

“The Gift”

CHAPTER 2

By Lauren Rivers

They were led to a rather handsome manor towards the center of town further cementing the impression that this bird had both money and influence and knew how to use them. Ethan followed without comment into the main hall where he could see numerous examples of avian art and craftsmanship. He noted with some interest there were places high in the ceiling where birds or bats could indulge themselves high within the large open space. Ethan could not understand the interest in hanging upside down but to the bats they seemed to enjoy it.

With Lydia at his side the pair climbed the central staircase to the landing and turned left following the peacock and his party into a comfortable sitting room full of books, maps, and various rewards from the avian's travels. The crocodile took a seat on the proffered couch, with Ethan following suit a moment later.

The peacock gestured to the giraffe that wasted no time relaying his silent orders to his other staff members within the house. He took a step towards the desk and rested one hand upon it, his talon barely contacting the surface as he awaited something. Less than a moment later a servant entered with tea and other refreshments on a tray. The servant set the items on the low table and proceeded to pour, starting with the peacock. Evidently she already knew what he preferred as he accepted the beverage without comment.

Once he had taken a sip he nodded. "There. Now we can have a proper conversation." He glanced at Ethan. "I'm told by my people here that you have some interest in speaking with me. My time is valuable so I'll ask you to be brief."

"I want the Aldrisian scroll you won in that last auction," Ethan said.

"Ah, so that's what this is about," he said. "I was surprised you bid so forcefully for it when you had to know I could have outbid you."

"I have my reasons." Ethan accepted his own tea.

"I'm certain you do," the peacock replied.

Ethan took a sip from the tea and returned it to the saucer in his other hand. "It's excellent."

"I insist on having the finest teas money can buy. This particular one is from across the sea, some place called the Talwyn nation." He shrugged. "I must admit, I was impressed by your boldness. Most people around here would never have approached me as you did." He took a walk around the couch where Ethan and Lydia sat. "That said, I'm curious as to why."

"I need the Aldrisian scroll you won." He looked into his eyes and locked his gaze with the other birds. "I've read the contents. It is of no value to anyone."

"Except, apparently, to you," the peacock replied.

Realizing his misstep, Ethan nodded. "As you say."

Halliwell gestured around the room. "It may be no surprise to you that I am a collector of souvenirs from my travels. I have looked all across the region for rare and valuable objects, and this is the first genuinely Aldrisian item I have been able to obtain."

"There must be something we can offer you that you would accept in trade," Ethan said.

"Perhaps," he replied.

"Name it," Ethan said.

The peacock held his hands together and approached the pair. "My son was returning here through the other side of the valley when his caravan was attacked. No

ransom demands have been forthcoming but I have reason to believe he is still alive and being held by one of my rivals. I would send my own people but if I am wrong it would mean war between us and I cannot allow that, but nor can I allow this to go unchallenged. As an outsider you could retrieve him for me and bring him home. Do that, and you may have your prize. His life matters more to me than some Aldrisian scroll.”

“Done,” Ethan said.

Lydia touched his shoulder. “Ethan, may I have a word in private please?” she pulled him to his feet. “Excuse us a moment.” Once they were in the corner of the room and safely out of earshot she looked into his eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked.

“I don’t have a choice if I want that scroll.” He cast a glance towards the peacock, who watched him intently. He could tell the wealthy avian knew he had Ethan right where he wanted him. No doubt he was used to being the man in charge who moved people like pieces on a chessboard. It was clear his missing son upset his carefully crafted universe and for the moment they were of use to each other. If it got Ethan what he needed it was a worthy price to pay.

“Yes, but I assume you want to do this without Diana or Rhodes finding out about it, and you and I are skilled but we could very quickly find ourselves overwhelmed and outnumbered. If we run into trouble, no one’s coming to our rescue,” she said.

Ethan knew Diana would no sooner leave him behind than vice versa, but her point was made. If they pursued this without the others it would be some time before help arrived in the event of an unexpected development. Even so, Ethan was determined. “We’ll be careful,” he replied before turning to Halliwell. “Consider it done.”

“Excellent. I’ll have my man provide you all the information we have before you depart. If you require I can furnish you with weapons and supplies.” The peacock gestured with a hand at a large collection of blades and other implements of war mounted on the wall.

“That won’t be necessary,” Ethan said. “We have all we need.”

“Then I’ll expect to hear from you soon,” he replied, turning to the giraffe who had stood silent in the corner since their arrival. “Mister Daniels, see to our guests and then escort them out.”

The giraffe nodded and walked back out the doors pushing them both open as he walked. Behind them two servants closed the doors behind him before heading off to resume their duties.

“You run an efficient house,” Ethan said, in an effort to stimulate conversation.

“Mister Halliwell requires it.” He offered a nod to the hawk. “He makes no mistake about what he expects from those he employs, in any capacity.” Daniels put particular emphasis on the last part of that statement, reminding Ethan that for the moment at least, he worked for Halliwell. The implication that failure would not be tolerated was clear. Sensing his apprehension the giraffe continued. “While my employer does not brook anything less than perfection he is a man of his word. If you keep your end of the deal he will do the same.”

“Good to know,” Ethan responded. “What do you know about the attack upon the caravan?”

“It had just entered the valley when the last witness reported seeing the caravan intact. They were returning from a business trip up north when the assault occurred.

When they did not arrive as expected a party was sent out to investigate. They found their carts with signs of distress but no indication of the party that was responsible.”

“And no bodies?” he asked.

“None.”

“I suppose that’s promising,” Ethan said.

Lydia nodded. “It does suggest they’re being held somewhere. If all you wanted was to cause damage there’d be no point in taking the bodies with you and leaving the carts.”

Daniels walked them to the door. “While the scene has been cleaned up I can point you in the direction of the site of the incident. I would recommend you start there. Do you have any final questions?”

“I think we have all we need,” Ethan replied.

“Very well, then. I await your return.” Daniels held open the door and once they were outside closed it just as quietly.

Lydia turned to Ethan. “So now what?”

“We head back to the others, get our equipment, and get this done before they notice we’re gone,” he said.

“Even if things go really well, you think we’ll be back that quickly?” she asked.

The hawk shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out.” He gestured towards the marketplace. “Rhodes and Diana will be selling for quite a few hours yet, and from what I know of this area the path to other side of the valley is fairly straightforward. Once we get underway it shouldn’t take us long to get there.”

Lydia nodded. “Okay, I’ve got a better question. What are you going to tell Rhodes?”

Ethan and Lydia returned to the marketplace less than ten minutes into the midday break. Diana and Rhodes were already eating, while the two of them had returned with fresh supplies for their stay and restocking of some of their regular items. Lydia set about putting them away while Ethan walked up to Rhodes who offered him a bite of his lunch. The hawk graciously accepted and tasted the morsel Rhodes placed in his palm. It was a delicious roasted meat of some kind though Ethan was not certain of the specific variety but it had a pleasant spice he found rather appealing. “Thank you,” he said.

“I hope you’ve had a productive morning, we certainly have.” Rhodes turned to his left and patted the cash box. “We’ve made quite a bit of money, more than usual.”

Ethan shrugged giving Lydia a look over Rhodes’s shoulder, but the crocodile simply turned away and continued to restock their supplies. In other words, he was making this mess so it was his job to explain it away. The hawk decided to dodge the issue. “Oh really?”

Lydia rolled her eyes at him.

“Yeah, almost ten gold pieces just this morning. We keep this up we might actually be able to take a break one of these days.” Rhodes gestured towards the inside of the cart, where Diana dined alone. “I suspect it has something to do with your lady archer. Most of our customers have been men looking to flirt with the pretty canine. I can’t say I blame them, though if this keeps up you might be out of a job.”

“Hey!” Ethan protested.

"I'm kidding, of course." He looked up in thought. "Or am I?" he touched his chin and received a jab in the ribs for his trouble. "Ow! Fine, fine," he said. "So are you going to be working the market tomorrow?" he asked.

Ethan's neck feathers fluffed up slightly. "I don't know yet. I'm sort of doing a side job that might take a little while."

"Nothing illegal, I hope," Rhodes replied.

"Oh no, nothing like that." Ethan looked at his hands. "I just can't say when we'll be back. I need to grab some things from the back of the cart and we'll be gone after lunch."

Rhodes sighed. "Okay, but just don't get us into any more trouble, okay?" he asked the hawk.

"I promise. There'll be no trouble at all." His statement earned him another smirk from Lydia. The rest of lunch went rather uneventfully, and when they were finished Ethan and Lydia departed once more.

As Daniels had indicated the site had been cleaned up with the carts removed and things more or less returned to normal. Nevertheless this was the most likely place to find any remaining clues they might have overlooked and track down the wayward son of Eldritch Halliwell. Ethan scanned the perimeter of the area considering possible ambush sites before examining the tracks left behind by various carts that had passed through on their way to Valadyne. Lydia examined an arrow which had embedded itself in a tree while Ethan rose to his feet. "Something's not right here."

Lydia turned towards him. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I've been looking at the tracks and they just stop at a certain point before resuming their journey some time later. Assuming the most recent heavy tracks belong to the Halliwell caravan we can assume that if they were attacked they would have made an effort to fight back if they felt they were in danger." He guided her along the deep grooves made into the dirt road. "The impression gets fairly deep here indicating the cart stopped for a significant amount of time. Now the tracks themselves are already making a significant impression suggesting they were headed this way with a full load. Neither Daniels or Halliwell reported anything missing other than the personnel so we can assume they were fully loaded coming back and that Halliwell recovered his property."

"A reasonable assumption," Lydia said.

"Yet there's no indication of either evasive action or a defensive formation. Even if you know you can't run you do what you can to protect your people, don't you?" he asked.

"You think they simply surrendered?" The crocodile folded her arms. "It may have been the most practical course of action."

"I don't think that's it," he said. "There's not even a swerve in the tracks. The drivers must have just stopped and abandoned the carts."

"But why would they do that?" Lydia asked. "For that matter, why not take the cargo?"

"Maybe the cargo isn't what they were after." Ethan walked to the edge of the open area where dense forest seemed to form and noted a few broken branches. "If someone did grab young Mister Halliwell, they would most likely head in this direction. The edge of the valley is a few dozen miles in this direction and where there are mountains, there are caves."

“You think that’s where he’s being held?” the crocodile asked.

Ethan shrugged. “It’s a strong possibility. If whoever grabbed him has another way out of this valley he may already be beyond our reach.” The hawk shrugged and started walking. “If you’ve got a better idea, I’m open to suggestions.”

Lydia hurried to catch up with him. “Lead the way.” She walked a few steps before touching him on the shoulder. “You got a plan for when we get where we’re going?”

“Stick the pointy end in the bad guys,” he said, brandishing his sword. Lydia simply smirked.

“A little bit more specific?” she prompted.

Ethan nodded as they walked closer to the mountains that bordered either side of the valley. The hawk returned his blade to its place at his side and held up a hand. “Give me a minute and I’ll give you a better one. He ran towards an angled tree before sprinting up to a higher branch and launching himself into the air. In a moment he could no longer see the crocodile beneath the canopy of the trees as he rose into the sky. Once he was high enough he scanned the entire area with his sharp senses. Ethan knew whoever it was would not want to be easily spotted but it was rather more complicated to disguise all signs of one’s presence, especially if it was a group. He searched the mountains and the thick trees until he found what he was looking for among the rocky terrain. He set down beside Lydia who stepped back upon his descent. Once he folded his wings inwards he gestured over his shoulder. “I think I found something.”

Lydia met his glance. “Our missing person?”

“Not quite,” he replied. “I saw what looked like signs of some old signal fires up there near a series of caves. There may be more but it’s the most promising thing I’ve seen so far. I want to take a closer look.”

The Oracle touched his arm. “I’ll follow your lead, but be careful. We could be heading into danger and not even know it.”

“I know,” Ethan said. “I’m hoping we can resolve this peacefully. When we find the people who took Halliwell’s son, I’m going to try to negotiate for his release. We can see what their mood is and if necessary fall back and come up with another plan.”

“You’re assuming they’re inclined to release us in the first place. Once they know why we’re there they may choose to hold us.” She shrugged. “We have no idea what this group wants or what they intend to do with young Mister Halliwell. For all we know they could have already killed him. It would support the fact they didn’t bother with any kind of ransom demand.

Ethan shook his head. “There was nothing at the attack site to indicate anyone had lethal intentions. If they had I guarantee you Halliwell’s people would have found bodies. It makes no sense to drag him all the way back here just to kill him.”

“Unless that wasn’t the plan,” she said. “Maybe they’d planned to ransom him but before they could he tried to escape and got himself killed. Now they don’t know what to do.”

The hawk considered the possibility. “If that’s the case then we should still report it to Halliwell. Either way we can’t go back empty handed.”

Lydia lowered her muzzle. “I’m inclined to agree. All right. We’ll try to talk to them and see what they say. Are you sure you don’t want me to do the talking?” she asked.

Ethan tilted his head. "No, I started this, I should deal with it," he said. He offered a sheepish smile as they continued their ascent up the side of the valley. Traveling on the rough terrain slowed their progress towards what he hoped was their destination. It had occurred to Ethan more than once he could make it there in a fraction of the time if he took to the air again but it would mean leaving Lydia behind and he did not wish to abandon her in the forest. If something went wrong she would be alone and have no idea what had happened to him. She would be left with the choice of following after him into potential danger or going back and telling Rhodes and Diana what they had gotten themselves into in their absence. Neither was an acceptable alternative.

The hawk continued to put one foot in front of the other on the slow climb up the ever ascending path. Birds were not designed for such activities, generally speaking, but his time with Rhodes had gotten him accustomed to traveling like the land bound species did. He spent more time walking and running places than flying or gliding. It was not that he was lacking in that respect either. Ethan was a rather skilled flyer especially when unencumbered. However, when one traveled with those who were not gifted with wings one tended to do as his companions did. Were he inclined to fly everywhere he'd always be arriving before Rhodes, and most of the point of a journey was the companionship. He made certain to get his fair amount of flying in during stops to keep in the habit and to keep his wing muscles strong, but there was some benefits to riding on the cart. After all, he got to spend more time with Diana.

He thought of his beloved Doberman archer and smiled. She was a canine, perhaps as far away from one of his kind as he could get. Even so, from the moment he had laid eyes on her he had felt a connection between them. Ethan had never been the kind to consider his prospects for a lover based on their species but he had to admit he had never thought he would fall for the type of woman Diana was for a moment. She was brave and selfless at the same time, having gotten home only to leave again for Rhodes's sake. She never once hesitated when he was in danger to rush to his rescue, or anyone else's for that matter. That was his Diana.

She was perhaps one of the most honorable women he had ever known. Quite possibly the most entrancing of all was the fact that he was still learning about her. Even though they had been traveling together for a while it seemed every day he discovered something new about the blonde canine. No matter how many times he thought he knew who she was there always appeared to be something more behind the many layers of the lovely canine. He hoped that never changed.

The higher they climbed the more erratic and confusing the path seemed to become. Ethan had to ascend to the skies several times to be certain they were heading in the right direction. If they had not had his constant course corrections he was certain they would have become impossibly lost. Even with his navigational skills it was difficult to pinpoint where they were relative to their goal.

After several hours of walking they came to a flat area halfway up the side of the valley. Lydia touched his arm and looked into his eyes. "I need a rest."

Ethan nodded and wrapped his arm around her waist. "Yeah, me too." The pair walked to the center of the clearing when Ethan suddenly stopped. No sooner had Lydia turned to ask what was happening when several figures appeared out of nowhere armed with drawn arrows ready to fire. Ethan whirled his head around from one side to the other but there was no escaping the logical conclusion. They were surrounded.

