blond and brown and large eyes which would have been lovely had they not been very slightly protuberant.

“Lady Selene,” Lord Albert replied, bowing slightly. “Margaret, may I present Lady Selene Cuorben. Lady Selene, Lady Margaret Mellis, my niece.”

“Your ladyship.” Selene curtsied to Margaret, who returned the gesture.

“I would have thought you’d be in the kitchen with everyone else, Selene,” Lord Albert said.

“I broke a dish,” Selene said. “So they sent me out here to do my music practice. I can’t break anything when I do that.”

“Quite true.”

Selene curtsied again, then returned to her corner. The sounds of a lute drifted out from the darkness. Apparently, she was practicing an old song for which she did not need written music.

“Uncle, is she... simple?” Margaret asked in a whisper as they crossed the hall, which was filled with trestle tables and benches.

“No, merely a bit different. She has all her wits intact, but she speaks what is on her mind forthrightly, without worrying what people will think. I find her straightforwardness refreshing in many ways.”

They had arrived at the doorway to the kitchen. Everything was heat, noise, and bustle within.

“Gwen, make sure the water’s hot, someone’s bound to want tea—”

“Mary, the stew’s done, you need to adjust the hob, it never works right when I do it—”

“Morta, here’s the mint you wanted—”

“Oh, thank you, Pearl, sweetheart – Lia, check on the bread, it should be done by now—”

“Forgive me for intruding, ladies,” Lord Albert called, “but could you spare a moment to greet a weary traveler?”

“Lord Albert!” a child’s voice cried, and a dark-skinned girl came hurtling out of the steam to embrace Margaret’s uncle. “Lord Albert, you came!”

“Yes, I came, and I brought someone with me. I make known to you the Lady Margaret Mellis. Margaret, I would like you to meet Lady Pearl Niger.”

The girl, who looked to be about ten years old, curtsied. "Pleased to meet you, Lady Margaret."

"And you," Margaret said, staring at the girl, whose face reminded her tremendously of someone. "Uncle, whose—"

"Is she?" her uncle finished. "Pearl, who are your parents?"

"The Black Dog and the Lady Drazah," the girl said with a wicked grin.

"Their real names, saucy child."

"Viscount Samuel Niger and his Viscountess Alison," the girl recited in a bored tone.

Margaret leaned against the doorframe. *Alison. Of course. She did not die any more than John did. She merely... became a pirate. And married her love. And bore him a child.*

Of course.

"But I like being a pirate's daughter better than being a Viscount's," Pearl finished.

"Do not be so sure until you've tried them both, little minx," Lord Albert admonished, tapping the girl's cheek lightly. "A life of wealth and privilege can be very enjoyable."

"A life of wealth and privilege can be very boring," said a woman's voice from behind the girl. "Lord Albert, how are you?"

"Quite well, Dame Mary, and yourself?"

"Oh, as well as can be expected with half my family away on a pirate ship and the other half here making mischief all the day long."

Margaret was duly introduced to Dame Mary Mustela and her daughter Guinevere, with twelve years to her credit, both of whom were as red-headed as the young men she'd seen in the yard. A question confirmed that yes, they were all Mary's sons, and that she had two others, who, with their father, were both currently serving under the Black Dog on the *Marauder*.

"Though what my Richard can do on board ship, being only thirteen, is beyond me," she said. "But for all I know about ships, boys that size may be useful in some way – they certainly have enough of them on board, what with my Rich and Anne's Dominic, and Daniel and Henry..."

Margaret gasped.

"Heavens, have I said something wrong?" Mary asked in concern.

"No, nothing at all," Lord Albert hastened to reassure her as Margaret sat down quickly on the nearest bench. "Margaret simply was not aware of those particular members of the Wolf's Pack."

"Dear me, I am sorry, Lady Margaret. Let me get you some water." Mary vanished back into the kitchen.

"She does mean who I think she means, then," Margaret said weakly. All the shocks of the last two hours were beginning to tell on her. "By Henry."

"Henry Lutum? She does. Please forgive me, Margaret, I should have told you much earlier than this. Yes, Henry Lutum is alive and well, and nearly here by now, I daresay."

"And Daniel is Daniel Devovi."

"Yes, although he no longer uses that name. He has taken the name of Niger to honor his mother – she was born a Niger, as I daresay you knew."

"And Dominic would be Dominic Portop, then?"

"And I thought you had forgot about the Portops," Lord Albert said with real approval in his voice. "Yes, he and his grandmother have been part of the Pack for some time now."

"I wondered why Anne Portop never wrote to me any more," Margaret said, as a cup of water appeared in front of her. She took it and drank it quickly, then turned to thank Mary for bringing it.

Another girl of about twelve or thirteen stood before her. She had a truly astonishing amount of brown wavy hair and a very earnest face. "Lady Margaret," she said with a curtsy.

"Margaret, may I present Ophelia Amelar-Lobos," Lord Albert said. "Sir John's wife's sister and his adopted daughter."

The girl made a face. "Please, Lord Albert, not Ophelia. Lia. I hate Ophelia. I wouldn't go mad and drown myself because some fool of a prince wanted revenge."

The comment surprised a laugh out of Margaret.

"And, last but surely not least, the lady of the Den herself," Lord Albert said, rising. "Lady Margaret Mellis – Lady Desdemona Amelar-Lobos, known to all as Lady Morta."

“Call me Desdemona again and I’ll throw you down the well,” the lady said frankly to him before turning to Margaret. “I’m pleased to finally meet you, I hear so much about you.”

“All good, I hope,” Margaret said, knowing she sounded banal.

“Oh, yes. About what a wonderful chatelaine you are, and how much of the burden you take from him, and how he knows he never has to worry with you on hand. As I said, pleased to meet you.”

Lady Morta resembled her sister closely, having the same earnest face – the look of a seeker after knowledge, Margaret thought – and the same hair that would probably refuse to be tamed, no matter what one did with it. “Likewise.”

“*Here they come!*” a voice bellowed from outside.

“I’ll find Lady Anne!” cried Lia, running toward one of the doors.

“I’ll fetch Carl!” shouted Gwen, popping out of the kitchen and dashing toward another.

“And I’m to fetch you, my love,” said Sir John, reentering the room in haste. “All of you, in fact – the caravan is indeed approaching, and it is traditional to greet our returned friends in the courtyard.”

“He means, so we don’t knock the walls down in our eagerness to get at them,” Lady Morta translated with a laugh, going swiftly to her husband. They embraced for a moment, then went out the door arm-in-arm. Mary followed them, with Pearl leaping around her – “My mother and my father are coming!” – and Selene rose from her corner and unhurriedly left the room for the courtyard.

“Will you honor me with your company to greet the returning travelers, niece?” Lord Albert asked, offering Margaret his arm.

She rose, slowly, and took it. “Uncle, this is all so sudden. People I haven’t seen in years, people I thought were dead—”

“You have done marvelously well so far, Margaret. If it seems to be getting too much for you, we can surely find you a quiet place to rest until you are ready to rejoin us.”

“No, I will be all right now,” Margaret said, willing the words to be true. “Let us go out and greet our friends.”

And I can see if the son of Violet Thomas still has her eyes after all these years.

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Henry’s green eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

There was nothing better than this, the last leg of the journey home. In only a few minutes, they would be back in the Den, and there would be the inevitable hugging and kissing and exclamations over them having grown, and then there would be supper and music and stories and laughter, and perhaps time for a bath before bed.

He glanced to one side – Rich grinned back at him. The other – Daniel waved nonchalantly, while Dominic gave him a tight little nod. Dominic didn’t mind the ship so much, but he wasn’t a good rider. Usually he rode in the wagon on the journey from the secret cove where the *Marauder* moored to the Wolf’s Den. But he couldn’t do that this time, because of the *thing* in the wagon.

Henry felt his face crinkle up in a smile. The *thing* in the wagon – which was a person, of course, but it was fun to think of him as a *thing* – was going to make his life so much better. Soon he would be able to walk in the sunlight without a disguise, say his name openly, and best of all, call the name of his godfather without fear.

Henry urged his horse up a little, cutting through the press of riders, and reached his godfather’s side – as captain of the *Marauder*, of course, Samuel Niger led the way on the road.

“May we sing once we get up the turn-off?” he asked.

“What song did you have in mind?” came the wary answer.

“*The Crew of the Good Ship Marauder*,” Henry answered promptly.

The Captain sighed. “You shouldn’t even *know* that song.”

“Drazah’s going to kill you,” Henry finished before Samuel could. “*Please, Captain?*”

“Oh, very well. Just this once. I’ll start it once I’m up the turn-off – ah, and here we are now.”

Henry moved his horse a little up the road and waited his turn. The moon was up, lighting everything a pale silver, so there was enough light to show him the other boys as they turned, and he pressed his knees into his horse’s side to get back into his place in line.

I love this song.

It was only a few moments before he heard the Captain begin to sing, in his lusty baritone.

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder

A few voices joined him.

And we pillage and steal when we can

The whole crowd began to sing as they realized what the song was.

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder,

And we're loyal and true to a man...

The singers faltered. Many of them, after all, were not men.

Er... woman... er... person...

"Oh, never mind," somebody said in disgust. "Let's just keep going."

The crew picked up the song at the next verse.

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder,

And we'll come at you out of the night.

We'll steal all your sails and damage your rails

And leave your ship not watertight.

"What do rails have to do with anything?" Rich asked Henry.

"I don't know, but it rhymes with sails."

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder,

And we're pirates – aye, that's what we be!

We will drink and we'll dance and we'll take off your pants

And we'll throw you right into the sea.

"Why are we taking their pants off?" Dominic wanted to know.

"Just keep singing," Daniel advised him.

The song wound into its final verse as they came into sight of the Wolf's Den.

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder,

And we always do just as we should,

We're the crew of the good ship Marauder...

Everyone bellowed the last line at the top of their lungs.

And we solemnly swear that we're up to no good!

"Who goes there?" shouted Lance Mustela from the palisade wall.

"Friends!" the Captain replied, riding up through the crowd. "Friends in abundance."

"Give the password."

The entire crew of the *Marauder* howled.

"Enter and be welcome!" Lance shouted over the din, and disappeared below the palisade, going down the ladder to be ready to welcome Helen, Henry would have bet money.

He looked around, watching all the familiar faces. Sera Jameson and Tricia Bush were murmuring together with their friend Bronwen Chimmering and Gideon and Fabian's best friend Warren Fluvis, probably plotting something to find out if the twins had swapped places to greet them. Helen Claraqua sat her horse calmly, waiting for the gate to open. Rich was talking with his father and his oldest brother Alex, whose new lady friend, Lillie, had joined the crew at their watering spot in France. She would have to be introduced to everyone.

Sir Boris Cuorben, Selene's father, was fidgeting slightly on the wagon seat, anxious to be reunited with his daughter. Captain Samuel, of course, was waiting right in front of the gate. And – Henry looked around – the woman who was the closest thing he had ever known to a mother (along with

Morta, of course), the fearsome Lady Drazah, had maneuvered her horse in between those of Daniel and Dominic, and was telling them something that made them laugh.

The gate rumbled and began to open. The Captain whooped and rode forward. Alex Mustela looped his arm around Lillie's waist and pulled her off her horse, depositing her face-down over his saddlebow, and followed his captain inside to the accompaniment of her indignant French curses and the rest of the crew's laughter.

I love coming home.

Henry urged his horse forward through the gate. He and the other boys had so much to tell Lia and Pearl and Gwen and 'Lene. Like the song they'd learned in a London pub about King Linus' ugly mistress...

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Part Five: The Feast Begins

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

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Part Five: The Feast Begins

The courtyard was chaotic, as friends and families exclaimed over one another. Margaret's ear caught snatches of conversations.

"Mother, this is Lillie—"

"Why, how nice, Alex, dear!"

Margaret detected just a note of false cheer in Mary Mustela's tone. She was obviously less than thrilled with her son bringing home a French girl.

"Samuel, where's Rufus?" asked Lady Morta.

"Oh, we bargained him for Lillie."

"Good trade," said Sir John.

Much laughter.

"No, truly we did," said Alison, who hadn't changed much in twelve years, Margaret saw, except to grow more beautiful. Her resemblance to her daughter was even more noticeable with the two side by side. "Lillie was orphaned as a child. The schoolteacher of the Village, a Madame Stegra, took her in, and Rufus fell for the woman just as hard as Alex fell for Lillie. And it was mutual."

"Being that they were the right size for one another," said the voice of the legendary Black Dog, "I think it was inevitable. Rufus opted to stay with his darling Utma, to help her finish the term at school. If all goes well, they'll join us on our next voyage."

"Already wed," added Alison. "But wait until you hear the prize we took this time—"

"Hello, Henry!"

Margaret's head snapped around. Guinevere Mustela was waving at a black-haired boy sitting easily on a handsome black mare. Yes, Margaret saw with a pang as the boy looked in her direction, he did indeed have his mother's eyes. Green as emeralds, and far more beautiful, for emeralds could never show joy or sorrow.

"Hello, Gwen," the boy answered, dismounting and taking his horse's rein. "Will you help me take care of Cecilia?"

"Of course." Guinevere reached into her pocket and produced a lump of sugar, which she gave to the horse as they walked towards the stables.

"I found that treatise you wanted, Lance," said a young woman with black curls, handing a wrapped package to the red-haired young man in spectacles who had held her rein so that she could dismount.

"Thank you, Helen. How much did it cost you?"

"Call it a gift," said Helen coolly, taking her reins back. "Or something to be shared between us, perhaps."

"Then next time that I go to town on business, I must bring you a gift," said Lance, accepting the reins of two other horses. "What would you say to a ring?"

Samuel Niger's laugh, just as much like a dog's bark as ever, drew Margaret's attention away from Helen's reaction to this. He was hugging the young woman who had been their coachman.

"My little cousin Dora, all grown up," he said, shaking his head at her once he'd released her. "But the same little hoyden as ever – dressing as a man, running off to join the Wolf's Pack – I recall you once swearing that you would only ever wed my friend John, since he was the only one of us who would teach you boy's tricks! Whatever became of that?"

"My heart was broken at the tender age of nine, when he vanished," countered the girl, laughing herself and smiling at Sir John. "Now if I'd known he'd gone to be a highwayman..."

"I would have been left without a lady," countered Carl Mustela, "since you would have always been sighing after your Wolf."

"She and half the rest of the young ladies in the kingdom," said Lady Morta. "But they must keep sighing to no purpose, for the Grey Wolf is mine." She adopted a "clinging vine" attitude, leaning heavily on her husband and simpering.

"And he shan't be for much longer, if you keep doing that," said Sir John, but his face was amused as he looked down at his wife, who promptly resumed standing on her own two feet and lifted her chin at him.

"I see Lord Albert is here," said Alison, looking in Margaret's direction. "And – who is that with him – good heavens!"

Margaret found a smile coming naturally to her face as Alison ran toward her, looking delighted. "Lady Margaret! How wonderful to see you!"

"And you, Alison – Alison Niger, is it now?"

"It is. Though many call me Lady Drazah as well." Alison released Margaret's hands and struck a heroic pose. "The Terrors of the Tides, the Tyrant of the Good Ship *Marauder*."

"The second being far more true than the first," said Samuel from behind her, and caught her hand as she struck at him. "Lady Margaret." He bowed to her, exactly as he might if they were meeting at Court, and she curtsied to him in return. "It has been too long."

"Indeed it has. And I have thought badly of you without justice for quite that long. Will you accept my apologies?"

"None are necessary. The plot was cleverly laid, meant to deceive all who might have interceded for me. And since I speak of it, will you pardon me for a moment?"

"Of course."

Samuel turned away from her. "Friends!" he shouted, gaining everyone's attention. "All of you know the truth of my story. But how much better would it be for us, if the whole kingdom should learn of it? If this exile of ours could end – if I could take up my rightful place, return to my estate, give all of you the homes you deserve – how much would it advance our cause?"

"Their cause?" asked Margaret softly under the cheers.

"Shortly, my dear," said Lord Albert, who was watching Samuel.

"Those of you who sailed with me this voyage know of this already," proclaimed Samuel. "But for those of you who did not, I have something to give to you. A gift, perhaps, though I cannot imagine who would be glad to receive such a gift. Unless it be a magistrate."

About half the crowd laughed. Those who had sailed on the *Marauder*, Margaret thought. But what could Samuel mean? Unless –

With a leap, Samuel was up on the wagon seat, reaching into the back of the wagon, dragging forth another man – a small, mousy-looking man, who had once been fat but no longer was, and whose hair was coming out in patches. His hands were tied behind him, and he seemed frightened of everything.

As well he might be, Margaret thought, recognizing him, and feeling a rush of anger and loathing, now that she knew the truth about him.

Paul Caudalis, you have a great deal to answer for.

"John, catch!" cried Samuel, and Margaret saw a blade flash. She almost gasped, but saw in time that Samuel had only cut Caudalis' bonds and shoved him from the wagon. He landed in the dirt at John's feet, and Alison and Morta pounced on him and hauled him upright, backing swiftly away once they had.

"Hello, Paul," said John politely.

"J-John," stammered Caudalis, backing away and looking around for an exit. He would find none, Margaret saw – the men and women remaining in the courtyard (all the children seemed to have vanished with the horses) had circled him, and most of them had drawn blades. "My old friend..."

"How dare you call me that," said John, all politeness in his voice gone. "After what you did, how dare you."

His left fist came around in a scientifically perfect arc, and Caudalis collapsed bonelessly to the ground. John regarded his hand carefully, apparently looking for damage, as his audience applauded him.

Samuel leapt from the wagon, laughing. "Well hit, sir," he called out.

"Why, thank you, old friend."

The men shook hands, playfully trying to outgrip one another.

"Fabian, Gideon," called John when they had finished.

The red-haired twins emerged from the shadows near the stables, both of them somewhat mussed and sporting identical black berets.

"Do I want to know?" asked John dryly, regarding them.

"Sera and Tricia bought them for us, sir," said one twin.

"In France, with some of their share of the loot," said the other.

John lifted his eyes momentarily to heaven, then motioned to Caudalis. "Remove our newest guest to a place in the cellars remote from Lord Septimus' room. Secure him well. Bring him bread and water, and a chamber pot, and nothing else. We shall deal with him in the morning. For now—" He pitched his voice to carry. "The feast begins!"

x X x X x

In the stables, the children of the Wolf's Pack had been caring for the horses with the ease of long practice. Those who finished quickly had time for other pursuits. Sera and Gideon vanished outside quickly, as did Tricia and Fabian. Lance offered Helen his arm calmly as they walked out together, and Warren Fluvis chased Bronwen Chimmering out the back door, both of them laughing like lunatics.

Daniel Niger watched them go, shaking his head. *Will I ever behave like that?* he wondered. *Make a fool of myself the way they do?*

Another motion caught his eye. Carl and the new girl, whose name he didn't know, were taking a moment out of rubbing down the horses in adjacent stalls to kiss.

Or do something like that?

Well, perhaps with Selene some day.

Thinking of the girl reminded him of what he had for her.

"There's a good girl, Delilah," said Lene as she stroked Daniel's mare. "You eat your supper, and we shall go and eat ours."

"Lene?"

"Yes, Daniel?"

"Did I tell you that the Captain let us board with him today?"

"No. Did you take anything?"

"Yes, we did. There was a woman aboard – the ship's owner's wife – and she was wearing so many necklaces that she could hardly walk. So the Captain let all the boys take one from her."

"Why would you want a necklace?"

"Not for myself," said Daniel, swallowing against a sudden attack of nerves. "To give to someone else."

"Who?"

"You." Daniel unbuttoned his special pocket and removed the long silver chain, giving it a small tug at the end to free the pendant, set with a moonstone. "I chose this one."

Selene accepted the gift and slid the pendant back and forth along the chain. "It's very lovely," she said. "I like the way it catches the light. It almost looks like a pearl."

"Dominic took a pearl necklace," said Daniel, taking the chain back from Selene as she turned around.

"To give to Pearl, of course." Selene lifted her hair out of the way so that Daniel could fasten the chain around her neck. "What does it look like?"

x X x X x

"White, white, white, black," said Pearl delightedly, tapping the pearls now lying against her chest. "White, white, white, black. White, white, white, black. And all the same size. I've heard of black pearls, but never seen them before. Dominic, how did you know? I love it!"

"I thought it would look pretty on you," said Dominic in a gratified tone. "And I liked the black ones. Because you're a black Pearl, with your skin and your last name."

"Niger means black." Pearl giggled. "That's funny! Thank you!"

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Dominic's cheek, making him blush a fiery red.

"You look like Richard," she decided after gazing at him for a few moments. "Like Richard when he's embarrassed."

x X x X x

Richard was undergoing embarrassment now.

"Lia, I have something to give you," he muttered under his breath, carrying an armload of hay into his gelding's stall and looking at what he held underneath it. "No, that's no good. Lia, this is for you. No, too boring. Lia, I stole this for you. But then that sounds bad."

"Rich, is something wrong?" asked Lia from behind him.

Rich spun around and panicked. "Here," he said breathlessly, shoving the torque of gold at her.

Lia stared at it for a moment without moving, before her hands rose to take it from him. "Oh, Rich... wherever did you get it?"

"Loot," said Rich, recovering his aplomb somewhat. "Captain Niger said we were old enough now to come along on a looting party."

"Was it part of the cargo?"

Rich shook his head. "The ship's owner was aboard, with his wife and son," he said. "The son was about our age, but so fat he couldn't even really walk. He waddled." Rich demonstrated. "Like a duck."

Lia laughed, then went back to examining the torque. "A diamond," she said, placing a finger gently on the gem. "A ruby. And a sapphire. My favorites. How did you know?"

"I just guessed," said Rich, looking at the floor. He wasn't about to tell her that Henry had taken his first choice... the gems that matched his lady's eyes...

x X x X x

"I brought something for you, Gwen," said Henry after he had brought Cecilia her food and water, and Gwen had made sure she was comfortable.

"For me?"

"I took it from a scrawny old woman," Henry laughed. "The Captain says she was my aunt."

"Henry, it's wrong to rob women," scolded Gwen. "Unless they're very rich women."

"Do you want to see it or don't you?"

"Of course I do."

Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out a long string of brown stones, which gleamed in the light of the stable lamps. Gwen drew in her breath eagerly.

"Tiger's-eyes," said Henry, holding them out over his hands. "I thought you'd like them best."

"Henry, they're beautiful!" Gwen held the string against her gown. "I'm so glad I wore the blue. These go so nicely."

"The feast begins!" shouted Sir John's voice from outdoors.

"Oh, we should run!" Gwen fumbled with the clasp of the string and nearly dropped it before Henry took it and helped her fasten it. Then they did run, and if anyone had asked him, Henry would have claimed he was holding Gwen's hand so that she did not trip and fall.

x X x X x

In his room in the cellars, Lord Septimus Vane sulked.

He could entertain himself, certainly, and usually cared for that kind of entertainment over others. He had not been relieved of his throwing-knives, and was passing the time by practicing with a target he'd scratched on the back of his door. And he had been promised food when it was ready. Still...

He was being mocked, and he did not care for it at all. There was no lock on that door, no guard outside it, he might have his weapons, but he was no less a prisoner. The ghoulish pair of brats who had brought him here had made that entirely plain, with their jesting bows and pretty speeches about staying in his place and being grateful for what he got.

It did not help that Septimus had in his time delivered speeches like those himself, to peasants and petty nobility who got above themselves. He was sure these boys derived from one of those two stocks – in fact, he thought he recalled a noble family, poor in everything but children and famous for red hair, who had been forced from their lands by King Linus' taxes.

The taxes were, of course, designed to do just that, since the lands went to the Crown when their owner failed to pay. And every ell of land the King owned was another ell he could exploit, for his own pleasures...

Decking out that ugly woman he keeps. Why, when there are so many beautiful ones, must his fancy fall on something with a face like a frog trampled by an ox?

Perhaps she did him some kind of service. His wife is certainly no use, to him or to anyone else. Dreadful woman. Drifting about the castle draped in scarves... I know what she spends the tax money on. Silks, wines, and paraphernalia for telling the future. She is convinced she has magical powers. Perhaps she does. She certainly possesses the ability to empty a room quickly, simply by walking into it.

His thoughts drifted. *So this family came to the Grey Wolf, and to the Black Dog. And others must have done so. Why? To revenge themselves on the King? For protection?*

Both guesses, had he only known, were partially right, but neither was the total truth.

x X x X x

"My friends, I believe it is time we allowed my niece into our secrets," said Lord Albert as Dame Mary directed her four youngest sons where to put the basins and dishes of food they were carrying from the kitchens. (Alex and Carl had been excused from kitchen duties on account of having newly arrived lady friends to entertain.)

"Agreed," said John, motioning Samuel and Alison closer. "Morta, my love, would you care to begin?"

"I would." Morta took a drink from her goblet of water. "None of us here have reason to love the King," she began. "He did nothing, for instance, to check the bands of brigands who ran rampant after the downfall of Praecad. One of those bands murdered my parents."

Margaret murmured something sympathetic.

"Most of those who live here were forced from their lands by taxes," said Alison. "Or arrested on trumped-up charges, because someone at Linus' Court had a grudge against them. Together, we have a chance of surviving, and more, of changing things."

"Changing things?" Margaret nodded thanks to one of the twins, who placed a steaming basket of bread in front of her, then turned back to the adults. "Changing which things?"

Samuel's eyes sparked, as Margaret had seen them do when he was about to execute a neat trick of swordplay. "Long live good Queen Mia," he said softly.

Margaret felt her eyes growing large. Piracy and highway robbery were not bad enough – these people were planning a revolution! Lady Mia Patel was well thought of, certainly, and high in the line of the succession to the throne, but to overthrow the King...

"We hope to make it as bloodless as possible," said John, as if he had read her thoughts. "Samuel's restoration will be a large step in the right direction."

"Once I'm back at Court," Samuel's face crinkled in distaste, "I can begin recruiting people. Lord Albert cannot do so without being found out for the radical he is."

"Speaking of Court, I bring disturbing news," said Lord Albert, choosing to ignore this description of him, though his eyes showed his amusement at it for a moment. "A conspiracy to assassinate Mia, and bring Linus to name Count Scarles as his heir."

The four were visibly shaken by this. "Who is involved?" demanded John, recovering first. "And what can we do?"

"The leader, as far as I can tell, is Lady Katherine Stone, one of the Queen's waiting women. And as to what you can do, my best suggestion is to send one of your young ladies to Court with me, supposedly as a serving maid for Mia, but actually as a bodyguard..."

Margaret reached for a piece of bread and broke off a piece, taking small bites of it and allowing the talk to wash over her without really hearing it.

I have never liked Katherine Stone. Without really understanding why, I have simply never liked her.

And Count Scarles... almost the image of Linus, though perhaps not quite as corrupt. Nothing would change with Scarles on the throne.

Does this mean I am with them?

She looked out of the corner of her eye at her uncle.

He has never led me wrongly. Sometimes his paths are hard to understand, but they always lead to the right destinations.

"Uncle," she said quietly at a break in the conversation.

"Yes, Margaret?"

"You have my support for this plan."

Lord Albert smiled. "I thought I should," was all he said, but his approval was tangible.

That taken care of, Margaret discovered she was ravenous, and did justice to the meal.

The tales of the Wolf's Den had not exaggerated Lady Morta's skill in the kitchen.

x X x X x

Far below, a man listened to the distant sounds of merriment and felt the familiar envy and anger rise in him.

They would pay. They would all pay.

And they had accidentally given him everything he needed to make them pay.

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Roman a Clef

Part Six: The Feast Ends

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

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Part Six: The Feast Ends

Supper was almost over. People sipped the last of their wine or idly cracked nuts. Gazing about the room, Margaret began to understand why tales of the Wolf's Den often included wary admissions that even among outlaws, the teller had felt safe.

There is more true gentility in this place than in any Court function I have ever attended.

Talk of the conspiracy headed by the Wolf and the Dog had occupied the first portion of the meal. Now, their hunger sated, the men and women relaxed and spoke of lighter things, of their hopes and dreams for the future, a future suddenly within their grasp. Alison, Morta, Dame Mary, and Lady Anne Portop (who had greeted Margaret with more real warmth than Margaret ever recalled her friend displaying before) had asked Margaret for details of the latest fashions, and were now discussing how their older gowns might be modified, and where appropriate garb for their daughters could be had.

On the other side of the table, Samuel held forth on the subject of the Niger family estate. "It'll be gone to ruin these eight years, since my mother died," he said bluntly. "She'd never keep on two servants where one would do, especially not when that one was devoted to her."

"But if he was so devoted, surely he'd have turned that into maintaining the house and grounds?" asked Patrick Mustela.

"Ah, no." Samuel let his goblet dangle precariously between two fingers. "Not when he knows who stands heir to that house and those grounds."

"Do you still stand heir?" Sir Boris asked, with the same frank curiosity that characterized his daughter Selene. "I thought you were disowned."

"Disowned, yes, but the estate is entailed, and with the rest of the family either dead, imprisoned, or uninterested in noble foolery, once my name is restored, I doubt I'll have much trouble reclaiming it. And the caretaker knows that. He won't have ruined anything, but neither will he have kept it up, or bothered to replace anything falling to pieces other than that which he needs himself to survive. I have a long road ahead of me."

"We have always had long roads ahead," John put in. "Only now, we can see where portions of them lead. I prefer it to the alternative."

A trill of music from the other side of the room, a pipe or flute, caught Margaret's ear. Two of the small trestle tables were lined with children, of an age with those she taught in Mellis Castle. The girls she had been introduced to already, and the boys she knew either by their resemblance to their families or by reputation. In Henry Lutum's case, both applied.

His father in miniature, but with his mother's eyes. One of the most famous children in Britain – and another sits close by his side...

And that other was the piper, Margaret saw. Daniel Niger held a recorder to his lips, his attention focused on his fingers and their movements. Margaret could not name the tune he played; she was sure she had heard it many a time before, but Daniel's undoubted skill had reshaped it into a new form that she was hard-put to identify.

Movement in the shadows behind the boys caught her eye. Dominic Portop slipped from the shadows, tiny Pearl Niger behind him. Each bore musical instruments, Dominic a lute, Pearl a drum and a larger recorder than the one Daniel played. Richard Mustela rose from his seat quickly to take the drum from Pearl's hands, dipping a shallow bow of thanks. Lia Amelar-Lobos took the large recorder, and Selene Cuorben accepted the lute from Dominic.

The talking at both tables of children (though the word was misleading, Margaret thought, seeing the poise with which all the younger members of the Wolf's Pack comported themselves) had died away. The scrape of trestle feet against boards could be heard as the red-haired Mustelas, with the darker heads of their various ladies among them, pulled tables and benches to one side, clearing a space in the middle of the hall.

Selene plucked a string on her lute and listened to its pitch as Daniel played a similar note on his recorder. Lia held her pipe at chest level, dry-fingering what looked like a complicated passage. Richard had drawn two slim sticks from his clothing, and Margaret wondered if he had been carrying them all this time.

Easy enough to conceal, I suppose, and if you could find the right place for them, hardly of a size to be in the way...

Henry emerged from the swirl of young people and approached the adults, whose conversations quickly found places to halt. "My lords, my ladies, if you are minded to dance, we are minded to make music," he announced, with none of the self-consciousness Margaret would have expected from a boy of thirteen. "If not, we pray your indulgence for a few songs for ourselves."

"I think dancing is a fine idea," said John, rising from his seat. "But only a few songs. With your young strength, you may never know weariness, but it is a constant companion to us in our age."

We shall keep the music slow, then, sir, so as not to overtax your old bones," Henry countered, and turned to Margaret while the table was still laughing. "My lady, will you favor me?" he asked, a slight flush now rising in his cheeks as he held out his hand.

If we could only teach the heedless boys at Mellis your manners, young man... "I will," Margaret answered aloud, placing her hand in Henry's. "But what of the young lady I saw you enter with? Guinevere, is it not?"

Henry's flush intensified, but a small smile lit his face as well. "Rich has lured her away to sing for them, Lady Margaret. Besides, I may always dance with her, but you are a guest, and will not always be here." They stepped onto the impromptu dance floor together. "And I had hoped to bribe you with a dance to tell me some of what you recall of my parents."

Margaret smiled. "No bribe is necessary for that. I doubt you could stop me."

Henry took his place opposite her in the line of dancers. He did not speak, but Margaret could see gratitude clear on his face.

The higher of the two recorders played a few measures alone, to tell the dancers of their steps. The beat of the drum began, then the lute, and the recorders rose in harmony above the voice of the girl.

*One day as I walked on the banks of a stream,
Sing oh, the sun and the leaves, oh!
A lady I saw, in her eye a tear's gleam,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees, the trees,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees.*

*The lady did see me, and to me did cry,
Sing oh, the sun and the leaves, oh!
Have you seen my knight? For his sake I would die,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees, the trees,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees.*

*Oh, tell me the name of this knight you adore,
Sing oh, the sun and the leaves, oh!
And what he may look like, behind and before,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees, the trees,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees.*

Margaret paid more attention to her steps than to the words of the song. It was like any other of its kind, moving its story slowly forward to the inevitable sad ending, as the lady leapt into the stream upon receiving the news that her knight was dead.

I have never understood such foolishness. Love is a fine and a noble thing, but destroying oneself for lack of it? There are always others who care, others who would help if they could. And if every bereaved lover killed herself, or every grieving parent or child, we would have no one left in the world.

Gwen's voice rose in the final verse, as the recorders twined a descant above her.

*Young lovers, be warned, and from wars keep away,
Sing oh, the sun and the leaves, oh!
For a grave is a grave, though your love by it stay,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees, the trees,
As the leaves they fall down from the trees.*

x X x X x

In the cellars, Septimus had fallen into a light doze. The red-haired twins had returned some time before with a tray of food and a bundle of blankets, and to his surprise, they had neither spilled the one nor stained the other. The room was comfortably warm, so that he could use all the blankets as padding, and the food (now only a memory) had been excellent. He could almost believe himself home, in his own rooms at Mellis Castle, with a pleasant day of studying and learning ahead...

A distant crash startled him fully awake. He arose and went cautiously to his door – he'd be damned if he'd sit by when danger threatened his family, but if the noise was nothing to do with his uncle or cousin, the arrogant Wolf and his Pack could go hang for all Septimus cared.

The corridor into which he peered was empty, lit by a few flickering lanterns hung on the walls. It connected with another about halfway down its length, Septimus recalled, in a T-junction, this corridor where he was being the upper bar of the T and the other the downstroke. The noise could have come from there. He was about to step out into the hallway when running footsteps warned him instead to retreat.

The door opened away from the junction, so that Septimus could press himself to the inside wall of his room and edge his face around the doorjamb. *I feel ridiculous, but it is the safest way to look out of a room without being seen.*

And one glimpse of the man who leaned on the corner of the two hallways, breathing hard, made Septimus glad of his caution.

For if I am to believe my uncle – and he speaks falsehoods only in the greatest of extremity – this man betrayed two of his closest friends, then killed twelve innocent people and made sure the blame fell upon another.

Paul Caudalis.

They must have found him somewhere, taken him prisoner, brought him back here with them. He seeks his freedom again.

But Caudalis undoubtedly sought more than that. Septimus' glance had showed him something roughly triangular in the man's right hand. Not even John Lobos and Samuel Niger, as careless as they had always been, would have allowed a prisoner to keep a weapon. Caudalis must have fashioned one for himself.

And I am likely the only one who knows of his escape, his sudden freedom within this place they call their own...

It was tempting, so tempting. All that was necessary was for him to return to his soft blankets, his disturbed rest. He had been told not to venture from his room. He had been asleep when the crash – undoubtedly Caudalis breaking free – had sounded. No blame could be placed on him. Niger and Lobos, and all their fine felons with them, would have what they deserved, no less, no more.

And what of the children?

Septimus hissed between his teeth at the thought. True, the Wolf's Pack, and the crew of the *Marauder*, held a great many whom he would not have been surprised to see as his own students, or as Margaret's or their uncle's.

And my own blood are here as well, my own kin. I cannot desert them. I cannot turn my back.

He risked one more look around the doorpost. Caudalis was gone.

Very well. Though I am sure I shall regret it in the morning.

Lord Septimus Vane blew out his candle and started for the stairs on silent feet.

x X x X x

Each person, or set of people, took a turn in entertaining at the Wolf's Den, Margaret discovered. Several of the younger children had done their part in playing for the dancing, and those who had not played at first – Henry and Gwen, and Dominic and Pearl – took their friends' places for the last two songs, allowing the original musicians to dance.

The Mustela twins, Warren Fluvis, and the girls who had laid claim to them took the stage next. They sang a comic song about three little robins being chased by two big crows, and how the robins fooled the crows into crashing into one another, while a blue jay nearby laughed and laughed.

The French girl, Lilie, borrowed Selene's lute to accompany herself as she sang a love song. This, unlike Gwen's song earlier, had a hopeful tone, a sense that the love might someday be requited, and the look in Alex Mustela's eyes as he listened hinted that the hope was well justified.

The Wolf himself was next to claim attention. He seemed, once he had risen, to have forgotten what he planned to do, instead tossing a red apple idly from one hand to the other.

"Try this," called Morta, throwing another apple toward him. John looked startled for a moment, but caught it in his free hand, tossing it into the air as well. The apples changed places for a few moments, until Alison rose from her place and threw a third apple towards her friend.

Margaret gasped, but the rest of the room laughed aloud, as the expression of panic on John's face changed to bewilderment, as his hands, seemingly without his help, caught the third apple and began to juggle the three. And then the four, as Samuel added another – and the five – and the six –

Margaret lost count as the red fruits whirled up and around. Finally, as John began to toss them back to various members of his audience, she thought to count how many he was throwing, and thus realized that he'd been juggling eight apples by the end of his display.

But it was not the end of his display, for Morta rose from her chair and caught the last three apples as John passed them to her, one at a time, and spun them into the air almost as skillfully as he had done. The children clapped and cheered, though they must have seen it many times before.

Margaret frowned a little as she saw Henry stand up and hurry from the hall through one of its many doors. *Is he bored with it? He doesn't seem that type. No, he's likely going to fetch their juggling balls, or whatever they use...*

From beyond that door came a boy's startled shout, abruptly cut off. Morta whirled, the apples falling unheeded to the ground. Men and women alike started to their feet, hands at their waists or within their jackets.

"Hold!" shouted a man's voice. A badly frightened man, by the sound of him, but also a man fixed on his purpose.

Paul Caudalis stepped into sight, Henry pinned against him, the sharp edge of a shard of white-painted ceramic pressed against the boy's throat.

Gwen cried out and swooned.

x X x X x

Not until Septimus heard the cries below him did he realize that he had ventured too far up the stairs. He would have turned to go back down, but the stairway was narrow and not well lit, and he feared missing his step and falling. Once he reached the top, he could turn around more safely and descend once more.

Besides, my errand is moot now. They have obviously discovered Caudalis' presence for themselves.

He stepped out onto an open expanse, one which he identified after a moment of thought as the palisade wall. It seemed the cellars of this place connected the different buildings one to another, likely for ease of movement during the snowy winter.

He inhaled the fresh air gratefully and turned to survey the land beyond the wall.

His eyes narrowed.

Interesting...

x X x X x

"One wrong move and he dies," Caudalis declared, his voice shaking, his hands white-knuckled as he clutched at Henry. The boy was still, not fighting at all. Fury was in the process of crowding out terror on his face, and his eyes were fixed on the adults at Margaret's table, flicking from one to another of them, as though expecting them to magically free him.

If only we could!

"Courage," she heard Lord Albert breathe behind her, a whisper almost too soft for her to hear, so how could Henry? Nonetheless, it seeped through her, replacing a little of her own panic fear with anger, with resolve. This sniveling criminal would not kill the son of the Lutums, the child popularly thought to be the reason that Lord Praecad had disappeared. It could not happen.

"Paul, be reasonable," said John mildly from his place in the open space between tables, lifting his hands to show them empty. "You don't know your way out of here. You have nowhere to go, no money, nothing."

"You'll give it me, then. From what you've stolen." Caudalis' eyes darted to Samuel, rigid and helpless where he sat, to Alison, her jaw clenched, to Morta, fists tightened by her sides. "You'll provision me, give me money and a horse. I'll take them and the boy, and leave him somewhere when I'm safely away. You can come out to get him later."

"You'll forgive us if we find ourselves less than inclined to take your word," Alison said coldly.

Caudalis sucked air between his teeth. "Have a care, Mistress," he hissed, digging the shard painfully into Henry's neck. "Perhaps I can't kill him, but I can hurt."

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Part Seven: The Wolf's Mate

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

(originally published in serial form in *Witch Weekly* magazine, reprinted with permission)

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Part Seven: The Wolf's Mate

Caudalis sucked air between his teeth. "Have a care, Mistress," he hissed, digging the shard painfully into Henry's neck. "Perhaps I can't kill him, but I can hurt."

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"Truer words were never spoken," said Mary Mustela, a fierce look in her eye.

Caudalis shrieked aloud in pain, and his grip on Henry's arm loosened. Henry tore himself free and landed a fist in the pit of the man's stomach. Gwen Mustela rose up, wraithlike, from between the tables as Caudalis doubled over, and Margaret heard the metallic jingle of a blade being dropped.

She only feigned to swoon, to get to a place where she could help Henry—

Gwen and Henry clasped their hands together and brought them down on the back of Caudalis' head, then released one another and tumbled away, Gwen over the nearest table, Henry under it.

The other children, released from their bonds by Henry's loosing, were already swarming forward, shrill shouts and angry yells filling the hall—Caudalis had disappeared under the tide of bodies—

Henry rose up from the other side of the table and whistled loudly, silencing everyone. He looked pale, and a graze on his neck trickled blood, but otherwise he seemed well and whole. "Sir," he said to John, nodding. "Captain." A two-fingered salute to Samuel. "Orders?"

"Alex, Carl, hold him," said Samuel, taking control of the situation from his seat, likely because his knees would collapse if he tried to stand, as Margaret could feel her own would. "Lance, fetch rope. We'll take no more chances."

"All heed Guinevere," Alison interjected, "for a quick mind and a quick body."

The Wolf's Pack drummed on the tables for Gwen, who flushed at first, but then smiled proudly at her mother and father. "And all heed Henry," she called out, "for not looking down to give me away."

The drumming increased in volume.

"I say," said Morta, rising, "all heed our wise young ones, who trusted one another and waited for the right moment to strike!"

Pounding and whoops of joy greeted this.

Margaret laughed shakily. "Is it often so lively here, Uncle?" she asked.

"Lively, yes, but never quite in this way," Lord Albert confessed. "But that is why I come to the Wolf's Den. Each visit is unique."

Margaret watched Lance reenter with a coil of rope, tossing it to one of his brothers, who began to bind the unconscious Caudalis. "I doubt any will top this one," she said.

"I doubt any will come after this one," said John, leaning over to join their conversation. "Once Samuel's name is cleared, he's sworn to use the Niger fortune to make good our debts. We will have no further need of outlawry."

"Unless, of course," Morta added, "Samuel should default on his promise." Her eyes rested speculatively on the pirate Captain.

"Who, I?" Samuel pointed to himself, a picture of innocence. "Not I, m'lady. I value my life and my health too much for that. Not to speak of my... generative qualities."

"Really, Samuel!" Alison slapped him on the back of the head. "As if I would let harm come to any part of you, especially that."

"Let harm come to me, I have no doubt that you would not," Samuel replied. "*Cause* harm to me, of your own accord..."

Alison sniffed. "Only if you fully deserved it," she said.

At this inopportune moment, motion from across the hall caught Margaret's eye.

Her cousin Septimus stood in the doorway, looking in sourly at the raucous scene before him.

"Pardon me," Margaret said hastily, and rose to hurry across the hall. "What is the matter?" she asked, stepping into the corridor with him. "What brings you here?"

"A troop of King's Men en route to this place."

"What?"

"I have just come down from the palisade." Septimus scowled. "Apparently they think enough of their fine fortress that they do not even bother to post sentries."

"On normal nights, they do," said Lord Albert from behind Margaret. "But this was a very special feast, to celebrate their prospective return to society. A return which is now, apparently, threatened. You are sure it is the King's Men and not the regular army?"

"I saw their device, Uncle. I am sure."

"Why bring warning?" Margaret asked, looking closely at her cousin. "I know your feelings towards these. Why did you not merely stay where you were, then claim protection as one abducted by the outlaws?"

"The King's Men, cousin," Septimus reminded her. "They are not known for their wisdom in treating those they find at the scene, and I have no desire to discover what an arrow in my throat feels like."

Margaret swallowed. "Indeed." As she now recalled, the King's Men had been the ones who had seized Samuel Niger and shipped him away to Kabaz, claiming there was no doubt of his guilt. *Will they treat us the same way? And these children—*

She turned to look at the group, laughing and jubilant, so unaware of the doom riding up the valley to destroy their lives, and resolve rose in her heart.

No. They will not have the children. I will not allow it.

"There are plans in place for precisely this," Lord Albert said calmly. "The Wolf has always known that one day his Den might be discovered. The adults will escape or remain as their hearts dictate. The children will come to us. With us, more precisely, since by fortunate chance we are here tonight."

"And how do you propose to transport them, Uncle?" Septimus asked, glaring towards the knot of laughter to one side. "Surely you do not suggest that we *walk* back to Mellis?"

"I shall explain all that after we have informed John and Samuel of this unfortunate development." Lord Albert turned and started back across the hall.

"I hope this is not our doing," Margaret said worriedly. "If our carriage was followed..."

"There would not have been a full troop of the King's Men merely lurking about the highway for no purpose but to watch for the Grey Wolf," said Septimus acidly. Then his face grew reflective. "Or would there? The King has been more and more adamant about catching him of late. And if there was suspicion that by catching him, one would also catch the Black Dog..."

The named gentleman was rising to his feet, his face uncharacteristically somber. "*Silence!*" he bellowed in what Alison had described over dinner as his storm-at-sea voice. It cut through the noisy banquet hall just as effectively.

"Thank you," Samuel said as the children slowly climbed off one another and seated themselves again. "I am afraid I have only bad news to give you, friends. We have little time. The King's Men approach." He held up a hand to stem the gasps and babble which ensued. "Anyone not yet seventeen will travel with Lord Albert and Lady Margaret to Mellis Castle. For the rest of you—I cannot command, but I hope that you will flee. There is no reason for you to stay and face death."

"Are you suggesting we abandon you?" Carl Mustela asked hotly, rising at his place. "Run from the King's Men like hunted animals?"

"The King's Men shoot first and ask questions later," Anne Portop countered, fixing the young man with a matriarch's glare. "You'll be little comfort to that girl of yours with an arrow through your heart."

"I'd hardly have him if he didn't want to fight," Lady Theodora countered, lifting her chin. "What sort of man would run from a battle?"

"The sort who is wiser than his years," said John in a quiet voice, but one which nonetheless stilled the talk which was rising again. "The sort who would let wisdom override folly. Friends, I ask you by all that has passed between us to leave this place now, while there is still time. Fighting would achieve us nothing but harsher sentences for killing men who were doing their duty to the kingdom."

"But if they find the Den abandoned, they will search the woods," said Boris Cuorben, one arm around his daughter Selene. "They will surely find some of us."

"Not if the prize they seek is already within their grasp," John said.

"No!" cried Morta, just as Margaret understood. "John, you cannot!"

John embraced his wife gently. "My love, I must."

"You will not stay alone," Samuel said harshly.

"You, they would kill on sight," John retorted. "Until your name is restored, you are not safe. They will have no reason to kill me."

"No reason but that they like killing, fool," said Alison, catching John by the shoulders and shaking him ungently. "No reason but that they will be angry, to find only one man alone in this fortress. And a live man could tell tales of them to the guards at the palace, tales of the sport they will have with you."

"To what end?" John gave a brittle laugh. "Who heeds a prisoner's words?"

"Why take the chance?" Alison released John. "Better to kill you and be sure you will never speak."

John shook his head. "We are wasting time. Hurry, friends, to your rooms. Pack what you will need. Lance, run to the treasury, take everything you can. Share it carefully, it will have to last."

"Father, Alex, help me," Lance called as he ran out the door. "Quickly!"

The hall emptied swiftly, Samuel and Alison among the last to leave. John sat alone at his table, Lord Albert some distance away, watching him. Margaret and Septimus stayed where they were.

"Sir!" Henry ran back into the room, a dagger hanging openly at his belt, and knelt in front of John. "Sir, let us stay with you. Myself and Rich and Daniel, perhaps Dominic and Lia and Gwen as well. Even Lene and Pearl could help. The King's Men would never shoot at children."

"If those children fight back, they will." John leaned down and raised Henry to his feet. "Your courage shows your true heart, Henry. But you will go with the rest."

"No!" Henry gripped the handle of his dagger. "Sir, you let us swear the oath when we were ten years of age—we swore to protect one another, to fight!"

"You swore first," John said, looking the boy in the eye, "to obey."

Henry slumped. "I don't want to leave you," he said almost inaudibly. "They'll kill you."

"They will not," said Morta, entering the hall by another door.

"How can you know?" Henry challenged her.

"I know." Morta's two-word statement had all the majesty of a pronouncement from God. "Now go and pack your things. It is not fair to leave your brothers in arms with all the work."

Henry scowled, but turned and ran from the hall.

"How can you know so surely?" John asked, turning to face Morta. "I know some people claim you are a witch, but your only magic is that which keeps my heart enthralled. You have no cantrips which can turn arrows."

"Oh, but I do." Morta brushed at her skirt. "Do you really think that even the King's Men would shoot a defenseless woman?"

John laughed shortly. "You, my dear, are hardly defenseless."

"But I will be. I will be terrified and vapid. I will cling to you and weep, and you will comfort me and show your hands empty of weapons in the process."

John caught her hands in a fierce grip. "And they will take us both prisoner, and have sport with you to torment me. No."

"With the woods full of our friends?" Morta scoffed. "They will wish to hurry away from here, and the castle is near enough that their stopping along the way would be questioned. They will take us both prisoner, yes, but they will bring us safely into custody."

John drew her close and held her. "I have no wish to see you in a dungeon cell," he said, his voice rough. "Or facing the same charges I must answer for."

"And I have no wish to see you alone in such an ordeal," Morta replied, drawing back enough that she could look up into his face. "I spoke the words 'for better or for worse', John, and I meant them with all my heart. We have had our better. Now we shall face our worse. Together."

John heaved a sigh. "Can I stop you?" he asked without much hope in his tone.

Morta merely raised an eyebrow.

"When have you ever stopped her?" Lord Albert asked quietly. "I think her plan has merit. The King's Men may be ruthless, but they are not heartless. And they will be far less inclined towards revenge if none of them have been killed or injured."

"Perhaps." John crushed Morta to him. "But that does not stop my fears."

"Nothing will stop your fears," Morta said, holding her husband as tightly as he held her. "Your fear is what has kept us alive for these twelve years. But it is time to set fear aside and act bravely."

"Courage is easy for oneself," John countered. "It is well nigh impossible to feel when one you love is in danger."

"But I will do this, nonetheless," said Morta firmly. "Because I love you, and I will not see you suffer alone."

Patrick and Mary Mustela appeared in a far door, Mary carefully fixing the straps of her husband's pack, and the conversation ceased as Morta hurried to help her friend. John watched her go, worry naked on his face.

"I would not try any tricks, if I were you," Lord Albert said blandly. "She will only be furious with you, and all the more determined to remain."

"I cannot let her take this risk!" John's hands tightened into fists. "If they decide to take out their fighting blood on her—"

"You cannot stop her," Margaret said, moving into the room so that John could see her. "You said as much yourself. And she knows the risks, and takes them gladly for you. As you would for her. Do you credit her with less heart or spirit than yourself?"

"No." The word seemed wrung from John. "But I would die rather than see harm come to her—"

"And so would she for you," said Lord Albert reprovingly. "You have been her protector for many long years. Do not rob her of her chance to protect you for once."

"Do you know what you are asking of me?" John demanded. "Do you?"

Lord Albert met his gaze unflinchingly. "Yes," he said calmly. "I do."

The rest of the Wolf's Pack had been returning to the hall as the two men spoke, and now Anne Portop hurried in, Dominic by her side, carrying her bag and his own. They embraced quickly, then the boy gave his grandmother her belongings and went to stand with his friends.

John lifted his head and smiled, with an effort, on the people who had been his friends and his companions. "I thank you all for everything you have given me," he said. "I will miss you."

"And we, you," said Patrick clearly as the rest of the group murmured in agreement. "Be safe, John. Morta."

"As safe as we can," Morta answered, her smile not untouched with irony. "Go quickly. They will see you otherwise."

Samuel, Patrick, Alex, and Carl knelt and pulled at a hatch in the floor that Margaret had not seen before. A trapdoor swung open with only the slightest of creaks and was laid gently flat on its other side. On the other side of the room, Gideon, Fabian, and Rich were hauling open their own, smaller trapdoor.

"Margaret, will you go with the children to the meeting point?" Lord Albert said. "Septimus and I will meet you there with transportation."

Margaret nodded and made her way through the crowd of children, who parted for her without a murmur.

"Let me help you, Lady Margaret," said one of the twins, leaping down into the tunnel revealed by the trapdoor and holding up his hands, interlinked as though he would toss her onto a horse. "Fabian will support you while you step down."

"Feh," Margaret said, waving off the proffered hand of the other twin and taking pleasure from the surprised looks on the children's faces. "Out of my way, young man." Nimble, she lifted her skirts and kicked off her shoes, then leapt down herself, landing just where Gideon had been standing a moment before. "Close your mouth before you catch flies," she directed him. "And you, Fabian, throw down my shoes. I will need them."

Fabian knelt and picked up the delicate heeled shoes, then handed them down to Margaret. She set them on the tunnel floor, slipped her feet back into them, and looked up at the children. "What are you waiting for?" she demanded. "Come!"

Gideon shook his head slightly, then reached up to help Pearl Niger down as Henry and Daniel leapt in unaided.

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Septimus finished fastening the last buckle on the harness of his horse. "However did they find time to excavate such tunnels?" he asked his uncle. "They should have been too busy robbing and trying to keep themselves fed."

"Some of the tunnels were already here when they arrived," Lord Albert answered, buckling the other side of the two-horse harness. "They expanded upon them, likewise the buildings and palisade. This has probably been a robber's stronghold for hundreds of years. The only difference is that these robbers have more conscience and less ruthlessness than some."

A horn blew without. "You in the palisade!" shouted a trained man's voice. "You have no chance of winning a fight. Throw down your weapons and we may spare your lives. All but the Black Dog—where is he?"

"He is not here," John's voice answered levelly. "But I am the Grey Wolf, and I am here. Take me prisoner if you will. I will not fight."

"You will not fight," the voice repeated skeptically. "What of the rest?"

"There is only one other here. My wife."

Septimus made sure the doors at the back of the stables were open wide enough to admit the horses and wagon as Lord Albert climbed to the driver's bench.

"Your wife? The witch?"

"She is no witch. Only a woman as I am a man."

"Stories say she witches you in and out of your robberies," the soldier answered. "Stories say she witched this place so it'd never be found."

"And it doesn't seem to have worked," Morta shouted, "or hadn't you noticed?"

"Any witchcraft fades with time. Now come out where we can see you, or we'll come in to find you."

A moment's pause. Septimus climbed into the back of the wagon, still listening.

"Her hands!" cried a different voice, hoarse and panicky. "She's witching us! She'll kill us all! *Stop her!*"

A woman's short scream, a man's despairing cry, both cut off by a gunshot. Then there was silence, broken only by a soft keening howl of utter grief, one that seemed more appropriate to a wounded animal than to a man.

Lord Albert shook the reins, urging the horses forward. "We can do nothing for them here," he said as if to himself. "Nothing for them now."

Septimus swallowed against the overwhelming pain in his uncle's voice.

I had forgotten how personally he takes the death of one he knows and cares for.

And he must be the one to tell those children that the woman they revere, quite possibly consider as a mother, is dead.

"Let me drive, Uncle," he said, moving forward. "You should rest."

"Thank you." Lord Albert pulled the horses to a stop and pressed his nephew's hand as he handed over the reins. "She was an extraordinary woman, Septimus," he said, his eyes glinting in the dim light of the lantern which sat in the bed of the wagon. "You would have loved her, had you known her."

"I believe you, Uncle." Septimus slapped the reins against the horses' backs. "I believe you."

And, strangely enough, he did.

I must at least respect a woman with that level of courage.

A pity she is dead.

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Part Eight: To Seek the Lost

The Black Dog and the Grey Wolf

Or, The Further Adventures of Samuel and Alison

By Valentina Jett

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Part Eight: To Seek the Lost

Pain.

All about her, every breath, every moment was pain. The cry echoing into her ears and down the hallways of her mind, the pounding beside her and around and inside, it was pain, all of it, and it could not be borne. She fled.

But the pain followed, hissing in the voices of a thousand serpents. *Yes, well done, run*, it whispered. *Run as you always do. Break your promises, and hide in the darkness forever so that no one will see your shamed face.*

What good are you? What good have you ever done?

You squander your talents, waste them foolishly, use them where they should never have been used. You hide yourself away from the world you should help, and abet those who should have been left to their own floundering. You lie when it seems right to you, and break your word for the sake of your own comfort.

Why should you live? Why should you go on wasting the precious time of those who could do so much better?

Stay here, in the darkness. You will trouble no one ever again.

She curled herself in a corner of the silent plain, tears falling softly from her eyes, and waited for time to end.

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Viscountess Alison Niger waited outside the door of the Grey Suite, stolidly ignored by the guard who stood at attention there.

A more tempestuous week I cannot recall, and hope never to experience again.

After their headlong flight through the woods, she and Samuel had slept out the night beneath a tree, then walked in the morning to the nearest village, where they bought provisions and began their trek to the capital. There were meeting places there, friends who could be identified with special words and signs, and the others of their scattered band would be making their way towards those places as well.

The word from the Wolf's Den had reached them on the second day of their travels; they had meant to stop for food at a small inn, but on hearing the gossip buzzing about the village, had quickly moved on. Alison had walked the afternoon in a fog of worry, not unspotted by tears, and had seen the like on Samuel's face. Morta shot by a panicked King's Man and near to death, John almost out of his mind with fear, and only the vaguest whisper of a third found in the Den, a third who was no one ever connected with the Wolf's Pack by any story at all...

The news from London had come on the fourth day. Paul Caudalis had been identified, by a more than usually alert captain of the Guard, and had babbled out the true story of himself and the Lutums and Samuel Niger when the captain hinted that it might be well to make a friend of the court. The King was duly horrified, and his Queen had a fainting fit in which she prophesied that doom would surely come to England if Samuel Niger were not given his just reward...

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"And so Viscount Niger is sought throughout the land," the gaily dressed court messenger proclaimed. "If he will swear to reimburse any merchants from whom he had stolen—for the King is just, and through all the pirating years of the man called the Black Dog, there was never a killing which could be put down to his crew, only the theft of money—a full pardon will be his for the asking, and the same for all his Marauders."

"I wouldn't believe it if I heard it from the King's own mouth, so I wouldn't!" Samuel shouted from the back of the crowd, resisting Alison's half-laughing efforts to stop him. "It's a trick, that's what it is, a trick to bring the Black Dog to heel now that they've leashed the Wolf!"

"Sirrah, you impugn the honor of the King!" the messenger retorted stiffly. "Mind your tongue when you speak of your betters!"

"That I won't," Samuel shot back, "for it's not so many years since I called Linus a prating fool to his own face."

The messenger turned an interesting shade of mottled purple. "And who might you be?" he managed to choke out after a few moments of sputtering.

Samuel pulled down his hood and shook loose his hair with the same gesture he used boarding a ship. "I am the man whose life depends on that message you carry," he said coolly as several people around him gasped and began to whisper to their neighbors. "More, the lives of the men who

follow me depend on it. I will not commit them to anything about which I am less than sure without asking them first, and they are not here to ask. Thus, I must be sure of it in my own person.”

The messenger blanched dead white and bowed jerkily. “My Lord... Viscount Niger...”

“Either will do, man, but for the Lady’s sake, not both,” Samuel said, striding forward through the crowd. “Now, may I see this paper of yours?”

The messenger handed it over, his hands shaking, and Samuel skimmed through it, nodding at certain points. “It’s got Linus’ sound to it, and—ah, yes. The inkblot with which he always dots his l.”

A ripple of laughter ran through the people as this was passed along.

“So you have sought, and you have found,” Samuel said, returning the messenger’s paper and bowing to him formally. “Will you assist myself and my wife in traveling as quickly as possible to London, that we may accept the King’s most generous offer?”

“What—oh—yes. Of course. My Lord.”

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It had been one of the hardest things Alison had ever done, not to laugh in the messenger’s face. Especially when Samuel began to imitate him the moment his back was turned.

My love, oh, my love. How you hated court life, and how I grieve to see you there again... but it is where you can do the most good at the moment. For us and for all. Perhaps, someday, there will come a time when we can return to our simple life together, Samuel and Alison, husband and wife, and have need of nothing more.

A noise from within the room caught her attention, a sound as of something heavy being moved.

But I should not say nothing more, for we will always need our friends...

And that need may well go unfulfilled if I cannot help them now.

A well-dressed man opened the door of the suite, his face grave. “Lady Niger,” he said, inclining his head to her. “I hope you were not waiting too long.”

“Only a few moments.” Alison curtsied slightly to Doctor Eldus, the King’s personal physician, then entered the suite and let him close the door behind her. “How is she?”

“No change. She remains in fever, though the wound seems to have escaped serious infection. Due, no doubt, to her husband’s devoted care of her.”

“Yes. How is he?”

“Again, unchanged.” Eldus glanced towards the bedroom. “I fear for his health more than for hers at this point. Her life is in God’s hands, while his is in his own, and I have never seen a man less inclined to do anything about his own fate.”

“I have often thought them two halves of one being,” Alison said with a sigh. “He will not long outlive her, no matter when she dies, be it tomorrow or fifty years hence. Nor would she long survive him, were he the first to die. If we wish to save either of them, we must save both.”

“Then I suggest we work together on Sir John. Your friendship with him, and my expertise, might be enough to rouse him from his stupor. Though it would do better if we could find another with whom he has a strong bond of some sort. Your husband, perchance, with their long friendship...”

Alison smiled, a little of her hope returning. “I know just the one. Or the four, rather. Samuel and I between us can surely keep him here until they arrive, and once they are here, he will not allow himself to sink into despondency. Have you writing materials here?”

“Certainly, in the sitting room.” Eldus led the way. “Might I inquire...”

“I will tell you only this,” Alison said, allowing herself a smile more usual to her husband or to Morta. “The letter must go with all speed to Mellis Castle.”

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Two days later:

A bright gray pair of eyes peered around the corner of the market entrance.

There it is. The tent. Gaily striped in red and blue, set between two of the most prominent stalls, it was impossible to miss, and had been the talk of the village since it had arrived three days earlier.

And there’s its master. A swarthy man in long robes was setting out merchandise on a table in front of the tent, though even from here the watcher could see there was nothing of true quality.

Of course not—he wouldn’t want to risk losing it to thieves. I’m sure he keeps his better pieces in the tent. Now, if he does what he has been

doing, what Henry and Rich have been seeing him do...

The man clapped his hands twice, and another robed man emerged from the tent, moving slowly with his head bowed. The watcher narrowed her eyes, trying to get a look at his face. She'd studied the portraits, but a lot of time had passed, and she might not be able to tell...

The other man looked up for a moment, nodded his head, then dropped his gaze again, but that moment had been enough, and the watcher's breath hissed out in exultation. She had found the man she was looking for.

And—just a moment—

The flap of the tent had opened again, and a woman was peering out. She wore a headdress, but her face was uncovered, and the features were hauntingly familiar.

The watcher pulled herself back around the corner and caught her breath. *I knew she looked like her, but I didn't know how much...*

"All right?" asked the small boy next to her, looking at her worriedly.

"I'm fine," Pearl Niger said, recovering her composure. "Just fine. You understand what you have to do?"

"Yes, m'lady! I know just what to do!"

"And where to go afterwards?"

A nod. "You promised I could have some gold. And maybe shake your brother's hand. Is he really your brother? You look so different from him..."

"Yes, I do, but we are still brother and sister," Pearl cut him off before he could go too far. "My father and mother took him as their own son when he was a baby."

"Oh. All right. And you said maybe I could keep one of them...?" The boy trailed off hopefully.

"Be sure not to be caught with it," Pearl cautioned him. "I must pretend I had nothing to do with it, so I shan't be able to help you if you're caught."

"I never get caught," the boy proclaimed proudly. "Never have, never will!"

"Good." Pearl peered around the corner again. The swarthy man was exhorting passing folk to look at his wares, while the other man sat quietly near the end of the table with a long stick of wood in his hand. Clearly, he was there to provide security.

I wish I could check what Rich said he saw, but I trust him. It means I will need a key, though. And Henry saw those...

A quick examination of the master of the tent showed Henry's observation was still in force—a large ring of keys swung at the rope-like belt, to the left.

Now, as soon as I know how I can best handle him, I can begin...

Pearl smiled sweetly. Daniel, her wonderful brother, and Lia, her best sister (her only sister, but there was no reason to mince words), had told her how to judge a person, and the two of them had done a promenade through this very market the day before and sized up the tent's master like a pig for sale.

I just need to be certain I know what I am doing...

Certainty had come hard in their short week at Mellis Castle. The cubs of the Wolf's Pack had never been around many children other than themselves, and occasionally found the ways of the raucous crowd they were now thrust into bewildering. Why were boys not allowed in girls' rooms, while girls could enter boys'? Why were the sleeping rooms hidden away, hard to find even if you knew what you were looking for? And why did the other children regard them with such distrust and dislike?

That, at least, Pearl thought she could answer. They were outsiders, strangers, like the occasional guest brought to the Wolf's Den to dine with the Pack. Strangers were always watched carefully, for by definition they were untrustworthy. They had to prove themselves before they would be accepted, and there had not been nearly enough time for that to happen.

And I am woolgathering. One task, one mind, foolish Pearl. She shook herself and concentrated. Out to the center of the market, making for the fruit stand, as though she meant to buy apples, but taking a route past the stands full of pretties, and running her long string of pearls through her hand as she did... and just as she passed that particular tent...

Perfect.

Drawing a deep breath, she sallied forth, her basket on her arm and her necklace twined between her fingers.

xXxXx

Rabadas the Sinister, so called because he fought with his sword in his left hand, surveyed his tiny kingdom with complacency. From his father's threadbare trading goods, he had bargained and bribed his way to this. A respected merchant, trading around and up the sunny coast, he felt sure he was the first of his people to come to this place.

Though I suppose to my servants—no, in my own mind I may be truthful, even if there are no such in this England, my slaves—it feels like home.

He hid a smile in his beard, glancing to his left to see the quiet man who sat beside the table, watching all corners of the market. *He was a landed man here, a noble, even. But he and his wife were abducted away by their enemies and sold into slavery, and I was lucky enough to buy them both.*

And with her welfare as a guarantee, I can allow him some freedom of movement. He would hardly dare try anything foolhardy, such as running away, whilst she remains tethered here within...

A girl paused in front of his table, her fingers twisting in her long necklace. Her dusky face was wistful, and Rabadas frowned. *If her family can afford to buy her a string of pearls such as she wears, why should she cavil at my wares? They are not of that same quality—at least, not the ones I show here outdoors—and without a doubt they are not so expensive—for those are real pearls, both the black and the white—*

And just as he thought this, another seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“Ha!” shouted a boy smaller even than the girl, a very grubby boy, leaping upon her. “Give it!”

The girl shrieked and tried to shove him away from her, but he fastened his fingers on the necklace and yanked.

With a sharp snap, the string parted, and the pearls spilled. The boy crowed with glee and leapt on them, the girl screamed and beat at him with her basket, and folk from all over the market came running, some of them scooping up the rolling pearls, others trying to belabor or catch at the boy. One of them, a hefty man in a stained apron, shoved the girl aside roughly, and she fell to the ground and did not move again.

Rabadas started to order his slave to intervene, but the man was already moving, using only his two hands and the weight of his body to wedge his way through the crowd. He reached the girl’s side, lifted her easily into his arms, and looked at Rabadas, indicating the tent with his eyes. Rabadas nodded, then began to shout. “Good people! Good people, hear me!”

The girl roused in the slave’s arms with a tiny moan, audible as the noise of the crowd subsided. He stroked the side of her face to calm her.

“Good people, I will pay you two gold pieces for each pearl you bring to me,” Rabadas said, his tones carrying even to the edges of the market and halting the beggars in their skulking flight. “The child deserves her necklet, and I would see it restored to her. Bring me the pearls. I will pay you more than you will get from any seller.”

And her family will pay me more than that to have both her and the string restored hardly the worse for wear, I am sure.

The girl sat up in the slave’s arms, and he set her on the ground, supporting her with one hand. “You are so kind,” she said softly, her voice slipping under the excited chatter. “Thank you, thank you—”

And suddenly she was beside him, her arms around him, hugging him with great fervor. “I don’t know what I would have done if I’d lost it!” she wept into his robes. “It was a gift, a gift from my dearest friend in the whole world, and that horrid boy would have stolen it from me... him and all the others... but you will get it back for me, I know you will!” She pulled away, smiling up at him tearfully. “Thank you, so much!”

“You are welcome, pretty one,” Rabadas said, stroking her cheek as he had seen the slave do. “May I know your name?”

“Pearl, my name is Pearl...” The girl flushed, the expression just visible on her dark skin. “The necklet was a play on my name. For that I am a black pearl, but my three dearest friends are all pale-skinned. I must have them back, as many as possible. Please, do find them for me!”

“I will, dear Pearl, never fear.” Rabadas patted her head. “Care for her,” he told the slave over her head. “Have the woman make her something she will like to eat and drink, and bring me my cashbox, then wait within for me until the gems are recovered.”

The man bowed his head, then came forward to collect the girl and lead her into the tent. Rabadas turned to the first man in line, the same one, he noticed, who had shoved the girl aside so roughly.

Very well, for you I shall save the clipped coins I was given in Lisbon...

xXxXx

John Lobos knelt at his wife’s bedside, barely noticing the whispering from the room outside. She had not stirred in nine days, and he knew the doctor feared for her life if she did not wake soon.

Tell me only that it was nothing I did, he begged silently, clasping her hand. Tell me I could not have helped you, could not have saved you, could not have convinced you to run and hide with the children, or with Samuel and Alison, or with any of our other friends. Tell me it was not my burden to bear.

But she could not hear him, and might not ever again.

He no longer hoped that the sound and sight of their children, the cubs of their Pack, might rouse her and bring her back to him. He hoped only that they might arrive in time to say their farewells.

To both of us, truly, for I know if she dies I will have no spirit left to live.

My love, my love, what is it about you that holds my soul so bound?

He had never known. He might never know, now, unless God chose to reveal it to him.

“Do not leave me,” he begged in a whisper barely louder than the hushed voices in the next room. “My Morta, do not leave me here all alone...”

Morta’s breath seemed, for an instant, to catch. Then a whisper so soft that his seemed a shout reached his ear.

“Why?”

John stared at his beloved, frozen in astonishment, and could not speak a word.