



## Musician's Touch

by SAMANTHA SCHELTEMA

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Oh! The things he asked her to do, sometimes she could scream in fury. Sometimes she did. Of course, she was punished afterward. She was used to it though; he often punished her for no reason, just for the joy he got from it.

Her name: Alaina of Tremain; her task: cleaning up after one of *his* experiments. This was the most dangerous task he could ever have assigned her, and he did so frequently. She didn't know which chemicals were dangerous and which were safe. Once, she had touched with her bare hand, a chemical that had been spilled on the floor. Her master ended up having to clean off her hand and used another liquid to keep her hand from burning off. He had saved the hand, and she was grateful, but a great, crimson-red scar was left, and nothing could be done about it. Now, she took extra precautions while cleaning: she wore a robe over her dress, and protective gloves. They had been a gift from her master, who had not wanted to lose his slave. These would protect her even if she ran through fire.

She threw on the robe and grabbed the gloves off her dresser, then headed to the laboratory. The mansion she lived in with her master felt empty and cold, as it usually did. The only time that it actually felt like a home was when he had a party with men of different Touches. Her master alone seemed to have many different touches, but his actual Touch was Alchemy. His Alchemy Touch explained why he never wore gloves when working with chemicals. He had never thought about whether or not Alaina should be protected until she had almost lost her hand. All the other occasions she may have gotten injured were all minor, and she cared for herself.

The men who came had always had many interesting things they could do with their Touches. One man saved her the trouble of serving them and made little balls of wine that each floated gracefully in the glasses. Another man with the Wooden Touch pulled up a chair for himself with just a wave of his hand. Yet another man made shapes with the smoke from the fireplace.

Alaina thought about the many amazing men, and how she would gape, awestruck at the men and what they could do. When she was allowed to see them on the rare occasion. Then, her master would bring her back to reality, ordering her to do more work. Her master barely let her stay in the same room with them. He was often too embarrassed by her appearance to let the men see her. If her master knew ahead of time that there would be company over, he sometimes allowed her extra bathing time to take care of her brown, matted hair, and clean her pale, freckled dust-covered face. Sometimes, she would look in the mirror, admiring the way she looked after bathing. Her hair was always cut short to prevent it from becoming damaged. Her nose was round and rather big, and Alaina believed it suited her round face. Her frame was skinny and graceful, but she hadn't sprouted in the chest area as she had wished. Probably her most beautiful feature was her eyes. They were a deep, amethyst purple that sometimes shaded to a jet-black when she was angry. She accepted herself as she was, for she did not have much with which to compare. The only woman she ever saw visited only once a year. Her portrait hung in the laboratory hall. Alaina would examine it every time she could.

Alaina began putting the clean glasses and utensils in the proper cupboards. Suddenly, her master came in mumbling. She continued cleaning the tables as he walked around; he would touch specific chemicals and sniff others. Alaina was used to this behavior, for it meant he was about to make a discovery for the good of mankind.

Alaina glanced at his features. Then she glanced at the woman's portrait on the wall. Both were very old. Her master was old enough to be her grandfather: he had a scraggly white beard, and his silvery white hair was falling out. He was a big man, who huffed and puffed when he walked a lot or went up the



stairs. His eyes were gray, and were slowly clouding over with blindness. He was still determined to solve the problems of their world and to help mankind before he moved on to the heavens.

Alaina found the woman very beautiful when she saw her, even for her age. She had flowing brown-gold hair. Her eyes were a golden color with brown flecks. She held herself proudly. Sometimes Alaina would gaze at her in admiration. The portrait did not do her justice: it did not show her kindness and gracefulness. She would often bring Alaina gifts “just because,” but always avoided her eyes. Alaina wondered why, but the gifts she was given were often so extravagant, and so expensive, she would forget about it in a second.

What was the relationship between the woman and her master? Alaina had seen them either staring into each other's eyes lovingly or screaming at each other, often in another language Alaina could not understand. On the screaming days, the wonderful woman would leave in a huff. Those days, Alaina was forced to stay in the lab with her master while he flung chemicals everywhere, often causing explosions. At the end of those days, Alaina would be found nursing wounds all over.

Now he was continuously mumbling to himself. It took him some time before he finally shouted, “Ah ha!” to no one in particular.

Most of the time, he treated her with kindness but still as a slave. On rare days he would treat her with malice, as if everything she'd ever done was wrong and she needed to be punished. On even rarer days, he would treat her as though they were the best of friends, sharing a secret.

Today was one of those rare days. He gestured her over to his sitting area. Alaina slipped off her robe and gloves after placing the last containers in the cupboards. She poured him a glass of wine and herself a glass of water. Her excitement began to boil over. Alaina sat when he told her to, but she was still jumping with anticipation. When he spoke of his discoveries, she eagerly listened.

“Alaina, Alaina, Alaina,” he whispered. “Please, calm down. We are not here to speak of what I discovered.”

Alaina frowned in disappointment. “What are we to talk about, Master?”

“Your future. As you know, I am getting on in years. We must decide what to do with you when I go.”

“You're not going to . . .” Alaina gulped, then whispered, “die, are you?”

“I don't know when that will happen. Obviously we cannot return you to your family; they are all deceased.”

Alaina looked down. She had never truly believed that all of her family was gone. Some part of her hoped that someday, someone would save her from this horrid place.

There was a knock on the laboratory door. Her master sighed and stood up. He never let Alaina answer the door; in fact he never let her outside. The only view of the outside, the only sun she ever received, was from a tiny window in her room, barely the size of her head.

Alaina leaned to get a glimpse of whoever was at the door. The woman that Alaina often thought about fell into her master's arms, weeping.

“He's dead! He's dead!” she exclaimed.

“Who, my love?” he whispered.

“My husband!”

“Let us go, now.” He pushed the woman out the door with him.

Though her master was trying to speak quietly, Alaina heard the short conversation. She had a very keen sense of hearing; she had to know if and when people were coming in to the room she was in.

Alaina stood up once the door was shut and resumed cleaning. After a few moments of silence, when her master was probably comforting the woman, they began yelling at each other. Alaina could hear their muffled yells through the door. As usual, she could not understand a word of what they were saying.

When she finished, she decided to bathe herself. Her master had not let her do this in a week, so she decided now was a better time than never. She enjoyed the bath; she heated up the water so it was steaming and then washed herself thoroughly. Her master didn't make any indication that he wanted her so she took her dear, sweet time.

The bells at the front door jangled. The bathing room was right over the front door.



Alaina threw on a robe and then ran to her room to get dressed in her nicest, most clean clothes; just a plain, faded burgundy dress with long sleeves. It was a bit warm for summer, but Alaina wanted to look at least somewhat decent for her master's guests.

She looked in her mirror and attempted unsuccessfully to comb her thick hair with her fingers. Alaina gave up and then headed down to the front door.

Before she entered the hall, she eavesdropped.

"Who are you?" her master said in a low and dangerous voice.

"My name is Gem and this is Jaetyn, my brother," respond a woman's sweet voice. Alaina figured she could not have been much older than herself. She wondered at how this strange lady could speak so confidently and kindly in her master's presence.

"We are here to speak to the king of Tremain," continued Gem. "We have been trying to find the palace, with no success. We have decided to ask you where he lives."

Alaina attempted to peek around the corner as her master said, "Who are you, really?" in an accusing voice. Gem, who sighed, was so extravagantly dressed that Alaina had to gasp. She quickly withdrew her head, but the damage was done her master had heard.

"Alaina!" he ordered.

She came timidly and quickly to his side, purposely looking down to avoid eye contact.

"Bring some refreshments to the sitting room. I have a few questions for our guests."

"Yes, sir," Alaina said.

She went to do his bidding but heard, "I recognize that voice," from the strange man she had barely noticed.

Gem cleared her throat as they were led to the sitting room.

No words were spoken, as far as Alaina knew, until she returned.

"Please, play the violin quietly for us," said her master.

Alaina almost hugged him, despite his frequent cruelty; this was a most special treat. She had discovered her rare talent when she was younger. Alaina had picked up the same old violin and had played it without any training. She had never even seen anyone

play it before. Her master sometimes brought her other instruments to try. Alaina played each with the same knowledge and perfection. She could often not resist the urge and would quickly pick the violin up to play for a few moments.

As she played, their conversation resumed. Alaina closed her eyes as the bow slid easily across the strings on the violin, in a perfect melody. She was good at seeming to be absorbed in her music, but was actually listening intently to the conversation.

"I ask again, who are you?" her master demanded.

"I am Princess Genevieve of Arnaude. This is my bodyguard." Alaina nearly gasped again, but maintained her steady composure. "We are traveling home to Arnaude, but I have decided to repair some of the relationships my kingdom has with others. I've come to make amends with your king."

Alaina was wondering why her master did not just tell the princess that they had no king. She stopped listening to the princess and her master when she finally heard Jaetyn moving. She ended a song and then opened her eyes to see a man's face staring at her. Alaina stifled a squeak when she saw that his eyes were the exact same color as her own. His eyes even had the same gaze: intent and determined. They both seemed to come to the same realization.

"Gem!" Jaetyn yelled out suddenly as he nearly fell out of his chair. The princess was at his side in an instant.

Alaina did not react. She just stared at the man's eyes. Her master soon came forward and saw what everyone else was reacting to.

"Alaina, leave, clean the bathing room," he hastily ordered. Jaetyn reached and grabbed her hand before she could move.

Alaina flinched badly, fearing that he was going to hurt her. Her only physical contact with another was when her master had slapped her for misbehaving. Jaetyn had also grabbed her scarred hand, and she was afraid of what he would think.

"Where did you learn to play?" he said quietly, as though he was still entranced.

"I didn't," Alaina answered, just as quietly.

"Where did you learn that song?"



“I made it up.”

Jaetyn released her hand and she ran out of the room, not stopping until she was in her own room. By that point, she had lost the urge to cry and became curious as to why he had reacted that way. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself and then began to change into work clothes. Disappointingly, Alaina was not allowed to clean her work clothes often; they were becoming filthy and smelly.

She began to unwillingly think that Jaetyn might be some lost relative. Her hopes began to rise and she joyfully skipped to do her chore. As she cleaned, though, Alaina became aware of her false hope. Her family was dead, her master had told her. She sat to sort through her thoughts. “I’m alone and always have been, always will be,” she whispered. She cried as her hope diminished as quickly as it had come. Alaina jumped when someone knocked on the bathing room door. She didn’t answer, so they knocked again.

“Alaina? I think we need to talk.” It was the voice of the purple-eyed man, Jaetyn.

She went to the door and opened it. Immediately, the man embraced her. Alaina again flinched but then relaxed, as he offered no harm to her. She found herself wrapping her own arms around him, to comfort him, since he was shuddering from what seemed to be tears.

They soon separated, but he kept a firm hold on her hand, her scarred hand. “Do you want to go to my room?” Alaina asked.

“Sure,” he answered as he looked at her fondly.

She pulled him to her room, thinking it would be the best place to talk. She also felt some strange connection to this man, and wanted to show him how clean her room was. He sat on her bed and looked around. Alaina awkwardly stood as she waited for him to speak.

“Are you all right?” she finally asked him. He was looking pale, as if he were about to cry again.

“If I could change the past, I would,” he told her. “How old are you?”

“I don’t know, I think around ten.”

Jaetyn nodded as though her answer confirmed something. “Let me start at the beginning. I wasn’t much

older than you, and probably stupider. I was mad at my parents so I decided to run away-”

“What did they do?” Alaina interrupted.

He looked at her scarred hand guiltily replying, “My father hit me for being rude to a guest.”

Alaina, too, looked at her hand. “Oh.”

“After some time, I ended up befriending a young girl who was lost,” he continued after a short silence. “I helped find her home and her family took me in for a while, no questions asked. The girl was so grateful, and we got along so well, that we spent every minute together. I guess you could say we fell in love.” Alaina did not fully understand the idea of love, but she had often dreamed of it. He continued before she had much time to ponder, “I believe that you have not yet experienced the undying bond between two people. You may not have even experienced love in a family.”

“I love my master!” Alaina said, and then looked down. She did not always like her master, let alone love. “Or, maybe not.” She felt her cheeks flush because of her outburst.

“A few years went by, and I finally began to grow up. I realized that I had to go back home. But I didn’t know what I was leaving behind. I left my love with a gift. A gift that one cannot bear alone.”

He sighed and went to look out Alaina’s tiny window. “I never saw her again.” Then he turned back and looked at Alaina. “She died giving birth to a child. That child had my purple eyes. This was why my love’s mother had shunned the child immediately. She sold the infant to a friend to raise and use as a slave.

“You know the portrait in the laboratory hall, the one of the lady? That is your grandmother. I’ve heard that you get visits from her.” He clasped Alaina’s hands and knelt down. “Alaina? My daughter, could you ever forgive me?”

Alaina was dumbstruck. “My . . . family . . . is . . . dead,” she managed to say.

“No, Alaina, your family is alive. You can trace it back through generations. But I could curse them for the way they treated you.” He paused and looked at her. “Alaina?”

Alaina was frightened, and her eyes were blazing wildly. She was angry and confused. “Why?” she tore her hands away from his and turned away.



“I could not stay away from home forever. I had to return to serve my king.”

Alaina looked back at him. Her hands fell open in her lap in hopeless confusion. She tried to accept her past, and let go of her anger.

“What am I to do now?”

Jaetyn brightened. “Gem and I are going to try our hardest to take you home with us. Then, you’d be free!”

“Visit is over. Get out of my house!” screamed Alaina’s master. He grabbed and pulled Jaetyn roughly out of Alaina’s room.

“Leave him alone!” Alaina could not let her master harm the man who claimed to be her father.

“Alaina! I’ll be fine. Leave this be,” Jaetyn winked at her and she fell behind. There was more yelling between Lady Genevieve and her master that Alaina could not understand, and finally the door slammed and there was silence.

That night, Alaina lay on her bed, quietly weeping. She cradled her left arm in her right, tenderly. Her head bled freely. She felt that if no one came to help her soon, she would die.

The evening was all a blur. Her master had stormed in and beaten her. He said that he’d rather kill his slave than sell her away. Alaina figured she knew too many of his secrets and he did not want her speaking.

She tried to sort out what had happened. After he had broken her wrist and thrown her down the stairs into the sitting room, miraculously not breaking anything else, she instinctively grabbed the violin. Her broken wrist suddenly seemed healed and she began playing a mournful tune. It had such a deathly sound that her master seemed to choke. It wasn’t the music itself; it was Alaina. She wanted to end her own misery by inflicting some on him. Her master had scratched at his throat, leaving horrible gouges in his neck. Alaina was then hit in the head, causing her to drop the violin. With a sudden burst of energy, Alaina ran to her room and attempted to bar her door with a very rickety chair and a broken wrist. She then collapsed on her bed, trying to stay conscious.

As she lay there in agonizing pain, she was able to dream about Jaetyn and her life with him. Her mind

wandered as she imagined her home, family, and love Alaina had never felt before.

An idea came suddenly into her wandering mind. Alaina felt as when she had picked up the violin to attack her master. This time, she wanted to try calling someone. She dug under her pillow for an ocarina she kept hidden there. She had received it from her so-called grandmother long ago. Alaina had never tried playing it before. Now, she pulled herself up and put the ocarina to her lips and began to play.

Alaina played the ocarina for as long as she could. She concentrated hard on Jaetyn and Genevieve trying to send them a plea of help. Her ocarina fell to the floor and shattered when a loud bang outside startled Alaina. When the door slammed open and a woman’s voice began speaking softly to her, she lost consciousness.

When she woke, she kept her eyes closed to take in her surroundings with her other senses. She felt clean and warm and comfortable. She tried moving and found that her wrist was completely healed; it was as if the night before never happened. Alaina sat up suddenly and found herself in a very green room. She heard someone snore and smiled when she saw Jaetyn in a chair with his head in his arms on her bed. There was a huge window that Alaina noticed when looking around the room. She immediately got up and went to it. Her eyes grew wide at the many wondrous things she could see. All too soon, she began to feel faint and dizzy.

“Whoa!” Jaetyn exclaimed as he caught her in his arms.

“Wha--” Alaina began.

“Shush, let me get you back in bed. You are not fully healed.” He carried her to her bed and laid her gently down. He then settled himself back in his chair.

“Did yesterday really happen?” Alaina whispered.

Jaetyn clasped her hands. “Yes, it did.”

“What else happened, Jaetyn?”

For a split second, Jaetyn looked away as if he were hurt by something she said, and then he turned back to her. “Did you realize that you have a Touch?”

Alaina looked at him as though he was mad. “I don’t.”



“Oh! But you do, and it is a very powerful one. You have the Musician’s Touch. Many pray for this Touch because of its beauty and usefulness.” He paused and cocked an eyebrow. “I want to hear your story first, and then I’ll continue it.”

Alaina looked down. “When you left, my master was very angry and frightened. He didn’t want me to go because I know too many of his secrets.” She began crying, the reality of her past finally hitting her. “He – he hurt me and threw me around.” She began sobbing and couldn’t speak. Jaetyn let go of her hands and began rummaging through his pouch on his hip.

Jaetyn pried her clenched hands open and set something cold and smooth in them. Alaina wiped her eyes and gasped. It was a beautiful ocarina. There was an intricate carving of a rose on the bottom and the name “Lorraina” inscribed under it.

“Who’s Lorraina?” Alaina asked, not wanting to play the delicate instrument just yet.

“Your mother. This ocarina had been passed down from generation to generation in your family. Your mother gave it to me in hopes that I’d come back and that I’ll remember her.”

“Did you remember?”

“I thought about her every day of my life, and still do.”

Alaina looked down. “I’m sorry.”

“That is all right. I should be apologizing. I should’ve been there for your mother. But, that is all behind us now. Will you please play that tune you played the first time I heard you?”

Alaina brought the ocarina to her lips. She played the song she knew so well, as she concentrated on soothing herself, hoping that it would heal her more. She felt her body become spiritually and physically stronger and she became calmer. Power and emotion surged through the melody until her very last note, which hung in the air. When she opened her eyes, Jaetyn was silently weeping and Genevieve had wrapped an arm around him.

“Have I done something wrong? Jaetyn?” Alaina asked.

“No, child,” said the princess. “He is very happy. He is just thinking on past memories.”

Jaetyn mumbled an apology and then left the room. Alaina watched him leave and then gasped when she found the magnificent lady, her grandmother, in the doorway.

Alaina closed her gaping mouth, not knowing what to say. Then she asked, “Why?”

“I did not want to be burdened with caring for you,” the woman answered tartly. “Do not try to have me pity you for your hard life. That is a small price to pay for killing my daughter.”

At this, the princess stood up and looked as if she would explode.

Alaina spoke first, in a confident voice that did not reach her heart. “Do you love me?” Alaina looked straight into her grandmother’s eyes.

“No,” she responded, staring back. Her grandmother then began to leave the room. “I want you out of this house in the morning.”

Alaina laid her head on her pillow and felt a tear go down her cheek. There was nothing she could have done differently to save her mother or have her grandmother love her. None of it was her fault, and yet, it felt as though everything bad that happened was because of her.

“What happened yesterday?” Alaina asked quietly. “I heard you talking to me and then I passed out.”

“We heard your music which tugged at us. It began to drift away so we followed. The music sounded helpless and hurt. Jaetyn knew right away that it was you. He knocked down the front door and ran up the stairs as I checked on your master. He was passed out on the sofa. But, before I could do anything for him, Jaetyn called for me to heal you.”

“You have a Touch?”

Genevieve smiled. “Yes, I have the Healer’s Touch. I healed you as much as I could before getting too weak. Then Jaetyn carried you here, and hasn’t left your side until now.”

“Where are we?”

“Your grandmother’s house. If you want anything from your master’s home I will be glad to walk you there later on. For now,” she began pulling the blankets over Alaina’s shoulders. “You must rest.”

Alaina whimpered when Gem started to leave the room. “Please, um . . .”



“My loved ones call me Gem.”

“Gem, I don’t want to be left alone. Please,”

Alaina pleaded.

Gem smiled and then curled up on the chair.

Alaina, reassured now, closed her eyes and slept.

Alaina felt renewed when she woke up next. She sat up and smiled brightly when she saw the sunrise, yet she did not know it was sunrise. The only time she had ever seen a sun was in books with pictures, and sometimes when it was the right time and her master opened the door.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Jaetyn asked softly. He then offered his hand to her, who took it gratefully and climbed out of the bed.

Jaetyn helped her to the window and then opened it. The wind caressed Alaina’s hair and the scent of nature made her dizzy with glee. The sounds and sights and colors and smells were all so overwhelming.

“We need to leave,” Gem said, breathlessly. “We must go to her master’s home to get her belongings and then leave.”

Jaetyn gave Alaina’s hand a reassuring squeeze and then began to leave the room. “Jaetyn?” Alaina panicked.

Once again he hunched over as if he was hurt for a split second and then turned around smiling brightly, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back.”

Reluctantly, Alaina turned from the window to face Gem. “Would you like to get dressed?” Gem held out a stunning purple gown for her. “I’m afraid it may be too big but once we are out of the city we’ll change into travel-wear. You’ll be a lot more comfortable.”

“I can wear this?”

Gem laughed her beautiful twinkling laugh. “Of course you can. It was your mother’s. Your grandmother was kind enough to give us some of her clothes.”

“She did?”

“Yes.” Gem began helping her change. “Once you’re ready, we’ll go to your master’s home and collect your things.”

“I really don’t have anything I need there,” Alaina said, downcast. “Everything I own was given to me by my grandmother, and I don’t want something to remind me of her. Jaetyn or you can see if anything belongs to

my mother.” Alaina sat on the bed when Gem was done tying her laces and brushing her unruly hair. Gem knelt at her feet.

“What’s wrong?”

Alaina looked into Gem’s eyes and immediately trust washed over her. It was, in fact, more than trust. She couldn’t quite describe this feeling for the woman that was mostly a stranger to her.

“I don’t want to go back. I don’t want to see my master again. I don’t think I’d have the courage to leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s all I can do to keep from running back over there to scrub the bathing room and bucket. Please, Gem, I don’t want to go back there.”

Without question Gem sat next to Alaina and held her close, Alaina’s second hug of her life. “You don’t have to go there ever again.”

Alaina grinned as tears flowed down her face, but still did not believe the princess. An hour later, and they were all ready to leave. Jaetyn had gone to Alaina’s master’s home and found nothing there belonging to her mother. Alaina was disappointed, but brightened when she wrapped her mother’s ocarina in a protective cloth.

They stood, waiting for Alaina’s grandmother, who had said that Alaina must get something from her. Jaetyn, Gem and Alaina stood in an awkward silence. When she did finally come down the stairs, Alaina’s master was with her.

“No!” Alaina screamed, but Jaetyn pulled her behind him and Gem.

“Relax, I’m not here for you,” her master said. “I’m letting you leave; you were starting to become a nuisance, anyway.”

“Alaina?” her grandmother said. Alaina stepped forward calmly. “Give me your hands.” Alaina obeyed. Her grandmother grasped them tightly and then she glowed brightly, causing everyone to turn away.

“Alaina,” said a much gentler voice. Alaina blinked and looked around. Everyone was gone, even her grandmother. Alaina tried letting go. She was holding hands with a young lady who looked a lot like her, but whom she had never met before.

“Don’t let go, Alaina. If you let go, we lose the connection, and I am lost forever.”

“Mother?” Alaina asked.



The lady nodded. "I am so sorry that you have lived such a hard life. But, Jaetyn and Gem will change it for the better."

"You're dead because of me, I don't deserve better."

"My daughter, you deserve the world. Don't ever blame yourself for what happened to me. I was a sickly child and way too young to have my own child. Oh, Alaina! How I wish I could be with you forever more."

"How is this possible? Why can't I see you again?"

"My mother has a Touch, but there is no time to explain. This is the only time my mother can do this with me. Then I will be gone from her body to live in peace in the heavens.

"Remember this, my child; I am always with you, never fear. Trust Gem and Jaetyn and learn to love them. They will be good parents to you.

"Will you give a message to Jaetyn for me?"

"Of course," said Alaina.

"Please tell him that I still love him and will continue to love him. But, tell him that it is good for him to love another. Tell him to trust his heart. Tell him to move on."

Lorraina sighed. "My time is almost over. I'm so sorry that I have left you. Please, leave this place behind and don't ever come back. It has changed much since I died and I don't want you to suffer anymore."

"I love you," Alaina stated.

"As I love you." They hugged and Lorraina kissed Alaina on the forehead.

Everything rushed back in darkness and Alaina collapsed on the ground, weeping.

"Good-bye," Alaina's grandmother said, then she left with Alaina's master. Jaetyn cradled Alaina in his arms.

"Did you see your mother?" he asked.

"Yes," Alaina answered once she had calmed down enough. "She also wanted me to tell you that she still loves you and always will. But, she wants you to trust your heart and move on. She says that you can love another."

Jaetyn glanced at Gem and then smiled. "Are you ready?" he asked Alaina.

Alaina nodded and took a deep breath. He helped her up and then Gem opened the door. Gem and Jaetyn went to their horses to secure their belongings and prepared to mount.

Alaina took a step outside and the wind blew past in greeting, as if saying, "Where have you been?" Alaina smiled happily and took a few more steps forward. She breathed deeply and then finally said to herself:

"I'm free."

She ran into Jaetyn's waiting arms. He knew how different this was for her, how exciting it was.

"I'm free, Jaetyn!"

"I know, honey."

"Thank you for everything . . . Father."

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