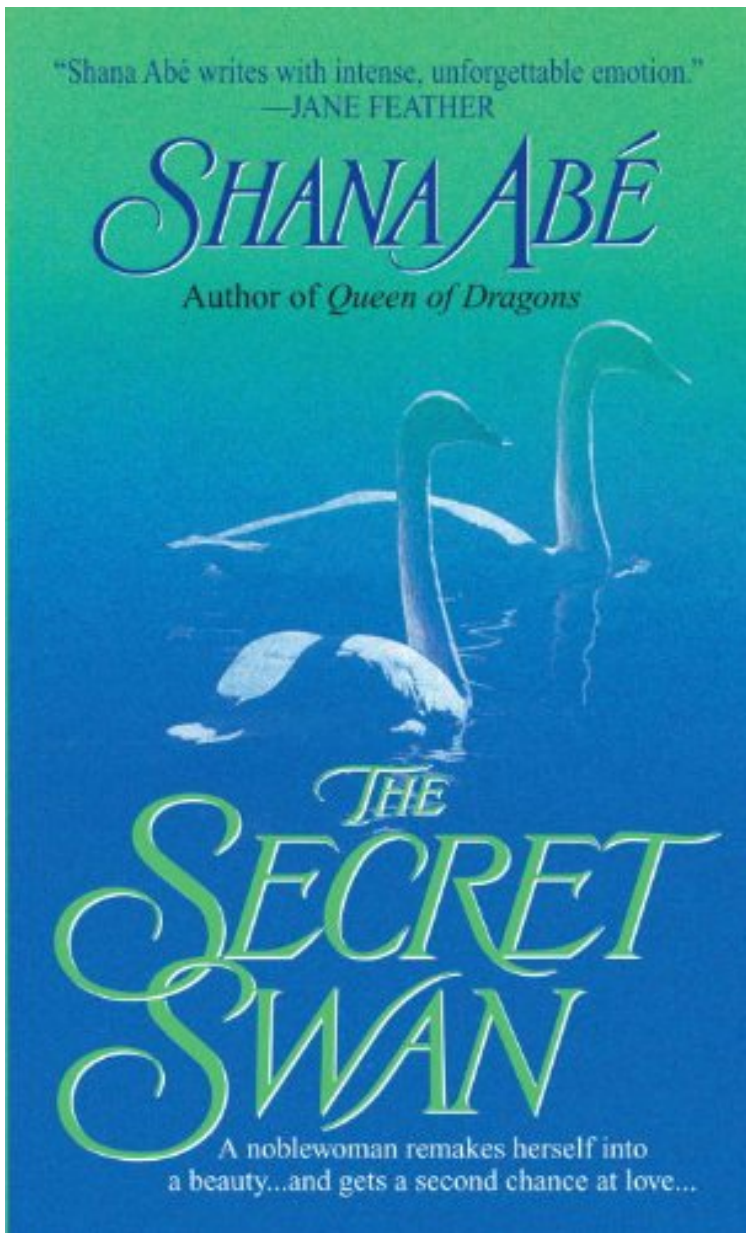


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The Secret Swan



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurShana Ab has captured the imagination of readers everywhere with her superbly sensual tales of forbidden love. Now she weaves the exquisite story of a man and woman torn apart by fate who realize years later that love's second bloom is the one that matters most.At fifteen Lady Amiranth St. Clare became the bride of Tristan Geraint. She thought all of her dreams had come true until she learned on her wedding day that Tristan had married her only for her bloodline. A week later Tristan deserted her for the glories of battle. Heartbroken, Amiranth felt she'd been abandoned, not knowing that Tristan had become

a prisoner of war nor that he would one day return to the life he didn't know he wanted until it was taken away. Eight long years pass before Tristan finally comes home. A beautiful woman greets him in the garden, claiming to be Amiranth's cousin. Yet somehow she seems hauntingly familiar, with an ethereal radiance that stirs him deep within his heart. Is she really his wife, grown into a lady of breathtaking beauty or another woman who has awakened within him a passion he has never known? To discover the truth, Tristan must reveal the secrets of what happened those years he was away and find the love that was closer than he ever imagined....From the Paperback edition.ExtraitIving Castle 1341 It was going to be the most glorious day of her life.Today, Lady Amiranth St. Clare was to become a woman. She was fifteen years old, and a bride.His bride. Tristan Geraint, Earl of Haverlocke.She had loved him for years already. It was deep and heady and thrilling, and completely without reason, she knew. Amiranth had not told anyone of it, not even her cousin Lily, her most trusted friend. It was as if to share this feeling with anyone else -- anyone -- would tarnish it, turn it from shining silver to tin.She did not dare risk that. It was too wonderful a suffering, too dear and delightful and agonizing to give up.Amiranth had seen him her very first time at court, when she was just a child. Only nine years old, and the moment she picked him out from the line of squires lingering by a wall in the king's antechamber she had felt it -- her breathing stopped, her heart stopped, her entire existence ... stopped.He was dressed as the rest of the young men around him were, in fine tunics and colorful hose, each wearing the heraldry of the lord they served. He blended in well with them. Were it not for just one stray beam of sunlight sliding along the floor, she might not have noticed him at all.But the sunlight was there, slanting down from a window high above, and at just the moment when she glanced his way he took a half-step into the light, jostled by a friend, the two of them laughing softly together.She felt as if she had stepped, unsuspecting, into a vat of honeyed nectar, thick and sweet, filling her, suspending her even as she died within it. A blissful death -- or an excruciating life -- to gaze upon him, to bear witness to this beauty disguised as an ordinary squire. Amiranth had never before seen such dark splendor, such grace in a boy. By heavens, she had never even noticed a boy before now.It was in this incredible moment that she felt a recognition sound through her, resonating from the depths of her truest, truest heart: Here was the person destined to complement her soul.She had not known his name then, of course, or anything else about him, but that he was a squire and so had to be at least four years older than she. All Amiranth had seen was a slender youth with sunlight covering his shoulders, gleaming across him. He was taller than most of the rest, with black hair that fell into dishevelment, and lips that curled up at the edges when he laughed, as if he might be holding back more than mirth.His eyes were brown, like her own -- but no -- darker, closer to jet. Mysterious eyes, holding secrets and spells in their depths; intense eyes that did not laugh with him, but rather scanned the room, watchful. He was waiting for something, she could tell.His gaze fell upon her and then skimmed past her, uncaring, and Amiranth could not even begin to summon a smile for him, so shaken was she.She had not been allowed to stay that day to see what it was he anticipated. She had been in the company of Constanz, her sister-in-law, who kept a hard grip on her hand and smiled very tightly at the people who came near. Constanz had never been easy in crowds. When Amiranth's brother arrived, the three of them left the gathering nearly at once.Amiranth managed to throw the sun-gilded youth one last look over her shoulder. A corner of him remained in the light, but he had turned away from it, speaking with his hands to the person next to him. She had the impression she could still see his face, tanned and alert, with his slight smile and sparkling jet eyes.That had been the first time.She had had to wait another year and a half for her next opportunity. She was eleven by then, and very proud that she was finally allowed to put her hair up all the time. Amiranth remembered that day with vivid clarity, because it was a very brisk October evening, and she had worn a gown just finished for her, ivory and gold, to match her hair. It had seemed almost a shame to wear a veil, but she had done it anyway, too enthralled with growing up to leave it off.They had been on their way to London again. Her brother Augustin went to the king's court at least twice every year, and recently had allowed that Amiranth could accompany him and his wife on a regular basis. Amiranth was good with the baby, dear little Emile, and even Constanz agreed that she could be useful. Lily's parents were still alive then, so she had not yet come to live at Iving.They put up at a rustic inn for the night. The sun was still shining rosy gold over the horizon, but they stopped anyway, because the baby was fussy. Augustin had gone to speak with the innkeeper, and Constanz had retired to the room with her son, but Amiranth was restless and soon persuaded her nursemaid to take a walk with her outside.The air was fresh and clean. Most of the trees still held their autumn leaves, and when they caught the breeze, sunlight made them wink at her in flashes of scarlet and orange. Amiranth was lifting her skirts as she stepped carefully over a puddle of mud when the commotion began in the courtyard.Riders, five of them, with foaming horses and thundering

hooves, splashing past Amiranth and her startled nurse with nary a look. But Amiranth had been looking. He was there, in the middle of them. His hair was longer now, windblown and mussed. He was speckled with mud and laughing at something one of the others had said. His face was angled away from her. He did not see her. Amiranth had felt time stop again, every bit of her fixed on him. The way his hands held the reins to his steed, his gloves taut over his knuckles. The ruddy flush across his cheekbones, darkening his swarthy skin. Even the faint curl to his lips, still suggesting something beyond his laughter, something bright and compelling in the black of his eyes. No, he did not see her at all. He and his group dismounted in the courtyard and barged their way into the inn, shouting for the innkeeper, trampling mud everywhere. The stableboys who had come out to take control of the mounts exchanged sour words, and her nurse was seizing Amiranth by the arm with scandalized exclamations, pushing her back inside to their private chamber, away from the rowdiness of his crowd. That night, with a casually deliberate inquiry over supper, Amiranth discovered his name: Tristan Geraint. Middle son of the Earl of Haverlocke. Wild and impetuous, Augustin had pronounced, slicing firmly into his mutton. An uncontrollable youth, the despair of his father. No good at all. Tristan, Amiranth thought, closing her eyes, savoring the sound of it. She didn't even mind that he had splashed mud all over her new gown. There came other times as she grew older, all of them brief, and all of them within the confines of the London court. She would sometimes see him drinking or talking, and worshiped him from a silent distance. On very good days she might pass him in a hallway with his friends, a swan amid a crowd of peacocks. If only she might reach out her hand, just a bit, she could brush against him, pretend it was an accident ... but oh, she did not dare. He was rarely without companions, yet it seemed to her that Tristan Geraint was always alone. It was the way he held himself, perhaps, that suggested restraint, or caution, or mayhap something darker. She could not say what. Yet even as he would smile and gesture and game with his peers, part of him looked always separate from the moment, nearly aloof. The corners of his mouth, so sensual and fine, held him back just enough. Amiranth imagined that she alone could perceive this aspect of him, that somehow she held the magic key to knowing him, the secret to revealing his hidden heart. That only she, in fact, could banish that loneliness about him. It was her destiny. He never saw her. No matter how hard she prayed, Tristan never even glanced at her, save when she was in some mass of people, and even then, only in passing. And she, for all her certainty of him, never quite gathered up the courage to speak to him first. And so Amiranth watched him from afar and dreamed and planned and practiced kissing the back of her hand, imagining how he might do it, were they ever introduced. They were not. But it did not stop her from dreaming. One year, something bad happened. No one would speak of it openly, but she knew that his parents had died of an illness, and then, very soon after, his older brother was killed in a hunt. There were rumors about him now, unpleasant things. His younger brother was whisked away to the countryside by a distant branch of the family; some said it was to spare him the sickness ... others muttered of more dire circumstances. She felt deeply for Tristan. Her own parents had died in an accident when she was but three.

Her love was now an orphan, just as she and Lily were. Amiranth knew very well how it felt to be orphaned. She did not see Tristan again for a very long time. And then, by sheer luck -- or as a result of all that prayer -- she was in London for his knighting ceremony. It was to be a regal, stuffy affair, the bestowing of knighthood upon a group of the most noble and worthy of young men; it happened every year, exactly the same. Heated chamber. Perfumed air. Adults in vivid colors, speaking in whispers above her head. The quiet, rumbling voice of the king, too distant to hear well. Augustin always had seats assigned near the back of the crowded hall. Despite their exemplary bloodlines, the taxes from their estate were never enough to grant anything closer. Amiranth sat there, bored and fitful, unable to even see beyond the massively plumed hat of the man in front of her, when the squires began their procession down the walkway. Out of habit she searched for Tristan, and when he passed by, she almost could not believe it was true. She stood in place, prompting Constanz to press a restraining hand upon her arm, but Amiranth was staring at the retreating back of Tristan's head, so familiar and dear she wanted to cry out a greeting to him. Constanz pulled her back down to her seat, scolding softly. Amiranth only nodded as her mind whirled with possibilities. She leaned back in her chair, fanning herself now with one hand, murmuring an excuse. Her sister-in-law leaned in closer, frowning; Amiranth slumped down more, trying to look faint. Her heart was pounding with excitement, and the room was very warm. It was not difficult to feign illness. When Constanz dismissed her, Amiranth quickly moved away, pretending to look for an attendant. Once out of sight, she managed to slip into the crowd standing along the walls, using the people to hide her. She knew that even if Augustin had seen where she went, he could not call out for her, not during such a great ceremony. Amiranth ducked and weaved through the assembly nearly unnoticed, and contented herself with a spot not too far from the king's

dais, tucked discreetly behind the velvet robes of some royal adviser. He was here! Her beloved, at last, approaching King Edward. And now she was close enough to see Tristan's profile as he bent his head before the king. Close enough to see his hands, loose at his sides as he knelt, tanned and elegant, and to be blinded by the quick gleam of Edward's sword as it cut through the stained-glass sunlight to rest upon Tristan's shoulders. Close enough to see his glossy black hair, longer than ever, the ends still curling past the leather strand he had used to tie it back. Close enough to see his lowered eyes, his lashes long and dark against his skin, his expression reverent as the king spoke his name. Her heart filled then, brimming with emotions she could not name or explain. Pride, joy, adoration, even pain. The sunlight fell across the splendid colors of the chamber and Amiranth felt it swim amid her tears, sending everything around her into a blur, only the shape of Tristan steady before her. She had daydreamed of that moment ever since, seeing him, feeling that sharp elation suffuse her at just the memory of it. And that had been the last time she had seen him, one year ago. Until today -- her wedding day. "Stand up straight!" Constanz's fingers pinched Amiranth at the shoulders, forceful. "You look the very kitchen wench when you slouch so." "Yes, Constanz." Even her sister-in-law could not bother her. Not this morning, only hours from having her deepest, most delicious dreams manifest. He was coming for her even now. Tristan would be here at Iving Castle soon, and they would wed, and she would be the happiest woman ever to live. So Amiranth stood patiently next to Lily in the chamber they shared, both of them listening with carefully averted eyes to this series of last-minute admonitions. She did not dare to look over at her cousin. They would both laugh, and spoil the scold. Constanz stood with her hands on her hips, surveying Amiranth up and down. The lines from her nose to her mouth turned deep. "They will be here very soon. Do not disgrace us, Amiranth." "I won't, Constanz." "Indeed you won't! You know how much this means, child. Your brother has worked very hard to arrange this betrothal. Do nothing to jeopardize it." "Yes, Constanz." "And stay here in your chamber until you are summoned. I won't have you destroying your gown by tearing about the way you do. I've spent far too much time on it." "I will, Constanz." "Your cousin may keep you company. Be ready when you are called." "Yes, Constanz." Her sister-in-law waited a moment longer, scorching her with her stare, then gave a short nod and swept from the room. The door opened; for a brief moment a chorus of outside noises blared into the chambershouts and commands, the random furor of conversations, all frantic preparations for Tristan's entourage, the wedding feast to come. Amiranth and Lily watched Constanz go, looking at each other only when the latch to the door clicked shut. Lily gave a slight smile. "She is worried for you," she said, all gentle goodness. "She is worried for her coffers," Amiranth replied, but then smiled back to take the sting out of her words. "It would not do to have the Earl of Haverlocke withdraw the sum he has promised for the distinction of my hand." "It is a distinction." Lily was defensive of her, as always. "He is fortunate to have you!" "Let us hope he thinks the same once he sees me." "Of course he will. You look lovely," Lily said now, a most effective distraction. "Do you think so?" Amiranth could not keep the edge of trepidation from her voice. The betrothal had been arranged sight unseen, the result of nearly a year of offers and counteroffers, letters exchanged, the approval of the king sought and granted, the final agreement sealed. It had not hurt that Amiranth had pushed, as carefully and subtly as she could manage, for the arrangement. That when the first astonishing query came from Haverlocke, she had managed to smile and nod to her brother, and say -- quite sedately -- why, no, she would not reject his suit out of hand. Augustin, who fretted constantly over his lack of funds, had pounced upon her agreement, the gleam of gold in his eyes all too visible. Like all noble marriages, it was to be an even exchange. His wealth, her breeding. Yet, for all the Earl of Haverlocke knew, he had never before even glimpsed his future bride. They were to meet formally this afternoon -- finally, at last. Out of habit Amiranth glanced at the closed half of the glass window of her room, trying to make out her reflection against the sky. All she could see were bits of herself: the silvery sheen of her hair, swept back; large, dark eyes; a gown of blue that shone with trimming. She could not tell if she looked well in the gown. She could not tell if her cheeks were flushed or pale, or if the color of blue became her, or if the elaborate gold girdle at her waist added to her plumpness as she feared. ...She wanted to be lovely, desperately so. At least for today, she wanted to dazzle, to smile and strike envy into the hearts of all the other maidens. Today was to be her wedding day, and Amiranth fervently wanted Tristan to see her, truly see her, the way she had seen him all this time. She wanted so much to impress him. What she would have given to have the looks of her older cousin -- sweet Lily, without an envious thought in her, so stunning that grown men had been known to walk into walls for staring at her so hard. Even with their coloring so similar, Amiranth felt as different from her as a cod was from a mermaid. Lily had assured her more than once how closely they resembled each other; how, when she had been Amiranth's age, her face had just the same roundness, her hair the same bright,

unruly curl -- even the same dimple when she smiled. Lily was only attempting to lift her spirits, Amiranth understood that. It was typical of her generosity, to try to offer a little hope to her admiring cousin. But Amiranth had no illusions about her face or her figure. All her life she had been plain. Just today, she prayed. That's all I ask. Just today, let me shine. She turned away from the glass, drawing a heavy breath to test the restraint of this new gown, the ties of the girdle. She kicked up one foot, and folds of royal blue fluttered in place, falling back against her with rippling sighs. Lily said softly, "You are as fair a bride as ever could be." Amiranth laughed a little in spite of her nervousness. "Now I know you're wrong. The fairest bride ever to be will be you." "If I ever wed -- and I certainly don't know who would want a wife with no name or fortune to speak of -- I would be delighted to look half as radiant as you right now." "You will wed, wait and see," Amiranth said. "To a prince, I am sure of it! I shall kiss you on your wedding morning and laugh and remind you of this moment." And Lily, with her breathtaking beauty and her loving heart, only smiled again at this, modest and tender. "Are you anxious?" "Yes." "I would be, as well." Lily came forward, taking her hands. "So let us not think of it. What shall we do to pass the time until he comes? Do you wish to sing? To sew?" Amiranth gazed around the room that had always been hers, and then hers and Lily's. It was as safe and familiar to her as could be, had remained exactly the same for as far back as she could remember: A large bed, carved wood and ornate cloth, gold and red and green. Thick rugs across the stone floors, tasseled and brightly colored. Cupboards and chests, furs and woolen blankets. A hearth of slate; the window of leaded glass, half open to show the sky. Tapestries draped against two walls, slowly swelling and falling with the breeze -- scenes of castles, and deer and streams, and crowned queens out hunting on a procession of white horses. She had lived here all her life. But soon she would reside in a new set of rooms, ones fit for a countess. Ones where he would come to her, and smile at her, and call her wife. "I'd like to just wait for him, if you don't mind," Amiranth heard herself say. "Yes. I'll wait." "Then I shall wait with you," replied Lily in her calm voice, and together they crossed to the window and looked out upon the unclouded day. They were late. Very late. The sun was well past its zenith and the riding party still had not been spotted. As the hours passed without sign of them, Amiranth felt a slow sinking in her heart, her hopes fading. Perhaps Tristan would not come. Perhaps he had never meant to marry her. Perhaps it was naught but a mistake, or some terrible jest, to wed the most handsome man in the kingdom to the drabest maiden. Perhaps he had found some other noble, desperate family with an eligible young girl, one that would take a lesser settlement than the rather immense amount Augustin had demanded. Perhaps he had decided that he did not need to wed at all, that linking one of England's oldest and most honored houses to his own -- for any sum -- was simply not worth the price. A mild breeze wound around her, soft against her skin, and with it arrived the most awful thought of all, one that sent a tremor of panic through her: Perhaps Tristan Geraint actually had seen her before, and noticed her. Perhaps he did not come because he knew her face, the sturdy dumpiness that had marked her all her life, common features, common wit, common, common, common-- But then the scout sounded his horn. She looked up, a hand to her throat. Lily was beaming at her, bright as a star, and Amiranth could only beam back, so happy and relieved she felt her eyes tear up. "There," Lily was saying, patting her on the shoulder, "I told you, love, he would come ... I told you...." At the farthest edge of the horizon came a smudge of darkness against the ample forest -- a line of riders, banners flying. There were not many, Amiranth thought, squinting to make them out. Somehow she had expected more of them, though she could not say why. Perhaps it was because he had always seemed to have so many friends in London. But approaching Iving now was a mere handful of men, all in his colors, crimson and silver. She tried to pick him out from the group and could not -- again came that flutter of panic. He had not come. This was no wedding party at all, but merely a messenger and outriders sent to withdraw from the agreement. Sweet heavens. How could she bear it? "I think I see him," said Lily now, interrupting her thoughts. She pointed, taking care not to reach past the frame of the window and be noticed. "At the lead, Amiranth. Surely that's him?" Amiranth leaned forward, holding her breath. The lead rider wore no helmet, no protection of any kind that she could see, not even the hauberk of the others. As they approached the outer walls of Iving, he lifted his head, surveying the castle. "It is!" Her breath released; she leaned back against the cool stone wall, close to laughing. "He came!" Once inside the bailey the group was no longer visible from the window. There was a rise in the noise beyond the door, from the great hall below. Amiranth closed her eyes, trying to envision what was happening. Was he inside yet? Had Augustin greeted him yet, and welcomed him in? Was he even now looking for her, perhaps? She felt Lily place her hand on her shoulder again. "Shall I go down and take a look?" Amiranth opened her eyes, giving her cousin a grateful glance. "Would you?" "I'm so terribly thirsty, aren't you?" Lily asked, tranquil. "And we don't wish to disturb the preparations for the party. I'll just go and

see if I can find something for us to drink." And with another smile, this one just as benign as all her rest, Lily left the room, carefully allowing the door to remain open behind her by just a sliver. She could not wait for news. Amiranth tried. She did. But there was so much going on, and all of it involved her, and she could see none of it. He was down there, somewhere! He was walking the halls -- her halls! -- and gazing at the rooms and talking to her brother. He was stepping where she had stepped a thousand times over. He was seeing all that she had seen, and hearing what she could hear. She had to see him. She could not wait. Her hallway was deserted. Even though the day outside was bright, the interior of the keep remained shrouded in cool shadows. Torches along the walls gave periodic relief from the dark, enough for Amiranth to confirm that she was alone. Augustin's solar overlooked the great hall, where everyone would be. From there she would have an excellent view. No one saw her; the solar was as empty as the hallway. She crept toward the balcony at the end of the room, staying in the shadows as much as she could manage. The ties of her girdle caught the faint light in golden glints, but there was nothing she could do about that. Really, she only wanted one small look. That was all. She would be done and gone before anyone noticed.... The solar balcony was composed of blue stone and pillars, impressive, tall arches that ran from one end of the wall to the other. Amiranth turned sideways to fit behind one of the thick columns, then peered around the curve of it to watch the scene below. People everywhere. Talking, laughing, shouting. She found Augustin first, because he enjoyed standing out -- tall and blond, dressed elaborately today, his finest tunic and hose, a heavy chain of gold and colored gems ringing his shoulders. He stood near the dais, speaking to his steward, who kept nodding and glancing to his left. Amiranth followed the steward's gaze. The Earl of Haverlocke stood apart from the confusion, arms crossed over his chest, looking vaguely unhappy about something. A group of his men surrounded him in a half circle, speaking to one another, eyes fixed upon the commotion of the hall. More of them mingled about, a few already drinking. But Amiranth was focused on the man she would soon join in marriage. He wore no beard, and she could not help but be glad about that -- to see the clean slant of his jaw, the true shape of his lips. It made him look younger than he was, perhaps, but she liked that about him. What good fortune that she was not to wed a man twice her age, as had happened to so many girls she knew. What wonderful, wonderful fortune instead to wed the one she adored. He was so handsome. Even now, standing relaxed with his weight on one foot, with his distant gaze and reserved manner, he was clearly superior to every other man in the hall. He remained rare and fine to her, exquisitely male in his crimson tunic with silver, the slight curl to his lips subdued. Without warning he looked up, straight at her. Amiranth froze. He can't see me. He can't. But it seemed that he could. Tristan's face remained very serious, his dark eyes shuttered. He showed no surprise at what he saw, nor did he look away. Instead he gave a very small frown, still staring. Amiranth felt completely exposed, even pressed back into the shadows. She was safe.

There was no way he could pick her out from the row of pillars; the solar was very high, and darkness curved and arched around her. But she felt a flush begin crawling up her neck anyway, caught in her childish game of spying on him. She stayed where she was a moment longer, partly to test her bravery, partly because she feared to stir, and allow the movement to reveal her. He really did seem to be staring right into her eyes, even from this distance. It was a strange moment, growing stranger as Tristan maintained his stare, penetrating. Amiranth felt her flush turn warmer, dizzying, and even the stone against her body was not enough to cool her. Tristan's gaze was keen and knowing, relentless. She felt connected to him, their eyes locked together, and in this long, tense interlude Amiranth felt a new emotion growing in her, something beyond her wild anticipation of their marriage. For some reason, what she felt right now was ... apprehension. He was so serious. Formidable. She was completely vulnerable to him, held in place in her brother's solar, fixed by the severity of this man she was to wed. Someone walked up to speak with him and he turned away, releasing her without another look. Amiranth scrambled back, heart racing, a metallic taste in her mouth. When she was safe in the hallway again she raised a hand to her lips, trembling. Her fingertips came away dabbed red with blood. She had bitten her lip that hard to fight his spell. They met over dinner, a quick meal before the ceremony. Augustin drew her close, his arm heavy around her shoulders, and introduced her in hearty tones. Tristan Geraint, love of her life, took her hand and bowed over it. His lips came nowhere near enough for a kiss. "I am honored," he said in a bored voice. He dropped her hand, and looked away from her again. In the final hour before the wedding, Amiranth sat alone in her chamber, staring at the mantle of cloth she held to her lap, worrying at the cut on her lip with her tongue. Should she do it? Would he like it? She had labored many an hour upon the design, meticulously stitching it together: Tristan's family colors and hers, chevron patterns of crimson and indigo blue in alternating folds, velvets and satins, white ermine lining the hood. It had taken many months to complete. In fact, she had finished it only a few

days ago. She had begun it on the very day Augustin had told her of Tristan's missive of proposal, her dreams at last coming true. When it was done, she had thought the mantle truly worthy of royalty. How pleased Tristan would be to see her thoughtful efforts for him, to note how gracefully she had combined their two houses in this design. She imagined him proudly wearing it as they rode back to his castle, how the wind would catch it and let the colors flare behind him, tribute to his elegance. But now, gazing at the bunched material on her lap, Amiranth was filled with doubts. Perhaps her work was too clumsy. Or she would look too eager, to present it to him now, like a pet begging for approval. She had meant to give it to him later tonight, or tomorrow. After they were wed. But something in her urged her to reach him before the wedding.

It felt like a peace offering, although she certainly could not say why she needed to broker peace with him. Yet he had been so quiet at the dinner. He had not even met her eyes. Yes, Amiranth decided, standing. She would give it to him now, in this fragment of time before their union, and tell him how pleased -- how very happy -- she was to be marrying him. She would let him know, in no uncertain terms, that she did not begrudge this arrangement. That it did not matter to her in the slightest that he was paying for her good name, to blunt the rumors that surrounded him. That he did not love her ... yet. Indeed, given the chance, she would tell him she had never believed any of the rumors anyway. He could not be a murderer. Not her love. Lily was downstairs, consulting with Constanz about the final details in the chapel. At any second Amiranth would be surrounded by women come to attend her. If she did not leave now, it would not happen. Carefully she draped the mantle over her arm and left her chamber. The Earl of Haverlocke would be housed in the finest of the guest quarters of Iving; Augustin would not put him anywhere else. It was a series of chambers not so very far from her own, ones that opened out into the larger of Iving's two enclosed gardens. At this time of year the garden was at its prime, with masses of blooming flowers that perfumed the air. Today it would be colorful and impressively lush, and Augustin knew it. Tristan was not in his room. The squire there scowled at her, startled to see her as he answered the door, and took a good long moment before bowing to her. At her inquiry he claimed not to know where the earl might have gone. Amiranth clenched her teeth and gave a strained smile, asking again if he was quite certain he did not know, did not have any idea where the earl might be, because her brother, the Earl of Iving, desired to see him.... The squire scowled again and rubbed his forehead, looking uneasy. At last he conceded that he thought the Earl of Haverlocke might have gone to the garden, and offered to look for her. "No, thank you," Amiranth replied, and turned smartly away. She did not quite dare to sweep past him into Tristan's room. Besides, there was another access to this garden, through one of the main hallways. The sun was lowering now, not quite dusk but nearly. As she stepped outside the light grew soft all around her, throwing purpled shadows across the grass and trees. She listened but at first heard nothing beyond the gentle splashing of the fountain Constanz had installed a few years ago. Birds sang, low and sweet; leaves rustled. There was peace in every corner. "...nervous?" A man's voice, not Tristan. Amiranth hesitated, looking around her, still seeing no one. "Hardly." This was Tristan. She recognized his honeyed tone instantly. "I merely want it to be done with." There was a pause, more leaves rustling nearby. Something moved behind a mass of tamed shrubbery directly ahead of her, great bushes cut into fanciful shapes. The men were in the heart of the garden there, Amiranth realized, hidden behind the thick brambles. They could not know she was near. She stared down at her feet, feeling awkward. Perhaps she should go. "Mayhap it won't be as bad as you fear," said the unknown man. Tristan laughed, sardonic. "Mayhap." The other man lowered his voice. "You know what the king said, Tristan." "I'm not likely to forget. 'Marry well, Haverlocke, and marry soon.'" "Revue de presse" Shana Ab has created an unforgettable pair of star-crossed lovers caught in an age-old feud, while beautifully evoking the misty isle and the historical backdrop. She truly makes us believe we are part of this wondrous tale."

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