

The
Spell

by
C.V. Shaw



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Author Photograph: Alexis Altarac www.lexavellaphotography.com

Instagram: [@lexavellaphotography](https://www.instagram.com/lexavellaphotography)

Cover Design: Karen Taylor www.theartofkarentaylor.com

Instagram: [@theartofkarentaylor](https://www.instagram.com/theartofkarentaylor)

Layout Design: Mónica Candelas candelas.monica@outlook.com

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Chapter 1

It is the 16th century in England where, in the town of Fleurham—which borders the south edge of one of the countryside’s lushest forests—sat a very old castle where King Maurice and Queen Lilac lived. The small town was nestled in the southeastern end of England and had survived a revolt with France. The king and queen were working their hardest to revive Fleurham, as tensions were still high among French inhabitants of the town.

Royal funds remained low and the rebuilding of Fleurham brought tension to the people of the castle, especially Lilac and Maurice, with Maurice being of French descent and Lilac of English. This caused disputes on both political and personal levels between them, leaving less than adequate attention for their five-year old daughter, Princess Isabella.

These tensions between them would temporarily subside, with Maurice passionately having his way with Lilac—and then they would start up again with quarreling when Maurice swiftly left Lilac’s side to tend to his business—including philandering with the town’s young maidens—leaving Lilac frustrated and lonely.

Maurice, a fiery, kingly man with a full, ashy blonde beard, bright blue eyes, and a deep voice, carried on with a calm demeanor and a

magnetic charisma easy to envy. His nonchalant ways infuriated his often angry and controlling wife. She persistently nagged Maurice, driving him to explosive outbursts.

Their bickering was a noise the castle had become used to among the other day-to-day sounds.



The faint sound of workmen throughout the town could be heard through the red and yellow mosaic windows all around the castle. A light, constant thumping noise, almost hidden by the din of the workers, seemed unusual to Johndor. He knew the castle and its noises. Even if he was blind, he would have been able to keep up the castle. He held the mop still for a moment as he focused on the unfamiliar sound. Johndor had been the keeper of the castle at Fleurham for the last 10 years—since Lilac had moved there when she wed King Maurice. Lilac had agreed to marry Maurice under one condition—that she would bring Johndor, his wife Minna, and their daughters Lauren (who suffered from nervous tension) and Bethlynn (who had had her heart freshly broken), to keep the castle, as Lilac had practically been raised by the older couple.

Johndor glanced over at Minna, who stared blankly out the window at Peter, the peasant farmer delivering the chickens. Johndor ran his hand over his sparse salt-and-pepper hair as he began mopping again.

For a minute, it seemed Minna was trying to make out what Peter and Frances the cook were negotiating, but instead, Minna was actually trying to decipher an uneasy feeling she had about herself. Her tall, curvy body stood stiffer than usual.

Trying to figure out the distant sound, Johndor didn't notice Minna's absent-mindedness until she dropped the spoon she was polishing onto

the silver platter, making a loud clanking sound and startling Minna back to reality. She looked to see Johndor's reaction and noticed he had set the mop against the wall and was walking with determination towards the stairs.

Minna wiped her hands on her white cotton apron and fixed the tight burgundy bun that sat atop her head as she walked out of the kitchen and followed Johndor down the hallway. She felt something was off, since Johndor had left the hallway half mopped. She paid close attention to Johndor's actions, as she well knew how astute he was and held a great deal of respect for the man. The tiny heels of her shoes clicked with every step behind him.

Johndor walked quickly and steadily despite a limp caused by his bowed knees, his face tense with a strict demeanor, his lips crooked from an old injury when a horse had thrown him off and proceeded to kick him in the mouth with its hind legs. He had many stories. You either believed them all or none. All were interesting, especially the one when a ghost jumped on the back of his horse. He claimed that when he turned to look, the ghost of a peasant with teeth as long as new pencils was smiling, demanding for his teeth to be looked at. "Lookamahteeth! Lookamahteeth!" Johndor would mimic, tucking in his chin to change his voice to a creepy, deep one.

Johndor finally reached the top step of the stone stairs, letting out a frustrated clicking of the tongue. Spotting Isabella, he rushed down the hallway and Minna hurried behind him. "I think she's had another nightmare." Johndor said looking back at Minna.

Isabella sat on the floor facing her parents' bedroom door, knocking nonstop, to a tune of three knocks and a pause.

"Why have they put you out?" Johndor asked, trying to ignore the sounds coming from behind the door. Isabella stared up at the enormous gilded wooden doors.

“Mother was crying funny, and it woke me. I think Papa was hurting her. I’m hungry.”

Minna quickly picked Isabella up and whispered to Johndor, “They’re carrying out another argument.”

“Argument!” Johndor scoffed, shaking his head from side to side in disbelief. “The devil is wise because of his age, not his intelligence. That was no arguing, Minna,” he said, still shaking his head with disgust at the sounds coming from the other side of the door.

Minna quickly cradled Isabella’s head between her neck and chin to cover her ears as she carried her down the hall, patting her golden hair gently. Isabella let out a gentle whimper of sadness. Johndor clicked his tongue, shaking his head from side to side as he followed them back to the kitchen. The three walked slowly down the stone stairs, humming a lullaby. Isabella stretched out her hands, trying to graze the tapestry on the walls.

Johndor reached out and pulled Isabella’s lower eyelids down to check her state of health. She then automatically stuck out her tongue, as she knew Johndor would be checking that next, to make sure her digestion was sound.

Chapter 2

King Maurice stormed out of his quarters while still fastening the buttons on his shirt. He yelled down the hallway to Samuel the young manservant, who was straightening a wall tapestry, and ordered his foot soldiers to have his horses and horsemen made ready.

Queen Lilac, bitter at how Maurice always decided he needed some time away after he had romanced her, walked rapidly behind him. She held her head in frustration and angrily muttered, “You will be sorry. You will be sorry!”

Maurice spun and yelled, “Shut up, woman!” He grasped the nearest painting and slung it down the hall, shattering the golden frame.

Lilac’s fingers curled, squeezing her thin strands of yellow hair tightly as she stomped her long legs faster after him.

Maurice took the stairs two at a time, his boots heavily echoing waves through the castle, trying to gain distance from Lilac’s threats, which were reverberating behind him down the hallway.

Minna, who was still on her way downstairs, carrying Isabella, reached the bottom floor, where she heard the whispers of two ladies cleaning the library floors.

“He’s certainly very angry,” Lauren said. “I wonder what he broke

this time.”

“Wonder what she did this time?” Bethlynn responded. “That usually determines how much repair work there will be when he leaves.”

“Oh, I hope it’s not the painting of Isabella with her mother. Poor Samuel just repaired that one,” Lauren said. “Lilac is lucky he has never reached for her face.”

Bethlynn chimed in, “He’s harmless at heart, but a little rearrangement to her face here and there might do her good.” Lauren giggled, holding the duster to her belly.

Johndor, having accompanied Minna and Isabella down the stairs, continued to the kitchen as Minna excused herself and walked quickly to the library. She stood outside the door, leaned her head in and matter-of-factly said, “It’s none of your business now, is it?” She cradled Isabella’s head as the princess fought to unwind herself from Minna’s hold after hearing her father yelling from the bottom of the stairs. Minna reached to firmly close the library doors shut just as Isabella escaped her grasp and took off running behind her father, out of the castle doors. Minna froze in confusion from all the mayhem.

Lilac, having just reached the bottom of the stairs, moved Minna out of the way and hurried after Isabella, shouting out to everyone, demanding that the princess be gathered and taken indoors. Johndor, having heard Lilac shouting, shuffled as quickly as he could out of the kitchen and through the castle doors after Isabella. He scooped her up mid-stride before she could catch up with the angry king, who was about to mount his horse. Johndor tried to lift her, but Isabella squealed when she heard her mother running outside and yelling at Maurice, demanding he get off his horse at once. She broke away from Johndor, kicking and screaming, and ran towards her mother. Before she could reach for her mother’s waist, a black crow swooped down low at the princess’s head, letting out a loud cackling sound. At the very same instant, an arrow

darted from the west side of the forest, straight towards Isabella's little body. Startled, Isabella fell onto her mother, and both tumbled to the ground. The events happened so quickly and simultaneously that it was unclear whether the crow had provoked Isabella to fall or the arrow had shot the princess down.

A startled Maurice removed his foot from the stirrup and ran to their aid.

Lilac quickly sat up and cradled Isabella in her shaking arms. "Are you okay, my darling?" she asked, rocking the crying princess back and forth.

"I'm scared, Momma. I'm scared," she cried, looking at her scraped and bleeding hands and knees.

"After him!" King Maurice yelled at the horsemen. He then turned and yelled at Minna and Johndor, "Get them inside NOW!" Maurice stood staring into the forest, past the blanket of dirt kicked up from the racing horses making their way to find the mysterious archer.

The princess was quickly carried inside, Minna shielding Lilac as she clung to her crying daughter. Isabella grasped Minna's hand from her mother's shoulder, and gripped tightly to the fabric of her mother's gown with the other hand. Lilac laid her on her bed, her little hand remaining interlaced with Minna's. She refused to let go of either woman.

Johndor, having followed behind the women, looked over the squalling child and then excused himself to go find the leaves that would heal her scrapes and wounds, along with some leaves from the linden bushes to calm the princess down. Hastily, Johndor walked out of the castle, making his way towards the dense trees of the forest as he passed Maurice, who was standing with arms crossed and fixed like a soldier, guarding the edge of the woods. The king's voice escalated as Johndor continued to walk past him, advising Johndor to go back inside, as the archer could still be hidden somewhere within the trees. Johndor clicked his tongue as he whipped his head to the side in disobedience and walked

straight into the deep forest with fearless determination. He emerged from the forest fifteen minutes later with soiled hands and a bushel of fresh-smelling leaves. He walked past the king, who was waiting at the edge of the forest, making no eye contact.

King Maurice nodded in acknowledgement of Johndor's safe return and in gratitude, knowing the plants were for healing his daughter.

Chapter 3

The king's men continued to search for the mysterious archer, but the forest was dense and the skies darkened almost immediately. A heavy rainstorm broke over the horsemen before they'd made it very far beyond the tree line, making it impossible to see before them. Thunder scared the horses, and they galloped faster than ever back to the castle.

The king now paced nervously by the castle doors, hands tightly gripping his hips. He heard the horses entering the grounds and ran down the steps towards Paul, the lead horseman. Paul shook his head in disappointment. "Nothing, sire. He was too fast, and the storm scared the horses."

"Rainstorm! What rainstorm?" the king shouted as he looked up, stretching his arms toward the clear skies.

"Everyone on guard! Day and night... no one sleeps!" the king shouted, then stormed back into the castle. Bethlynn and Lauren, who were staring out the kitchen window, looked at each other in distress without saying a word, knowing the mood in the castle would be strained. Samuel, who was standing in the front room contemplating all that had happened that day, shook in fear at Maurice's demeanor. Maurice headed up into Princess Isabella's quarters. His anger ceased when he saw Johndor

adjusting the strips of linen he'd wrapped over the princess's knees. He stood quietly by the door so as to not disrupt the moment and took a breath of relief to see Isabella was safe. Lilac, who stood on the other side of the bed, stared at Maurice with an angry, blaming look. Minna held a cup of linden tea up for Isabella to sip while Minna recounted the story of how she and Johndor met. Like a favorite book, Isabella could hear it countless times and still become excited over it. Minna edited the story every time to make it funny for Isabella.

"He made me walk miles and miles to meet his family, all while telling me the same story ten times. He promised to carry me when my feet ached from walking, but I was too heavy, and we both fell and rolled down a hill." Minna spun around to demonstrate, inspiring giggles from Isabella.

The king walked in, stood next to Minna, and patted Isabella on the head. He reached down and softly squeezed her nose, bringing more giggles. Looking past his daughter, he saw the bloody rags in Johndor's hands.

King Maurice asked nervously, "How deep did it pierce?"

Johndor angrily ignored the king's question, seeing his erratic behavior as the culprit for the incident. When he finished wrapping Isabella's knees, he answered Maurice while he looked at Isabella. "Not too deep, just an ugly scar at the end."

Maurice looked at Lilac, feeling the heaviness of her gaze, and clenched his jaw in anger at her. Minna, noticing the exchange of hostility, nodded at Johndor, gesturing that they should leave. She kissed Isabella's foot and curtsied as she made her way out with Johndor.

Queen Lilac reached to caress Isabella's head. She suddenly stopped, and her smile slowly faded as her eyes began to water. The queen leapt up, grasped the hem of her sky-blue gown, and rushed out of the room. She ran down the stairs and out the front doors to where she and Isabella had

fallen, then dropped to her knees and frantically searched the ground.

The sky darkened and a lightning bolt danced across the gloom. With a loud clash, thunder shook the grounds and rain poured down over Lilac. The king ran out and grabbed Lilac by the arm, yelling over the clattering of the rain and the neighs of the scared horses, "Come inside! Have you lost your mind?"

"My ring!" she replied. "My ring is gone."

King Maurice pulled her up, and she fell against him in utter despair. He grasped her by the shoulders and held her back to inspect her left hand. Her gold and ruby wedding ring was not there. He stared at her bare finger as his anger swelled. He scurried her toward the castle and Minna, who had been discreetly watching from the front door. Lilac fell into Minna's arms, crying like Isabella had earlier.

The front doors slammed. The king jumped on his white horse and galloped off into the forest. The king's horse, Isiah, was not afraid of thunder. His attitude was as strong as his master's. Isiah had been a gift on Maurice's 22nd birthday from his father, and over the years had become a loyal friend and trusted confidante to the king.

Isiah ran as fast as he could through the wet grass and mud. The king didn't know in which direction to guide Isiah, as there was no trace of the archer, but the steed picked a direction, his intuition always keen. Maurice recognized a large oak tree with branches mimicking arms and legs and pulled the reins to the right as Isiah pulled to the left. The king had never been allowed to explore past that specific oak tree. His parents had told tales of the bewitched and enchanted villagers that lived in that direction. Although they were tales, Maurice had never dared to venture in there until today.

When the king kept pulling the horse to the right, Isiah stopped and began to back up, neighing and swaying his head back and forth and side to side.

“No, Isiah... this way,” Maurice yelled as he pulled the reigns with all his might.

Quickly, Isiah took off down the forbidden, narrow path between the strangest of trees. The trees were somehow brighter than any trees Maurice had ever seen. In fact, they seemed to glisten. The muddy, rocky path magically transformed into bright green grass ahead of each step Isiah took. Mesmerized, the king glanced backward, where the path had turned to a rocky, muddy footpath again. Large silver insects flew across his face, but stopped there for a second, as if looking into his eyes.

The king looked around, forgetting the purpose of his journey, awestruck by the enchanted atmosphere. He held his head with his left hand, not sure if he was dizzy or the actual forest was rotating.

Suddenly Isiah halted, then galloped from side to side, confused. The branches of the biggest tree before them parted, and a black crow cackled loudly and soared over the king and his horse. The king followed the crow with his eyes, wide-eyed and open-mouthed to witness such shiny wings. In fact, he could swear they were lined in silver. Isiah followed the crow with a mesmerized rhythm, straight into a thick forest of more odd-looking trees. Some were tall and thin. Others were as wide as a small house, with different trunks winding around each other, decorating each other with a myriad of different leaves, as if they were a family of different breeds birthing from the one very thick, black root.

The crow disappeared from their sight in the thickness of the trees above.

The king feared they were lost and wanted to turn back, but he did not know which way was back any more. He swore he heard a woman’s voice calling in a soft and slow tone on the wind. Maurice directed Isiah towards the sultry voice.

Confused and taken aback, the king’s goal of capturing the archer had become second to his urge to discover more about this mysterious

place they had stumbled upon. Isiah followed the king's gaze, turning circles three times in slow motion. Somehow the trees seem to have changed from shiny bright leaves to a darker olive color. And neither the king nor his loyal steed could tell any longer which direction they'd just been facing.

Raindrops began to trickle down, and the king thought perhaps it was the rain that had changed the color of the leaves. He looked up as his surroundings grew dimmer and he noticed a large gray cloud moving closer to them. Noticing that Isiah was paralyzed and staring at the cloud, he pulled the reins and pushed hard on the saddle, ordering Isiah to move. A startled Isiah leaned back on his hind legs and galloped forward, not knowing where he was headed, but trying to get away from the growing gray cloud that seemed to be following them.

The forest became denser and denser with trees the farther they went. In shock, the king had Isiah cut through the thickness of the forestry. He took his gaze away from the cloud and looked forward. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief, seeing that the trees appeared to be magically moving out of Isiah's path.

A heavy, vibrating clash of thunder unlike the king or Isiah had ever heard before scared the horse to a screeching halt, sending Maurice jolting forward.

Hot, heavy raindrops came down stronger and stronger, obstructing Isiah's view. He quickly moved under a large mushroom-shaped tree nearby with hundreds of thin branches hanging over the ground like an umbrella. This most peculiar tree dangled hundreds of odd, jagged leaves that each looked like two thunderbolts facing each other. The leaves' color changed from green to violet and back to green so that just when the eye was sure the leaf was green, it became violet, and then, certain that it was violet, it became green again.

Exhausted and relieved to have cover from the violent downpour,

Isiah, forcing Maurice off his back with a shake of his body, slowly lay down to rest as Maurice sat next to him on the wet ground. A half hour passed before the rain settled slowly. Maurice dared to pull a leaf from the mushroom-shaped tree. As he rubbed the leaf between his fingers to decipher its color and velvety texture, the leaf turned to ashes. A strong gust of wind brought a whiff of sulfur and separated the branches, opening a view for Isiah and the king.

Maurice stared in surprise as a small thatched house came into view. He straightened his back in disbelief. Isiah stood up quickly. They both stood frozen, staring at this gray and black cottage in the middle of a mysterious nowhere. The chase for the archer had been completely dismissed. Intrigue had set in.

Maurice grabbed Isiah's reigns and walked him towards the cottage under gentle pellets of rain. He sensed a somewhat dark nature as he noticed that adorning two small windows, there seemed to be the remains of bushels of flowers either missing their buds or already withered. The strong, sharp smell of sulfur in the air made Isiah shake his head from side to side and stop moving forward. Maurice pulled a silk cloth from his pocket and covered his nose. Staring at the windows, he was certain he saw shadows moving inside the cottage although he was still yards away.

With a loud clash of thunder, another heavy downpour broke, settling the smell of the sulfur, but sending Isiah running for shelter, right to the front of the cottage, with Maurice running quickly behind.

The rain stopped in an instant. A haggard old woman stood outside the front door holding some rags. She turned to whisper quick, stern words through the slightly open front door, then turned back and smiled at Maurice. She held up her hand to Isiah's mouth and offered what looked like sugar cubes. Isiah neighed as she reached and put them into his mouth. She opened the thick rags in her hands, releasing the sweet smell of cinnamon, and offered them to Maurice. The rags were

warm and dry, so Maurice placed one around his shoulders and back, and the other over Isiah's back. Isiah's legs weakened and shook a little as he slowly settled under the roof and gently fell asleep.

The old lady opened the door widely, ushering Maurice inside.

