



ANGELA J. FORD

MUSIC
OF THE
NIGHT

A TOWER KNIGHTS TALE

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PROLOGUE

The first note pierced the silence as the orchestra warmed up. First the strings, their mellow tones drawn out and haunting, followed by the chords of the piano and chimes. The audience filtered in, ladies dressed in fine gowns, their fingers and necks covered in the glitter of sparkling jewels. Lords escorted them—dressed in their best, each carrying a rose for their ladies—and yet some wore masks to hide their faces for what was to come.

I stepped farther back into the shadow of the black drapery, although no one would see me, hidden in my perch in the back of the theater. Lifting a spy glass to my good eye, I took in the stage and waited. A cocktail of scents wafted past me; the choking smoke of cigars mixed with the floral fragrance of perfume. No expense had been spared in the grand hall, decked with shades of crimson, curtains of velvet black and gold, shimmering crystals.

Hushed chatter filled the air as the audience took their seats, the hum of excitement potent as they waited to be seduced by the magic of the theater. Opening night was the highlight of the theater, a fresh performance with exotic dancers and throaty singers giving a parody of life. I cared naught for such amusement, but I needed one of them for my plans.

Shifting to a more comfortable position, I brushed at the mask biting into my skin. The faint itch of my scars reminded me that hiding my loneliness and pain was no longer an

option. My patience had run dry, forcing me to act. My song was ready, all I needed to do was find a singer—a strong one—cast a spell, and the rest would fall into place.

Aside from whispered prayers, they'd forgotten me, the one who haunted the tower, who brought chaos and terror into their lives. I'd returned in secret to haunt their steps, to make them realize that all along, this place was mine. I was its master, and it was time to take my freedom.

The first song began, casting a hypnotic spell over the audience. They fell silent and the dancers swayed on the stage. One caught my eye, hair as dark as a raven with long limbs accenting graceful movements. She was too far away to see clearly, yet her movements made her stand out from the others. While she danced in sync to the music, her eyes darted about the stage, and she missed a step or two. I wondered what drew her attention, and why she was not as dedicated to the dance as the others. A heaviness pinched my chest and I sighed. If I were a normal human, like the lords and ladies who filled the hall, I'd go up to her after the performance, introduce myself and woo her.

But tonight my purpose transcended the mundane, and I needed a singer, not a dancer. Still, watching her eased the ragged edges of pain that plagued my soul and increased my resolve. I would move heaven and earth to earn a chance to live life, like the mortals.

It happened every evening, and tonight was no different. As the daylight faded to shades of twilight, the unearthly cry of an organ played with ardent passion. It filtered through my consciousness calling me to heed, to beckon to its mournful cry. My fingers moved, catching the cadence of the wordless song as though it were the wail of a creature in profound anguish, crying for what it suffered, yearning for solace just out of reach. It tugged on my heartstrings, as though the call were for me and me alone, as though I could answer it and bring it comfort.

Rising from the warmth of my bed, I padded across the cool stone floor, determined to locate the source of such heart-rending music. My black hair fell to my waist and swayed behind me as I approached the window and threw it open, heedless of the cool kiss of autumn and the whisper of twilight.

I'd lived in High Tower for only a year, and I was still growing used to the constant chill. All year long, the bayside town was covered in a dense layer of gray fog that hung above the rooftops, occasionally stretching ghostly fingers in warning against those who prayed for sunlight. Storms often rocked the harbor, flashes of lightning and booming thunder like nothing I'd ever heard before. It seemed as though High Tower was cursed by the gods to eternal gloom and grayness.

The storms matched my mood, for once, before High Tower, I'd been a young lady of wealth and status, living in a

vibrant city with my father who was a wealthy merchant. I had everything money could buy, given to me by my doting father—stylish dresses, brilliant jewelry, a beautiful horse and private music lessons. Handsome suitors sought my hand for marriage and I had many lovely—if somewhat vapid—friends among the ladies of the city. Suddenly, everything went wrong. Trade goods were lost, debt piled up, and my wealth and status burned away like paper put to flame. The final blow was the death of my beloved father, leaving me homeless and destitute, until I'd come to High Tower.

The music that filled my dreams was my one solace, imbuing me with hope and the promise of a future, a chance to start over. My heart throbbed as the music filled me. I closed my eyes, lifted my arms, and felt it wrap around me, like the arms of a lover, a spirit behind the music who wanted to fill me with his presence, with his gift and only his.

“Are you real?” I whispered. “If so, come to me, send me a sign, teach me the music, your music of the night and I will sing, I will sing for you.”

The music faded. Heart pounding, I leaned out over the windowsill, trying to peer beyond the mist. High Tower was supposed to be a haven, but the thick gray mist made me feel trapped within a cocoon of mystery.

A sudden gust of wind sent a blast of harsh air through my thin nightgown, scattering the mist just enough to provide a glimpse of a black structure, shining oddly through the gray. A tower. A tremor of excitement coursed through me and I leaned further out the window, hoping to see more, but just as quickly as it had come, the mist moved, hiding it from view again.

Pressing my fingers to my mouth, I strained again. The tower! That's where the music came from, the sorrowful melody I heard each evening. It was real.

A soft rap on the door reminded me it was almost time for the evening performance. “Come in,” I called over my shoulder, lingering hopefully by the window.

“Lord, it’s cold in here,” Samara, my maid, scolded as she slipped inside. Damp blonde curls clung to her forehead and her bonnet was askew, her face pink with exertion. “Lady Aria, what are you doing with the windows open?”

“I saw it.” I pulled the window shut and latched it. “The hidden tower on the shore.”

Samara set a tray of food on the vanity and crossed her arms, frowning. “You know it is bad luck to talk about the haunted tower.” She waved her hands to dispel the bad luck in the air.

I snorted and clasped my hands over my mouth, so not to offend. Samara had been my maid since my misfortune led me to the gates of High Tower Castle, the domain of my distant relative, Count Zorik, a handsome and enigmatic man who ran a thriving theater. As a way to repay the Count for saving me from the streets, I’d secured my spot with the dancers, although my heart called me to sing. Music stirred the passion in my soul although I’d been warned, time and time again, about the dangers of High Tower. It lulled pleasure seeking fools into complacency and swallowed them whole like a monster of the depth, drowning them in the delights of the flesh until they were too addicted to leave.

When I’d first arrived at High Tower, I’d quivered in fear, awed by the massive, sprawling castle which lay like a sleeping beast on the edge of Esum Bay. A dark road twisted like a snake out of the slim trees, stunted by the gray mists and lack of sunlight, to the town. Even the coastal road was covered in shadows and long weeping trees until it reached the outskirts of High Tower where the sun began to shine again.

Tossing on my robe, I sat down at the vanity to eat my light meal. The cook had sent baked fish, seasoned with lemon and apples in a cinnamon sauce with potatoes on the side. The smell was heavenly.

“Samara,” I gave her a pointed look before spearing a potato on my fork. “I know you believe in the supernatural, but what do you imagine is so terrible up in the tower?”

Placing her hands on her hips, which made her petite figure look quite comical, she waved a finger at me. “Lady Aria—”

“It’s just Aria,” I corrected her for I did not deserve the title anymore. Samara was only a few years older, and we were more friends than lady and maid. Although I usually followed her advice, for she’d grown up in High Tower Castle and knew the superstitions of the town. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you to respect the spirits?” she quipped.

We glared at each other until I burst into laughter and she followed shortly after, giggling until she wiped her eyes.

“Aria,” she sighed, flinging open the wardrobe. Dresses glimmered in the low light, endless silk and petticoats and yards and yards of frills and fabric that would make anyone jealous. “I swear, you’re too curious for your own good. You need a man, no, a lover to calm you down and make you happy again. Then maybe you’ll forget about disturbing the ghosts of High Tower.”

My hunger vanished at her words and I put the fork down, staring sightlessly at my half-eaten fish and potatoes. How could I forget about ghosts and spirits? I had to admit, ever since my father’s death, I’d had a childish hope he’d send a spirit from the afterlife to teach me how to sing like my mother. I still recalled his words as he held my hand, his voice shaking with pain.

Count Zorik of High Tower is the only one who might help, but he is not a man you should become indebted to. I’ve made too many mistakes, and you might be saved this once. If you have nowhere else to go, call upon him, and he will come. But do not tarry in High Tower. If you can use your gift, your music, perhaps it will free you from the misery I have inflicted upon you.

“Samara, it’s because I want to sing, and you know Count Zorik will arrange a marriage for me and send me away if I

don't. I've taken a year to grieve and now he won't listen to excuses. Besides, did you hear the music this evening?"

Samara jerked, then continued to shake out my dancing dress. It was low cut, form fitting, and gathered at the waist. The skirt ended just below the knee, layered with fine black silk. The gown was meant to move and swirl with the music, despite its revealing style. I had to remind myself I was no longer a fine city lady, but a connoisseur of the music of the night.

Samara laid the dress on the bed and picked up my hairbrush. "I did not hear the music," she began, glancing around the room to ensure no one was listening. No one was, but all the same she lowered her voice to a conspiring whisper. "But we saw another sighting."

"A sighting?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Aye, of the ghost. Word is, he haunts this castle by night and the tower by the wood by day, sneaking in to cause chaos. The cook claimed he tricked her today. The Count wanted roasted quail, and she swears he requested baked fish, no seasonings. You can't imagine the uproar dinner was. He was livid, all red in the face and shouting. Poor cook." Samara wagged her head as she untangled my curls. "She should have known better. No one likes baked fish without seasonings. But that's not the half of it. Earlier today, a strange man borrowed the Count's favorite horse, and the horse keeper, poor Lawrence, claims it was the Count himself who took it out earlier."

The ominous tone of her words made me shiver. Unexplainable events took place within High Tower Castle, nothing more than innocent pranks, yet there was a distinct tilt toward slighting the Count, making him seem stupid in front of the lords and ladies and servants.

"What does the ghost have to do with the music?" I asked.

Samara's eyes widened. "Some say the music is only the wind, blowing through the old pipes of the tower and giving it song. Or fairies playing a joke. What if it's a spirit whom the

Count has offended? Coming back from the dead to haunt him?”

And there's where the story lost me, for how could it be a spirit when the music felt so genuine and compelling? I could sense it within, just as real as the stone floor beneath my feet.

I dressed quickly, waving away Samara's help to smooth the lines of the dress and clench it tight around my waist. The neckline plunged, displaying an expanse of cleavage that left me uncomfortable, with almost transparent gossamer sleeves. I snatched up my cloak and tossed it around my shoulders to preserve my modesty as we left my room.

“It's not wise to walk alone,” Samara whispered, hooking her arm around mine.

“You do it all the time,” I retorted as we moved into the wide passageways. It was cold and echoed with a pool of light every few feet. Zorik had boasted to me about the modern invention of gas lamps that kept the castle lit, day and night. Although I appreciated the light, sometimes a sense of dizziness overwhelmed me as I passed, as though the lamps were sucking away the air I breathed.

“No one bothers the maids,” she said. “Besides, I always carry a candlestick. If anyone bothers me, I'll rap them on the head.”

I snorted at the idea of petite Samara smacking anyone on the head with a heavy candlestick holder.

Samara poked my side. “You could join the other dancers in the dressing room off stage and save us this walk.”

“But then we wouldn't be able to gossip,” I reminded her.

“True,” Samara consented, picking up the pace.

Anticipation twisted in my stomach whenever I walked to the grand hall where my spirit would bask in the glory of music. The moments that passed with and without music were distinct in my mind. Song made me come alive, and I felt the very same energy within me, flowing through my veins, lifting me out of my grief and alighting the world in vivid color.

The melody of flutes and stringed instruments hovered as the orchestra warmed up. I took a deep breath, tasting the hints of wine, cinnamon and sharp cheese in the air, refreshments for the guests who came to watch tonight's performance. The production would run for seven days, and then the singers and dancers and musicians would rest before preparing for the next. Butterflies danced in my stomach as I moved behind the curtain to take my place with the other dancers.

Samara took my cloak and faded into the darkness. I closed my eyes as I waited for the cue, wishing that instead of moving onto the stage to dance, I could stride forth and boldly sing. Singing made me feel close to my departed father, and the mother I'd never gotten a chance to know, for she, too, had been a singer, wooing my father with her voice. Count Zorik had made it clear that he had more than enough dancers and was in need of another singer. If I could not fulfill that duty, he'd arrange a marriage and send me away, perhaps back to the city or an estate with a rich old lord I'd have to submit to.

An idea plunged into my worried thoughts. I had to learn to sing well and who better to teach me than the spirit that haunted the tower. After the performance I'd sneak away and find out the truth for myself. Pulse pounding at the boldness of my decision, I pressed my lips together to keep them from trembling.

A memory of my father's words rang in my ears. *Be strong, Aria, be bold when I am gone. Do not hesitate to follow your heart, to find the music that will set you free.*

ARIA

Music throbbed in my veins as I danced, part of the performance, part of a work of magic. The ebb and flow pulled me, the music almost compelling me to sing along, breathless with wonder instead of dancing my heart out. My true desire washed over me in waves, fresh, poignant, powerful, until the last note faded away. If anything, the performance had done nothing but deepen my determination.

As Lady Siobhan took the stage to sing the last song, I drew behind the curtains with the dancers to take off my shoes and massage my sore feet. When she finished, the audience went wild. I could imagine the flowers being thrown and Lady Siobhan, smiling and curtsying in a fake display of modesty. My feelings toward her were ambivalent, but if she knew I planned to steal the spotlight, she'd have words. The theater often hung on her whims and moods. If she did not have her way, she was prone to refuse to sing. Count Zorik rarely interfered, only commanded others to ensure she was happy. I wondered what he'd do if she wasn't.

When I first arrived at High Tower Castle, another woman had the spotlight. Six months later, she disappeared. Samara informed me she'd returned to the city of Solynn to marry, but rumor was she'd left in the middle of the night, leaving most of her possessions behind. A few months later, Siobhan replaced her with glee, allowing the lords and ladies to fawn and simper over her.

Replacing my slippers, I reached for my cloak and looked back over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. One of the dancers caught my eyes and shook her head ruefully, milk-white hair moving in silky waves down her back.

“You should stay and join the festivities, Lady Aria.” She grinned. “You deserve it.”

A shiver went down my spine. The Count’s theater was famous for its sensual, spellbinding performances and midnight parties that descended into debauchery. After my first night, I declined to partake in the midnight reveries. It was often a masked affair, lords and ladies dressed in their finest with faces hidden, for none wanted to admit how deeply the theater seduced them to give into wild urges, leaving all sense of propriety behind.

Orderly behavior disappeared under raucous laughter, pawing hands, breathy moans and cries of pleasure. I was deeply aware of what took place. Ladies pushed up against the wall, hands under their skirts and the frantic, drunken thrusting. I understood the need for one night of heightened bliss and release, one grasp, one glimpse of a moment that freed one from the tedious boredom of everyday life. Once, I’d wanted to be part of it, but it left me hollow, longing for more, and it frightened me. I wanted more, much more than the parties could provide.

“Another time,” I said.

The girl shrugged, but before she could reply, a wild, gasping scream echoed through the theater. My heart raced and the dancers turned as one toward the wail. It came from behind the curtain, and as I took a step toward it, I recalled the tower. Either I could find out the reason for the cry or search for the tower while they were distracted.

The scream came again, this time drowned out by shouts as the theater descended into chaos. Dancers burst out on the stage, and the men who opened and closed the curtains shouted while Count Zorik ordered the audience to stay calm.

Gliding between the panicked dancers, I snatched up my cloak and dashed off the stage. Ducking into the halls, I almost

tripped over a livery boy who scurried around the corner toward the screaming without so much as a “apologies, milady!”

It was late, almost midnight I thought, but I tended to lose all track of time on performance night. Following the winding halls, I made for the entrance of the castle. The halls were wide with vaulted ceilings and arched passageways. Gargoyles and other stone creatures were carved into columns, watching me out of dead eyes. The flickering light only adding to the disturbing gloom. I pressed on, Samara’s warning about walking alone ringing in my ears. Shadows shifted, giving the illusion I was not the only one walking the silent halls. When the double doors of the castle rose before me, my shoulders sagged as tension left them.

Given my scant clothing, I pulled my cloak tightly around me as I stepped outside. I took a deep breath, allowing a faint smile to pinch my cheeks. My soft slippers padded across the cobblestone drive, and I eyed the path that led away from the castle and down into town. I needed a horse, and a fast one.

“Ho there, lady,” a driver called, smoking a pipe as he stood by his horses, waiting in the cold for a lord or lady who might not appear again for hours.

“Saddle a steed for me?” I called, fingers crossed he wouldn’t question me.

Grunting, he moved away, and shortly afterward, led a black horse toward me. I swung into the saddle, took the offered lantern, and spurred the horse down the winding drive before he could say anything. The black gates of High Tower Castle were wide open, welcoming those with the audacity to visit the theater.

The night was bleaker than I’d imagined, and once my mount left the flickering light of the castle, we plunged into darkness. Grateful for the low glow of the lantern, I pushed on, and the mist opened before me, creating a path that led away from High Tower Castle and through the town. It was quiet, hushed under a blanket of sleep with the lulling sound of the Esum bay, water slapping up against the bank.

Tiny cottages perched close to water's edge and yellow lights hovered above the water. Sometimes the fishers went out after dark to catch larger creatures that only came to the surface at night, for aside from the theater, High Tower was known for its distinctive fish and other exotic seafood.

I should have been frightened, impulsive and foolish as I was, to flee safety in search of... Music? Yet it tugged on the strings of my heart, pulling me forward. The road forked outside the town, the left-hand path leading down to the coastal road and out of High Tower. The other path led upward, farther in, and, I guessed, to the black tower which hung over the town, watching, waiting, silent. Hidden behind a wall of mist as though it did not wish to be seen.

Silence met my ears as my mount trotted across the meadow, following a dirt road I could not see. Vague shapes appeared on either side of me, revealing themselves as stunted trees when I held up the lantern. The wood was silent, still, without hints of animal life. Magic still hummed in the air, calling me, inciting me. I couldn't have stayed away if I'd wanted to. A shiver of arousal crawled across my skin, and the woods whispered my name. *Come. Aria. Come to us.*

The horse slowed, and I coaxed him down to a walk as a faint light appeared. My breath caught as I made out the vague shape of the tower, and I tilted my head back. The structure was immense, yet the shadows of night and clouds of mist hid most of it from my sight. Still, when I squinted, I made out the glow of light that came from within. A sound caught my ear. A musical note, nay a tune sung by a man?

This was the moment of truth. Before I lost my courage, I slid off the horse, and that's when I heard the voice. Rich, sweet and sensual like chocolate and yet commanding, controlling.

Tying the horse's reins around a tree stump, I tossed my cloak over one shoulder and ventured closer, well aware I was eavesdropping on who or what created music in the tower. I was fairly certain it was no ghost.

Echoes of music grew louder as I moved closer. Beautiful as it was, I had trouble understanding the words, for it was like nothing I'd heard before. Like the language of trees and nature itself. My heart beat faster, and my fingers trembled as I approached, the whisper of wind egging me on.

The tower was ancient and round, a lone building that once might have been a watchtower before the Count's castle was built. Moss and vines clung to the walls and trailed upward into the darkness. The forbidding double-doors were shut, but an arched window stayed open. The panes of glass had broken, letting in the cool air. But the mysterious singer did not seem to be bothered by such trifles.

I crept closer to the open window, which was difficult to do, given the weeds that had sprung up around it, vines and moss and old leaves and bracken. I stepped on a stick or two, yet the singer continued uninterrupted. Standing on my tiptoes, I peered into the haunted tower.

I could not see much in the dim firelight, so I caught a glimpse of tall, broad shoulders, thick hair, and that was all. A table sat across from the singer where green plants stood tall in a basin of water. I blinked, detecting movement as the plants unfurled, their leaves spreading and growing and then, budding.

My hand went to my heart, and my mouth fell open. I leaned forward, placing a hand on the stones to keep my balance, swayed by the song. Did my eyes deceive me? No. As the music swelled, the plants grew, budding, opening, lifting rose-red faces to the light, to the voice of the singer. My attention turned to the shadow. Who had such power to use a wordless song to make plants grow? My foot slipped against moss and the ground beneath my feet gave way. I pitched backward with a cry, my hands flailing for something to halt my fall.

The music stopped as though a spell had been broken, and I landed on my backside, cursing. My cloak caught and snagged on brambles as I struggled to sit up.

I rolled onto my belly, my hands and knees sinking into the soft earth. The fragile silk of my sleeve tore as I rose and accidentally stepped on it. Curses. Samara would be cross if she had to fix my ruined dress.

No sooner than I regained my feet, a flicker of black hurled itself at me, trapping me against the unforgiving wall of the tower. I opened my mouth to scream, but a black glove clamped around my lips, blocking my air. Trapped by the singer, the ghost within the tower.

A deep voice, edged with anger, growled, “If you promise not to scream, I will release you.”

One teal-blue eye bored into mine as I nodded. The stranger’s pale skin, thick black hair and broad shoulders were all I could make out in the shadows of night. A shock of thick black hair fell over his forehead, yet a blue scarf was tied across one eye. Even in the low light, I spied scars peeking out from the edges, and I shivered. What incident had stolen his eye and damaged his face?

The rest of his face was all sharp angles, high cheekbones, an aristocratic nose. His jaw tensed as he released me, as though waiting for me to scream, claw at him and make a mad dash for my horse.

When I did not scream, he dropped his hand to his side, and that’s when I realized the other was about my waist, firmly trapping me between his hard body and the wall of the tower. As I studied him, sandalwood, candle wax and a faint floral scent emanated off his skin. He was only a man, not a ghost. Samara would be chagrined when I told her the spirit of the tower was only a silly fable, granted, one that was easy to give into considering the gloom and mist that wrapped around High Tower like a mother swaddling a child.

A shuddering breath left my parted lips as I lightly touched his chest. I meant to push him away, but my eyes were suddenly riveted to his white shirt, open at the neck, displaying an expanse of his well-defined chest. I could not

tear my eyes away quickly enough. Heat flamed my cheeks and for once I was grateful both for my dark skin and the dark of night which hid my reaction. How ironic was it that instead of a ghost, I'd found an attractive man? Pushing away that pesky thought, I returned my gaze to his scowling face, unsure whether he was angry with me for trespassing or the fact that I'd seen his gift.

“What do you want?” he barked, that one piercing eye studying me with a scrutiny that made me wish I'd changed into something more modest before leaving.

Lifting my chin, I glared right back at him. Instead of fear, I only felt a quickening in my blood. He had something I wanted, and all I had to do was open my mouth and ask. “I heard the music,” I told him. “It called to me, coaxed me here, and so I came.”

His full lips curled and his brow furrowed as he shifted his weight. My cloak had fallen back in the struggle and now his eye slid to my bare neck and the plunging neckline of my gown. Oh goddess, did he think I'd come to seduce him? I squirmed under his stormy gaze.

He must have realized my discomfort, and the fact he pressed me—rather intimately—against the stone wall. His hold loosened, but his scowl darkened. “I haven't played for hours. Speak, woman. Is there another reason you came? To spy on me?”

Without waiting for an answer, he dragged me away from the wall toward the yawning entrance of the tower. My chest tightened and words tumbled out of my mouth as I stumbled to keep up. “I'm not a spy. Like I said, I heard your song, your music during twilight. Everyone says a ghost haunts High Tower, but you're no ghost, I didn't think you were. I was hoping, wishing, praying for a sign and the music led me here. I want to be like you, I want to sing. I want to...” I trailed off, for some yearnings were too personal to reveal to a stranger who seemed furious with me for no reason.

He deposited me inside the entryway, pausing to swing the doors shut. They closed with a boom of finality, sending up a

shower of gray dust as they shut out the chill. I jumped and snatched my cloak around my shoulders, hiding the swells of my chest from him. I'd just danced in front of dozens, and yet even on stage the spotlight was always on the singer.

Now the man stood a proper distance away, back to me, arms crossed. Clasp my hands together, I took in the room. What would Samara say when I told her that I'd not only met the ghost but I was inside the haunted tower? It wasn't dark and dreary like I imagined, and yet it held an aura I couldn't quite comprehend. Was it a scent, a sound? Something was odd and out of place about it, but my curiosity overrode my doubts.

The atrium of the tower was a perfect circle with a spiral staircase at the back. The stones rose above me and I tilted my head back, watching the staircase disappear into the darkness. What was up there? Bats? Crows? Other demented creatures of the night?

Black drapes hung above the arched windows and tables pushed against the wall, covered with twisting green vines and tall white candles. Hundreds of them. A chandelier hung suspended above us, also lit up with candlelight. They were beautiful as they flickered, reminding me of blue and violet wisps that came out at twilight and hovered above Esum Bay. Fairy lights, Samara called them, come to guide souls to rest. A dark sentiment but I thought them beautiful as was the tower, even though it smelled like old moss, new flowers and something else odd and achy like iron.

The middle of the room had been carved away into a hole wide enough for three to stand comfortably, and a set of three broad steps led down to it, as though paying homage to the sacred spot.

Near the stairs a table held a collection of green plants, standing tall and steady, even though there was no light to help them grow. The roses I'd seen grow and bloom while the man sang were nothing more than sprouts again. I gasped and pressed a hand to my mouth. It only confirmed my suspicions. The man in the tower had some kind of magical power over music. My longing to learn from him intensified.

“Will you teach me?” I breathed. “To sing like you?”

The man half-turned, his frown deepening. “What I do in this tower is no concern of the living.” His words were bitter, harsh. “Yet you want lessons from me. Why?”

“I saw the flowers,” I admitted. “You made them grow with only your voice. How?”

“My work is important.” He ignored my question and yet he had not kicked me out. He’d only welcomed me into his lair. “I cannot teach what you do not already possess.”

Surely he was conflicted with his thoughts, or this would not be a discussion. All I needed to do was to persuade him that teaching me would be worth his while, even though I had nothing to offer. I stepped forward, and the floor rattled beneath my slippers. My eyes darted to a trapdoor covered with bars. How odd to have a trapdoor at the doorstep of the tower, but the strangeness of my situation couldn’t distract me. Taking another step toward the man, I decided his grumpy attitude nor his attractive face would deter me. Long ago I’d learn the quality of a man could not be judged by his appearance but his actions.

Still, I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit I was enchanted by him, the elusive tower and his seductive music. He had the gift I sought, the song of life budded on his lips, and if he taught me to sing, to enchant an audience with my voice, I’d be free. Free to rise in the world from a ward of the Count to a free woman. I could make a name for myself, build wealth and leave High Tower and its gloominess to return to the city, or elsewhere.

“I can sing,” I told him. Straightening my shoulders, I undid the clasp of my cloak and let it float to the ground. It pooled around my ankles, but I was past embarrassment. There was only the want, the determination to prove to him that I had a gift which needed to be cultivated.

Closing my eyes, I lifted my arms and sang a song of star-crossed lovers determined to be together regardless of station and duty. I thought of myself as a bird in flight, yet my budding voice was trapped within me and could not soar high

and wild and free. When I tried to catch the cadence of rhythm, my voice cracked, and a note went sour and flat. Fingers brushed my neck, the touch as gentle as a kiss, and the song died in my throat.

My eyes flew open. He stood over me, barely a breath away, his fingers stroking the veins of my neck as though he could touch the raw music inside me. His one eye was wide and when he met my gaze, the hostility had melted.

“Indeed, you have a gift, all it needs is refining.”

The strange note in his low voice sent a fluttering sensation through my chest. At the same time, I became conscious of what I’d done. Leaving High Tower Castle in the middle of the night was both foolish and dangerous. Samara would be in my room, waiting for me to return, and yet I’d boldly made the decision to follow my heart and seek the haunted tower. I knew nothing about the strange man, and yet instinct told me he would not harm me.

“I’ve seen your face before,” he murmured, his knuckles brushing my cheek and moving my hair away from my shoulders. The touch was so light and intimate I had to remind myself to draw breath again. “You’re the Count’s new ward.”

I loathed those words. As though I belonged to him. A sharp reminder of how indebted I was to the Count’s kindness.

Eyes flashing, I lifted my chin. “I belong to no man. I’m only here because of a mutually beneficial agreement.” I paused, trying to find the right words to convey my need. Explaining about my father’s death and the debtors seemed too personal. I’d spent the past year grieving and now I wished to honor my father using music, just as my mother had. “The Count has given me a home and in exchange I dance in his theater, but my true wish is to sing, to hold an audience. If I become good enough, I can leave High Tower and support myself. If I don’t, the Count will arrange a marriage and send me away.”

The man reached for me, fingers closing around my wrist as he pulled me toward the middle of the room. “You do not wish an arranged marriage?”

My lips trembled. “It brings nothing but unhappiness.”

“And you believe singing will bring you happiness?” He led me down the three steps to the very center of the tower.

A swirl of lines and shapes were etched into the floor, chipped into the grooves of the stone circle. A mist hovered above us, and while I disliked the personal questions the man asked, I sensed it was part of the negotiation.

“Yes, singing will allow me to control my own destiny.” I thought of the debtors who took everything after father died, of Count Zorik and his chilling words regarding a marriage, should I choose to leave High Tower.

The man spoke again, this time his voice rich, powerful. “I admit, you do have a gift, but you know not what you ask. You should leave High Tower, seek your fortune elsewhere, and never think of this place again. Never come back.”

I blinked and swallowed hard. I’d thought he was about to offer me a deal. Could I not persuade this man?

“What do you want?” I begged. “Whatever it is, we can come to an agreement. I just want to sing, it’s all I ever wanted. My father taught me before he died, but it wasn’t enough... If you would but help me, I will find the means to pay you!”

Panic clawed up my throat as I recalled the heavy weight draining my hope and happiness away. Nightmares rose to choke me and screams died in my throat as fear overrode reason. It all went away when I sang. I couldn’t explain it, but singing was power, the pull, the thrill of the audience. If I had that, I’d never be destitute again, living in squalor, begging for scraps until I was found by the guards and delivered to the Count.

My twenty-first name day had come and gone. Although I was safe, it was not guaranteed. The very thought of marriage made my stomach clench. If I did not sing, could not earn my place, I’d be gone come spring.

“Please,” I clasped my hands in front of me. “Music is all I have, it’s the only thing that brings me joy. They will send me

away and I don't want to be sold like some animal, to a high lord to produce heirs and sit at court. You don't know what it's like!"

Tears of frustration and fear made my voice tremble, and I swiped at my face with the back of my hands to keep those precious tears from falling. I would not be weak in front of the ferocious man when he might be my only chance.

He faced me again, moving so close I tasted his breath against my lips. "What would you give to stay here and sing?"

"Anything." Defiance laced my words as I lifted my chin, daring him to tell me no again.

"No matter what may happen?"

"No matter what," I echoed, although the back of my scalp prickled. Father always warned me never to make a promise without knowing the details, but I'd done just that, for this man would teach me how to sing. This man would help me turn music into magic.

He held out his hand. "Then we have an agreement..." He paused. "Your name?"

"Aria," I slipped my hand into his. His breath was warm, but his hand was cold, sending yet another fluttering sensation through my veins.

"Call me Uriah. Return here tomorrow night and your lessons will begin."

Fate mocked me. Ironic, how the dancer I'd admired in the theater appeared on my doorstep. I watched her leave, black hair flying as she spurred the horse down the hill, back toward the flickering lights of the town, back to High Tower Castle and safety. Even though there was no need for concern, I followed her until she crossed the bridge out of my domain. Squeezing my hands into fists, I stood still long after she'd gone, letting the vapid mist sink through my skin, leaving me cold and clammy. It was uncanny how quickly she'd responded to the call. It had been years since I'd been willing to try again, especially after what had happened last time. Still, a flicker of doubt made me wonder if I should proceed with my plan or let matters lie. Nay, it had been too long; it was time for vengeance.

Still musing, I made my way through the silent wood back toward the tower. Although I'd heard the Count sought performers for his theater, I'd forgotten about his new ward. She wasn't what I'd expected. Tall and beautiful with raven hair, gentle curves and those sharp brown eyes, full of life and defiance. I'd tried to frighten her, but she'd displayed her true spirit. Her resolve was unwavering. When I'd pressed up against her, I sensed there was more, a depth of pain or sorrow she kept hidden, yet it lingered under the surface. Which meant she was an ideal student for my designs. Magic needed to cling to a strong emotion to work, and her sorrow would allow me to imbue her with music and magic.

I'd made sure to have her stand in the circle when she'd made the agreement to give me anything. Anything.

An owl hooted in the wood, reminding me of the past, reminding me of what could be if I went forward with my plan. It was her choice, and I had to admit her tenaciousness and lack of fear tempted me. In fact, she'd laughed at the idea of a haunted tower. A smile touched my lips, quickly fading when I recalled what I had to do. Despite my loneliness and longing for companionship, I had to be careful for the situation was fragile. My emotions could not cloud my judgement, and so I banished all thoughts of taking her as my lover. Learning the music of the night would destroy her, but it was a chance I had to take.

Enough blood stained my hands. I had to end it all, take my revenge before he grew strong again.

With a heavy heart, I returned to the tower and opened the trap door. The underground lagoon had once been a mine and a passageway between my tower and High Tower Castle. Back then, a beast haunted the waters, eating the miners who worked there and anyone else brave enough to venture to the watery grave. But the tunnels had since flooded, and the monster had gone to seek food elsewhere.

Kneeling, I pressed my hand against the water and hummed a tune, letting the vibrations roll outward. It was dangerous, calling monsters with the power of song, but I'd set the events in motion this evening, I had to follow through to the hopeful conclusion.

After a few beats I stood, wiping my wet hand on my pants and climbed the ladder back to the warmth of my lair. Straightening, I eyed the spiraling staircase and ripped off the cloth covering my scars. It was time to write a new song, the best song, combining the heights of my musical prowess into something the orchestra would play for me, and I'd sing. Nay. We'd sing. Together.

Grim smile on my face and faint hope stirring within, I climbed the stairs to compose a melody for Aria to sing.

“**D**ead?” I asked Kita, the maid who helped me undress.

When I snuck back inside the castle, after leaving the horse in the stables, Kita had dragged me to my room, bursting with news of what had caused the screams in the theater. A fire roared and my tea was cooling, but Samara was nowhere to be found. My relief at the success of my dangerous adventure transformed into fear, and a thread of unease shivered down my back. Dead. Nay, killed.

“Yes,” Kita whispered, too distraught about the sudden death to notice my torn, muddy costume. “One of the servants was having an affair with Lady Tremain, can you imagine? A lady having an affair with a commoner? She claims it was love, but you know how the ladies are. They’ll do anything for a night of pleasure. Anyway, she went to find him, and he was behind the stage. Not where the dancers stay, mind you, but with the pulley system, still holding the rope, eyes wide open, drained of blood.”

“Blood?” My throat went thick. What kind of creature drank blood?

“Everyone is in an uproar. Some say the creature that killed him is still in the castle. Others swear they saw it slink out one of the back doors, covered in blood and grime, but no one got a good look at it. The lords and ladies think it’s all an elaborate joke, part of the performance to frighten them.”

“What do you think?”

Kita's voice shook as she replied. "I don't know what to think. I've never been so frightened in my life. What if the creature is still here and comes for one of us? Madame Blu said to bolt your door at night and don't go anywhere alone."

I covered my mouth with my hand to keep my next words from bursting out. I intended to travel alone every night, for I needed those lessons. Unless I could persuade Uriah to come to me, but my cozy room with the large fireplace, high window and wide bed was an inappropriate place for lessons and would likely lead to sordid temptations. I shivered, but not from the cold.

Kita soon left me alone with my secret, and after a quick bath, I pulled on my nightgown and burrowed under layers of fur to sleep. High Tower Castle kept odd hours. Since Count Zorik owned the theater, the performers, lords and ladies were often up late. Heavy curtains covered my window to keep the light out, for I slept most of the day. Not that High Tower ever experienced pure, unfiltered sunshine. The grayness left me feeling dull during the daytime, and the entire castle had adapted to nightlife, only creeping to bed during the wee hours before dawn.

Closing my eyes, I sensed the tension of what had happened that night hover over the castle like the fog outside. Dead. Drained of blood. Did Kita speak the truth or had she exaggerated? I needed to speak to someone who wasn't flighty like Kita or superstitious like Samara. Tomorrow, I'd seek Madame Blu, the woman in charge of the castle and the theater.

Sleep captured me quickly, dragging me down under the weight of dreams. Sometime in the night I became aware of a presence, a hulking, vague shadow in my room. It leaned over the bed and watched me sleep. My heart raced and I struggled to open my eyes, to look my nightmare in the face and render it powerless. But my eyes wouldn't open and my limbs were heavy, as though I lay in death. I couldn't wake, wouldn't wake, no matter how I fought and struggled.

My heart throbbed and my breath turned labored. Why couldn't I move? The shadow would harm me if I lay still,

accepting its intrusion. Would it eat me in my sleep? Drain me of blood? As though sensing my fears, the bed dipped with added weight. My fur blankets were pulled back, sending a wave of cool air over my skin. Despite it, sweat drenched my nightgown, pressing it flat against my body.

A combination of cold and fear made my nipples peak and ache. The nightgown twisted around my thighs while something wild and feral sniffed at me. A body pressed against mine, an arm pushed my shoulders down, holding me still—as if I had the ability to move—while the other hand pulled up my nightgown to reveal that secret spot, that hidden place. A cold hand touched my hip and my body arched, a hiss leaving my lips as the heated breath of that presence whispered. *Sing, Lady Aria. Sing for your life.*

My own scream woke me and I tumbled out of the bed, shaking away the tangled covers as I crawled toward the window. In one movement I flung the curtains open, sending a stream of steady gray light into the room. I spun, eyes watering. But there was no one. Nothing. I was alone, frightened by nothing more than a nightmare. I pressed one hand to my racing heart and shook my head, forcing a laugh from my lips. How silly of me, to be cowed by only a dream. Still, the haunted phrase stuck with me. *Sing, Lady Aria. Sing for your life.*

It was just after mid-day and hours before the evening performance, but I couldn't bring myself to stay in my room, tainted by my dark dream. I dressed quickly, peeking out the window now and then, hoping for another glimpse of the tower to remind me last night hadn't been my imagination. Sure enough, the mist cleared enough to offer me another glimpse. In the light, the tower appeared more threatening than I recalled, and my curious thoughts drifted to Uriah. Where had he come from, and why did he dwell alone—I assumed—in the tower? What was his work? Why did he play that sorrowful music each evening?

Tonight, if pressed, would he reveal more of the mystery of himself to me? Or would he stick to lessons? I wondered how long it would take until I was able to coax the flowers to

bloom with the power of my voice. I imagined Count Zorik's reaction and the lords and ladies riveted in awe as I created life with my song.

Walking the cold halls of the castle and shivering at the thought of a monster hiding in the shadows, I went in search of Madame Blu. Gas lights lit the halls and a rosy aura glowed, an aura that left me thinking of blood. High Tower Castle was an old building with many wings and rooms and hidden passageways I'd yet to explore. Plenty of places for monsters to hide, to lie in wait for those who walked the halls alone.

I found Madame Blu in the chambers where the performers gathered. The chorus practiced their song; the musicians warmed up their instruments and the dancers stretched and wrapped their ankles in cloth to keep them from turning. I rarely joined them, for I cared not for the merriment and Samara provided all the gossip. Now that my initial curtain of grief had faded to a dull ache, I decided I should join them more often. Voices died away when I entered, and they shot curious glances in my direction.

I waved a hand in embarrassment. "Carry on and please, ignore me," I begged.

Madame Blu bustled toward me, her round face and rosy cheeks lit up in a smile. Her stature was generous, and she often lamented about how much she loved the sweets from the kitchen, yet they did nothing to flatter her figure. She was the kindest person in the castle, at least toward me. When she reached me, she wrapped me in a gentle hug. She smelled like cinnamon.

I took a deep breath and returned the smile, but she was already talking in her low, raspy voice. "Aria, look at you, you poor thing. You must be worried sick over what happened after last night's performance. I should have sent for you immediately, but we were overwhelmed. Where is dear Samara? I sent her to your room not two minutes ago, I'll have someone call her back." She turned and waved frantically at another maid. "Kita, be a dear and go fetch Samara, tell her Lady Aria has honored us by joining us backstage." She steered me across the room and planted me on a stool in front

of a mirror. “You look so thin, Aria,” she pinched my arm and wagged her head. “You need to eat more, and your eyes look so large and sad. Are you getting enough sleep? I know it’s hard with the chaos here, but I’ll have Maria prepare a sleeping draught. That ought to help.”

“Madame Blu,” I protested as she began to arrange my hair. “It is quite unnecessary. I only wanted to ask if there will be different arrangements in the castle. Because of what happened? Do you think it was a creature of the night?”

Madame Blu scoffed. “Creature of the night. Who told you that? I’ll have you know the castle has been searched high and low, and additional guards will be stationed around the entryways at night. What happened last night will never happen again, so don’t you fret.”

Fret? I couldn’t help but fret. With additional guards around the entryways, how would I get in and out unseen?

“No, don’t furrow your brow, that’s how you get wrinkles.” She finished my hair, a mass of waves pulled back from my face and sweeping down my back. “Samara will be along shortly, we’ve had a bit of a costume change. I was against it from the start, but you know how the Count feels about my opinions.” She gave my shoulder a motherly squeeze.

I grabbed her hand before she could walk away. “Can you keep a secret?”

“A secret?” her eyes sparkled, and she leaned closer. “Whatever is the matter, dear?”

“After the performance, I have to sneak out... To see someone?”

She covered her mouth with her hand and wiggled her eyebrows. “Oh, a secret admirer. Do tell.”

“I can’t,” I pressed my hands together and widened my eyes. “But I need a way to get in and out, unseen.”

Madame Blu put her hands on her hips. “You are asking for me to put your life in danger. I don’t like it.”

“It’s for a good reason.” I took a deep breath, hoping I wasn’t wrong to confide in her. “I found an instructor, someone to teach me to sing. My voice isn’t good enough, and I want to gain the lead.” I didn’t mention leaving. It seemed wrong to talk about leaving High Tower Castle when it was her home.

Madame Blu sighed dramatically. “Lady Aria, you have high aspirations. Of course, I want to see you succeed, but...” She shook her head. “You put me in an impossible position. I’ll help you, but if we so much as hear any more rumors about night creatures, no more going out for you.”

I clasped her hand, a shaky laugh escaping my lips. “I promise.”

T rue to her word, Madame Blu helped me escape unseen that evening. After the performance, she handed me a cloak and led me through a corridor I hadn't known about. A horse was saddled and once again I raced through the night, a mix of wonder and anxiety twisting in my stomach. Lantern light guided me, and when I arrived, I dismounted and tied the horse to a lone stump. Padding across the dirt path in my slippered feet, I listened for a sound, but tonight the tower was silent.

The double doors swung open, and Uriah appeared like a ghost, candlelight illuminating his silhouette. I took a deep breath for he was just as hauntingly attractive as the evening before, and the halo of light made him look like a dark angel. Clasp my hands together, I whispered a prayer. I was here to learn the magic of music, nothing more, no matter how dark and curious and tormented my instructor was. As I approached, I sensed a new air to him. Instead of pants and an open shirt, he'd dressed in full attire, as though he were one of the lords who attended the theater. His unruly black hair was brushed straight back, but half his face was still covered with the cloth, folded and tied tightly around one eye, a spiderweb of faint scarring peeking out from the edges. I wanted to know what happened to him, but it would be too forward of me to ask during my first lesson.

"You returned," he observed, standing to the side as I entered, unable to keep my eyes off him.

He did not seem as fearsome as the evening before, yet there was still something about his presence that tantalized me. Even though the tower was bright, he was clad in shadows. A sudden reminder of my dream came to me and my face warmed. Turning away from his piercing gaze, I noticed the room had changed. The roses from the previous night were gone, leaving just candles forming two circles.

The hollow boom of the doors clanging shut made me jump. There was no going back. Even though my heart thumped, I would show him no fear. I'd show him I was ready, no matter what he asked.

“We had a deal,” I said, wondering why I suddenly felt shy.

“That we do,” he said matter-of-factly. “Have you warmed up?”

I shook my head, and my fingers went to my cloak. I hadn't had a moment to change after the performance and still wore the gown with bells at the waist and sheer silk covering my legs. In the low light of the theater, it was hard to see, yet it was far too inappropriate for my instruction with Uriah.

Still, he held out his hand to take my cloak and hung it on a hook near the door. Moving to a table, he poured a drink. “Here. It is a cool night out. If you wish to become an exceptional singer, you need to protect your voice.”

A drink, a slow way to poison someone, but would Uriah do so to me? During the very first lesson? Shaking off the undesirable thought, I took the cup. My fingers grazed his, sending a thrill through me. The liquid tasted like warm water, with a hint of sweet honey and sour lemon. Warmth replaced the chill of my ride and I offered Uriah a slight smile, hoping to lighten the mood as I returned the cup to him. He ignored it.

“Stand in the middle.” He pointed to the circle in the heart of the tower.

Obediently I glided to it, wondering what the designs carved into the stone meant.

“Sing,” he instructed.

This was not at all how I envisioned it. Clearing my throat, I opened my mouth, and a tune came out. The same song that had been sung at the performance earlier. It was a complicated piece with high thrills and long, drawn out notes. I stumbled over a verse and when I reached the chorus, my voice caught and cracked, then faded away as shame overwhelmed me. What was I thinking? This was folly, wasn't it? To have a strange man teach me the magic of music in the heart of night?

Before I could blink, he was in front of me, lifting my chin to force me to meet his gaze. "You are still cold." He touched my neck, massaging my muscles. "You need to warm up properly to let the music flow."

His proximity and the way he lifted my face to his was akin to the way lovers stood before kissing. A strange flutter in my heart distracted me and arousal pooled deep in my belly. I caught my breath as he continued to knead my neck. Of course, he would not kiss me, he was merely instructing me.

"You must relax, there's too much tension in your muscles. Now stand tall, proud. You are in control of the sound, the music. Be confident. Only then will the music soar from you. Now, with me."

He began to hum, a low note which steadily climbed. I copied him and together our voices rose and fell, high and low, just like a dance with two partners.

"Good, now we move to the next phase. Open your mouth."

I gasped but obeyed as he moved behind me, pressing one hand against my belly.

"Wider." His rich voice was right next to my ear. "When you sing, your music comes from your chest, but it needs to flow from your belly. It needs to come from the depths of your being if you wish to command the music of the night. Feel it welling up inside you. Now, close your eyes, and sing."

Just as suddenly he let go and moved away, leaving me standing alone in the center, eyes closed, a wordless song pouring out of me.

“Better,” he praised. “Can you hear the difference?”

Opening my eyes, I nodded, pleased by the ability to increase the volume and richness of my voice with such simple steps.

“With me.” He moved in front of me, this time a proper distance away and began to sing.

He guided me with his voice, his warm tones beautiful and intoxicating like the sweetest wines. I could not tear my eyes away, for his voice inspired my lacking confidence and imbued me with music. For the first time, I sensed my gift in the pit of my belly, growing like an unfurling bud. My voice no longer shook, the cracks faded away and sweet, smooth music rolled out from under my tongue. It was as easy as breathing.

I did not know how long we sang, but when at last he held up a hand, I felt as light as a feather. Breathless, I pressed a hand to my stomach and stared at him. A laugh burst from my lips. “That was marvelous! I’ve never been able to sing like that.” I spun around. “How did you do it?”

He flushed and turned away. “It is within you.” He handed me more water. “Drink. Take a moment and we will begin again.”

Suddenly aware of how thirsty I was, I drank, and then we sang again. Each note was pure and spirited with a life of its own. Song echoed around us until I had the distinct feeling we were feeding something, helping it grow in strength as we sang. I tasted a glimpse of that power for just like he said it was inside me, and it was he who revealed it. Under his instruction the music flowed out of me, although he did not make it easy. He pushed me to reach high notes I’d never reached before, to hold a note until I thought I would explode. I sang until the candles blurred into a haze and the tower seemed to tip and swirl.

“Rest,” Uriah said.

I took a breath, but there was no air, and suddenly I was falling. He caught me before I hit the floor and lowered me

down, cradling my head in his arms. “Rest.” His voice softened as he placed one hand on my heart. “The magic is strong within you, but it demands too much. Don’t give in to it, fight it, and the weariness will pass.”

I nodded without speaking, my eyelids shuttering close. Vaguely I knew that I should free myself from his hold, yet he held me firmly against his body and nothing within me wanted to leave his embrace. What did that say about me? My chest rose and fell under his warm hand, while his fingertips brushed my hair away from my neck. When the spinning stopped, I opened my eyes, surprised to see how close his face was to mine. My breath hitched, but he moved away, helping me to my feet and then relinquishing all contact.

Just when I thought he was opening to me, he turned away. “It is late, you should go now.”

Swallowing hard, I went to the door and pulled on my cloak, repressing a wave of disappointment. The moment had broken, just when I thought he might be comfortable enough to talk to me. But Uriah wasn’t my friend, just an instructor.

Blinking hard, I turned toward the door, then paused. “When should I return?”

“Practice,” he called over his shoulder. “And return one week from now.”

My spirits dampened. Despite the success of my first lesson, I took my leave.

A week! I couldn't believe it. I climbed into bed, my fingers touching my throat as he had. How could I go a week without seeing him? Would I retain what I had learned? I wanted to practice right then and there, but I forced myself to lay still, to breathe in and out until I fell asleep. I slept without dreams, only to wake when a mournful melody broke my sleep. Heart racing, I slid out of bed.

The hidden sunset cast a rosy aura across the land, and even as I unlatched the window, I heard the rawness, the pain and the loneliness of that song. The organ swelled, carried by a gentle breeze, echoed by the waves. I closed my eyes and let the music in, basking in that hum, swallowing each uncanny emotion the music delivered. As I listened, I began to understand it as though it were an echo of emotion, internal screaming and heart-throbbing loneliness. When the song ended, I found my face wet with tears.

A tap on the door interrupted my solitude, and Samara poked her head in. "I hoped you'd be down in the dressing room with the others again," she slipped inside, depositing my meal on the vanity and moved to the wardrobe. "Madame Blu said you had a late night, and to let you sleep." Her eyebrows wiggled as she studied me.

"Madame Blu needs to learn how to hold her tongue," I retorted. I had no intention of sharing my whereabouts, especially since my secret sent tingles through my veins and set a spark of hope in my heart. If everyone knew about it, the

magic would be gone and I might not be allowed to leave again. And I desperately needed those lessons.

“Secrets,” Samara tsked, but I detected a playful hint in her tone. “I will get it out of you one day. My guess is that you’ve taken on a lover.”

I slumped in front of my meal with a groan. It was not uncommon for the singers to take lovers, nor the lords or ladies. And no one would mind if I did, since I was a lady of no means, no wealth. “I wish, but I can’t be tempted to stay in High Tower.” My thoughts went to Uriah, the touch of his rough fingers on my neck, gentle and yet so much more. I shifted my weight and clamped my mouth shut, determined to say no more.

“Oh, I see,” Samara giggled. “Keep your secret, then. I’ll find out, one way or another. You should let me know though, I’ll bring you a tea and herbs to keep you safe from lover’s curse. By the way, before the performance, the Count wants to see you.”

My back went rigid, and I froze, fork in midair. “Why?” I demanded, questions colliding and muddling with each other. Did he have news? Had he arranged a marriage and sought to get rid of me?

Samara shrugged. “He did not tell me, but it did not sound like he found you a husband, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

It was. She knew. They all knew. I could not dance for my living forever and be a burden on Zorik’s charity. It was too early to perform for him, but I had to tell him, had to let him know I had a solution. All I needed was time.

I ate as much as I could, although the roast meat and potatoes stuck in my throat. Dressing for the evening, I followed Samara through the low-lit halls of the castle. It was cold outside of my room, away from the warmth of the fire. The fingers of winter were descending, reminding me of my first winter in High Tower Castle. Snow and ice hung off the rooftops, leaving the stones slick and the bay frozen. The fog was thicker than ever, visibility so bad I often could not see

even the bay, yet the glimmer of white made the land appear brighter.

Count Zorik's audience chamber was much warmer than my rooms. Expensive fur-lined rugs and red drapery covered the windows, and a roaring fireplace took up one side of the room. Hints of amber and spice hung in the air, meant to tempt my senses and help me relax. Zorik sat at his desk, signing papers with a black feathered pen. I glimpsed his signature stamp, a blood-red emblem. I swallowed hard, reminded again of the man who'd been found drained of blood. The theater seemed to have recovered from the incident rather quickly. Other than hushed whispers, no one spoke about what had happened.

Zorik noticed me hovering in the doorway and, with a smile, waved me inside. He was a handsome man, a head and shoulders taller than I with a slim figure, pale skin, shoulder-length chestnut hair and sharp green eyes. I assumed he was about ten years my senior, for he had a youthful appearance but carried himself with an authority befitting his station. We were only distantly related—enough for him to take pity on me—yet sometimes when he studied me, I wondered if he thought of me as a single woman, ripe for marriage. I shouldn't be concerned by that—should be flattered—for he was rich, handsome, single and desirable.

Still, he had no loyalty to any woman. I'd seen his mistresses, and they changed as easily as he changed clothes, toying with one lady's affections and then casting her aside for another. If I married at all, I intended to marry a man I loved who was loyal to me. Perhaps that was the very reason Zorik hadn't married. He was more than happy with his dalliances and distractions. Besides, he ran a thriving theater despite the constant gloom that overshadowed High Tower Castle.

“Lady Aria.” He lay his pen aside. “Come, sit.”

I was in my dancing clothes for the performance and the bells around my waist rattled as I moved. Clasp my hands in front of me, I made my way to the couch and perched on the edge.

“Count Zorik.” I bowed my head, acknowledging the authority of his title.

He laughed as he joined me, sitting so close, our knees touched. His smile made the dimples on his cheeks appear but a strange aura surrounded him. “Aria, there’s no need to stand on ceremony, it’s just us.”

I met his gaze and his eyes narrowed keenly as he assessed me, then took my hand in his.

“I’m told you wanted to see me?” I said, unable to keep the worried catch out of my voice.

“Yes, for two reasons.” He rubbed my knuckles with the pads of his thumb, yet his eyes demanded my attention. Gold flecks appeared in one eye, making me flinch. I instantly regretted it as his brows narrowed. “You don’t have to be afraid of me,” he chuckled. “I only asked that you come here because of the nasty business that happened in the castle the evening before. The servants talk, is all, and I want to assuage your worries. You are safe in this castle. Besides, I haven’t forgotten about our arrangement.”

“Zorik,” I cut in, wishing I could snatch my hand away from his. The way he stroked my fingers made my skin crawl. It differed from Uriah’s gentle touch. I frowned, wishing I wouldn’t think of my instructor in such a forbidden way. “I want you to know I intend on honoring our agreement. I found an instructor to teach me, and I am practicing. I hope to sing for you before the month is out, and hold an audience, as Siobhan does.”

I would be successful, captivate the audience with my music, and then leave High Tower Castle to return to a world where the sun shone, and the plants grew green and wild.

“Please, don’t arrange a marriage for me,” I implored.

His eyes lit up, and then he threw back his head and laughed. It was short, shallow and rough, as though he did not quite like what I said but needed a reaction to gather himself. “You are full of surprises, aren’t you? Carry on with the lessons. I assume there is no expense to me?”

When I shook my head, he released my hand and rose. “Good. I had a slightly different proposal for you, but we shall see, in time. In a month, I’d like to hear the progress you’ve made. I’m sure Siobhan will not mind sharing the spotlight.”

She would, and we both knew it. But she often complained about how her voice was hoarse from night after night of singing. Surely she would allow me one night? It would be a battle to face later, but at least I had the Count’s ear.

“Is that all?” I stood, aware of the passing time.

“Yes, yes. Good luck tonight.” His charismatic smile showed off his full white teeth and the sparkle in his eyes.

I hastened to the door, relief seeping through me. Just as I pulled it open, he spoke again. “Lady Aria, you are growing into a beautiful woman. You would make a lovely bride.”

His voice dipped lower. Was it a warning? Or something else? I didn’t want to find out. Pretending I hadn’t heard, I hastened down the echoing halls to the theater.

That night I tossed and turned in bed, muscles sore from dancing and thoughts drifting to Uriah in his tower. Did he lie awake at night like I did? Was he lonely, longing for more than just his music? Was he glad I came to him for lessons, despite his fury that first night? Who was he? Had he always been in the tower? I didn’t think so, but I wouldn’t know. I’d only been at High Tower for a year. I thought back to the eve of my twentieth birthday and shivered. That was the day the Count’s men had come to Solynn and rescued me. Again I recalled Zorik’s taunting words, and they followed me into my dreams.

I stood on the stage, while the audience watched me, tittering behind their hands. I opened my mouth to sing, and a cloud rolled out of my throat, filling the air. I waved my hands to snatch it back, but it continued to roll while the audience pointed and laughed.

Fool! They cried. You cannot sing. Go back to dancing!

Zorik’s mocking eyes held mine as he stood and held out his hands. Something glinted in his palm. A ring! Terror filled my body when I saw it, like nothing I’d felt before. A

numbness came over me and I knew what he would say before he spoke. *Lady Aria, you may dance but you cannot sing. Become my wife, and your debt will be fulfilled.*

I opened my mouth to reply and suddenly the scent of sandalwood and candle wax arrested my senses. Two arms held me tight against a broad, hard chest. His lips against my ear, whispering. *Sing. Lady Aria. Sing for your life.*

The eve of my next lesson was colder than before. The nights of performing had ended for that month, giving the entire ensemble a couple of weeks off. Our next production would be a tenacious dance and strenuous number to sing. I doubted I would be ready to sing for such an event, but I would try my best. My dark dreams haunted me, and I was more than happy to bundle up and set off for the tower. Snowflakes twirled in the air as I rode Beauty, the black horse. Her shoes had been changed to protect me against the ice on the bridge. I didn't know whose doing it was, but I suspected Madame Blu played a hand in the luck that followed me.

I left earlier than usual, determined to reach the tower before the music began. I wanted to see Uriah play, if indeed he was the master behind the raw tones of the organ. I didn't think he'd like me to catch him in the act, but if nothing else, I wanted to feel the vibrations of the music while he played.

By the time I crossed the bridge and moved up the sloping hill, the music had started. One slow, high note followed by others. I squeezed my legs around Beauty's back, urging her to move faster. We trotted up to the tower together, and I swung off her back, then covered her with a blanket. Momentarily I felt bad for leaving her out in the weather when she was used to the warm barn. But I would return soon enough. Since it wasn't a performance night, I'd been able to bundle up appropriately, my hands covered in gloves, a thick scarf around my neck and a warm hat on my head. I moved across

the dead ground and my boots rang out, making a jarring sound as I crossed onto the pavement. I paused as I touched the door, briefly wondering if it would be locked and I'd be forced to stand outside, hopping from foot to foot while he played.

I pushed. The door swung open, and music blasted.

Invisible fingers pulled me into the room and spun me around, closing the door behind me. My hat was tugged off my head and my scarf unwound. Before I quite knew what had happened, I stood in the middle of the room, while the candles danced. It was in that moment I knew there was something in the tower, something very much alive. But I did not know whether what had awakened was compelled by the music or something else. Unease went down my spine, and I couldn't shake the sensation that I was trespassing.

The music continued, the pace growing frantic while I stood in the center of the circle, my eyes on the staircase. The candles were lit, as usual, and yet seemed to float. Slender white candles alight with a pale yellow glow. Red and pink rose petals covered the floor, slightly curled as though they started to dry up and then thought the better of it. Thick vines grew around the stones, ivy that wound its way up, twisting around the staircase.

My breath caught as I watched those vines, for they moved like snakes, gliding and sliding in undulating waves, up and down the stairs, clinging to the walls, watching me with dark mistrusting eyes.

I clutched my arms around my waist and wished I hadn't come. The tower was haunted and foreboding without Uriah there to tame it. The music which seemed so sensual and beautiful from afar seemed to watch, to keep guard, to make the tower alert. Yes, that's what it was. The very walls were alive and breathing.

I tried to calm myself, tried to breathe, but my eyes were pulled again and again to the staircase. What if I took a risk and climbed them? What if I saw Uriah play? No sooner had the thought grown in my mind, I heard another note. His

voice. It was low and wild, heart-wrenchingly beautiful. The knots in my belly loosened. I lifted my arms and rose on my toes as best I could in my thick-soled boots. Music swirled like the waves of the ocean until I was no longer in command of my own body. I spun, I twirled, and my feet moved to the rhythm. I danced to the music, a song of longing and loneliness, a sentiment I could echo, of bondage, of a thirst for release... Knowing it would never happen.

I opened my mouth, and my voice sprang out, high and wild like the cry of a beast. I arched my body, rising and falling with the music, while my voice did the same. The grip of night fell over the tower like a blanket, and only the candlelight remained. The music faded, and I collapsed on the stone to catch my breath.

It was silent. The madness that took over the tower had ended. The spell that had captivated me loosened its hold, and the compulsion to sing and dance faded away. I took deep shuddering breaths to calm myself. My hair hung in loose waves, my clothes were disheveled, and at some point, I'd tossed my cloak aside. It lay on the stairs, covered in petals.

“You came.”

Those two words sent a shiver of excitement racing through my veins. Warmth spread through my lower belly as I rose to my feet and turned to greet him. He stood on the stairs like a statue, eyes wide, lips slightly parted as he stared at me. His white shirt was open, sleeves rolled up and his dark hair unruly. I glimpsed the rawness of his emotion before he clenched his jaw, hiding his surprise. Yet there was no anger in his movements, only caution.

Brushing my hair away from my face, I swallowed. “Yes. It is the date. One week from the last lesson.”

He glanced around the room as though searching for something. “So it is, but you are early.”

“I...” Well, there was no use lying to him. “I wanted to hear you play. The music compelled me.”

His eyebrows arched up, and he studied me, a rosy glow appearing on his cheeks. Or perhaps it was just the flicker of flame. “And you are... well?”

Well? Aside from the breathless fluttering sensation in my chest I felt fine. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He moved down another step until he stood on the main level, and yet he appeared hesitant to approach me. Was he suddenly shy because I’d been in the tower while he played?

“It felt alive,” I said, attempting to dispel the awkwardness in the air. “Like it controlled some part of me. I wanted to sing and dance endlessly while it played. It is magic, isn’t it?”

I expected a reaction from him, but he shook his head. “No, and yes. I admit I am surprised the music allowed you to enter, that it did not destroy you. It isn’t meant for mortals.”

Mortals? I shifted, suddenly it was cold in the room and I hugged my arms to myself. “What do you mean? I hear the music every evening.”

“Most do.” He moved nearer. “It doesn’t frighten you, but it should. Do you come to sing or because you are curious about me?” He pressed his hand to his heart and glided nearer until he towered over me.

Sandalwood and candle wax filled the air along with a hint of cinnamon. And was that cloves? My lips parted as his presence momentarily stunned me into silence. It was like a shadowed cloak wrapped around me, pulled me in, dragging me deeper and I wanted, nay, craved to know the depths of who he was, to peel back layers of mystery and gain answers. Although deep down I knew it did not matter who my instructor was, only that he taught me.

“I’m curious,” I admitted. “You’re mysterious. I’d like to know more about my instructor.”

His eye hardened as a frown slid over his face, hiding the confusion and embarrassment I’d seen earlier. When he spoke it was gruff, distant, as though I’d crossed an unknown barrier with my words. “Does it matter?” he demanded.

I bit my bottom lip and stepped back, putting more space between us. “Nay.”

But he went on. “What do you know about the town of High Tower? Of the tragedy that struck? Of the lure of the theater and the spell that music weaves around us all? Do you ever wonder why Count Zorik seeks to entertain? He wants the people to forget what happened, leave the past behind and focus only on the future.” A bitter laugh broke from his throat. “Am I the only one who remembers?”

I studied him, the hunch of his broad shoulders, the scarring around his hidden eye. A tragedy? I’d been so wrapped up in my grief I had not considered the history of High Tower. No one spoke of the past, only of the theater and music and the exciting galas. But Uriah knew more. Did he think me spoiled and stupid to yearn to do nothing more than sing? Did he judge my lust for the applause of an audience and to aspire to greatness?

Blinking hard, I swallowed down my insecurity. “Will you tell me?”

He pursed his lips. “I suppose it would be better to hear from me than the gossip that floats around High Tower Castle. It is not that I am angry with you, Aria.”

The way he spoke my name was like the sweetest note and something within me gave. I thought again of Count Zorik’s words, the way he placed his hand on mine as though I were a possession and belonged to him to do with as he pleased. It repulsed me and yet I couldn’t help but want Uriah to step closer, to touch me. I would relish his caress, his attention. Perhaps that was why I sought him out. I gravitated toward the dark and mysterious, and he was just that. Heat flamed my cheeks as reminders of my sensual dreams came to me, along with the knowledge that if Uriah entered my chambers while I slept, I’d welcome him.

Uriah’s quiet voice interrupted my thoughts. “Time for conversation will come later, but since you are here, let us begin.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

At his bidding, I stepped into the circle and began to sing.

Her presence had taken me off guard, and the truth almost slipped from my lips. Her eyes had darkened as she considered my words and yet instead of retreating, she stayed to learn. We sang together, and the outpouring of magic left me weary. I sent her away early, watching, once again, to ensure she returned to High Tower Castle in safety before returning to muse. What should I tell her about the past? The truth seemed so far-fetched I hardly believed it at times. Yet my soul reached out, wanting to speak, share and bond with her. I'd locked myself up for far too long. Perhaps it would ease my soul to have a friend, someone I could speak openly with, to allow myself to feel the depth of an emotion other than pain.

She kept coming and my attempts to keep her at a distance grew weaker. Each week she arrived like a breath of fresh air come to brighten my lonely evenings. I gave her magic and she sang, her voice growing stronger with each lesson.

Until, one day, she returned three days after her lesson instead of letting a full week pass by. I heard the telling thump of the horse trotting through the wood and then her calm tones as she soothed it, promising to return. She knocked at the door and I whispered a spell, allowing it to open and let her in. Whenever she entered, the air shifted with vibrance, for she was full of light and life. She was a beacon of sunshine, and although I wanted to hold her at a distance, to hold myself back from her, she consumed my every waking thought.

Slipping the cloak from her shoulders, she hung it up as I walked down the staircase to meet her, a question in my gaze as she held up a basket.

“I know it’s too early for another lesson,” she admitted, holding the basket in front of her with both hands.

I smiled at the hopeful glimmer in her eyes. “Why did you come?”

“I brought you this.” She crossed the space between us and pressed it into my hands. “A gift for your time. It’s only been a month but I’ve already noticed an improvement.”

A gift. She’d surprised me yet again. It was clear that I’d misjudged her. Placing the basket on a nearby table, I opened it to find a jar of honey, a bottle of wine and dried meats.

“I didn’t know what you would want,” she said softly, “but it’s lonely here and I can’t imagine what you do for food. The castle has more than is needed.”

She cared, truly cared, beyond the simple exchange of a teacher and student. Stunned by her gift and thoughtfulness, I reached for her, taking her hand and then pressed it between mine. Her skin was still cool from the ride and she smelled like roses and wind. A small sound escaped her throat and then I released her.

“Come, share a meal with me,” I invited.

“No lessons today?” She breathed. “Only conversation?”

I regarded the curve of her wide lips. A sudden urge to trace them with my thumb and devour her forced me to draw my gaze away. “Only conversation,” I repeated, somewhat roughly. Turning my back to her, I struggled for control. It would be all too simple and easy to take her, and she’d undone me with her kindness.

Little did she know I often went to the castle to steal food and drink for myself. Ah, the fates laughed at me again. For a moment I was tempted to invite her upstairs to my haunted lair, but there would be no going back after that. “Sit.” I waved my hand at the room, barren of any place to sit, except the stairs. “Anywhere you like.”

I unpacked the basket, glad to distract myself by keeping my hands busy.

“How did you learn the music?” she asked, clasping her hands in front of her. “Was it something you always had?”

A dangerous question. My thoughts returned to my upbringing and my desire to have something of my own, something beautiful to create. “If one has the gift, it is always within you.”

She cocked her head, studying me. “Do you often do that?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Deflect questions. I’ve noticed you don’t like to talk about yourself.”

She was bold. “I don’t because there is not much to say.”

Biting her lower lip, she considered my words for a moment and plunged ahead. “Will you tell me what you know about High Tower then? It’s odd here, why?”

“Aye, the mists, the silence, I’m surprised anyone still lives here,” I admitted, knowing I had to choose my words carefully. “Once though, it wasn’t like this. Long ago, knights were sent here to keep the town safe, but their actions were vile and the gods cursed them with misery and pain. One by one, the people in this town died and the knights were left to eternal damnation, lest they find a way to break the curse. If you notice, there is no life here, because there is no light. Only the fish in the sea bring life here, everything else comes from trade.”

Her expression changed, her mind working as she struggled to understand the tale I weaved. “There’s something that haunts the castle, some call it a creature of the night.”

I went still. “What happened there?”

“Someone was killed.”

Killed. It was happening again. I fought to keep my expression blank as she told me about the pranks played on the

Count. Some I could take credit for, but I listened wordlessly. “Does it frighten you?”

A muscle in her face twitched. There was something else she wasn't telling me. Dropping her gaze, she shook her head. “I'm not frightened... Such incidents seem to suit this place.” She shivered. “But I plan on leaving, anyway.”

Ah. So she wished to leave. “What keeps you from leaving now?”

Her fiery dark eyes held mine and emotion blazed behind them. “I did not come to High Tower because I had a choice,” she admitted. “I only intend on staying until I learn to sing well enough to leave...to take care of myself. There are other theaters, less reputable but I can earn my keep if I can captivate an audience.”

The fever in her words allowed me to glimpse the passion in her soul. I sensed an unseen kinship between us. Sitting on the steps, I passed her dried meat and she tore strips of it off with her slim fingers, chewing slowly.

“I am certain you will succeed,” I told her, deeply aware of my need for her voice, yet disquiet rippled with the knowledge she was more than simply a pretty face, a voice to use for my wishes. She had admirable aspirations and if we continued, I'd ruin her.

She glanced at me, her sensual mouth tilting up into a smile. “What about you? Don't you want to leave this place?”

A lump grew in my throat but I swallowed down my initial response. “I have wished it many times.”

“But something keeps you here?”

Turning away I nodded. “Yes.”

She frowned. “We've had this conversation and you've essentially told me nothing, nothing about yourself, and, not much about High Tower.”

Her disappointment was clear, and I had to remind myself she was stronger than I expected. Perhaps the music would not unravel her soul. She was right though; I had told her nothing.

“Talk about yourself,” I encouraged. “We share a passion for music, but I know little about you.”

“There’s not much to say,” she retorted, almost glaring at me. I opened my mouth in surprise, but she laughed. “I supposed I’ve been very sad and gloomy since coming to High Tower. Nothing to do with this place, but with what happened before. Here it’s quiet, set away, and I need the solitude, or at least I did. Now, I’m ready, I think to find my place in the world and gather the strength to go out and seek my fortune. I was a high-born lady, before this, but those words mean nothing now. My family name is ruined, the money is gone, and I don’t want to rely on Count Zorik’s charity for the rest of my life. I suspect it comes with chains of its own, metaphorically speaking of course.” The smile was gone from her voice leaving a wistfulness. “My mother died when I was young, I don’t recall her much, except she loved to sing. She passed her gift to me and I’ve always wanted to become better, I just did not give it any thought because I had many distractions in the city. There were balls to go to and new dresses, and I had friends. We’d walk the streets, laughing and talking about nothing at all.”

Once she began speaking, it was difficult for her to stop, and yet pain swirled around her words. Something had driven her to High Tower, but she danced around that pain, wouldn’t speak of it.

“The city of Solynn is much different from here, laughter around every corner, the carriages clattering up and down the cobblestones. It was so much, the noise, the people. I liked to escape to my mother’s garden, a tiny patch of green outside the manor, and read of other places. I always wanted to travel, to see more than just the city, to experience the country, bright and beautiful, to climb the hillocks and hear my voice echo across the moors. The world is impossibly enormous and I doubt I could travel it all in a lifetime.”

Listening to the fever in her words made me realize she deserved much more than the gloomy horror of High Tower. Yet, how could I fulfill my plan and give her happiness?

“There, I’ve said too much.” She gave a shaky laugh and stood. “I should return and leave you to your work.”

Her voice went up at the end, as though asking a question. I sensed she wanted me to ask her to stay, and I both wanted her to stay and wished her to leave me alone.

“Return soon,” I bade her.

ARIA

After I surprised Uriah with the gift, the air changed between us. The shift was ever so subtle but the distance and the tension between us faded into friendship. Even though I shouldn't want him, something about him that went beyond his beautiful music, compelled me. I sensed a kindness and regret in his tone and gestures. He was more alive, more passionate than any suitor I'd courted in Solynn.

Even though it was foolish, I dreamed of him. If I left High Tower, could I persuade him to come with me? What was there for him in the tower except loneliness and misery? Was the music a worthy excuse? I determined to ask him more about his work as I snuck outside to find Beauty, saddled and waiting for me.

It had been six weeks since my first lesson, and as I rode through the silent town snowflakes whirled above my head. When the tower loomed before me, a lightness bubbled within me. For the first time since my father's passing, I had something to look forward to, someone who brought me joy.

Heart racing, I dismounted and tied up Beauty, then slipped toward the doors of the tower. As usual, they opened before me and Uriah lifted his dark head, that one eye appraising me.

"Lady Aria."

The mere sound of my name on his lips welcomed me inside. I smiled as he moved away from the plants, which

wilted as his presence left them.

“Take a moment to warm up,” he said.

Our nights of singing had fallen into a routine. I arrived and warmed up. We sang, took a break, and started again.

My gaze was drawn upward as I moved to the middle of the room, taking my place in the circle of runes. “What’s up there?” I asked, nodding to the spiraling staircase.

“So, you are curious about me,” he jested, a small smile rising on his face.

I tore my eyes away from his lips, banishing my wistful thoughts. Why was his appearance so distracting? “Yes.”

“If you must know, it is my sanctuary, where I write and practice.”

“Where you play the music that comes from the tower each night?” I added, knowing I was right. My fingers tingled like I were on the edge of discovering a secret.

He cocked his head and pressed his lips together. Something unreadable flickered in his eye. “When I first came to High Tower I took this place as my own, but it was simply a tower of rocks.”

His words were like a spell and I lifted my gaze to the floating candles, trailing vines and crystal chandeliers. I imagined nothing, nothing at all but darkness and cold, unfriendly stone.

“Go on,” I breathed.

“Rats and roaches made this place their home. I banished those foul creatures and shaped the tower into my own haven. It took time but I searched these barren shores, and built the organ I play each evening.”

I gasped. “You built it? With your own two hands?”

He rewarded me with another slight smile. “If you are determined, you can do anything.”

“It must have taken you a long time,” I sputtered. “Where did you find the materials?”

“It did, but I had nothing but time. Wood is plentiful, it was the tin for the organ pipes that took much longer.”

I stared, a new respect rising as I studied him, noting his broad shoulders and long fingers. His skill went beyond music to crafting, to taking a rough object and forming it into beauty. No wonder he was an excellent instructor. I opened my mouth to ask if he would allow me to see it, the organ piano he built with his hands, but he interrupted.

“Come. You should be warm now. Sing.”

Sing. Once again he'd pulled away just when I was learning more about him. Still, he'd opened up and shared with me, and I hoped those rare tastes of who he was would become more frequent.

Clasping my hands in front of me I stepped back into place, closed my eyes, and let the music guide me.

URIAH

“**H**ow come I never see you at the theater?” She asked one evening, after we’d finished singing.

I handed her a cup of water, surprised by the question. “I am not welcome.” A safe answer, although it was not true. When I pleased, I sought amusement at the theater, just not in the way she assumed.

Aria’s brow furrowed. “Not welcome? Have you spoken to Count Zorik? He’s in constant need for singers for his theater and you have the best voice I’ve ever heard.”

The compliment hung on her lips and I softened as her curious eyes studied me, waiting for a response. “I no longer consider myself a performer, besides, a woman always sings the lead in the theater.”

“I’ve noticed,” Aria wrinkled her nose. “Why? There are few performances with men, and when they are it is usually a duet, a heart-rending tale of two lovers. Sometimes the chorus sings, other times Lady Siobhan takes the stage alone.”

I lifted a finger, my words hinting at a truth while attempting to keep the bitter ring out of my tone. “Because a woman is pleasant to look at and the sound of her voice encourages dreams of pleasure, which is the focus of the theater.”

“And a man’s voice is not pleasurable?” Her eyes flashed.

“If you will take note, the main patrons of the theater are lords, with ladies on their arms.”

Aria nodded, considering. “You’re saying the performances are to please men?”

“Are they not? Have you watched as a member of the audience?”

She shrugged. “Once, before I started dancing, but I admit I was too distracted to pay much attention.”

Distracted? Most visitors attentions were riveted to the performance and the sensual threads of magic that wove into their minds. Egged on by the potent flavor of wine and cigar smoke and the music—music I often wrote and smuggled into Count Zorik’s study. The theater was half mine, half his, for I provided the music while he wrote the stories that bound the audience to their seats, and made them go mad with lust and longing afterward. Was Aria immune to the magic? But how could she be? “Surely you partake in the pleasures after each performance?” I asked, studying her for a reaction.

Nostrils flaring she took a step back and twisted her fingers in front of her. “I...I...no. I went once but those parties aren’t like the festivities I am used to.”

Her discomfort increased as she stared at the floor, moving one foot over the runes.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” I encouraged her. My body relaxed as I enjoyed the fact that she had not been enchanted by his magic. “What takes place in the theater is not for everyone.”

“No?” Now she met my eye again, a brow arched. “What about you? The halls are dark and mysterious, no one would know if you slipped on a mask and joined.”

I did not like her suggestion and my eyes narrowed as I studied her. “You could do the same.”

Her lips trembled and her shoulders tightened, but she recovered quickly. “The pleasures I enjoy cannot be found in the theater. I only asked because the winter ball approaches,

and Count Zorik will throw a party for the lords and ladies in town.”

It bothered me, her being in the castle while such parties took place. I knew what happened behind closed doors, when darkness overtook the theater and the lords and ladies gave in to their dark urges. A sudden need to protect Aria rushed over me and I extended my hand. “If you wish to avoid it, come and sing with me.”

She smiled, a bright bold smile that set my heart at ease.

Once she left the tower, I followed and watched her ride down the path back to High Tower Castle, back to...well... there was nothing more terrible in the wood than I. Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited while she returned to relative safety. She wasn't a threat, not yet, and I did not believe he'd do her any harm. I'd taken precautions to ensure he would not notice. But once she sang in the theater, once she took the lead, the battle would commence. Still, the more she returned the closer I came to losing control. The way she sang and moved, the threads of passion in her voice, the richness of it. It was like listening to the voice of an angel, and it reminded me of my lonely existence, of the past and what could be the future. Everything could be different, could change but I should not peer into her soul and crave her purity, her innocence when no redemption was left for me.

The very sound of her laughter was both enchanting and compelling. She spoke to me as though I were another human and there was no fear behind her words. If anything, I sensed her attraction to me and the flicker of disappointment when it was time for her to leave. It was the right thing to do, I couldn't risk temptation to the destruction of all, but perhaps I could entertain her affections.

My scars burned as I returned to the tower, a reminder of what happened if I gave in to my desires. Instead of returning to the underground lagoon, I climbed the spiral staircase, uttering curses under my breath. I'd even taken the time to dress for her, and I shed my clothes until I wore a simple shirt and pants. Lowering myself to a chair, I buried my head in my

hands, trying to remind myself of what I would gain if I succeeded.

The killings would cease and the accursed mist that hid High Tower would shatter. I'd feel the warmth of sunlight on my face, and my scars would no longer burn when I ventured too far from the tower. Normality would return, I could love again, live again, devote my life to more than simply music. I'd see the plants grow green in the forest, and the woodland creatures would return. Was it too much to ask for a normal life?

It was easier to think without her there, without her scent imbuing the air, without her gentle feminine presence reminding me of what I'd never had and desperately wanted. Time and again I'd come so close to tasting her lips, full and smooth, begging me to take them, taste them, crush them, consume her. And the way she sang, her gift was unlike any other. She had potential, and I wanted more. I understood her need to sing but why had she promised me anything, everything in exchange?

Falling to my knees, I opened a trunk, releasing the musty scent of old material. I took out the print, the designs for a mask, one I'd need for later. I had to take another trip to High Tower Castle, there were more materials I needed to gather.

ARIA

The day of the winter ball I snuck out before supper was served, ignoring the warnings of the coming foul weather. I'd be back before midnight, before the wild storms crept over the waters and ravaged the shoreline. This time I was wise and not only brought a blanket for Beauty but also a bag of oats.

The tower seemed to await my presence. The door opened as if it sensed my coming, and the vines curled around the stones, lengthening and growing thick to shut out the cold. It was dark inside, and the music had yet to begin. Pulse pounding, I waited until the first note played, and with it came a glow. The candles lit themselves.

It was as Samara had warned me, but the tower wasn't haunted, it merely lay under an enchantment, a spell. Only the music held sway over it.

Branches grew near the door, holding themselves out like hands to take my cloak, scarf and gloves. I unfastened my boots as well and pulled on my satin slippers, knowing I would dance, knowing I would sing. Moving to the center of the circle, I waited for the music to fill me up, to take over, like a current pulling me swiftly downstream. My legs quivered in anticipation.

The power of the music struck me like a wave, overflowing and surging through me. A cry of surprise, of yearning, of desire burst from my lips. Palpable emotions furlled out of the music, but instead of dancing, a song burst

out of my throat. Sharp pain radiated across my body. I felt it all the way in my toes, the silent scream awakened every sense and hurled me back to a memory of the day my father died...

The manor house was silent, the ominous fingers of death stretching out. It lingered around that place now, holding tight, refusing to let go. Panic squeezed my heart, for in the days since my father's decline, everyone had turned their back on us. The servants left, aware there would be no wages, the ladies I once called friends now whispered about me behind my back, and worst of all, the letter I'd sent to Count Zorik had not been answered. He would not come for me. I was alone, with only a few pennies left, and I did not know what to do.

A boom sounded from downstairs, the doors thrown open. Already? It was only a few days after I'd buried my father. Surely it wasn't the debtors. My limbs trembled in fear, for I'd heard of what happened to ruined families. Everything was taken from them and often members of the household sold as eternal servants to pay off their debts. They were expected to work without privilege, belonging to their new Master or Mistress, body and soul. My stomach heaved at the thought of being taken against my will. If they could not find me, they wouldn't sell me.

Heart in my throat I slipped down the hall, and a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. A squeak of dismay left my lips and stale breath with remnants of brandy blew into my mouth. The man forced me downstairs to meet with the others, five or six of them, and they gathered near, eyes dancing, like vultures about to feast.

Falling to my knees, I clasped my hands together.

"Please," I begged, "have mercy! I have no where to go, no one to take me in."

But they closed around me, hungry, interested until one knelt before me. Using cold fingers he lifted my chin to his hard gaze. A sour scent hung on his breath and his beady eyes flickered down, examining my body. When he spoke the air froze. "Aria, what a slight for someone so young and

vulnerable. Come, I have a position at my manor house, an easy one. In fact, I will pay you for your services and you'll have a clean, dry place to sleep and food for your belly."

But I knew about that house, had seen the marks and bruises he left. Fear rose in me and I pulled back. Another lord squeezed my shoulder in a manner that was supposed to be sympathetic. "Aye, you should take the position, it will be the best you can do."

"Where else would a young lady such as yourself go?"

Another touched my hair, almost pulling it.

"For a pretty young one such as yourself, the brothel would do."

"You could sell your body while you're young and pretty."

"Easier than maid's work with those chapped hands and sour faces."

Bile threatened to spill out of my mouth and I shrank in upon myself, recoiling from vulture-like fingers.

The door banged open and my head snapped up.

A man walked in, a fierce scowl marred his face. "Fools!" he cried. "Aria is a lady of noble birth. How dare you offer her a servant's position." He bowed to me, a hand on his heart. "My lady, the sale of the house will cover your father's debts. You are free."

Free. I stumbled to my feet, my gaze flickering to the open door. The men stepped back, cowed into submission, but their dark thoughts poked and prodded at me. I had to leave, run, get away before they took me against my will. I fled, out the open door and down the street.

"Aria! Lady Aria!"

"Come back here."

I twisted down another street and their shouts grew faint. I kept running, headed toward the part of town where they wouldn't look for me, where lords and ladies rarely went. It was cold, frozen, and my fingers went numb. My shoes were

thin and I had no cloak, not even a penny to my name. I ran into a man who pushed me into a muddy puddle, he whipped his horses up, shouting about utter filth. Crawling to my knees, I surrendered to utter grief.

“Aria. Aria!”

The voice calling my name sounded so far away. I was frozen back in that place. I could smell the dung in the street, the press of unwashed bodies and feel the gnawing deep in my stomach. A wave of dizziness came over me, I would be sick if I did not get food, or a place to lie down and soon. Salty tears lingered around the corners of my mouth and I wiped my nose, which would not stop running. It was cold. Oh so bitterly cold.

“Aria. Aria!”

Was it Count Zorik? Come to save me?

A hand stroked my cheek and my eyes flew open as an arm came around my waist, breaking the spell. A sob burst from my throat, my eyes watering as a surge of relief rode me. I was in the tower, standing among the glowing candles, and he was holding me. Uriah. I clutched his shirt as my frantic breathing slowed and I returned to reality, deeply conscious of the way our breaths rose and fell together, and the feel of his arm around my waist, holding me tightly.

He cupped my cheek, guiding my gaze toward his, and in his face, I saw recognition and wonder. It was like seeing him naked, raw and without boundaries for the first time and I thought I detected a wet glimmer in his eyes. Was he moved by the music as I was? But what had just happened? I’d gone back to a terrible moment in my life and yet, it had produced such beauty. I’d never sung like that before. It had to be the magic of the tower.

“It has awakened,” Uriah whispered, his thumb brushing my parted lips.

My head lolled back and my lips opened further, wanting more, more than just a caress, more than a touch.

“What happened?” I whispered, meeting his gaze, wondering if he felt what I felt, the union of souls, as though we were one and the same with a knowing that went beyond, far beyond conversation or conventional measures.

“The music. The gift. The magic. It is within you.” His voice was ragged, breathless, and his arm tightened around my waist. “I’ve never seen the tower take to someone like this. I thought it might happen in a few months, but not this quickly. You are, indeed, gifted, but the tower will ask you to use its gift in return.”

I licked my lips, unsure what he meant. “How? Why? Where did I go? It was like I was in my past and... I could see it, touch it, sense it. The smells, the sensations were all real, too real.” I shivered.

He blinked, glancing away. “It always is. You have wounds in your past, something the music latches on to. It is only when you have a deeply emotional moment that the music can build in you and become great. It is your connection to that moment that makes it powerful, for when we experience a range of raw emotions, only then can we sing with all of our hearts, all of our abilities. If we throw everything into the notes as though the song and only the song will save us, then the purest form of magic is created.”

I’d never heard him talk so much. “Our tragic pasts make us great?”

“Yes.” He paused, his gaze lingering on my lips. “I could not have told you this, you had to experience it for yourself. And now every time you return to that moment, you will sing as never before.”

That moment. But I never wanted to return to that moment. I frowned. “I have to think of the most painful moment in my life in order to sing?”

It explained the intensity of the music I heard from the tower, the loneliness, the anguish. Was pain truly the magic behind the music, because if so, I did not want it. I closed my eyes briefly and even catching a flash of what had happened to me was too much. If I were to sing, I’d break down each

evening. Especially if Uriah wasn't there to bring me back. I'd become lost in my own thoughts with nothing to anchor myself to the present moment.

As if he sensed what I was thinking, he rested his hand against my neck, brushing my wavy hair off my shoulder. "Yes, it is always like this, deep and painful magic, but you have to bring yourself back each time. You have to find a memory strong enough to remind you of who you are, or else the music will rule you."

I knew. I knew right then who I would think of each time, and the strength of my emotions shocked me. "What do you think of?" My voice fell as something else rose. Longing. A deep yearning. More than anything, I wanted his lips on mine. I wanted his pain and passion, and I wanted to take the memories he filled himself with at twilight and burn them away with pleasure.

"I torment myself, day after day, but I will admit, it has become easier, now that you are here," he said.

Those words gave me hope that it wasn't just one-sided. How could it be? The way he held me so tightly and stroked my exposed skin. Angling my head, I took a deep breath and leaned forward, lifting my lips to his.

He froze, his gaze flickering from my lips to my eyes. When he spoke, his voice was shaky. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I wanted to beg, to plead. *Just kiss me. Give me a moment after that darkness. Purge my soul from it.*

He sucked in one slow breath, his eye clouding with need? Regret? He opened his mouth and then crushed his lips against mine.

ARIA

The kiss was more than anything I'd ever experienced. Every fiber in my body tingled as I leaned into him. His tongue swept into my mouth, momentum building as he lengthened the kiss. My knees went weak, and I sagged against him. Throaty moans escaped my lips and my heart thumped wildly as he deepened the kiss. As though our lives, our very souls, depended on it. And it seemed only natural, the apex of pleasure after the emotional toll of singing, of the poignant and deep memories that had been unburied. The kiss was like a healing balm, smoothing over the wounds, healing the cracks in our souls that led us to each other.

My hands went around his neck, drawing him closer as I arched my body into his. My nipples hardened and heat pooled between my thighs. Eyes closed, I gave into the enticing taste and scent of him, delighting in the myriad of sensations. The hardness of his chest, the warmth of his body against mine, his insistent tongue in my mouth and his hand, coming around my lower back to press me closer to him as though he would take me, body and soul, right then and there. My breath hitched when he broke the kiss. For a moment all I heard was our low pants, synced together. When at last the height of that moment faded, I opened my eyes to find him studying me, an indescribable look on his face.

“Aria.” He whispered, as though he questioned whether I were real at all, relaxing in his arms.

I held onto his shirt, unwilling to let go, to leave that moment when everything had changed. I could see clearly now, my hopes and dreams twisted into one and joining with Uriah's. "Will you tell me?" I breathed. "I want to know it all, I want to know everything."

He brushed a curl from my forehead and his eye changed, going from soulful to sad, as though the torture of his past would swallow him whole again. "I cannot tell you all, for some secrets are not mine to share." Then he took my hand and pressed it against his bare chest, until I could feel the quickened pace of his heartbeat like a drum beneath my palm. "But I would have you know that I will not keep you here against your will. Now you know the destructive beauty of the music, and what it demands. Magic is not without its costs. If you wish to leave, to sing no longer, I will not hold it against you. The price of this magic is high, often too high for others to pay."

There. His honest words pierced something deep in my heart, as though a knife pressed through my tender skin and wounded me. I gasped, tears gathering in my eyes although I struggled to blink them away. He thought I would leave now that I understood the secrets of the tower. He assumed I'd run and although it was a hard truth to swallow; I wondered how he managed it, day in and day out, without losing himself to the pain. But I would show him how strong I was, I would not cow, would not leave in the face of difficulty.

I was also reminded of how little I knew this man aside from his dark allure that pulled me in, the way he held me, oh goddess, the way he kissed me. Just for tonight I'd let myself go, I'd lose myself in him and tomorrow, when I was back at the castle in my own bed, I'd think clearly. For with the high emotions surging through me and the lingering effects of both the magic of the music and his powerful kisses, I had a hard time thinking straight.

His arm around my waist loosened, and he glanced away. "Come, the storm builds and you cannot return tonight. The underground passageways will be flooded as the lake rises. I will guide you home before dawn."

“What passageways?” I asked, wishing he hadn’t let go.

“Ah, you did not know.” He pointed towards the door. “The trap door leads to an underground tunnel which links to High Tower. It hasn’t been used in decades, but originally this was a tower to defend against dark creatures. Knights would travel to and from the castle underground, to keep the enemy from knowing their true numbers and to ward off the attack. It was the safest method of travel.”

A numbness washed over me. A secret tunnel. I thought of the odd happenings in the castle, the man who’d been attacked and killed, the dark shadows I saw lurking from time to time when I fled back to my room. “Who else knows about the tunnels?”

“Count Zorik, likely the servants, anyone who knows the layout of the castle.” Uriah shrugged. “Why?”

“No reason,” I blurted out too quickly, wondering if Madame Blu knew. “But why didn’t you mention them before? I’ve been riding here instead of traveling through the tunnels.”

“Ah, your horse.” Uriah strode toward the tower doors. Before he opened them, he tossed more words over his shoulder. “It isn’t safe in the tunnels. They are old, full of water and who knows what lives in the deep. It would be easy to lose your way without the proper guidance.”

Then he walked outside, leaving me toying with a burst of feelings. He cared enough to protect me, to keep me with him, but what would we do while we waited out the storm? Since we stopped singing, his attitude toward me had cooled rather remarkably. Was it the kiss? I touched my fingers to my lips, as though the mere touch would wipe it away. My stomach flip-flopped, and an ache throbbed between my legs. Oh. I was in trouble. I wanted, craved, needed him in a way I’d never desired a man before.

It wasn’t long before Uriah returned with Beauty behind him. He tied her up near the entryway and shut the heavy doors. “I’ll send her home in the morning,” he said, turning in

my direction. He bowed and extended his hand. “Shall we move to more comfortable quarters, Lady Aria?”

I took his offered arm, a flustered smile on my face, my heart hammering in my throat as he escorted me toward the staircase. I glanced back at Beauty for strength, but she had her head down, nosing her new surroundings.

“I’ve dwelt here for years,” Uriah explained as we climbed the spiral staircase.

We moved slowly, but with my hand tucked under his arm, I did not mind. Besides, I still had trouble catching my breath at his proximity.

“This place used to be normal, I assume. Although an odd aura surrounded it. One night, something drastic affected this place. Since then I’ve been here, in the tower, with my music. Here I’ll stay...” He trailed off, then took a deep breath. “It is a burden I would ask no one else to carry.”

Here. Alone. For how long? Four or five years? Four years ago I’d been seventeen. Happy, full of life and prospects. That was before misfortune befell Father. I wished I had seen it earlier. I was focused on music; I wanted lavish dresses, sparkling jewels, new books, fine horses, all those wants, and my father gave until it broke him. He should have told me no, made me wait. I saw that now.

“What happened before?” I asked, to shake away the unhappy memories.

“Before.” He grunted. He waved a hand as though it were nothing more than a mere shadow of the past. “I was the son of a blacksmith with dreams of becoming a musician.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Grand illusions. I became a knight in the queen’s army and was sent here. It’s ironic, the very thing I was running from became my reason for living.”

We paused in front of a small alcove just off the staircase. It continued upward, but Uriah pulled me in front of an arched door. I squeezed his arm to keep him from moving, hoping he’d finish his thought before we entered. “What were you running from?”

He eyed me. “Music. I was a terrible blacksmith’s son. I shrank my duties, ran away and joined a troupe. I learned to sing, to play, to earn my keep. My father beat me and the children made fun of me, because a man should fight or work with his hands, not play and sing. Becoming a knight was supposed to change everything, I’d leave the past behind and yet...”

Trailing off, he bent his broad shoulders. Shoulders of a blacksmith, a knight, a man who could tempt others with his music, with the rhythm that burst from his throat and his hands.

“I don’t want your pity.” His voice was rough as he moved into the room. “You asked, and now you have an answer.”

Pity was part of what I felt as I followed him into the room, a blast of warmth enveloping me. He had pain, too much pain to draw from, and yet, I saw what others had turned a blind eye to. He was a man, a mortal with a range of emotions too, and perhaps the pain of his past made him stronger. But it wasn’t fair for him to be trapped in the tower. Why? But I sensed that part of the conversation was over as I walked into the room.

The space was small, but somehow, he’d made the semi-circle homey. A low fire cast light across the room, and long candles floated on the walls, adding a gentle glimmer, like fairy lights, to his chamber. The scent of cedar and amber and candle wax filled the air. Candles and chandeliers hung from the sloping ceiling, some lit, others dark, while green vines covered the walls. Red roses added bright spots of color to the cream and black aesthetic of the room. To one side was a bower, a bed thick with furs against the vine-covered wall, a writing desk covered with letters and a chest filled with clothes, food, something else? I could only imagine.

“I do not entertain much,” he said, placing the one chair before the fire. “Sit, I will make some tea.”

I perched on the chair, soaking in the fire’s warmth and turning over what he’d shared. Soon a fragrance that was both sweet and salty filled the air. It was a scent I could not place

but had a slight tang of lemon. Uriah pressed a cup into my hands and sat down, cross-legged in front of the fire, adding wood to encourage it to flare up again.

“What about you?” he asked, breaking the silence. “What about before? You told me about Solynn but I sense you did not tell me all.”

I sighed, remembering that fair city. We lived close to the outskirts, in a beautiful town where a governess gave me lessons and scolded me when I played in the garden and ripped my fancy dress. I recalled the stink of the air, the smell of too many bodies close together. Not like High Tower, where it was fresh and wild, almost enchanting. “I lived in the city with my father who made his fortune in trade goods. We were in debt. I did not know how badly until father passed and I was kicked out of my own home.” My face went hot as I remembered the gleam of the debtors’ eyes, the rush of fear and adrenaline as I fled, the pitying glances of the people who watched, too frightened to lend a hand. “I lived on the streets with the beggars until Count Zorik sent for me. Apparently, his reply to my father’s letter with an offer had been lost, but it doesn’t matter, I’m here now.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I blinked and met his eye. A retort rising on my lips. “I don’t ask for pity.”

“It is not pity.” He took a sip of tea, steam curling around his hair. “I recognize your pain, why you sing.”

“Is there no other way?” I leaned forward, fingers anxiously tapping the mug. “For the magic to work?”

He half turned away. “I’ve tried, but nothing else works.”

I sat back, unable to keep the misery out of my eyes. “How do you do it, every night? Play the music without it driving you mad?”

He sat the tea down and moved closer. His fingers grazed my knee. “Because I have a purpose. I know what it is, and that keeps me going.”

I wanted him to say more, to tell me, but he'd already revealed so much of himself to me that evening. I sensed he would not say more. Taking my cup of tea, he set it on the hearth and pulled me to my feet. He turned me in his arms until I faced the doorway. "Look around," he said, pressing one hand against my hip. "It has been a lonely existence, but I have a truth I hold to, which keeps me going. You will have to find the same if you wish to keep singing."

I closed my eyes, resting my head about his shoulder while I enjoyed the sweet sensations his hand created. Slowly, his fingers inched up my dress, and I had no desire to stop him. The magnitude of his presence was enough as he nipped at my ear and then kissed my exposed neck, first biting, then licking. I could only imagine the loneliness he felt. It was the same stark fear I'd faced, cold, alone, homeless, wondering where I'd get my next meal. And now, although safe, I did not belong; I wanted more, so I'd never return to that dark place of panic and need and tears. And his very touch made me feel safe, wanted, as though nothing bad could happen to me ever again. That's what I wanted.

My lips trembled, and he spun me to face him, devouring my lips again, his hands roaming up and down my dress, seeking, searching for my fevered skin. I held on to him as he maneuvered me to the bed.

ARIA

The candles burned low and the gentling hissing and popping of the fire was the only sound, aside from our gasps as he guided me down onto the bed of furs. He lay on top of me, holding his weight with his elbows while I lay between his legs. A thousand sensations fired through me along with a deep need, an unending want that went beyond lust. Now that I knew his story, his heated kisses meant more, a life of pain and this night of pleasure. I craved him, needed him to make the bad thoughts go away, to erase the memories and leave nothing on my mind but the stamp of pleasure. I opened my mouth, eyes glazed over, chest heaving as he rose to his knees, running a finger down my cheek, tracing a line down my neck and further still to my open dress. It was thin silk, for my cloak kept me warm out in the wintery weather. Faintly I heard the low moan of wind twirl around the tower and I imagined the waves were high, but I was safe, warm beneath him.

My eyes flickered open as he palmed my breast and my nipples ached. They were hard, likely poking through the silk, and I shifted. A sudden impulse to spread my legs and let him take me made me breathless. “Please,” I whispered, breath catching.

Pausing his caress, he met my eyes. “Please?” He raised an eyebrow, daring me to beg.

“Don’t stop,” was all I managed to get out, arching my back, pushing my body toward his.

“If you wish it, Aria.”

My name on his lips sent delicious tremors through my body. He pressed his mouth over my erect nipple, the material of my dress muting the pleasure as he licked, slowly, then used his fingers to rub my nipples, forcing them to harden as though they would explode. Soft whimpers of pleasure left my lips as he pulled my dress down further, exposing the swells of my breasts. But it was as far as the dress would go, still fastened at the back. He trailed wet kisses down my skin and I struggled beneath him, relishing the pleasure and yearning for more, much more. When his lips met mine again and his tongue pressed into my mouth, I almost cried out.

In one skillful move, he pulled me to my feet without breaking the kiss, his arms secured me, undoing the ribbon and buttons that bound me in my clothes. They came loose, and I sighed, reaching up to cup his face, to trace the line of his jaw and touch the scars I could see. He froze but did not flinch, passion burning brightly in his teal-colored eye. His nostrils flared as I drew his head down and kissed him, tasting the sweetness of his lips, the fire beneath his skin. He bit my bottom lip, gently, then roughly, his hands moving my dress away, pushing it down my body until I stood naked in front of him.

A rush of shyness came over me and I ducked my head, using my hands to cover my breasts and my damp cleft.

“No.” His breath was strangled, and he took both of my hands and pressed them to my lips. “You are beautiful in every way. You never need to hide.”

Words. But I could tell he meant them, and so I held my head up high, my hair sliding down my shoulders. My large, round breasts were so close to his chest, they almost brushed.

“Your turn,” I teased, my fingers going to his shirt, unbuttoning it further.

He watched me, a strange expression on his face, and I wondered if a woman had ever undressed him, had ever proclaimed her need for him. Urgency made my fingers tremble, and I fumbled at his belt until his firm hands helped

me. Moments later he stood naked in front of me, the flickering of the fire allowing me to see the rigid lines of his muscle, the power of his chest. He may as well have still been a knight trained for war, for battle. His arms were long and slender and his stomach tapered down to where his cock stood, thick and proud, the gleam of cum on the head. I took it in my hand, stroking as he groaned. His fingers twirled through my hair, cradling my head. My lips burned as he pressed kiss after kiss to them, but I wanted more.

“I need you,” I whispered.

“Say it again,” he demanded, nibbling at my neck, his hand dropping to my hips to hold me steady while his hardness pressed between my legs.

My entire body quivered. “I need you,” I gasped. “All of you.”

My knees went weak as he lifted me in his arms and laid me down on the bed as though I were the most fragile treasure. Bending his dark head, he took one of my breasts into his mouth, his tongue lashing my nipple, eliciting cries of pleasure from my throat. I shifted my legs, wetness pooling between them. I needed him to take me, to thrust inside, instead of leaving me breathless and begging. Instead, he turned his attention to my other breast, pinching the hardened bud between his finger, watching my reaction as he squeezed.

“I want you to experience pleasure,” he told me, trailing wet kisses down my stomach. “Pleasure such as you’ve never felt before, just as you experience a mix of pain mingled with magic.”

He paused as he reached my dripping core, and touched a finger to my folds, gathering the wetness there and rubbing. I bit my bottom lip, but I couldn’t keep my hips from bucking, jutting up, shamelessly begging for more.

“Uriah,” I begged.

“No more words,” he said between kisses. “Close your eyes, experience the pleasure, just as you experienced the music.”

He parted my legs, exposing my most secret place to him, glistening with my arousal. He touched me again, making my hips shake while he bent my knees, putting one foot over his shoulders. “You are mine,” he whispered. “My angel of music, my savior and I will ruin you for all others.”

Amid pleasure, I ignored the darkness behind those words and spread my thighs wider, giving myself fully to him. My back arched as he licked between my folds, using his fingers to spread me even wider. His tongue delved inside, gently at first, exposing all my secrets, tasting, sucking. When his tongue grazed my swollen nub, a low keening burst from my lips. The ache intensified, and I pushed myself against him as he drove me to the brink of pleasure. I spasmed around his tongue, but it wasn't enough; I craved more. I wanted him to go deeper, to take me over the edge until I sank in a pool of euphoria. He licked in steady circles, thrusting, probing. He brought me close to the edge, over and over again, holding my hips steady as I bucked and cried out, desperate for more. When at last he had his way with me, I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do more than lie there as he spread my legs achingly wide. And then everything stopped.

My eyes opened, glazed over with need, a sheen of sweat on my body as he hovered over me, holding an ankle, studying my face. He took his cock in one hand and rubbed it over my inflamed skin, making me cry out again.

“Tell me, what do you want?” he asked, eye dark with arousal.

My heart skipped a beat and my words came out at almost a sob. “You, Uriah. Just you,” I pleaded. “Please.”

In one motion he thrust into me, filling me in all the right places. A mewl of pleasure left my lips, and I reached for him, wanting to feel his skin against mine, his lips on me. Sensing what I needed, he slowly pulled and thrust in again, forcing me to lift my back, arching right off the bed as I cried out. His arms went around my waist in a moment, and I brought my legs up, allowing him to go deeper. He thrust into me again and I lifted my hips to take him until he and I moved as one. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him closer, pulling

him to me until our lips met and tongues twisted. We moved in sync, in rhythm, our strangled cries matching each other beat for beat.

My muscles clamped around his hardness, taking everything he offered, relishing the pleasure. It built inside of me until I felt light-headed, woozy, and sparks danced around my eyes. It was almost too much, the delectable taste of him, the exotic touch, the frisson of skin against skin and the way, the way he made me feel as though my heart would burst. It was more powerful than the music and pushed past dark memories of pain, betrayal and fear. It filled the darkness like a burst of light, flowing inside and fixing everything that was broken, everything that hurt, mending, healing, making it, not whole but better than before.

My fingers dug into his back and everything burst in a blinding flash of light and euphoria. I was as light as air, floating, as waves of pleasure erupted. Faintly I was aware of Uriah sagging against me, his kisses against my neck. I held on, I'd never let go. How could anyone experience this and go back, back to what life was before? This was true transcendence, this was true magic.

Even as my eyelids fluttered, I heard that voice, that whisper in the back of my mind. *Sing. Lady Aria. Sing for your life.*

URIAH

I lay on my side, cradling her in my arms, listening to the steady rise and fall of her breathing, calm, hypnotic, and yet sleep did not come so quickly for me. Everything that had happened that evening twirled through my mind, the beauty, the magic and then, making love to her only solidified what was between us. It was unimaginable, beautiful, and I held her tighter, enjoying her warmth, the scent of her as she slept. I dared not let go, for the magic would break if I did.

She was stronger than I'd ever imagined. With the power of our voices combined, I had no doubt we'd be able to break the curse, destroy the spell. I saw the truth now, the very truth I'd been afraid of. In taking her as my student instead of destroying her, I was waking her up, causing her to thrive, just like the rose buds. Which meant there was a future to look forward to, together. After this, after she helped me, we could belong together. Aria and I.

The truth was powerful enough to make me weep, to know the pain and sorrow I'd put myself through and the stain on my soul might be forgiven was almost too much to bear. It was dark. The fire had gone out and yet I lifted my face skyward, whispering a prayer. *Please. Let it be this time. Let it work.*

Aria stirred in her sleep, a contented sigh leaving her lips. My body ached with the need to wake her and take her again. To see the bliss on her face, to hear her cry as I brought her to climax again and again. Now the fates did not frown or laugh at me, I knew she had caught my eye for a reason, because we

belonged together. Even our hopes and desires for the future were the same. She wanted to sing, to travel, to leave High Tower, just as I did.

Still, a cloud of melancholy marred the perfection of the night. The next month would be fragile. She still knew nothing, and I wasn't sure if I should explain my plan to her or leave her in the dark. It was dangerous and if he found out, what would he do to me, to her, to us? A fierce inclination to protect her threatened to choke me, but I could not keep her prisoner under lock and key. Her freedom was too important to her, and there was a chance she'd sing and he'd suspect nothing at all. Still, I had to plan for any obstacle, and most importantly, I needed to protect her.

An idea brightened my thoughts, and I cursed myself for not thinking of it sooner. Before the mine was closed, treasure was found, treasure I could imbue with magic. While I was unsure a spell of protection would work, I could try.

Closing my eyes, I leaned into her silk soft hair and breathed in her essence. Running my hand down her curves I reminded myself, once I enacted my plan and it was all over, we'd belong together.

ARIA

“**A**ria.”

The gentle murmur of my name broke my sleep. My eyelids fluttered, but I was so warm, so comfortable, and blessed sleep had come without nightmares. I curled my legs up and squeezed my eyes shut, unwilling to leave the cocoon of furs surrounding me.

“Aria.”

His voice was hushed yet insistent and the warmth of his breath kissed my face. Suddenly I remembered where I was. In his bed. And my clothes, likely still discarded on the floor. My heart raced as I became aware of the way my body molded against his, the curve of my back into his chest, his arm, curled around my waist while one hand traced the slope of my bottom.

“Dawn will come soon and you will be missed. It’s time.”

Time? I blinked unsteadily as understanding gripped me. Time for me to return to High Tower, but how could I after such a night? Nothing would induce me to leave his arms, his bed of pleasure and the strange sensations that tingled through my veins. My face warmed at the thought.

“I...” My breath hitched. “I don’t want to leave you.”

He kissed my bare shoulder, his lips lingering against my skin as he breathed in. “It is but parting for a moment.”

I opened my mouth, but words did not form under his caress. Instead of rising I closed my eyes, limp under his touch. His hand slid down my back, tracing my spine until he reached the curve of my buttocks and slowly, sensually, squeezed my cheeks. A moan of ecstasy burst from my lips. I was his, and his alone. Did he not sense it? Did he not feel the way my body melted under his touch? How could I leave his embrace, leave him to his misery? Did he not want me to stay with him?

“It’s part of the enchantment,” he went on, squeezing me against him just for a moment. “What you feel, the rise of your emotions, it’s part of the magic of the music.”

I stiffened, unsure whether I was hurt or angry.

“Don’t mistake me.” He kissed my shoulder again. “The taste of you is enough to leave me with sweet memories until you return. But you must understand, what has happened between us has bound us together. Should you change your mind after leaving here, I will not hold it against you. Now come, you must rest. The magic is particularly draining.”

Magic. I had to know. I shifted on the bed until I could see his face, illuminated by the soft glow of one candle. My doubts faded when I faced him, for his eye was dark, hungry, as though he would ravish me again and again and never be satisfied. “Are you saying, the way I feel, what happened tonight was because of magic?”

He pulled away, leaving a gust of cool air between us as he reached for my dress. Holding it up, he leaned toward me, his face deadly serious. “Only time will tell. I know my heart, Aria, but I don’t know yours yet. Let me take you home, and return to me one week from today. Perhaps you will think differently in the daylight.”

Words burned my lips, but I hesitated, unwilling to give a promise I could not keep. He’d been hurt, tortured by so many, I would not be the next one in a long line of regrets. Not if I could help it. Perhaps words, promises, would mean nothing to him, and my actions, more. He’d see. I would return, because I could not stay away if I wished it.

Dressing quickly, I followed him downstairs and put on my cloak and gloves while he opened the trap door. Fingers of cold air rushed up, and when I looked down, I saw nothing but white mist. My belly flip-flopped as he held out his hand. “The stairs will lead us down to the boat.”

A boat? Were the passageways so flooded? I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and let him guide me.

The mist cleared as we went down and lights glowed around us, embedded into the cylindrical archways of the tunnel. We reached the bottom quickly and stood on a landing of slick rock, just beyond a yawning darkness that must be the water. A rowboat was tied up at the edge, and Uriah deposited me inside after untying the rope. Standing behind me, he took up a pole and guided the boat through the water. It moved silently with only an occasional dip, water lapping up against the sides and then falling silent. I was cold beneath those tunnels, and icicles formed above me as we glided, silent passengers in the underground cavern.

“What are those lights?” Breath escaped my warm mouth in an icy white cloud and I couldn’t help but stare up at the glitter above, shining like stars, pinpricks of light against the darkness.

“Crystals.” Uriah’s low voice echoed through the tunnels, sending a shiver of delight up my spine.

I bit down on my bottom lip to still my excitement. I wanted him just as much, just as badly, as if he’d never taken me to his bed. If anything, the yearning had changed to a craving. A need as vital as food, no, as important as the air I breathed. It took me a moment to control myself before I realized he had not ceased speaking.

“It was the reason this tunnel was first built. Miners discovered crystals in the rock and in their lust for wealth and riches, dug deep. But they awoke creatures of shadow and bone, monsters that dwelled in the water. The dark creatures attacked, the tunnels flooded and shifted into what they are today. Naught but a connection to a past, a reminder of what once was.”

“They are beautiful,” I breathed, enchanted by the shimmering lights above the dark void. Looking at them reminded me of beauty, of hope, and the uneasy feeling that there was something in the waters, waiting, watching. Hungry.

When Uriah first mentioned the tunnels, I thought it might be a way to journey to him without needing to go outside, but I was gravely wrong. The water could not have been deep, for he pushed with the pole as though there were no need for paddles. Other tunnels shot off into darkness. I imagined the miners hoping for riches as they dug further, creating a twisted labyrinth underground. Sometimes I thought I heard the faint sound of rock and axe, but it was nothing more than my imagination.

A low hum echoed through the tunnel. Uriah sang a haunting tune under his breath. It was warm, comforting, and eased my worries. My shoulders relaxed and all too soon, the boat bumped against a ledge where another set of stairs led up. I was back at High Tower Castle.

I waited for the spell to break as Uriah stepped off the boat and held out a hand to assist me. I held it tight as the boat wobbled and then I was on solid ground. I lifted my face to Uriah’s shadowed one. His hair fell across his eye and suddenly I couldn’t breathe. My lips parted and liquid lust warmed my body.

“Here is where I leave you. Aria.”

Squeezing his hand, I searched his face for a sign. “I’m not ready.”

“You are,” he assured me.

A moment passed, and then another, but we stood, frozen. I wondered if he was as reluctant as I, although he hid it well. At last I shivered and let go of his hand. Unsure what else to say, I turned to leave when his hand caught my elbow. In a whirl, he spun me back into his arms. His lips were like a brand on mine, sealing me, marking me as his.

It was over too quickly and before I caught my breath; he was back in the boat, lifting a hand in silent farewell. I

watched, pulse thudding as he faded into the gloom, the fire of his kiss lingering on my swollen lips.

ARIA

“**L**ady Aria? Where have you been?” Samara gasped as she swept into my room.

I lay in bed, a contented smile on my face as I replayed the night over and over in my head, until I memorized every word, every touch that had transpired between Uriah and myself.

I waved Samara’s alarm away. “I was here. Sleeping.”

She frowned and crossed her arms. “You weren’t. I assumed you’d skip the ball and come to check.” Glancing around the room, she moved closer and lowered her voice. “Madame Blu had such a fright, she thought you’d been stolen.”

I sat up. Samara wasn’t making much sense. “Who would steal me?”

“You know.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “Because of what happened last night.”

I went still. Something wasn’t right. Samara’s eyes were wide and red, her face pale as though she hadn’t slept well. I fisted the covers. “What happened?”

Samara’s eyes darted across the room. “Another attack. It was one of the livery boys this time. He was so young, found clawed to death outside the kitchen.”

A dark shadow passed over me. “Clawed?” Had I passed the kitchen on my way up? Had I imagined the shadows

lurking in the castle?

“Aye. No one is to go anywhere alone. Not anymore. And, Lady Aria, I know it isn’t my place, but there is a horse missing from the stables. I know you and Madame Blu have an arrangement, but whatever you’re doing is dangerous. You could be killed if you keep running off alone.”

I blinked hard and my heart lurched. She was right. But how could I beg an escort to take me to Uriah’s tower? He was my secret, and I was loath to share it. Dropping my head into my hands, I rocked back and forth, furiously trying to think of a solution that wouldn’t endanger me. If only I had Uriah to speak to, to explain what was happening at High Tower Castle and why I could not return. Oh goddess, but his taste, his touch, his tongue, the way he inflamed my body. How could I stay away? And the music.

“You have a secret lover, don’t you?” Samara asked, a note of excitement in her voice.

“I...” I meant to deny it, but heat covered my face.

“Oh, but you do,” Samara tittered. “Let me guess, one of the visiting lords? Oh, you’re not going to tell me, are you? Well. If you’re in his room at night, I suppose I don’t need to worry.”

And just like that, I was free again. I opened my mouth to correct her assumption and shut it again. Let her think what she wanted. I still had to find a way to go to and fro safely. Before the week ended.



THE DAYS and nights dragged by, one after the other, when my thoughts were full of Uriah. Each evening I listened to his music, my heart crying as I thought of how he created the magic, using his pain to create something beautiful. A few days after I returned, Count Zorik summoned me.

He was in the music hall, sitting in the front row along with a few lords and ladies I recognized from the performance.

“Ah, Lady Aria.” He rose when I walked in and gestured to the stage.

Trepidation rose in my belly, and I tried to calm myself. “You wanted me, sir?”

“Yes.” He clasped his hands together and glanced at his audience. “Lords and Ladies,” he boomed. “As you know, our next production will be a difficult number not only for the dancers but especially for our lead singer. Lady Aria has been my ward for the past year, learning to sing. I think now we should see whether she has improved. My opinion is partial, of course, which is why I have called you here. You will be the judge while Lady Aria sings, and I promise to abide by your honest decision.”

He spun to face me, a grin on his handsome face. “Up on the stage, Aria,” he encouraged, then waved to the conductor, a tiny old man with white hair known for his love of music. He lifted his baton, and I took a deep breath. With relief, I was grateful I could turn my back on the preening lords and ladies, dressed in their best, drinking wine and waving their fans. They had ambushed me. No one told me I’d perform today of all days, and I’d neglected to practice. I clenched and unclenched my fists. What game was Count Zorik playing at? He’d chosen the hardest production, and no doubt, the most difficult piece for me to perform. I knew the music. I’d heard it many times before and always imagined myself standing in front of the audience while the lights from the chandeliers shone down and the audience held their breaths while I sang.

Tentatively, I glided to the center of the stage and took a deep breath. I closed my eyes as the music began. This was my moment, it was now or never. The slow strands of the music flowed to my ears. Clearing my throat, I straightened my posture, just as Uriah had taught me. There hadn’t been time to warm up, to test my voice, but the song started slowly enough before building to a straining crescendo. I would do my best. When the time came for me to begin, I closed my eyes, pretending I was standing in the tower.

My voice cracked during the first verse, but I gained strength as I sang, thinking of the past, thinking of the

emotional upheaval of my father's passing. I wasn't sure when the music took me away, but suddenly I was the lady of Swan Lake, standing in the water, singing of what was lost and the hope it would be found again. My voice soared like a captive swan set free, wings spread to fly again. It rose and ebbed like the lake, captivating all that heard.

When the last note dropped away and I opened my eyes, tears streamed down my face. The lords and ladies stared, as though they'd never heard music before. And I knew. I knew that I had gained the lead.

Rehearsal began in earnest the very next evening. The production was called Swan Lake, a tale of a princess changed into a swan by an evil sorceress. I would sing the lead, the lady of swan lake, while Lady Siobhan was given a lesser role. A lightness filled me and my heart raced each evening I took the stage during rehearsals. The music soared like a bird in flight and I sang, eyes closed, giving my spirit over to the music of the night.

I'd gained everything I'd wanted but although Uriah was the first person I wanted to tell, I did not have a moment to myself until I sank into bed, late at night to sleep the day away. Aside from learning each song, I had to be fitted for new dresses and spent a good amount of a time being poked and prodded by needles and holding my arms still until they were numb.

One evening I left rehearsal, a song still budding on my lips as I slipped into the cold, silent hall. A cloud of perfume hung in the air, something thick and rather choking. Wrinkling my nose I hurried down the hall, away from the smell of debauchery, when a shadow stepped away from the wall. I froze, mouth dry, suddenly reminded of the dark creature that might or might not be loose in the castle.

An ugly laugh broke through my anxiety as the shadow stepped into a pool of light. I pressed a hand to my heart. "Lady Siobhan, you frightened me."

She smirked, her eyes masked in shadow, her body covered with a ruby red gown, shimmering and dipping lower

than the gauzy gowns the dancers wore. One hand rested on her hip which was thrust out, while the other held a glass of wine. She took a long sip before she spoke, and when she did her voice was thick. “I frightened you?” She waltzed closer until I smelled the wine on her breath. “Good, fair is fair, I suppose. You took my stage, my spotlight, you’ll be sorry.”

I swallowed hard and a knot tightened in my belly. Still, I lifted my chin. “I sang and was given the lead, I did not take it out of spite.”

“No? You took it because you want the stage, the attention, the praise, the gifts, you want it all to be lavished on you.” She shook her head. “You used to be a grand lady in the city, but this isn’t Solynn, this is High Tower, my domain. Don’t expect any favors just because you’re Count Zorik’s ward.”

“I don’t,” I snapped, fingers clenching into fists. They were just words but the effect she had on me was tangible. “I practice and I earned this,” I insisted.

“Did you?” She leaned closer, and then upended her glass of wine across my chest.

I gasped as the liquid soaked through to my skin.

“Lady Siobhan?” a male voice called from the other side of the hall.

Footsteps approached and Siobhan swept past me. “You’ll be sorry,” she whispered as she passed.

ARIA

It was with trepidation I awaited the first night of the performance, shaking off Lady Siobhan's cruel words, but they were only the beginning. When I walked down the halls, whispers followed me.

"It's the Count's ward you know, the one he saved."

"Aye, she used to be a noblewoman and now look at her, singing in the theater."

"She thinks she's too good for us, do you know she never attends the parties after the performance?"

"I heard many a man asked for her hand, and she denied them all."

It was only the ladies who stayed in the castle, gossiping behind my back, and yet it stung. I wondered what would happen after opening night. Would the negative attention turn positive?

"They all adore you," Samara whispered one night after rehearsal. "They all want to bask in your glory. Just ignore the ladies, they just like gossiping."

I removed my slippers and flopping on the bed with a sigh. "I know, but I wish they would stop. I don't like the gossip."

"It's only going to get worst after opening night," Samara reminded me. "Siobhan enjoyed the attentions."

Siobhan. I scowled.

And then there was the problem of the dark creature in the castle. It was hard to ignore the second occurrence, but I'd escaped from harm thus far. Would it be wrong to attempt to escape?

"I don't mean to complain, and I look forward to opening night but..." I worried my lower lip between my teeth. "Do you think I'd be able to escape for a night, just to be alone?"

Samara's face turned pink, and she grinned. "Oh. You want to sneak away and see your secret lover, do you?"

Let her think what she would, although guilt pinched at me. I should tell her, of all people, the truth. "Aye." I'd missed two lessons and my entire body ached at the thought of him waiting for me, especially after what had taken place between us the last time.

"I'll help you, if you tell me something about him," she teased. "Your face changes when you talk about him, you must be completely besotted."

I was, but I couldn't help it. Besides, I did not want to tell her anything about him, for it seemed as though I would break a spell, as though I were sworn to secrecy. Not that I was ashamed of him, in fact, the opposite. I was proud to know a man so skilled he could craft magic from his words. My undeniable attraction to him was so potent it made my head spin. I wanted nothing more than to be with him, and every waking moment I spent thinking about our last encounter. To utter a word about what happened would break the magic between us, and I desperately wanted to unravel the mystery of my mysterious instructor. He'd told me some, but not enough about his past, and I certainly did not understand why he played the heart-wrenching music every night.

"See." Samara shattered my thoughts. "You're doing it again. Whoever he is, I'd like very much to meet him."

I stared at her, horror growing in my throat. "Please don't try," I begged. "I just need your help to escape."

Samara stared at me for a moment, then shook her head, tongue in cheek. "You're an odd one, Aria. Perhaps you know

that already, but..." She held up a finger. "I like you, and it's rare to find a kind lady in a fine castle like this."

I smiled at her but did not say more. After she left, I drew the curtains, peering out to the cool night. It was a midnight velvet with thick mists hiding the stars. It was too dark to see the tower, but I knew he was out there. Alone. Always alone.

When I slept, I dreamed of a great beast with shaggy black hair and eyes that shone, one gold, the other teal as it trotted on four legs through the castle. A foulness emitted from it and it growled as it sniffed and passed, ears alert, tail sweeping the floor. Fangs curved out of its snout and a sharp bark erupted from its mouth as it came upon a door. It scratched and sniffed, digging against solid stone, begging to be let in. I traveled behind the beast, but when I looked at the door, it was my own. Dread made my heart thump hard. The beast was after me. It was trying to get in.

ARIA

Samara was true to her word, and two nights later, after practice, I was able to sneak away, fading into the shadows of the castle until I found my way outside. The stables were quiet, the shadows were long, and the air bitter and frozen. After the first snow, the air had turned cold, far too cold for snow. My mount wasn't ready, and it took me a few moments to find the reins and saddle, all the while feeling bad as I checked to ensure the horse's hooves were ready for the ice that covered the bridge.

Squeezing my thighs around Beauty, we galloped to the tower. The air created icicles on the tips of my hair and exposed eyebrows. We arrived in a blur of cold air and I whirled off her back, my heart pulsing with anticipation, an ache already gathering between my legs as I approached the door.

A trellis of vines grew around the door as though it did not recognize winter, nor care about the cold. I approached slowly, biting my lip. How would he react when I returned? Would he hold me again, make sweet love to me until I couldn't breathe, couldn't think again? I lifted my hand to knock, and the door swung open.

He rose above me, his face pale, haunted, lips pink and full. I gasped, a hand going to my throat, surprised and awed by his presence. His white shirt was open at the neck and tucked into his black pants. His hair was brushed back and the lights behind him showed off his elegant profile. He was

strength and beauty, and my heart twisted and melted at the sight of him. I wanted to rush into his arms and yet stand and take in the way his teal eye lit up, soft and gentle as he studied me from head to toe. A warm shiver came over me as he held out his hand, and I took it. He pulled me inside, letting go to shut the doors behind me, then leaned against them as he examined me.

“You returned,” he breathed. Finally.

“I could barely stay away,” I admitted, holding his gaze, unashamed of my wanting, my yearning for him. And yet, an air of shyness hovered around me.

His lips curved up into a smile and his eye went dark. “But you waited...”

Moving closer, his presence swallowed me up. Oh. My breath hitched in anticipation of delight as I reached out a hand, trembling, frantic, almost craving his touch to soothe my nerves.

“I’m sorry it took so long. I wanted to return sooner but I sang for Count Zorik. When the next performance opens, I will be the lead singer.”

The smile faded, and a tension hummed in the air. “It is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“It is! The production is in rehearsal and...” My lips wobbled. “The music is beautiful and I love singing but...”

“It’s not what you want?” He cocked his head.

“It is, it’s just the jealousy and other performers whispering about me. I just want to sing and be left alone. Is it possible?”

“Then you do not want lessons anymore?”

“No!” It came out sharp and hard. “I do. I want to sing, more than anything. Perhaps I’m just... I don’t know. The castle unsettles me because there was another attack the night of the winter ball. It’s getting harder to sneak away, to escape.”

Uriah’s entire body went rigid. Brushing past me, he strode into the room, his back to me as though he wanted to hide his

reaction. But why?

“What is it?” I ventured.

He turned, his face drawn. “But you are well?”

I squinted, why did he keep asking me that question? “No harm has come to me, but why would it?”

Crossing his arms, he frowned and studied the floor until at last he came to a decision. “Because the creatures of the night are real. High Tower used to be the haven of monsters, and the song I play each evening keeps them at bay. Clearly it is not enough.”

His words hit me like a slap across the face. “Wait.” I held up a hand. “That means that... You have to stay here, don’t you? To keep the monsters from attacking, to protect the theater...” Tears of disappointment welled up, and I cursed my stupidity. What was I thinking? That he’d fall in love with me and race away to Solynn or elsewhere? “Tell me the truth,” I begged. “Are you trapped here?”

It all began to unravel, the legends, the stories I had little faith in, but I’d seen the power of music in the tower, I knew it was a magic that wasn’t natural.

Uriah was beside me in a moment, his broad hands on my waist, pulling me into his embrace. “I did not know you cared so much,” he murmured.

Closing my eyes, I leaned into his chest. “How could I not care?” I protested, my fingers twisting around his shirt, anchoring him next to me. “I...” The words I wanted to say died in my throat, and for a moment, I couldn’t imagine my life without him. “You’re the one bright spot of life I’ve had ever since coming here. I was grieving and hopeless and now I have something to look forward to and knowing this is just a moment in life, unless I choose to stay in High Tower forever, is more than I can imagine.”

“I did not know that,” he said, cupping my cheek with his hand. “I did not realize you feel the way I feel.”

This time when he kissed me pure magic sent chills up my spine. When I opened my eyes, the candles shone brighter, the

rose petals strewn about the floor gleamed and a lightness hovered in the air. Something was changing. Uriah eyed me hungrily, but with practiced self-control, he stepped back, taking my hand, drawing me to the center of the tower. “Will you sing with me?”

“I will.” I squeezed his hand. Although the problem of his task, his bondage to the tower had not been resolved, I felt a lightness within.

“I have a new song for you to learn tonight, one I wrote myself.”

“I’d be honored.” I flushed, almost cowed at the idea of learning one of his songs.

“You’ve heard it before and it may be too soon, but I’d like to hear your voice. You’ve surprised me thus far, I wouldn’t be surprised if this came to you naturally too.”

I licked my lips and stood tall. “What is the meaning behind the song?”

“The meaning,” Uriah repeated, stroking his chin. He stretched out his arms. “It is a call to life, to awaken, to come into being.”

He looked strong and powerful standing there, arms spread. It was easy to believe he wasn’t mortal at all, that the magic that flowered from his voice was a gift from the gods. My heart ached just staring at him and I decided, then and there, I’d come clean to Samara and enlist her help. Surely the library of High Tower Castle held works, research, a history on what had happened in High Tower. For I wondered if, like in old fables, High Tower was cursed by gray mist. Surely if there was a curse, there was also a way to break it. I could not believe I was thinking such things. Aria of Solynn, the merchant’s daughter, full of life and energy and vibrance, one of the most sought after hands in the city until the ruin of my family name. And now I was in a remote town, plotting to break a curse.

“I’ll wait while you compose your thoughts,” Uriah quipped.

Startled, I jerked my head up, realizing I'd been staring off at nothing at all. I clasped my hands in front of me. "I'm ready now."

"Repeat after me," he instructed and opened his mouth.

His rich deep voice was wild and haunting as he sang a song I'd heard before in a language I could not understand. It captured me, infusing me, and when I added my voice to the song, the very air shivered and danced. I had to close my eyes and dig deep, searching for a poignant, powerful memory. I did not want to pull upon pain to inspire my voice to sing, but when I reached for the depths of my emotions, the pain of my father's passing was too powerful, too strong, too gripping and almost rendered me speechless. I struggled, grasping to regain my voice as Uriah went on. Deep and compelling. I imagined him as a knight waving his sword, striking down wave after wave of monsters.

I opened my eyes and watched the ardent passion in his face as he sang. Music was his muse, his first love, his passion, that much was clear, and as I thought of how we'd made love, his lips on mine, skin on skin, the song poured out of me with an abundance of feeling. I lifted my arms and let the sound pour from deep inside me, until it felt like a wave, thrumming up from the bottom of my feet.

It cascaded out of me in ripples as I followed Uriah's lead, my voice leaping and dipping.

"Again," he cried, and started over.

I joined him with a confidence I'd never experienced before. Somehow, somehow, he'd healed me, awakened me, and although I reached for sorrow, the burden of it had lessened, now that he was there. Astonishingly, my furious longing to sing in the theater had abated, not because I did not want to, but because I'd found something better, something pure. Love. Singing to the applause of an audience seemed hollow compared to the magic that soared out of me with Uriah. This, this was true life, true happiness, true transcendence.

No sooner had I thought it, than a flash of blood-red caught my eye. I turned, almost breaking the note as the plants on the table sprouted and grew as we sang. The first bud bloomed, a bright red rose, a promise of love. That's when I realized I was singing alone. The deep tones of Uriah's baritone had faded away, and it was I who woke the roses and brought them to life.

URIAH

“I have a gift for you,” I told her.

After she'd made the flowers bloom with her voice, I'd brought her up to my lair, to rest. Now she leaned back in the furs of my bed, sipping a cup of tea as she regained her strength. I had to remind myself, no matter how magnificent her voice and the wonders she created with it, she was only mortal and needed to recover. Still, she progressed much further than I could have imagined and I'd noticed something new in her song. The raw pain had faded, and she sang with a confidence even I, with all my experience, had yet to master. I'd have to question her about it later.

“For me?” She sat up, eyes alert, pressing a hand to her chest.

I followed her movement, my gaze lingering on her generous bosom. I wanted to unravel the clothing that bound her and take her again and again. From the darkening in her eyes, I knew she wanted me to.

Going to the chest, I lifted out a box with the items I'd spent the last two weeks perfecting for her. Aside from music, I still dabbled in blacksmithing, and my skills had come in handy once again. She sat up, alert now as I crossed the small space and sat down beside her, offering her the gift.

She gasped, eyes wide as she glanced from me to the box. It fit in the palm of her hands, and I liked the way her eyes brightened as she opened it. Her mouth formed into an “O” as

she lifted out the necklace with a jewel at the end. Her lips trembled and her eyes shone with tears.

I still had a handful of crystals from the mine, from before, when it was thriving and full of life. I'd taken the biggest ruby I could find, glistening and blood-red, carved and polished it until it shone before fitting it into a necklace for her.

"Thank you," she whispered, reaching blindly for me. "It is beautiful. This must have cost a fortune..."

She trailed off as I took it from her hands and opened the clasp to fit it around her neck. "It was crafted with love, for you," I told her somberly.

It fit perfectly, hovering just above her breasts. She touched it for a moment, before throwing her arms around me, burying her face in my shoulder.

"Do you like it?"

"Like it?" Her breath caught. "I love it, especially because it came from you."

I craved those words from her; they were sweeter than the sweetest wines. I pulled back, twisting my fingers through her hair to guide her lips to mine. She responded with a matched fever, moving until she straddled me, her warm body pressing against me as she took over the kiss with her insistence.

I shifted to move her down on the bed, but she wouldn't let me. With a sly smile, she pushed against my chest until I lay flat and she moved on top of me, shimmying out of her dress. It hit the floor, and she helped me out of my shirt and pants before taking control again. I liked her even more then. She was bold, confident in her moves. She bent over me; her erect nipples grazing my chest, sending all the blood shooting down to make me harder than before. Pressing a hand to the subtle skin of her hips, I stroked, one hand going back to grip her bottom, squeezing as her eyes glazed over. She rubbed against me, panting before placing a hand against my cheek.

"Uriah," she whispered, breathless. "I'm going to save you."

I did not have time to wonder what that meant, odd words, for her to say and yet, she saw more than I gave her credit for. Palming her breast in one of my hands I lifted her nipple to my lips, catching her gaze right before I licked it. “You already have.”

Her reply was lost as I took her nipple between my teeth, playfully biting, licking, eliciting more cries of rapt delight. Warm thighs gripped me and I enjoyed her naked figure in the candlelight, her soft curves, the subtle tilt of her mouth as she struggled for control.

“Just let go,” I told her as she guided my cock up and into her. “Just enjoy.”

I held her tightly against me as our hips moved in sync; she was just as warm and tight as before, just as heavenly. I sensed us diving over the cliff together into bliss as past and future faded until it was only us, in a beautiful, minute existence. This I would treasure, this moment I would remember and take to the grave. Whether my plan failed or succeeded.

ARIA

The first performance night would arrive soon, and yet I could not unravel the mystery of my lover. I had to find out what kept him in High Tower and how to free him. I'd promised and the look on his face had been closed, guarded. Yet he'd given me the gift. I lifted the jewel off my neck to stare at it again.

The imperfect cut made me love it all the more with its many sides and angles. It was no small stone and fit in the center of the palm of my hand, and yet when I held it, a chill went over me. Something within the ruby moved and swirled, a thread of blackness. When I allowed my thoughts to drift, all I could think of was blood and the clawed bodies. If the creatures of the night were real, they were already within the gates of High Tower Castle. That very thought made me reluctant to venture out of my room alone, especially at night.

Still, when the organ music played, I couldn't help but go to the window and listen, the winter breeze blowing my hair straight back and chilling me through and through. My lips parted, and I imagined him, in all his glory, sitting down to play and pulling the threads of an untold story of pain back into his life. Although I assumed the pain was from his childhood, I wondered. Was it his lack of acceptance? The scarring around his eye? I felt uniquely bound to him, and he'd shared so much and revealed so little all at the same time.

The telling tap-tap came on my door, and then Samara burst in. "Look at you at the window again," She shook her

head in disapproval. “And you did not even bother to lock your door. One day I’m going to walk in, and something will have eaten you.”

Latching the window, I moved to the fire and held my hands over the dying embers. “Samara, I need your help.”

“It’s about time.” Samara set down the tray of food and rubbed her hands together as she joined me in front of the fire. Nudging me with her elbow, she asked, “You’re going to tell me about him, aren’t you?”

I reached for the poker to stir the embers back to life. “Yes, you’re right, I do have a secret lover. Samara,” I dropped my tone as though the very walls were listening. “You can’t tell anyone about him.”

“On my honor.” Samara nodded so hard her bonnet slipped off. She placed her hand on her heart. “I swear, I won’t tell a soul.”

Leaning the poker against the wall, I sat down on the rug in front of the fire, tucking my legs under me. Samara joined me, her eyes dancing with curiosity.

“Remember the night the first man was killed?”

Samara nodded, eyes as big as a teacup saucer.

“I snuck away to find the tower, the one you claim is haunted.”

“Lord save us,” Samara muttered under her breath.

I squeezed her arm. “It’s not haunted at all. A man lives there. He’s the one who plays the music each evening. I asked him to teach me to sing, and he did. That’s why I’ve been sneaking away.”

Samara’s jaw dropped, and she stared. “Oh Aria, you’ve been bewitched.”

“No.” I reached out a hand to reassure her. “Although I must admit, there is some magic at work. But he is my instructor, you’ve heard me sing.”

“Aria.” Samara’s eyes glistened with tears. “You’re not the first one to learn music from him. It happened a long time ago, before I came here. Another lady went to sing for him, and she ended up dead.”

My throat went dry as dust. No. There had to be some kind of mistake. “Who told you this?”

“Madame Blu, who else.” Samara chewed her lower lip.

It was a blow. Madame Blu was so kind. Would she lie about something like this? And I had to admit, more deaths had taken place in High Tower Castle, ever since I’d gone to see him. Oh goddess, had I started something?

“Is there proof?” There had to be a falsehood somewhere, and I’d find it. Just the way Uriah helped me sing, made me feel for him could be no lie. It was truth and purity and love, I felt it in the depths of my being. Surely there was a misunderstanding somewhere.

The fire flickered to life as Samara placed another log on it. Wiping her hand on her apron, she faced me again and took my hands. “Aria, you’ve been so sad since you’ve arrived here, and now, I see that you’re happy. But isn’t it enough? You can sing now, the Count won’t send you away, you’ve got everything you wanted.”

Everything I wanted. No, it wasn’t true anymore. I had everything I’d *thought* I’d wanted before I met Uriah.

“Will you take me to the library?” I asked. “I need to learn more about the history of High Tower. Tomorrow, wake me early and we’ll go during daylight.”

Samara’s face fell. “You’re going to pursue this, aren’t you?”

“I need to know the truth.”

“I told you the truth and you don’t believe me.”

My shoulders slumped. I did not want to drive away my one friend. “But there’s more, surely there is more.”

“If I help you, will you promise to stop this nonsense? No more sneaking out to see the ghost and sing in that haunted

tower?”

The fear in her eyes made me wish I hadn't told her anything, and yet how could I stay away? My very soul called out to his and the bitterness of that music. No, I had to dig deep, to find out what had happened in High Tower. “If you are right and he turns out to be a monster, I will stop,” I told her, because she needed some reassurance and I knew there was no possibility of Uriah being a monster, or causing death.

Samara's eyes narrowed as she studied me and then rose. “Okay then. Come. It is time to dress.”

My gown beautifully combined lace and gold glitter. Unlike the costumes of the dancers, this one swept the floor, and although it molded to my figure when I looked in the mirror, I felt wealthy and beautiful and confident. Samara curled my hair and pinned it up, leaving some to drape over one shoulder, with a single red rose in my hair. I left the necklace on for it matched, the liquid glimmer of ruby catching the light.

“Lovely.” Samara touched the jewel, then snatched her hand away as though she'd been stung. “Which admirer gave you this one?”

I smiled, although it rang hollow inside. “I thought it matched well.”

“It does,” Samara agreed. “Are you ready?”

I swallowed hard. “Ready as I'll ever be.”

We went down the passageways to the theater and instead of joining the others in the dressing room, I was given a private room. I stood there, eyes closed, warming up my voice as Uriah had taught me. The production began with a burst of song, and I glided behind the curtain to await my cue. I tried not to fidget, my fingers stroking the necklace. A sudden memory of my mother returned, her dark curls around her smiling face as she sang for my father.

Taking a deep breath, I allowed peace to fill me until a movement caught my eyes. A shadow flickered and the air chilled. Turning away from the curtain I peered into the

darkness for I had an uncanny sensation that someone was watching me. Why? I could not tell, but I saw nothing in the shadows and I pushed the sudden anxiety away. It was just nerves, that was all.

Before I could investigate further, the curtain opened, just a sliver. My cue. Gathering myself, I raised my head and walked out onto the stage to thunderous applause. Trepidation faded as the spotlight shone upon me. I opened my mouth and sang.

The song took over until I was not myself, not a living, breathing, being, but music in and of itself. Every note, every chord throbbed through me while the skilled musicians played. I sang with an emotion that was fresh, poignant, powerful. It washed over me like a wave, and when the last note left my lips, I stood in the middle of a stage, arms spread wide, a halo of light glowing around me while the audience stood, a blur of faces roaring in enthusiasm. The room whirled and I stumbled, taken aback from both the strength of my emotion and the response of the audience.

The magic of my song hung in the air and once again I had not pulled my song from a place of pain, but of love. A wave of faintness passed over me, but I had the presence of mind to give a deep bow as roses peppered the stage. I backed away to safety of the curtain, ducking behind it to rest.

ARIA

Ever since opening night, my room was filled with flowers, gifts and letters from admirers. It was nice to escape my room and walk the silent halls in daylight. My slippers whispered on stones and although gas lamps lit up the dark halls, shadows of evil drifted around every corner. I shouldn't have been frightened in daylight, yet my heart thumped so loudly, I was sure Samara could hear it. Pushing the heavy library doors open, we stole inside to a bone cold room shrouded in gloom.

“No one comes here,” Samara whispered as she moved around the room, lighting lamps and disturbing the dust. When she yanked open the heavy curtains hiding a bay window, the frowning interior of the library appeared.

I tilted my head back, taking in the rows of shelves that reached high above my head and the grotesque statues that posed at the corner of shelves. Women—half human, half fish—with their bosoms bare, peeking out from reeds and vines. Squat little men with fat noses, long beards and pointed hats on their heads. Shivering, I turned in a small circle, eyes widening. Most of the shelves were empty.

“Why would they?” I said to myself, for the theater was the main attraction. No one bothered reading when delights and pleasure could be had before and after a sensual performance. “I'd thought, though, more books would be here.”

“I don’t like this.” Samara came to stand beside me, staring about the square room.

“Me either,” I admitted. “We won’t stay long though.”

I moved to the nearest shelf and choose a book at random. It was old, musty, and the title had faded. It fell open and black letters covered the page, words I did not understand. Brow furrowing, I returned it, and pulled another, and yet another. Frustration mounted as my search proved futile and it wasn’t until Samara touched my sleeve that I stopped.

“Aria, we should return.”

“Go ahead.” I waved her away. “I’m going to stay here a while.”

“But—”

“Look, it’s daylight. Whatever haunts the castle does so at night, and I will return to my room before then. I know you have other responsibilities.”

With a sigh, Samara excused herself, leaving me alone to continue. There were so few books, I finished a shelf and moved to the next one. As I worked, the statues watched me as if silently judging. I couldn’t shake the sensation. My skin prickled and my breath quickened.

There’s nothing to be afraid of, I reminded myself. I am in Count Zorik’s castle, and monsters don’t come out in daylight.

A large hardcover was next on the shelf and it stuck when I pulled at it, as though it did not want to be seen. Well fine, I’d done enough research for the day. It was clear nothing of note was kept in the library. But suddenly the book came free and I stumbled back, the heavy book in my hands.

At first it appeared like the others with a faded title and words I did not understand. With a huff, I flipped the page. It opened to a picture richly done in vibrant colors, so bright it seemed real. A creature was depicted, and a numbness washed over me. It was a monster, skeletal-like with white bones, covered in a dark shroud. A yawning mouth opened to blackness and socket-less eyes stared as it lifted a bony finger.

Mouth dry I turned the page to another creature, slender and death-like, embracing a woman who lay in slumber while it kissed her neck. A bead of sweat trickled down my neck as I turned to yet another horror. A creature standing on two legs like a man, except that was where the resemblance ended. Instead of hands it had claws and the head of a wolf.

Swallowing hard, I slammed the book shut and a folded piece of paper dropped to the ground. I scooped it up and unfolded it. Words were written with a shaky hand, but at last words I could read...

I write this in haste, for it is too late for me now.

I pray the gods forgive my blindness. What I thought was love has turned to a monstrous betrayal of the worst kind.

He promised me the world, promised me my voice, the theater, everything, yet kept his secret from me.

I should have listened to my conscience that warned me against High Tower, for there's a reason it's cursed, gloomy, hidden away. Nothing can live here, except sin and those drawn by the ever-present darkness. But his love blinded me, as did his gifts and my fame. He's not even human, not really, I've seen his true form, the teeth, the claws. The devil on earth. He knows now, and he will come for me.

Oh, I hear the footsteps at the door. Forgive me!

- Lucia

The last words were scribbled, and splotches of ink marred the page. With trembling fingers, I folded the note and forced myself to open the book again, studying the sketch of a wolf man. Was Uriah a beast? A monster?

No sooner had I opened the book the doors to the library swung open. I cried out and pressed my hand to my heart. "Madame Blu, you gave me such a fright."

Madame Blu crossed her arms, lips tight, eyeing me with a seriousness I'd never seen before. "Aria, sweet, Samara told me she was worried about you."

I closed the book, wondering what else Samara had said.

“I was curious, is all,” I admitted, placing the book back on the shelf but keeping the paper in my hands, hidden in the fold of my cloak so Madame Blu could not see it.

“This is unwise.” She wagged her head. “You’re the star of our show and I could never forgive myself for letting you run, unguarded, through the castle. Come along to the dressing room. I’ll provide some tea and perhaps you can tell me why you’re curious, all of a sudden.”

I went with her, grateful to leave the dusty library behind in favor of the warm dressing room and tea. Still, the letter burned in my hand, and questions rose.

No one else was in the dressing room at that hour, and I took a seat while Madame Blu went for tea, and, no doubt, cakes too.

Unfolding the paper, I read it again, my hands clammy. I gulped in deep breaths as my hands shook and pain radiated from my chest, breaking down my confidence. I’d been so hopeful and now, if the words to this sordid tale were true, I should saddle Beauty and run for my life. I was certain no one named Lucia lived in High Tower Castle... Not anymore at least.

Madame Blu returned and took the seat opposite from me. “Well then, what led to this curiosity?”

She poured the tea and passed me a cup. A hint of chamomile and honey rose, steadying my nerves.

“Was there once a singer here named Lucia?” I plunged right in, studying Madame Blu’s face for a reaction. There, her expression changed so swiftly, alarm, fear and then sorrow.

Leaning back, she frowned. “Aria, what makes you ask about such a horrific affair? It was twenty years ago, but all the same I don’t like to think of it. She used to be our star singer, before she went raving mad, got it in her head that there were monsters and threw herself in the lake.” Madame Blu wiped a tear away. “She was so full of life and vibrance and her voice, magnificent!”

The story sounded plausible and yet, twenty years ago?
“You said twenty years?”

“Aye, or so. I was much younger myself, thinner you know.”

“And the Count ran the theater then?”

“Of course, who else do you suppose?”

“Who taught her to sing?” I pressed.

Madame Blu’s face changed into one of puzzlement. “She spent enough time with the Count but, I don’t believe he taught her. Pardon my words, the Count has an ear for fine music, but he doesn’t teach it.”

My fingers went stiff. If he didn’t teach her, there could only be one other...

“But we shouldn’t talk of such things, Aria. Leave the past alone, there’s nothing you can do to change it.”

“What about High Tower?” I whispered. “How long has the theater been here?”

“Bless me, as long as I can remember. But don’t mind the memory of an old woman. I’ve been here a while, but it’s not like I was born here. The Count needed a manager, and I thought myself well qualified.”

I closed my eyes, thinking of Uriah up in the tower. Twenty years ago, had he taught Lucia to sing? And could he shift into wolf form? If so, why hadn’t he tried to kill me?

“Excuse me.” I stood. “I feel ill. I must return to my room.”

URIAH

She was late. I floated in the lagoon, humming a tune as I waited, although I already sensed the presence of monsters there. Water slapped against stone, the sound eerie, reminding me I wasn't alone, not anymore. A sixth sense warned me the monsters were near and would not delay long. It was almost time to put my plan in motion, yet I'd delayed because of her. One more night of bliss, I promised myself and then I'd enact my plan. What would she think of me when she discovered the truth? Would she despise me for what I'd done? Underground it was easy to give in to dark thoughts, to let the murk and gloom drag me down.

A grate moved, and then a light glowed. She hurried down the stairs toward me, flustered, breathing hard.

"Aria," I called, holding out a hand to help her aboard.

Quickly she took my hand and released it, although her fingers trembled. Still, I pushed off, away from High Tower Castle, back to my lair. She was silent, and I hummed a melody to keep the monsters at bay.

We arrived and Aria moved out of the boat without my help. When I joined her in my tower she stood in the center, cloak and gloves still on, her back to me. I sensed it then. Something had shifted, changed between her and I, but I could not put a finger on what.

"How was the performance?" I'd snuck in to watch her and she was magnificent. When she sang, there was a new

element in the air, a shift more potent and powerful than the magic I used.

She whirled to face me but would not meet my eye. “It was magnificent, the audience, the applause, the music,” she breathed, a hint of fever finding its way back into her voice. “I wish you could have heard it.”

“What memory did you call upon?” I probed.

Her head dropped. “I thought of you.”

I hissed, a sharp intake of breath as I stepped back. Of me? Why? I’d brought her no pain and yet, the magic did not, should not have worked that way. “Why?”

Biting her lip, she looked away. “Because I’m sick and tired of being sad all the time. I want light and happiness in my life. I don’t want to take the gift, the one thing I love, and tarnish it with past memories, with that darkness. Every time I hear you play, I think, I hope there might be a way out of this, Uriah.” She faced me at last, nostrils quivering.

I moved closer, my instincts screaming at me. Something had happened, someone had frightened her, and yet she wore the ruby. Who had dared lay a hand on my beloved? “Speak,” I commanded, sliding my hands around her waist. “Tell me, what frightened you?”

She went rigid at my touch, yet her eyes darkened into pools of liquid desire and her breasts pressed against my chest. When she licked her lips, my eyes were drawn there, but it was not the time to kiss her. I had to hear the words from her lips. Her gaze was imploring as she pressed a hand against my cheek, her fingers cold, trembling.

“Tell me who you are,” she whispered. “Tell me this is all some dream, that you are good, that monsters don’t exist, and magic will not demand a price.”

I jerked and leaned back, dislodging her hand. I tensed as howling darkness called out to me, seduced me with pain and madness and blood. Somehow, somehow, she’d been warned against me. Had *he* done it? Had he told her who I was? And if so, why was she standing here? Why had she come?

Instead of answering her question, my walls came up. What a fool I was, to think she could love me, dark and demented. Eventually she'd discover the truth and run. As she should. This was no place for such beauty and grace to take hold, and yet she'd come to me, learned from me, took the gift and changed it. Instead of running, she stood before me, teary-eyed, demanding the truth. She was only mortal. How could I trust her not to give me away, how could I have been so weak as to give her my heart?

“Why would you ask me this?” I growled. “I warned you in the very beginning to run away, to leave this place, but you made a choice. Now the music is within you, the magic swells and grows.”

“I didn't know,” she cried. “Please, tell me the truth? Are you the reason High Tower is like this?”

It dawned on me. Had it been the week before? We made love, and she promised to save me. I had given little thought to those words but she must've gone sneaking about the castle, searching for more about High Tower, the history, the mystery behind it. I pulled away from her. It was happening again. I'd lose her, just like the others, for I had no doubt she was in deep danger now and telling her the truth would only intensify it. There was only one thing left to do.

“You have learned all that I can teach you.” I crossed my arms, my own voice hollow and empty inside me. “You owe me. Sing for me, and our bargain will be fulfilled. I will come for you, I will decide the place, the song, and when it is done, you are free to go.”

Aria gave a low moan. “Why are you doing this?”

My hands tightened into fists in an attempt to steel my resolve. She could not see that I mirrored her pain, like a broken mirror, the cracks filtering out, breaking, shattering. There went another future. Lost. Would I ever break free of this prison? Would the heavy mists ever shed to reveal sunlight again?

“To protect you,” I spat the words, whirling to face her. “There is more, much more going on here, and whatever your

instincts are, they are right.”

Her eyes flashed as she drew closer, studying me. She lifted a hand to touch my face, her fingers grazing the place where my bad eye hid. I flinched. “Whatever you’ve done...” She shook her head. “Was it so terrible that you don’t deserve love?”

The anger and pain shattered within me, and with a groan I kissed her, hard, as though our very lives depended on it. Her mouth moved under mine, lips parting, tongue snaking out. I took all of her, drowning myself in her essence with that kiss. The bittersweetness of it rocked my soul for I knew, deep down inside, it was a goodbye. Nothing could be like it had been before, not now.

With a sob, she tore herself away and ran to the doors. They opened at her touch, and she fled out into the night, leaving me alone with my anger. Loneliness swirled like grasping fingers full of glee, seeking to drown me in a sea of blackness. I stepped forward to go after her when a folded piece of parchment caught my eye.

Snatching it up, I opened it to reveal words and splattered ink. A hand I knew well, which told a story of terror and a broken heart. Lucia. Aria knew about Lucia.

ARIA

A presence followed me as I fled through the wood, into the meadow and over the bridge. When I reached the town, I stopped to catch my breath before taking flight again, following the cobblestone road to where it wound up to High Tower Castle. It was frightening in the dark, the mist hovering like ghosts and phantom fingers stretching out to tear my hair, yank at my clothes and stroke my cheeks. When I reached my room, I was shivering, cold, wet and my throat raw and sore.

Most of all, my heart ached with a physical pain that made me want to cry out. I rubbed my chest, but nothing made that hurt go away. It was deep, unsettling, similar to how I'd felt when my father died, but so much more. Angrily, I brushed at my tears. It was no use crying for a lost future.

Dragging a chair in front of the fire, I laid out my wet cloak and watched it steam, warming once again. Shivering out of my dress, I pulled on a fur robe, sinking into the warmth. Just a few minutes by the fire and I'd go to sleep. Hadn't father said to sleep and things would look better in the morning?

I touched my lips, sure the imprint of Uriah's kiss still burned on them. I sensed he would not harm me, not intentionally at least. Or was he waiting? Waiting for the final song before he offered me up? I did not believe he'd kill me, and yet, what was so important that he needed my voice? A

ragged sob escaped my throat just as the ominous clang of boots rang in the hall.

My heart skipped a beat as the stomping paused in front of my door. An image flashed before me: a torn throat, clawed body, blood spilling out on the ground. Pulling the neck of my robe together, I halfway rose as Zorik burst into my room.

His handsome face was twisted into a snarl of fury, lips flat, eyes blazing as he hurled himself toward me. I stumbled back and cried out as his fingers locked around my neck and slammed me, hard, against the wall. My head rocked back, jarring against stone, and spots danced before my eyes.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?” he demanded, his brows dark and glowering, his hand on my throat crushing.

A mere squeak left my lips as I pounded on his hand in a futile attempt to twist out of his reach.

He must have realized he was hurting me, for he let go, trapping me with his body instead, his face inches from mine. A strange musk emitted from him. There was a rawness to it, an edge I instantly disliked.

“Find out what?” I rasped, my hands going around my neck to protect it. It was already sore from my flight through town, and I was sure Zorik had left bruises. I’d never seen him so furious. His weight against me was punishing, as though he wished to draw the breath out of me. Adjusting his position, he gripped my arms, forcing me to look at him as he shook me.

“Your instructor! You dared go to the one place that is forbidden and learn magic, music, from a monster?”

“I didn’t know it was forbidden,” I wailed, fighting against the tears that pressed against my eyes. So Zorik knew about the haunted tower and the monster that dwelled there? Why hadn’t he warned me? “Please Zorik, I don’t understand why you are so angry. I learned to sing, my voice is much better, you said so yourself and the theater is full night after night.”

“Don’t tell me what I already know,” he growled, giving me another shake as though it would force his words to sink

in. “It is forbidden to go to the haunted tower, and now you have brought madness to High Tower.”

“I was simply singing,” I replied, my mind going to the murders, the blood. Was Uriah capable of killing?

“Were you?” he snapped, yanking at my robe until it fell open, displaying my nakedness to him. “Or were you whoring around, plotting and scheming?”

“Zorik, I wasn’t!” I begged, scrambling to cover myself while trying to escape his grip. Tears and snot dripped down my face. “I only wanted to sing, and he taught me, I thought you’d be happy!”

“No more!” he roared. “He’s the menace that haunts this castle, he’s the reason people are dying with his pranks and tricks and murder. In your quest for glory, you’ve opened the door and let the devil himself inside.”

He hurled himself away from me, a scowl marring his handsome face. “You’ll stay here until I decide what to do with you.”

“What does that mean?” I begged, sinking to my knees.

Zorik approached, placing one hand on my head. His fingers twisted through my hair and he yanked my head back. The dark glow of his eyes frightened me, as though he would eat me alive if I spoke another word. “You’ve always been mine, Aria. All mine. And now I will do what I please. I saved you. I brought you here. You will sing when I command it, and you will not leave this room unless I request it.”

He whirled, coattails flying, and stormed out of the room.

I heard the key turn in the lock, and I sank down on the carpet and sobbed.

URIAH

The world swirled in slow motion as I read the hastily penned words. Lucia. I still remembered her. Dark skin, like Aria's, a head full of glossy brown curls. She was full of life and energy, vibrant, bright, and she could sing. When I took her under my wing, I'd been able to change her, give her the magic that made her music soar. And then it went all wrong. The official story was that she'd gone mad and drowned herself, but I'd stood over her body, bloodied and broken.

Remorse filled me for what I'd done. I recalled lifting her body and giving it to the waters, then burning my blood-stained clothes. It was a sore reminder of what I was up against and what might happen to Aria if I did not reach her in time. It was clear she assumed it was all my doing, and I'd misread her. Perhaps she'd come to the tower to ensure I wasn't a monster, to hear it from my lips, and now she thought I'd killed Lucia.

Fear made me move, sent me down the trapdoor to the lagoon. I felt that subtle shift in the air and a cry. Something was wrong, something was very, very wrong. My heart pounded in my chest as I rowed, staying alert to the waves, for I could not forget that I'd called the untameable to that watery grave. Still, I moved quickly, already seeing the secret passageways in my head. I had to reach her before whatever madness resting in High Tower Castle consumed her. Would I be too late?

The grate was locked when I reached it, a heavy object had been moved over it, confirming my worst fears. I punched at it, hopelessly, knowing it had been sealed with magic I would not be able to break. Still, fear made me punch it again, brushing my knuckles against the metal.

It would happen again, just like it had with Lucia unless I found a way to get in. Mad with panic, I turned to the waters and a dangerous plan twisted in my head. I had to be calm, I could not let on to him that I knew that he knew. It was time to sing my final song, and damn High Tower.

ARIA

Hurling myself on the bed, I sobbed until my head pounded and my throat was raw. I could not sing, not after what happened tonight. The very thought shriveled up and died within me as I thought of Uriah. The signs had been there all along and I ignored them. How he'd tried to push me away, at first, and then succeeded in pulling me under his spell of magic. I knew the magic was dangerous, but he was so beautiful, so sad. My empathy reached out to him, wanted to help. But it wasn't just that; it was also the way he changed me. I'd come alive with his guidance, my confidence swelled and I'd learned how to sing without painful memories. I could not forget the way the roses bloomed under my song. How could such magic like that be dark and evil?

The first murder had taken place the night I went to see him. Before, in fact. I'd fled the castle right after, but he'd had plenty of time to creep in during the performance, especially with access to the underground tunnels. He'd mentioned my face was familiar. Did he sneak in to watch the performances? To steal food from the kitchen and play jokes on the Count? Breath whooshed out of my body, replaced with a deep-seated fear. I'd fallen for a dark angel. I did not know what Uriah was, other than some sort of magical demon who haunted High Tower and needed the music of the night. Was he an immortal soul seeking revenge? I dared not think of why, all I knew was that I had to get away from High Tower Castle, I had to flee into the night. But how? My door was locked and

Count Zorik in his anger seemed dead set on keeping me there. I thought of poor Lucia, who'd gone mad. Had this happened to her?

With a pang, I recalled the note and moved to my cloak to retrieve it, but it was gone. It must have fallen out during my flight from the tower. Miserable, I huddled down on the bed again and pulled the covers over my head. I had to sleep, to plan. Tomorrow, maybe, everything would seem different.

A dream filled my sleep, vivid, striking. A presence entered my room, seeping between the cracks in the wall to haunt me. A soothing melody played, bringing me peace, and when I opened my eyes, the presence was Uriah. Light hovered about him and he was dressed like a prince wearing a cloak of crimson. A gold and black mask covered one eye. He was so beautiful my heart ached all over again, and when he pulled back the covers, that place between my legs throbbed. Despite everything I'd learned, I wanted him desperately, and that knowledge broke me.

He hovered over me and opened my robe, spread my thighs and bent to kiss the bruises on my neck. His kisses were a healing balm and tears filled my eyes at the sweetness of his movements, the grace in which he adored me. I felt that deep intense connection to him that went beyond the heat of his gaze and the quickening inside my body. I did not know how to explain it. My heart beat faster as I trailed my fingers down his sculpted body, running my hands down his chest, up his arms, sinking my fingers into his dark hair.

Pressing his warm mouth against my beating heart he moved further down. He lifted my breast to his mouth and tasted my nipple, fanning the flames of desire as he sucked and kissed, taking his time. I squirmed beneath him, encouraging him with soft moans as I spread my thighs. Wetness seeped from me as I waited for him to reach my hardening bud and take me again, for in doing so he'd wipe away the darkness and ease the longing in my soul.

My body burned for release as he kissed his way down my stomach and paused, cupping my bottom with both hands to give him better access to my wet entrance. He kissed me there,

so lightly, so gently a small cry of pleasure left my lips. I lifted my hips as he rose above me, strong arms embracing me. He entered me in one thrust then stilled, guiding my face toward him, taking my lips, dangling us both on the edge of untold pleasure.

Moving my hand from his hair, I reached for the mask, trailing my fingers along the black and gold. It was hard, and I had the idea that if I took it off, I'd see the truth, understand the man who'd seduced me, who'd made me fall in love with him. He shook his head firmly and drew back, but I had to know. Despite his warning, I pulled, and the dream shattered.

ARIA

I woke, flustered and disturbed, my body pulsing with need. Disoriented, I stumbled out of bed, unsure what time it was, only aware that if it were evening again, the music from the tower had not played. I did not know what it meant, and yet I wanted to go to the window and catch a glimpse of it through the mist. The dream left me wavering between desire and flight, yet I returned again and again to the knowledge that I had to leave High Tower and start over again. This time I had my voice, although my throat was swollen. I touched it gingerly, recalling Count Zorik's anger.

Again my father's words drifted to me, as though he were there in spirit, guiding me. *Be strong, Aria, be bold when I am gone. Do not hesitate to follow your heart...*

Followed by Uriah's rich tones: *Trust your instincts.*

How could I when I was frightened of the wrong man? It was Count Zorik who made me tremble with fear and Uriah who made my heart soar.

The key turned in the lock and I backed against the wall, pressing my hand to my mouth as the door swung upon. Relief was instant as Samara breezed in and set down a tray of steaming hot food, the aroma reminding me I'd missed dinner the evening before. I moved toward it and then caught Samara's face. It was pale, her hair wild and unbrushed, her eyes red-rimmed.

"What's wrong?" I gasped as she locked the door.

Samara sank in front of the fire, shoulders shaking as she held back a sob. “Kita is dead.”

“Kita?” The maid who helped me when Samara was busy. When I’d first come to High Tower, her kindness helped ease my sorrow. Now it was my turn to stumble. I reached a chair before my vision went dizzy. Had he lashed out in his anger? Gone seeking blood because I rejected him? “When?”

“Last night.” Samara squeezed my arm, her eyes sightless as she stared into space. “Madame Blu found her near the cellars, where the trapdoor is. It leads to an underground lagoon that’s long been disused, but we keep the grate locked.”

With a pang, I recalled that I had unlocked the grate. I’d let him in. This was my fault.

Trembling, I threw my arms around Samara and we held each other, rocking back and forth in sorrow and grief. Why hadn’t I listened when Uriah told me to run? Count Zorik was right, I had done this. I had opened the door and let the devil inside. Guilt racked me like it had when my father passed. I’d always wanted more than I had, and my desires led to corruption. My father had given me everything I requested, which led to massive debts and the ruin of our family. My ambition to sing had led to murder and bloodshed.

Pulling back, I faced Samara. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “We have to leave High Tower Castle, we have to get out of here.”

“And go where?” Samara begged, eyes wide. “We have nothing.”

“We can steal horses and ride away to the city.”

Pressing her lips together, Samara shook her head. “The guards would bring us back, and Count Zorik is always watching. If we go out there, the spirits will catch us and kill us!”

I’d forgotten how superstitious she was. “But we have to take a chance,” I pressed. “The darkness is already inside...”

Samara shook her head. “We must pray that it passes and passes quickly. It has already taken four lives. What more could it want?”

“Do you want to stay here and wait while it takes us, one by one?” I demanded.

“We have to give it what it wants, and then it will leave us alone.”

The horror of her words hit me full force. Of course. What had Uriah told me? One more song, and he'd set me free. I could almost hear the faint echo of my dreams.

Sing, Lady Aria. Sing for your life.

If I sacrificed myself, then High Tower would be set free from this madness. Was that what Lucia had done? Had she tried to stop it twenty years ago? I could never be sure, but I knew one thing... I had to try.

ARIA

Samara was right. Fleeing was not an option. Guards were stationed outside my door. With each passing day, my throat healed from the light bruising until I could sing again. The production ended while I healed and this time, Count Zorik gave the performers a week to rest before rehearsing for a new production. The music matched my mood. Dark and foreboding, haunting almost, and each evening when I left my room—escorted by the guards—I wondered what had happened to Uriah. For at long last, the tower was silent.

Opening night drew near on swift wings yet my mind wandered. Why was the tower silent? Would the monsters return? What was happening to Uriah? If I were free, I'd run back there, inexplicably drawn by him. But I wasn't allowed to go anywhere alone, and during rehearsal I sensed the cold eyes of Count Zorik, watching me with an intensity that sent shivers up my spine. Even worse, the weather in High Tower changed. The mist thickened to a white haze that made it almost impossible to see more than a few feet in front. When I opened my window, it twisted inside, cold and clammy, making me shiver with unease. I wanted to sing through it, call through it, but the bleakness outside matched my soul. Plans to escape filled my mind, and I determined I'd sneak away during a performance or when I was supposed to be in my dressing room. I had to take action instead of waiting for Count Zorik to relent.

When Samara tapped on my door, I sat up with relief, grateful for a familiar face. Behind her came another maid, one whose name I did not know. She set down my meal and excused herself while Samara hung up my dress for the performance.

“I can’t stop thinking about her,” Samara whispered as the door latched behind her. We’d taken to whispering now that guards stood outside the door, unsure how much they would hear.

“Kita?” I sat up in bed but had no motivation to get out or prepare for the production.

With a sigh, Samara plopped on the bed and rubbed her eyes. “It was so surreal, I sent Kita up with your meal. When she returned, she told me you weren’t there and then, later that evening she was just... Gone.”

Suddenly a ringing went through my ears and I sat up straighter. “You sent her to my room?”

Samara nodded. “It was late, I know, but Madame Blu had me sewing costumes. Just the hems, mind you, those are easy. I forgot what time it was and when I noticed, Kita volunteered to run your meal up. We assumed you weren’t there because you grew tired of waiting and went off to the kitchen yourself.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“What is it?” she asked. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!”

I pressed my lips together. “Not a ghost, but, Samara, this was four weeks ago this time? On a Thursday?”

She gave me a strange look. “Yes, why are you so concerned about the timing?”

I leaped out of bed and spun away from her, pressing a hand to my mouth. If Samara was right about the timing, then I had been with Uriah. There wasn’t a way for him to sneak inside and kill Kita, which meant perhaps I’d been wrong about him. My heart thumped wildly as I tried to make sense of it. Lucia’s jumbled note indicated there was someone,

unless she was a raving lunatic... But Madame Blu had confirmed her story. I racked my mind, considering the times I'd been with Uriah.

For certain, the first death had taken place during or before the performance, which implicated Uriah, unless another creature of the night roamed the castle, killing at will. Yet the deaths were infrequent. It seemed as though a creature craved blood at a specific time or it was vengeance. The threads of the mystery started to furl together. Was it wishful thinking? Was my desire clouding my judgment yet again? I knew for a fact Uriah possessed abnormal magic, although all he demanded from me was a song. Was it something dark and deadly? Or were the deaths simply a coincidence he had nothing to do with? Lords and ladies came to and from the theater at all times. There were too many of them to narrow down, although some were patrons of the theater who attended every performance. Could one of them secretly be a creature of the night waiting to pounce? I dismissed my idea again, for at least two of the murders had taken place outside of performance time, when the castle was supposed to be quiet.

“What is it?” Samara repeated. “Lord help us, do you see one of the spirits? The ghost?”

Facing her, I dropped my hands, cheeks flushing. “It wasn't him.” I wasn't sure, but I wanted those words to be true so badly. *Please. Please let them be true.* “He did not kill them.”

Samara wrinkled her nose. “Who are you talking about?”

“The man in the tower.”

“No.” She stood, hand stretched out. “Aria, not this again. The ghost or whatever creature you saw in the tower isn't real. He may have appeared to you as a man, but it was only to trick you.”

I shook my head firmly. Part of me wished I'd never shared my secret with her. She was too stuck in her ways, in the old beliefs, to think differently, but I had to believe in something. Could it be possible the power of our love would

set us free? I had to go to him again. I went for the door before recalling I was guarded.

“Samara, I need you to do something for me.” I turned to her.

“Aria, no.” She pressed her lips together. “You have the performance to think about.”

“I know.” I glanced at my new dress. “And I will sing. I will let the guards escort me to and fro, and I will not leave the dressing room until you come for me. But this is a matter of life and death. Do you know of the trapdoor that leads to the underground tunnels?”

“The flooded ones?” Her hands shook. “Why?”

“I need you to unlock it.”

Samara cocked her head, nostrils flaring. “Why?”

“Please, just do it, if it’s not already unlocked.”

Samara backed away from me, hands closed into fists. “I can’t. I won’t. This is for your own good, Aria.”

My thoughts went to Uriah. How would I reach him? If I thought of him while singing, would he come? Or, after the performance, I needed a distraction so I could return to him, find out once and for all if he was involved. This time I’d ask direct questions. My fear of who he was, of what he might be had driven him away. Originally, I’d gone to give him a chance to explain, and yet I’d failed to tell him why, afraid that in his anger he would destroy me. But his passionate kiss had clarified, for how could he be angry and kiss me like that?

“What I will do is help you escape,” Samara went on. “I’ll find horses, distract the guards, and find a way for us to ride away. All you have to do is wait for my signal and we’ll figure out the rest.”

I blinked, recognizing that I had an ally and yet, not in the way I wanted or expected. “Okay,” I breathed, knowing I could not push her further. “I’ll prepare.”

Samara helped me dress. Before Uriah—when all I’d wanted was to sing—I would have squealed with joy and

danced around the room in it, but now my heart was hollow, and I wasn't sure if anything would make me happy again.

My gown was the color of snow, a fine silk that wrapped around my body as though it were the mist itself that haunted High Tower. The bodice laced up over my chest but left my shoulders bare. A trail of white roses covered the edges, reminding me of when I'd first spied Uriah, singing the song that made the roses grow. Sleeves started just below the shoulder and descending into a cascade of ruffles, limiting the movement of my arms but leaving me with a sense of refinement and royalty.

The waist was a bit tight, but it was still much better than wearing a corset and the skirts swept to the floor.

"There." Samara pulled me in front of the mirror after she finished styling my hair. "You look stunning."

I pressed a hand to my stomach and took a deep breath. I did, along with the ruby at my throat, the one token I hadn't thrown away. I fidgeted with it.

"Come," Samara beckoned. "The hour is late."

Music hummed through the halls as we hurried to the theater. Vibrations of strings and chimes twisted through the air, chasing away the shadows. Yet the tones were deep, mournful. The chandeliers tinkled, jewels purred, catching the tune of the vibrations. My feet stirred, an aching rose in my throat, to sing and dance as I once had. Samara left me alone in my dressing room where I sat at the vanity, my back straight, warming up my voice, just as Uriah had taught me. Someone had left a single red rose in a vase. My thoughts flew to Uriah as I lifted it to my nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance.

Tonight I'd forget about the twisted mystery of High Tower and give myself over to song. Completely. The performance was full of rich and strenuous numbers, but the final one, the duet between two lovers, when the man dies, would be my most exalted piece. Even Lady Siobhan couldn't be angry with me, for she also sang in quite a few numbers. It was a four-hour performance with an intermission, and the theater would be packed.

Holding the rose to my nose, I glanced at the mirror, and a shadow flickered. A burst of crimson and gold filled my vision yet just as suddenly, it was gone. Rising, I turned around, knocking over the vase which shattered on the floor, leaving the rose in a pool of water and bone white china.

The door to my dressing chamber swung wide open. I pressed myself against the wall, gasping for breath as a shadow filled the doorway. All I saw was black as Count Zorik strode in.

“Aria,” he said, eyes flashing to the broken vase. He cocked his head. “Are you well?”

Are you well... Those words often uttered by Uriah seemed strange coming out of Zorik’s mouth. I caught my breath, ashamed of being frightened. I hadn’t had a conversation with him since that night and yet his pale face was flushed, his eyes bright. The scent of brandy hovered around him.

“Quite,” I said, wishing I were not alone with him, wishing that Samara or someone else had stayed with me.

“Very well then.” Zorik nodded, clasping his hands together. “You look quite beautiful in that dress.”

So that’s how it would be. He would ignore the fact that he’d lost his temper? “Thank you.”

His hand went to his pocket. “I brought you a gift, a necklace I thought would go quite well.” His gaze lingered on the ruby stone around my neck, and his mouth tightened. “Here, this one will suit better.”

He held out the box and inside lay a necklace of jewels. Diamonds caught and glittered in the light, reflecting the velvet surfaces of the room and mirroring everything it came in contact with. When it caught the light of the ruby, the necklace turned blood red, and a lump swelled in my throat. “It’s beautiful.” I stumbled over my tongue at a loss for words. “But... I can’t accept such a gift. I’ve done nothing to deserve it.”

Zorik's brows knitted together, mouth hardening into a scowl. His eyes darkened as though he were a god of thunder about to bring lightning down on my head. I had no desire to wear the necklace he offered, worried about what accepting such a gift would mean to him, yet I couldn't deny its worth. It would catch a high price in the city. Perhaps enough for room and board and food while Samara and I sought work at another theater.

"You don't have to do anything to deserve it." Zorik took slow steps toward me, like a predator circling its prey. "I took you from the streets, and in exchange, you gave me your voice, you fill my theater with music and gold coin flows aplenty. It is only fair that I give you a share in the wealth."

He was so close I smelled his musk, and the hairs on my neck stood up straight. Did he know I was frightened of him? And yet, he would not hurt me before the performance. Would he?

Placing the box with the necklace on the vanity, he placed his hand on the wall beside me, trapping me in place. I fought to control my breath as I stared up at his dark eyes, which went down, darkening, hungry as he studied my neck. He leaned closer still, his breath on my neck. "I know your secret, Aria," he whispered. "I know what you've done."

I almost screamed. Panic fluttered in my breast and my heart kicked, hard. I made a small sound, hoping, praying I would not break down and cry in front of him. My limbs trembled as he moved away, his gaze going to the broken vase. "I'll send someone to clean this up."

And then he was gone, leaving me alone, shaking with fear and fury.

ARIA

The haunting melody of the orchestra wormed its way through the walls of the dressing room, giving me strength as I caught my breath. What was it about Zorik that frightened me, and why the sudden gift? I glanced at it, the diamonds shimmering and cascading, a necklace worthy of a talented singer. I knew why I did not want it.

Father used to indulge me with expensive gifts, diamonds and sapphires and silk gowns. I wore beauty like a shroud made of possessions, and ultimately it led to downfall. Everything was fine until one trade went wrong, a ship sunk, pirates took another, and my father began to borrow. The next endeavor would be successful, and it was, but not enough to pay off the creditors who came round more and more, to take, to remind, to hover with their presence. The stress of it killed him, and I had no idea. I hadn't helped, hadn't stood up, spoiled with nothing to give, I'd watched it happen with a helplessness which increased my grief, because somehow I believed it was my fault. If I wanted less, if I had been able to stand up and fight them, to do something, everything would've been okay. Now, at a crossroads, listening to the pull of the music, I felt that same frustration, crying out, a clawing out. I was stuck, trapped, and yet I wanted, needed to escape, to take my future into my own hands. What could I do?

Leaving my dressing room and the diamond necklace behind, I moved through the rustling curtains, the dancers and their shimmering skirts. A pure note kissed the air, the threads

of it pulling me, compelling me. I glided onstage to the bright spotlight. Silence swept across the audience as I closed my eyes, opened my mouth and let the magic surge out.

It filled me and I gave like an endless vessel that could not overflow. Song flowed out of me as the story unfolded through song and dance. The hours passed, each one rich, ripe, heartbreakingly beautiful. As I sang, a hope so vivid and cruel pierced my heart and my resolve rose. I would do anything, everything to rise above my situation. I would not be the victim again. There was magic, a song within me which would allow me to fight off pain instead of succumbing to it.

The curtain went down, and I had a moment to breathe, the dancers to rest and stretch before the epiphany of the performance, the final song. The duet. I took a sip of water before taking the stage again. As I left the dressing room, a strange scent hung in the air, a faint hint of rotting moss and water. I paused, then let it slip from my mind as I took the stage, allowing the magic to simmer in my belly.

Shadows swirled as I glided to the middle of the silent stage, hands clasped, waiting for the signal. A haze covered the stage, slow tendrils of mist moving as though it were alive, snaking around my ankles. The mournful strings of the violin played. Straightening my shoulders, I tilted my head and began to sing. The cadence of rhythm flowed out of me, hushed and sweet yet filled with a desperate longing. I recalled the magic within, the way I'd felt when I'd opened my eyes to see the roses burst into bloom. That light, that love was all there and the edges of a shimmering luster.

A sudden chill took me as another voice began to sing the male portion of the duet. Opening my eyes, I turned as a man walked out of the shadows toward me. Rich, deep tones wafted across the stage, mixing with the trills of the flute, the deeper bass of the strings and the somber tones of the trumpets. I held out my hands to the mysterious man, lulled, thrilled by the sway of the music. His voice wrapped around me like the arms of a lover, pulling me deeper, taking me on to an unknown destination. My body came alive with that pull, reasoning left behind, only to sing, spellbound in that pleasure.

The light grew as the man came closer, singing a melody that wooed my heart. Robes of crimson and black swept the stage and when the light reached him, I saw the mask. A blend of obsidian and gold and his face, chiseled like alabaster, that face I'd know anywhere. It was Uriah... But how?

Shock stroked my loins and my doubts fled as I reached out to him. Emotion filled my song, twisting into a tune of anguish. The orchestra played along as our voices lifted and soared before intertwining, as they had on so many occasions.

He was so close I could reach out and touch him again. Oh, to be filled with his essence, his gift, his magic. It surged around us. When our fingers touched, a bolt of pure desire shot through me and the volume of my voice increased until we were the roaring of the waves, the shout of thunder, the fury of the wind and the intensity of fire.

The whirl of magic crescendoed. Resting my hands on his forearms, I tilted my head back so I could sing to him, as we'd once done. His long fingers gripped my waist as he drew me closer, as though he would take me right then and there, in front of the watching audience. Dimly, amid the swirl of magic, I became aware that I was giving Uriah exactly what he wanted. This must be what he meant. One final song, not that I sang to him, but that we sang together, our magic united, unfurling, flowing out of us with a potent strength that would do... Something. I remembered how the flowers grew; the candles danced, and I felt compelled to sing and dance, as though the magic owned me body and soul. When it had me under its control, I was nothing more than a willing puppet and he was the master who ruled the magic.

All along, had he been using me? Baiting me? Dragging me under his control so he could use me for this? A sudden need to act, to do something, to break the spell came over me as he closed the gap between us. I met his eye, and a question lay there as he pressed a hand against my cheek.

A sob threatened to break the flow of my voice and yet I pushed, straining for the moment when I had to belt out the last note and hold it. The climax of the song and perhaps something else unknown? My voice climbed higher, nostrils

flaring as I moved my hand up his sculpted chest, touched his shoulder and then felt the vibrations of his voice pouring out of him. When I'd first heard it, I thought it was the voice of an angel, so perfect, so exquisite, enough to disguise the horrors.

His voice climbed with mine until we reached the last note and held it in an outpouring of emotion. My fingers flicked upward, grazing the edges of the gilded mask. Before he could react, I tore it from his face.

ARIA

A shriek pierced the air, followed by others as the audience rose amid gasps and cries. The orchestra broke off, a sour note strummed as lords and ladies strained for a better view.

“It’s him! The ghost!”

I gaped too, a knot of dread coiling in my stomach as Uriah stood bare before me. His one eye, that hidden eye, wasn’t gone. Instead, it gleamed a bright yellow, as though liquid gold had been poured inside. Around it was a series of scratches, deep and red as though—my breath caught—as though a beast had clawed him.

Instead of letting me go, he pressed me more tightly against him while chaos erupted around us. “Aria.” The rough edges of his voice sent a thrill through me. “If our love meant anything to you, will you do one last thing, for me?”

Our love. How could he jump to such a conclusion and yet, it was true? My lips trembled. “It wasn’t you, was it? You did not cause these murders? These terrors? Tell me you didn’t!”

His lips brushed my cheek as he took me in his arms, shifting my body to face the audience. But I wanted to look at him, to see him. Dancers hurled themselves across the stage, screaming in hysterics. They believed the ghost had appeared, that the devil was within and they fled.

Distantly I heard Zorik cry, “Guards! Kill him!”

Swords and stones. They were coming for us. Nay, for him.

“If we survive this, I will explain everything,” he said. Chills went up and down my spine as he spoke the command I’d only heard in a dream. “Now sing, Lady Aria, sing for your life.”

I gasped, flashes of my dark dreams swirling around me, the beast with one teal eye, one gold eye. Uriah. The tantalizing presence in my room. The command to sing for my life. It had all been a premonition, leading up to this very moment. There was no running, no hiding from the madness that gripped High Tower Castle, and the music ripped out of me. How could I not sing when my voice might be the magic that stopped it all or brought it to its ruin?

A wordless song soared out of my throat, vaguely I recognized it was one that Uriah had taught me, and the notes soared across the room while the ground beneath my feet trembled as though it were a beast on the edge of explosion. Uriah’s arms held me steady and there was a warm comfort to it along with his words: *if we survive this*.

The theater was in an uproar and emptying rapidly. Surely they were not that frightened of a man with a golden eye? Or was it the shaking? The portent of impending doom?

And then I saw it... Shadow creatures flickering out from the dark curtains, a swirl of blackness covering them yet I caught a glimpse of bone-white fingers, hollow eye sockets and a black mouth, open in a silent scream. They were eerie, frightening as they moved among the people. Guards struck out at them as they shielded fashionable ladies in hysterics. Lords in masks fled, the musicians tripped over their own instruments in haste to escape. The shaking became more violent, and I wondered if the castle was about to cave in on itself, but Uriah remained firm.

Above me the chandeliers swung, adding to the sound, and Count Zorik stood out amongst the crowd, a snarl on his handsome face. He was the only one who wasn’t panicked, who wasn’t running, almost as though he expected something

like this to happen. Coolly, he took off his coat, unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. Shadows swirled around him as he approached the stage, and a deep foreboding rose. My voice caught, I choked as Uriah steered me away from Zorik.

“Sing, Lady Aria,” Uriah encouraged. “Sing for your life.”

The ruby at my throat pulsed as the music soared out of me again like a wave and with a snarl Zorik went down on all fours. “I see your game, Uriah!” he shouted, anger riding his tone. “You’ve done it again, haven’t you? Stolen one of my singers for your dark sorcery of music? You can’t have it all, you can’t win!”

“She is stronger than you could imagine, Zorik. You’ll not get away with this, not this time.”

A hoarse laugh burst out of Zorik’s throat. “If I die, you die.”

Breath sailed out of me again as I stared from one man to the other. They knew each other, and suddenly I saw the similarities. Uriah in the tower, Zorik in the castle, both tall, handsome men with pale skin and sharp features. Both were drawn to the music. Uriah created. Zorik organized. Yet the spell that hung over High Tower had to do with both of them. How had I not seen it before?

Zorik threw back his head and a loud snapping echoed through the air as every muscle in his body cracked. Before my eyes, his spine straightened and stretched. His arms and legs elongated, and his hands and feet transformed into sharp claws. Hair covered every inch of his body until his transformation was complete. A wolf, dressed like a man. He stood in his new form, on two legs, legs of a wolf, his arms long, his head a snout with curved fangs. When he looked at us, his eyes had changed, one gold, the other green. A gold eye, just like Uriah’s.

Black spots danced before my eyes and bile rose in my throat. I screamed and flailed, desperate to get away from the monster that had transformed before my eyes. Uriah held me firm. He lifted a hand and pulled on a rope as Zorik lunged for

us. We were hurled into the air, swinging at a terrifying rate as the curtains closed and a boom erupted.

Distantly, I heard the splash of water and frantic cries as we landed. Uriah dragged me through the darkness and upward to a door and then a set of stairs. We climbed until at last we burst out into frigid air. It was the dead of winter and we were high on the roof of the castle. A thick darkness gripped the night. Below the eerie shapes of floating lights, lords and ladies fled as the castle broke and shuttered, coming apart as if the music had driven it to devastation. Or perhaps those shadow creatures.

Teeth clattering, I half-turned in Uriah's arms, trying to see his face. Seeking reassurance. "What is happening?"

"Sing," was his haunting reply.

Mist closed around us as he turned me to face him and took my hands. The aching song that poured out of him begged me to join him. Cold rolled around me like an oppressive cloud. Somewhere behind me I heard a snarl... Zorik, or whatever he'd become. I spun toward it, but Uriah guided my face back toward his.

We sang as the growling grew louder. The screams below faded, but the terrible booming sound did not cease. The very rocks shook and trembled and yet, the more our voices climbed, the less the darkness plagued us. The fingers of mist shrunk and rolled back, the ice in the air thawed and the fear of death and betrayal that haunted me lessened.

I held tight to Uriah as I sang. Hot, salty tears flowed down my cheeks. Memories took me, plunging back to the night we made love, those first heated kisses, the stories we'd shared, the pain that bonded us together. When at last I came back to myself, a weariness rode me, forcing me to slump against Uriah. My legs felt boneless, my body hollow, and it was cold. Oh, so very cold.

I lifted my head, and out of the corner of my eye, Zorik bounded toward us on four legs before swinging a claw toward Uriah's skull.

On instinct, I yanked Uriah away, screaming, “No!”

In an instant, Uriah and I were torn apart and Zorik hurled through the space between us, shouting and swinging. His momentum carried him forward as the tower shook again. A sliver of moonlight cast its pale face over us. Uriah lifted his hand, a hand that still carried a rope and tossed it. Zorik snarled, ducking away as the rope lassoed over his foot and caught him. Uriah pulled at it, muscles straining as he shouted in a language I did not understand. Zorik fell over the edge just as something dark as night reached up and snatched him. White bone flashed, socket-less eyes stared up at me, and the rancid odor of old moss and water grew stronger. The thing stretched out tentacle-like arms, to embrace Zorik. The dark and evil monster floated over him and a sucking sound came, as though it were drinking the blood out of his body.

Zorik went down with a cry. There was a jarring crunch of bones snapping and then nothing at all.

Strength left my body, and the coldness enveloped me as though that dark creature would come for me next. I fell backward into Uriah’s arms. He caught me before I hit the ground just as the floor dropped away and the castle disintegrated beneath our feet.

The song had taken too much energy, too much life force. I wanted to reach out, to touch him, to tell him I loved him as we dropped, the cold hurling around us, but there was no time, nothing left to say as we sank into the void.

URIAH

I held her tightly in my arms as we fell, like a disgraced star shooting from the heavens to plunge to the earth. It had worked. The breath almost left my body with the knowledge. My silence had brought forth the monsters, creatures of the night who rose to do my bidding, striking down High Tower Castle when I called them with my song. Aria had done her part too, singing with her soul, the outpouring so intense I hoped it hadn't killed her. I detected the faint pulse, the steady beat of her heart even though she'd lost consciousness. It was no surprise, that outpouring of energy, of magic was only meant for immortals, meant to destroy. While it had done the work, I hoped her mind was still secure, that she would not descend into madness like Lucia had. I still marveled on the outcome. Instead of singing from a place of pain, I'd thought of her, and only her as I let the song bloom out of my heart. I'd been wrong after all. The key to powerful magic wasn't pain, but love.

The lake rose before us, and a maelstrom whipped up. The last wild tides, surging at last, come to gloat at the destruction of High Tower and steal the residual magic that clung to that place. It was only then I realized I still carried the rope, the end bitten off by the monster. It was a futile, fragile hope, but I tossed it. The rope caught on a nearby tree branch I swung ashore in the seconds before the rope ripped free. Rubble and dust rose behind me, the ruins of High Tower Castle. The thick mist that haunted the town was sucked down into the waves

along with the demented shadow creatures, taking the last of mischief and magic and darkness with it.

A brisk wind blew as I stood on the shore, holding her. The moon glowed and stars lit the night sky. Tears pebbled on my cheeks as I sank to my knees, a song of gratitude rising on my frozen lips. The first starry sky I'd seen in fifty years, when the spell cast us down. The townspeople had called Zorik and I the gods with golden eyes, but we were no gods, only sorcerers who'd played a dangerous game. Now the spell that held us captive, that bound us to High Tower was broken, all because of the music of the night.

With a pang, my gaze went to Aria who lay in my arms, still as death. Pressing my lips to her forehead, I rocked her back and forth. A bright glimmer encased her body, as though her soul would take flight. All of this, only for her to die? My magic pertained to music only, not healing. Even so, I racked my brain, searching for answers. Tears blurred my vision as her heart beat grew fainter, this time the roar of the waves matched the cry of my heart.

ARIA

Warm... I was suddenly so warm. When I opened my eyes, a golden haze greeted me. I sat up with a gasp, pushed back the blankets and stared, lifting my arms like a sun goddess worshipping the light. Sunlight. There was sunlight! It warmed my skin, creating a cozy glow. So brilliant and beautiful. The gloom and darkness of High Tower had faded along with the wretched night of golden eyed monsters, shadow creatures, music and magic. Was I dead?

I glanced around, unable to comprehend what had happened. My beautiful white gown had been replaced with a simple golden robe. The sleeves fell back, revealing my skin to the sunlight, and the ruby necklace still glimmered around my neck. Instead of a dark glimmer inside, it was nothing more than a normal stone. Beautiful, yes, but nothing unearthly or magical about it. Frowning, I bit my lip.

I lay on a bed of fur blankets and satin pillows. I was outside, on a balcony where a light breeze blew. A golden castle surrounded me on one side, but when I looked out, blue sky and sunlight met my eyes. I strained to see more, glimpsing brown brambles and bushes. I was warm, but wasn't it winter? What had happened to High Tower and Uriah?

Rose vines twisted and bloomed around the balcony. Bright red, soft pink and gentle lavender. I swung my feet over the bed, intending to explore, when a lean shadow appeared in the doorway and out walked Uriah. The sight of him took my

breath away. He wore loose trousers and a white shirt, his hair was rumpled and his eye, that golden eye, was covered in a mask yet again.

His eyes relaxed in relief, and he gave me a cautious smile. “I am glad to see you awake.”

He strode toward me, pausing by a small table I’d overlooked to fill a cup with liquid. He passed it to me as he sat on the bed. “Drink, this will help you recuperate.”

I took a sip. A sweet, warm liquid coated my throat, making me realize how thirsty I’d been. As I drank, I eyed Uriah, unwilling to break the spell. There was warmth, sunshine, and he was here with me. What more could I ask for?

He ran his fingers through his hair as he studied me, the movement showing just how relaxed he was with almost a hint of shyness. “I suppose I owe you an explanation.”

“You promised to explain if we survived. Did we survive? Or are we dead and this is the afterlife?”

His smile was crooked, showing me a swift glimmer of white teeth. Taking the cup from me, he returned it to the table, his movements graceful in a way that made my heart ache. I wanted him, just as badly, if not more, as if I’d never let him take me as his own.

“No.” He sat on the bed beside me and took my hand. “We are not in the afterlife, although sometimes I imagine it will be like this. This calm. This peace.” He touched a hand to his heart, his expression earnest. “None of this would have happened without you. Just as you promised, it was you who saved me.”

He kissed my hand, the featherlight touch of his lips sending a tingling sensation through me. I wanted more, and yet I needed to hear his tale. Reclining on the pillows, but still holding his hand, I looked up into his face. “What happened to everyone?”

“They are safe here. At least those who were human. You can see them later, if you wish. Some remained in the town,

others fled, but some came here, with us. We are in my lands now, my castle I suppose.”

My eyebrows arched. His lands? His castle? My voice dropped. “Tell me, what happened back there? I can hardly believe it’s sunny and warm. It’s almost as if a spell of sadness was cast over High Tower, and now it is broken.”

His eye burned bright as he stared at me, the words slow from his lips. “Almost. It was sorcery.”

My eyes darted around the balcony again. “Sorcery?”

“Yes, like the light. It is still winter, but light magic keeps you warm now. I wasn’t sure if you’d come back, and sunlight is the best way to heal a soul.”

Tears pricked my eyes, and I glanced away, wanting to know and yet, enjoying the moment before the truth spilled from his lips. Sorcery. “I do feel better, peaceful, like you said. Uriah, I have one question, before you tell your tale. Who was Lucia?”

His face changed, a sort of sadness, sorrow seeping in. “She is part of the story. I will tell you in full, and then all will become clear.”

“Before you go on,” I interrupted, because I had to tell him. The words burned inside me, begging to be let out. “I want you to know I was afraid, but I never doubted your love was real. I wanted to trust you, but I was frightened.”

“There is nothing to forgive. I did not make it easy for you because I was frightened too, that you’d meet such an end as Lucia had.”

Reverently, he brought my hand to his lips again and held it there for a long moment, as if to compose himself. I waited, my pulse quickening until he finally began, staring off into the light as he spoke.

“As I told you before, my father was a blacksmith and I learned the trade from him. My mother died of the fever when I was too young to remember her. Looking back now, I think it broke my father, making him rough and unforgiving. Violence was his way, and although I loved music, he was intent on

beating it out of me. When I was thirteen, I ran away to join a troupe and learned to sing and perform. I was good at it, but when the troupe came back to town, my father caught me. He gave me the worst beating of my life, and when I was recouping, the knights came to town.”

He paused, the glint of memory shining in his eye. “I still recall that day. They rode in on giant horses, their armor glittering in light. My father sold me to one as a squire, and I was angry. But eventually I came to enjoy the lifestyle. The knights traveled, fought monsters, saved damsels in distress, and at last, ventured to the queen’s court.”

My brow furrowed. “What queen? I know of kings who reigned but not a queen?”

A strange look crossed his face, and he grew still. “No, and you wouldn’t. She was a powerful mage. As her power grew, so did the knights in her service.” He paused. “After I became a knight, I met the man you knew as Count Zorik.”

I gasped, I couldn’t help it, although I’d assumed they knew each other.

He pressed his lips together, eye guarded. “He and I are similar, not as young as we appear. Immortality will do that to one.”

My heart kicked at the revelation. “You are immortal?” I repeated. Just how many years had he dwelled in High Tower? Waiting, longing to break the spell of sorcery? I moved closer to him, pity and sorrow twisting within me.

“Aye.” He tilted his head, studying me. “I am a Sorcerer of Music.”

“Oh,” the word rolled off my tongue.

He leaned forward, an intensity in his eye. “Aria, I am not a good man. My soul is haunted and my yearning for magic overruled all. My own pain and sorrow I brought upon myself.”

I wanted to tell him I did not care about all that, but I closed my mouth, for I did not know the entire story yet. “Go on.”

Rolling back his shoulders, he stared off again. “Where was I? Ah, yes. Zorik and I became friends. Of a sort. We fought together, rousting our own company. The queen gave us free rein, and we traveled to cities and towns, seeking battle, causing chaos, searching for adventure and fame and glory. I admit, we were not good men because we had magic and power, and it went to our heads. We left much sorrow behind, for Zorik enjoyed pleasure and I sought music, and we did not care who we hurt or cheated or killed to get what we wanted. Gold flowed aplenty until the queen heard of the chaos we caused in her kingdom and she banished us from her realm to High Tower. It was, then, as you know it now, a fishing town, small, remote, with an old castle and watchtower. There were miners and monsters, and we were sent to guard the tunnels and fight the monsters so the miners could work in peace.”

I held up a finger as I caught the threads of his tale. “From her realm?” I all but whispered. How funny, I hadn’t believed in the supernatural before, but now I’d seen with my own two eyes, experienced it, lived it. And a sorcerer sat at my bedside, telling me a dark tale of magic and death.

ARIA

Uriah twirled a finger through a strand of my hair, angling his face toward mine. “What is it about you that makes me spill my story, share my sordid past without fear? Any other would have gone running, screaming of gods and ghosts into the night, yet you remain.”

“You know why,” I told him. Surely, he knew how my heart felt about him.

His eye darkened, and he moved closer still, his lips hovering above mine until I caught his scent. It had changed to notes of amber and other, rich spices. Intoxicating, compelling, and when his lips closed over mine, it felt like heaven. I closed my eyes to enjoy the sensation, the taste of him, until he pulled back.

I missed his warmth and closeness instantly.

“Your spirit, Aria, is captivating. You’ve never been frightened of me, even when I tried to scare you away. You know that I’m a sorcerer and yes, I am not from this world, this land, but from another realm. As the ultimate punishment for our deeds, Zorik and I were sent here. The separation from everything we knew and loved and understood was supposed to break us, teach us a lesson. But we did not learn. Down there in the dark and damp and gloom we had plenty of time to let our minds run wild. The monsters, the blood and gore drove us mad, but we knew enough about magic to create an arcane spell. It was supposed to return us to our realm. Instead, we called down a terrible sorceress who cursed us.

“Ironically, she gave us our greatest desires. Zorik became the Sorcerer of Pleasure and I, the Sorcerer of Music. However, we were bound to High Tower and our greatest desires would cause us pain until we learned a lesson. Finally, she took an eye from each of us and replaced it with a golden one. Everywhere we went, the people feared us, calling us the gods with golden eyes.”

I gasped and pressed a hand to my lips, but still, it did not make sense. “But Zorik did not have a golden eye, not until he changed.”

“True.” Uriah nodded. “He used magic to hide it, blood magic, I assume, which is potent and powerful.”

I frowned, recalling his strange musk. Had it been magic? “Go on,” I breathed.

“That’s when the gray mist came down, and storms battered High Tower. The monsters ate the miners, the tunnels flooded, the treasure was washed away, and Zorik and I remained. At first, we worked together to break the spell, but nothing we did changed anything.

“We grew to hate the sight of each other. I retired to the tower to sing, and he brooded in the castle. I was always better at hiding, but Zorik wanted to live again. He lured people here and created the theater, changing names every so often or killing those who discovered his secret. People returned to High Tower, forgetting the tragedy that had taken place, and I hoped my dark music would break the spell.”

I studied him as he spoke, a whirl of emotion passing over the sharp angles of his aristocratic face. Had he truly reformed? Left the darkness behind, or would the lure of dark magic always rule his nature? He sat before me, contrite, breathtaking. Despite everything I knew, it hadn’t changed the way I felt about him.

“I haunted the castle,” he continued. “It was the only source of food and drink. I usually stole enough for myself before returning to my lair, using the flooded tunnels. I also visited the theater, seeking students to teach to sing. Alone, my magic is strong, but to overcome Zorik, I needed another

voice, a partner. I had other students, apprentices of the music of the night. I gifted them with magic and at first the combination was strong, and it gave me hope, but the music drove them mad. They lost their minds, some died in the lake, others became empty shells of themselves. It was not enough. I persisted with music, and Zorik drowned himself in pleasure that left him hollow. He eventually began to experiment with blood. It wasn't a bad idea, as sorcerers we were both aware of the potent power of blood magic. While he thought blood could break the spell, I was determined music would, for it drove away the monsters and caused the plants to bloom. Decades we went back and forth, growing more reckless as time passed. Until Lucia.”

Lucia. I shivered at the thought of her and tried to control my emotions. But the thought of Uriah loving anyone other than myself made my stomach burn.

“She came from the city, like you, a product of tragedy. Zorik was good at finding lost souls, those with no family to come here, because no one would miss them. He sent his guards to the city to find them, usually claiming he was some distant relative. And so the theater was always full of singers and dancers and musicians. Some, when they discovered Zorik's sorcery, offered him their souls and became immune to his destructive tendencies. Lucia was not one of them, but she saw more into both of us than anyone else did.

“She became my student, the one I hoped would help me break the curse over High Tower, for she was strong enough to withstand the magic I gave her and she could sing. I did not know that she'd fallen in love with Zorik, and he with her. Now, looking back, I think her love for him might have broken the spell if circumstances had been different. He discovered she was taking lessons from me and assumed I planned to use her against him to break the spell and take High Tower as my own. At the same time, she discovered his dark magic. He used magic to change his appearance, hide his golden eye and shift into a wolf form. He killed, at times, when he lost his temper, or needed to perform blood magic to strengthen his hold over High Tower Castle. In a fit of anger and betrayal, he killed her. When I found her body, clawed and ripped, I

confronted him and we fought. That's when I discovered it would be very hard indeed to kill him, and he tried to tear out my eye, leaving me with these scratches."

He gestured to the mask.

"You tried to save her," I breathed, for the note made sense, those hastily scribbled words, because her lover was a monster. It had almost happened to me. And then, because I could not help it, I asked, "Did you love her?"

He studied me until I dropped my gaze, and then his finger caressed my chin. "In a way, I suppose. I cared about her safety, but nothing compares to the way I feel about you."

I took a shuddering breath, amazed at how easily he could stay my concerns with his words and one heated look. Holding his gaze, I pressed on, leaving Lucia in the past. "You called me, didn't you? With your song? I heard it the night I went to the tower. It was as if a magical being spoke to me, whispered for me to come. I ran out in the night, brazen and bold because of you."

"Did you?" He leaned closer, his hand moving to my hips, fingers threading through the covers. "I saw you dancing one night in the theater. You caught my eye because your heart wasn't in it, and you looked as if you wished to be anywhere else."

I gave a laugh, a choking sort of laugh, holding back the sob that threatened to spill out. "I wanted to sing, not dance."

He moved closer, his hands sliding up my arms, his voice dropping to a lower timbre. "I was disappointed when you appeared on my doorstep, because I didn't want it to be you."

My heart skipped a beat, and I opened my mouth to protest.

He shook his dark head. "I wanted it to be someone else." With each word he moved closer, his fingers stroking my neck, his thumb brushing over my lips. "Someone disposable, someone I would not care for. I didn't want to take you as my student and destroy you, but you were different, stronger. I had hoped you might survive, and I certainly did not intend to fall

in love with you. I am the Sorcerer of Music. I was supposed to bewitch you, not the other way around.”

He kissed me, and the kiss was unlike any other. It was raw, warm, both sweet like chocolate and bitter like lemon. When he pulled back his eyes had darkened further, something liquid and dangerous which sent spikes of heat coursing through my veins. As though the sunlight turned my blood to molten lava, reminding me exactly what I wanted.

“What made you return?” I asked. “To sing with me? Your tower was quiet for so long, I was worried. And Zorik had me closely guarded.”

“I was afraid of that,” he murmured. “I found the trapdoor locked when I tried to go to you, and then I stopped playing, because I needed the monsters to return. Like I told you, my song kept them away. They are attracted to dark magic, blood magic, and I hoped they’d destroy Zorik for me. I had not counted on them destroying the castle as well. I had to come for you, for you made an unbreakable promise, standing in the center of the tower. Either way, we were doomed. He was going to kill you, and tell the staff you’d gone away because he’d arranged a marriage for you. Don’t think you are the first he told that lie. If you were doomed, I figured at least we could sing together one last time, perhaps even break the curse and come to this, together at last.”

“And this is it? All that you hoped for?”

“More than I hoped for.”

I lifted an eyebrow, pulling him closer. “You saved the people of High Tower and broke the curse. That makes you a hero.”

He gave me that endearing crooked smile again. “I don’t feel like one.”

“I imagine heroes never do,” I quipped.

“Are you sorry the theater is gone and you won’t get the chance to sing in front of hundreds again?”

“I thought it was what I wanted, but the past few months have made me realize that although I love to sing and create

and I appreciate the magic within, I want a life with you more than fame and glory. What I truly want is love and friendship and..."

He closed my mouth with a kiss.

"I don't deserve you," he whispered. "After all I've done, my past still haunts me, and knowing I've been given a second chance to re-live my life leaves me eternally grateful. If you'll have me, if you'll stay with me, marry me, I will treasure you from this point on, for you are my heart now. You taught me to sing from love, and not only did it break the curse... It made me reborn."

The passion in his words, the rawness of his voice, and his touch sent rivers of pleasure and desire coursing through me. Squeezing my hands around his lean, hard arms, I sat up, tilting my head to catch his eye. "I love you," I whispered. "I have for a long time. When I met you, and you taught me to sing, the part of me that was dead and grieving came alive. What happened in High Tower changed us both. That darkness is behind us now, and we can look forward to a future, together." I touched his cheek, desperate for him to believe my words.

He kissed my open palm, my wrists. "Say it again?"

In one move I straddled him, pressing myself against the length of his hardness, twining my fingers through his dark hair. This time I looked down at him. "I love you."

With a groan, he buried his head in my chest, holding me tight against him. My nipples burned and the junction between my thighs ached to be filled with him. Spreading my legs further, I rocked against him until he lifted his head to mine and captured me again. "I love you, Aria, my angel."

"Show me." I reached for his shirt, my fingers sliding under the cloth to press against his smooth skin.

"I will spend a lifetime showing you," he promised, raising his arms to discard his shirt. His trousers followed shortly and then, standing over the bed, he undressed me, a worshipful look in his eyes.

Closing my eyes I gave myself over to him, spreading my legs, arching my back as he thrust inside, our joint groans and gasps as we moved, the rhythm of our lovemaking both familiar and yet new. Tears slipped down my cheeks as we moved to that climax together, frissons of hope and joy, a blend of relief and beauty. He kissed me again and again, my neck, my shoulders, my breasts, my lips and I held on to him as if heaven and earth could not tear us asunder.

When at last we lay in a tangle among the scattered bedsheets, curled around each other, more questions danced through my thoughts.

“Is it over?” I asked.

“What, my love?”

“The music of the night? Will we sing no more?”

He raised himself on one elbow, one finger tracing lazy circles on my back, dangerously close to my bottom. “Never.” He kissed my shoulder. “But we will sing a new song, a song of life. The land out here is broken, barren, nothing grows. The monsters drove all the life away. I would see it return, and you can help me.”

“I’d like that.” I smiled, closing my eyes.

As Uriah’s fingers twined around mine and the edges of sleep lulled me near, I heard the tinkling of silver bells. A sweet sound of hope and joy. Somewhere, far off, trumpets sounded and a melody filled in the air. The warmth of the sunlight faded, replaced with the silver light of the moon, and as Uriah and I slept, lovers entwined, I could have sworn I heard the stars sing, and it was the most beautiful melody I’d ever heard.

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading *Music of the Night*

I grew up as a musician first, and a writer, second. I'll never forget the sensation of taking the stage and playing for an audience. That power, that thrill felt like pure magic and the essence of it is captured in this romance. This tale was also inspired by *Phantom of the Opera*, both the book and the musical. I always felt bad for the opera ghost, and I wondered what those music lessons were like which is the direction I steered this tale in. Finally, since my roots are deep in epic fantasy, I could not resist that ending. I truly hope you enjoyed the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela J. Ford is a bestselling author who writes epic fantasy and steamy fantasy romance with vivid worlds, gray characters and endings you just can't guess. She has published over 20 books.

Angela is also a [Co-Founder of Booksniffer](#). A new app for book lovers, plus an effective way for authors to market their books to new readers.

She enjoys traveling, hiking, and playing World of Warcraft with her husband. First and foremost, Angela is a reader and can often be found with her nose in a book.

Aside from writing she enjoys the challenge of working with marketing technology and [builds websites for authors](#).

Angela is passionate about helping indie authors succeed and co-hosts a podcast called [Indie Author Lifestyle](#).

If you happen to be in Nashville, you'll most likely find her enjoying a white chocolate mocha and daydreaming about her next book.

