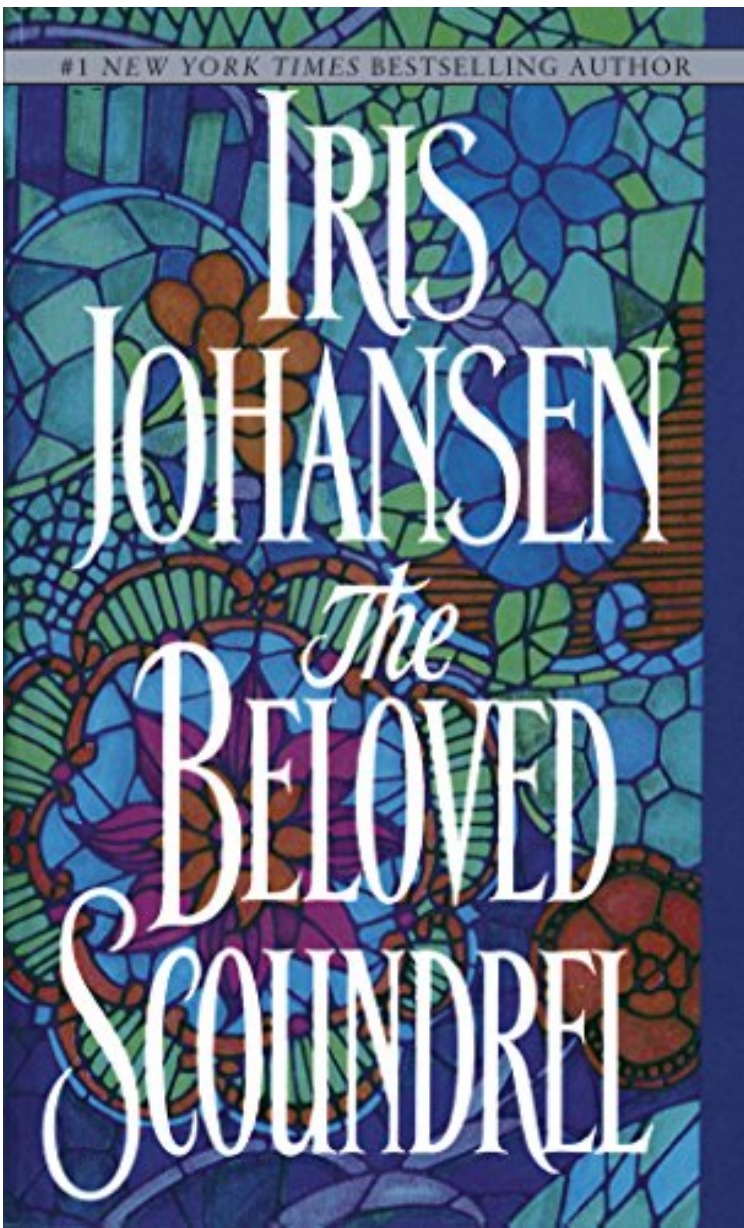


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# The Beloved Scoundrel



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNow, from nationally best-selling Iris Johansen comes a thrilling tale of abduction, seduction, and surrender that sweeps from the shimmering halls of Regency England to the decadent haunts of a notorious rogue...She was a hostage torn between passion and loyalty...Marianna Sanders realized she could not trust this dark and savagely seductive stranger who had come to spirit her away across the sea. She possessed a secret that could topple an empire, a secret that Jordan Draken, the duke of Cambaron, was determined to wrest from her. In the eyes of the world the arrogant duke was her guardian, but they both

knew she was to be a prisoner in his sinister plot and a slave to his exquisite pleasure. He was the fabulous rake they called the Duke of Diamonds... For years, brilliant, deadly Jordan Draken had schemed to destroy the emperor who threatened everything he valued most in the world. Now that he held this defiant woman who was the key to his final triumph, he felt a fierce sense of satisfaction... and the first stirring of desire. She was only supposed to be a pawn in his plans, but once alone with his captive, Jordan realized she was a prize

he could never surrender. From the Paperback edition. Extrait Chapter One February 16, 1809 Talenka, Montavia The Balkans The Window to Heaven was shattered. Only moonlight and cold wind streamed through the huge circular cavity where splendor and beauty had once reigned. Marianna dug her fingers into the door to keep herself upright as she stared at the devastation. The journey had taken too long. She had failed Mama. The pattern was smashed; the Jedalar was gone. Then she forgot everything else as the deep sense of loss over the act of sheer desecration hit home. She knew the Jedalar should be more important to her but, dear heaven, all that wonder and beauty gone forever. Why was she so stunned? They had destroyed everything else in her life. Perhaps it was even fitting that this last beautiful remnant had died. "Marianna."

Alex tugged at her arm. "I think I hear them!" She went rigid, listening. She heard nothing, just the wind whistling among the shelled and deserted houses of the town. She looked away from the shimmering splinters of glass scattered across the floor of the church, her gaze searching the ruins that had once been the town of Talenka. She still heard nothing, but Alex had always possessed sharper hearing than she. "Are you sure?" "No, but I think . . ." He tilted his head. "Yes!" She should never have come back. She should have taken the road to the south. Her mother would have forgiven her. They had not taken quite everything from her. She still had Alex, and by God, she would not let him die. She slammed the heavy brass-studded door and dragged Alex behind her as she tore down the long aisle toward the altar, stumbling over a broken iron candelabra and several fat white candles scattered on the marble floor. The soldiers had wreaked their usual havoc here, she thought grimly. Everything of value had either been stolen or destroyed. The gold crucifix that had once adorned the wall beneath the Window to Heaven had vanished; the statue of Mary and the Child to the left of the altar had been toppled from the pedestal. "Horses," Alex whispered. She heard them now too. The sharp clip-clop of hooves on the cobblestoned street outside. "They won't find us," she whispered back. "They didn't see us come in, and those pigs can have no traffic with either churches or prayers." She pulled the little boy behind a column beside the altar and crouched down beside him. "But we will stay here awhile and wait for them to go away." Alex shivered and drew closer to her. "What if they do come?" "They won't." She slid an arm around his shoulders. He was thinner than he had been last week, she realized in concern, and he had been coughing all day. The scraps of food she had managed to salvage from the deserted farmhouses outside the town had barely been enough to keep them alive. "What if they do?" Alex repeated. Heavens, he was persistent. "I said they" She stopped. She didn't know the duke's soldiers wouldn't come, she thought wearily. She could not be sure of anything or anyone. She doubted if those monsters would come to worship, but they might come to loot and burn again. "If they come, we will hide here in the shadows and be very quiet until they leave. Can you do that?" He nodded, his weight heavier against her. "I'm cold, Marianna." "I know. As soon as we hear them leave, we'll look for shelter for the night." "Can we light a fire?" She shook her head. "But maybe we can find a blanket for you." "And for you." He smiled at her only a faint smile, but it was enough to light his face with the cherubic radiance that had led her mother to use him as a model in her last work. It was the first time she had seen him smile since the night they had Mama . . . She quickly blocked the thought. She must not think of that night or anything that happened since. She had found it weakened her, and she must stay strong for Alex. "A blanket for me too." She wanted to lean forward and kiss him, but Alex had reached the advanced age of four and regarded himself as too old for such a display of affection. "Just as soon as they leave the village." But they weren't leaving. They were coming closer. She could hear the horses just outside the church and men's voices laughing and talking. Her heart pounded as she drew Alex closer. Let them go away, she prayed frantically. Mother of God, let them not come into the church. Footsteps on the stone stairs. The muscles of her stomach tightened painfully. "Marianna?" "Shhh." Her hand clamped over Alex's mouth. The door creaked as it swung open. So much for prayers. Now she must do as her mother had taught her and rely only on herself. Mama. A tide of grief overwhelmed her. Tears stung her eyes until she could barely see the man standing in the doorway. She blinked. She had not cried since it had happened, and she would not cry now. Tears were for the weak, and she must be strong. She watched the man start down the aisle. He was tall, very tall, his stride long and purposeful, his dark cloak billowing behind him like the wings of a vulture. He was not in the duke's livery, but that didn't mean he wasn't the enemy. No one followed him, she noticed in relief. He had

left those other pigs outside. She had a better chance of besting one man. He stumbled in the darkness and muttered a curse. She heard Alex's gasp beneath her hand. There had been many curses that night, curses and laughter and screams. She had held Alex to her breast so he would not see, but she had not been able to keep him from hearing. Her hand kneaded his thin shoulders in silent comfort. The man stumbled again and then stopped, stooped, and picked up something from the floor. A few minutes later a tiny flame of light pierced the darkness as he lit the stub of a broken candle he had retrieved. She shrank farther back into the shadows, her gaze raking the enemy to search out weakness. Dark hair tied back in a queue, a long face, a glimmer of green eyes. He lifted the candle high, his eyes searching the darkness until he found the gaping hole that had once been the Window to Heaven. His hand tightened on the candle; his face contorted in an expression of demonic fury. "Damnation!" His booted foot kicked out at the shards of glass on the marble floor. "Dammit to hell!" He'd cursed in English. He must be English, like Papa, but she had never seen Papa in a fury like this. Alex whimpered. The man stiffened. "Who's there?" He was turning toward them! She tried to think quickly through the sick terror tightening her chest. If he saw them, they would be helpless prey. Their only weapon was surprise. "Stay here," she whispered. "Wait!" She pushed Alex still farther behind the column, darted forward, and charged the man. "What the dev Oof." Her head connected with the stomach and knocked the breath out of him. She grabbed the broken iron candelabra from the floor and brought it up between his legs. He gasped and doubled over in agony. "Alex! Come!" she called. Alex was behind her in seconds, and she grabbed his hand and ran up the aisle. But before they reached the door, she was knocked down and hit the floor, hard. He had tackled her! He flipped her over and leaped astride her. Helpless. She was as helpless as Mama had been. "No!" She struggled wildly. "Lie still, damn you." Alex leaped on the man's back, his thin arms encircling his neck. "Run, Alex," Marianna cried. "Run!" She felt the man above her tense. "My God!" he muttered, and then added in disgust, "Children!" He leaped to his feet, throwing off Alex's hold. Marianna scrambled to her knees and reached for the candelabra she had dropped. "Marianna!" She looked up to see her brother struggling in the arms of the man. She lunged up at him, wielding the candelabra, but Alex was immediately lifted as a shield between them. "Oh no, not again," he said grimly, this time in Montavian. "I will not permit a second assault on my person. I have other plans for my manhood." As all men did. She wished she had a sword to cut his off. "Let him down," she said fiercely. "Presently." He must be very strong; he was holding Alex as if he were weightless. "But only if you promise not to attack me." "Put him down." "Or?" "I'll find a way to hurt you again." "Ah, another threat. You're a little young to deal in threats." She took a step closer. He stiffened, his wary gaze on the iron weapon in her hands. "Keep your distance." As she stopped, he relaxed a little. "One of the first things you should learn is that the man who possesses the prize dictates the terms. Now, I seem to have captured an object you value." He backed away from her a few paces. "He's very small, isn't he? Small children are so easy to hurt." Fear ripped through her. "I'll kill you if you""I have no intention of harming him," he interrupted. "Not if you don't force me to defend myself." She studied him. His thick dark hair had come loose from its queue and framed a long face that was all planes and hollows. His straight black brows slashed over startling green eyes, and his nose reminded her of the beak of an eagle. It was a hard face, a face as inflexible as stone, the face of a man who could be cruel. "Answer my questions, and I'll set this young man down," he said. "I assure you I don't usually make war on children." She did not trust him, but she had little choice. "What do you want to know?" "What are you doing here?" She searched wildly for an answer he would believe. "It was cold, and we needed shelter for the night." "There's not much shelter here with that window broken." His gaze was on her face, reading her expression. He didn't believe her, she realized in despair. She had never been good at lying. He continued. "Perhaps you're a thief. Perhaps you came in here to see what you could steal. It wouldn't be""Marianna wouldn't steal," Alex said belligerently. "She only wanted to see the window, but it was gone. She would never""Hush, Alex," she said sharply. It wasn't Alex's fault. He was only defending her and didn't know the importance of the Jedalar. "The window?" He glanced up over his shoulder. "Hell yes, it's gone." That terrible anger twisted his face again. "Bastards! I wanted that window." He wanted the Window to Heaven. Then he must be one of them! "Who . . . who . . . are you?" His gaze narrowed on her face. "Not Mephistopheles, as you seem to hink. Who do you think I am?" She moistened her lips. "I think you belong to the Duke of Nebrov." "I belong to no one." His lips tightened. "Certainly not to that whorson bastard. I don't Ouch!" Alex's teeth had sunk into his hand. Marianna tensed, prepared to spring if he retaliated against the boy. But he merely shook off the boy's teeth. "It seems the cub is also fierce." "He's afraid. Let him down." "I'll strike a bargain with you. I'll put him down if you promise not to run away." He had seemed sincere in his dislike of the duke, but that didn't mean he was not the enemy. He wanted the

Window. "You put him down and let him leave us, and I'll not run away." "But then I'll not have my shield." She smiled with fierce satisfaction. "No." His lips quirked, but he did not smile in turn. "Done. I think I can protect myself from one small girl. Drop your weapon." She hesitated and then dropped the candelabra. "Good. Your promise?" She had hoped he would not demand the words. "I promise," she said grudgingly, and then quickly added, "if I see no danger to Alex." He set the little boy on his feet. "There's no danger here for the boy." There was danger everywhere, and she must be prepared to face it. She turned to Alex. "Go to the garden and wait for me there." "I don't want to go." She didn't want Alex to go either. The night was cold and he was ill and she did not know how long this Englishman would keep her here. But there was no choice. Alex had to be sent out of harm's way. She took off her wool shawl and wrapped it around him. "But you must." She gave him a gentle push. "I'll be with you soon." He started to protest, but when he met her gaze, he turned and ran toward the small door to the left of the altar. She was alone with him. Mama. What if he hurt her the way they had hurt her mother? Fear closed around her heart, robbing her of breath, freezing her blood as she turned to face him. "You sent away my hostage," he said mockingly. He set one of the candelabras upright, found the candle he had dropped, and relit it. "It makes me feel exceptionally insecure. I don't know if I can tolerate Why the devil are you shaking like that?" "I'm not." Her eyes shimmered with defiance. "I'm not afraid." He could see that she was more than afraid; she was terrified. It was probably good that she feared him; fear would produce answers, but for some inexplicable reason he felt the need to save her pride. "I didn't say you were. It must be the cold. You gave the boy your shawl." He took off his cloak. "Come here and let me put this around you." She looked at the cloak as if it were a sword pointed at her. She took a deep breath. "I will not fight you, but you must make me a promise. You must not kill me afterward. Alex needs me." "After what?" he asked. His gaze narrowed on her face, and he understood. "You think I intend to rape you?" "It's what men do to women." "How old are you?" "I've reached my sixteenth year." "You look younger." In the loose, ragged blouse and skirt she wore her body appeared to be as straight and without womanly form as that of a child. She was small-boned, delicate, almost painfully thin, with a smudge darkening one cheek. Her fair hair was pulled back in a long braid and added to the effect of extreme and vulnerable youth. She stared at him scornfully. "What difference does it make how old I am? I'm female, and men don't care. They care for nothing." She sounded so certain, he felt a surge of pity for the waif. "Has this happened to you before?" "Not to me." Her tone was suddenly reserved. He could almost see her withdraw within herself, sidling away from the pain she would not discuss. "And it won't happen now," he said grimly. "I'm not known to be above debauchery, but I don't rape children." But she wasn't a child. The delicate beauty of her features should have reflected wonder instead of raw wariness; her clear blue eyes gazed at him with a worldliness far beyond her years, and her lips were set tight to prevent their trembling. He had seen the same look on the faces of the children in the towns and villages along Kazan's border, and it made him as angry now as it had then. "Where are your parents?" She did not answer at once, and when she did, she spoke so softly, he had to strain to hear. "Dead." "How?" "Papa died two years ago." "And your mother?" She shook her head. "I . . . don't want to tell you." "How did your mother die?" he repeated. "The duke." He remembered her earlier accusation. "The Duke of Nebrov?" She nodded. It was no surprise to him. The powerful Duke of Nebrov had launched an insurrection against his brother, King Josef, over a year ago. It had been a bitter struggle, and both armies had almost been destroyed before the duke had been forced to acknowledge a defeat. The king's forces had been too scattered and weak to pursue Nebrov to his own lands, where he was now licking his wounds and undoubtedly building a new army. As he retreated, he had made sure that Montavia suffered as much as possible and given his men free rein to rape and pillage as they pleased. On Jordan's journey to Talenka from Kazan he had traveled through town after town like this one that had been shelled and sacked, its inhabitants murdered and brutalized. "One of the duke's troops killed your mother?" She shook her head. "The duke," she whispered. She stared straight ahead as if the scene was there before her. "He did it. He did it." "The duke himself?" That was unusual. Zarek Nebrov was a brutal bastard, but his rage was usually cold and controlled, and he seldom indulged in spilling blood without reason. "Are you sure?" "He came to our cottage, and he . . . I'm sure." She shuddered. "Mama told me who he was. . . . She had seen him before. He hurt . . . her, and then he killed her." "Why?" He received no reply. "Did you hear me?" "I hear you," she said haltingly. "If you do not wish to hurt me, may I go now?" Christ, he felt as brutal a bastard as Nebrov. The girl was helpless and in pain. He should just call Gregor and have him send one of his men to find the girl's nearest relations and take her to them. But he knew he had to find out more. The coincidence was too blatant. She had come to see the Window and, by her few agonized words, it appeared the girl's mother had been tortured before she had been killed. Nebrov

never did anything without reason. "No, you may not go." He held out his cloak to her again. "You will put on this cloak." He deliberately kept his tone hard, but he sat down in a pew so that he would appear less threatening. Standing, he felt like a giant looming over her fragile form. "Sit down." "I won't talk about that anymore," she said unsteadily. "No matter what you do to me." That painful memory was probably her biggest weakness, but he found he couldn't strike at it. "Stay," he said wearily. "I promise I'll never ask you to talk about that night again." She hesitated, her gaze searching his face. Then she took his cloak and slipped it on but did not sit down. "Why do you want me to stay?" "I'm not sure." He was probably wasting his time here. He had done all he could. Now that he knew the Window was destroyed, his only course was to meet with Janus so that he could carry the word to Kazan and then set out for Samda and try to find Pogani. Even if this waif knew something she wasn't telling, the Window was broken, dammit. Yet he couldn't let it rest until he was certain Nebrov hadn't discovered something he had not. His gaze returned to the cavity surrounded by jagged glass. "It seems strange that we were both brought together at this place and time. Do you believe in Fate?" "No." "I do. My mother had Tartar blood, and she must have instilled a belief in the Fates with mother's milk." His stare never left the empty window. "The town is sacked and deserted, you couldn't be sure the duke's forces wouldn't return, you and your brother are ragged and in want, and yet you picked this time to come to see the Window? Why?" "Why did you?" she countered. "I wished to acquire it. I heard it was magnificent, and I wished to take it back to my home." "You wished to steal it." "You don't understand." "You wished to steal it," she repeated, her tone uncompromising. "All right, have it your way. I wished to steal it." He met her gaze. "Now, why did you come?" Those clear, fierce eyes slid away from his own. "I had to see if it was still there." "Why?" She didn't reply. "It would be wise of you to answer me." Her defiant gaze shifted back to him, and her tone was scornful as she echoed his own life. "Why, I heard it was magnificent, and I wanted it for my home." The girl had courage. She was still frightened, and yet she refused to yield. He was careful not to show the flicker of admiration he felt. "Shall I go to the garden and fetch your brother? I'm sure he would tell me why you're here." "Leave him alone!" "Then tell me the truth." She burst out, "Because it was mine!" Christ! He hid the excitement that jolted through him. "The pope would not agree. Everything in his churches belongs to God and so to him." "It is mine," she said fiercely. "My grandmother gave it to me before she died last year." He was careful to keep his expression impassive. "How kind of her. And what right did she have to bestow such a gift?" "She created it. She said the church did not pay us for the work, so it was still ours." "I fear she told you a falsehood. The Window was created by Anton Pogani, a great craftsman." She shook her head. "He was my grandfather, but it wasn't he who was the craftsman, it was my grandmother." His brows lifted. "A woman?" Surely no woman could have had the artistry and skill to create the Window's twenty-three panels portraying man's climb from the earthly plane to Paradise. "That's why she had to let him lay claim to the work. They would not have accepted the work of a woman. It is always our women who do the work." "Always?" She nodded. "For over five hundred years the women in my family have worked with glass. We're trained from the time we leave the cradle. My mother said I have a special gift, and when I'm grown, I will be as great a craftsman as my grandmother." A flare of hope shot through him. "And just how familiar are you with the Window to Heaven?" He had deliberately kept his tone offhand, but she went rigid. Wariness when there should have been no such response. He retreated quickly and changed the subject. "What do the men of your family do while you're creating these glorious works?" A little of her tension eased. "Whatever they wish. They are well taken care of." "Then it's the women who work to provide the living and care for the men of the family?" She looked at him, frowning. "Of course, it is our duty. Why are you looking at me like that?" "Forgive me if I find the idea extraordinary." She shifted uneasily. "I must go. Alex is waiting." "And where will you go? I assume your home is in ruins like the rest of Talenka." "We didn't live here. Our cottage was just outside Samda." Samda was over seventy miles to the west. "Then how did you get here?" "We walked." The journey from Samda through this war-ravaged land would have been a rough, dangerous trek even for a man on horseback, and yet the child had been driven to forge her way to the church on foot. "Do you have relatives in Samda?" "I have no one anywhere," she said matter-of-factly, but desolation echoed beneath the words. He had a sense of everything coming together. After all the hell and blood that had gone before, Fate had finally got it right! He hadn't even had to go to Pogani; the Jedalar had come to him. "Then I'll take you with me." She stared at him, stunned. "Come with me," he repeated. His eyes glinted with recklessness. "It's clear you were sent to me as a gift, and I never refuse a gift from the gods." She started backing away from him, looking at him as if he had gone mad. Well, he felt a little mad at the moment. Despair and anger had changed to hope, and that could be a heady brew. "How can you take care of your Alex without help? He needs hot food and warm

clothing. I can give it to you." She hesitated. "Why . . . would you do this?" "Perhaps I wish to do my kindly Christian duty and aid two orphans," he said mockingly. Those clear blue eyes searched his expression. "But I think you're not a kind man." "How clever of you to realize that fact, but you're not entirely correct. "I do practice kindness . . . when it's convenient. It is convenient now. Isn't that fortunate for you and your Alex?" She shook her head, her gaze clinging to his. He could see she wanted desperately to be convinced.

All he had to do was say the words she wanted to hear. He tried to decide the best way to proceed.

Persuading women to do as he wanted them to do had never been a problem for him. He had learned to charm and beguile before he left the nursery. Yet he was curiously reluctant to lie to this big-eyed waif. "You're quite right. I've never been known to follow the path of duty. I've always found it an abysmal bore."

He continued crisply. "Very well, I do have a reason for wanting to help you, but I have no intention of divulging it at present. If you want to come with me, then you'll do so on my terms. You'll agree to obey me without question, and in return I'll promise that there will be food and shelter and protection for both of you as long as you're under my care. If you choose not to come, then you can stay here in these ruins and let your brother starve to death."

He turned and started back up the aisle. It was a gamble. He had no intention of leaving her here even if it meant abducting her, but it would be simpler if she made the decision. "Wait." He stopped but didn't turn around. "You're coming with me?" "Yes." She moved brusquely forward ahead of him. "I'll go with you." She added quickly, "For now. But Alex stays in the garden until I'm sure it's safe. I'll take food and blankets to him." "As you like. But you'd better make up your mind quickly. I intend to leave this town by sunrise." "That's too soon," she said, panic-stricken. "Sunrise," he repeated. "What did the boy call you? Marianna?" "Marianna Sanders." "Sanders." He opened the heavy door for her. "That's not a Montavian name." "My father was English." She slanted him a glance. "Like you." He recalled his outburst of profanity when he had seen the broken window. "And your mother?" She looked away from him.

"Montavian." She asked quickly, "Why is an Englishman in Montavia?" "Because he wants to be," he said mockingly. "You've not asked me my name. I'm hurt you have so little interest when we're to be fast companions." "Well, what is it?" she said impatiently. He bowed. "Jordan Draken. At your service." A sharp gust of wind struck them as they started down the steps, and she frowned. "It's getting colder. I need that blanket for Alex. I can't leave him out there without" "Ah, Jordan, you were in the church so long, I thought you were taking holy vows," a voice boomed. Marianna stopped short on the steps as she saw the huge man coming toward them. She had thought Jordan Draken was tall, but this was a bear of man, towering almost seven feet. The giant threw back his head, and his laugh again boomed out. "I should have known you would have found a woman to amuse you even in this deserted hovel." As he drew closer, the moonlight revealed a face as intimidating as his great bulk. He must be near his fortieth year, and his face reflected evidence that those years had been spent in violence. His nose had been broken, and his gray-streaked black hair was a wild, tousled tangle framing cheekbones that looked as if they had been chipped from a mountain. A jagged white scar curved from his left eye, across his cheek to the corner of his mouth. "Easy," Draken said quietly. "It's only Gregor. He won't hurt you." How did she know that? she wondered wildly. She looked beyond the giant to the men who sat astride their horses at the foot of the steps. There were at least fifteen of them, several bearing flaming torches, and they all looked as wild as this Gregor. They wore black fur hats and strange, quilted bulky tunics trimmed with fox fur and sheepskin, their wide trousers tucked into high leather boots that reached their knees. Rifles were holstered on their saddles, and each man wore a huge sword at his hip. Why had she consented to come with Draken? She knew the answer. Alex was ill. Alex must have warmth and shelter, and it had seemed worth any risk to see if this man could give it to him. "Stay where you are, Gregor." Draken turned to her as the giant stopped on the fifth step. "No one will hurt you. I gave you my promise." And he had not lied to persuade her to come with him, she remembered. He had given her a choice, and she had made it. She mustn't be a coward now. She threw her shoulders back and demanded, "Tell him to give me a blanket for Alex." An undefinable expression crossed his face. "Very well." He said to Gregor, "Go fetch a blanket for the lady." He nodded his shaggy head and loped back down the steps to a giant of a horse. He opened a saddlebag and took out a sheepskin blanket. He turned, took the stairs three at a time, and stopped before Marianna. "Here." He thrust the blanket at her and smiled with surprising sweetness. "I'm Gregor Damek, and I know I'm an ugly monster of a fellow, but I don't eat children. I promise you." In that terrifying visage, his hazel eyes were gentle, and she felt the tiniest ripple of warmth go through her as she took the blanket. "My . . . name is Marianna," she said haltingly. "Take the blanket to your brother," Draken said to her. "We'll set up camp at the north edge of the town. There will be hot food and a warm fire for you both." He turned and started down the steps. "If you decide to trust me." He had come for

the Window. She couldn't trust anyone who wanted the Window to Heaven. Yet he was English, and why would an Englishman want the Window except for the reason he had given her? Perhaps she could trust him . . . a little." Wait." Her hand went to the fastening at her throat. "Your cloak." "Return it to me later." He mounted his horse with loose-limbed grace and lifted his hand to his followers. He was not dressed as they were; his tight dark blue trousers, intricately tied cravat, and fine coat reminded her of the kind of clothes Papa had worn when he had visitors from England. Yet, curiously, he did not look out of place with these men. She had a sense he possessed that same wildness, but it was controlled, channeled, as theirs was not. The hollow clatter of hooves echoed on the cobblestones as the horsemen turned north. He was leaving her, once again letting her make a choice. The knowledge brought a sudden lift of spirits as she clutched the sheepskin blanket to her breasts and hurried back up the steps. What a frightened little dove." Gregor's expression was sad as he looked back over his shoulder at the doorway through which Marianna had disappeared. "There are so many wounded children in this land. It hurts my heart not to be able to help them." "That 'little dove' nearly emasculated me," Jordan said grimly. "I assure you, she's far more falcon than dove." Gregor's eyes twinkled. "Then you did try to mount her. For shame and in a holy church too." "I mounted her, but not in the way you mean. She tried to kill me with an iron candlestick." "Because you frightened her. Her brother is inside the church?" "In the garden." Gregor frowned. "I will go and get them. They may be too frightened to approach us." "No, let her come to me." "But I think" "The Window to Heaven was shattered," Jordan interrupted. "It's completely useless." Gregor gave a shocked exclamation. "Who?" "Well, we know it wasn't Nebrov. I suspect it was broken accidentally when he tried to capture the town." Gregor grimaced. "I would not like to have been the officer in charge of the troop who made that mistake. I wonder why he didn't secure Talenka before he marched on to the capital." "Arrogance. He thought he would wrest the entire country from King Josef and then have all the time in the world to steal the Window to Heaven. It was only when he was defeated that the urgency of the matter hit home. He needed the Window to barter with Napoleon for power and support." He paused. "However, when they smashed the Window, it seems he tried to rectify the error. He took a troop and rode west to the cottage of Anton Pogani." "The man who created the Window?" "So everyone thought. Your 'dove' tells me the work was done by her grandmother." He briefly related the details he had learned from Marianna. Gregor whistled. "Poor little girl. No wonder you're being so kind to her." "For God's sake I'm not being kind. Haven't you heard anything I've said? She won't admit it, but she knows the Window to Heaven. She's been trained in glassmaking, and someday she may be as good a craftsman as her grandmother. It's a chance, but it's the only one we have." "I heard you." He beamed. "You should not be ashamed of being kind. I know you like the world to think you wicked, but I promise I will tell no one." "I'm not" He stopped and shrugged. "The girl would disagree. She's already told me she knows I'm not kind." Gregor glanced back over his shoulder. "I still think I should go back and get her. What if she flies away?" Jordan reined in his horse as he turned a corner. "She's not going to fly away. Because you're going to go back to the church and stand in that alcove in the shop across the street. Send Niko to watch the back entrance to the garden. Neither of you are to let your presence be known, if she sets out in the direction of the camp." "And if she doesn't?" "Bring her to me." Gregor's expression was troubled. "She thought herself free. You did not tell her the truth." "I didn't tell her a lie. She is free as long as she makes the right decision. Sometimes it's necessary to hood a falcon to keep her from flying in the wrong direction." He added impatiently, "And stop looking at me as if I were going to harm your little bird. The only reason I didn't take her by force is that I know more will be accomplished by offering honey instead of lemon. I'm well aware I need to coax her into submission. I have no desire to have her claw at me again." The assurance didn't please Gregor. He had seen Jordan offer honey to women before, share the sweetness, and then withdraw and walk away. "This is not a good thing. She's not like your usual women. She is wounded." "You talk as if I was going to bed her," Jordan said dryly. "As you say, she's only a child." "How old?" "Sixteen. I don't seduce chits scarcely out of the schoolroom." It was true Jordan preferred older, experienced women and avoided like the plague the young innocents who were thrown at him both in Kazan and London. Yet Gregor's instincts told him there had been something unusual in Jordan's attitude toward the girl a few minutes ago. "The schoolroom from which this particular chit emerged teaches more interesting lessons. You need the Jedalar. I think there is little you would not do to get it." "Then you needn't worry about her for a time. She's incapable of giving it to me for at least a few years. Perhaps never." He nudged his horse into a trot. "I'll see you at camp." He glanced over his shoulder. "And, Gregor, my friend, while you're contemplating letting the little dove fly the cage, you might consider that the alternative to my guardianship is leaving her to starve or become a whore in this benighted country." A

convincing argument, Gregor thought gloomily, as he watched Jordan ride away. Jordan was a hard man and had grown even more ruthless since he had involved himself in Kazan's concerns, but, whatever fate he dealt the girl, it would be better than what she faced here. "Niko!" He wheeled his horse and gestured to the burly young man at the rear of the troop. "No rest for you yet. There's work to be done." The campfire was burning brightly, a beacon in the darkness, luring her closer. "Marianna?" Alex's hand tightened on hers. "Is it all right?" She didn't know, she thought in sudden panic. She didn't know if they would be safe. She had stayed for hours in the church agonizing over this decision. Draken's followers appeared a wild band, and yet he was . . . What? Violent, hard, clever. He had demonstrated all of those traits in the short time they had been together. She had also discerned a relentless determination and a blunt honesty. Yet how could honesty live side by side with deception? Every instinct said he had not told her the truth about the Window. Alex coughed and pressed closer to her. "I smell food. I'm hungry, Marianna." Food and shelter and safety for Alex, Draken had promised her, and she had promised him nothing. After all, she could always escape later if she found the threat too great. In the meantime Alex would have a chance to heal and grow stronger. "There will be food soon." She drew the sheepskin blanket closer about Alex's shoulders, drew a deep breath, and strode boldly toward the campfire.

Présentation de l'auteur

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