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Opening extract from
Reckless II : Living Shadows

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Inspired by a tale discovered and explored with Lionel Wigram

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1

WAITING

He still wasn't back.

'I won't stay long.' Fox wiped the rain off her face. With Jacob, this could mean anything. Sometimes he stayed for weeks. Sometimes months.

The ruin lay deserted as usual, and the silence between the scorched walls made her shiver nearly as much as the rain. The human skin warmed so much less, yet Fox now shifted into the vixen ever more rarely. All too clearly she had begun to feel how the fur stole the years from her—even without Jacob reminding her.

He'd held her so close before he left, as if he wanted to take her warmth with him into the world where he was born. Something frightened him, though he didn't admit

it, of course. He was still like a boy who thought he could outrun his own shadow.

They'd been way up in the north, in Sveriga and Norga, where even now the forests were still buried in thick snow and where hunger drove the wolves into the towns. Before that they'd traveled so far south that the vixen still found desert sand in her fur. Thousands of miles... cities and countries she'd never heard of before, and all supposedly to find an Hourglass. But Fox knew Jacob too well to believe that.

At her feet, the first wild primroses were springing up between the shattered flagstones. She snapped off one of the delicate stalks, and the dew rolling off the flowers was still cold. It had been a long winter, and Fox could feel the past months like frost on her skin. So much had happened since the previous summer. All that fear for Jacob's brother... and for Jacob. Too much fear. Too much love. Too much of everything.

She tucked the pale yellow flower into her lapel. Hands... they made up for the chilly skin her human body came in. Whenever she wore her fur, Fox missed reading the world with her fingers.

'I won't stay long.'

With a quick movement, she grabbed a Thumbling who'd pushed his tiny hand into her jacket pocket. He only let go of the gold coin after she shook him as hard as the vixen would a captured mouse. The little thief bit at her fingers before he dashed off, muttering insults. Jacob always tucked a few coins into her pockets before he left. He hadn't adjusted to the fact that she now managed quite well in the human world—even without him.

What was he afraid of?

Fox had asked him, after they'd ridden for days from one wretched village to the next, only to end up standing beneath some dead sultan's dried-up pomegranate tree. She'd asked him again, when Jacob had gotten himself drunk three nights in a row after they'd found an overgrown garden with nothing but a dried-up well in it. *'It's nothing. Don't worry.'* A kiss on the cheek and that careless smile she'd been able to see right through since she was twelve. *'It's nothing...'*

She knew that he missed his brother, but this was something else. Fox looked up at the tower. The charred stones seemed to whisper a name. Clara. Was that it?

Her heart still tightened whenever she thought of the brook and the two dead larks. Jacob's hand in Clara's hair, his mouth on her mouth. So ravenous.

Maybe that was why she'd nearly gone with him—for the first time. She'd even followed Jacob up into the tower, but in front of that mirror her courage had deserted her. Its glass seemed to her like dark ice that would freeze her heart.

Fox turned her back to the tower.

Jacob was going to come back.

He always came back.



2

THE WRONG WORLD

The auction room was on the thirtieth floor. Wood-paneled walls, a dozen rows of chairs, and a man by the door who ticked Jacob's name off a list with an absentminded smile. Jacob took the catalog the man offered him and went to stand by one of the windows. A thick forest of towers; beyond them, like watery mirrors, the Great Lakes. He'd only arrived in Chicago from New York that morning, a distance that would have taken a week by stagecoach. Beneath him, the sunlight glinted from countless glass walls and gilded roofs. When it came to beauty, this world could easily compete with the one behind the mirror, and yet Jacob felt homesick.

He sat down on one of the chairs and surveyed the faces around him. Many were familiar: antiques dealers, museum

curators, art collectors. Like him, they were all treasure hunters, even though the treasures of this world possessed no magic beyond their age and beauty.

The bottle, which Jacob had tracked all the way to this room, was listed in the auction catalog between a Chinese emperor's teapot and the silver rattle of an English king's son. The bottle looked so innocuous that hopefully it wouldn't attract any other bidders. Its dark glass was protected by a much-handled sheath of leather, and the neck was sealed with wax.

BOTTLE OF SCANDINAVIAN ORIGIN, EARLY 13TH CENTURY, read the caption beneath the picture. Exactly the description Jacob had given when he sold the bottle to an antiques dealer in London. Back then he'd thought it an amusing move to render its inhabitant harmless that way. On the other side of the mirror, releasing him would have been deadly, but in this world he was as harmless as bottled air, a bubble of nothing behind brown glass.

The bottle had changed owners several times since Jacob had sold it. It had taken him nearly a month to trace it—time he didn't have. The All-Healing Apple, the Well of Eternal Youth... he'd already wasted many months searching for the wrong objects. And death was still embedded in his chest. Time to try a more dangerous remedy.

The moth above his heart was growing darker every day: the seal on the death warrant issued by the Dark Fairy for uttering her name. Her sister had whispered that name to Jacob between two kisses. No man was ever executed more tenderly. Betrayed love. The black moth's blood-red outline was a reminder of the crime he was actually dying for.

A dealer to whom he'd sold a carafe of elven glass many years ago smiled at him from the first row. (She'd taken it for Persian crystal.) Jacob used to bring many objects through the mirror, to pay for Will's school or his mother's doctor's bills. Of course, none of his clients had ever suspected that he sold them objects from another world.

Jacob glanced at his watch and looked impatiently at the auctioneer. *Get on with it!* Lost time. He didn't even know how much he had left. Half a year, maybe less...

The emperor's teapot fetched a ridiculously high price, but, just as he'd expected, the bottle didn't arouse much excitement as it was placed on the auctioneer's table. Jacob was certain he'd be the only bidder, when suddenly another hand rose a few rows behind him.

The other bidder had the delicate build of a child. The diamonds on his short fingers were certainly worth more than all the items in the auction combined. His short hair was as black as a raven's feathers, but he had the face of an old man. And the smile he gave Jacob seemed to know a little too much.

Nonsense!

Jacob had sold a handful of gold coins for the auction. The wad of banknotes he got for them had seemed more than enough. After all, he hadn't sold the bottle for that much in the first place. But each time he raised his bid, the stranger also raised his hand, and Jacob felt his heart grow angrier with every number the auctioneer called. A whisper went through the room as the bids surpassed the price for the imperial teapot. Another dealer joined the bidding, only to drop out as the price kept climbing ever higher.

Give up, Jacob!

And then what? He had no clue what else he should look for, be it in this world or the other. His fingers instinctively searched for the gold handkerchief in his pocket, but its magic was as powerless here as the creature imprisoned in that bottle. *Nevermind, Jacob. By the time they realize you can't pay, you'll be long gone through the mirror.*

He raised his hand again, though the amount the auctioneer had called made him nauseous. It was a steep price, even for his own life. He glanced back at his opponent. The eyes looking back at him were green, like freshly cut grass. The small man adjusted his tie and gave Jacob another smile, and then he lowered his ringed hand.

The auctioneer's hammer dropped, and Jacob felt dizzy with relief as he picked his way through the row of chairs. A collector in the first row bid ten thousand dollars for the silver rattle. Treasure, on both sides of the mirror.

The cashier was sweating through her black jacket, and she'd put too much powder on her pasty skin.

Jacob gave her his most winning smile as he pushed the wad of money toward her. "I hope this will do for a deposit?"

He added three gold coins, which were usually a welcome currency even on this side of the mirror. Most dealers took him for a fool who didn't know the value of antique coins, and he always had some preposterous story ready for those who quizzed him about the Empress's head on them. The sweating cashier, however, just cast a suspicious look at the three coins and called over one of the auctioneers.

The bottle stood barely two steps away, together with the other sold items. Even from this close, the glass didn't reveal anything about the creature hidden inside. Jacob felt a brief temptation to grab it, despite the guards by the door.

But then a quiet cough interrupted this far-from-sensible train of thought.

“Interesting coins, Mr... I’m sorry, your name is...?”

Green eyes. His competitor barely reached up to Jacob’s shoulder. His left earlobe was studded with a tiny ruby.

“Reckless. Jacob Reckless.”

“Ah, yes.” The stranger reached inside his tailored jacket and gave the auctioneer a smile. “I will vouch for Mr. Reckless,” he said, offering Jacob a card. His voice sounded hoarse, and it had a slight accent Jacob couldn’t quite place.

The auctioneer bowed his head reverently.

“As you wish, Mr. Earlking.” He looked at Jacob. “Where shall we send the bottle?”

“I’ll take it now.”

“Of course.” Earlking smiled. “It’s been in the wrong place far too long, hasn’t it?”

Before Jacob could reply, the small man made a quick bow. “Please give my regards to your brother,” he said. “I know him and your mother very well.” With that he turned and disappeared into the well-dressed throng.

Jacob looked at the card in his hand.

NOREBO JOHANN EARLKING

Nothing else. The auctioneer handed him the bottle.