

Two Callista, Serena, and Stormy Extended Scenes

1. Cut (and lightly expanded on) from Chapter 14 of *A Stolen Heart*

Callista took the fledgling back. It chattered and tried to pull its wings free. “We should get a towel dry her off. And perhaps ensure there’s nothing fragile around that she might break.”

After a gentle yet thorough toweling down, Callista placed one of the unnecessary pillows from her bed on the deep stone windowsill in the sitting room. The fledgling curled up on the cushion in the sunlight for a nap.

“Poor thing is probably exhausted after all of that excitement.” Serena clucked her tongue. “Good. Gives us time to make your chambers more suitable for it.”

At that moment, someone knocked.

The man at the door carried a long, short planter full of gravel, and a boy behind him held what looked at first glance like an odd coat hook. The man bowed over the planter. “General Drake requested we bring this gravel and a bird perch for her ladyship’s...pet lesser gryphon?”

“Yes, thank you.” Serena held the door open for them to enter.

The servants helped rearrange some furniture to make room, for which Callista profusely thanked them. After the servants left, she and Serena moved anything breakable into cabinets or drawers and covered the upholstery in extra linens.

“We’ll need to teach her not to claw at or soil the furniture,

of course,” Serena said as she smoothed a pale blue sheet over a chaise. “But in the meantime, best to protect the furnishings.”

“Yes, I don’t want to have to tell the king I ruined his furniture.” Callista grimaced. “Do...you think he’ll mind?”

She hadn’t even considered that King Cassius might disapprove. Would he make her get rid of her new pet? Or might her choice make him reconsider marrying her—well, Lady Tatiana? That would significantly complicate her mission.

Serena patted her arm. “Don’t worry, my lady. The king is a good man. I doubt he’ll fault you for rescuing a poor baby animal. Now, what are you going to name her?”

“I haven’t decided.” She wandered over to the window.

The lesser gryphon had tucked its head against its side, but its tail hung over the edge of the pillow. The lesser gryphon had tucked its head against its side, but its tail hung over the edge of the pillow. Now dry, it had lighter coloring than she’d thought. The white baby down on its head was already being replaced with gray adult feathers, so eventually, it would be all gray. Gray wings faded to silky gray fur on its back and a fluffy gray tail Callista suspected would become more poofy as it grew.

It looked so innocent and vulnerable sleeping there. So alone and desperate for rest and safety.

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Gryphon fledglings were adorable little menaces.

“Please, go take a nap,” Callista begged Serena, ignoring how much she wanted to do the same thing.

“I’m fine, my lady.” Serena curtsied. The older woman insisted on formality despite Callista’s protests. She also refused

to let Callista clean up after her new pet. Standing by while Serena dealt with messes made Callista feel useless and cruel, but every time she tried to do it herself, Serena seemed to appear out of thin air and before Callista knew what was happening, she had been ushered to the side and the maid had taken over. The one time that Callista had dared try to argue, Serena had put her fists on her hips and turned as stern a look on Callista as she did when the gryphon misbehaved.

“My lady, you insult me by trying to prevent me from doing the work I am paid to do.”

Callista had smiled. “I don’t think caring for a gryphon fledgling was in your description of duties—”

“Cleaning this room and helping you certainly are, and I intend to do my job well.” Serena had lifted an imperious eyebrow. “Besides, imagine if you do become queen, as you likely will, and anyone ever learns I let the queen of Aedyllan clean up a pet’s messes! No, my lady, I cannot abide it.”

That hadn’t quite stopped Callista from attempting to pick up a mess, scoop up spilled gravel, dispose of fallen feathers, or fix sliding furniture covers before Serena noticed. If the maid had any idea the kinds of messes Callista had gotten into while living on her own in ruins or working on a farm, she wouldn’t be so worried about helping. Of course, if Serena knew those things, she’d also turn Callista over to the closest guardsman.

Still, Serena’s help with the fledgling was a lifesaver.

Lesser gryphons were primarily diurnal to Callista’s understanding, so why the fledgling had decided the middle of the night was the time to run and fly around the suite knocking over anything it could was beyond comprehension. In one of

those bouts of chaos, she'd flown into the window and hurt her wing. Thankfully, Callista hadn't detected any broken bones. Likely a sprain. She could heal it easily, but to do that, she needed a couple minutes alone with her pet.

At least the lesser gryphon was currently asleep on Callista's lap. When she was so peaceful, it was difficult to believe how chaotic she could be when awake.

"My papa always says raising a puppy isn't for the lazy or faint of heart." Serena leaned against the wall and smiled tiredly. "Seems that's true of any whelp of any species."

"I might have thought twice before claiming her as my own if I'd realized how true that is." Callista chuckled and rested her head on the back of the armchair.

"You could set her free, my lady."

"I couldn't possibly toss her out!" Callista raised her head to stare at Serena. "Unless...do you think she would be happier? I don't want her to be trapped and unhappy."

Serena considered. "She seems content. Since the poor thing ended up in the laundry, I presume she doesn't have the best sense of self-preservation. Not to mention, her wing is hurt."

It was, but only until Callista could get a moment alone with her pet. She wasn't about to let the fledgling be in pain when she had the ability to heal it. That meant she had to convince Serena to leave, which was proving far more challenging than it should have—even though, deep down, Callista cherished Serena's sincere help and attentiveness. She reminded Callista a little bit of Marie, so open and caring. Serena's smiles were softer than Marie's, but equally warm. Without Serena and Marie, Callista honestly didn't know how she would survive the long hours alone

in the palace.

Still leaning against the wall, Serena poorly hid a yawn behind her hand.

Callista shook her head with a quiet chuckle. “Truly, Serena. Now is a good time for you to get some sleep. If I move, this moment of peace will be shattered. Perhaps later you can return the favor.”

“I...suppose if I think of it as simply resting so I can watch the gryphon later...” Serena shifted half a step toward her door.

“Yes, go. I command it.” Callista winked.

Serena laughed and tucked a graying strand of hair behind her ear. “That is a first for me, my lady. As you wish. But if I don’t come back out soon enough, please wake me.”

Callista waited a few minutes after Serena had closed her bedroom before she healed the fledgling’s tweaked wing. The purple glow of her magic tinged the white and gray feathers a shimmery lavender. The critter shifted with a sigh and nuzzled deeper into the folds of Callista’s sapphire dress. She was going to be covered in gray cat hairs.

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King Cassius laughed. “No, please, don’t worry about me. This corridor is an effective hiding place from the demands of the lords since they’re not allowed here. I should thank you for giving me an excuse to linger in solitude.” His brown eyes twinkled.

She laughed politely. “I’ll be back shortly, Your Majesty.”

Callista closed the door and turned around to find Serena walking toward her.

“I will take care of the gryphon, my lady. You freshen up and then accompany His Majesty.” Serena winked and then clucked to the fledgling. “Come on, little one. Let’s get you some chicken.”

The fledgling chirruped and glided to the ground, where it bounded after Serena. At least the little beast was intelligent.

Calling out a thank you, Callista went to her room and did her best to brush off all of the cat hair and rapidly comb through her hair. Satisfied she was presentable, she took a deep breath and released it slowly before leaving her suite.

...[chapter ends the same]

2. Alternate, original form of the first half of Chapter 45 of *A Stolen Heart*

Callista sat on a bench in the autumn section of the garden, next to a bed of frost-touched marigolds. Brown leaves with delicate patterns of crystalline ice covered the ground. Any leaves still clinging to branches were rapidly leaching color after the freezing temperatures that had attacked during the night. That had been one nice thing about living in the castle ruins. Autumn lasted longer and winter arrived slower away from the mountains.

She drew her thick cloak closer and hunched forward. Her breath fogged in the pale sunbeams angling through the air. She'd have much preferred to be back in her warm, oversized bed, but Stormy was in a wild mood and would not be contained. The rapidly growing lesser gryphon leapt through dying flowers and bushes, hunting down any insects she could find. She was causing a dismaying amount of chaos to the poor plants, and Callista felt guilty about the inconvenience to the groundskeepers, but at least her pet wasn't destroying her chambers.

"What did I say?" Serena asked as she shuffled through fallen leaves toward Callista. She carried a small basket, and she grinned at Stormy and then at Callista. "Little Storm was simply bored. The royal kennel master says a bored dog is a misbehaving dog, so it makes sense that would apply to other animals."

Callista grinned back. "You were correct as usual. What have you brought?"

"Hot tea." Serena sat next to her on the stone bench. "Ach, this bench is likely to drain all the warmth right out of you!"

“It’s not so bad after a few minutes.”

“Well, tea will help.” Serena pulled teacups out of the basket. “One for you, and if it’s not presumptuous of me, my lady, one for myself and one for Sir Andrew.”

Callista glanced over at the silent guardsman standing several paces away. She’d given him permission to wait inside, but he refused to neglect his duty, even if his charge commanded it. Considering he’d have to explain himself to Vallyn if anything happened, she couldn’t blame him.

“You’ve saved me the guilt of enjoying a hot beverage while either of you shivers, so I think you’re brilliant.”

Serena tucked a whisp of gray hair that had escaped her bun behind her ear. “Your ladyship is a good soul.”

The comforting warmth of the ceramic teacup in her hands and the hot liquid settling into her belly couldn’t drive away Callista’s shame. Soon the truth would be known. She would enjoy the older woman’s friendship for as long as she could, but the end was approaching quickly.

While Serena chatted with Sir Andrew, a nobleman walked down the path. She wasn’t paying him much heed until he stopped in front of her.

“Lady Tatiana.”

Blinking, Callista looked up at the man. Thick mustache. Light brown skin. Short hair speckled with gray. She was certain they’d been introduced, but fae take her if she could remember his name.

“Lord Tolley.” He leaned down and cast a quick look past her, then whispered, “The baron wants you to convince Alimer to have the wedding as soon as possible.”

She licked her dry lips. “Why? What difference would a few weeks make?”

“Support, idiot girl,” the nobleman muttered. He shuffled his feet, and his gaze snapped around, constantly flitting back to the guard. “Some are losing faith. I’m loyal, of course, but others are wavering. If they desert him, it’ll be on your head.”

Callista’s mind raced. “Who is doubting? I can reassure them—”

“You’re a pawn yourself,” Tolley scoffed. “As if you—”

“Excuse me,” Sir Andrew’s voice cracked through the air like a shattering icicle. Tolley jerked away from her. “My lady, is this lord bothering you?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Callista held Tolley’s gaze as she sipped her tea. Tolley tugged on the edge of his doublet, then marched away.

Callista placed the teacup in the basket and stood. “Stormy, come here, girl!”

The gryphon wheeled around and landed on Callista’s shoulder, where she tugged at a strand of Callista’s hair with her beak.

“Yes, I know, you want to keep frolicking.” She scratched where Stormy’s feathers transitioned into fur on her lower chest. “But I need to talk to the general.”