

“The Gift”

CHAPTER 1

By Lauren Rivers

One thing a life on the road had taught Ethan was how to sleep in virtually any conditions. On most nights they were either between towns or in the middle of nowhere. The nature of their business meant they were always going from one place to another. Ethan and Rhodes were traveling merchants who sold jewelry and textiles from their cart in the various marketplaces where they could find space. It was a simple existence but it was one they both enjoyed. Typically they would stay at a place for a couple of days before moving on, but move on they would sooner or later.

Such a nomadic existence generally meant they kept their possessions and supplies light by necessity. The bulk of the contents of their cart consisted of their wares, a few weapons, and clothes. Each member of their group carried a few personal items with the remainder of their storage space consisting of food to sustain them in the expanses between population centers. Things had become slightly more cramped since they had been joined by Diana and Lydia, but Ethan found he rather enjoyed the additional company.

Diana Lynwood was a beautiful Doberman archer from the fabled city of Aldris. Legend said that her home had once existed somewhere in this world though no one knew exactly where. Treasure seekers had attempted to ascertain its location for centuries without much success, but the tales of its wealth and power kept people looking for even the smallest fragment of the once legendary city. Artifacts from Aldris were known to fetch a high price at auctions both legitimate and otherwise, and even all this time later people were willing to go through enormous effort to possess just a piece of it for themselves.

Lydia on the other hand was almost as much of a mystery as their archer from a mythical city. The female crocodile had been standing in the woods almost as if she had been waiting for them. When they had come upon her she had offered them her company and guidance to a nearby campsite for them to stay the night. Ethan had eagerly accepted much to Rhodes's chagrin. The hawk had simply known he could trust her, just as he had felt the same with Diana. He knew on some level there was no logical reason for this, but he simply knew. The hawk had gotten to know both of their new companions very well in the days to follow, finding them both rather unique companions.

Despite Rhodes initial reluctance to take on new members to their group he soon warmed to both of them and after a while the foursome had developed a bit of a personal rhythm. Each member of the party had their own routine and collective tasks each one had taken on for the benefit of the group. Rhodes was the salesman of the group since he was best at interacting with customers. His fine clothing and dignified manner generally seemed to attract some of the more wealthy customers. He was also the primary point of contact with any of the marketplaces they negotiated with for space. Out in the wilderness he was generally tasked with setting up the campsite and tending to their pack animal.

Diana's primary duty was their defense and hunting for food. As an expert archer she was the most skilled at catching big game for them to eat, which had done wonders in improving their overall menu when away from a town or other spot of civilization. Well trained in preparing the animals she would often keep them fed between ports of call. Her other duty was somewhat ironic given when they had first met she had been the one

in need of help. At first alone and frightened she had come to the merchants seeking sanctuary and help, but in time she had proven herself a capable woman and a generous companion. In town she often helped with procuring supplies since she was not needed as a guard when selling their goods in the market.

In the rare cases when something did come up, both Ethan and Rhodes were trained in the use of a sword, but so far it had only been needed a handful of times. For the most part Ethan helped Rhodes with the stock in town and served as a partner for all things related to the business. The stallion was their front man, but he was just about everything else. Ethan's job in between towns was to gather resources they would need such as firewood and other things not provided by either Rhodes or Diana's efforts.

Lydia tended to do just about whatever else the group needed. In town she had taken on the duty of being responsible for the group's procurement of both supplies and raw materials. She was an excellent negotiator, being shrewd and savvy when dealing with local suppliers. There seemed to be almost nothing the crocodile didn't know about prices and haggling, and more often than not she seemed to get a little extra for her trouble. As an Oracle, it was no surprise she was good at interacting with people. In between the towns she would often entertain the group with stories or insights or anything else to break up the long stretches between places. She kept her finger on the pulse of the group and almost always seemed to know when one of them needed something before they realized it themselves. Such was the talent of the rather special Oracles.

Together the group had formed a sort of family, and one Ethan felt closer to than his own blood kin. His relationship with his father had not been the best, and while he loved his mother she had never understood him the way he felt those he traveled with did. They had wanted the best for him, he knew that, but it was not the life he wanted. Ethan was much happier with the way he was living now.

Tonight Ethan found himself looking up at the stars above. The night sky was full of pinpricks of light dotting the distant universe. Each bright point shone down upon the world like a beacon guiding sailors and others along their way. The view was calming, soothing him as he stretched out in his bedroll. He felt his wings wrapped around his body as they usually were when he slept on the ground and could tell they were getting cramped. He sat up and threw the covers off of himself allowing the hawk to stand. His only clothing was his pants as he preferred not to wear anything on the top half of his body when sleeping, just in case he ever needed to use his wings in a hurry. It was best not to have to worry about whatever might get in the way when seconds counted. Tonight he could hear the sounds of insects and other animals providing a constant backdrop to the wilderness.

Glancing around he could tell the others were all still sleeping. His bedroll was beside Diana's, with the others spread out a bit more away from the couple. Her eyes were closed as she made tiny yips in her sleep. From time to time he could see her feet paws twitch which told him she was dreaming of something. Her chest rose and fell with her breathing, a gentle rhythm in tune with her body. Ethan leaned down towards her face, resting on one knee as he brushed a stray hair from her muzzle and touched her cheek with his hand. She was so beautiful when she slept. He watched her for a few moments until finally deciding a walk was what he needed.

Taking a few steps away from the campsite he slipped on his belt and his dagger just in case he should need it, not that he anticipated any sort of trouble. Ethan cast one more glance towards the cart to be certain of his landmarks, and set about exploring the area.

The forest was quiet other than the occasional call from something or other in the thick wilderness. Ethan often enjoyed being out in between the cities when it was just him and his companions, for the most part. When they were camping on their way to someplace else they could simply be themselves with no other concerns other than being good company.

The hawk strolled along until he found a scenic overlook of the nearby valley. He sat upon a smooth rock resting his body and letting the cool night air fill his lungs as he simply closed his eyes and relaxed. The motion of his chest rejuvenated him while he leaned back to enjoy the pleasant experience.

Sensing someone nearby his eyes shot open and he turned behind himself. "I know you're there. Show yourself." Ethan kept his hands at his sides, not touching his dagger but keeping his hand close in case it was necessary. He watched the trees as a familiar crocodile in a breezy purple dress emerged from the woods. "Lydia."

"I thought you could use some company," she said.

"I could've killed you," he replied.

"I knew you sensed my presence," she smiled. "Quite Oracle like of you," the crocodile said as she smiled and took her seat beside him.

Ethan resumed his place on the rock and looked at her. "I've gotten better at knowing when people are near."

"Yes, you have," she said. "Always wise to be prepared, especially in this day and age."

Ethan shrugged. "I suppose."

"There are some dark days up ahead, but nothing we can't handle," she told him.

The hawk was tempted to ask what she meant by that, but Oracles rarely told the whole truth. Most of their advice was up to interpretation. They considered themselves guides, not people whose purpose was to tell others their destinies. Ethan had always known she knew more than most, but he had never understood the mystery behind her abilities. In truth he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Somehow the mystery was more appealing than any truth that could be behind their talents. "I'm surprised anyone else was up."

"I sensed you leaving, thought you could use someone to talk to," she said.

"Usually when someone has trouble sleeping there's a reason, even if they're not aware of it."

"Maybe," he allowed. "I just get the feeling like Diana has been a little distant lately."

"Ah," she said, understanding. "Our resident archer has been somewhat quiet as of late. Do you think you know why?"

"I was hoping you might have some insight on that," he replied.

"I may be an Oracle but I'm not a clairvoyant. I can't tell what's on her mind, but I expect you do." She smiled. "Has she been sharing her journals with you?" she asked.

"No," Ethan admitted, "Though I have stolen a peek or two when Diana is elsewhere."

Lydia smiled to herself, which somehow she always managed to make disarming even though crocodiles tended to smile bigger than most. The Oracle touched her hand to Ethan's shoulder. "I'm certain she wouldn't mind."

One of Diana's few possessions was her journal chronicling her journey from when she left Aldris. A remarkable artist and archivist, she recorded as many details as she could remember of her experiences from the moment she found herself stranded in this world away from everything familiar. When not occupied by other activities she would often write on its pages preserving her thoughts for later consideration. Most of the time she was more than willing to share her work with the rest of the group, but in the past few days she had kept it to herself.

"I think she's feeling homesick," he said. "I know she chose to travel with us but I also know her home is part of who she is and she has been away from it far too long for comfort." The hawk looked out over the valley below and took in the spectacular view of the vast verdant landscape. Beneath them was a fertile region filled with a number of small villages at which they would be passing in the next few days. The largest of which was a rather respectable town called Valadyne. He had been there once or twice before, recalling it was quiet but pleasant. It was small enough so as to escape the title of a city but large enough so that one could find most of the things one needed there. Known for freely welcoming travelers the town was a popular spot for those headed through the vast valley.

"Indeed, she wears Aldris on her like her clothing," she said, noting the pride the Doberman archer displayed any time she showed off her heritage.

Ethan nodded. "She does. It's one of the things I love about her," he said.

"Do you ever miss your home?" Lydia asked.

The hawk became silent. "Home is a complicated subject for me. There are things I do miss about it but I think leaving it was something I had to do. If I hadn't I never would have met any of you."

Lydia smiled warmly at the avian merchant. "You know I certainly understand a bit of wanderlust. It wasn't exactly a popular suggestion when I told my father I wanted to see the world instead of stay home and marry a young man from my town. He was disappointed, but I managed to convince him to let me go, if for no other reason than to get it out of my system."

"And did you?" he asked.

"I haven't stopped wandering since," she said.

Ethan straightened up slightly. "I didn't leave home because I wanted to see the world. Suffice it to say staying was not an option. I just couldn't walk those halls given what they meant to me. I know perhaps one day I may not have a choice, but until then I need to do what I have to for myself."

Lydia as always knew better than to press and said nothing. Her hand touched Ethan's arm for a moment in understanding, and he locked eyes with her smiling in gratitude. The crocodile had an unprecedented skill in knowing exactly what you needed when you needed it. The Oracles were truly something special.

"I want to do something for her," Ethan declared.

The crocodile nodded. "I offer my help, should you desire it," she said.

"Thank you," he replied. "Now I just need to figure out what that is." The hawk exhaled.

“Valadyne is less than a few hours away, perhaps we will find what you seek there,” she suggested.

“Maybe.”

Lydia squeezed his shoulder. “Come back to camp. We have a long day ahead, and you’ll need your rest.”

Ethan rose and followed her back to their campsite, where neither Rhodes nor Diana had stirred from their sleep.

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Valadyne was a modest town with all of the usual amenities for a place of its relative importance. It lacked some of the greater facilities of its larger cousins but it had a tavern, an inn, a stable, and a marketplace. Along with a rather large town hall it seemed a popular place for people to put down roots. The outside of the town was laced with half a dozen farms which no doubt provided a good amount of the food supply. In addition there was a rather pleasant lake bordering one side which was a popular fishing spot and general place to spend the day.

Ethan took in a deep breath catching some of the rather pleasant aromas wafting from some of the food vendors. There were a number of stands and shops in the area that seemed to sell ingredients of varying degrees of commonality. He scanned their wares as they passed by looking for the person who would allocate empty slots to passing merchants.

The hawk turned to Rhodes as he guided the cart slowly through the townspeople. “Rhodes, would you mind if I sat this one out? I have something I want to do while we’re here.”

Rhodes turned to face him with a slightly raised eyebrow. “We usually do this together,” he said.

“I know, and I promise I’ll make it up to you the next place we hit, but I really need to take care of something.” He gave his best pleading look which he imagined was not nearly as good as Diana or Lydia’s. He attempted to make his eyes wider when Rhodes shook his head and held up his hand in mock disgust.

“Fine, just stop doing that,” he said. “But you owe me,”

“Understood,” the hawk replied.

The Gypsy vanner stallion rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the path ahead. Once he found the weasel he was looking for he leaned over to address him. “My companions and I are looking for a space to sell our wares.”

“What are you trading and how long are you staying?” he asked.

Rhodes relaxed his grip on the reins. “We carry clothes and jewelry. We should only need a day.” The horse winced as Ethan elbowed him in the ribs. “Make that two.”

“Fine. Four gold coins, and you can take slot five.” He held out a paw, and a moment later Rhodes deposited the fee into his open palm. “Thank you. Now the marketplace opened an hour ago, and closes at six. You do business only during those hours. You need anything, you come to me. You cause any trouble, and you’ll be ejected from the marketplace. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly,” Rhodes replied. At the weasel’s nod, they pulled the cart into the allotted space.

Ethan jumped down to the ground and walked back to the rear of the cart where their female companions had just emerged. "Diana," he said.

The Doberman archer smiled at his approach, but it rapidly faded into a more neutral expression. "Ethan," she replied.

"I was wondering if you wouldn't mind staying with Rhodes this time. Lydia and I have some shopping to do, and I thought you might appreciate the change in routine," he said.

Diana looked at him for a long moment, though if she suspected him of having an ulterior motive she did not let on. Finally the Doberman archer gave a nod and a weak smile before embracing Ethan and at last doing the same to Lydia before waiting for Rhodes so they could do the necessary setup and start selling their wares. If they got started within the next half hour they could still make a decent amount of money before the midday break.

After taking a moment to watch the two of them lay out the velvet cloths, Ethan observed Diana while she set the boxes of jewelry and a few disassembled racks for displaying their clothing on the rear of the cart. He turned away at the sensation of a gentle pressure on his arm. "I'm coming."

"I sense her spirit is off," Lydia said, confirming what he already knew. It did not take an Oracle to tell that his beloved canine archer was not her usual unshakeable self. While at times she was not always talkative it was rare she was so quiet, especially with Ethan. The fact that she had not even made a token argument about staying with Rhodes told him all was not right making it all the more important he find some way to lift her spirits.

The hawk scanned the booths as they passed searching for the perfect solution. He knew it was unlikely he would simply stumble upon something to solve his dilemma but perhaps he would find inspiration among the various merchants who filled the tiny marketplace. He let the scents of the various spices and ingredients fill his nostrils as he walked past a spice trader who noticed Ethan's interest with a wide grin.

"I thought I knew everyone in this town, but I don't remember you," the wolf said. His black fur shone in the gentle light as he brought his full attention on his latest potential customers. "Don't get many avians around here." He paused as he noticed Lydia. "Or Oracles, for that matter."

Lydia held up a webbed hand. "Don't mind me," she said. "I'm simply a guide for this one here. He'd be lost without me."

Ethan looked at her with a little bit of mock offense but moved on quickly. "You've got quite an array of spices here."

"I have to if I want to stay competitive." The lupine spice merchant glided a paw over the rows of bags all held open to the wide path where interested parties could observe their contents.

Ethan leaned forward to sniff one or two of them and looked up. "May I try one or two?"

"Of course," the wolf said, handing him a tiny spoon. "Please, try as many as you like, but wipe the spoon after each use." He then provided him a small bowl of water and a cloth.

With an encouraging nod from Lydia, Ethan tried a spice that looked dark red in color. He placed a small quantity on his tongue and let the flavors mingle in his mouth for a moment. "Interesting."

"That one's paprika," he said. "It's real popular around here."

"And what about this one?" Ethan asked, pointing towards a spice he did not recognize.

The wolf sniffed it and shrugged. "I don't know if you want to try that one. It's pretty strong."

Ethan washed off the spoon and wiped it clean. "Why?"

"It's a little potent." The merchant offered a mild smile.

The hawk put a little on the tiny spoon. "How bad can it be?" he put a little on his tongue and immediately regretted it. Ethan's eyes shot open as he fanned air into his mouth, spitting onto the ground and swearing loud enough it caught the attention of a number of people standing around the spice merchant's stand.

"I tried to warn you," he pointed out.

Lydia looked at the bag from where the powder had come. "What is it?"

"Wasabi."

Ethan stopped coughing after several minutes and handed the small spoon back to the merchant. "You should have a warning on that stuff."

"I do," the merchant said nonchalantly, pointing to the card before the bag which had a few symbols in front of it denoting its significant potency.

Ethan looked down sheepishly and accepted his humiliation with as much dignity as he could muster. "I'm looking to do something for a member of our group, and I was hoping to find an idea somewhere in this marketplace." The hawk looked at the various spices and noting the ones he knew, recognizing more than a few of them from the kitchen at his childhood home. One of the benefits of his youth had been fantastic cuisine and access to the most wonderful spices capable of making the most drab food taste mouthwateringly good. His mother and father never kept anything but the best in the house so in this way it had been one of the things he still carried with him from his past, a fine appreciation for quality ingredients.

The merchant nodded sagely. "Well, you can't go wrong with a good properly spiced meal. The right food can trigger the most intimate memories and the deepest of feelings. There's nothing more precious than a well prepared meal shared among friends. If you really want to make your friend happy, you'll find her a meal that reminds her of home."

"That might be a little difficult," Lydia said.

"Why?" the merchant asked. "Sometimes you can substitute ingredients if you can't get exactly what you need, and most of the spices in the region you can find right here at my stand, all you'd need is a recipe."

Lydia nodded. "We'll keep that in mind."

"You'll be back," he said with a smile.

Ethan walked away, somewhat disappointed. "Well, now what?" he asked. "I've read Diana's journals cover to cover and I don't recall her ever having any recipes written down."

"I'm afraid I'm not aware of any either," the crocodile said.

“I can’t ask her either, so what are the odds that we would find an Aldrisian recipe in Valadyne?” he asked.

Before Lydia could answer Ethan found himself drawn towards the city hall building where a crowd had gathered. Large clusters of people moved inside as Ethan made his way towards the large flow of people. He approached a young panda. “Excuse me, what is going on here?”

The panda tilted his head oddly. “You don’t know? It’s the auction. It’s a big event around here. It’s sort of the place to be. You never know what you’ll find.” The young ursine shrugged and looked ahead for his companions. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to go, and I want to get a good seat!”

Ethan turned to Lydia. “What do you think?”

Lydia held up her webbed hands. “Lead on.”

The town hall was larger than it appeared from the outside. Already more than half of the seats were filled with people. From their manner of dress they appeared to come from everywhere and all manners of economic class. Food and drinks were being served from tables on either side of the room while people socialized and laughed. Ethan and Lydia entered with the flow of the crowd as he searched for two seats together. At the moment there were still plenty of empty places, and after checking to be certain they were not marked in any way he took a seat along the aisle with Lydia.

“It seems like quite the event,” she said.

“So it does,” Ethan replied. “Even if we don’t find something for Diana it should be an interesting experience.”

The crocodile nodded her agreement. The crowd continued to make their way inside with about half of them going for refreshments and the other half staking out their claims on the limited seating. Ethan looked up as he saw a peacock enter with his entourage of servants. It was clear he was a wealthy individual. His influence was obvious as the townspeople parted before him to allow his group to move without interference of any kind. Two of his associates peeled off to acquire food and drinks for the group. Ethan watched the high class bird approach one of the front row seats and wait for one of his people to dust it off before sitting.

The hawk stared at him for a moment longer before his attention was drawn to the front of the room by the arrival of the auctioneer. He walked up to the podium and placed his hands on either side waiting the length of a breath before he held up his hands. The room immediately fell silent.

“Good day to you all and thank you for coming.” He nodded to a few individuals in the front row before he continued. “I assume you are all familiar with the rules. All sales are final. We have quite a large number of items this month so let us get started.” The hyena was dressed in a long jacket with tails that made him look rather handsome in appearance. He motioned towards the side of the stage where a young doe emerged with a sword in her hands carried on a velvet cloth.

“A fine weapon, one retrieved from the nation of Viridis. This sword was acquired from a merchant passing through the region on his way to his next destination. The blade is twenty three inches long made of finely crafted metal and well designed for both weight and balance. What am I bid for this fine item?” he asked. The auctioneer set about taking bids for the first object which seemed to gather some moderate interest, and

after a moment went for ten gold pieces to a rather well to do looking gentlemen in the fifth row.

The next item was a map of the region from several hundred years ago. Ethan watched with interest as a few of the attendees bid furiously for this item until at last one of them conceded his defeat to the other. With a gracious bow, the second man sat once again.

It did not escape the hawk's notice that there did not seem to be any particular category of items up for bid. Everything from spices to weapons to works of art seemed to be up for claims by the highest bidder. Ethan could see now why it was such a popular event. As the panda had claimed, it was difficult to know what you might discover. The mystery had a certain allure to it, for certain.

He was about to let his mind drift when he heard the hyena mention his home nation of Tannaris. The hawk's attention immediately focused on the auctioneer as he resumed speaking.

"From the nation of Tannaris, this lot contains a few assorted items of varying interest, from a few coins believed to belong to a nation across the sea, a few various spices, a dagger, a pair of books, and lastly a scroll containing writing in Aldrisian. What am I bid for this lot?" the hyena asked.

Ethan's glance shot to Lydia. "We have to get our hands on that scroll."

"You don't even know if it's legitimate. It could just be a piece of paper with some scribbling on it." Lydia held his arm.

The hawk considered the possibility but it was generally considered at best inappropriate to sell an item under false pretenses or knowingly misrepresent the details of any particular piece. He had to get a closer look. He held up the back side of his hand which was the signal for the assistant to bring it closer for inspection. The young doe waltzed down Ethan's aisle with the basket full of items and held it out to him. He picked up the scroll and opened it while the auctioneer waited a few moments. The scroll was old, and certainly the writing was legitimate. He had seen enough of Diana's handwriting to know it was authentic. He skimmed the writing and smiled. It was exactly what he needed to cheer her up. No matter what happened, he needed the scroll.

Once the interested parties had a chance to review the lot, the bidding began. Ethan held up his hand. "Two gold coins."

Lydia looked at him. "Are you sure about this?" she asked. "That's a lot of money."

"I need that scroll." He pulled his arm free and countered the next bid. "Four gold coins."

The peacock from the front row held up a hand. "Ten gold coins."

Ethan swallowed. Their entire collective fortune added up to twenty gold coins, and that was between all four of them. He held up his hand. "Twenty." He could feel Lydia's eyes get wide beside him and the grip of her hand, but the pressure released a moment later when the peacock outbid him with fifty gold coins, a sum he could not possibly match. He let out a deep sigh and sank into his chair. While there were a few other token bids it was clear from the looks the peacock flashed around the room it would be a bad idea for anyone to compete with him for his prize. He was declared the winner a moment later and he flashed Ethan a smirk. Not to be defeated, the hawk took note of the bird's appearance for later.

“At least we tried,” Lydia said.

“We’re not done yet,” Ethan replied.

Lydia gestured to the auctioneer. “Were you watching the same auction? We lost.”

“That still doesn’t mean its over,” the hawk insisted.

“Pretty sure it does,” Lydia said.

Ethan shook his head and sat quietly through the rest of the auction. When it had concluded, he rose to approach the peacock only to be stopped by his entourage. “Excuse me, but I must speak to your employer.”

The tall giraffe shook his head. “I’m afraid Mister Halliwell is rather busy, and in no position to entertain requests from the likes of you.”

Ethan pushed his way forward only to feel a hand on his arm. Lydia met his glance and shook her head. “Ethan, let’s just go.”

“I’m not going until I speak to Halliwell.” Ethan stood his ground and in a moment was rewarded with a mild nod from the peacock.

The giraffe turned back to Ethan and nodded. “It would seem Mister Halliwell has chosen to indulge you. Follow me, please,” he gestured.

Ethan spared Lydia a glance before the two followed the peacock out of the main hall and into the village proper.