


CALLIE THOMAS



MASK
OF DECEPTION
AND
SACRIFICE

SACRIFICED HEARTS



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*For those who are broken, there isn't a wound too deep that
God can't heal.*



*For my mom, who taught me to have hope even in the
darkness.*



*For my supportive readers, you've been a whisper of
encouragement in my ear.*

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

While this story is a sweet fantasy romance that should make you smile and swoon, please note that there are sensitive topics that may affect your reading experience, including imprisonment, emotional and physical abuse, and death of loved ones.

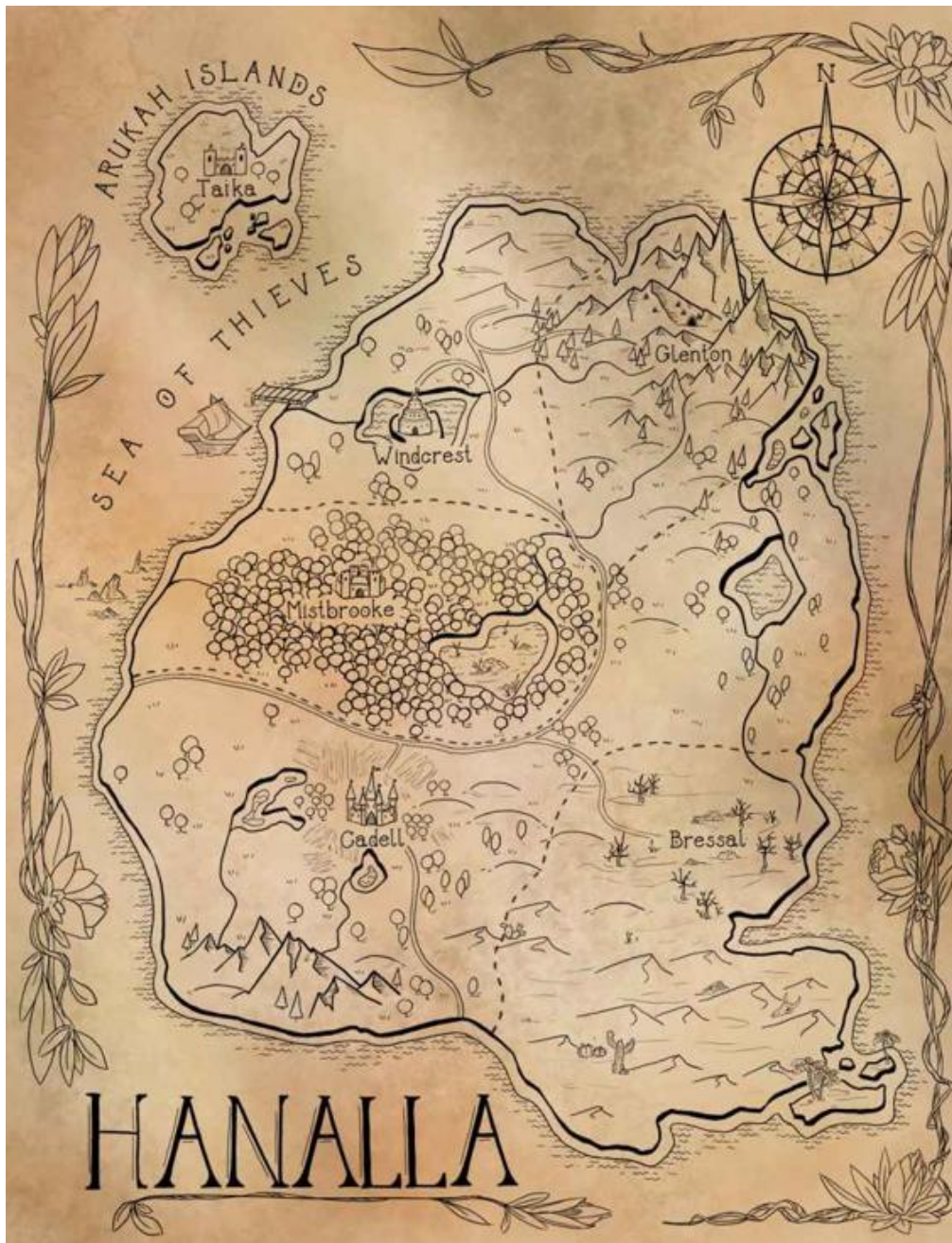
I promise I took extra care when writing those scenes as I know they are delicate subjects to those that have experienced it firsthand.

All my best,

Callie

“Two broken people will either fit together perfectly, or
destroy each other beyond repair.”

— UNKNOWN



Good Girl



I never thought I'd return to this castle—to the fortress I once called home. Nor did I ever expect to find myself locked away in the forgotten recesses of the dungeon as if I were a common criminal.

Darkness enveloped me like a heavy blanket, the stifling pressure of it crushing my shoulders. There was no escape. I paced within the four walls, counting the twenty-five steps around the perimeter. The dank air reeked of body odor and other foul things that wafted through the dungeon hallway. The stench was impossible to ignore, and my stomach twisted in disgust.

Screams constantly echoed off the stones, piercing noises of anguish and desperation that haunted me nonstop. Some days I wanted to join them. To give in and wail my frustrations too.

But I refused.

Instead I traced the magic brand on the inside of my wrist for comfort, the sign of my true identity. The emblem of my kingdom that had once reigned in this very castle thirteen years ago before the usurp led by the Taika family.

Thieves that sat on a throne coated in my family's blood.

But King Ernesh wasn't satisfied with just a crown.

He was set on eliminating not only my bloodline but our entire existence by burning scrolls and tomes dating back hundreds of years from when we colonized Arukah Island. He poisoned the people—our people—against us. They grew

suspicious of anyone with dark hair, condemning us as mind manipulators and evil by nature. Not because of our actions, but because they harbored an irrational fear at the possibility of what we *could* do if we had the chance.

It didn't matter that our magic was a gift from our divine leader, Ruah. Or that the creator of all things and controller of magic flowing through the world didn't make mistakes. When all the kingdoms in Hanalla were gifted with unique abilities, only ours was considered fiendish.

So we were forced into hiding to survive, disappearing just as the king wanted.

Until they found me on the outskirts of the forest, picking blackberries and lost in my daydreams. In their haste, the guards had missed my magic brand and only noticed my long, black braid. It was enough evidence to arrest me under the assumption that I was a loyalist or possible distant relation to the old monarchy. If they realized Princess Fiona had returned from the grave, they wouldn't hesitate to end my life as they had countless others.

Death was the lie that kept me alive.

My fingers traced the raised patch of skin of my wrist, a nervous habit I had developed as a child. Too dark to see clearly, but I could feel the calluses of the raven's wing—the emblem of Ravenwood.

Long ago, it meant hope. Now, we were marked as villains. Monsters to be destroyed without a trial or even a sound reason besides our connection to the old monarchy. If they had known I was the missing princess, they wouldn't have let me waste away in a retched cell for the last month . . . or was it months? It was hard to tell anymore.

Day was night and night was day. Everything was always the same, a continuous loop. I assumed the monotony was part of the torture. My resolve cracked with each passing hour.

I was ready to confess and end the madness.

But what would it prove to give them what they wanted? To have my life and the last of the lineage of Ravenwood

scratched out of existence? What would my parents' sacrifice be worth?

No. Giving up wasn't an option.

I wasn't taught to be weak and roll over for mercy. Our family motto beat in my heart, etched into my soul. *Stand tall in adversity and hold steadfast to truth amidst the lies, for courage isn't freely given but earned by facing the battle head on.* I was raised with a sword in my hand, and the knowledge of magic flowed through my bloodline.

The power of illusion. Magic similar to a two-sided coin, a blessing and a curse. I could alter the reality of what others perceived around me—transform the scenery, change a person's appearance, or even make them temporarily disappear. It also granted me protection, opening my eyes to the secrets hidden by magic.

A gift I had to use wisely. There'd only be one chance for escape. Once they knew I had the power they feared, the magic my family was slaughtered over, they'd wouldn't give me a second opportunity.

I shook my chains in frustration. The metal cuffs restricted the movement of my hands, preventing me from summoning my magic. With a sigh, I slid down the wall, curling into my usual corner.

Footsteps approached my cell, slow and steady and right on schedule. Each step rattled the metal keys that hung around Gorgton's belt, the clanging making my mouth water in anticipation of the food scraps he'd leave outside my cell. It almost motivated me off the stone floor, but I settled on tilting my head in his direction. If I seemed too eager for my meal, he'd give me less . . . or perhaps none at all.

My ravenous stomach gurgled in protest at the thought of skipping another meal again.

Dim light from his lantern burned my eyes from disuse, and I threw an arm over my face, blocking out the painful glow. My cell was the furthest away, so he only visited me when necessary. His winded breaths sounded close, whistling

through his nostrils from his overweight stature. Walking down the halls of the dungeon was the extent of his daily exercise. It brought me comfort to know I could outrun him should the opportunity arise.

My stomach growled again.

At least until I fainted from lack of sustenance.

“Wake up, princess.”

He thought it was only a nickname . . . if he only knew how close to the truth he was. I wished I could be there as his leering smile slid off his face when he discovered Princess Fiona had escaped his watch.

Metal clanged down the bars, drilling into my head. He trailed my spoon across the bars again in hopes of riling me up.

“Aren’t you hungry?” He waved the plate of gruel and burnt bread.

I rolled onto my sore knees, the stone floor bruising my soft skin. I didn’t care about the pain. Desperate for my next meal, I locked my sights on the plate, following it back and forth.

“There she is. Come closer, my pet.”

Since I’d arrived, they had been training me. Commanding me as one would their horse and whipping me when I bucked out of line. At first, I resisted. Who were they to command me about? But I reconsidered when I nearly blacked out in a pool of my own blood. If I was too weak, my disguise would slip . . . and then there’d be more dire consequences to deal with.

I inched forward, watching his meaty hands closely. It wasn’t that I had surrendered—*no*—it was what I had to do to survive. Eventually, they’d have to take me out of the disgusting pit of despair. Then they’d see what I could truly do.

Until then . . . I had to play the part.

His smile stretched across his face as rotten as his breath.
“Good girl.”

I ground my teeth at that phrase, my hands balling into fists as indignation coursed through me hotter than the flames in the lantern.

Don't react, I reminded myself, lowering my head for a calming breath. *It's what he wants. I'm still in control.*

Shifting closer to the bars, I held his stare and hoped my disdain for his existence reflected on my face.

“In one of your moods again? And here I was coming to share good news with you. Or perhaps you aren't interested in the king's royal decree.”

Not really. I only cared about the plate in his hand, but I didn't dare say so for fear he'd dump it again.

“What decree?” I asked, my voice brittle.

“Well, that's not a very nice way to ask,” he said, snatching the bread from my plate and taking a bite. “You forgot to say please.”

“Could you *please* tell me the king's royal decree?” I asked again through clenched teeth.

His satisfied smile whirled the bile bubbling in my stomach. If I were a killer, he'd be the first to go. But lucky for him, I wasn't.

Prison brought out the worst in everyone—including me. Starvation had my fingers twitching to strangle his neck for a dinner roll. But I held fast to my resolve, refusing to be the monster everyone assumed Illusionists were. The reason I was rotting behind bars in the first place.

Maybe there was a purpose to these mental games. King Ernesh paraded Ravenwood loyalists around before their execution as a public display to everyone in Taika. The prisoners' mannerisms were crazed and erratic, proving that murder was the only way his kingdom could be protected.

“Seems like the king is giving you a task before he sends you to the gallows.”

My eyes darted from the plate to his face, my interest truly piqued.

“Oh, like the sounds of that, don’t you? Don’t think it’s much of an improvement. Where you’re going, you’re not likely to return.”

I squinted at him. “What do you mean?”

“The king has sent you on a death mission. You’ll probably be dead by nightfall. But if you survive, I’ll be looking like a knight in shining armor compared to that monster.” He growled at my grimace and dropped the metal plate on the ground with a clatter, the burnt bread rolling some feet away. The grayish substance splashed onto the stones and his shoes. “You should appreciate the hand that feeds you. I can always make things worse for you—so excruciatingly worse that you’ll remember the last few weeks with fondness. Think on that, my pet. Enjoy what’s left of your meal.”

Spine stiff, I fought the urge to lunge for the food despite my intense hunger pains. He chuckled as he sauntered off, taking the light with him. Alone in the darkness, I dropped to the floor, stretching a thin arm through the bars to feel for my dinner. My fingers dipped into the chilled liquid, the gruel probably days old. Sadly, the bread had tumbled too far for me to reach, but I was thankful for anything to fill me up . . . even if it tasted like they served it from the kitchen’s mop bucket.

My eyes welled as I scooped the slop into my mouth, slurping it down no better than a wild animal. What had I become?

Thank goodness Vivian and Thatcher couldn’t see me in this disgraceful state. My governess and loyal footman had rescued me, smuggling me out the secret tunnels before the siege had reached the royal chambers. More than servants, they had become the only family I had left, raising me deep in the lush woods in the middle of Arukah Island. The woods felt more like home than this crumbling castle, and as soon as I gathered my strength, I planned on returning.

I scraped my fingers across the plate, not wasting one droplet.

Wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my gown, I scooted away from the bars until my back thumped into the wall. Not far, my tiny cell barely had enough room for me to stretch my legs fully. I curled into a ball, the usual regret and guilt filling me. I was no better than a pig eating out of a trough.

How long did they plan on keeping me as their prisoner? Did they hope I'd eventually snap and let my powers loose? The thought strengthened my resolve. I wasn't going to let them break me and tarnish the Ravenwood name.

We weren't the monsters—*they were*. And I vowed to endure whatever torture they had planned until my last breath.

Which felt closer and closer each day. The longer I spent down in the darkness of this cell, the farther away Ruah felt. My thoughts turned to Thatcher and Vivian, and I hoped they were still safe and far away from here. They were all I had left, and the notion of anything happening to them sent a stab of icy pain through my chest, numbing me all the way to my toes.

Light beams flickered from down the hall, distracting me from my mental anguish. Shielding my eyes, I squinted at the approaching glow.

Someone was coming.

Voices echoed down the walls, shouting over the moans and protests of the prisoners. Chaos ensued, more than their usual agitation, because of the presence of whoever had entered the dungeon.

Perhaps they'd stop before they reached my cell. Or had Gorgton been telling the truth for once? Did the king require something of me? My eyes flew wide.

Did the king know who I was?

Fear sent my hands airborne to call forth my invisibility, but the chain around my wrists snapped taut to the metal belt around my waist, my skin chafing. There was only enough time to curl back into my protective ball before the lantern's glow spilled into my cell, the shadow of the bars slanting across my face.

“Mind you, this one’s a screamer. For my sanity I had to put her as far away as possible. Don’t worry—she’s more behaved now.” Gorgton leaned closer, sandwiched between two royal guards. “She’s a good girl now, isn’t she?”

I nodded slowly, my nerves buzzing like a beehive.

“See?” He gestured at me. “She’s lost a bit of her spunk, but if she gives you any trouble, just give her a smack. That usually does the trick.”

Both guards frowned at him, just as repulsed as I was.

The taller guard of the two said, “Is she sickly? There’s barely any meat on her bones. Surely you’d rather send us someone who stands a chance.”

“Don’t let her fool you—she’s not weak. She’s fast and smart. Manipulative. Just what the king requested. Don’t underestimate her or you’ll find a knife at your throat.”

The shorter guard raised a brow. “Noted. Release her and make sure her chains are secure for transportation. Safety precautions.”

Gorgton’s lip curled at the command, yet he still pulled the metal key ring from his hip and searched through the cluster of rust-covered keys until he found mine. He eyed the shorter guard with disdain. “I’ve been fetching prisoners for years, boy. I know what I’m doing.”

The warm tingle of hope rushed over me at the metal grinding of the key, followed by the groaning lock. It was the first time they allowed me to leave. This could be my only chance at escape.

“You’ll be a good girl, won’t you, princess?”

I dipped my head, my greasy hair curtaining my face as the corner of my mouth lifted. A lie slipped easily from my lips. “Always.”

Secret Passages



Heavy chains dangled from my wrists, the metal clanging together with each step I took. I followed the shorter guard with red curly hair, darting glances at my surroundings as we hurried through the passageways.

I tested the iron shackles clamped to my wrists, twisting and pulling as I continued through the dark corridors. They didn't budge. Attached to a snug chain around my waist, they snapped taut if I lifted my hands too high, only allowing them to meet my eyes. Simple tasks like eating or combing the hair from my face required a delicate finesse.

The guards didn't realize how smart they were to chain my hands.

An Illusionist needed full range of motion to summon their magic. My hands needed to be high above my head to yank the curtain of magic down. Small illusions were manageable and could be held without much strain or concentration. Including now, my glamoured appearance concealed my facial features and violet eyes—a rare trait of my father's lineage. One that had been passed down through generations of royals, dating back to our abandoned kingdom in Bressal.

A sense of unease slithered up my spine at the thought. Not that the spooky corridors with ghostly silhouettes lurking on the walls made me feel any better. Neither did the faint scratching noises from the tiny creatures in the walls. Or the odd brown stain I leapt over.

I blinked, finally taking notice of the decrepit state of my surroundings.

What had happened since I left to cause such disarray? Mother would have never allowed such untidiness and neglect . . .

Back then, Ravenwood Castle had been lively and warm, with candles illuminating the fine tapestries and statues throughout the halls. Royal guests drifted through the corridors on their way to the next feast or enchanted ball that my mother loved hosting each month, each one more elaborate than the last and decorated with her glamoured illusions to bring joy to her people.

But now, time had chipped away at the castle's interior, decorations missing from the walls and cobwebs stringing from the ceiling. A thick layer of dust coated the floor, my slippers crunching on a foreign substance. We stuck to the worn grooves in the filth. I couldn't even tell where we were, other than it was somewhere forgotten and left in ruins.

Demons of my past roamed these corridors. They inflicted wounds deeper than I had acquired the last few months in my cell. Everything had changed. Our old kingdom had been forgotten.

Gone were our amethyst banners and raven crests. Walls were now adorned in tan and burgundy tapestries depicting twin broadswords crossed at their blades. A fitting crest, as they stole this kingdom with violence.

My heart sank at the thought that I could be the last Illusionist left.

History kept repeating itself. First with the war against the Illusionists in Bressal and then again in Ravenwood. Fear was a fine-tipped sword if wielded by the wrong hands. And somehow the blade always found its way back to our throats.

If only they knew how severe the punishment was if we used our magic inappropriately or for ill gain. We wouldn't dare!

Magic had rules, just like anything else. If we chose to use it for evil purposes, then there would be dire consequences on our soul. Warped illusions would haunt our dreams, staying with us like misty ghosts from our past, clouding our peripheral.

Not that I knew from experience, for I had no interest in black magic. Instead I'd wait for a more peaceful opportunity to escape and not let my temper get the best of me.

I just hoped I had the strength to keep my disguise in place until that time came. Already the toil of holding this illusion wore on my bones and spirit. Even with my royal bloodline, which was, for once, to my benefit. My magic was stronger and more resilient, with our family tree boasting the most powerful Illusionists in creation, usually the female descendants. As such, I could hold small illusions for days to sometimes weeks without depleting all my energy, and the larger ones I could hold for about an hour. That is, if I was well-rested and fed so my energy was at full capacity. Adrenaline could fuel me for an impromptu escape, but I still needed to find a way out of these chains if I wanted to summon my invisibility glamour.

I sighed, knowing I couldn't rush it. For once I revealed my true identity, the king wouldn't rest until I was dead, or worse, drugged under his submission. Then I'd be no better than a puppet on a string . . . and who knew what the king would force me to do.

Pinching my lips together, I swore a mental vow of silence. I wouldn't give them anything they could use against me.

As we turned the corner, a glimmer of recognition hit me, a soft sigh escaping my lips. Six pillars marked the crossroad, each path leading to different areas of the castle. Servant shortcuts that allowed them to move quickly and undetected. Memories of me as a small child hiding from my pesky brothers resurfaced. This used to be my playground, where I roamed freely searching for adventure. I knew most of the secret passages, including the one I snuck out of in the royal mausoleum.

It had been so confusing for me that our loyal subjects we protected and provided for turned on us like a pack of wolves. Now that I was older, I'd come to the conclusion that people in general were ungrateful and would always desire what was best for themselves, ignoring any repercussions.

Hence why I preferred our secluded cottage in the woods. That was all I wanted. Not a crown or a crumbling castle. Just peace and solitude and lying under the stars at night. What I wouldn't give—

A hand shoved me from behind, and I tripped over my feet, stumbling into the present.

“Speed it up. We don't have time for daydreams.”

My fists tightened, and the urge to draw an illusion, to escape this torture once and for all—but my bound hands prevented it from happening.

Patience, I reminded myself. Now is not the time.

I studied the purple-veined marble floors as we walked. My family's colors swirled beneath my feet, too costly to strip like they did the tapestries and statues. Through this corridor, they sparkled as if freshly cleaned, with speckles of onyx twinkling like inky jewels. All the oak doors had been removed from their hinges, replaced with gaudy burgundy fabric. The heavy fabric sucked the light from the hallway, the castle eerily quiet in the flickering candlelight.

So quiet . . . too quiet . . .

Either it was the middle of the night, or this was an unused section of the castle—a place they took someone they wanted to forget about.

I swallowed thickly and hoped I was wrong.

The taller guard yanked on my chains, pulling me to a stop in front of a floor-to-ceiling tapestry. An old, twisted tree was stitched in ivory thread, the same lone tree that grew in the main plaza outside the castle gates. It was an odd thing, appearing to have grown upside down with gnarled roots twisting up like broken fingers to the sky as if begging to be put out of its misery. My eyes widened, recognizing a familiar

symbol. On each tree limb sat an outline of a raven, their yellow eyes stitched to judge us for eternity.

All the Ravenwood symbols had been destroyed when Taika took over . . . so why did this one still exist?

Squinting my eyes, I scanned the fabric for glimmers of hidden magic. It was possible someone had left a secret message or image from the past, since only an Illusionist could see the truth in the magic. If I could touch it, I could sense who the magic signature was from and the intention behind the spell.

But what if it was someone I knew? What if it was my parents?

One of the guards peeled the tapestry away, revealing a secret tunnel, the ceiling strung with cobwebs. A tiny light flickered at the end of the path, painting warmth on the stones. Thoughts of the tapestry now forgotten, I tried to recall this tunnel from my youth and if, by the grace of Ruah, it would lead us out into the open air.

How I missed the sunshine . . .

The taut chain dragged me forward, my worn slippers creating hollow taps as I ventured further into the narrow corridor. An icy draft wafted past, a musty odor of decay and old age greeting us. Whatever was at the end of the hall had been left to rot. Not as promising as I'd hoped.

"Where are we going?" I asked, my nerves breaking my vow of silence.

The shorter guard glanced over his shoulder at me, his freckled face covered in shadows for a second before he turned away. The other guard behind me was equally silent.

Were they not going to answer me?

I jerked back on the chain, but in my weakened state, it was a half-hearted shake that did nothing to deter them.

We stepped out of the tunnel and into the blinding light of a cramped room. A servants' room where they'd wait out of sight until they were summoned. One lone guard sat in a chair,

a deck of cards in his hands that he laid out on top of a barrel. Completely immersed in his game, he didn't glance up. Behind him loomed a massive armored door, something custom made. It opened inward toward the room—or it would if there weren't twelve latches down the length of the wall. Whatever was in there, they didn't want it getting out.

My stomach dropped, a foreboding tingle itching between my shoulder blades. There was nothing in the tiny room but the door and a stack of wine barrels. Why had they brought me here?

“How is he today, Hanson?” the shorter guard asked, his reddish brows scrunching together.

“Quiet. Too quiet if you ask me. Did you bring me the new prisoner?” the new guard grumbled and placed another card on the barrel before peering up at me. “*A girl?*” He blinked at me in confusion, dark bags hanging under his eyes.

“This is who Gorgton sent,” the taller guard said, shrugging.

“We're just following orders,” the shorter guard chimed in.

“I know.” Hanson slapped the deck of cards on the barrel and stood. “It just doesn't sit right with me. Looks like a young thing too. How old are you, miss?”

Three pairs of eyes locked on me.

“Twenty, sir.” I lied, hoping the higher number would cast off any suspicion of my true identity. Balling my fists, I reinforced the glamour on my face, making sure my disguise held at their scrutiny.

One of the benefits of already being glamoured was that once I summoned an illusion, I could manipulate that magic within me, even while I was in chains. Sweat dotted the nape of my neck at the exertion, and I hoped my adrenaline would be enough to keep my disguise at full strength with the guards so close to me.

Hanson's bushy eyebrows lowered, the unruly ends threaded with silver. He flicked a glance at my hair and back to me, shuddering. “Do you know what to do?”

“No, sir.”

Stiffening, he glared at the guards before asking me, “They didn’t tell you?”

“No, sir,” I repeated.

“We were ordered not to, Hanson. Said we’d scare the young miss.”

“I’m not scared,” I interjected, ignoring the lump in my throat. “Just tell me what I have to do.”

“Good. You need all the bravery you can muster. You’ll find his chalice on the table . . . or somewhere nearby if he’s thrown it. The beast enjoys hiding it from time to time. Anyway, you have three days to get him to drink before . . .” He fumbled over his words, staring at the shackles around my wrists that were connected to a longer chain around my waist. “Her hands need to be free, Raimen.”

“We can’t. She could be one of *those*.” Raimen whispered behind his hand like I couldn’t hear him an inch from me.

I bit my tongue so my fury didn’t bubble forth. What he said was true, I was one of *those*, but I didn’t appreciate the condemnation behind his words.

“She will just have to make do with the chains . . . I doubt she has much of a chance, anyway. Everyone that comes down here is days away from execution. She’s dead either way.”

I winced, the cold truth slapping me across my face.

“Sorry to be so blunt, miss. Nobody has ever got him to drink. I’m beginning to think this is how they clean out the dungeon cells when they get overrun.” Hanson laughed at his gruesome joke, the other guards joining him.

“Where do I fill the chalice?” I commanded, feeling my upbringing creeping in.

The laughter stopped.

“Uh, there’s a spigot on the wall that holds his tonic. You don’t need much since it’s just going to go to waste,” Raimen said. “We have to ration it out.”

“His tonic?”

“Yes, it’s supposed to help calm him.”

I nodded. “Two fingers high? Or three?”

The taller guard crossed his arms and scratched the whiskers on his chin. “Well, I’ll be. She really thinks she can do it.”

“Of course I can do it,” I snapped back. Or at least I thought I could if I didn’t have these ridiculous chains binding me. “Who is even in there? What kind of monster? An animal of some sort?”

Hanson sucked in a startled breath. “Are you new to the island? He’s the monster that burned down houses and barns, destroyed crops, stole livestock and trinkets from houses, and partook in other sadistic games he found entertaining. The king caught him and keeps him locked in there, but he’s resourceful and has been known to escape.”

That gave me pause. “Wait. Did he murder that farmer a few years ago?”

The three guards nodded.

Vivian always traveled into town once a month to gather supplies. Besides filling our pantry with food, she also filled our minds with idle gossip. The monster of Taika was well known. Not only known as a murderous monster, he had also burned down half the countryside and was said to have abducted the only crown prince in a jealous rage.

Parents used his disappearance as a common threat to stop children from misbehaving. The monster loved to snatch naughty children and eat them for supper if they misbehaved. Goodness, even Vivian had scared me straight using that line.

Chills raced down my spine as my courage sputtered out. “You’re sending me in with that—that *murdering* beast?”

They were all silent, pity shimmering in their eyes.

“Someone has to do it,” Hanson said finally. “Right, Lyonel?”

The taller guard nodded in agreement. "It's the king's orders, not ours."

"Remember, he has to drink from the chalice. We will be checking if you succeed, so don't even think about lying." Hanson signaled to Raimen, who rushed to unlatch the bolts on the door.

"Wait! I don't know how to get it to drink. Don't I get a moment to think?"

Hanson sighed. "There's no time. You only have one hour each day to complete your task before you go back to your cell."

"What if I don't want to go?"

Lyonel gripped my arm as I reared back, backpedaling toward the tunnel opening. One of the guards grabbed my chain and pulled me closer. Hanson opened a small peephole next to the door while Raimen waited for the signal.

"It's clear. Send her in." Hanson shut the slot with a definitive snap.

"No, please," I begged. But beefy hands shoved me through the slit in the armored door and closed it behind me. I plastered myself against the cool metal, pushing on it with my bound hands. "Take me back to my cell."

The grinding of the locks was their response. Then the window slid open, and bright candlelight illuminated the area around me.

"Don't turn your back on him. Listen for his footsteps and don't get too close," Raimen instructed.

Flipping around, I eyed the room cautiously, adjusting to the gloom.

"I'm impressed. His new restraint hasn't failed yet," Hanson mumbled in the background.

"Yet. They never hold him for long." Lyonel sighed.

"Ignore them and listen to me," Raimen said, drawing my attention to him. "Look for the spigot to my left. Hurry, you're

wasting time.”

The peephole whipped closed again with a snap.

Shadows danced along the pillars in the distance, a half-empty ballroom. The other half was hidden behind dusty bookcases, their backs like makeshift walls covered in silver cobwebs.

I focused on calming my raspy gasps, the sound deafening in the silence. This had to be a cruel joke. A trick to scare prisoners into behaving. I hated to admit it, but it was absolutely working. I’d rather spit-shine Gorgton’s boots than stand in this creepy ballroom a second longer.

That sobered me up. *I am in control. They have no power over my emotions.*

“You can do this, Fiona,” I whispered under my breath.

At least I thought I could . . . until something growled in the darkness.

Man or Monster



Fear froze me in place. I held my hand over my mouth, stifling any sounds. There was a monster somewhere in here . . . and they had locked me inside with him.

I crouched down, creeping to an entryway table against the wall. The shape of it reminded me of a similar piece my mother had in her study, usually with a vase full of whatever wildflowers I had picked.

I slid down the wall and plopped on the ground, wishing I had time to reminisce more. Memories about my mother were rare these days, but the footsteps echoing across the room reminded me this was neither the time nor place for woolgathering.

Hollow steps thudded at an easy pace, the sound strangely like boots. I strained to hear them over the pounding of my heart, and I jolted when they fell silent.

Don't move. My hands were coated in sweat at the thought of venturing from my safe spot. Could I just hide here until my hour was up? I squeezed my eyes closed and rested my cheek on the leg of the table. But then the king planned to kill me if I didn't complete his task.

Both were horrible options.

They gave me zero instructions—like they wanted me to fail. How did one even get a monster to drink from a chalice? Let them lap it up like a dog? If the monster would even let me get close enough to do so.

Once, I found a wounded fox hobbling lost in the forest. Its front leg was bleeding, leaving a trail through the leaves for any predator to find. When I tried to approach to help, it snapped and flashed its teeth in fear. I had to wait and let the poor creature trust me before I could get closer. Day after day I visited with scraps until eventually I could bind its leg with a piece of my ribbon.

What if this was the same situation? What if I had to win this monster over to complete my task? I had a dreadful feeling it was. And with my luck, it'd take more than three days. Time I didn't have.

I am doomed . . .

But what choice did I have? My life was in the monster's hands either way. The guards were right. I was wasting time the longer I cowered against the wall. *No more hiding.*

I rose on my knees, peeking over the table. Shadows shifted through the cracks of the bookcases, lit candles dancing in mysterious drafts.

No sign of a monster.

On the wooden table before me rested a bronze chalice with strange etchings on the sides of the cup. A different language? The inside was empty, stained in violet, and reeked of a sickly sweet scent—like overripe blueberries. A spark shot through my fingers when I touched it, and I jerked my hand back.

Powerful magic coursed through this chalice, unseen to the normal eye. But not to me.

Prepared this time, I grabbed it, sensing ancient magic ... similar to an Enchanter's elemental magic, but thicker and purer. A spell created with kindness, hope, and good intentions.

I expelled my breath in a rush, glad to know it wasn't black magic but curious who this strange Enchanter was and why they'd let such a rare object leave the safety of Mistbrooke Forest. Illusionists and Enchanters rarely saw eye to eye, as they accused us of conjuring nothing more than

fantasies. But the importance of protecting magic and our creations was ingrained in us and something we'd always agree upon.

Who made you . . . and why?

I held up the chalice, inspecting the craftsmanship. The swirls etched in the metal were magnificent, impossible by the human hand. Magic hummed against my fingertips, almost as if it were alive and recognized my touch as much as I felt its comforting presence.

Interesting, indeed.

A spigot protruded through the wall above the table, which I guessed was where the liquid funneled in from the room where the guards waited. Holding the chalice underneath, I filled it with azure liquid. My nose scrunched when another wave of the overly sweet scent floated into the air.

Now what? I bit my lip, standing on trembling legs.

Be brave.

The monster obviously wasn't venturing out to greet me, which meant I had to go into its lair if I wanted to complete my task. I blew out a jittery breath and forced my legs to move.

Tiptoeing across the floor, I took notice of boot prints in the dust. A concerning number of footsteps aimed in the direction I was heading, toward the bookcases, but only a few prints returned to the door.

Pillars lined the rectangular shape of the room, some chipped and some in stone crumbles. Closer to the bookcases, I could make out the thickly bound tomes stacked on top, the titles too tiny for me to see. Almost as if whoever placed them wanted to barricade themselves in to gain as much privacy as possible. A fortress of books.

High up on the far wall were a set of tall arched windows. Their glass panels were pitch black in the middle of the night. Faint lines etched across the glass, perhaps patterns of stained glass that would be visible in the sunlight.

I stopped at the sole opening between the bookcases, unsure of who—or what—would greet me beyond this point. A weighted tension hung in the silence, warning me to head back to the door.

“Hello?” I called out.

Something rushed across the room, the candlelight flickering angrily at the movement. I shuffled further in, and the spot between my shoulder blades itched as if someone were watching me. I leaned in, noting another trail of bookcases randomly positioned around the pillars like a maze. Most of the bookcases weren’t holding books, the shelves just full of dust and cobwebs.

“Who are you?” a stranger asked.

I spun around, nearly knocking a candelabra over in my haste.

A tall man leaned casually against a cracked pillar. Startled by his masked appearance, I nearly let the chalice slip between my fingers. I caught it in time, causing only a few drops to dribble down the front of my gown.

“You scared me,” I mumbled, avoiding his question.

Thank goodness it was only a man. Well-dressed, he wore a flowy white cotton shirt tucked into a pair of leather pants and black boots. His dirty blond hair was slicked back, neat and tidy. Young, if not a few years older than me, with a ghostly white complexion. Besides his handsome appearance, what caught my attention more was the golden mask he wore as if he had come from a masquerade.

I cleared my throat after a moment, realizing we’d just been staring at one another.

“Are you supposed to be here?” I asked. Surely he must have taken the wrong secret passage and wandered in by mistake.

“Are you?” he countered. His pale brow rose, barely visible in the dim light.

For the first time since my imprisonment, embarrassment coursed through me over my ragged appearance. With my soiled clothes and knotted hair, I'm sure this gentleman thought me the monster instead. I shifted away, hoping he couldn't smell me.

"It's not safe here. You should leave the way you came before the monster awakens," I warned the man. Perhaps he could lead me to another exit?

"Are you . . . concerned for me?"

I frowned as he pushed off the pillar and strolled my direction. His eyes locked on me, intense and unwavering. Not one ounce of fear . . . unlike me.

"How sweet," he purred.

The closer he got, the more my neck prickled.

Light reflected from the scattered candles, his shadow large and looming—my breath caught—almost as if the shadow were another person entirely. It moved when he did not, tilting its head as if curious . . . as if it knew I was watching.

"Stay back." I backpedaled from the masked man and bumped into a bookshelf, nearly toppling it over. He continued to move closer to me, an odd twinkle in his eye.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

"I was sent by the king."

He glanced at the chalice and scowled. "To poison me?"

I scurried around a lone chair, my hands holding the chalice trembling.

"I mean no harm."

"They all say that," he grumbled.

"It's the truth."

"Liar," he accused, his eyes narrowing. "It's been a few weeks since they sent someone. I had hoped they had finally given up."

“So . . . you don’t want to drink—”

“I do *not*,” he screamed.

He snatched the chalice from my hand and chucked it over the rows of bookcases, liquid splattering everywhere. It landed noisily on the marble ground out of sight, bouncing and rolling to a stop.

One-handed, he knocked the chair away with an unfounded strength that didn’t match his stature. He raised his hand as if to strike me next but tucked it behind his back instead, gaining his composure.

This man wasn’t a monster—he was a lunatic.

I sprinted away before he could strike again, racing around a pillar into what looked like a makeshift dining room. A half-broken table with overturned chairs was surrounded by more empty bookcases and dead potted plants. No place to hide here.

His footsteps picked up, sounding closer. It spurred me through the next opening in the bookcase, which led to a destroyed bedroom. A pile of ripped blankets lay forgotten on the floor, a wardrobe with one of the doors torn off, another dead plant on the nightstand, and a large bed with ruffled sheets spilling onto the floor.

“It’s useless to run.” His voice was calm, eerily so. “I always catch them.”

The door. I had to get back to the main door, but I’d have to race by him if I wanted to go that direction . . . and who knew where the other opening led to?

This room had another path further ahead, displaying the arched windows from before, the clear glass coated in grime. More tall bookcases trailed down the width of the room with one of them reversed and misshapen, like chunks had been sliced from the wood. Concerning scratches and divots gouged the length of the wood . . . marks from the blade of a weapon.

Before I could rush out the opening, I skidded to a stop at a floor-length gilded mirror.

A wide-eyed stranger reflected back at me, her breaths matching my own. The glamour I conjured over myself was usually invisible to an Illusionist because we always saw the truth. But the reflection revealed my lies, and it was more than disturbing to see someone's face that wasn't my own.

Freckles dotted my circular face, my eyes smaller and puffy, and I could barely make out the fake gray color. My lips were so thin, like they didn't exist, nothing like my full ones I was used to seeing. It was a glamour of one of the castle maids from my childhood, one I'd used often enough that it required little effort to conjure. At least I still had my black hair, even if it looked similar to a rat's nest.

It was a comfort to know my illusion still held up, even if I didn't understand why the mirror didn't show my true form.

I gasped when a figure stepped up behind me in the mirror. A stranger I didn't recognize, his wild blond hair and bulky frame engulfed the empty space around me in the mirror. Nearly a head taller than me, he wore a golden mask that couldn't hide the contempt glistening in his dark eyes, practically radiating his distaste. Under his oversized nose, his menacing smile bent in a manic angle of delight, unfurling wide over his features at the absolute terror in my expression.

How many masked monsters were in this room?

My mouth dropped, and I was too stunned to do much of anything else. A crippling fear tightened around me like I was caught in his trap, trembling at the face of death.

"Don't I frighten you with my haggard appearance? You've stayed longer than most," the man said in the reflection, his bushy eyebrows taking up most of his forehead.

When I didn't respond, he struck the mirror over my shoulder. I shrieked, jumping away from the shattered glass . . . except . . . the mirror never cracked. The silver glass rippled around his knuckles like a rock dropped in a metallic pond.

Magic.

Not only did it protect the mirror but it also showed my illusioned form. For years, I had only seen my glamouring, and the thought of another magic unlike my own stirred my curiosity. I wanted to touch it, to see whose magic it was—could it be another Illusionist?

Just as I went to place my hand on the golden frame, he whipped me around. The handsome man glared down at me through his mask, a wide smile at my confused expression. *Huh?* He had changed his appearance.

He didn't allow me to question him about it, grabbing my chin and wrenching it up. "I'm disappointed. You didn't even try to run."

"Release me," I commanded, but my royal tone only had him chuckling.

"You're in no position to order me about."

I fought his hold, but he only increased his grip to secure me in place. Refusing to give up, I swung my chained hands at his face, the iron the closest thing I had to a weapon. But he caught it easily, my movements sluggish.

His lip curled in disgust. "You aren't worth my time. Why did they even send me a bag of bones?" He lifted my empty fist, shaking my scrawny arm to prove his point. The shackles slid toward my forearm with each shake. The masked man stopped suddenly, studying my raven brand peeking from under my shackles.

The black raven would look to most like a tattoo, but to Illusionists, we knew it to be a sign that we were glamoured. Most Illusionists were marked at a young age with an enchanted ink during a special ritual between the family. The ink would then transform into an image, something unique to the individual. At a glance, the opacity of the image showed the strength of the glamour, from invisible to midnight coloring. And to my parents' relief, it was one of the only things resistant to my magic—I could never hide it.

Not that I expected him to know this, but the longer he stared, the more I fidgeted.

“What is this?” he asked.

I pointlessly tried to yank my arm back.

He brought my wrist to the candelabra beside us, the heat of the flames warming my skin. “Is it a bird?” He mumbled incoherently to himself as he turned my wrist back and forth. “It’s hard to see it clearly.”

His thumb flicked over my wrist, tingling like magic.

“I had a pet sparrow once,” he said, his voice soft in memory. “A smart, resourceful thing. Though it did leave feathers everywhere.”

Lost in his thoughts, he wasn’t expecting my retaliation. I stomped on his boot with all my might. With that one movement, it was like all Thatcher’s defense training came barreling back in my thoughts. In rapid succession, I rammed my bony elbow into his side, kicked the side of his knee, and slammed my chains into the soft flesh under his chin as a frustrated scream tore from me. Surprised, he released me, his head snapping up from the impact.

I didn’t waste another second and sprinted back toward the exit.

With a growl, he pursued, gaining speed and closing the distance between us faster than I’d like. I stumbled over a stack of books as I ran past, retracing my steps to the exit and tumbling as I pivoted around the last bookcase.

His hand lunged for me, mere inches from my nose, before a bronze cuff around his ankle stopped him short, his body swaying.

Curious, I stared at the odd piece of metal with Enchanter symbols engraved on the circumference. A magical restraint of some sort, one like I had never seen. Somehow it kept him confined to the space behind the bookshelves. Even without an anchoring chain, it allowed him to move freely within the magical boundary.

Wildly he waved his arm around, stretching his fingers in hopes that he could gain that one last inch. “Get back here.”

I shuffled back, shocked I had somehow survived.

“I said to get back here,” he thundered. The shadows behind him flailed about, yet he didn’t move.

“You must really be mad if you think I’d willingly walk close enough for you to touch me.”

Emotions whipped across his face, fury foremost, a vein bulging from his neck. But in a flash, disappointment, his scowl sagging at the corners before he was emotionless.

“You’re one of many. They come, they go—they all mean nothing to me.”

“You carelessly talking about killing innocent lives is why you’re locked in here in the first place.”

His eyes dipped down to my wrists. “Then what’s your excuse? Why are you in chains?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.” My confidence returned now that I was out of reach . . . *which reminds me*. I knelt down, brushing my torn skirts aside, and dusted the dirt from the floor.

“No need to beg for mercy.”

“The one thing I won’t do is beg.” I glared at him.

“I will enjoy breaking your wings, little sparrow.”

“You will fail.”

With a roar, he leapt for me again, and I wished I hadn’t jumped when he did. Luckily, he didn’t reach me, held back by his strange cuff. Over and over, he threw himself at me while I watched, prepared to leap back if necessary, but he never budged an inch.

Satisfied, I scraped my iron shackles against the stone, ignoring the torn flesh and blisters underneath the metal.

“What are you doing?” he asked, bending down. He panted as he watched, settling from his earlier outburst.

When a faint line was noticeable to the eye, I stopped. My line of safety. So I knew how far he could reach without

putting myself in danger.

Now I needed to think of a plan to convince him to drink.

After dusting off my hands, I stood. "I'm leaving now."

He stood too, frowning. "Leaving? I didn't say you could leave."

"Maybe because I didn't ask you if I could."

"I don't think I like you," he ground out.

I shrugged. "Most people don't."

He didn't respond, probably waiting for me to elaborate.

When I turned to leave, he asked, "Are you coming back tomorrow?"

"Three days, as you know."

"Well, if you do return, can you take a bath first? You're disgusting." His nose crinkled as he took a step away from me.

"You nearly kill me, and you complain about the way I smell?" I shook my head. "I doubt the guards would send a bubble bath to my cell."

His neck reddened, more of his anger draining so that his mannerisms seemed more refined. He tucked his hands behind him, his back straight. Now it truly did look as if he were about to ask me to dance at a masquerade.

"Are you really the monster?"

"Do you see anyone else here?" With his palm up, he gestured around him. "Unless you are the monster."

"I've been called worse."

His eyes narrowed. "If you're leaving, stop talking and do it already. I prefer the silence over your presence."

Adrenaline flowed through my veins as I walked away, the whole encounter nothing what I expected. I found the chalice on the floor and returned it to the table for tomorrow. Then, as if I were visiting a friend for tea, I daintily knocked on the armored door.

The peephole popped open, and two pairs of eyes stared through, with a third pair trying to squeeze in for a better view.

“You want to leave? You still have plenty of time,” Hanson asked.

“I do.”

Something loud shattered behind me and I twisted around, afraid that my taunts had encouraged him to break through his restraint. But the masked man wasn't there.

A hand grabbed my arm and yanked me through the cracked opening of the armored door. It slammed closed, the guards staring down at me in disbelief.

“You're still alive,” Raimen said.

“More importantly—did he drink from the chalice?” Lyonel asked.

I stared at my empty hands. “No, he threw it across the room.”

“Eh. He does enjoy his games, and fetch is one of his favorites.” Hanson shrugged, flicking the last of the bolts on the door.

Raimen nodded in agreement. “But at least you have no broken bones. No blood. It's not as bad as you think.”

My mouth hung open. “Other prisoners left like that?”

The three guards nodded.

“Who even is he? He changed his appearance.”

The guards exchanged glances, their faces full of doubt.

“It must have been a trick of the light. Nobody has mentioned anything besides the mask he wears to hide his identity,” Lyonel responded.

We left through the dark tunnel on our way back to the dungeon.

“Well, I heard he's from the mainland—a convicted runaway avoiding the punishment for his crimes,” Raimen said over his shoulder, walking ahead of me.

“I heard he was born that way and the king hopes to train him to heel like a pet,” Lyonel added.

“How long has he been locked in there?” I asked, surprised at the kernel of pity forming at the thought of being trapped in a room of bookcases and never being able to venture outside. It could turn anyone into a monster cooped up in a cell.

“We don’t know. Just gossip from the servants’ hall,” Lyonel said from behind me. “We were hired three months after the last guards were . . . killed.”

More innocent lives lost, but why? Wouldn’t it make more sense for the king to execute the monster instead? Why keep him alive?

Blinking, I found myself at the entrance of the dungeon, surprised that the conversation had distracted my walk. The prisoners shouted at our arrival, rattling their doors and hurling threats at the guards.

“You said I have three days to get him to drink?”

“The king allots you three days. If you fail, then you will be executed for your crimes.”

“But I’ve done nothing wrong besides have black hair.”

“True, but we don’t take any chances with Illusionists. Black magic is outlawed everywhere—decreed from Cadell for all the territories.”

I bit my tongue to keep from arguing. Illusionists didn’t conjure black magic any more than Enchanters did. The same magic that flowed through them flowed through us—it just manifested differently. Why did they get to be labeled as heroes, and not us?

It was pointless to try to sway them differently.

“If you thought that, then why not kill me outright?” I asked.

“Why would we kill a perfectly good mouse if it could be used as bait for a snake?” Gorgton chimed in from down the hall.

I turned to him, not liking him anywhere but in my eyesight. He waddled the rest of the way toward us, relieving the guards of their duty. The two guards eyed me as if remembering who they were conversing with—a prisoner. They nodded to Gorgton before exiting down the long path of the cells. The other prisoners rioted and banged on their bars, spewing filthy names at the king's men.

“Awful chatty today, aren't you, princess?” Gorgton grumbled. He yanked my metal cuffs, the iron chafing my raw skin.

Suddenly, my interest in socializing evaporated. Defiant, I clamped my lips closed while he unlocked my cell. He shoved me through the door, and I landed on the hard stone floor.

“You never spoke more than ten words a day to me. What a surprise to hear you gabbing with those guards you just met. Just remember who got you this opportunity. It wasn't the—” he pressed his face into the bars with a horrid glee “—it was me. I'm your ticket out of here, and if anyone's getting a reward, it will be me.”

I scowled at him. “What reward?”

“Don't you worry about it. You just focus on getting that monster to drink his tonic.”

My fingers twitched with the urge to raise them and bring all his inner demons to flash before his eyes. To watch him tremble on his knees, begging for help, when all the shadows were just his imagination.

But then how different was I from the masked man? I wouldn't allow myself to be the monster everyone assumed my people were. Anger—no matter how justified—wasn't going to prove our innocence. We weren't killers or torturers. Our magic, just like those on the mainland, were gifted from the creator, Ruah. Fear blindsided the other territories, but we were no different from them. We didn't have strength or elemental powers. What we had was ever more precious—we conjured hope.

And hope in the right hands could be just as powerful as an Enchanter's flame.

So, I remained silent, even as everything inside me screamed at the unfairness and abusive treatment I'd had to endure. One day, I prayed justice would be served.

But I selfishly hoped I was the one ladling it out.

Your Name for Mine



A lone in the dark, I collected myself, my hands still trembling. What had just happened? Why would the king keep this lunatic in his castle so close to his people?

He must want something from him—but what? I recalled the ease with which he flung the chair across the room as if it weighed nothing at all. With a strength like that, he should be able to easily escape the castle, but the cuff on his leg trapped him in the ballroom just as I was locked in this cell. Based on the makeshift rooms, his lodgings were more long-term than mine.

His mask flashed in my thoughts again. Perhaps the most confusing thing of all—his changing mannerisms. In the blink of an eye he went from handsome and refined to raving like a wild beast.

Then there was the mirror. Our reflections had both been altered, with his to the point of frightening. Hideous and almost inhuman—as if constructed with all the wrong pieces. Not to mention the rage and hate churning inside of him, so much that it spewed from his pores.

I shuddered at the memory.

Where did he come from and why did he wear a golden mask? How did his appearance change? Magic? And most importantly . . . why did he want to kill me?

There were just too many questions.

Tucking my legs under my dress, I rested my chin on my bent knees. The chill in the dank air bit more than usual.

I knew I should be terrified, but for the first time since I'd arrived, a lightness filled me, tingling like summer sunshine bottled up in my chest, a feeling I had lost some weeks ago—hope. He could be my chance for escape if only I could figure out how. This opportunity had fallen into my lap like a tangled mess of ribbon that only needed to be unwound.

Easier said than done. Based on his reaction to the tonic, the masked man was proving uncooperative. Wouldn't he want to drink his medicine so that he could get better? Or perhaps he didn't want to change and enjoyed his crazed behavior. Well, willing or not, I had to force him to drink it so I could survive.

I had failed the first day, but there were still two days until my deadline. How could I convince him to drink? Not by strength or speed. Could I reason with him? I laughed in the darkness at that notion. Perhaps bargaining would be simpler? But I had nothing to offer. There was always the option of coaxing him to drink as one spoon-fed a child.

None of those sounded plausible, but I had to try *something*. I traced the raven's wings on my wrist as I thought, my eyes drooping from exhaustion. His mask flashed before my eyes again, and surprisingly it wasn't fear whispering in my thoughts at the sight of it, but curiosity.

Who is the man behind the mask?

No sooner had I fallen asleep than I awoke to Gorgon returning to my cell, banging a metal cup along the bars. "Wake up, princess. You need your nourishment before the guards come to collect you again." He placed the plate on the floor with a clatter. "Aren't you hungry?"

Yawning, I eyed him warily.

"Eat," he barked, and I flinched at his harsh command.

I crawled over the filthy floor and reached for a strip of burnt bacon. Before I could pull it through the bars, his boot

stomped onto my fingers, the blackened meat crumbling on the stone.

“I expect you to do better today. Despite what they say, the monster *is* only a man. I put a lot of time into you, and my reputation is hanging on your success.”

When I didn't respond to his threat, he ground his toe into my bones. Pain rippled up my arm to my shoulder. I cried out, my screams mingling with the rest of the wails from the other prisoners.

He bent down so we were eye level, his breath as putrid as his heart. “Understand?” After I nodded, he finally released me.

I recoiled to the safety of my cell, holding my throbbing hand to my chest. I wished I had a scathing reply, but fear lodged in my throat and addled my brain. Thatcher had taught me to defend myself, whether with words or a dagger, yet whenever someone confronted me, I froze, forgetting all my lessons.

Even when Gorgton left, taking my untouched breakfast with him, I remained motionless on the ground.

I hated him.

I hated this pit of despair.

I hated that I wanted to lose myself to the darkness . . . because after today, I was desperate enough to do anything to flee this prison.

The guards came, leading me from my cell back down the twisting maze of hallways. They ignored me today—which I was thankful for as it let me to study my surroundings.

If an opportunity presented itself, I needed to know which direction to go.

A blanket of foreboding wrapped around my shoulders as soon as I stepped out of the narrow tunnel, my eyes on the armored door.

“Is it that time already?” Hanson asked, laying his cards on the barrel. “He's in a mood today. Throwing things around—

and I know I've said it a thousand times, but I'm not cleaning it up. I had a bloody nose for a week last time." He stood, shaking his head. He opened the peephole and shut it just as fast, nodding at Raimen. "I'm a guard, not some prisoner's maid."

"Make Rajah do it when you trade shifts," Lyonel said with a shrug.

"It's the principle of the matter, Lyonel."

Raimen began to turn the iron bolts, my pulse fluttering, and I tuned out the guards arguing.

"Are you ready?" Raimen asked quietly.

I glanced up from my shaking hands. "If he throws the chalice again, can I refill the cup? How many times can I offer it to him?"

"No. There's only so much supply, and he's already wasted barrels of his tonic. The king only allows one cup a day."

I was afraid that might be the answer.

"Then in you go," he said, giving me a gentle shove through the cracked opening before closing the door.

The darkness embraced me, transporting me to the past when the screams of servants clawed through my mind and the smoky soot billowed in the air. I blinked, back in the ballroom again, the soft beams of candlelight burning the remnants of my flashback away. The combination of fear and darkness had a way of triggering old memories. Sometimes the past refused to stay where it belonged.

I forced myself into motion. Eventually the cold chills of my past dissipated as I focused on the present. The chalice remained where I left it yesterday and I picked it up, filling it from the spigot.

"You again," the masked man said, the phrase sounding like a curse.

His voice echoed in the expanse of the room, bouncing from one pillar to the next so that I couldn't pinpoint his location.

“I could smell you as soon as you walked in,” he complained.

“Your words don’t hurt me.” Yet I shivered anyway.

“Then I’m not trying hard enough. You smell no better than a pig sleeping in its own waste.”

“Really? A pig? How unimaginative. With all the bookcases surrounding you, I assumed you had a higher intellect.”

“Are you trying to rile me, little sparrow?” His soft chuckle grew louder as I approached. Unexpectedly, he rounded the corner of the bookcase, stopping before the safety line. “That makes you the dimwitted one between us.”

“If you can’t stand the sight or smell of me, just take a sip from the chalice and I will leave you alone.”

“*Oh.*” He opened his arms wide. “Why didn’t you say that I only needed a sip? Here I thought I needed to drink the whole glass. Hand it to me so you can be on your way.”

I frowned at his sarcastic tone. “Do you really mean it?”

“Look, if you don’t want me to—”

“No, I do. I do.”

Could it be that simple? Just ask?

Narrowing my eyes, I studied him as I moved closer, confused by his change of heart. Yesterday he chased me around the room. Today he was going to drink it without protesting?

I toed the safety line with him across from me, his face void of emotion.

“Closer,” he said with his hand outstretched. “I can’t reach it.”

The gloom from the clouds blew away, flooding the room with soft moonbeams which highlighted the ridges of his face. Clean shaven, his skin was smooth, and his full lips creased downward in a frown as if he rarely had a reason to smile. The golden trim of his mask accented his features, giving him a

mysterious quality. His eyes were hidden in the shadows of the silk, but I sensed the intensity in his gaze as he studied me as much as I did him.

The longer he stared, the warmer my cheeks grew.

“What’s your name?” he asked suddenly, his tone a caress.

“If you drink the whole cup, I’ll tell you.”

He wiggled his fingers as a reminder. “You still haven’t handed it to me yet.”

I offered it to him, careful to snatch my hand back before he could grab me. He didn’t try. Instead, he brought the chalice to his lips, then sighed dramatically.

“It’s a pity.”

Come on. Drink it already.

“What’s a pity?”

“That all of this will go to waste.” Before I could stop him, he tipped the chalice away from him, letting the clear blue liquid splatter over the stone tiles and onto his boots and the hem of my torn dress. Then he wound back his arm and chucked it over my shoulder across the room.

I scowled at him, grinding my teeth with each clank of metal as it bounced in the distance. Two days wasted, and now I only had tomorrow left.

“Don’t cry, little sparrow,” he mocked.

“I’m not,” I said flatly, a numbness seeping into me. I lifted my chin, holding his glare. “Isn’t this tonic supposed to help you? It’s quite churlish of you to be wasting—”

“Help me?” He pounced, but the cuff prevented him from moving farther. “You know *nothing*.”

“Then tell me so I understand.”

“You aren’t worth the breath required for an explanation. Get out.” The cruel hint of anger marring his brow relaxed, his brows slanting upward in weariness. “Leave me to my solitude.”

“I’ll only be back tomorrow,” I whispered.

His lips pinched. “Why bother?”

“It’s my last chance.” I lifted my chained hands, pleading with him. “As much as you think it, I’m not your enemy. We aren’t so different—I’m their prisoner too.”

“How naive you are.” He shook his head.

His words were like jabs, poking at me until I wanted to scream. Not that I’d give him the satisfaction. Taking a calming breath, I turned around to find the chalice for tomorrow.

“That’s right. Be a good girl and leave.”

Hearing that phrase, the one I’d heard nonstop since I’d been locked in my cell, snapped something inside me. A white-hot fury sizzled through my veins until I saw red. Spinning around, I caught a glimpse of his retreating form as he ventured back into his lair. I didn’t think as I stormed across the line, chasing after him to shove him from behind. He slammed into the piano with a grunt.

“I’m *not* your good anything,” I roared, fists clenched.

Stiffening, he regained his composure and slowly rotated around, shaking with restrained fury. A shadow fell over his features from the candlelight, his eyes dilating. “You want to play, little sparrow?”

Then he lunged.

My eyes widened at my mistake. I leapt out of reach, knocking over a chair as a barrier. My bravado disappeared as I bolted for the exit, and I dove for the opening between the bookcases before he could grab me. I crawled over the safety line a second before his hand struck out where I had been, snatching only air. Blinking at him, I scooted away, eyeing his disheveled appearance.

That was close . . . too close.

He let out a light-hearted laugh, shooting chills down my spine. “Not so brave now, are you?”

His voice . . . I could have misheard it, but before he had sounded like someone else.

“Cross the line again and you’ll regret it.” He smiled, a deranged smirk under his golden mask.

“You truly are a monster.”

“So they say. I find it’s best to just embrace it.”

“I find proving them wrong more satisfying,” I said, raising my brow.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

I scrambled to my feet, giving him a wide berth despite the safety line, to search for the lost chalice. It didn’t take long in the empty room. Shimmering bronze, wedged into a pile of rubble, drew my attention. I returned it to the table and knocked on the door, trying my best to ignore the tickling sensation between my shoulder blades.

The metal locks squealed, and the armored door swung open. I glanced over my shoulder one last time, surprised to see the masked man still watching me.

“I can’t wait to see what you have planned for tomorrow,” he mocked.

His menacing laugh echoed around the room, drilling into my mind even as the guards escorted me from the room.

“You all right?” Raimen asked.

“She’s a prisoner. Who cares how she feels?” Hanson replied for me.

My hands balled into fists, and I bit my tongue to remain quiet, fuming the entire walk back to my cell. Gorgton frowned at the news of my failure and slammed my door shut with extra force that had my ears ringing.

But now that I was alone again, I could think. I paced the perimeter, tracing the raven’s wings as I tried to connect the pieces of the puzzle.

I had one more day to figure out a way to get him to drink. What could he want? I counted the twenty-five paces of my

cell as I thought. Once, twice, three times before the answer came to me.

My name. He asked for my name. As much as he pushed me away, he was also curious enough to ask questions. What must it be like to be so alone? Weeks without seeing anyone? Every day must be the same for him, just like it was for me.

Just like me . . . I repeated it again, an idea forming.

I put myself in his place, wondering what it'd be like to be locked away longer than months and possibly years. I'd probably go insane from boredom.

My head jerked up. *That's it.*

If I could pique his interest, he'd want me to keep returning. The monotony of living every day on repeat was so much torture in itself that he'd be desperate for a change. I had to somehow keep his interest . . . and not die in the process.

What other option do I have?

Food came and went, but the wet goop held no interest to me. My mind was singularly focused on replaying our last two encounters. When I did fall asleep, I dreamed of running through the stacks of bookcases, the masked man beckoning me closer to the shadows.

The next day, I was in a fog when the guards came to collect me. My late-night planning had me sleeping through the next meal delivery. The ground tilted under my feet, the lightheaded feeling coming and going without a moment's notice. When I stumbled the third time into the wall down the long hallway, the guards pulled me to a stop.

"What's wrong with you?" Lyonel studied my face in the dim light.

"She looks ill," Raimen agreed.

I shook my head, their silhouettes a blur. "I'm only a little dizzy. Once I eat something, I should be fine."

"Don't you get meals delivered twice a day?" Raimen asked, pulling me back into motion.

“If you could call the slop they send me a meal.” I stumbled again, and one of the guards grabbed my elbow to steady me. I brushed off his hands and straightened. “I’m fine.”

“We shouldn’t bring her. She’s sick.”

“No,” I shrieked. “I only have three days—today is my last.”

“If you’re up for it,” Raimen murmured under his breath, eyeing me as we continued down the hallway.

I repeated the directions in my head as we walked. *Left, second right, straight until the pillars, take the third path, and go through the tunnel behind the tapestry.*

With each journey down this empty stretch, I noticed new details. Discolored markings on the wall, burnt tapestries dangling like charred threads, and dusty circles dotted the floor as if this was once a decorated path. Now it was left to ruin.

Lyonel tugged the curtain aside and guided me into the opening of the tunnel. This tunnel was the worst part. Visions of my childhood flashed before me, the echoing screams from my past, the fear of being separated from my family and not knowing if I would see them again.

We walked into the tiny room, the light calming my erratic heartbeat. I blew out a shaky breath.

“Last day,” Hanson said, stating the obvious.

“I know.”

“Then let’s not draw this out longer than necessary.” He nodded, his mouth a fine line. Solemnly he checked through the window and gave Raimen the signal to unlock the door.

Lyonel pushed me through with a soft whisper of good luck before he slammed the door in my face.

I repeated my late-night plan—to keep him talking so he gets comfortable enough to lower his guard.

The masked man was waiting for me, leaning on the pillar almost exactly where I had left him yesterday. A grin stretched wider across his face the further I came into the room.

“What shall we play today, little sparrow? Are you feeling brave again?” He chuckled.

His sudden question made me jerk, almost spilling the freshly poured tonic in my hands. “I thought we could talk today.”

“Talk,” he repeated, confused. “About what?”

“We could ask each other three questions each.”

He straightened, suddenly interested. “Any question?”

“Within reason.”

I stumbled on my way over, the dizziness returning again. I pressed my finger into my temple until it passed.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s nothing.”

“I thought you were supposed to be answering my questions.”

“I’m hungry is all. That also counts as one of your questions.”

He glanced down and back to me. “Do they not feed you?”

I blushed, his direct gaze making me feel a different type of dizziness.

“Is this your second question?”

His jaw ticked. “Yes.”

“They do feed me some form of oatmeal, but sometimes I can’t force myself to consume it.”

He grunted, his eyes drifting to the mark on my wrist. “Does it mean something? Your tattoo?”

“Yes. Now it’s my turn to ask. You’re out of questions.”

A hint of gold danced in his eyes. “Is it your name?”

“Drink and I will answer,” I replied, knowing he’d drop the subject.

“I don’t care that much.”

I tugged my tattered sleeve down. “Then you’ll never know.”

“You are full of secrets, little sparrow. Why don’t we trade? A name for a name?”

The corner of my mouth ticked up, and I flicked my hair over my shoulder. “Any name in particular?”

“Your name for mine.”

Disturbing shadows twisted behind him in the candlelight. What was that?

“No, thanks,” I said, smiling sweetly.

I knew I played with fire, poking the beast in front of me. But the more curious he was, the calmer he reacted. If I could calm him, could I get him to drink?

Spinning away, I strolled beside the bookcases, my skirt rustling over the stones. The burn of his stare tingled down my spine.

“What if I guess the first letter?” he asked. “If I’m correct, then you have to tell me.”

“And?” I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to see him straining toward me, his hand outstretched. He quickly tucked it behind him. “If you’re wrong, you’ll drink?”

“No. Never that,” he said with disgust.

“Then I’m not interested.”

“Fine. It’s your turn to ask me questions.” He leaned a shoulder against the bookcase.

I nibbled on my lower lip, his eyes straying to the movement.

“What’s your name?”

“What if I don’t answer?”

“Then I will leave and the game is over.”

He grumbled, running a hand through his blond hair. If he answered, he’d lose his leverage at getting my name.

“You may call me Zee.”

I grinned. “How long have you been imprisoned?”

“I don’t know, but it feels like forever. Since I was a child, but I escape any chance I can get.” He glanced up, thoughtful. “Two months since I broke out last . . . but it’s hard to keep track of time in here.”

“That has to be hard.” I shuddered at the thought.

I tried to imagine him as a small child, wandering through the dusty bookcases alone. Who would have put him here? And where was his family? Had he always been on his own?

He turned from me, his profile striking. “It’s all I’ve ever known, so don’t look at me like that. All right, my turn again.”

I frowned at him. “That was only two questions.”

“No, it was three.” He ticked off the questions on each finger. “You asked me my name, how long I was imprisoned, and if it was hard. That’s three.”

“That last one wasn’t a question. I was commiserating with you. If you’re going to cheat, then I’ll leave.” I blew out a breath between my lips, my hair shifting from the breeze. I eyed him under my lashes.

He crossed his arms, his fingers tapping his rolled-up sleeve. “But you just arrived.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“No,” he snapped, clearly affronted by the suggestion. The shadows swirled on the pillar behind him.

I pressed my luck and pivoted toward the door. One step. Two steps.

“But . . .”

I halted, waiting for him to continue. “But?”

“Being here has to be better than being locked in your cell.”

“It is,” I said, surprising myself with the truth. “There’s no bed, only the hard stone floor. It’s dank and dark, and the other prisoners scream constantly so that it’s impossible to get any sleep unless I’m dead tired.”

He tilted his head. “Being alone, no matter how comfortable a room, isn’t as wonderful as it seems.”

“But you have a window.” I walked back to the safety line and pointed to the tall windows across the room. “I haven’t seen daylight in weeks.”

“Then stay and see it for yourself.”

A crazed laugh bubbled up out of me. “You say that as if I have a say in my life.”

“We all have a say if we fight hard enough. Do you read?”

His abrupt question had my head spinning. “I . . . uh, not usually. We can’t afford the luxury of books.”

“That was a dumb question,” he mumbled to himself.

“No it’s not,” I said. “When I had access to a library, I read more. My mother read—” I broke off before I said more. Her memories were precious, and I wasn’t quite ready to share them.

“She read to you? That sounds . . . nice. My mother died during childbirth.”

“I’m sorry. My mother has since passed too.”

Another wave of dizziness hit me, and I swayed a few steps.

“I don’t mind you being here when you’re not forcing the chalice down my throat. If you want peace and quiet, I can give you that.” He walked away as he spoke, leaving me more confused. When he returned with a chair, he set it on the line and pushed it forward, the wood scraping the stones. “Sit.”

I dragged the chair across the line and obeyed, blinking up at him wide-eyed. “Thank you.” And oddly enough, I meant it.

It might have been the first kind thing someone had done for me since I arrived.

A rosy bloom of color crept up his neck and he turned away, fidgeting as he left.

“You know, it’s been weeks since the last time I sat on something besides the floor.”

Somehow, even in a room with a crazed man, I felt more at ease as each second ticked by. I allowed myself to slump back into the chair, stress leaking from my limbs one at a time. My eyes fluttered closed at the peacefulness.

In the silence, I could almost pretend I was back home waiting for the songbirds to chirp in the sunrise. Thatcher would be coming in from his midnight patrol, usually with rabbits for stew.

“Do you like music?”

His question startled me, and my eyes shot open. How had I let my guard down and forgotten that he was in the room with me?

“I’ve written a few pieces and can play them if you like.”

He wants to . . . play music for me?

I glanced down into the liquid in the chalice. My reflection guiltily stared back at me, reminding me what I still had to do in order to gain my freedom. I placed the cup on the ground.

“If you want to,” I whispered.

“Music has a way of healing the shattered pieces hidden inside us. With each note, it mends the jagged edges of our soul, filling the crevices with a harmony no words can describe. The melody spreads a soothing balm to suppress our aches, frustration, and emptiness and replaces it with a symphony that allows our soul to take flight. Now, close your eyes and listen. Surrender to the rhythm pulsing under your skin—”

My eyes fluttered closed.

“—and let the music set you *free*.”

Soft, calming notes tinkled out from the piano. Starting slow and building in tempo, the song soared throughout the dusty ballroom, filling me with something I couldn't name. An explosion of emotion, raw and gripping, hung on each note, binding us together as if we shared a connection through the song.

I sighed in awe as it echoed through me, a bittersweet tune that made my heart long for what it couldn't have. *Goodness, he's right.* The music ached in my chest, pulsing as if it were alive—as if I were free and far away from here. In my mind's eye, I danced between stars with reckless abandon. Letting go of my responsibilities, of my pain, and allowing the haunted composition to spin me until I was floating in the sparkling twilight.

When he stopped, the bubble around me popped, returning me to the darkened ballroom. Lighter and calmer, the music still resonated in me even after he finished.

I placed a trembling hand over my heart. “That was beautiful. I could feel it, just as you said. Thank you for sharing it with me.”

“I wrote that after I met you. You have a sadness about you—it's palpable. I tried to capture it in the song, but it still doesn't feel right.”

“You wrote me a song?” I sputtered, too shocked to say more.

“Not *for* you—*inspired* by. It's still a work in progress.” A few notes sounded as he talked, tentatively tapping the keys until he played the melody again in earnest. “This bridge here . . . it's missing something. I'll get it eventually. I have nothing but time.”

“That's something I don't have—time.”

The frantic tune ended in a jarring off-note chord.

“Because the guards are coming to collect you? Your time with me is up?” Fabric rustled out of sight.

“No, I—I'm to be executed. Soon.” My throat clenched, the finality of my future crushing what little joy I had found in

the music.

“Why?”

“Because they think me a traitor.”

“Are you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I am. They took one look at my hair color and made a decision.”

“Your hair?” Zee appeared from around the corner. “It means something, yes? I read about it in a book once.”

“They think I’m an Illusionist.” The word tasted odd on my tongue, forbidden to speak aloud.

He laughed. “Just because of your hair?”

“Yes. Do you know anything about Illusionists?”

“Not really,” he drawled out in boredom.

I opened my mouth to reply and promptly closed it, surprising myself at what I had almost revealed. The truth—that their accusations were correct. I was an Illusionist. Someone should know the truth about our people. Only the horrid parts were recorded in the tomes, the ones that hadn’t been burnt yet.

But honestly, it’d be so freeing to unload this burden I’ve carried around all my life. No more secrets. No more illusions. No more lies. I could just be . . . me.

And who’d believe this masked prisoner, anyway?

What am I thinking? This secret needed to go with me to the grave.

Angry at myself, I snatched the chalice and shot to my feet. The sudden movement sent the room whirling. Lightheaded from starvation, I stumbled forward, claspings tightly to the chalice like a lifeline until my legs gave out.

But instead of me crashing to the ground, a pair of strong arms encircled my waist and dragged me to the solid wall of his chest.

Behind the Mask



Zee scooped me off my feet, his blurry face hovering close to mine. He swiped the hair from my eyes and tilted my face up.

I groaned in protest, the room spinning.

“Are you going to faint?”

The more I blinked, the more my vision cleared. We had moved. The shiny panes of glass were over his shoulder, covered in dust. We were as far away from the safety line as possible.

We were in his domain, and I had lost the upper hand.

“Put me down,” I demanded, fighting his hold.

“No.”

I glanced at the chalice in my fingertips, thinking to use it as a weapon. But surprisingly, there was still some liquid left at the bottom. Not much, but maybe a small sip.

My last chance.

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked, tightening my grip on the stem.

“I don’t know.” He sounded a little confused himself.

“Well, you can’t just keep me here.”

“Why not? They lock me in here—why not you too?”

“Zee.”

He paused at the word as a ghost of a smile stretched across his face. Glancing down at me, he tucked me closer to him. “Yes?”

“I can’t breathe. You’re holding me too tight.” I gasped dramatically, opening my eyes as wide as they could go.

Immediately, his grip relaxed and his brows rose.

“More,” I choked out despite his gentle hold.

“Any more and I might drop you. Is this better?”

He shifted his grip so that he freed one of my arms when his hand slid to my shoulder.

“Much,” I wheezed and fluttered my eyelashes for effect.

At his sigh, I rolled toward him and crashed the chalice onto his lips. His head whipped back, and the liquid poured into his mouth. It gurgled in the back of his throat before he swallowed, sending him into a coughing fit.

He threw me to the hard floor, my teeth rattling and vision swirling again. But it was worth it . . . I had earned my freedom.

“What have you done?” he bellowed. He doubled over with a long wail before taking off around the corner.

I did what I had to . . . but at what cost?

His screams tore through the ballroom, ripping my exhilaration to shreds. Instead, regret clawed at my insides with each one of his wails, my victory short-lived.

What had I done? I stared in horror at the chalice next to me, droplets of blood on the rim. Never had I considered the liquid I poured into the chalice in the first place. Was it truly a tonic? Or had the king forced me to do his dirty work?

I kicked the chalice away, the sickly sweet smell turning my stomach. Had I become like everyone else, believing the worst in people because that’s what I was told?

Had I become a monster in order to gain my freedom?

No. Say it isn’t true.

A wise person would have run while they had the chance, but I found myself creeping around the bookcases in search of Zee. When I rounded the corner of his bedroom, I sagged into the side of an empty bookcase. Out of everything I had imagined, I never expected to see him curled into a ball on the floor, whimpering as he held his stomach.

“Zee,” I exclaimed. Rushing to his side, I crouched down and placed a hand on his shoulder, which he shrugged off.

“You,” he spat, sounding nothing like himself.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t know it would hurt you. Let me help you up and over to the bed.”

“Touch me again and I’ll—” His threat ended in a moan, and he hunched over again. His blond hair was coated in sweat, his muscles twitching.

I wrapped my arm under his, lugging him up despite his protests.

Like a viper, his hand struck out and coiled like a vice around my throat. His anger fueled him to his feet, taking me with him.

“I caught you, little sparrow.”

Gasping, I scratched at his forearm.

“Now you’re *mine*.”

My lungs demanded air, and my eyes crossed, Zee’s face blurring. What little strength I had scrounged together ebbed out, and my vision tunneled. Like a bursting dam, the tingles of my magic drained from my body just as my eyes drooped shut.

“What the—?!” He dropped me, and I crumbled into a pile at his feet. “Who are you?”

Desperate for air, I wheezed in each greedy breath in rapid succession as my heart picked up to a normal rate. Each gasp stung, my throat swollen and raw.

He leapt back, falling over the bed. “Your eyes . . .”

My glamour had wavered enough that he knew. Even as my body screamed for rest, I reinforced my facade, my skin burning from exhaustion.

His face twisted in horror, and he rolled back on the bed to put even more space between us. The monster was frightened . . . of me. “You really are an Illusionist.”

“That’s ridiculous. Your tonic is causing hallucinations.”

“No,” he breathed. His eyes bulged beneath his mask. “Your eyes were violet, and your face was shaped differently. No freckles.”

Besides Vivian and Thatcher, nobody had seen me as myself. If I wasn’t so terrified he’d strangle me again, I would revel in the novelty.

He groaned again, his breath hissing through his teeth. He pressed his face into the rumpled sheets with a whimper.

“Get out . . . before I hurt you again.” Then he slumped onto the bed.

Did I kill him?

I gasped, rounding the bed to flip him on his back. Sick with fear, I placed my fingers on the pulse of his neck and sighed at his steady pulse. Eyes closed, his mouth hung open as he slept.

I tapped his shoulder, prepared to bolt if he so much as twitched. He only snored louder.

Whatever was in the tonic knocked him out cold.

I’d never been so close to him before that I could see the worry lines etched into his brow or the patchy stubble along his chiseled jawline. His bottom lip was slightly swollen, a strip of crusted blood from when I whacked him with the chalice. *So sorry.* I was reluctant to admit he was probably the most attractive man I’d ever seen, even with half his face hidden.

Unless there was something hideous behind his mask.

I bit my lip, instinct demanding I run to the door and collect my prize. But a part of me begged to know the truth. Would it hurt to peek under his mask? After I left, I'd never see him again—

I froze, stunned when the oddest thing happened. My heart lurched. *No*. I snatched my hand back as if burned. *Absolutely not*. I could not have feelings, even friendly ones, for this masked monster.

If he even was a monster . . .

I fidgeted.

There were a few times when he did seem like he wanted to help and he was battling himself more than me. Or was I just making excuses for him?

My fingers hovered over the silk mask. There were no ties or fasteners holding it in place. Since that was the case, it should just fall off if I touched it.

Just one quick peek . . .

As soon as I touched the silky fabric, tingles of magic shot through my fingertips. Not an Enchanter's magic, but still as pure and maybe the most powerful magic I'd ever felt. An ancient magic that wasn't quite good or bad but melded to the wearer in some way. What did that mean?

My fingers brushed his cheek, and I frowned down at him. The same magic seeped into his skin, flowing across the surface. It sparked against the pads of my fingers, stirring my emotions like the winds of a tornado. When I pulled back, the whirlwind ceased, my thoughts righting themselves.

Was it the magic from his mask causing him pain? Could I remove it?

I tried to tuck a finger under the glittering edge, but it was no use. It was attached to him somehow and not budging.

His eyelashes fluttered, and I scampered back, bumping into his wardrobe.

Fiona, I scolded myself. This man was not a problem to fix or an animal to save. I had enough to worry about with my

own neck on the chopping block. I walked backward slowly, tracing the brand on my wrist.

I hoped he found a way out of this place. Maybe I could come back for him under a different illusion?

And do what? Let him chase me around and yell at me? screamed my voice of reason. Captivity was warping my mind.

Shaking the strange thoughts from my head, I returned to the door and knocked. It was time to leave this blasted castle once and for all. Yet I still glanced over my shoulder one more time, hoping that Zee would be all right.

“I did it,” I said as soon as I entered the guard’s room.

“Made it out alive, did you?” Hanson said. “We heard a commotion but couldn’t see you from the window.”

“Well, yes, but I mean I got him to drink the tonic. But he cried out in pain afterward. The tonic is safe to drink, right? I didn’t hurt him, did I?”

The three of them stared at me like I’d grown a second head.

“Zee is all right, isn’t he? He was just lying there unconscious . . .” I bit my lip, my stomach knotting at the memory.

Lyonel narrowed his gaze. “Oh, I’m sure the monster is fine.”

“Why are you looking at me like that? I did what you requested.”

“Not that we don’t believe you . . .” Raimen started.

“—but we don’t believe you,” Hanson finished drily.

Letting out a long breath, Lyonel nodded. “I’ll check.”

“You’re a braver man than I am,” Raimen muttered under his breath.

The guard went in and came back out minutes later with a grim expression. “It’s as she said. The mask didn’t come off

though.”

The two other guards grumbled at this.

“What does that have to do with it? You said I only needed him to drink.”

“You’ll have to speak with the king. We don’t know what the proper protocol is,” Raimen said.

“Well done, miss. I didn’t think you had it in you,” Hanson said with a grin. “But you have to head back now. The castle will be awake soon. You have to stay out of sight.”

They ushered me through the halls, and I balked when we reached the dungeon’s entrance. *Not here again.*

“Wait.” I pulled on my chain in Raimen’s hand. “There’s been some kind of mistake. Why am I being taken to my cell? Zee drank from the chalice.”

“Only King Ernesh can grant you freedom, and it’s the middle of the night. You will have to wait until he summons you.”

The dungeon’s door swung open.

“And I’ll be by her side when he does,” Gorgton chimed in, joining us as we walked to my cell. “I knew if anyone could do it, it’d be her.”

The endearing pride in his tone made me want to vomit on his boots, even with my empty stomach. He must have sensed my distaste or noticed my green complexion, for his lips peeled back in a scowl, leering at me until a wave of goosebumps spread down my arms.

Desperate, I whipped back to Raimen, my blood pounding in my neck. “How long must I wait here?”

“I can’t say, miss. The king will be eager to see you. This is the first time anyone has made it this far. We will come fetch you when it’s time.”

“You mean us,” Gorgton corrected. “You will come fetch *us*.”

“Of course,” Lyonel agreed. “Perhaps while she waits she can get a decent meal? She’s been stumbling down the halls faint with hunger.”

But Lyonel’s thoughtfulness didn’t ease the blow of the hollow thump when my cell door slammed closed. They strolled away, taking the glow of the lantern with them.

Soon, the darkness tucked close around me like an old friend, my guilt gnawing at my insides. At least my worrying kept my nightmares at bay. I replayed the scene over and over, analyzing Zee’s face and words. The guards had said he was unharmed . . . but his screams painted a different picture. Here I assumed his tonic was for medicinal purposes, but I had a dreadful feeling I was wrong.

Hours crept by with no summons from the king. I flinched at each noise, straining to hear the footsteps of the guards over the prison noises. When my morning meal arrived, I was thankful for a distraction.

“A gift for you, princess,” Gorgton called out. He held a platter of sliced roast, sausages, boiled potatoes, and a fresh apple. “Straight from the king’s breakfast table.”

My stomach clenched and gurgled in delight, and the smell alone had my mouth watering. Food . . . *real food*. He placed the loaded plate in front of my bars with a chuckle.

“You’ll still have to eat with your hands. No weapons for you.”

The rosy red apple was the first place to start, reminding me of the outdoors.

I crunched into the apple’s skin, sweet juices flowing onto my tongue, and I closed my eyes on a sigh. This wasn’t one of the apples from the island. The king had a known sweet tooth and paid an atrocious amount to have them imported from the mainland each month. This one piece of fruit was worth more than everything in my small cottage combined.

The richness of the cuisine sat heavily in my stomach, and the thought of eating another bite churned what little morsels I had ingested. I curled up in a ball, full for the first time since I

was imprisoned, and fell asleep, dreaming of the stars twinkling in the night.

Because today, I'd be free.

But even after I woke, I still had to wait. Another meal was brought, a platter of questionable gray mush that tasted even worse now that I had eaten the delicious meal from breakfast. I pushed it away, sickened at the sight of it.

More hours passed while I impatiently paced my cell. When Gorgton came to fetch me, I was pressed against the bars, almost ready to claw my way out.

“Someone's eager to meet her king.”

Not my king, nor will he ever be. But I wouldn't waste my breath arguing that with this idiot. Nor did I want to ruin this chance at leaving my cell.

Sometime in the middle of night, the hushed halls were empty and only a few servants slipped by, keeping as far away from me as possible. We took a new path at the pillar intersection, which led us to a more elaborately decorated portion of the castle.

A place I knew well.

It was the heart of the castle where most of the entertainment, whether for work or pleasure, took place. We stopped at an ivory door adorned with diamonds and carved moons, and I knew on the other side was the throne room.

A guard waited outside and signaled when we were allowed to enter. Gorgton's boots tapped on the tile, shaking up his leg and jiggling his rotund stomach.

“Let me do the talking unless His Majesty asks you a direct question,” Gorgton demanded under his breath as the doors opened.

On the other side of the room garbed in his finest sat King Ernesh, stiff on his throne. Older than I imagined, he watched us with rapt interest, his fingers steepled under his chin. A white mustache stretched from ear to ear, connecting to scruffy sideburns that reached his jawline. Despite the late hour, his

inky black hair was slick, combed back, and horribly out of place like a patch of animal fur on his head. Too dark to be natural, it clashed with the snowy white of his facial hair.

It was a mockery of my lineage and a visual reminder that the only one with power in Taika was him. Never mind the innocent people who were killed for being born this way.

Air hissed from my teeth, and my hands clenched into fists at the desire to rip each strand out by the root.

Gorgton escorted me in, the chain between us taut even though we were quite close. His shoulder brushed mine as we walked, the slight touch more than I liked which had me straining away from him. When the king lifted a bejeweled hand, Gorgton jerked us to a stop, still a good distance away. He dropped to one knee and pulled me down to the velvet carpet beside him.

“Bow, silly girl,” Gorgton hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

But I was lost in the sensation of my fingers skimming over the plush burgundy carpet, and old memories resurfaced out of the lost corners of my mind. Hazy memories of building wooden castles out of blocks behind my father’s throne and drawing animals on my slate as I waited for one royal event or another to end. Happiness washed over me, a contentment that had disappeared the day they died and was followed by a hollow ache that reminded me I’d never see them again. My eyes drifted up of their own accord, the memory of my father’s wide stature on his throne and black beard that always hid his mischievous smile materializing over the present scene. His black cape was draped over one shoulder, lined with raven feathers along his collar that matched my mother’s flowing black dress of sequins and onyx. His usual royal attire when he was attending public events.

I blinked, and King Ernesh took my father’s place, his direct stare burning into my forehead. I ducked my head back down just as the king’s expression slipped into a grimace of disgust.

“Is this the girl you told me about?” King Ernesh asked, his voice crackling from exhaustion.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Gorgton replied.

“She appears not to have any injuries like the others.”

“I chose—”

“Stand, guard. For a large man, I can barely hear your faint mumblings.”

My lips twitched.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” He rose to his feet but kept a stern grip on my shoulder, forcing me to stay on my knees in submission. “I chose her specifically for this task and spent weeks training her.”

I ground my teeth, wishing the blasted chains were gone.

“You chose well. What’s your name, girl?”

It took me a moment to realize the question was directed at me. I opened my mouth, a lie ready on my tongue—because who’d be brazen or stupid enough to give the king his enemy’s name? Apparently me. Fiona was common enough that it wouldn’t bring suspicion, but it’d ease my conscience to know a Ravenwood did not come cowering before the traitor’s throne.

“Fiona,” I said.

“Avert your eyes, girl. Show respect.” Gorgton pushed my skull from behind so my chin thumped into my chest.

The king cleared his throat. “No, it’s fine. It’s hard enough to see her face underneath all the grime as it is. How long have you been with us?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Almost two months, Your Majesty,” Gorgton added.

“Only that long? She looks positively frightful and smells just as unbecoming. A lost waif from the streets and yet this girl was able to get him to drink. How remarkable.” He

combed his wiry beard, deep in thought. “I wonder what else she’d be capable of if she was more presentable.”

“Else?” I murmured, confused. Why would I do anything for the king now that I’d completed my task? “I have earned my freedom, have I not?”

“Quiet.” Gorgton whacked the back of my head.

“Freedom?” repeated the king, leaning forward. “Did you remove the mask?”

“No? There was no mention of removing his mask.”

“Then you did not complete my task to earn your freedom.”

Dread filled me at those words. I glanced up at Gorgton, his lips pinched in a sour expression. Surely he’d explain to the king that I had done what was expected. Zee drank from the chalice, so I was going home. *This isn’t happening.*

My heart beat wildly in my chest at the thought of returning to my cell again. Of returning to Zee after what I had done.

“But . . . I already tried to remove the mask. It doesn’t come off.” I braced for the slap that followed, my teeth rattling from the impact.

The king’s eyes went wide, and he scooted so far forward I thought he may tumble out of his seat. “He let you touch his mask?”

“He’s been noticeably calmer around her, Your Majesty. He’s even been playing music again,” Gorgton added quickly. “Perhaps he needs more than one dose is all.”

“Very interesting, indeed. Yes, this is progress. Get her cleaned up and try again. Mark three days hence, and if she’s unable to get him to drink again, she will be first on the execution block.”

Another three days? But I already did what they requested.

The king steepled his fingers. “She will continue to administer his tonic until the mask comes off . . . or she dies.”

He nodded as if that was a satisfactory plan. “Now take her away before her scent lingers in the carpets.”

“But—”

Gorgton dragged me by my chains, cutting off my sentence. I stumbled after him, regaining my balance to avoid landing on my nose in the throne room. Growling, I jerked on my chains, so furious my fingers curled for attack, ready to tear his deceitful lips from his body.

“If you hurt me, they’ll send you right to the gallows. Put your claws away.”

“You lied to me,” I spat.

“The king had informed us that the mask would slide off after he drank his tonic. He only needs more—which should be easy for you since you’ve done it before.”

“How much tonic? And for how long?” He couldn’t expect me to force him to drink for the rest of my life.

Gorgton ignored me, leading me to the left part of the hall and away from the dungeon.

“Where are we going?”

My eyes lit at the large arched double doors sealed with an iron bar—the main entrance. I slowed my pace, trying to memorize each detail. During the daytime, this would be open, and now I knew exactly how to get here. It was the fastest way out . . . if only I could get out of these chains.

We entered through a passageway, the tunnel narrow but lit with a few candles. The end of the path led us into the servants’ hall until it wound around the corridor into the heated chaos of the kitchen. The same place I snuck off to and begged staff for extra treats when I was little.

“Ms. Taft? Where is Elise? This prisoner needs a spray down.”

I blinked at the old woman, whose back arched crookedly as she punched at the dough on the counter. Practically the same as when I last saw her, her kind eyes locked on me and

widened at the ebony color of my hair. For a moment I thought she might recognize me as the royal scamp with a sweet tooth.

“No prisoners in my kitchen. She’s covered in dirt and crawly things. The king wouldn’t want either in his meal. Out, out!”

I frowned. Not the greeting I expected, but I did have my glamour on.

“Then point the way to Elise, and we will be out of your kitchen.”

“Hmph. With the layers of grime on that child, you will need more than a spray. She’ll need to soak first before she can be scrubbed.” She resumed punching the dough. “Elise is in the pantry, but don’t keep her long. We have a full menu to prepare and a baking schedule to keep. Isn’t there a maid you could bother instead?”

“They aren’t awake at this hour like the kitchen servants. We’re here on the king’s orders,” he growled at her.

She lifted a gray brow. “Well, don’t come crying to me if there’s no bread for your midday meal.”

He rolled his eyes and tugged on my chains.

“Wait,” she called out as he led me from the room. She flicked a gray strand from her face, flour marring her sparse eyebrow. She narrowed her eyes, studying me. “You’re as skinny as a bean, girl. Here, take this muffin.” She snatched a bran muffin from one of the overflowing baskets on her wooden table and offered it to me.

My mouth watered at the delicious fragrance, the billowing steam proof that it was fresh out of the oven.

I glanced at Gorgton out of the side of my eye, expecting him to grumble or slap it from my hand. A cruel smile curled the corner of his mouth. He was pleased I had checked with him first.

“Go on, my pet. I’ll allow you this little reward.”

Anger bubbled up in my chest as I tempered the urge to slam my chains straight through his cocky grin. But I wouldn’t

give him the satisfaction. I wouldn't react. *He has no power over me.*

I turned back to Ms. Taft, taking her offering with a demure thanks. What I didn't expect was her firm grip on my fingers preventing me from pulling away.

“Stand tall.” Her words were clipped, a direct order. “Face the battle head on.”

My lips parted. Had I misheard her? Or had she quoted my family motto?

Stand tall in adversity and hold steadfast to truth amidst the lies, for courage isn't freely given but earned by facing the battle head on.

With a nod, her bony finger tapped my shackle once, the one covering my magic brand. She released her hold, letting my hands fall limp in front of me, and wiped her hands before returning to kneading the mountain of dough.

Had she seen through my glamour?

The Liar Returns



The next hour marked one of the most humiliating experiences of my life. Standing in just my undergarments, Elise threw bucket after bucket of icy water on my body in the middle of the servants' courtyard. This area served as a shortcut between the different wings of the castle, the one most servants used to rush to their tasks. Cobblestone paths were worn from boots, reaching out like spider legs in different directions.

The sun peeked over the horizon, painting a new day in soft peachy strokes. There was nowhere to hide as the veil of night faded away in the bright colors. Many of the windows faced the courtyard, their panes aglow with flickering light as the castle awoke and started its morning routine. Soon, servants would be wandering about, and a blush spread across my chilled skin. I asked Elise for a more private location, but her response was to hurl another bucket of water directly in my face.

As I sputtered for air, it dawned on me why Gorgton asked for Elise by name. I recognized the family resemblance at her first scowl, and she was just as merciless. Elise hummed as she worked as if my muffled cries brought her joy.

Whatever frustrations the woman had, she took them out on me, viciously scrubbing at my arms as if I were one of her pots in the sink instead of a human with skin.

My teeth chattered, but I refused to complain. My bare feet were tinged blue in the murky water, yet my nerves were thankfully numb.

When she was finally done, most of the servants were up. Maids snickered after filling their pails, whispering behind their fingers as I stood shivering in the frigid morning air. Leering footmen gawked from the kitchen window until Gorgton pounded on the glass, demanding they return to work.

Eventually they covered me in a torn cloth and led me back into the castle. The heat from the kitchen burned as soon as I started to thaw.

Ms. Taft hissed through her teeth when she saw me. “Ravens above, are you trying to kill her? Have her sit by the fire and warm up some.”

“No time. I have to get her back to her cell before any of the royals spot her. Even if we cut her hair, it will still grow back. She’s lucky she’s alive at all.”

Gorgton slapped my shoulder like my existence was some kind of joke.

“But she’s in shackles. Surely she isn’t a threat.”

“King’s orders. He doesn’t want to rekindle any more rumors of the rebellion.”

Ms. Taft’s eyes snapped to mine. “Yes, the rebellion. There are those who still stand with the old monarchy.”

“There’s a rebellion?” I mumbled through frozen lips. This was the first I’d heard of an uprising. Did Vivian and Thatcher know?

“Yes,” Ms. Taft said, her eyes widening.

“It’s mostly rumors more than anything. A few loons screaming in the woods doesn’t prove much.”

“I heard there were hundreds,” she said, stressing the last word.

I blinked my bleary eyes, the number unfathomable. “Hundreds?”

She nodded.

“Ms. Taft, that’s enough traitorous talk. Spreading rumors will only get you whipped and locked in chains like her.”

Elise hustled in, a basket of potatoes in her arms. “The way she talks, you’d think she was a filthy rebel too.” She slammed the basket on the counter, glaring at the old woman. “But of course, that couldn’t be the case. Right, Ms. Taft?”

Her gray eyes slanted over her long nose. “I may have served them years ago, but I have no connection to them or the rebellion. You forget, Elise, that this is my kitchen. One word from me will have you back to scrubbing floors from sunup to sundown.”

Elise held her stare.

“We don’t have time for this.” Gorgton pulled on my chains, dragging me from the room before the two women could come to blows.

My legs were hollow from the chill, and I trembled behind him. With soggy footsteps, I squished along with each step.

A maid was waiting for us in the hallway, a golden bundle in her hand. When she saw me, she skittered back like I was a raving wild woman instead of a drowned rat.

“Here, sir. The clothes you requested.” She slid them toward Gorgton, and he pushed them back. “Is it not to your liking?”

“I don’t care if she’s in bedsheets. But I need you to help her get into this contraption.”

“Me?” Her voice squeaked.

“Follow me,” he barked. He continued down the familiar path to the dungeon.

What contraption could he mean? And even more confusingly, he stopped one cell before mine, pushing me inside.

“Go on,” he ordered to the maid.

The girl trembled like a leaf, side-stepping toward me. She shook out her bundle, a golden dress of lace and satin.

“A gown?” I asked.

“The king wants you to look your best.”

“Does that mean you will unchain me? I can’t get my hands through the sleeves otherwise,” I asked.

He grumbled as if he hadn’t thought this through. “Only a minor complication.”

In a blur of motion, one I was surprised he could even make, he slammed my head into the stone wall behind me. The high-pitched scream of the maid blended in with the roar of the prisoners just before I blacked out.

When I awoke, I was propped in the corner of the room like a rag doll, dressed in a gown fit for royalty. My neck was stiff after hours at an awkward angle, and my joints cracked as I scrambled to my feet. Soft black curls, now dried and combed, swung over my shoulders. Trailing a finger along one of my side braids, I winced at the large goose egg on the back of my head.

“Gorgton,” I seethed. The man was lucky he hadn’t killed me.

My new cell was the same size as my old one but had a blanket and chamber pot, the latter nearly bringing tears of joy to my eyes. Nothing had made me feel like an animal more than not having a discreet place to relieve myself.

Though my skin was sore and red in a few spots, it was nice to feel clean and in a comfortable dress. Even Lyonel and Raimen did a double take when they came to fetch me.

I ducked my head, not enjoying their scrutiny, and reinforced my illusion. After Ms. Taft’s cryptic message, I wasn’t sure if my disguise had been slipping without my notice.

“Did you know about the mask,” I accused on our procession through the halls, “that I had to remove it to earn my freedom?”

They were suspiciously silent. Another reason not to trust anyone within the castle walls. I wasn’t the only one spouting lies.

The passages were empty again, and I expected this was another midnight trip to see Zee. Nerves bubbled up inside me.

His emotions were unpredictable, and I could only guess how furious he'd be when he saw me. Last time he tried to choke me. I could only hope not visiting yesterday granted him the extra time he needed for his temper to cool. As a prisoner himself, Zee might even understand where I was coming from.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, afraid I already knew the answer to Hanson's frantic movements at the end of the tunnel. Tension filled the room as we entered, sending chills down my spine.

"Oh, it's you," Hanson rushed to say. He eyed me a moment before adding, "You look so different. Almost like you could really be a lady."

How do I even respond to that?

"Stop staring. She's nervous enough as it is," Raimen snapped, drawing Hanson's attention from me. "How is he today?"

Hanson groaned and paced the room, chewing on his fingernails. "It's not good."

"Not good how?" Lyonel asked.

Hanson opened the peephole and snapped it closed. "I don't think she should go in today."

"Why not?" I asked, concerned. Was it something besides his temper? Was he ill or wounded from the tonic? Blinking, I realized I was more concerned for Zee than I was for myself.

"Since he awoke, he's been in a rage. I've sat in this chair, night after night, and I've been privy to an assortment of his moods and tantrums. But this one has gone on for two days, nonstop. He's volatile."

"Bring me my sparrow," Zee bellowed with a ferocity that seemed like it could shake the castle's foundation.

My jaw dropped.

"I don't know what that means. He keeps asking for some bird. Ms. Taft is preparing him roasted sparrow in hopes of appeasing him. Meanwhile, he's destroying everything around him," Hanson said. He scrubbed his finger across his forehead

in a nervous tick. “The room is a disaster. They better not expect me to clean it up.”

“We will take her back,” Lyonel agreed.

“No,” I said, surprising everyone, including myself. “Send me in. I want to see him.”

“Miss, it’s pointless today. He’s raving mad. He won’t drink,” Hanson stressed.

“Sparroow,” Zee singsonged. “I hear you.”

My heart jolted in my chest.

“He obviously has something to say to me.” Whatever it was, I was sure I deserved the verbal lashing. I swallowed thickly, my mouth suddenly dry.

Hanson shook his head like I was just as crazed as Zee. “I mean, if you want to go in, we can’t stop you.”

“But . . . he’ll kill her,” Raimen stated, outraged.

“She’s dead in two days anyway.” Lyonel shrugged. “Here or there, does it matter?”

“If she wants to go in, then send her.” Hanson rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. “Just don’t get too close to him. He’s still magically bound to his area and won’t be able to reach you.”

“Unless he gets the cuff off,” Raimen pointed out.

“He can’t,” Lyonel said. “It requires magic blood.”

“I don’t trust it. He’s already escaped once since I’ve taken this position. And those shackles were ‘unbreakable’ too.”

Hanson and Lyonel grimaced, their faces pale.

I bit my lip, forcing my features into a neutral expression despite the dread building up. *Oh, no.* Zee already suspected I was an Illusionist. Did he also know my blood was needed in order for him to escape?

Or had I found a possible bargaining chip? His freedom in exchange for his mask.

“I’m ready,” I said, unsure of what to do with that knowledge.

“It’s her choice,” Hanson repeated when Lyonel and Raimen didn’t move. “Open the door.”

I slipped through the opening, my hands tingling with nerves. Overturned bookcases greeted me, nearly twenty or more, all of them flat on the floor for the width of the room. Some had splintered into pieces, and others were covered in shredded books like fallen snow.

Standing over the mountain of debris was Zee, waiting for me with his arms crossed like I was a disobedient child about to receive a stern lecture. At least he looked healthy. Furious, but well. Besides the deep-set scowl of his mouth, his murderous gaze pierced through me in a way that made my blood run cold.

I shivered, afraid to move closer.

“So the liar returns,” he spat. A delirious chuckle erupted from him, bouncing off the empty walls like there were two people laughing instead of one. “And so finely dressed and clean, like some sacrificial offering to lay before my feet. Did you think a new gown would save you from my wrath?”

“I’m not scared of you.”

“Is that so? Come closer and prove it.”

I held my ground, narrowing my eyes.

“You’re all talk, little sparrow. Tweet, tweet. Then you fly away when you get too scared.” He rested a foot on one of the fallen bookcases. “I did some remodeling while you were hiding. Not sure if I trust not having you in eyesight at all times.”

“It’s a mess.”

“I prefer a chaotic masterpiece.”

“How are you?” I edged further into the room.

“Like you care.” He kicked on the wood, pacing down the pathway. “You didn’t come yesterday. Why?”

“They brought me to the king instead.”

He spun to me. “Because you’re an Illusionist?”

“I’m not,” I stammered. *Magic blood* echoed in my mind.

He threw his hands in the air and shouted at the ceiling, “She can’t stop lying.”

“If you’d just listen to me for one second—”

“Lies, lies, lies.”

“—I want to apologize.”

His head whipped in my direction, a strand of his blond hair falling over his mask. “You think that’s what I want?”

There was a sharp edge to his words. I shuffled closer, twisting my fingers together.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, holding his stare. “But you deserve one anyway. I’m sorry.”

“Liiies,” he hissed, pointing at me.

“Yes, I’ve lied about a lot of things, mostly to keep my head attached to my neck. But this? I’m telling the truth. I’m not proud of my actions or the desperation in which I behaved. These last few weeks have been . . . *crushing*. I hate who I’ve become.”

Zee remained silent, his lips pinched as if he held himself back.

I pressed on. “I didn’t make these rules. The king did. He’s the one forcing my hand to a sadistic ultimatum. I don’t want to do this. I especially don’t want to hurt you.”

“What do you mean ‘forcing’?” He took a step, but his cuff held him in place.

“I—what?” I narrowed my eyes, confused.

“What are you being forced to do?”

Did he not know? How could he not? I held his cool gaze, waiting for him to laugh at the joke he made.

He didn’t.

“Your tonic,” I said, pointing between him and the chalice on the table. “I can’t fail three days in a row.”

He stiffened. “What happens?”

“You know...” Was he trying to remind me he was in charge? That he controlled my life like everyone else did? I crossed my arms, defiantly silent.

“They send someone else,” he answered when I didn’t.

“In a way, yes.” I walked down the line of overturned bookcases and he quickly followed, keeping pace with me.

“I’m not in the mood for riddles.” His voice was low, his patience thin.

“Let’s just say you won’t have to deal with me ever again.”

He froze. His breath came in rapid pants. “They kill them? All of them?”

The crack in his voice halted my footsteps. Had he truly not known?

“Yes.”

Zee scowled at me, his eyes crazed behind his mask. “I don’t believe you. The only thing you know how to do is lie.” Then he roared in animalistic fury, an oversized shadow dancing angrily behind him. He sprang at me through the broken rubble but jerked to a stop when the cuff on his ankle collided with the invisible boundary.

I stumbled back, tripping on an uneven tile, and I fell to the ground, landing painfully on my hip. My heart spasmed in my chest, fear pumping it three times faster. He had lost whatever control he had, laughing maniacally with wild eyes burning behind his mask.

In spite of his attractive features, he truly appeared monstrous right now.

“Zee,” I whispered in horror, “don’t let your emotions overtake you.”

“Little sparrow always thinks she knows best,” he mocked, sounding nothing like himself.

I took a deep breath and rose to my feet. “I know what you’re going through. The lack of control, the confinement to this room, these shackles make you want to give up and give in to the darkness—to your inner monster.”

“You have no idea—”

“I do,” I countered. “The darkness whispers to me too. But that’s the easy out, a coward’s way. We are not cowards. You’re stronger than this. Let me help you.” And in a crazed decision, I held out my hand for him. “Trust me.”

His fingers curled around my wrist in desperation, dragging me over the remnants of the bookcase. A greedy smile spread across his face, like he was a predator who caught his prey. “Help me? But who will help you?”

“Zee,” I said with forced bravado, “I know he’s inside of you, and he will make the right choice.”

He tipped his head back and laughed, the sound of it like broken glass. The gold mask shimmered in the candlelight, the shadows playing tricks again. “Wrong. I am Zee. It’s Alizar who doesn’t have a brave bone in his body.” He pulled my face close to his. “This whole time, you’ve only had me.”

Alizar? As in . . . another person living inside him? Did I have it wrong this whole time? He wasn’t grappling with his conscience but with another personality?

And if this “Alizar” represented goodness, where did that leave Zee—wicked and deranged?

“You’re not a monster.” I prayed it was true.

“Oh, but I am.” He pinched my chin and wiggled it in glee with each word. “Now what shall I do with you?”

“Kill me?” I lifted my chin. “Make it a fair fight and unchain me.”

“Our games are more fun when you’re alive.” He dragged me through the dining room and into his bedroom where he snatched a torn sheet from the floor.

Why had I let my guard down? Why did I think that we could possibly have anything in common? To think I had

pitied him, was concerned for him. I stood in the same spot where he—

My eyes widened as I remembered.

The same place where he had told me to get out before he hurt me again. He had let me go. *Zee is lying*. He hadn't said that—so it must have been Alizar.

“Alizar,” I begged, “I know you can hear me.”

“Oh, he can.” He tied the sheet around my shackles, some fabric form of a leash. “He’s not going to do anything about it.”

“He will,” I pressed.

“He won’t,” Zee growled back.

“I know you will do the right thing.”

“*Shut up.*” He cinched the knot tight with an angry jerk.

“You’re in there and you do have control. Despite what Zee says.”

Grabbing the sheet, he tugged me close, growling an inch from my face. But I refused to cower and hoped that my bravery would encourage Alizar to take a stand too.

“Alizar,” I screamed, holding the last syllable until my throat burned and my lungs emptied. Panting, I lifted my chin higher, meeting his stare with determination.

I will stand tall. I will fight.

The harsh lines of his face relaxed, melting into curiosity.

“I hear you . . .” With slow steps, he shuffled away, trembling with the movement as if each footstep were a battle of wills. “I always hear you.”

“Alizar,” I repeated, my eyes fluttering in relief.

“Why did you come back? I told you not to.”

My chest rose and fell as I scanned his face. “I came back for you—to help you.”

“Me?”

“Untie me. Please.”

He blinked at the sheets around my wrists and slowly fumbled with the knot. “Did you mean what you said before? About—uh—the king killing those who brought me the tonic?”

Finally free from the bedding, I stepped back, eyeing him warily. “Yes.”

“And you? Will he kill you too?”

I sighed. “Yes. How do I know it’s really you and not . . . him?”

“The truth is in the shadows.”

I glanced over his shoulder, his own shadow normal sized, slanting across the stone floor.

“You should go. I can’t hold him off much longer,” he urged.

I grabbed his hand between mine. “Thank you.”

He mumbled some incoherent words, staring at our joined hands. His thumb slid across my knuckles, awakening a tingling sensation that sent my heart into a frenzy that had nothing to do with fear. At the second swipe, time slowed and the room around us faded away. Just him and me bathed in the candlelight.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears at his gentle caress, his eyes searching my face as I did his. Warmth spread up my arms and filled me with a sense of longing. For what? I had no idea, but my feet inched me closer, desperate to find out. So close, I memorized the angles of his face, the patches of blond stubble along his cheeks and jawline. The sudden urge to trace his skin left me breathless to remove this distance between us.

Yes, I knew he was handsome, but now standing inches from him turned my knees into pudding. He was stunning. A perfect combination of elegance and steel that would be lethal if he knew how to wield it.

How had I missed it? Or had I been so focused on my task that I never stopped to see who he may be behind his mask?

His lips twitched, a small smile teasing the corner but not quite there. Gone were his confidence and brash behavior, instead replaced with an almost shy quality so that I could feel his nerves brimming between us through our touch.

“Your skin is soft like rose petals,” he murmured, his thumbs tracing distracting circles on the backs of my hands. “Not many—if any—have allowed me to touch them.”

Something inside me ached at the loneliness of his words. Secluded from the world so that he’d only seen life through his window, bound by his magic chain. Who wouldn’t break under the same conditions? Wouldn’t I? It hadn’t been two months, and I could feel darkness from my own cell creeping within me.

Maybe all Alizar—or Zee—needed was someone to show him kindness. Or even love.

I shook my head in a feeble attempt to dislodge my crazed thoughts. *What is wrong with me?* This masked man nearly killed me. Not to mention he spoke of himself with two names as if more than one person resided inside his body. These stirring emotions were more dangerous than the end of a knife. I couldn’t let his sad eyes sway me or I’d never find my way back home again.

“Don’t come back for me again,” he whispered. “I’m not worth it.”

My heart cracked a fraction and I pulled away, my fingertips gliding down his hands as he reluctantly released me.

“Don’t give up. That’s what they want us to do. Stand tall, Alizar. “

“What’s your name?” he asked urgently before I left the room.

I glanced over my shoulder at him, catching myself before I said it. “It’s safer you don’t know. Both of you.”

No attachments and no memory I was ever here. Princess Fiona didn’t exist, and this castle was no Ravenwood.

Then I ran, sprinting full speed to the door as if the madman were on my heels. But he wasn't. In fact, it was oddly silent when I left.

Losing Control



Back in my cell, I sat in a daze on the floor. Was Zee a crazed man who had succumbed to the madness of captivity? Or was there some truth to his ravings?

His beastly appearance materialized in my thoughts, but it didn't scare me like before. Because that wasn't how I saw him. His image swirled then appeared with his charming smile.

They were two distinct people with different speech, gestures, and memories—could it be true?

Zee and Alizar . . . two different personalities in one body? Not an erratic man with swinging emotions, but two distinctly different beings trapped in one body.

Could the magic of the mask have split him in half? *The truth is in the shadows . . . shadows . . . there were two different shadows.*

If so, then who was the original—Zee or Alizar?

One was selfish, unpredictable, and overflowing with pent-up anger that trickled into his other emotions. But sometimes he had a thread of humor, honesty, and insightfulness that surprised me . . . well, when he wasn't screaming at me.

And the other was calm, patient, and protective, but his cowardice kept him in Zee's shadow. Was that him, fighting to be heard when he had no voice? Trying to get my attention?

Two sides of a coin—or perhaps two sides of a mask?

And why did the king want the mask? To use the magic for his own purpose?

I had no idea about any of it. Just one wild accusation after another that left me even more confused than I was when I started.

I rubbed my fingers over my knuckles, remembering Alizar's touch from earlier. The minor attraction between us wasn't enough to tempt me.

Tempt? What was I even thinking? He was my means of escape, a monster in a mask and nothing more.

I bit my lip. *People call me a monster too.*

We were not the same. I'd never hurt anyone . . . well, unless it was self-defense. A survivor instinct all of us were all born with.

What if . . . what if Zee didn't burn down the farmland in malice but in desperation to escape the prison of his life—all because he wasn't like everyone else.

Is he really a monster?

I groaned and rubbed a hand down my face. I didn't know anymore.

Light flickered from down the path, brightening the stones as it approached. The prisoners slammed on their bars in a frothing rage before the slurping and gnawing replaced their displeasure. They were the two quietest times of the day—mealtime.

Which also meant the guards would be coming soon to collect me.

Gorgton dropped a plate of scrambled eggs and cabbage outside my bars. "Not sure who sent in the special request, but it appears someone in the kitchen likes you. Everyone else got the usual . . . and you got this. It came with a blueberry muffin, but I ate it."

Savory flavors wafted over, tickling my nose and beckoning me closer. Steam drifted up from the plate, the cabbage still warm.

“Or maybe it’s a last meal, and someone thinks you won’t survive the night.”

My stomach soured at that and the thought of facing Zee again. He never made things easy and always did the unexpected.

The guards came early, while I was still eating, their cheeks flushed as if they ran the entire way.

“He’s been asking for you again, miss,” Lyonel said.

“Asking is putting it lightly,” Raimen muttered under his breath.

Lyonel cleared his throat. “His mood has improved, but he was adamant that you arrive . . . post haste.”

“And he orders you all about?” I asked.

“He drives Hanson loony banging on his piano hour after hour. Clashing chords that make your eyes go crossed.”

“Who knew music could be a weapon?” Raimen said. “So here we are, fetching you an hour early. I hope he doesn’t think to keep you an hour later.”

Me too.

Hanson’s face lit up when he saw us through the tunnel. “Hurry now. I feel like my ears are bleeding. He stopped playing, and I don’t want him to start up again. Toss her in.”

“Should we check—” Lyonel started.

Hanson barked over him. “Send her in. Now.”

Before I could ask, I found myself shoved into the darkened room.

“Remember, two days left,” Hanson said. The door slammed, followed by the latches turning, trapping me inside.

“Two days,” I mocked under my breath. They must have assumed I was a simpleton for them to keep repeating the days like I’d forgotten. My life was at stake! It was constantly on my mind with each second that passed.

“Took you long enough. What game shall we play today?”

“Hello, Zee,” I said with a sigh. I knew it would be him when I walked in, but I’d held a kernel of hope that it’d be reasonable Alizar. “As I told you before, it’s not a game. You have to drink this so you can take off your mask.”

A twisted smile marred his handsome features. “The mask is me. You can never remove it.”

I filled the chalice, ignoring his grumbles behind me. I marched straight to the safety line with my head held high. “Well, if I’m dead, then we can’t play games anymore.”

“I already said I wouldn’t kill you. Stay and I’ll not let them take you.” He held out his hand for mine. “I’ll protect you.”

“*Right.* And you think I forgot that you tried to tie me up with a bed sheet yesterday?”

“Tie,” he said, holding up one finger. “Not kill. You keep trying to run away, and I don’t like that.”

“Most captives don’t like being held against their will. You should know.”

“How else do I get you to stay?” His hands balled into fists.

I crossed my arms. “Why do you want me to stay?”

“Do I need a reason?” He fidgeted, his fingers tapping on his pants as if they were keys of a piano.

“Yes.”

He pinched his lips and stiffened, tucking his hands behind his back.

“Your company is . . . tolerable.” He inclined his head as if he had offered me the highest praise.

“Well, I find your company *not*,” I seethed, insulted beyond comprehension.

He froze for a second, momentarily stunned by my outburst.

I jabbed a finger in his direction to drive the point home. “And there’s nothing that would convince me to stay with you.”

“Warm food? A soft bed besides a floor?”

I shook my head.

“Not even for the sunshine through the windows?”

“I won’t be tempted,” I said. Though a small piece of me begged for the glorious rays of the sun to heat my skin again. The chill of the shadows ached all the way to my bones.

He strutted off three paces and rushed back. “What if I drink?”

My prepared argument dissolved on my lips. I blinked at him. “You’d drink from the chalice? For what? My company?”

“For you to stay with me—forever.”

My jaw dropped in utter shock. He couldn’t be serious.

“I think it’s a fair trade. You live, and I get . . . you.”

“I’m not for trade.”

He glanced down at the chalice in disgust. “Then I’m not going to drink.”

“So, you’d let me die because of your stubbornness?” I hissed.

“It would be your choice, not mine.”

I sputtered in indignation. Zee really was a loon if he thought that. Did Alizar feel the same way? Could he be reasoned with more than the other?

“Do you play chess?”

I jumped, startled at his demanding question. It had the bite of interrogation.

“I will only answer a question if you answer one of mine,” I countered.

“Fine. Now answer the question.”

“No. I was never taught, but it was my father’s favorite pastime. He talked of it some but was too busy to teach me. Once, he told me the queen was the most important piece. People always assume it’s the king, but you must always protect her. It was his same motto in his real life. Protect the queen.” As I said it, I heard his words echo in my mind, a sound I never thought I’d hear again. My father had died doing just that, trying to save my mother. Memories threatened to overtake me, and I pushed them down again, deep down into the little box where they couldn’t hurt me. My heart clenched at the loss of the two people who were now more strangers than family. Time had a way of erasing not only the hurt but also the good moments.

“You’re sad,” he stated in wonder.

I turned away and clumsily dashed the tear that beaded on my lashes. “I don’t think of these memories often—or at all, in most cases. Don’t you have a sad memory?”

A moment of silence passed between us, long enough that I was sure he was avoiding the question.

“The day I saw myself in the mirror for the first time. I had nightmares for months. My appearance doesn’t seem to bother you like it did the others.”

His soft tone had me whipping around.

“Alizar?”

He glanced up, his eyes vacant as they met mine. “You didn’t listen to me. You came back.”

“I didn’t have a choice. The guards collect me from my cell each evening.”

“How many days do you have left?”

“Not many. Two. Can you help me?” I lifted the chalice in desperation. Surely he’d care more for my life than Zee.

“Drink? No, no.” He swung his hands in the air as if to ward me off.

“What if I could help us get out of here?”

His eyes darkened. “Us? Together?”

Zee.

The shadows behind us curled up like a tidal wave, yet he hadn’t moved. It almost felt like it watched me with its ghostly eyes, scanning my face in search of something.

“It’s impossible. I’m trapped in here by magic,” he said. “And you’re in chains. You won’t get far.”

“You could release me. Pick the lock.” I smiled at him. “Please?”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” he growled.

My smile drooped. “No, of course not.”

His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head, a strange expression on his face. “What do you think of me?”

I fumbled over my words, unprepared for his blunt question. The truth was definitely not an option.

“Well, what do *you* think of *me*?” I asked in return. A question with a question—my mother’s tip for social kindness. Who knew I’d be using it in a dusty ballroom with a prisoner instead of at an afternoon soiree.

“You first.”

“I think you are . . .” Words scattered in my head and bounced around just out of reach. Panicked, my fingers tightened on the stem of the chalice. When I finally caught one, I blurted it out without thinking. “Handsome.”

I regretted it immediately. Fiery heat sizzled up my neck, flooding my face until I thought I’d combust in shame. Why would I say that? Even “monster” was a better word to use.

Darkness clouded his features, a displeasure that made the air thick with tension.

“You’re funny,” he said deadpan.

“I wasn’t jesting.” I clamped my lips closed as another wave of heat coursed through me. *Stop talking.*

He rubbed his thumb over his eyebrow and sighed. “Flattery and lies will get you nowhere. I will not drink for that.”

“Lies?”

“I know what I look like—I see my reflection in the mirror every day. It never changes.”

“Oh.” I held out the syllable, grimacing. “That’s right. I had forgotten about your appearance in the mirror.”

“Forgotten?”

“It’s just . . . I don’t see you like that.”

He held my stare in challenge. “Prove it.”

“I don’t know how I can. I mean, you look like . . . you. Your face is leaner with a strong jawline, more manicured eyebrows, smaller forehead, and you have one dimple right here.” I reached a hand out but caught myself just before I crossed the line. *Oh my, that was a close one.*

“I have a dimple?”

“Do you not know?” I tapped my left cheek. “It’s right here and only when you smile, so not often.”

“My mirrored reflection is all I see, and it’s all anyone should see. How do you see something different?”

“Immunity to different types of magic, I guess?” I chuckled nervously.

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure if I believe you, but it sounds like a ridiculous thing to lie about.”

“I agree. It would be.”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “You don’t have dimples in either version I’ve seen you. Right now, you’re plain in a pleasant sort of way.”

Even though I know he spoke of my disguise, his flippant remark still clawed at my ego.

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks.”

“You didn’t let me finish. But when I saw you the other day . . . you were beautiful.” He blinked and turned away to mumble, “really beautiful.”

A smile crept across my face before I could stop it. *He thinks I’m beautiful?* I shook my head before I floated away. *Focus.*

“Ahem.” I coughed into my hand, trying to relax my cheeks and failing. “It’s as I told you. A side effect of your tonic and nothing more.”

“Then tell me why I dream of violet eyes,” he demanded.

“I don’t know.” The barest of whispers, my mind still reeling.

“Not all masks are visible to the eye. What are you hiding, little sparrow?”

“Nothing.”

“Hmm . . . it doesn’t feel like ‘nothing’. I will figure it out.”

I should’ve kept arguing, but the sweet taste of honesty tinged my tongue, tempting me into saying things I shouldn’t. Instead, I turned and headed for the door.

What was with this need to be honest with him? I rubbed a hand across my chest, a strange fluttering I didn’t care for.

“I think I’ll leave now,” I said.

Time-wise, I’d stayed longer than all the other days I visited him.

“Leave? Or run away?”

I stopped, my back stiff.

“And here I thought you weren’t scared,” he mocked.

“What do you want, Zee?” Fed up, I spun around, my hands in fists at my waist. “Questions? Games? Insults? My life is only a game to you.”

“And does forcing me to drink that ‘tonic’ make you some kind of hero? You think your life is worth more than mine? Do

you know how painful it is to drink it? Do you even wonder what it does to me?"

"Tell me then. What does it do?" I held up the chalice, demanding answers.

"As I've told the guards, it makes things worse and rips me in half. We aren't meant to be separated. It's killing us both—or maybe that's the point. The king wants us dead."

My spark of anger snuffed out, leaving me chilled to the bone. *Kill him?* That wasn't part of the agreement, nor did I want that on my conscience.

"I asked the guards, and they said you'd be fine," I whispered, swallowing the lump of shame in my throat. "I assumed it caused some pain, but I had no idea it was deadly."

"Or you didn't care about discovering the truth—you only cared about yourself."

His words cut sharp, the very echo of my thoughts from earlier. He stepped in my direction only to be jerked to an abrupt halt. Muttering, he fought the cuff with swift but useless kicks, his voice swelling in anger with each failed attempt. Strands of his blond hair flopped over his forehead, covering his mask. Bent over with his hands on his thighs, he stared at the floor as he collected himself.

Guilt had me rushing back to the line, desperate to make amends.

"Zee," I said, jolting when his wild eyes snapped to mine.

"You didn't run away yet? Isn't that what you normally do?"

"Not this time . . . but you're right." I bit my bottom lip. "I did value my life more than yours, and I'm sorry for that."

"Finally. Something we can agree on." He smoothed his hair back over his forehead and tucked his hands behind his back, regaining his composure.

"I shouldn't have said those things to you. It's my fault. I'm frustrated too. I'm tired of these chains tearing up my skin. Not having my own bed to sleep in. Forced to eat slop that

even an animal wouldn't touch." My vision blurred, and I swiped a tear from my cheek. "They humiliate me, starve me, manipulate me, hurt me . . ."

The more I spoke, the whinier I sounded. Whatever happened to me had bound to have happened to him too, yet he wasn't here complaining. I had to stand tall and face the battle head on.

I was just so weary of fighting.

"Who hurt you?"

The venom in his words waylaid my internal speech. His shadow loomed behind him, violent and wild. I had never seen it so tall, the head almost to the rusted chandeliers.

Zee was losing control.

"It's not important. Maybe you should—"

"I want a name."

I swayed forward, barely restraining myself from placing a calming hand on his arm. A few splatters of his tonic spilled from the chalice. "I'm a prisoner. Torture is always on the menu. You can't get mad at him for doing his job."

"Name."

"He works for King Ernesh—"

"Name."

"—and is under his royal protection, so—"

"*Name*," he bellowed overtop me.

"Gorgton," I shouted back, matching him in volume. I ducked my head, embarrassed. This was not something I wished to discuss with anyone, especially him. Steadying my breathing, I traced the raven's wing under my cuff.

"Who is he?" he asked, his voice low.

"The head guard in the dungeon."

"Consider it taken care of. Who else?"

“What? *No*. I don’t want any trouble for him or anyone else.”

“He hurt you? Caused you pain? Then he needs to be taught a lesson.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then realized that the chances of the two of them meeting were impossible. Gorgton rarely left the dungeon unless summoned by the king or the royal family.

“Who else?”

“Nobody. Just him.”

He pointed at the door, his body still vibrating from his pent-up fury. “And those three idiots out there?”

“No, they’ve been kind. Please.” I traced the wing of my brand.

“You promise to tell me if there’s anyone else?”

I bit my lip.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.” The words hung in the air like an invisible string binding us together.

The darkness behind him folded inward, shrinking before my eyes.

“I said I’d protect you, little sparrow, and I will.”

His eyes burned with his oath, my heart somersaulting in my chest. No man had ever looked at me with such fierce determination.

It was almost like he cared.

“Why me?” I asked suddenly. “Out of every other person who brought you the chalice, why protect me?”

“It’s as you said. We’re the same—just fighting to survive. Nobody had ever explained it to me that way before . . . or took the time to speak to me at all.”

“Oh.” Scrunching my eyebrows together, I pondered my mixed emotions at his response. It was what I had been

wanting him to understand—that we were allies.

Then why was I so disappointed?

Sparrow's Promise



I didn't want to dig further into those emotions for fear of what I'd find. Besides, time was fleeting, ticking away to the date of my execution faster than I liked.

Closing my eyes briefly, I took a long breath, collecting myself.

If Zee was right about the tonic being dangerous, then I couldn't in good conscience force him to drink it.

"I don't want to hurt anyone, including you. So, what am I to do?" I frowned at the liquid in the chalice, its sweet scent nauseating. "How do they know if you drank it? Do you think we could trick them?"

His dark eyes trailed over my face. "Nobody has ever asked me before."

My cheeks heated under his scrutiny. When he didn't say more, I pressed him again. "Well? Can you pretend you drank it?"

An amused smile curled at one corner of his mouth. "No. They will know."

"How?"

"I'll be awake."

"That's why I said for you to pretend," I said with exasperation.

"I could, but then they will try to remove my mask. And nobody touches my mask," he said coolly and raised a brow.

“Even you.”

I gritted my teeth as a wave of frustration washed over me. “Why? If this mask is the reason you’re locked up, why wouldn’t you just take it off to earn your freedom?”

“You say it like it’s so easy. Just pop it off like one removes their hat. But as with everything that’s enchanted, nothing is ever that simple. It only comes off if I’m dead—which will happen if I keep drinking what’s in there—or my broken pieces become one.”

“Pieces become one?”

“Yes. Alizar and I would have to merge. And—out of everything—the least likely option to occur. Alizar is a bore and a rule follower who’s scared of his own shadow.”

“And you’re so great?” I huffed.

“I am, actually. I’m stronger and smarter. This mask was specifically made for me so I could exist. Everything he lacks, which is a lot, I provide in spades.”

“How so?”

“The mask removes my weaknesses and amplifies my strengths. It took what I was before and turned me into a warrior. I don’t want to be weak again.”

“And Alizar?”

“Who cares about him?”

My anger sparked. “I do. Why don’t you let him speak?”

“Let him? He never asks. The three times he’s talked to you is more than I’ve heard from him in years. He’s a useless ghost.”

“Ghost? I think you mean gentleman. In those three instances I’ve seen him, he was protecting me from you.”

Zee’s jaw clenched, his eyes glittering behind his mask. He opened and closed his fists before tucking them behind his back. “I can be a gentleman too.”

“Like anyone would believe that. It’d just be another mask you wear. You are who you are.”

“Or I was made how I was made.” He narrowed his eyes, straining against his cuff. “Nothing’s set in stone, little sparrow. Perhaps I just need a little motivation for change.”

I laughed sarcastically, shaking my head at his jest. Zee? A gentleman? That was rich indeed. But when I met his eyes, they were steel and unamused.

“Laugh all you want, but it doesn’t make it any less true. Did I not offer you protection as well?”

“You strangled me.” I stepped closer, careful not to cross the line. Lifting my chin, I pointed to my throat. “I bet if you look closely, you’d see the marks you left on my skin.”

“You mean after you slammed the chalice into my mouth and forced me to drink poison? I apologize for my *rude* behavior. I have *no idea* what could have provoked me.”

We scowled at one another, neither backing down.

“How did I ever see any good in you?” I asked.

At that, he flinched, stumbling back as if my words had wounded him. He didn’t retort with a jab as I thought he would. Had I offended him—could he be offended? I glanced away in shame.

“Sorry,” I blurted. “I shouldn’t have said that. That was too far.”

He turned away, his broad shoulders slumped. “You’re probably right though. What good can be found in a monster?”

I grimaced, catching myself just before I could dash over the line to console him. How did he have this power over me to forget myself?

“You’re not a monster, Zee.” I sighed. “I just . . . ugh, I’m not used to being around people. My manners can be a bit brash.”

“No, I like that you stand up to me. You look me in the eye and listen when we converse. Nobody does that. There’s no

fear between us.”

The shadows behind him swayed slightly, surprising me that it was still Zee speaking.

“And I feel . . . different around you. It scares me a little, to be honest,” he said softly, not meeting my eyes. “I thought you might be different than the others. Surprisingly, your betrayal stung more than the fat lip you gave me. But I still shouldn’t have hurt you. I give you my word from now on—not one person will lay a finger on you, not even me.”

Trust was like a snowflake, a beautiful fragile crystal. Each one unique and rare, but if it broke, it was impossible to put back together.

How could I trust him after everything that happened?

“I know you don’t believe me, but I am sorry.” He finally glanced up, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

I forced a smile. “It doesn’t matter. I only have tomorrow left to live.”

“Not true. I won’t let them take you.”

“What can you do locked in this dusty ballroom? Only the king can grant my pardon, and this is what he has requested. This . . . tonic. It’s not worth the consequences.” I lifted the chalice, hating how the weight of it was barely noticeable in my hand. Why was I even holding it? I’d never force him to drink it again.

“Give me a day . . . let me think on it. There has to be another way.”

My ears must have played tricks on me. “You want to help me?”

“I meant what I said. I won’t let anyone hurt you, little sparrow.”

His promise vibrated through me, warmth spreading through my torso. They weren’t just words but a declaration that reflected over his face, his eyes beseeching me. And with that look, the part of me I kept locked away creaked open, and a need for friendship, for kinship, for something *more* came

bursting out of the crevices. And I was sure it'd be nearly impossible to put them back in again.

There was something about him, like a wild animal lost and alone. He lashed out because that was all he knew how to do. But when I showed him kindness, he responded in kind.

My heart clenched. He needed someone too.

“Why do you call me sparrow?” I asked, tilting my head.

“At first, it was because of the tattoo on your wrist. Now you remind me of my pet sparrow.”

“I remind you of a bird?” I wrinkled my nose. “You’re terrible at compliments.”

He burst out laughing, and I couldn’t stop my grin from forming.

“I shall practice more.”

“It’s hard to imagine you caring for a pet.”

“It wasn’t a pet in the way you’re thinking. When I was younger, I lived in an old hunting cabin close to Whistle Thorn Woods.”

My brows rose, and I nearly jumped out of my seat. “That’s where my cottage is.”

“Is it? I’ve never been inside but could hear the whistling even from the cabin.”

“As a child you never explored the woods?”

“I was locked in the cabin. I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to.”

With a sigh, I pressed a hand to my heart. “Oh, Zee . . .”

He drew himself inward as if to hide the scars from me. “Not Zee,” he whispered.

Alizar.

And sure enough, the shadow behind him rested normally across the bookcase as it was supposed to.

“Sorry,” I said. “I can’t tell when you two . . . swap.”

“Zee doesn’t like sadness. Calls me weak. He prefers the anger.”

I nodded.

“And it wasn’t Zee’s sparrow—it was mine. The bird had somehow gotten trapped inside with us. It pecked on the glass the first two days, desperate for its freedom. Then eventually it accepted its fate. I shared my rations with it until it eventually trusted me enough to eat out of my hand. In the mornings, she’d sing. Her song was a cheerful respite.” He sent me a smile coated in sadness. “But she didn’t stay long. As soon as the guard came back to check on me at the end of the week, she flew out the door, and I was alone again.”

“She left you with some precious memories.”

“As will you when you leave.” In the same instant he stiffened and slammed his fist on his thigh. “She’s not leaving.”

I didn’t need to check his shadow to know Zee was back and furious again.

“I think it was a good thing she left,” I said.

“Because you like it when I’m in pain?”

“No. When you love something, you want what’s best for them. When the sparrow left, it was able to live a full and happy life. You did that.”

Zee’s lips curled in disgust. “Love is a myth. I’ve ripped out 17,340 pages with the word love on it because it’s a lie. Books should hold the truth, so the pages were removed. Even if they love you, nothing will stay unless you make them.”

I folded my arms. “I was taught if you loved something, you should let it go.”

“But then it’s gone. And when you—I mean—it’s gone, then I’m sad. I don’t like that feeling.” His eyes flicked up to mine. “I’m not weak.”

“Sadness isn’t weakness. In fact, some would say it’s a strength because it’s one step closer to empathy. It can help you understand your enemy. Personally, I like using it to help

people. I once saved a fox in the forest. Its front paw had been injured in a poaching trap, and it was frightened of its own shadow. After a week of me taking care of him, he finally trusted me enough so I could mend his arm. It was such a rewarding experience. Never before had I been so close to a wild fox before.”

“So, the fox stayed after you saved it?”

“Uh. Actually, no.”

He rubbed his jaw. “Well, then that was a terrible story. It didn’t make me feel better at all.”

“The point I’m trying to make is that I let the fox go knowing he didn’t belong to me. Forcing the fox to stay wouldn’t have made him mine. He’d have just fought harder to escape. This way, he left with a good memory of me. And if Ruah wills the fox to return, then he won’t do so in fear.”

“Ruah?” he thundered. “Who is this man?”

“Not a man but the creator of all magic in Hanalla. Powerful yet unseen, Ruah is our provider and protector. After everything that’s happened in my life, I know I have someone watching out for me.”

“You mean the one that cursed me like this and created this mask?”

Tapping my lip, I tried to figure out another explanation. “Oh! Think of plucking an apple from its tree and then choking on its fruit. Is it the tree’s fault because it grew the apple? Or is it yours for eating too quickly?”

“The tree.”

An unexpected laugh slipped from me at his quick response, and I rolled my eyes. “Zee . . .”

“You laughed.” His mouth twitched. “It was pretty.”

Despite myself, I blushed, trying to remember the point of my story. “Ahem. Well, the point is that it isn’t Ruah’s fault for the terrible things in the world. Sometimes it can feel like we’re cursed, but we do have a choice to make: good or bad.”

“There is no choice. It doesn’t matter what you do or how many good decisions you make. You are always condemned.”

There was a rawness in his words, something crying for help.

“You have to earn their trust again. And even if they don’t forgive you, Ruah will. You can find solace in that.”

Zee nodded. “How do I earn your trust? Or is it already too late?”

“Patience. Barking orders and dragging me around is doing you no favors.”

He chuckled as if it were a grand joke. “I’m not good with patience.”

“Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want. Like this.” I raised the chalice. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t.”

I glanced at the liquid in the chalice. “All right. I won’t.” I strolled back to the table and set the chalice on top before returning to him, my hands up in surrender. “No chalice.”

He tilted his head, his shoulders relaxing.

“Are you still leaving?”

“I can, if you wish me to.”

“I don’t.”

“Because I’m tolerable?”

“You are. Perhaps I can teach you chess.”

What else was I going to do if I wasn’t here? Sit in my cell and listen to the screams? Let the nightmares of my past torture me in the darkness? At least this would help the time pass. And maybe I’d be a natural like my father.

I was not.

Zee lugged the chess table to the safety line and set up each piece carefully into its position. Each wooden piece was crudely carved into mostly similar shapes.

“So, the bishop moves forward—”

“That’s not your bishop, that’s a pawn.”

I studied the misshapen piece. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he grumbled, already irritated. “I carved it myself.”

“Really? Okay, so the pawn moves diagonally. Or was that the horsey?” I glanced up at the sound of his grinding teeth.

“Were you even listening when I explained?”

“Of course I was. There are just a lot of pieces and they all move differently. I wasn’t expecting a midnight chess lesson.”

With a sigh, he nodded. “One more, all right? Pay attention. This here is . . .”

He went into his spiel again, lifting up the dark pieces from his side of the board. I tried to focus. Honestly. But there was something mesmerizing in his soothing tone as he spoke. A deep rumble that distracted me and drew my eyes to his charming face in the candlelight. Again, my gaze traced the edges of his mask, and I wondered what he’d look like without it.

I rested my chin on my palm, the rattling of my chains reminding me this wasn’t a social gathering.

“What piece is this?” he demanded suddenly, drawing my attention to a corner piece with bumps on the top.

“Um.”

“If you’re going to waste my time, just leave.”

We met eyes over the board. “Check your temper, Zee.”

He sucked in a long breath and huffed it out through the corner of his mouth. “Sorry.”

Stiffening, his knee bumped the table, knocking over some pieces so they rolled across the board. We snatched them as fast as we could before they could sail off the edge.

I grabbed a wayward pawn—I thought it was a pawn—just as his hand covered mine. My heart skipped at the contact, but whether in fear or excitement, I couldn’t tell.

How was he able to reach me?

Noises muted the longer I stared at our connected hands. The reckless danger left me breathless, my chest rising and falling in quick pants of excitement. I shouldn't like the feel of his touch or wonder what it'd be like for him to trace the planes of my face. It was those types of thoughts that would lead to my death.

As if he'd pounce any moment, I gingerly pulled my fingertips from under his, hoping he wouldn't react as he had before and tie me up with a bed sheet.

His grip tightened, preventing my escape.

"Wait."

"Zee . . ."

"I just want to see if your skin is as soft as Alizar said."

His thumb slid over my fingers, shooting delicious tingles across my skin. When he did it a second time, I shivered, and his knee hit the table again, knocking the pieces over. This time we let them tumble to the ground.

"Sparrow," he whispered. His shadow danced behind him, curious as if trying to peek over his shoulder. "Trust me."

Slowly, he released my hand but kept it relaxed on top of mine. The heat of his skin was comforting.

Comforting?

I blinked and pulled my hand away, tucking it on my lap where he couldn't see it tremble.

The peephole opened behind me, and Hanson mumbled through the opening, "Yeah, I see her. She's still alive."

Zee's jaw clenched, his eyes darting to the noise.

"I think my time's up," I said.

"Why is there a time limit?" he barked, his mood darkening.

I lifted my hands, showing my shackles. "Nobody wants to see a prisoner so close to where they sleep, even a plain yet

pleasant-looking girl.”

He cringed and rubbed the back of his neck. “It sounds worse when you say it.”

“No, it sounded just as terrible when you said it before.”

A blush crept over his cheeks as he smiled, his dimple showing.

Chuckling, I bent down to gather the stray chess pieces. It was then that I noticed my chair had crossed an inch over the safety line. I must have scooted it to reach the board and didn’t notice.

Zee had been able to grab me the whole time if he’d wanted.

But he didn’t.

Truth and Accusations



Somehow I found sleep while curled up in the corner of my cell. As the day passed without me, I dreamed of walking through Ravenwood's corridors, the passageways like I remembered from my youth.

I normally didn't let myself wallow in the memories, but knowing that I had one final day left, I granted myself this indulgence. So, I let the dream draw me into its hazy illusion, the familiar honeysuckle fragrance wafting through the air.

The velvet carpet painted a bright red line down the throne room, one that I followed through the beams of sunlight. On either side of me were rows of royal subjects dressed in long flowing gowns and gilded shirts. Oddly enough, they all wore black masquerade masks, watching me through empty eyeholes in silence as I walked down the carpet. Only their heads turned as I passed, the weight of their gaze leaving pinpricks down my spine.

At the end of the room sat my father, clad in all black, his raven feathers fanning out behind his neck. Each feather he had earned through bravery and sacrifice for his people. He smiled, though it was lost in his overgrown beard, but I could see his happiness twinkling in his eyes. Next to him, my mother's throne sat unoccupied.

The sight alone worried me. It was unlike her to not be by his side. She was a firm believer in appearing as a unified monarchy.

Father reached out a hand, patting the vacant throne as if offering me a place to rest my weary feet.

I shook my head, knowing it wasn't my place. "That's Mother's chair."

"Come, Fiona. Sit." The deep drawl of his voice, that gravely cadence gutted me. After years of not hearing it, I thought I had forgotten. But I immediately recognized his voice. My steps quickened as I rushed down the carpet to reach him.

"Father . . ." My throat clenched, and I was unable to stop the warm tears gliding down my face.

"No time for tears, my sweet," he said and patted the throne again. "Sit with me."

"But Mother—"

"She knows and is very proud of you. We both are. Come now. Sit."

I toddled up the stairs and stopped at the queen's seat, realizing this was the first time I had sat in a place of power. Did I even want to? I'd spent years in the woods, hidden away not only from the king but from my past as well. I was born a princess, and yet I knew nothing of the task.

Was I scared? *Yes.*

Was I unworthy of the privilege? *Yes, again.*

Our people would know I was a fraud. I could never fill my mother's shoes, nor did I want to. I'd rather see her beautiful face again.

"You will one day," my father said as if he read my thoughts. "This is your throne now, and you must claim it."

"But—"

He tsk-tsked as if I'd asked for extra dessert. Patient as ever, he patted the throne's armrest again, finished with my arguments.

With a deep breath and a silent prayer, I sat on Mother's throne. As my bottom landed in the seat, the golden fabric of

my dress bled black, sparkling from tiny onyxes. The back of my neck tickled, the ruffling plumes sprouting out over my shoulders to match my father.

“Perfect,” Father said. “Let your glamour fall . . . let them see you as I see you.”

I lifted my eyes, trembling at the very thought. The vulnerability of the request. But the crowd before me had me slamming back into the high-back throne. They had gathered as close as they dared, the eyes of their masks empty voids fixed upon me. It was as if they could tell I didn’t belong, and I didn’t measure up.

“No, Fiona. They’re waiting for you to return.”

“I—I can’t.”

“You can.”

I whipped my head at the voice, at Zee who now sat in Father’s spot. His gold mask shone bright and illuminated the now darkened room. He wore Taika’s colors, burgundy and tan, his blond hair slicked back as usual. His ankle rested on his knee, a causal stance as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“It’s time for you to fly, little sparrow. I’ll make sure you don’t fall.”

He held out his hand for me, and I stared at it, knowing I shouldn’t take it even as my palm twitched with desire to do so.

“Trust me,” he whispered, a seductive caress that sounded like a mix of him and Alizar. “We are the same.”

My hand moved on its own, resting in his just as Zee smirked, pleased at my choice. He lifted it to his lips, holding my gaze as he pressed a lingering kiss to my knuckles. Just one innocent touch and my heart launched into flight, soaring almost out of my chest that woke me up with a start, panting in the darkness.

Most of my nightmares were fragmented memories of running through the crypt, flames nipping at my heels. Or I

was trapped inside the castle, the ghosts of my family eerily watching, and I was unable to escape their spectral wails.

But this dream was different. The vivid details surprised me—it felt too real. Instead of waking in fear, peace resided in my chest.

I flattened my palm on my racing heart, hoping the pressure would calm it back to normal. It was nothing more than last-day jitters. My cheeks were still damp, and I swiped them with the sleeve of my gown just as a ring of keys jingled down the hall.

Gorgton lumbered up to my cell, squinting at me through the bars in disappointment. In his hand was my tray of food, piled high with fresh fruit, a steaming mince pie, and a crusty piece of bread.

“Last meal it seems.” He dropped it by the bars with a clatter. “After all the work I put into you, I’d hate to have to hang that scrawny neck.” Then he left, taking my bread with him before rushing off to attend to a fight further down the prison hallway.

I ate my fill of fruit, which wasn’t much due to my nerves. I hadn’t even touched my pie, the insides bubbling like lava, billowing savory steam into my face. I picked at it as it cooled, still lost in the memory of my dream. I thought I’d be more startled at the appearance of my father, but it was Zee who consumed my thoughts. I couldn’t pinpoint what had my emotions in a twist. His smile? The sultry cadence of his tone? Or was it the way his eyes burned with emotion as he stared at me?

I won’t let anyone hurt you, little sparrow. His words echoed in my mind, and I caught myself smiling down at my mince pie.

Goodness. My brain is rattled. It was impossible to believe that I was daydreaming about Zee of all people.

I tapped a finger on the pie filling to check if it was cool enough to eat and jerked back at the pokey object hidden in the juices. A trap? Was someone hoping to injure me? A blade

in my food? I suspiciously glanced at the fruit I had eaten. Could someone be trying to kill me? Carefully, I dug the object out, my eyes widening at the long, narrow thing between my fingers. Turning it this way and that, I gasped in recognition of the black quill.

It was a raven feather.

A message from someone—but who?

Obviously someone who worked in the kitchen since it had been cooked in my food. Ms. Taft? Elise? Or another servant who had spotted me in the courtyard? Whoever it was, one thing was certain—someone in Taika knew my true identity.

I scooted away in a panic, huddling back in my corner with the feather clamped in my fist.

Things had changed and not for the better. I had to make a run for it the first opportunity I got. I had hoped to convince Zee to release me from my chains, but at this point, I had to risk running even if I was still bound.

Illusionists were rarely killed but were instead broken mind, body, and soul into bending to their captor's will. If they knew who I was, they'd want me and my magic for their own selfish purposes.

Raimen and Lyonel found me that way, probably assuming I was in a mood on my last day when instead I was terrified of what I held in my grip. Before they could notice, I tucked the feather down my bodice, shivering at the cool, wet texture.

Both of the guards were careful with me, treating me like a fragile piece of glass as they marched me past Gorgton and his menacing glare and out into the corridors. Their fear for me was sweet and unexpected.

Even Hanson sent me a pitying look as I walked in. “Try your best, but know that nobody has made it this far before. It's truly an accomplishment.”

It took me a minute to piece together the situation. They all thought I couldn't do it. That I'd fail.

“Maybe we should unchain her for the last day?” Raimen suggested, rubbing his jaw.

My head lifted a fraction, and it took everything in me not to beg for these chains to be removed. Because as soon as they did, the guards would never see me again.

“Give her a chance, Hanson,” Lyonel said.

“You know I would if I could. But I don’t make the rules here, and I have a nice, comfortable job I don’t want to lose for some girl with sad eyes. I have a family to feed.”

I spun back to the others, hoping they’d keep pressing the issue. Much to my frustration they didn’t.

“Go on now. Send her in,” Hanson ordered after checking the peephole. “It’s quiet today . . . which isn’t a good sign. His silence is usually as terrible as his tantrums. Be careful.”

I walked through the small opening, stiffening when one of them patted me encouragingly on the shoulder. Then the door swung closed, and I was left in the dimly lit room.

Zee didn’t greet me when I entered. In fact, the room was eerily silent besides the crackle of the candles. My footsteps were loud, echoing in the space, and yet he didn’t comment on them. I rubbed the raven’s wing on my wrist, an unsettling building in my chest.

Something wasn’t right.

I passed the chalice resting in its normal spot. My only ticket to freedom and one I ignored. Nobody should have to suffer in order for me to survive.

“Zee? It’s me.” I called out when he still didn’t appear. “Are you all right?”

“Go away.”

“Wh-what? Why?” I sputtered. His two words hurt more than I expected. Here I thought we were making progress toward a truce.

“Because I said so. Tell them to take you back. I don’t want to see you.”

“But . . . it’s my last day.”

“I know and I don’t care.”

Something about the cool, dismissive tone bristled my anger. I charged through the opening, veering right into his music room where his piano remained unoccupied, the lid covering the keys. Books had been flung like a trail of breadcrumbs, tossed haphazardly on their spines and open, the pages creasing.

I followed the trail to the short makeshift hallway under the three stained glass windows and around to his empty bedroom. Even more books were scattered here, some of the pages ripped, with shreds of parchment strewn about like flower petals.

“Where are you?” I demanded, storming into the dining room.

As I entered, I noticed him sitting at the broken table. His blond hair was disheveled like he’d run his fingers through it one too many times, and a few strands hung over his forehead to hide part of his mask. Instant relief hit me at his uninjured state, and I realized some of my anger from before had stemmed from worry.

“Zee,” I mumbled, my emotions too mixed to even know where to begin.

When he saw me, his lips curled in distaste, and he slid a thick book across the table between us. It flew off the edge of the broken slat and landed with a heavy thud at my feet.

“I told you to leave.” He glanced away with an arrogant flick of his head, assuming I’d obey.

My eyes narrowed. With that commanding tone, one would expect he was the royal instead of me. Like I was one of his misshapen chess pieces he could move at his whim.

I was done with people dictating orders to me.

“Oh, I heard you. It confused me since the last few days you were trying to tie me up to keep me here.”

“What’s so confusing about ‘go away’, ‘leave’, and ‘I don’t want to see you’?” The shadow behind him swayed upward, looming over him.

I should leave. A smart person would. I’d been trying to escape since I arrived, so why were my feet rooted to the floor? In a flash, Zee from my dreams appeared before me, his lips pressed against my knuckles.

Remnants of last night’s dream stirred a longing for the illusion. I didn’t want it to be a dream.

“No, I won’t leave.”

Whether that was a response to my feelings or Zee’s, I couldn’t tell, but I had a strange feeling it was both. I refused to be like the pages in his books that he so casually ripped out when he disagreed with them.

“Isn’t that just like a woman? As soon as she’s rejected, she can’t take the hint and leave. Desperate for my company, are you?”

Heat climbed up my neck and spread over my cheekbones. His insult at my wanton behavior crossed the line of respect, burning me to the core. Whatever happened between yesterday and today, he wasn’t just sparring. He was out for blood.

“Like I’d ever be interested in the likes of you.” I sniffed in distaste.

A flash of hurt washed over his face. It was a split second, one that I’d have missed if I hadn’t been studying his face.

“As hideous as I am, I’d still never want you even if you were the last woman alive. I’d rather die alone.”

Who could love an Illusionist?

My lips trembled at my greatest fear, but I squeezed them together, refusing to break. Why was this hurting more than I could explain? My heart shuddered, his words like poison-tipped arrows.

“Hit a nerve, did I?” Zee quipped with glee.

“Enough with the verbal jabs,” I shouted, the flames of the candelabra closest to me flickering from my outburst. I panted in the silence between us, collecting myself before I continued. *I am in control.* “I want to speak to Alizar.”

He tipped his head back, laughing maniacally.

“Even shy Alizar doesn’t want you here. We don’t converse with liars.”

The accusation spun my head like a physical slap.

“Lying? About what?”

His nostrils flared and he shot to his feet, his palms spread flat on the table as he leaned forward. “Don’t be coy.”

“If you’re going to accuse me of something, then say it out loud.” I mirrored his stance, pressing my palms onto the slanted half of the table, my chains scraping the wood. After everything I shared with him—he had the gall to think I fabricated my memories? Those were real, broken pieces of me that I’d never shared with anyone before.

“The bird on your wrist . . .”

My rage extinguished faster than a finger snap, instantly replaced with dread. This wasn’t the subject I’d expected. I stepped back, wishing I hadn’t prodded him . . . because he was right.

I was lying.

“It isn’t just a tattoo, is it?”

The question hung in the air. For so long I’d lied about who I was that it had become second nature. For once, I wanted to be honest with someone.

No. Not just anyone—with him.

I wanted Zee—and Alizar—to know the truth. But did I truly trust them? Zee could easily prove my guilt with my confession, which left my fate in his hands. This information could be enough for him to trade for his release.

Should I lower the wall around my heart and tell him the truth?

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

“Your ‘tattoo’ changed color. When you were weak, the lines were a faint gray. But today, the sparrow is pitch black, changing based on your strength like the book said. How could that be when you have numerously told me you weren’t an Illusionist?”

All my lies caught up with me. I wiped my palms nervously on my gown.

“Sparrow . . .”

My name sounded more like a growl than a word, and I flinched. Not quite a lie, but an omission of the truth. He still didn’t know he had the wrong bird, and I had no plans of correcting him. If he was this upset over me being an Illusionist, I couldn’t imagine his reaction if he knew I was the missing princess.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” He stood, trembling with fury. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Why does it matter if I am or not? It doesn’t change anything.”

“I need to know if the violet eyes I dream about are real.” And then he mumbled under his breath, “Is any of this real?”

Walking around the table, I placed my hand on his chest. His muscles bunched beneath my touch, his back rigid. “Does this feel real?”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore. All I’m asking for is the truth. Just tell me you’re not an Illusionist.” His jaw tensed as he waited.

A strange feeling coursed through me. The need for him to know the truth.

“What if I can’t?” My eyes flicked up and stared at his through his mask. I didn’t want him to look at me differently. He, out of everyone, should know what it felt like to be called a monster. If I answered truthfully, it’d change everything.

“So . . . you are an Illusionist?” Disgust dripped from his words.

To my horror, my eyes filled and my throat tightened, but I couldn't stop myself from uttering the truth. "Y-yes."

He spun away from my touch, shoving both his hands through his hair before whipping back to ask, "Are you . . . glamoured right now?"

I took a deep breath, fighting the instinct that told me to lie.

"Yes," I whispered.

He swiped the remaining stack of books off the table and onto the floor. "You used your black magic to trick me."

I spoke through clenched teeth. "It's not black magic. My magic is a gift from Ruah, the creator of all things. A blessing that everyone thinks is a curse."

"Your magic is based on lies. You manipulate people's minds in order to control them."

"I use my magic to stay alive," I growled back, rounding on him. "The king would kill me if he knew my identity, or worse, he'd use my magic for his own gain. Then I'd be no more than a puppet on a string."

That stopped his pacing. "I wouldn't let him."

"You say that like you could influence the king's decision, but all I see is a prisoner, just like me. We have to do what we must to survive. My glamour is for my protection from those that would do me harm—not to control anyone."

I took a step forward, and he retreated. The simple gesture hurt more than he knew. Why did I think honesty would bring us closer? It was only a wedge driving us further apart.

"And your hair is truly black? Not dyed?"

"Why would anyone dye it black?" I said, aghast.

He slid around the table away from me. "Because of the connection to the old kingdom. Some dye their hair in order to show their power."

"Black is a color and nothing more. People on the mainland have dark hair without consequence. They are

farmers, fisherman, shop keepers—and nobody is hunting them down.”

“Then you’re from the mainland?”

I ground my teeth. “No.”

“Then you must be part of the rebellion.”

“The what?” He wasn’t listening at all. I threw my hands up in the air.

One lie, and all trust between us had shattered.

“I’ve heard whispers about them from the servants who deliver my food. Ravenwood loyalists who are recruiting followers hoping to overtake the Taika monarchy. They have someone else they want to put on the throne instead . . . a lost heir or something like that.”

My heart hammered in my chest, my mouth as dry as sawdust. *Please don’t ask me about that . . .*

“Does everyone know of this? Even the king?”

“He’d be deaf not to.”

No wonder he was hunting the Illusionists. He was terrified he’d lose his throne. Why hadn’t Thatcher told me of the rebellion? Warned me?

Lowering my eyes, I caught the title of the book that had fallen at my feet. *Hanalla’s History of Magic*. A book I never knew existed.

“Wh-where did you get this?”

“Everything brought here is to be forgotten. It’s one of the many things, besides me, that the king locked in here hoping it would disappear from the kingdom. Not that I need to explain myself to you.”

My hands trembled as I reached down and grabbed the book, thumbing through the pages. A musty smell wafted up, reminding me of cozy nights reading by the fireplace. Of course they’d leave a rare book containing the history of my family’s magic in a forgotten ballroom to collect dust. I held it close to my chest, a connection to my past.

“Have you done any illusions on me?”

I jolted at the accusation, my anger churning again.

“Did you not read this?” I shook the book at him, my chain rattling from the movement.

He scowled. “Answer the question.”

“I can’t do any illusions when I’m in chains. I need my hands free.”

“Come to think of it, you’re the first prisoner they sent here with chains. Hold on—then explain your disguise if you can’t use magic.”

“My glamour is still in effect because I conjured it before they captured me. Since I’ve arrived, I haven’t summoned my magic. I’ve only maintained my illusion.” I slammed the book on the table. “Maybe next time you should read this in its entirety before you accuse me of tricking you with black magic.”

“Unless this is all an act and I fell for it.” He bowed his head, some of the fight leaving him.

I shook my head. “You still don’t understand how my magic works. King Ernesh is the one spreading lies, feeding the fear of his people to turn you all against us. Our magic is supposed to bring joy, beauty, and hope. I can summon your favorite memories or the face of your lost beloved, transport you to some exotic place you only dreamed of visiting, or offer protection during time of war. How do you think we escaped the battle on the mainland hundreds of years ago? This island wouldn’t even exist without Illusionists. We used our magic to protect those fleeing from the old kingdom of Bressal so they could escape to Arukah Island. That’s not vile or evil. Black magic is when you take what’s supposed to be for good and twist it for your own gain. Any magic can be turned black, like the magic in your mask. What have you done with the magic bestowed to you?”

He let out a long breath, unable to meet my eyes.

“That’s what I thought.” I scoffed, a sarcastic bark. “You know what the worst part is? I’ve never told anyone the truth

before. I always wanted to, and now that I've gathered my courage to do it, I wasted it on *you*." The embarrassing pinprick of tears had me fleeing from the room with my head held high. But inside, my heart ached, cracking like broken glass with each step I took.

"Wait," he begged.

He chased after me, catching me just before I crossed the safety line.

"What? You have more accusations?" I glared at him.

"No. It's just . . . you can't leave yet. Today's your last day."

I jerked out of his hold, surprised he let me go so easily. "I know, and I believe when I told you this, you said you didn't care."

"Well, then maybe I lied too."

"Enough. I'm tired of being hurt. Sick of it, Zee. My heart is covered with bruises, and at this point, all I want is to be left alone. I thought we were forming a friendship of sorts, but—"

His eyes widened through the slits of his mask. "Don't finish that sentence."

"I guess what I'm trying to say is goodbye."

His hands latched on to my arms again, full panic crossing his features.

I lowered my voice. "When the guards come to take me back to my cell, I'm going to run. It's my last chance before . . . before . . ." I couldn't say it.

He glanced frantically around us. At the fallen bookcases. At the torn bits of paper on the floor. At his hands digging into my arms.

Then finally he met my gaze, the color of his eyes hidden in the shadow of the mask.

"Fill the chalice and bring it to me," he commanded.

"Wh-why?" I stuttered.

“Just bring it before I come to my senses.”

“Like I’d trust you after everything—”

He pulled me closer, almost an embrace, his eyes squeezed shut. “I’m sorry. I swear, I haven’t spoken that phrase more than once in the last five years, and now it seems to be every other sentence with you. It’s . . . humbling.”

“You said the tonic was poison. I’m not purposely giving you that, even if that means gaining my freedom.”

He dipped his head. “I can suffer through it for you. We both can.”

“You want me to stay?”

At that, his eyes opened, full of pain. “I do.”

In a daze, I walked to the table and filled the chalice a little less than I usually did, yet still quite a bit more than what I had forced him to drink last time. With hesitant strides, I returned to him, holding the cup tight between my fingers.

“This doesn’t feel right.” I stared at my reflection in the liquid.

“Yes, but it’s what must be done.” He snatched the chalice from my fingers and tossed his head back to drink the whole thing in one swallow. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he slapped it back into my palm. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Zee?” I scanned his face, watching for any side effects. He had never drunk a full dose before.

“Leave me now.” He headed back toward the dining area, his shoulder hitting the bookcase as he rounded the corner.

“Wait—” I called out.

“I said *leave*.”

I stared into the empty chalice, my feelings more confused than ever.

He drank the entire cup . . . and he drank it for me.

Crumbling Defenses



Dropping the empty chalice, I sprinted after him and barely arrived in time to catch him before he collapsed in my arms. My muscles trembled under his weight before we both tipped over like fallen trees to the ground.

He rotated us mid-fall, tucking me in his arms so I landed on top of him. He groaned at the impact, wincing in pain.

“Zee,” I cried out.

“Why do you never listen to me?” The gruffness of his words didn’t match his husky tone.

“I had to make sure you were all right. You are so stubborn.” Maybe my tone didn’t match my words either.

“You came back for me,” he murmured.

“And you drank for me.” I propped myself up on my forearms to scan his face.

“I did. And I am sorry about what I said.” He reached out a tentative finger to my cheekbone, but before he made contact, he shuddered and his hand dropped to the floor. His eyes slid closed, his lashes resting on the mask. “Before I fall asleep . . . can I see you again?”

See me? The question caught me off guard. His tone was mild, almost shy.

“Alizar?”

“Please? Can I see the real you?” His words were slurry like he was intoxicated.

I hummed in the back of my throat, knowing this wasn't a simple request I could grant. "I can't drop my glamour without having my hands free to summon it again."

His frown turned into a painful hiss.

"But maybe when we escape and are free—"

His snore cut me off, his head flopping onto the floor.

Oh. He was already unconscious. I patted his face lightly, hoping to rouse him, but he snored on. I left my hand on his cheek and softened it to cradle his jaw.

This man tested my patience but at the same time made me feel more alive than I had in my whole life.

In his sleep, he nuzzled into my touch, and my heart melted at his need for affection. The longer I stared, the more the shield around my heart trembled, my last defense dangerously close to shattering and leaving me bare. When he wasn't arguing, his face had an innocent, boyish look. And this urge to protect him, as he had promised, flowed through me too.

Because if I didn't, who else would?

Yes, I had grown up away from people, but I wasn't truly alone. Not like he was. I had Vivian with her spunky personality and tall tales, and humble Thatcher who was dutiful and serious, determined that I could survive on my own.

And Zee was left with his shadows. No friends or family.

Well, not anymore.

I leaned down to whisper in his ear, "Now you have me."

The scent of his sandalwood soap and leather polish teased my nostrils, and I couldn't help but chuckle that he smelled like a proper gentleman on his way to a masquerade. I snuck another whiff before pulling away. It was nice in a way I couldn't describe, like I wanted to take the aroma and wrap it around me like a warm blanket. Another layer of my defense chipped away as I smiled down at him.

The candlelight danced across his golden mask, alluring and tempting me to trace it with my fingers and see what he looked like behind the disguise. Of course I wouldn't. Now that I knew him, it felt wrong to go against his wishes and remove it. It violated the trust between us when another fragile snowflake had just begun to take shape.

He'd remove the mask when he was ready. It must be his choice, just like with the chalice. Otherwise, it wouldn't matter how many times I apologized—he'd never forgive me.

And I'd never forgive myself.

I gently eased his head to the floor, wishing we had more time together. Time to actually get to know one another under proper circumstances besides life and death. I tucked his hair away from his mask, and a soft smile stretched across his face, his lone dimple winking up at me.

“Sparrow,” he mumbled.

I sighed, a wistful sound even to my own ears. There went another layer of defense.

What was I to do? How did I stop myself from becoming attached? It was more difficult when he was asleep. At least when he was awake and arguing, I was too distracted to notice the many shades of blond in his hair, ranging from light wheat to shiny gold. I'd have missed the scar over his left eyebrow, so faint I would never have seen it if I wasn't this close. My eyes dropped to his mouth, and my stomach clenched. I absolutely wouldn't be wondering if his lips were as soft as they looked . . . and how they'd feel pressed against mine.

Kiss him?

Squeezing my eyes closed, I sucked in a breath.

No. Don't even let yourself think it.

Friendship was one thing, but a relationship? With Zee? He drove me crazy half the time, and the other half he was crazed himself.

I opened an eye to peek at him, groaning when he was still as attractive as before. Perhaps I just needed space. *Yes. Space*

and sleep to collect myself. Tomorrow I'd feel more like myself. There would be fewer thoughts of kisses and more thoughts of survival—because who knew what plans the king had for me this time. I had to remain focused on my task.

Rolling off of him, I rose to a stand, brushing out my skirts, then frowned at the awkward angle his limbs were in. It almost appeared as if he froze mid-stride on the stones. I sighed, knowing I couldn't leave him to sleep on the cold floor.

After a few useless attempts to drag him from the room, I decided it was time to ask for help. I rushed to the door and knocked.

Hanson opened the peephole. "It's just her. Open it."

When the door opened, I stepped back and watched Raimen's hand wave around midair to search for me.

"I need help," I said. "Can one of you come inside?"

The door slammed closed, and the peephole opened.

"What's going on?" Hanson demanded.

"It's Zee. He's fallen asleep on the floor, and I need help moving him to the bed."

The peephole slammed shut with a thud. It seemed the guards didn't believe me. Heck, I wouldn't believe me either if I hadn't watched him drink his tonic with my own eyes.

The peephole flew open again.

"You got him to drink . . . twice?" Hanson could barely get the words out.

"It's unheard of," Lyonel agreed.

"A miracle, really," Raimen added.

"Believe me, I know. Could one of you help me move him? He's too heavy on my own."

Hanson turned away. "It's your turn. Lyonel went last time."

There was a loud grumble before the door opened and Raimen was pushed inside. He scratched at his messy mop of red curls.

“Thank you,” I said.

He shrugged. “I didn’t really have a choice. Where is he?” He unsheathed a dagger from his belt and I squeaked, lifting my chained hands in the air. “Oh. This isn’t for you, miss. It’s a precaution should he wake early. Follow behind me, and if I say to run, you run, understand?”

For a split second I wanted to argue. But I doubted they’d believe me if I told them Zee drank the tonic on purpose. He wasn’t planning on attacking anyone.

But it was easier to just nod.

I dutifully followed behind him, watching as he eased slowly around the pillars and beckoned me to keep moving when the coast was clear. It was a little much, and I tried to keep my eye-rolling to a minimum.

When we entered the dining room, I pointed to Zee’s sleeping form. “See?”

“Stars above. You really did do it twice.” He edged forward and kicked Zee’s boot twice before jumping away.

“Would you quit lollygagging and help me move him already?”

“Right. Yes.” Raimen sheathed his dagger. “I’m only doing my job, miss.”

We lugged him to his bed and placed him on top. I shrieked when Raimen grabbed his mask.

“What are you doing?” I slapped his hands away.

“My . . . job? I have to check.”

“He doesn’t like it when anyone touches it,” I scolded.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, glancing at me from the side of his eyes.

I snatched the covers from the ground and flung them over Zee, pulling them up to his chin and tucking him in as one would a child. Poor thing. Had anyone tucked him in when he was young? Another crack sounded in my defenses.

I turned away and pulled up short to Raimen's mystified expression. "You tucked him in?"

"Um . . ." My cheeks heated. "I suppose I did."

He opened his mouth to ask another question when his eyes dipped down to my chest, and he swallowed his tongue. I stepped back at the level of his gaze.

"You, uh . . ." He fumbled with his words and tapped his collarbone. "You have something here."

The black feather I had tucked away had somehow wiggled its way out, poking through the top of my bodice. I quickly shoved it back in the fabric.

We stared at each other for an uncomfortable amount of time.

Raimen knows. How else could I explain a feather in my dress?

My eyes flicked to the opening in the bookcases over Raimen's shoulder, and I debated if I should run. *Run where?* I'm locked in a ballroom. I glanced nervously over my shoulder. And my esteemed protector was tucked under his covers snoring.

I balled my hands into fists, bracing myself for the oncoming attack.

"Well, uh, shall we return now? Unless you want to sing him a lullaby." An odd smile pulled at the corner of his mouth. Then he winked, shocking me speechless.

Was he the one that put the feather in my pie? Did that mean Raimen was part of the rebellion?

Before I could ask, he pressed his finger to his lips, shaking his head. Then he led us back outside into the guard's room and acted as if none of this had transpired. Raimen filled

the others in as I stared dumbly at his back and questioned my sanity.

That had actually happened, right? I hadn't imagined it?

Lyonel turned to smirk at Raimen. "You owe me three crowns. I told you she could do it."

"Next time I'll know to bet on her," Raimen said, laughing.

"But did you remove his mask?" Hanson asked, cutting straight to the point and killing the men's laughter.

"No," Raimen said. "I tried when I got there, and it was still stuck fast. The tonic must not be working correctly, or the king was misinformed."

Hanson patted my shoulder and nearly knocked me over. "Well, it's still better than anyone has done thus far. Twice he drank—it's unheard of. The king shall be informed of your progress. He might want to meet with you again."

That didn't sound like a reward at all, especially if I had to deal with Elise again.

My mind played through scenarios on the walk back to my cell. Was Raimen trustworthy? Should I run now and hope he didn't blackmail me? Should I wait to speak to Zee and formulate some plan for escape? I could use my blood and release him from his shackle . . . but would he do the same for me?

Last time I asked, it was a resounding no.

The smile on Gorgton's face when we entered the dungeon made me wish I had failed. It was frustrating that my success had now become his.

"That's my good girl. I knew you could do it."

He nodded in approval, and I turned to face the wall. Zee's offer of locking me away with him didn't seem like a terrible idea after all. At least I wouldn't have to deal with this oaf every day.

But then I wouldn't have the opportunity to walk through the halls each day and would lose the possibility of an escape.

“Goodnight, princess. Sleep well.”

He left me to curl into my usual ball in the corner, and the smell of sandalwood drifted up from my gown. The spicy scent calmed me with each inhale, reminding me of those few days where I felt less alone. I drifted off to sleep thinking of Zee.

I woke with a jolt, Gorgton rattling the bars of my door. “Get up. The king has summoned us.”

“What?” I yawned behind my hand. “It feels like I just fell asleep.”

“Quit complaining and get on your feet.”

Stretching, I blinked at him through sandy eyes. Was it daytime? My internal clock couldn't tell anymore.

In one of his moods, Gorgton unlocked the door and dragged me upright. He looped an arm around my waist, practically carrying me down the hall.

“Put me down this instant,” I commanded.

“Then walk.”

He tossed me ahead of him, and I landed in a run to avoid falling on my face. The other prisoners jeered at me, reaching their dirty hands through the bars, straining to catch a hold of my gown.

“Back, you vultures.” Gorgton removed the stick at his waist, cracking it across their knuckles and wrists. The tortured screams rang out through the space, overlapping with the screams of my past.

Covering my ears, I tried to fold in on myself, but Gorgton had other ideas and snagged my chain as he passed to drag me like a dog behind him. I fought the chain, my metal cuffs tearing at the flesh of my wrists. When he veered a new way down the path, I stumbled over my feet, stunned that we were venturing toward the royal chambers.

A grayish hue flooded the corridors, and the depressing patter of rain tapped against the windows. I searched for the sun through the cloudy windows, but it was no use. The overcast sky kept the sun's warm beams locked away.

We stopped in front of a grandiose door, carved with flames and swords. My fear spiked as all the worst-case scenarios filled my thoughts.

Had someone reported who I was? Raimen? Or a person from the kitchen?

Just as I wound my wrists back to slam them into Gorgton's head, the doors flew open, and my chin dropped to my chest.

"Bring her in, quickly now, before someone sees her," the king ordered.

I walked in on numb legs, my body overheating and a fine layer of nervous sweat coating my body. My hands trembled as I scanned the room, hoping to figure out why I was summoned.

Gaudy gold trim lined the walls of the room, clashing with the faded tan striped wallpaper that looked as if it were meant to brighten the room but now only made it more depressing. The oak wood floorboards gleamed, freshly polished, and we walked down the burgundy rug to where a four-poster canopy bed took up the majority of the space, the heavy velvet closed tight.

In front of the bed waited the king, dressed in his finery and too many rings to count. He sat perched in a wingback chair, his foot propped on a stool and bound with cloth strips so that only his pale toes were visible. An entourage of guards surrounded him, ones I had never seen before.

A wave of fury hit me at the sight of his shiny black hair, a reminder of who the real monster was. *Him.*

I was prepared this time when Gorgton brought me crashing to my knees. We bowed while I glared at him from behind my tangled hair.

“What was your name again?” King Ernesh asked by way of greeting.

“Fiona.”

Gorgton slapped the back of my head and growled into my ear, “Say ‘Your Majesty’ and avert your eyes. Show some respect when you speak.”

I ran my tongue over my bloodied lip, my thoughts darkening.

“Fiona, I hear congratulations are in order.” The king politely clapped his hands, unfazed at my reprimand. “Another dose of tonic has been taken? Wonderful, indeed. Bring her forward.”

Shoved from behind, I stumbled forward on my knees, scowling at Gorgton over my shoulder.

The king laughed, slapping his leg. “Yes, yes. She will do nicely. What spunk she has.”

It required every drop of my self-control to not demand answers and that we get on with why he summoned me. The question nearly bubbled out of me, but my fat lip reminded me of my place.

“What do you want as a reward? Your freedom?” He leaned down, his eyes bright. “How about something else?”

“I—I don’t know what you mean,” I said, then added, “Your Majesty.”

“What if I offered you a task to stay here as a servant in the castle? You’d be well rewarded for your services.”

My mouth opened and closed, the king’s request not making sense. Why was he giving me a choice?

“I only wish to return home, Your Majesty.”

“And where is this home? Hmm?”

“Mainland,” I lied.

“Which one of the five territories?” He leaned back in his chair. “Mistbrooke? Windcrest? Or perhaps . . . Bressal?”

“Bressal was destroyed in the Battle of the Bones long ago. That’s a trick question. It doesn’t exist,” I said. I held the king’s gaze, reinforcing my glamour. Everyone on the mainland believed this falsehood, so I should too. It was one of the greatest illusions my people created.

We made a whole kingdom . . . disappear.

“Well, this is unfortunate for you. Black hair is still punishable by death on this side of the sea. We can’t let you return home.” The king scratched his beard, eyeing me with suspicion. He lifted his index finger and drew a circle in the air. “Turn around.”

Standing, I kept my features neutral and slowly spun in a circle like a dog performing a trick.

“She’s as bland as the chicken we ate last week, but if he’s attached to her, then so be it.”

“Your Majesty?” I asked, glancing between the guards’ stoic faces.

“Rufus. Just one, where he can see it. Preferably the face.”

“Wh-what?” I stammered when one of the burly guards marched toward me with a sneer. “What did I do?”

“Nothing,” the king said, fluffing the fabric at his cuff. “You’re just a means to an end, I’m afraid.”

Rufus’s fist slammed into my cheek, knocking me off balance in an explosion of white light. Dizzy, I staggered to stay upright. Then suddenly the room came into focus, followed by an ache in my cheekbone and the metallic scent of blood.

“Well done. That will do.” He gestured at Gorgton. “Now go take her to him and pass along my regards.” Smiling, he sank back in his chair, turning to discuss his afternoon tea.

I’d been dismissed.

After respectfully bowing, Gorgton led me from the room, my fingers pinching my nose to stop it from bleeding. A red glaze covered my hands, and drops of it plopped on my dress, staining the once-elegant golden fabric.

So much blood.

“Are you even trying?” Gorgton snapped at me when the king’s doors clicked closed. “Why is the mask not off yet?”

“It’s not something I can do—he must choose to do it.”

Displeased with this answer, he yanked on my chains with a throaty growl and dragged me down the hall. He wheezed from the swift pace, stomping his boots with each step.

“Then make him want to do it. It’s as simple as that.”

Yes, so simple. I rolled my eyes and tuned out the rest of his lecture, longing for a quiet reprieve in my cell where I didn’t have to endure his company.

I startled at the turn down the familiar hallway, and even more so when we stopped under the tapestry. Gorgton pulled it back, and to my surprise, Raimen and Lyonel came walking out, chatting about the pig race they both placed bets on.

“Miss,” Raimen said, his eyes wide.

“A present from the king. Remind the monster what’s at stake if he doesn’t agree,” Gorgton said and passed me to Lyonel.

“What’s at stake?” I asked nasally and dabbed my sleeve against my nose.

“You,” Gorgton replied.

I frowned, feeling like one of Zee’s pawns on his chess table.

“There’s so much blood.” Raimen turned a shade of white, one breath away from fainting. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a handkerchief. “Here.”

“No,” Gorgton commanded. He waved away the cloth. “He must see her like this. It is as the king wishes. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Lyonel and Raimen repeated in unison.

“Well, go on.”

Raimen's gentle hand supported me under my elbow, the other protective on my back as he led me through the tunnel. "Careful, miss. Lean on me if you need to."

Where Raimen was soft-spoken, Lyonel was frothing mad at the sight of me.

"This is ridiculous. She's done nothing wrong. How could the king punish her?"

He stormed off down the passageway, I assumed to fill Hanson in about the situation.

"Easy steps," Raimen said. "We will figure something out."

My heart jolted in my chest.

"Who is 'we'?" I whispered under my breath.

"You know who, and now they know you exist. And you've lit a flame, princess. We're ready to *fight*."

The rebellion.

I swung my head to face him, my left eye almost swollen shut. "Y-you called me . . ."

"Stand tall. You still have to slay a monster," he said, then frowned as we walked into the room, his normal demeanor returning. "I've blood on my clothes now." He sent me a scathing look.

"I . . . sorry," I mumbled.

"Goodness me," Hanson hissed. "That's a black eye in the making. Of all the things you had to endure, this one burns something fierce. I'm sorry it happened to you. You've done nothing to deserve it, miss."

"Well, what do we do?" Lyonel gestured to me and grimaced.

"We do as the king requests. We send her in with the message," Hanson said.

Three pairs of eyes landed on me. All of them full of concern.

“What message?” I asked, the only one out of the loop.

Hanson sent me an incredulous look. “*You . . . you are the message. The king finally found something the monster wants. Now he might find a way to get him to heel.*”

I blanched, my stomach twisting at the idea of Zee being forced to the king’s demands. Was that what I had been offered to stay in the castle? Monster bait?

Hanson pointed to the door. “Go on, Raimen. Open it.” The command was half-hearted and weary.

They pushed me in and locked me inside. I stood there a few minutes, my face pulsing with pain. Now more than ever did I want to escape.

The room was quiet, just like it had been when I had left a few hours earlier.

It reminded me of when I first entered this room a week ago and how differently I felt now. The fear was gone, replaced with concern . . . and maybe something more.

Like I was in a trance, I walked through the rooms till I reached the bedroom to check on Zee. Still tucked in his bed, he snored blissfully unaware. I brushed a lock of hair from his brow, thankful he didn’t have to see me like this.

I moved toward the mirror, covering my mouth to silence the gasp that escaped. Raimen wasn’t kidding. Blood crusted around my nose and upper lip. Some had smeared in finger lines outward to my cheeks.

I grabbed a balled-up piece of paper, one of the many scattered from before, and spit upon the surface to scrub my face. Frantically I wiped the blood away before Zee could see. Not that I thought he’d be upset, but I didn’t want the king to have any power over him.

Especially when I had my own plans of convincing him to escape. I didn’t want him distracted.

When I was done, my face was pink, and the blood was replaced with smeared ink from the pages. Yet nothing could hide my red swollen eyes or fat lip. I took my hand and swiped

it across my face, shifting my glamour to cover the marks. It was easy enough, especially with a mirror. Like layers, I shifted my disguise to the top, hiding the bruises and wounds underneath.

“What are you doing?”

I spun around to spot Zee sitting up in bed, squinting at me.

“Why are you here? And what are you doing to your face? Wait . . . is that blood on your dress?” More alert, he flipped back the covers, only momentarily puzzled before charging across the room to me. “Why are you bleeding?”

“No reason,” I lied.

His shadow shot up faster than I expected, startling me back a step.

“Really? Back to lying again?”

“A bloody nose is no reason for concern, Zee.”

“I don’t know why you’re lying, but you are . . . and it makes me . . .” He turned to the mirror to stare at his monstrous reflection. Taller and hunched, his oversized features sat wrong on his face. I expected him to punch the glass as he had before, but this time he just sighed. “It makes me disappointed.”

His words wounded me as easily as Rufus’s fist, but I had to stick to my resolve. I curled my hands into fists, forcing myself not to comfort him. I had to be strong.

Zee couldn’t submit to King Ernesh, not because of me.

“Whether I’m bleeding or not is of no matter to you.”

I retreated a step. Yes, space was good.

“Is that what you think?” he growled.

He took a step forward.

“Yes,” I said crisply and held my ground. “We have a common enemy and need to work together in order to escape. But beyond that, nothing ties us together.”

“Nothing?” He crowded into my space with a smirk.
“Then why are you blushing?”

“It’s hot in here.” I fanned myself with my hands.

“Why is your pulse pounding in your neck?”

“Adrenaline,” I blurted.

“Why? Nobody is here but us?”

“Y-you frustrate me and tried to keep me here against my will. I have to be on my guard.”

At that he moved back a step and lifted his palms in the air.
“Nobody is stopping you from leaving. What other excuses do you have?”

I was already digging at the bottom of the barrel. So, I thought of Gorgon, of his smirks and commands, and voiced what I’d have said to him if I could.

“I hate you,” I said, holding his stare.

He tilted his head, the candlelight dancing on his mask. It was as if he heard the truth behind my words—what I was too afraid to admit.

That I didn’t hate him . . . not even a little bit.

A soft smile pulled at his mouth, too alluring and handsome. His dimple flashed, and I quickly squashed the rush of joy at seeing it.

Were we playing another game? We stood there staring at each other as my tower of lies started to wobble under his intense scrutiny. While he just . . . waited.

And somehow it was working. I shifted forward and still he didn’t move, his eyes locked on mine.

What am I doing? I had no idea.

My daydreams now drove me to behave as I would never dare. Was it the shadows of the candlelight? The way they shifted and swayed, cocooning us in a blanket of darkness so that the room faded away?

Tentatively, I brushed my thumb along the bristles of his jawline, his hair fair in color here too.

“Do you really?” His words were deep, rumbling from his chest and into me, making me realize I had somehow moved closer, pressing up against him.

“Do I what?” I slid my hand up his jaw, the tips of my fingers catching the silk fabric of the mask.

In a subtle gesture, he tilted his head up a notch, moving the mask out of reach. His large hand warmed my lower back. So gentle, it neither pushed me closer nor pulled me away. Nothing to give a hint of his true feelings.

“Hate me?” His breath caressed my cheek.

My eyes flicked to his before the meek word sighed from my lips. It was better this way. Safer. “Yes.”

His hand flinched on my spine. “Prove it.”

I must have had a moment of complete insanity as I lifted on my toes and pressed my lips into his. Soft, warm, and setting off every nerve in my body in a delicious heat I wanted to lose myself in. As if there was more to be discovered, an explosion between us that was yet to be ignited. If only I knew how to light the match . . .

It was one sided. His lips rested against mine, completely unresponsive.

I jerked back, embarrassed. He did nothing to stop me, his eyes narrowing in curiosity. Why had I done that? I’d never kissed anyone—or been kissed—in my life. Why would I think that now, with a masked prisoner, would be the perfect opportunity?

Shadows writhed on the pillar, subdued, its slender arms reaching for me.

I shuffled back, my cheeks heating more. His hand fell away, leaving a chill in the empty space where it had been. Like a coward, I darted for the door, wishing to curl into the corner of my cell.

To be anywhere but here with his knowing eyes on mine.

A foot from the safety line, Zee's arm wrapped around my middle, drawing me back to a solid wall of muscle. His chest rose and fell with quick breaths, his heartbeat vibrating through the layers of clothing between us—erratic and a bit crazed, just like him.

Maybe mine was the same, my pulse thumping in my neck.

The tightness of his grip loosened, his hand gliding across my side to my stomach, his fingers splayed wide. He held us together in silence, minutes passing before I heard the barest of whispers.

“Why did you do that?”

At a loss for words, I shuffled through my thoughts for the appropriate response. Because I sure couldn't speak the truth—that I had been thinking about it nonstop. Or that my lips still tingled with want to do it again.

He leaned over my shoulder, his lips brushing my ear as he spoke. “You can't kiss me and then run away.” His fingers tensed on my ribs before drawing me backward, slowly walking us away from the exit.

I turned part way to him, the heat of his breath fanning my cheek. “I do what I want.”

He made a sound of agreement in the back of his throat. “You do. I like that about you, little sparrow.”

Tingles danced across my skin, and I shivered.

“You still never answered my question—why did you kiss me?”

“Why did you *not* kiss me?” I countered, frustrated at his rejection. I spun completely around so we were face-to-face. I wanted him to look me in the eye when he said it, and I braced myself for the worst.

“When I kiss you, I don't want there to be confusion of who I'm kissing. No more magic.” His thumb traced my bottom lip, and I tried not to wince when he rubbed over my cut. “I want to see you—not your disguise.”

“I could say the same thing.”

Yet I still leaned into his touch.

“If I remove it, then I would no longer be, and I find myself becoming quite attached to a certain dark-haired prisoner. Make no mistake, there’s something between us, something that needs to be explored in private. Not in an empty ballroom with guards waiting on the other side and listening. Just us.”

The heat of his words, the promise in them, had my eyes fluttering shut. If I couldn’t kiss him . . . I at least wanted to savor all the delicious sensations that coursed through me at his nearness.

Our breaths mingled, and I could almost taste him in the air. The thrill of being so close ramped up the tension tugging between us. I wouldn’t pressure him if he wanted to wait. Perhaps his feelings for me weren’t as strong as mine were for him. For I feared my emotions were dangerously close to deeper affection than could ever exist in the reality we lived in.

And though he didn’t kiss me, he eased his body against mine, molding us together as if I had been made for him. His breath hitched, sounding as tortured as I felt.

Eyes still closed, I tilted my chin up, closer to the warmth of his skin. Maybe I could just pretend and imagine what could be in my mind.

Would that be enough? Or would I still feel empty without him?

“Agh. If you won’t kiss her, I will.”

A-Alizar?

My eyes popped open at the same time his lips pressed gently to mine, removing the last pesky inch of space between us. His hands threaded through my hair, grazing my scalp to keep our lips firmly together. Like I was a decadent dessert one savored, he took his time, stirring a desire within me. Sweet like icing, but addictive like chocolate.

I sank into him, overcome by the sensations sizzling through me. His touch erased my every thought and every fear until all that was left was the feel of his skin on mine.

My fingers had tangled into the fabric at his neckline, lost in the white folds of cotton. His heartbeat pulsed under my fingers, reminding me how the rhythm of the music had done the same thing. Did he hear a new melody beating between us?

Alizar caught the sigh from my lips as if desperate for anything I could give him. Maybe I understood that need more than he knew. After weeks of harsh treatment, his soft caresses on my cheeks were nearly my undoing.

Well, until he nibbled on my bottom lip, and I jerked away at the pinch of pain.

When I looked up at him, he looked like neither Zee nor Alizar, but a strange combination of both. His hooded eyes locked on my mouth, his breathing ragged. He touched a finger to his lower lip.

“I taste . . . blood,” he stated, his brows pinched.

The peephole opened with a snap in the distance, and the guards’ murmurings built into a panicked frenzy.

“It’s not like her. She never goes over her time,” Raimen whispered harshly.

Hanson grunted. “She’s not there.”

“I don’t see her either,” Lyonel added.

“Did he kill her? Do you see a body?” Raimen’s voice squeaked at the end.

“I’m here,” I shouted from behind the pillar.

Zee gritted his teeth, pulling me back into his embrace. “I demand more time.” His command echoed in the ballroom, silencing the guards’ conversation.

I tried not to smile at his request and failed. It gave me false hope for a life outside these shackles and prison cells. For a future I dared not dream . . .

“Can he do that?” Raimen asked.

Fabric rustled. “I don’t know,” Lyonel responded.

Zee snarled, “You can tell the king—”

“Thirty more minutes,” Hanson cut in.

“An hour,” Zee countered, “and she will dine with me.” His eyes dropped down to me, too dim to recognize the color. “It will be the first time I haven’t eaten alone.”

He was a prisoner the same as me. Didn’t the guards give him orders? Or was that the benefit of being a scary beast—he could use fear to get his way?

I pulled back, not wanting to cause more trouble. After my visit with the king, I hoped to not ever see him again. “It’s okay. If I have to go back—”

“Stay with me.” It wasn’t a command, but a plea. “I don’t want to be alone anymore. *Please.*”

And just like that, I passed the point of no return as the final wall around my heart crumbled.

The Arrangement



“Her? Dine with you? Absolutely not,” Hanson roared. “After what the king did to her, she needs to recuperate. She’s been through enough.”

Zee’s grip tightened and he spun me around, glancing at the stains on my gown. “Blood. Why are you covered in blood?”

As I opened my mouth, he cupped my face, bringing me close. Not in anger, but in fear.

“Don’t. Lie.”

“He offered me a position on the castle staff.”

“And you took it?”

“No.”

“So he was furious and took it out on you? And . . . you glamour’d it, didn’t you.” He pulled away from me, his brows lifting. “You said you wouldn’t trick me.”

“Tricking and protecting are two different things.”

His breath caught. “You’re protecting me? Why? Talk to me.”

“The king wants to force you to do something, and I don’t want to be the reason why you do it.”

“What did he say about me? Did he tell you who I am?”

“No, of course not. And just so you know, I’m not worried about that. Whatever you did before, that was in your past.

Being punished like this, locked away your entire life, it's truly unforgivable."

"Let the girl go," Hanson commanded in the distance.

As I turned to the voice, Zee grabbed my hands and pressed them to his chest. "How can I let you go after you said that to me? How can I live in the darkness now that I have seen—now that I've *felt* the daylight? Stay with me, little sparrow."

"I know you can hear me. If you don't release her, we will be required to come in and take her by force," Hanson snapped.

The temperature in the room dropped. A darkness so thick I couldn't even call it a shadow rose up like a wall behind him. It blocked the meager light streaming through the windows. Menacing, it reached the ceiling, the sudden movement extinguishing some of the candles around us.

"You will not touch her." A simple command laced with deadly threat.

"Emergency procedure," Hanson whispered, and the peephole slammed shut.

Zee grinned, a cool line cracked across his face. "I love it when they play games with me."

"Zee . . ." I blinked at him.

He slid his eyes to mine, nothing like himself. "When they're gone, it will be just us. You'd like that, yes?" He picked up a strand of my hair and rubbed his thumb over it. "I know it'd please me. Very much."

"Look at me. Control yourself. You don't need to hurt anyone."

"But that's how people listen to me."

I put my hand on his chest. "I heard you without it."

Something glistened in his eye. "So you did. Because we're the same. They, on the other hand, aren't like us."

"Us?"

He picked up my hand and brought it to his lips and kissed the back. “Follow me. I want to make sure you’re safe.”

“If I just left, then—”

“Those idiots strike first and ask questions later. They’ll probably wallop you before you can walk out the door.”

Draping my hand on his arm, he led me to the dining room.

“They know me, and despite them being my guards, they haven’t been cruel or aggressive.”

“Sometimes it’s the people closest to us that can wound us the most. We’re never expecting the attack when the knife goes in our back.”

I swallowed at those haunting words. Shadows slithered across his face, cloaking his features.

“You don’t think I would—”

He cupped my face. “No, I don’t. But I also don’t like all the lies between us. I want to know you. Your name, where you live, your family, your favorite foods, what you hate, what you’re scared of—whatever you can share, I’ll gladly listen.”

“It’s best that you don’t know.”

“Even your name?” he ground out, his patience tapering out.

I opened my mouth, ready to reveal the truth, but then I remembered the books scattered throughout the room. They were all old Ravenwood books that had been stored in here. He already knew I was an Illusionist. What if he discovered I was the lost princess too? What if he looked at me differently because I was royalty? King Ernesh had tortured him for years, which could have tainted his view of royals. What if my crown was the wedge between us? It didn’t matter that I didn’t want the responsibility.

I glanced at my feet, my mind made up. Let him remember me as I was—his sparrow.

“Keeping secrets is what has kept me alive so long.”

“This is ridiculous,” he barked and kicked a pile of loose papers into the air. “I said I’d protect you.”

The peephole clanked open.

“Miss, are you all right?” Raimen called out.

Zee turned a shade of scarlet, already at his limit. He bellowed across the room, “Go away.”

“We have to hurry. He’s having one of his moments,” Raimen relayed, and the peephole slammed shut.

I pointed at Zee. “This is why I can’t tell you the truth. You can’t control yourself. Remember what I said—you always have a choice. Are you a man or a monster?”

He scowled at me, gnashing his teeth together.

An ache of disappointment throbbed in my chest. My blood held the key to his freedom, one I had hoped to give before the guards whisked me away. When he was with me, he was different—gentler, kinder, and more protective. But he only held anger in his heart toward everyone else.

What would he do once he was free? Frowning, I scanned the tight lines of his face. Could he be trusted to make the right choice? Or would I be putting everyone in harm’s way?

I stepped back with a sigh. “Because I won’t stand by a monster. I’ve seen enough death and destruction in my life—and those memories still haunt me. But you can stop this. Use my mantra, ‘I am in control.’”

“I don’t *want* to be in control. When I’m angry, I feel alive. I feel free. There’s no cage that can hold me.”

For a man who had been imprisoned his whole life and lived alone in the shadows, I could only guess how much he desired that very thing. But I still hoped he’d choose a different path.

“I will not be a part of this.” I waved to the door. “No matter how strongly I feel for you—”

He let out a breath as if punched. “You do?”

“It’s beside the point. You make your own choices. I can tell you when you stray off the path, but I can’t force you back on. It has to be your choice. But that doesn’t mean I have to stay and watch you destroy your life. You will not find true happiness in others’ pain.”

His eyebrows lifted, and his arms flopped to his sides. “You make me happy.”

“But am I enough?” I whispered. I touched a hand to his cheek.

“You are to me,” Alizar whispered back. “Don’t leave me in the darkness.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, his mask digging into my skin. Magic sparked through my skin, wild like static electricity.

“I can’t do it all for you, Alizar. Or for Zee either. You have to be brave and take the step for change on your own.”

The door swung open, and multiple boot steps raced across the stone floor, echoing in the emptiness of the vast ballroom.

“Miss? Miss?” Raimen called out in a panic.

“Quiet, boy. Stay focused,” Hanson snapped.

I forced myself to step back, studying Alizar one last time. The desperation in his eyes was so painful it grabbed me by the heart, his expression so similar to Zee’s. I couldn’t tell them apart again. Or maybe they were both upset.

“I’m going to leave now. Please . . . don’t hurt anyone.”

His jaw worked, and he nodded. Eyes downcast, he stepped away, chanting under his breath, “I am in control.”

Both guards thundered around the corner of the dining room. Zee tensed, his jaw ticking at the intruders invading his territory.

“Move out of the way, miss,” Hanson ordered. “We don’t want to hit you by mistake.”

Hit?

“Hanson, please—don’t hurt him.” I said shielding Zee’s body with mine, my back to the guards. “He’s letting me leave without a fight. No violence is necessary. Right, Zee?”

Zee nodded, tucking his hands behind his back.

“We ain’t falling for the monster’s tricks again,” Hanson grumbled.

“Ignore them,” I told Zee. Then I mouthed a private message. “Don’t look at my face.”

He tilted his head.

“I mean it, don’t look. I have to alter my glamour, and I don’t want you to be upset.”

His eyes narrowed and I ducked my head, letting my hair shield me from his gaze.

Both Zee and Raimen knew I was an Illusionist, but Hanson didn’t. Another person equated to more risk, one I couldn’t take knowing he wasn’t part of the rebellion. Pressing my fingers on my cheek and eye, I let the magic course through my fingers, tickling as the layers of my disguise swapped places and my bruises were visible again.

“Sparrow?”

I turned from him to face the guards and lifted my hands in the air, my chains dangling at my elbows. “I’m coming.”

Both grimaced when they saw me, the long reeds of their blow darts pressed against their mouths. Not swords or arrows as I had originally thought. I swallowed nervously, then strode across the space to the guards.

“Sparrow?”

The fear in that one word almost had me turning back around to comfort him.

“Stay back, you fiend,” Hanson barked suddenly.

“Miss, a little faster, please.” Raimen held out a hand for me, wiggling his impatient fingers.

“What if she wants to stay?” Alizar asked, surprising me. “She is out of sight as she’d be in the dungeon. Why not leave her here?”

Hanson bristled. “There are rules.”

“I make the rules,” Zee retorted. The ripples of his anger sent a shockwave across the small space.

“The king makes the rules. You have no power with your mask.”

“So brave. *So stupid.* Come closer and see what little power I have as I strangle the life from your body.” Zee chuckled in excitement.

“Hanson,” I snapped. “You’re riling him up on purpose.”

The guard didn’t spare me a glance. Instead he aimed the reed in his mouth at Zee.

Before I could consider the consequences, I leapt in front of Zee as a dart shot out of Hanson’s reed. Pain pricked at my chest as a sticky heaviness spread through my veins like syrup, and I sank to my knees, my limbs unresponsive. I held on to my magic the best I could, but it was like trying to catch the sunlight in my fingers.

Don’t let them see the truth . . . don’t let them see me.

A guttural roar echoed far off in the distance, equal parts agony and fury, sounding as if someone were torn in two. Then it was blissfully silent.

How odd, I thought just before I blacked out.

Perhaps it was because my last thoughts were of sunlight that, when I awoke, I imagined myself bathed in the golden beams. Comforting, the light nestled around me like a heated blanket. I flipped my palm up and sighed, content at the light shining over my skin. It felt so real . . . too real . . .

Not a dream or an illusion—but real sunshine.

A surprised laugh erupted out of me as I held up both hands in the sunlight. How I missed the way it trickled through the leaves in the woods or glinted across the water. Hours I

used to sit by the river while I fished, dozing in the rays while I waited for the fish to nibble.

I paused. But today the woods were silent. No whistling winds, rustling creatures, or rushing water.

Because I wasn't outside.

I blinked, a slow motion as if weights hung off my lashes. Where was I? Could this be a dream after all? My mind was hazy, taking longer for a single thought to form.

Confused, I stared at the three stained glass windows and rubbed my eyes. These were Zee's windows. The ones in his ballroom. Light streamed through the colored glass, illuminating the starburst pattern in vibrant colors in the upper half of the windowpanes. Below the dazzling colors was plain glass, a bit dusty from neglect.

Sore, I rolled my shoulders and tried to gain my bearings. But then the weight around my waist shifted, nearly startling me from the chair I was sitting in. I tensed. The *lap* I was sitting in.

Zee's lap.

In an instant, I was awake and acutely aware that I was wrapped in his arms in a large wingback chair. It was positioned in his music room so it could face the windows, and the yellow rays pooled around us. The room was brighter in the daytime, less spooky without the shadows and candles. We must have been here awhile, sleeping in each other's embrace.

His nose was pressed into my hair, steady puffs of air swaying the black wisps at my brow. Relaxed in sleep, his head rested on mine and his soft lips parted to reveal his straight teeth. Vulnerable but devastatingly handsome, he was so close that I was almost tempted to sweetly kiss his cheek.

What had I missed? I didn't remember falling asleep.

When I tried to get up, he stirred, pulling me into him and stretching at the same time.

"Sparrow?" he asked, his voice brittle from sleep.

"Zee?"

He hummed, content. “You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“What happened? Where’s Hanson? Raimen?” I scooted away from him, troubled. “They would’ve never allowed me to stay.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.” His topaz eyes, the color finally distinguishable in the daytime, softened as he scanned my face. Until they caught on my cheekbone.

“What?” I pressed a hand to my cheek and hissed, remembering King Ernesh’s message. The message I had hoped to keep from Zee, but I hadn’t altered my glamour back.

“Oh, no.” I tried to turn away, but he caught my chin.

“I already saw. Why did you hide it from me?” he whispered.

“I didn’t want you to be forced to do something you didn’t want to do.”

“Force me to do what?”

“I don’t know. The king said I was a message for you.”

“Ah.” His eyebrows lowered. “I heard it loud and clear.”

“And?”

“And I want to go back to sleep.” He tucked my head to his chest and settled back against the chair with his chin on my head.

“Zee,” I chastised, then whacked his chest. “Do not go to sleep.”

He grunted but remained still.

“What happened to the guards?”

“Gone.”

“Gone?!” Morbid thoughts raced through my mind, and an icy chill crawled up my spine despite the sun’s rays. Had he . . . killed them?

“Don’t fret. They are alive and will be back tomorrow. For now, we have today together.” A chuckle rattled in his chest,

and he traced a lazy finger up and down my arm.

Out of patience, I wasn't in the mood for his idle chitchat. I grabbed the fabric of his shirt and shook him. "Explain what happened."

He peered down at me with sleepy eyes. "I made an arrangement."

"For what?"

"For your safety."

"Zee . . . no, no, no—" I dropped my forehead to his chest.

"It's all right. Alizar suggested it, and we're both in agreement."

I jerked back. "What about me? Don't I have a say? I don't want that wretched king to get whatever he wants."

"It was a mutual exchange. We both got something we wanted." His fingers played with the ends of my hair. "You're not going to let me sleep, are you?"

"What did you trade?"

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Can I at least have my breakfast before you interrogate me?"

"How can you think of food at a time like this? Please, I'm worried about you." I pressed a hand to his arm. "The king will try to trick you, so don't trust him. The Taika kingdom is built on lies. On the death of my people—Illusionists. I don't want anything to happen to you too."

"Don't worry about me, little sparrow. Nothing will happen." He stilled. "But it sounds like you've dealt with him before. Does he . . . know you?"

I bit my lip, contemplating how much truth I should tell him. "He killed my parents—my whole family, really. For years I had nightmares, sometimes even when I was still awake. Flashbacks of fire and screams that I couldn't escape . . . sometimes I still have them. It's why we live out in the woods far away from this castle, so the king won't find me and finish what he started."

His arms wrapped around me so fast, I wasn't prepared. Nor was I prepared to see the wet puddles I left behind on his shirt. How many tears had I cried over the years for my family? For the time we'd never have? There shouldn't be a drop left inside me.

"My sparrow." He made soothing noises as he rubbed my back.

And I wrapped my arms around his neck, desperate to hold on. I only had so many people left in my life.

"He's taken everything I've ever cared about," I mumbled into his neck, inhaling his sandalwood scent. "What if he takes you too?"

"He doesn't want to hurt me," Alizar said. His words were like a splash of calming water. "And I got a better deal out of the bargain."

"I don't care how many black eyes he gives me, whatever cruel and vile request he has for you—don't do it."

"But I care what happens to you." He cradled my face and brushed the stray tears with his thumbs. "It's all I care about."

My heart soared just as it had in my dream. He smiled down at me, so charming with his dimple.

In a single heartbeat, Alizar and Zee blended together in a seamless glance, their mannerisms overlapping. They were becoming more alike than they realized.

"Did you like your present? I wanted to make sure you'd wake up in the warm glow of sunshine. Did you?"

"I did. Thank you. I've missed it."

His lips twitched. "Good. Are you hungry?"

It dawned on me, more slowly than I cared to admit, that for this entire conversation I had been sitting on his lap as if it were a common occurrence between us. My cheeks heated as I sprang off of him and nearly tangled over the hem of my gown.

He was there, righting me before another blunder could occur.

“Are you sure you’re all right? It might take time for the sedation to wear off.”

Hanson’s face reemerged in my mind, his weapon at his lips and his sights set on Zee.

“The darts,” I said, nodding as I remembered. “Besides feeling groggy, I’m fine.”

He touched my cheek just below my bruise. “You keep protecting me without hesitation. Why?”

“Because I—”

Love you? My mind filled in the gap with words more powerful than any magic I could summon. How could I possibly love him so quickly? Barely a week’s time, but the situation between us had entwined us so closely that I was aware of him, his mannerisms and emotions, as if they were my own. I longed for his freedom as much, if not more than, my own.

Goodness. Was that what love meant? Sacrificing yourself for the sake of someone else?

He stared at me, still waiting for me to finish my sentence.

“I don’t think you’re the monster everyone claims or as terrible as you imagine yourself to be. You push others away because deep down, you’re still the same lonely child who’s seeking affection but too frightened to admit it.”

His jaw ticked, and he glanced away. “Is that how you see me?”

“That doesn’t mean you’re weak.”

“Then what does it mean?”

“It means you need someone . . . you need me.” Liquid warmth spread through me at his stare.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“You better get used to saying that,” I joked.

A mechanical grinding sounded on the other side of the bookcases, echoing off the walls and furniture. Startled, I stepped closer to him, my palm flat on his chest. He covered my hand with his own and fought a smile.

“Don’t be frightened. It’s only our breakfast. As much as I want to stay and watch you bask in the sunlight, I’m famished. You’re in for a treat. I’m sure whatever has been delivered will be far better than whatever drivel they’ve been serving in the dungeon.”

Draping my hand over his arm, he led me to the dining room as if we were attending a royal dinner. He even helped me to my seat, sliding into the side of the table not splintered into a million pieces. He pulled back a burgundy drape from the wall where a small window hid in the woodwork. Flipping the latch, he opened it and pulled out a tray piled with pastries, meats, and cheese. My nose wrinkled at the large boiled eggs in metal cups, their spotted black shells cracked open. The eggs were unnatural in color, almost green with bold veins in the whites.

I slid the strange egg in front of me back to him. “I’ve never seen so much food. Do you always eat this much?”

“A monster needs his strength.” He snapped out his napkin and placed it on his lap.

“Some monster you are.”

He stabbed a sliced pear and pointed it at me. “I told you I could be a gentleman.”

I laughed. “That remains to be seen.”

“I guess I have all day to sway your opinion.” He bit the fruit off his fork, eyeing me with interest. “Speaking of which, what do you want to do today? I have shelves of books you can read, chess if you actually pay attention to the rules for five minutes, or I can play my new song for you.”

“Zee,” I said, eyes downcast. “This doesn’t feel right. How long do we have before they take me?”

“Midnight.” His fingers tapped the table.

“We can’t spend the next few hours pretending we’re not prisoners and that you didn’t make some trade to ruin your life. It’s not going to do either of us any good. Can you at least tell me what you got in return besides a day in my company? Nothing would ever be worth—”

“I bargained for your freedom. You’re going home tomorrow.”

Violet Eyes



My fork clattered to my plate. “You’re letting me go?”

“Yes. Someone once told me if you . . . cared for something, you should let it go. So that’s what I’m doing. Then when you’ve left . . . perhaps you’ll think of me fondly and not as the monster you first met.”

“You think that I’d forget you?” I asked incredulously. His eyes sprang wide when I jumped to my feet and rushed around the table to throw my arms around him. “I could never.”

He pulled me to his lap, clinging to me in despair. Squeezing his eyes shut, he took breath after shuddering breath, pained. Unable to fight it, he burrowed into my neck for relief.

My heart ached for him—for this raw moment where he let his guard down and let his sorrows overtake him. I held him close, combing my fingers at the nape of his neck. Whatever he needed, I would give him.

And right now, he needed to not feel alone.

“You’re making me reconsider the letting go part. Just thinking about it . . . hurts. I don’t like it,” he whispered.

“I know.”

He rocked us, whether to comfort himself or me, I wasn’t sure. But I took solace in his embrace either way.

“Zee?”

“Yes?”

“What if . . . what if I let *you* go?” I pulled back, grinning at my solution. “I could remove your cuff with my blood—it has magic in it. I overheard the guards discussing that it was the only way you could break free.”

“No,” he said with a crisp finality.

“Why not? With your freedom, you could easily smash your way out of this castle. We could leave together.”

His throat worked. “But then they’d know you’re an Illusionist. It’s just as you said. The king would send hunting parties after you until you were under his command . . . or dead.”

“Then we’ll escape to the mainland. Magic has been legalized there, and nobody would be able to tell if I’m human or an Enchanter.”

“Illusionists are criminals there too. There’s no safe place for you. This is the best I can do.”

“Or—or we can get on a boat and just sail away—*anywhere*—as long as it’s far away from here. Wherever you want, just as long as we can be together.”

Now I was the desperate one, digging through lackluster plans like a dog on the hunt. After weeks of attempting escape, my priorities had shifted without my knowledge. I didn’t want to return to the forest now that I had met him. Not now that I knew what it felt like to truly live. To be forced to say goodbye to his comforting embrace and the tingle of his kisses, or the joy I felt in his company and his quick wit that made me laugh . . . it was enough to scream at the unfairness of it all.

Here I thought he needed me . . . but maybe it was I who needed him.

He sighed against my skin, a desolate sound. “Please, no more talk of running away. We can’t. I couldn’t live with myself knowing I didn’t do everything in my power to try to protect you. I don’t ask for much. Only today. Memories that I can hold on to when I feel myself breaking into two. You will be the cement that holds me together.”

I didn't want to become a memory or part of his past—my heart clenched in agreement. But if that was his desire, I couldn't force him to stay with me.

Who could love an Illusionist? my mind reminded me. I sighed, already knowing the answer.

“Of course. I didn't mean to upset you.”

“Now, I have one more trade to make with you.”

“Another trade?” My fingers sought the lines of my brand. I didn't know if I could handle any more of Zee's surprises.

He twisted a silver prong of his fork so it bent sideways from the rest. “I will release you from your chains, but you have to promise to put them back on before the guards return. Remember, they can't know who you are.”

I was on my feet before his next breath, offering up my chains.

“You didn't promise, little sparrow,” he said, raising a brow.

I crinkled my nose, not liking that part of the arrangement.

“Can I counter with another offer?”

“No. Promise, or you can wait until tomorrow when the king releases you.”

Shifting from one foot to another, I grumbled a quick, “I promise.”

He set to work, wiggling the fork in the keyhole until the metal clicked and my chains fell to swing by the chain around my waist. While he worked the second lock by my spine, I stretched out my arms wide, my shoulder blades screaming from lack of use.

When the second lock clicked, the metal clanked onto the floor in a circle around my feet. I stepped out of the ring and took my first calming breath I had in a long time.

I am free.

Zee threw the fork on the table, the ends stabbing through the broken slat of wood with a thud. “Remember, you have to put them back on when they get here.”

“I will.” But I was only half listening, lifting my hands to the cobwebs dangling from the chandelier like I could reach them. Magic nipped at my fingertips, coursing through the air as if it missed me. I knew I had missed it.

Then I remembered Alizar’s request, the one he had asked me for numerous times. I turned to Zee, rolling my shoulders.

“Do you trust me?” I asked.

“I trust you more than I do myself.” He shrugged as if there was nothing he could do about it.

Cupping his cheek, I smiled up at him. “And I trust you—both of you. Don’t panic like you did last time.”

“Panic?” He frowned, no longer amused.

The shadow on the pillar behind him squirmed for attention, but I couldn’t spare it a glance or I’d miss Zee’s reaction. Slowly, I lowered my glamour. My muscles relaxed, fatigued from weeks of carrying the burden of holding my disguise in place.

His lips parted on a silent exhale, and his hands dropped to his sides. The silence built between us, and I wondered if I’d made a mistake. He was used to seeing me a certain way—it was too much change.

I twisted my fingers together.

“You wanted to see me. Well, Alizar did.”

“Your eyes . . .”

“Yes?” Why was I so nervous? Each puff of air sputtered out of me like I had raced across the countryside, while my heartbeat thundered in the wake of his answer.

“Violet like I remembered. So vivid and breathtaking.”

I let out a sigh, some of my nerves dissipating.

“I can’t believe you were hiding this lovely face away.”

“Says the man in a golden mask.”

He reached out to trace the curves of my skin, his eyes darkening in unabashed desire. “I wish you didn’t have to use your glamour again. These lips were meant to be kissed.”

Then his mouth was on mine, striking the match between us. We clung to each other, two lonely people who had found a connection in the darkness. Both of us had seen through each other’s facade to the radiant soul underneath.

My fingers plunged into his silky hair, somehow not close enough. The fabric of the mask rubbed against my skin, the perfect combination of friction and magic that made my knees tremble. To hold me steady, his hands slid around my back, gliding up to cup my shoulders, plastering me to him. His scent washed over me, just as intoxicating as his heated kisses.

Nothing existed but him and me, swirling the notes of an internal melody of our making . . . one that branded on my heart.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you,” he groaned between kisses. “I can’t stop, nor do I know if I want to.”

Zee kissed like a man starved, with a reckless hunger, whereas Alizar’s kisses were reverent, each one precious as if it were our last. The fire I had hoped for was now an inferno, hot flames threatening to consume us both.

Finally, I had to pull back for air, gulping in deep breaths as his lips trailed along my jaw.

“Zee . . .” I could barely get his name out.

“We can do this all day if you like. I don’t mind.”

I laughed, twisting with ease from his grip. He held his palm out, mesmerized, letting a section of my hair glide through his fingers as I moved away.

Eyes bright, he watched me carefully, as if he was planning to pounce on me any second.

“If you’re pleading for us to run away together, you make some valid arguments.” he said huskily. “This was quite the counteroffer.”

Laughing again, I shook my head. “No, I wasn’t. Honest. I think I was a little lost, too, and I’m not one to lose control.”

He grinned, appearing too pleased with himself. “Is that so?”

I jumped back before he could wrap me up in his arms and kiss me senseless again. The time we had together was precious—and I wanted to give him something more to remember me by.

The others could believe what they wanted about Illusionists. But Zee? I wanted him to know the truth by experiencing it himself. Then it wouldn’t matter what lies the king spoke or what was missing from the history books.

We weren’t monsters.

“If I show you something, you must promise not to be frightened of me.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Frightened? Of you?” The deep rumble of his words quickened my heart. “Impossible.”

“Close your eyes.”

His brows pinched together over his mask, but he obeyed and stood still.

I raised my hands high, summoning the memories of my home and the forest and materializing it around us. Gone were the bookcases, now replaced with thick oak trees covered in soft patches of moss on the trunks. The cold stones shifted to mounds of grass, dotted with bluebells and dandelions like I remembered. The chandelier disappeared into the white fluffy clouds and the blue sky stretched out as far as I could see. Harder were the other sensory details: the whistling wind through the branches, a flap of a bird’s wings in the distance, and finally the earthy smell riding on the wind.

Zee turned his face at each new illusion, his features scrunched in confusion. Yet he kept his eyes closed, trusting me.

Like a painter, I spun in a circle, tweaking details until they were to my liking. Until they were home.

“All right, open your eyes.” I held my breath and waited for his reaction.

Slowly he opened them, his whole body stiffening as he glanced around. He turned in a circle.

“Is this real?” he asked.

“It’s an illusion.”

Wind rushed by us, stirring the leaves in the trees and shaking a few from the branches. Zee held out a hand, catching a brown one. “It feels real.”

“I know, but I can’t hold a complex illusion for too long. It weakens me. Little glammers are one thing, like my face, but an entire room?” Sweat dotted my brow.

“Where are we?” He touched a tree, a chunk of bark missing in the shape of a moon.

“Whistle Thorn Woods. You said you’ve never been, so I thought I’d show you. Isn’t it enchanting?”

“You live in these woods, right?”

“Yes, see where you touch?” I pressed my hand over his and into the moon-shape carving. “These markings are from when Thatcher was teaching me how to navigate the woods. It’s similar to a map.”

“And if I followed these moons, I’d find your house?”

“You’d find the stream where we catch our fish and gather our drinking water. If you follow the three lines, then you will find our cottage. They’re hidden in the bark and harder to see.”

“Three lines?”

“One for Vivian, one for Thatcher, and one for me—my family.”

Tension released from him as he murmured, “Family.” Almost as if it were an unknown word he had never experienced.

“Ready?” I asked him.

He turned to look at me, puzzled.

I raised my hands to the blue skies, gathering details of our cottage, then dropped my hands with practiced speed, like removing a cloth from a piece of furniture. The woods before us shifted into the dirt pathway in front of our tiny cottage. My eyes watered at the memory, and my breath hitched. I wished more than anything that this wasn't a figment of my magic, but rather that I was home again.

"I have no words," Zee mumbled, his eyes wide beneath his mask.

Nausea rolled in my stomach, and I fought through it, knowing I had pushed myself too fast after such a long break from using my magic. But I didn't care, forcing my cramped muscles to relax. *I can do this. I am in control.*

Zee didn't notice, his hands brushing through the blades of grass in fascination. "There are even ants. I would've never known this wasn't real. Are all illusions this strong?"

I winced and plastered on a smile. "Depends on your bloodline."

His head swiveled toward me. "Sparrow? Are you all right?"

"It takes a lot to hold it in place. I'm out of practice."

"Then stop. You've shown me enough."

"No, I can do it." I sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. "Do you want to sit in the sunshine? Or dip your toes in the river?"

"I'm tempted to see inside where you live. What knickknacks—"

I changed the illusion to the interior of our cottage and leaned against the wooden wall for support. The tiny space didn't offer much room. Zee bumped into a stool and quickly righted it.

A circular table hogged most of the limited space in one corner of the room, along with a small fireplace with a small stack of freshly chopped wood. Next to that sat a crate with dishes and pans and another one with knives and weapons. A

water barrel held our fresh water that we ladled out for drinking and cooking. In another corner were our blankets and bedding on the floor. I slept with Vivian at night, and Thatcher snored away during the day.

I didn't think it odd or unusual until I saw the pity on Zee's face.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Since I was around five. It's quite cozy with the fire lit."

He nodded and crouched at the bedding on the floor, pulling at the worn cotton sheet. On the wall directly behind him was our Ravenwood banner, nailed into the wood.

In a panic, I released my illusion, the weight that had been pressing into my shoulders vanishing as did the interior of my cottage. Perhaps I wasn't quite ready to share everything with him. What if he looked at me differently? I didn't want to change the delicate beginnings of our relationship.

Now Zee crouched in front of an empty space, blinking in confusion. He turned to me to ask, "Are you all right? It doesn't hurt you to use your magic?"

"No. It's just strenuous to hold. Sorry if I scared you."

"I've never experienced an illusion before. Can you see it too?" He stood, tapping his lip as he walked over.

"I have to force my defenses to lower to see my own illusion, otherwise I always see the truth."

"Like how you see my real appearance?"

"Yes, which is why I found your mirror so odd."

He barked a laugh. "It was a gift from the king to show me that my darkness was visible on the outside. Like I could forget."

"That seems . . . cruel."

"Yeah, well, it's complicated. I've not been as even-tempered as I am now."

I laughed at his joke, but he didn't join in.

“I’m serious. Apparently, solitude has done me wonders—even if I hate it.”

“Why were you doing those things? To the townspeople?”

He touched his mask, frowning. “I’d like to blame the mask. To say it forced me to do those things, but that’s not true. It gave me an immense power, when before I was weak . . . sickly even.” He ducked his head. “I wasn’t supposed to live, and for years my father searched for some cure to save me. Herbs, medicines, enchantments, nothing worked until he purchased a chalice from an elderly woman on the mainland. Mixed with the right tonic and juices, it was supposed to have healing effects. Something about the chalice being formed from crushed pearls—I don’t know.”

He sighed and started to pace from the door to the door in the dining room. “But there was an exorbitant price tag for purchasing the chalice, one my father refused to pay. Yet, he took the chalice anyway, agreeing to the terms of the one-year arrangement when he already knew he had no plans of fulfilling his end of the bargain. This enchanted item was supposed to heal me—and at first, it did. I grew stronger and could finally walk and talk, simple things I couldn’t do on my own before. Meanwhile, my father gloated to anyone who’d listen how he swindled an elderly woman, too old and stupid to do anything about it. But then she returned in the night while I was sleeping. How? We never knew. She put the mask on me and . . . Zee was born.”

Zee? Sure enough, his shadow slanted across the stone like normal. How long had I been talking to Alizar and not noticed? They were beginning to swap more often now, so it was hard to tell.

“The mask brings me strength, more so than I can handle. I was restless, jittery, lashing out, and then eventually breaking out. The more I revolted, the more I was beaten and chained. I would’ve normally listened, but Zee, he was furious at being forced into a weakened state, and he fought back . . . and I—I—I let him.”

I had been giving him space, letting him speak his piece, but at this, I rushed over to place a supportive hand on his back.

“Don’t comfort me. I willingly let Zee do these things. I should have stopped him, but after a while, he only grew stronger and more uncontrollable, so that when I finally did have the courage, it was too late. There was nothing that could stop him . . . until you.” His eyes drifted from the floor to me. “You’re the only one who’s gotten through to him.”

“Me?”

He threw his hands in the air suddenly with a groan. “Why do you have to say it like that? You make it sound like I acted on my own.” His shadow flared up like an angry cloud. He stormed from the dining room to stop in front of the mirror. He pointed at his reflection. “You blame me for everything. But you were right there with me, reveling in each misdeed and inch of freedom I stole. You are no different from me because I am made from you, oh high and mighty Alizar. So don’t cast yourself as the victim so you can win her over. You heard her—she sees the truth—she sees you.”

His fist shot out, slamming into the mirror with such force that it rippled the liquid glass almost out of the mirror. Silver swirls blurred his image until the waves finally calmed enough to see his scowling face.

“I hate you,” Alizar spat at his reflection.

“Likewise,” Zee agreed.

I stood frozen, watching from the edge of the room at an argument between one person and the other inside of him. That warning bell inside me told me to flee, that this was too much for any sane person to handle. But it was too late. I was caught up in the middle of them whether I wanted to be or not. My heart couldn’t be altered with the snap of my fingers.

My eyes fell to the floor, and I wondered if maybe I was a little crazed as well. Who else would fall in love with a man like this?

Me.

I closed the space between us and wrapped my arms around him, my cheek resting on the tense muscles of his back. After a moment, he relaxed, his hands covering mine.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” Zee said. “I hope I didn’t scare you. Alizar and his big mouth.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad he told me. It took courage for him to share.”

“Thank you,” he whispered quietly. “Would you be upset if I played for you on my piano? The music soothes me when my heart is heavy.”

“Of course.”

I didn’t know how much time had passed, but I watched the golden hues melt away and the stained glass windows turn dark as he played through his list of songs. Emotion flickered on his face as if each note told a story, one that only he could hear. He arched his back, his whole body swaying as his fingers climbed up the notes. It touched on a bit of obsession, his eyes closed for portions of the song as he lost himself to the music.

And I lost myself in him.

I didn’t mind it at all. I had given him a piece of myself, and this was him doing the same.

We missed dinner, but we didn’t care. We sat on the floor by his piano as he listened to stories of how I grew up in the forest. The first time I caught a fish and fell into the river. The first time I conquered my fears by bravely climbing a tree. How I learned the different calls of the birds so I could mimic signals to Thatcher and Vivian should there be trouble.

“And what does trouble sound like?”

I leaned back, pushing the air through my throat to mimic the deep raspy caw of the raven.

“A raven?!” he said, recognizing it immediately. “An odd choice.”

“They are actually intelligent creatures. My mother had trained hers to pick flowers for her.” A wave of sadness hit

me, and I touched the invisible raven on my wrist, using the raised bumps as a guide since the lines now matched my skin color. “I had hoped to train one to bring me sweets, but it brought me bugs instead.”

He chuckled. “Not quite the same.”

“No, and you have to make a big deal that you like their gifts. I had to touch a cockroach once.” I shivered.

He laughed at that, his arm sliding over my shoulders. “I shall remember to not mistakenly bring you bugs instead of treats.”

I smiled at him, my heart filling.

He moved in the direction to kiss me, but the peephole slammed open, stopping us both.

“Miss? I’m coming to collect you now,” Lyonel said, his voice shaking with nerves.

The heaviness I had been hoping to avoid pressed into my chest as I realized my time with Zee and Alizar was up.

“So, this is goodbye,” I whispered.

Zee didn’t respond. Instead he rose to fetch my chains.

I summoned my glamour back in place but left the bruises visible. When Zee returned, he flinched, unprepared for the switch. I let him wrap the chain around my waist and then loop my cuffs through it.

“I’m sorry,” he said and clicked the ice-cold chains into place.

“I know you’re protecting me. Thank you.”

He swooped in to claim my lips again, a frantic mixture between their kisses that I couldn’t tell who was who. Or maybe it was both of them. I pulled back when the door opened, knowing the guards would be here soon. My heart ached at the thought of leaving, the sensation similar to a hundred knives piercing my flesh.

“I’ll miss you,” I said softly.

“There aren’t enough words to say how much I will miss you. How does one say goodbye to food, water, or air? I need all these things to live . . . just like I need you. I’ll have to learn how to survive somehow.”

His lips and cheeks trembled, his eyes shining like glass behind his mask. As if it took him extra strength, he pushed me away from him and stepped back into the shadows of the candles.

“Don’t come back for me,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “I’m not worth it.”

Then Lyonel clamped a hand on my arm and dragged me from the maze of bookcases while I fought back tears.

Champion



I didn't want to show weakness, but it was impossible not to.

With an iron hold, Lyonel escorted me from the ballroom for the final time. I captured each detail in my memory the best I could. The way the candlelight flickered on the walls, the elongated shadows that once reminded me of ghosts but now made me think of Zee and Alizar. The air that had a forgotten smell, like old books in a library.

I glanced over my shoulder as Lyonel dragged me out, my heart breaking that Zee was nowhere in sight. He was already gone.

“Are you all right, miss? He didn't hurt you, did he?”

“No,” I replied, sniffing. “He was a perfect gentleman.”

Then the tears leaked out the corners of my eyes, and for once, I let them stay where they were. Numbness filled me, reminding me how alone I was, and was quickly followed by regret.

I never told him how I felt. Why hadn't I said something?

Right before we entered the tunnel, I heard it. Soft at first before crescendoing into one of his ballads. The music from his piano had me spinning back to the door.

My song. He was playing my song.

“Miss, please.” Lyonel yanked on my arm. “I don't want to have to carry you.”

I closed my eyes, remembering the first time I had heard it. Today, the melody had more than feeling, like pieces of himself were attached to each note he played.

It was more than beautiful—it was a word that didn't exist.

“I'm sorry, miss, but we have to keep moving.” There was no fight in me when Lyonel scooped me into his arms. I kept my eyes on Zee's door as long as I could, my ears straining for the music until it was only audible in my mind.

Lyonel carried me all the way back to the dungeon while I tried to right my off-kilter emotions. I should appreciate this gift Zee has given me, but the hollow ache refused to subside.

As we entered through the main door, Gorgton jumped from his stool and stomped up, almost appearing concerned about me.

“Did the monster hurt her?” Gorgton asked, scanning my face.

“It's like she's in a trance. Magic, maybe?”

Gorgton snapped his fingers in front of my nose. “Princess?”

My eyes shifted to his, and I held his stare as my grief morphed into a hot fury at his presence.

That he was here and Zee was not.

When he snapped his fingers again, I swung my chained hands up under his chin to shove him away from me. He stumbled back into one of the prison cells and into the awaiting hands of the prisoners. Their dirty hands and arms coiled around him, holding him in place with delirious glee. One arm slithered around his neck, Gorgton's mouth opening and closing in panic.

His face turned a dark shade of plum, contrasting with the whites of his eyes bulging and the trickle of blood on his face. The other prisoners cheered around me, banging on their bars in excitement.

But I still felt nothing. No satisfaction in him receiving his just dues.

“Sir,” Lyonel shouted. He set me on my feet and yanked the stick from Gorgton’s waist, thrashing at the prisoners’ arms until they released him.

Gorgton stumbled forward, panting and wheezing. The deathly glare he sent me stirred nothing inside me. Then he lunged, growling like a madman.

Lyonel intercepted him by stepping in front of me. He wiggled the stick as a reminder. “She is to be released, sir, without further injury to her person. It’s the king’s orders.”

Gorgton’s lip peeled back, and he spit blood on my dress. “You little wench. I don’t know what you did, but you’re dumber than I thought if you actually think you’re leaving. This prison is my domain. I’m king around here . . . and I say you stay. Do you hear me? You belong to *me*.”

I turned away, done with him and the sound of his voice, to return to my cell.

“I’m going to break her scrawny little neck,” Gorgton growled just before the whack of metal on flesh. He cried out, his screams blending in with the prisoners’.

“She is not to be touched by royal command,” Lyonel barked. Soon he was close behind me, Gorgton’s keys in his hand. Unlocking my cell, he held it open and waited for me to enter before shutting it and leaning against the bars defiantly.

“What are you doing?” Gorgton asked.

“I’m staying here to protect her. If she has more bruises on her than yesterday, then we’ll all be reprimanded. You’ve already shown your recklessness with your temper. I have a family to feed, unlike you.”

Gorgton sent me one final scathing glance before he stormed off down the hallway.

I walked up to the bars next to him and curled my fingers around the metal. “Where is Raimen? And Hanson? I didn’t see them today.”

“They are healing.”

“Healing?” I repeated. “From what?”

“Your monster wasn’t happy when they accidentally sedated you. They escaped with a few bruises and welts. Nothing too concerning besides Raimen’s broken arm.”

“No,” I groaned and rested my forehead on the bars. “Are they going to kill him?”

Lyonel turned his head in surprise. “Raimen?”

“No, Zee.” When he didn’t understand, I said, “The monster. Are they going to hurt him?”

“*Ha*. No. He’s untouchable. But at least this time he did seem apologetic afterward—not that I’d trust him. Once a monster, always a monster, you know. He immediately called for the king and made the arrangements for your release.”

“Zee . . . summoned the king? Can I do the same thing? Is that a prisoner’s privilege?”

Lyonel blinked at me like I rambled nonsense. “No, miss. Maybe you should get some rest. It’s going to be a big day for you. Also, um . . .” He tapped his chest. “You should probably hide that. Wouldn’t want the king to get the wrong idea.”

The edge of the feather poked out of my bodice. I quickly shoved it back into the folds of the fabric.

“Oh,” I squeaked. “Thank you.”

He made an agreeable noise in the back of his throat.

“Are you . . . going to tell someone?”

“If I were going to say something, I would’ve the first day I saw the bird on your wrist. Raimen noticed it, too, but we couldn’t be for sure until Ms. Taft spread the word that the raven was back in the castle. We’ll get you out of here, miss, don’t you worry.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Not everyone believed in the revolt, and many that did now regret seating King Ernesh on the throne. We want change. We want you.”

I pushed away from the bars in frustration. “Look at me, Lyonel. Do I look like I could lead a kingdom?”

He turned around, his bushy brows slanting over his large nose. “You’re supposed to represent hope. Be that hope for us—that’s all we ask. Now, listen.” His eyes darted down the hall and back to me before he beckoned me closer. “There will be a man who will help you out of town. Look for the candlestick maker’s wagon and show him your feather. He will take you somewhere safe.”

I nodded. But weren’t they releasing me? Why would I need to escape town?

“Rest now. I’ll stand guard.” He ducked his head in a respectful bow.

“You and Raimen . . . I’m still in shock. Hanson too?”

“No, not Hanson I’m afraid. We put on a show for him so he wouldn’t become suspicious. But even though he’s not part of the rebellion, he’s still grown protective of you. I think we all have. You’ve earned more than one feather for taming that monster, that’s for sure.”

The last thing on my mind was the quantity of Ravenwood plumes on my royal garb. Nor did I want one for Zee’s sacrifice. That wasn’t an act of my bravery. I just wanted him.

My future suddenly seemed . . . empty.

I walked over to sit against the wall and pulled the moth-eaten blanket over my lap.

“Will I see him again?” I asked.

“Not after his bargain is complete. It’s for the best for everyone. You did a good thing.”

“Yeah . . .” I whispered, my heart aching.

After a few hours of sleep, Lyonel shook my shoulder, his eyes knowing. “It’s time, miss. The king has called for you.”

As he led me down the hall, Gorgton stepped in front of us, barring our path. “I’ll escort her to see the king because I outrank you.”

Lyonel ground his teeth. “I can provide assistance, sir.”

Gorgton grabbed my shoulder and yanked me to his side. “I had enough of your assistance yesterday. You are relieved. I’ve also reported your insubordinate behavior.” A greasy smile tugged at his lips. “You’re wanted at the training hall, post haste.”

Lyonel’s eyes met mine before flicking back to Gorgton. “Yes, sir.” And he left me in his beefy grip.

“Just you and me, princess.”

I tried to run but only found myself slammed into the dungeon door.

“Ah-ah-ah. Not so fast. Since you’ve been so talkative lately, I thought you could use a muzzle until you learned your place.” He whipped me around and tied a cloth over my mouth faster than I thought possible. “When you’re obedient and well-mannered again, we can discuss removing it. Until then you will be silent.”

I let out a muffled cry.

He laughed. “Sounds like music to my ears. Now move, or we will be late.”

Squeezing my eyes closed as I walked, I reminded myself this was only temporary. I only had to endure these last moments before I gained my freedom. By tonight, I’d be sleeping in my own bed and filling Vivian in of every moment in the Taika castle.

Daylight illuminated the corridors and removed the usual dreariness. But today it brought me no joy to walk in the warm beams, my thoughts on Zee.

Servants ignored me as we passed, an oddity since I was bound and gagged. They were too busy whispering to one another in excitement, the underground rumor mill hard at work.

I strained to listen, only catching the tail ends of conversations.

“ . . . not dead like we thought . . . ”

“ . . . the king is holding a feast . . . ”

“ . . . must celebrate his return . . . ”

“ . . . thank the stars the monster is dead.”

I stopped in my tracks and mumbled through my cloth at the poor maid who scurried away after she noticed my interest.

It couldn't possibly be true. Zee . . . dead?

What had he agreed to for my release?

Gorgton pulled my chains, impatient at my slow pace, and I stumbled to keep up.

I refused to believe it. They were rumors—they had to be.

My throat clenched, too tight to breathe. This wasn't what I wanted. I'd never trade my life for Zee's. Panting through the tight cloth in my mouth, I sensed my emotions were spiraling, my desperate reign on my control slipping through my fingers.

Zee . . . gone . . . Sweet Alizar . . . dead . . .

“This is no time for nerves,” Gorgton said.

He shook my shoulder as if that would snap me out of it . . . as if that could heal my broken heart.

“What's wrong with you? Just stand here and behave for once,” Gorgton commanded, pointing to the spot behind him as we waited to be granted access into the throne room.

The room was spinning when the doors flew open. It was by my determination alone that I forced my feet to move down the red carpet. *I am in control*. I had to be . . . it was all I had left.

My dream from the other day overlapped with reality. Royal subjects lined the walls today, clapping at my arrival in a sophisticated manner. They didn't leap away in disgust but instead almost pressed closer in interest of me so that I found myself reinforcing my glamour in protection.

Why were so many people here?

The king lifted his fist, and a hushed silence blanketed the room. It drew our gaze to him, sitting with confidence on his throne. A spark of anger shattered my numb exterior. His

pleased expression to see me made me itch to slap it off his face.

I narrowed my eyes, and something akin to a growl sounded in my throat.

Where is Zee, you murderer? I wanted to shout.

Movement beside the king caught my eye, another man dressed in fineries. His back was slouched while he rested his chin in his hand to stare at the wall in a daze. No, not at the wall, the window, as if he was fascinated with the dust motes floating in the sunlight.

His black hair was combed back off his forehead, so glossy and dark like ink. On top of his head rested a golden crown, smaller than the king's but no less expensive.

Ugh, another Taika royal. I rolled my eyes, my curiosity in him waning, and I returned my gaze to the king.

So the crown prince had returned. No wonder everyone was celebrating and whispering in the halls. It also explained the overly large smile on the king's face, the one that made me fidget the longer he stared at me.

"Here's our little champion," King Ernesh announced, beaming at me. "Bring her closer."

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Gorgton replied.

"Yes, yes. There is good."

Gorgton yanked on my chains as he bowed, forcing me to my knees with him. I tucked my chin down, my thoughts tangled in confusion. *Champion?*

"Arise," the king commanded.

Before I could move, the hefty weight of Gorgton's hand pressed into my shoulder as he used me as leverage to stand, nearly toppling me over. Once on his feet, his grip tightened in wordless communication for me to stay humble on my knees.

Instinct wanted me to shake him off, to lash out, but Gorgton was right about what he said the last time we were here. Any attacks on him—a king's guard—would not go well

in my favor. Instead I chewed on the cloth in my mouth, biding my time, and prayed that this whole process would speed up and I could go home.

“My people, today is a day of celebration. A day this glorious kingdom won’t forget. Today my son has been returned to me thanks to this prisoner here. As a most gracious king, I offered many the opportunity at redemption, to rid the Taika kingdom of the monster that has terrorized us for years.”

I bowed my head, my chained fists vibrating with anger.

“None have been up to the challenge. Until this woman who traveled to us from the mainland wandered into our kingdom, not knowing the consequences of having dark hair. The black magic from the old kingdom that had cursed this land and my own son. Look upon her face, see the bruises she earned through her bravery. In my name, she was able to slay the wretched monster where others before her had failed. She has brought peace to the lands and your crown prince back to his waiting throne.”

Applause sounded, a deafening racket that rattled in my skull. The king was spreading lies—*why?*

In an instant, it was quiet again, and the king continued.

“As a reward, a hundred crowns has been offered to her as well as safe passage back home to where she lives. Now, please, rise to your feet, girl. I’ve already forgotten your name—my apologies.”

Gorgton’s hand cinched around my bicep, pretending to offer aid.

I turned to glare at him, hating my reliance on him. I couldn’t reply with this blasted cloth in my mouth.

He smirked, savoring the moment before turning to the king to declare, “This is our cherished Fiona, Your Majesty.”

I could only grumble under my cloth.

The prince turned at this as if awaking from a daydream, his eyes on me.

A deep loathing surged through me as I held his gaze, my heart hardening so that I barely saw him through the haze of my anger. He was no different from his father—lying about the truth. I didn't save him from Zee—the prince wasn't even there. The king was spinning these falsehoods in order to earn favor with his people.

The prince glanced away and wrapped his hand over his mouth as if he were unable to stand the sight of me. It was one of the best performances of hurt and betrayal, and I wanted to clap at his theatrical skills.

I hated this place, full of its deceptions.

I hated this prince who used Zee's death as a stepping stone to his throne.

I hated myself for being too weak to stand up for the truth.

“Why is she gagged?” the king asked, perturbed. “I had hoped she'd offer me her gratitude for my generosity. I'm sure the court would love to hear it.”

“I fear the horror of the monster has turned into waking nightmares. She screams in fear, traumatized by the events. But I assure you, Your Majesty, that she's very thankful to you and to me, her protector since she has arrived. To show her gratitude, she has offered to share her reward with me.”

I stared at him dumbly. Surely, I had misheard.

“What a wonderful suggestion, Fiona.” The king clapped his hands in delight. “Truly a champion inside and out.”

But . . . I hadn't said that.

I shouted over my gag, pleading for the king to understand. Gorgton curled an arm around me, his hand painfully pinching the flesh of my arm so that I winced.

“There, there, my pet. Of course he won't separate us. Don't fret,” he cooed.

I whipped my head to him, the only thing he didn't have pinned in place with his meaty hands. Never had I thought myself murderous, but if someone had placed a dagger in my hand at this moment, I would have gleefully plunged it into

this man's heart. I hoped my eyes conveyed my feelings on the matter.

He only smiled bigger.

A soft murmuring drifted around us, fans fluttering above all the sweet sighs. A forbidden romance between prisoner and her captor.

Bile rose up the back of my throat at the very thought.

I most especially, with every fiber of my being, *loathed* this man.

“Then that settles it. The two of you shall be sent—”

“Your Majesty,” Gorgton interrupted again, ignoring the king's frown. “Fiona's last wish was to stay here in the beauty of your kingdom. Nowhere else across the vast lands of Hanalla is there a ruler so magnanimous as to give a prisoner a second chance at life. She's asking—nay, begging—you to let her stay in the castle under my protection.”

I fought his hold, twisting in place, and I realized a moment too late that it looked as if I were snuggling closer. *Ugh.*

The king narrowed his gaze before his eyes widened. “You have accepted the position I have offered you? Today is a day of surprises, yes, wonderful surprises. Of course you may stay, my champion.”

At that, the prince stiffened and quickly leaned over to speak privately to the king, who jumped at his son's nearness. They whispered, inaudible to me, but they finally nodded in some sort of agreement.

“The prince has made a wonderful suggestion. Let us remove her chains once and for all and let the people welcome her into our kingdom.”

Polite applause was drowned out by Gorgton clearing his throat. “I don't think we should release her just yet, Your Majesty.”

“Are you going against the wishes of the crown?” Steel lined the king's question.

I nodded enthusiastically before he gripped my hair, secretly holding my head in place.

“Of course not, Your Majesty, it’s just—”

“I, your king and benevolent ruler, commanded you to release her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Of course.”

Click. The sweet sensation of my chains dropping off my wrists had my eyes fluttering closed. I rubbed the tender flesh while I waited for the second lock around my waist to open.

“What is your name again, guard?” the king demanded.

“I am your faithful and trusted servant Gorgton, Your Majesty. I have served in the dungeon these past thirty-seven years.”

Click. The heavy chains puddled on the floor around me and I opened my eyes, ready to escape.

The prince shot to his feet, startling everyone in the room. “Say it again.”

I flinched at his voice . . . so similar to Zee’s. Sorrow had a way of making me hear what I wanted to hear.

Gorgton tripped over his tongue, fumbling in shock at the outburst before he whispered his name again.

“Louder,” the prince growled.

Eyebrows high, I glanced between the two of them, wondering what other bridges Gorgton had burned in his past.

Sweat glistened on Gorgton’s high forehead as he stared at his prince. He shouted his name before the court, the last syllable cracking with nerves.

“Ahem, I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation to your outburst?” the king hissed at the prince.

“I wanted to make sure I heard it correctly,” the prince said with a smirk and retrieved the dagger from the closest guard’s hip, then hurled the weapon at us from the top of the dais.

I screamed, yet no one heard, the shriek caught in the fabric. Then I screamed again when the dagger plunged into Gorgton's chest, blood splattering on my arm. The prince rushed down the steps, his sights locked on the man gurgling at my side.

As more screams tore across the room and more guards flooded in from the hallway, I knew it was finally time. I lifted my hands into the air, calling my magic to me, the tingles of it nipping at my fingertips. In a rush, I brought down the cloak of invisibility just as the chaos around me built into a frenzied panic.

“An Illusionist,” the king spat, cursing my people. “Kill them both—immediately. Well done, my son. You saw through their black magic.”

Like a dance, I weaved between the bodies in the room, careful not to touch anyone to give away my whereabouts. I spun around another guard, not breaking my concentration on the open door in front of me. The door to freedom.

“Shut the door. Don't let her escape,” the king bellowed.

But it was too late. I'd already slipped outside before it closed.

Flying Home



I yanked the gag from my mouth, inhaling a breath of fresh air.

Screams vibrated through the cracks of the ivory door, people calling out that I was here or there when I wasn't even in the room. It only added more kindling to the fiery chaos.

And I wasn't going to wait around for the flames to die down.

The strenuous weight of glamouring invisibility was wearing me down. I needed rest and nourishment to be able to hold this complicated illusion. It was better to swap into a basic disguise, and when the hall was clear, I changed my appearance to one of the maids I had seen walking by earlier.

It was barely in time as two more servants rounded the corner, huddled in whispers. The blonde's eyes popped wide when she saw me leaning against the wall.

"Gertrude? Aren't you supposed to be in the library?"

"Y-yes . . ." I mumbled, not sure where that was.

"You best hurry before you get a switch on your backside," the brunette girl added when I still didn't move.

So, I took off in the direction of the main entrance, hoping it was also where the library was. When I reached the end of the hall, I heard them scream.

I peeked over my shoulder, shocked to see the prince interrogating the maids.

Oh, dear.

Not even considering the consequences, I ran the entire way to the main entrance, only slowing to a reasonable, brisk pace as I walked past the guards. One of them sent me—or Gertrude—a seductive wink.

Oh, gracious.

Was I supposed to like this guard? Or not? The hazards of taking on a disguise without learning the person first. I pretended to be shy, ducking my head as I exited the door and letting my fingers skim the edge of his shoulder. He was too stunned to speak, his mouth agape as I took the stairs two at a time.

“Fiona!”

At the sound of my name I glanced up to the top of the stairs. The prince searched the royal gardens, his fingers tapping the stone railing. Apparently, he didn’t want just Gorgton’s life but mine as well. Immediately, I lowered my eyes so I didn’t draw any attention to my new disguise.

“Fiona,” he called out again.

This time I ignored him and joined the clump of servants hustling across the lush lawns. Their arms were full of brightly colored balls and decorations for a celebration of some sort. Manicured bushes lined the dirt paths, and I veered off on my own, heading past the towering stone statue of King Ernesh and out the castle’s main gate into town.

I pushed my way through the fray of people. Prickles raced down my spine as if every person in the town square could see through my illusion. The bustling marketplace was overwhelming after all my time of solitude. Voices screaming prices, chickens darting between legs, and children giggling as they ran past, bumping into me.

Overwhelming, yes, but it also made me feel alive.

A group of guards marched in two neat lines, returning to the castle. I turned to the nearest merchant, picking up a handwoven basket in mock-interest.

“Do you like the pattern, miss? My sister is the most famous weaver in all of Hanalla. Even the queen of Cadell asks for her baskets to be sent to her.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. Surely the queen of all Hanalla had baskets woven from magic reeds from her enchanted forest or something. Swallowing my skepticism, I faked a smile. “You don’t say.”

He brightened at my interest. “The truth, miss. Requested them specifically for all of Prince Asher’s toys. It’s an honor and privilege to have earned her trust.”

Riiight. I raised a brow. “Do you perhaps know where the candlestick maker is?”

“But miss, I can give you the best price at ten crowns—”

“Oh, I’ll be back. I just need to see how many candles I can afford before I buy one of your beautiful baskets to carry them in.”

“Thank you, miss, thank you so much. You can find Roland eight stalls down. If you don’t see him, he might be near his wagon. His supplies need to be kept in the shadows so they don’t melt in the sun. I’ll be waiting for you.” He nodded, overjoyed at the prospect of a sale.

I made a note to come back when I had a few coins to purchase a basket as an apology. He wouldn’t know it, but at least one queen would have purchased a basket from him.

I shook my head. Since when did I start calling myself a queen? All this talk of the rebellion had addled my thoughts.

Pushing my way toward Roland’s booth, I noticed his balding head poking out from under his wagon.

“Hello?” I called out, waving a hand.

“Hold on to your skirts, will you? It will take me a minute to get the next supply out. Impatient customers . . .”

“I can help,” I suggested, shimmying between the booths to him. I crouched down at the wagon, and he narrowed his gaze at me.

“I don’t need no helps from the likes of you castle folk.”

“Well, I don’t need candles from the likes of you. Someone said you would offer help.”

“Who’d be idiotic enough to do that?” He dumped a pile of ivory candles into a shallow crate.

“Lyonel.”

His hands froze. “My brother?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me your relationship, though that would’ve been helpful. He said I should show you something.”

“Well, you have my interest now.”

I pulled out the raven feather from my bodice, and his head cracked into the undercarriage of the wagon. He howled, rubbing the spot.

“Put that away before you get us killed. If you’re joining the rebellion, you have to know there are risks. You can’t just go waving those about. This is serious with many lives at stake. Are you sure you want to join?”

I thought for a moment on how to answer, and I shifted the sleeve of my gown, showing my raven tattoo. “I think I am the rebellion, no?”

His head cracked on the wagon again, and he hissed in pain. “Is that real? Stars above, could this be the answer to our prayers?”

“I don’t know about all that, but I need to get out of town, and Lyonel said you’d help me. I’m tired and weak, and I want to lower my glamour for a few minutes.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.”

“Fiona . . . just call me Fiona.” The regal title struck an off-note chord within me. That was my parents’ title, not mine.

He nodded, his blue eyes determined. “Crawl into the back of the wagon. I’ll gather all my supplies like I’m closing up early.”

I obeyed, trusting that there had to be at least one decent person left on Arukah Island. He was true to his word, stacking the crates around me and covering me with the cloth from his table.

“Stay low until we have left the castle gates.”

“I will,” I whispered. “Thank you, Roland.”

The rumors from the castle had trickled into the streets, and the townsfolk’s excitement at their prince’s return circled around us. It was all I could hear as the wagon led us down a back road away from the noise of town.

“I’m going to try the East Gate. My cousin Tatum has his shift there today, and he won’t blink an eye at letting us through.”

He was right. After a few slaps of greeting and asking about their respective families, the wagon was in motion, rolling from the cobblestone streets to the crunch of the dirt path.

“All right. It’s safe to come out now.”

I didn’t hesitate and flipped the heated blanket back for a cool rush of air. “Is it safe to lower my disguise?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Everyone’s in town right now. The prince has returned, and the kingdom is in an uproar. Some slip of a girl is rumored to have killed the—” He stopped mid-sentence, sucking in a breath. “*You*. You killed the monster, didn’t you? Why didn’t we put the pieces together? Who else would have magic strong enough to defeat it?”

Instead of responding, I let my glamour go, and my magic veil slipped away like a silky caress on my face. So many emotions crossed over his features: shock, recognition, and the one that gripped me the most—hope.

“The raven has returned, indeed,” he whispered to himself, then smiled.

The energy to talk fled, and I leaned onto a crate to rest. Or maybe it was just the thought of leading a rebellion. I had

spent weeks fighting for my life. Humiliated. Tortured. Honestly, I just wanted peace.

I pulled the gag over my head and spit on the cloth, silently scrubbing Gorgton's blood from my clothes. I didn't want any reminders of him or of my time in Taika. The more I thought it over, the more I wondered if I even wanted to be some leader in their rebellion.

"We meet in the Eastern Woods when the moon is full, rain or shine. Our next gathering is scheduled for three days from now. Do you have a place to hide until—"

"Yes," I said, turning my head toward the whistling noises from the forest in the distance. "Can you stop the wagon?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me in confusion. "But we're still a good distance from the farmlands and cottages. These woods are for hunting and fishing."

"Please, Roland," I asked.

The wagon jerked to a stop, and the horses shook their manes, panting.

I took a breath, bracing myself for the weight of my illusion, and summoned my veil of invisibility. Tingles flowed from head to toe, and I didn't wait another second before I leapt out of the wagon unseen.

"Are you well?" Roland turned around to ask, then sputtered at the empty spot where I had been.

Motionless, I stood a few feet from the wagon, watching him scan the high grass for me. His brows pinched in worry with each second that ticked by.

Persistent that he was, he waited another half hour before finally giving up.

"If you can hear me, remember, three days from now," he shouted in the wrong direction. "Please be our hope." Then he clicked his tongue and the horses took off, leaving me on the outskirts of Whistle Thorn Woods.

So close to home and yet so far.

When Roland's wagon was a dot in the distance, I sprinted for the tree line. Instant relief shuddered through me as I stepped through the entrance of the woods. The soothing sounds of home greeted me—birds chirping in the trees, the rustle of leaves in the canopy above, and the telltale whistle gliding through the holes in the branches that gave the woods its ghostly tune.

Cupping my hands, I hooted two times as I walked, my signal to let Vivian and Thatcher know I was nearby. I listened for a response, but only the whistling winds replied. Perhaps they couldn't hear me?

As an extra precaution, I kept my invisibility on, gritting my teeth through the strain of holding it in place. Until I could survey the woods more closely and verify that more guards weren't out hunting, I needed to stay hidden. My nerves prickled up my spine with unease, and I let out another unanswered signal.

This wasn't like them.

I picked up speed when I saw our cottage over the grassy knoll. Grinning, I charged through the door and skidded to a stop.

Candle stubs remained unlit, the chilled room covered in silver webs strung from corner to corner. I placed a hand over my nose, a foul odor permeating the air like rotten cheese. Moldy food sat forgotten, decaying and black, with flies buzzing around it.

It hadn't been ransacked, all our meager possessions still in their place. Nobody had been in our cottage for some time.

Where were they?

To keep my mind from spiraling, I cleaned up what I could. Being useful helped me not focus on the dread at what their absence could mean.

Had they been caught too? Tortured? Killed?

Don't even think it. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth as I took a ragged breath.

I prayed they ran off to safety—wherever that may be—and would be returning soon. If only I could figure out how to get word to them.

Thatcher had to know people in town . . . but who?

Propping the door open, I let the fresh breeze cleanse the stench of the cottage as I headed toward the river to check our trap for fish. It was soothing in a way, returning to my everyday chores like nothing had changed. Like these last two months hadn't torn my heart into a million pieces.

After I ate some grilled trout, I lit the candles as I always did but soon caught myself staring into the shadows as if they could shift and change into a figure I'd recognize.

I shook my head, righting my thoughts. There was no one in the shadows. Nor would there be again.

Another death at the hands of the Taika kingdom.

The soothing crackle of the flames had me lowering my glamour, finally feeling like I was back at home. I washed the grime and blood from my skin, then dunked the ends of my hair in the bucket, and I scrubbed my scalp clean. I crushed a handful of honeysuckle in my hand, combing it through before rinsing my hair again. The fragrance was slightly better, not that it'd please anyone but me.

Sighing, I slipped into a clean, warm frock of dark green that matched the leaves on the trees. The dry clothes had a musty smell, and I mentally noted to give the other two a wash in the morning. I held up the stained, golden gown with intricate lace and full skirts. A gown that belonged in a castle, not a forest.

Without a thought, I tossed it on the flames of the fire, the red swirls gobbling the fabric in greedy bites until a charcoal pile of ash was left.

Then I locked up the door and windows tight before climbing under the wool blanket on the floor and letting exhaustion take me. What should have been a peaceful rest was riddled with memories that refused to let me relax. Dreams of me waiting in the corner of my cell, expecting

Raimen or Lyonel to arrive to collect me. Or for Gorgton to come lumbering down the hall with his lantern, his keys jingling on his hip, carrying a plate of gruel in his hand.

Disoriented, I woke in a panic, not sure where I was, before flopping back onto the bed with a groan. Just before sunrise, I gave up on sleep and got an early start on chores. The cottage was quiet when I left, my heart sinking as I closed the door behind me.

The skies were rosy and cheerful even as dark clouds thundered off in the distance. I'd have to hurry to finish what I needed before the storm arrived, especially since I was doing chores for three versus one.

I worked for hours in the garden, weeding and uprooting dead plants. So many tomatoes were pecked apart by birds, and blackberries were infested with bugs. Covered in sweat, I headed to the river, not only to cool off but to empty and reset the traps.

I dipped my bare feet into the chilly water and sat on a nearby rock, my slippers dangling from my fingers. The topic I hoped to avoid bubbled up, refusing to be ignored a second longer.

What was I going to do about the rebellion?

They were expecting a princess—no, a queen—to lead them into the kingdom, when I was no more than a forest sprite hiding in the woods. Whenever I used my magic, it brought fear and hate, no matter how many times I explained it was for good. When was it enough? When should I stop trying? Why would Ruah make me this way only to have people hate me?

I wiggled my toes as the dark clouds rolled in and blocked the heat of the sun.

It'd be best for everyone if I stayed here, then nobody else would be forced into danger. I frowned at the realization.

A life of solitude.

My chest ached, resisting my decision. But I gathered those emotions and the memories of my parents and tried to

push them back into the hole in my chest from which they sprang. But they refused.

My mother's face, oval with high cheekbones, smiled in my thoughts. The same smile I had inherited. *Stand tall, be brave, and fly.*

But . . . what if I failed?

My head snapped up at the warbled cawing in the distance. Not a true raven's caw, but also not one of Vivian's or Thatcher's. Could they have sent someone with a message?

Our cottage was hidden deep within the forest. Moss grew up the walls, and overgrown shrubs created the perfect camouflage. With each season new trees grew, and we cut some down for firewood to change the forest's layout. Without a map, travelers would go in circles.

I stiffened when the caw sounded again. It was definitely a signal for trouble.

Slipping my shoes on my wet feet, I hurried through the trees. If they were a friend, they'd know that call and where to find me. So instead of tracking the signal, I followed the familiar trails back home.

Fat raindrops dripped from the sky, drenching my skin and clothes. It was slow at first, like a warning, before the hiss of rain dropped in buckets. Mud splattered on my hem, but I didn't dare go the long way around despite it being the higher ground. I didn't want them to leave without telling me where Vivian and Thatcher were, and if they were all right.

When I arrived at the cottage, I gasped at the cozy candlelight illuminating the windows and excitedly barged inside to greet my guest.

I froze at the entrance, my fingers clamping the doorknob in a white-knuckle grip. A finely dressed man eyed my family's banner hanging on the wall. He wasn't wearing his crown, but I didn't need it to recognize him.

The prince of Taika turned to me and crossed his arms. "Fiona of Ravenwood." He smiled, pleased with himself. "I caught you."

Fell for Your Illusion



My heart skipped and then plummeted into my stomach. Tense, we stared at one another in a silent standoff, waiting for the other to move before we reacted.

When he opened his mouth to speak, I spun on my heel and bolted out into the pouring rain. I needed distance between us so that I had time to summon my invisibility. The problem was that it was almost impossible to do while sprinting and not tripping on tree roots and mud puddles.

I threw my hands in the air anyway, just as the prince screamed behind me.

“Sparrow, wait.”

My heart commanded me to stop, so I did.

I was too scared to turn around. Was he an illusion? How would the prince know that name? Or where to find me?

“Don’t disappear on me,” he said, the words barely audible in the rain. “I deserve the truth for once.”

His voice . . . was the same.

“Zee?” I choked.

My heart pounded in my ears. It was almost as loud as the storm around us, and I had to strain to hear him.

“It’s Alizar, well, Crown Prince Alizar of Taika. It seems we both had one more secret we didn’t share. Isn’t that right, princess?”

He's alive? I turned, my lips trembling. *Please don't let this be a trick.* My heart couldn't take losing him again.

He was a good distance away, and the rain slanted like a curtain between us. A hollowness filled me, and my hands dropped uselessly to my sides. A tornado of emotions swirled through me so I could hardly think. Alizar—Zee—was the Prince of Taika? He had held me and comforted me over the loss of my family when it was all because of his father's greed for power.

"Your family . . . murdered mine. Your father . . ." I traced the brand on my wrist.

"I know." He winced. "It's one of the reasons I didn't tell you. I didn't want you to see me differently. I'm not him, nor do I wish to be."

Was the boy responsible for his father's actions? I thought back to my comment about Ruah and the apples on the tree.

"You are not." I didn't want to fight—especially not with him.

But apparently he didn't feel the same way.

"And what about you, *princess*? What about your lies? Did you pretend to care for me to gain your freedom? To gain your throne?" he accused, marching through the muck toward me. "Tell me our kisses weren't another illusion and that stealing my heart wasn't part of your plan."

"Wh-why would you say that?"

"The king told me of your deal, that you were to do everything in your power to get me under your control. And I . . . I fell for it," he growled. He kicked a brown arch of muddy water in the air. "I fell for you."

I took two timid steps toward him. "When has the king ever told the truth? Did the monster really take the crown prince as a boy? Did I fight a monster and win? No. I'm not a champion. Not a princess. I'm just a girl who lives alone in the woods. I've nothing . . . well, I thought I had you, but it seems maybe I never had that at all."

He met my eyes through the rain. The black ink from his hair streaked down his face, his honey blond hair peeking through the dye.

“But our connection—it’s too strong to be real. It has to be some form of magic.”

“Does it? Or is it something else shining inside me, feeling like the warmth of the sun every time you look at me?” How could he not believe me?

He positioned himself in front of me, still too far away for me to touch him. Black lines of dye dripped down his brows, over his lids, and under his eyes.

My Zee. My heart flipped at seeing him again, then sank, his doubt stinging all the more.

“Do you really think I never loved you? That you’d believe another’s word over mine? And here I was mourning for you, thinking the king had killed you. It seems I fell for your illusion, my prince.” My voice broke, and I curled into myself, covering my face with my hands.

Then he was there, prying back my fingers. “Look at me, little sparrow.”

He lifted my chin as water drizzled down my face. My gown was soaked, the thin material plastered to my skin like a second layer. The heat of his hands warmed my face, grazing my cheek in awe.

“Then what’s this thing between us?” he whispered. “I’ve never felt it before.”

“Love.”

He blinked, and droplets dripped from his lashes. “Show me.”

I lifted a hand to his face but then stopped when he flinched, expecting him to rear back if I touched the sensitive skin around his eyes. But he surprised me and leaned closer.

“Touch me,” he begged.

With gentle strokes, I wiped the dye away, revealing his alluring features and skin that had remained hidden under the mask. He turned his face, pressing a kiss on my wrist. When his eyes opened, they were hooded and filled with longing.

“Is this an illusion?” he panted as he scanned my face. “I don’t think I’ll survive if it is.”

“Kiss me and find out.” I cradled his cheeks and brought his lips to mine, sinking into bliss as his mouth slid across mine.

How could he not feel the rightness of our touch? The blazing heat between us at only one kiss. Once again, the match between us lit into an inferno, the two of us seeking the other in desperation.

“I love you,” I said against his mouth, and that only built up his intensity as he clung to me, his hand deep in my hair.

Then he slowed, savoring the moment, the cool rain practically sizzling as it splattered on our skin. He pulled back to brush tender kisses along my face, his spicy scent overtaking me. He paused when he reached my closed eyes.

“My favorite part,” he whispered. “I’ve never stopped dreaming about them.”

He swooped down to capture my lips again—a kiss of perfection. It had the intensity of Zee with the sweetness of Alizar.

“Do you believe me now?” I asked breathlessly.

His lips pressed into mine again, urgent. “Yes.”

I pulled back, concerned. “And the fact that I’m from Ravenwood?”

“Fiona, I don’t care about crowns and kingdoms—especially my own that never cared for me. I don’t care about magic or power. I care about you. When you disappeared, a piece of me shattered in that throne room, and I nearly collapsed on the floor. You had taken the light with you, and I knew in an instant, whatever scrap of affection you’d give me, I’d take it gladly. But my heart?” He pounded a fist on his

chest. “It wasn’t happy with scraps. It wanted every smile, every argument, and every caress as if I’d die without it.”

“Oh, Zee . . .” My eyes went wide at my blunder. “Sorry, I mean Alizar.”

“You can call me Zee. It’s not wrong. I am both. The mask couldn’t have been removed otherwise. Before, we were too strong . . . and maybe too stubborn to fuse together. We needed a common goal, something we both cared about. We needed you.”

“It wasn’t just me. I didn’t remove your mask—you did. Only by facing the good and the bad in your life were you able to become whole again. I just gave you a nudge.”

“You gave me everything. And I will spend the rest of my life giving you all of me in return. You, Fiona Ravenwood, have my heart until the end of time. And even then, I think I will love you from the beyond, waiting for you to join me. Anywhere you go, let me go too.”

“As if I’d ever let you leave this world without me,” I scoffed, burying my face in his chest. I hoped he couldn’t distinguish my tears from the rain.

He scooped me up in my wet gown as if I weighed nothing and carried me back to my cottage. The rain drummed on the roof, a calming noise, as Alizar lit the fire while I stood in the puddle forming on the floor.

I cleared my throat. “Don’t panic, but I’m going to glamour so I can change out of these wet clothes.”

“I won’t peek.”

“Well, I’m removing the temptation altogether.” I pulled the invisible veil over me, his eyes going wide when I disappeared. “Don’t stare. It’s unnerving, even if you can’t see me.”

“How am I staring? I see nothing but an empty room.”

I quickly unlaced my front stays, wiggling out of the wet garment, and it plopped onto the floor.

“Oh, goodness,” Alizar said, his cheeks red, and spun around to the fire. “Just tell me when you’re done.”

Soon I was in another clean dress, with the wet one hanging on the hook by the fireplace. I released my glamour and tried not to laugh at his startled face at my reappearance.

“You’re good, then?”

“Yes. Just need to dry my hair. Come see if any of Thatcher’s clothes fit you.”

I frowned, eyeing the door in hopes that Vivian and Thatcher would stride through any minute. Their disappearance ate at my consciousness, and I’d have to head into town once Alizar was situated and see if anyone had seen them.

He tried on a few of Thatcher’s things. The pants seemed to be too loose and the shirts too tight.

“I’m afraid I’ll split a seam just by breathing,” he wheezed.

Grabbing the dagger from the crate, I walked over to him. “I’ll make a few cuts so it can at least be comfortable. Is that okay?”

He lifted his arm in agreement. “Start here.”

Once we had changed, I started on dinner, tossing a few vegetables in a pot on the fire. It wasn’t much, but I didn’t want to head out in the downpour now that I was dry. While I ripped up spices to sprinkle in, Alizar strolled around the cottage, investigating crates and jars, his mind unable to rest.

Suddenly, he shrieked, and I nearly lost my fingers while I stoked the fire.

“I am a dunce.” He barked a laugh. “Your identity had been visible all along, and I was blind not to see it. It’s not a sparrow on your wrist, but a raven. *Ravenwood*.”

I smiled at him over my shoulder. “I still like being your sparrow though.”

“My sparrow that came back.”

“Actually, I think you came back to me.”

“Well, you kissed me first.”

I lifted a brow.

“Not that I’m complaining. Each kiss from you is a treasure I’d never trade away.”

“As they should be.” I giggled at him, his reaction at the sound reminding me more of sweet Alizar.

He let out a nervous breath, his fingers tapping on his thighs. “I can’t believe how lucky I am. To be honest, I’m scared I’m going to mess this up somehow and lose you.” He stared in horror at the fire as if he could already imagine such a terrible fate.

I crawled the distance to him and pressed a quick kiss on his lips, jolting him out of his thoughts. “You won’t lose me. Not now, not ever.”

We chatted while we ate, mostly about our favorite dishes, and when Alizar finished the last of the soup, I realized that I’d need more to fill him up tomorrow. His stomach was an endless pit.

In exchange for my cooking, he offered to clean the dishes. I hid my snickering behind my hand as he dropped all the dishes into the bathwater bucket I used to wash in, declaring the task complete. A sure sign this was his first time cleaning up after himself. He had to start somewhere, I guessed. Our next meal might have a sweet honeysuckle flavor, which caused me to chuckle again. But honestly, I appreciated that he wanted to help at all.

“Oh, no,” he said dramatically, pointing at the single bed on the floor.

“What?”

“Since there’s only one bed, it appears we’re destined to share it. How ungentlemanly of me, but there seems to be no other choice.”

He didn’t sound very upset about it.

“Not to worry. It’s actually two mattresses.” I dragged the corner of one until there were a few feet between them.

“But the chill in the night air after getting caught in a rainstorm. You’ll need the extra body heat to stay warm.” He smirked.

“The wool blankets are quite warm. Those in combination with the fire at night, and you might wake up in a sweat.” I smiled sweetly when his lips dipped into a frown.

“What if I just want to sleep next to you?” he huffed.

I placed a hand on his cheek, patting it softly. “You will . . . just four feet away from me.”

I laughed again when he growled. He dropped onto his mattress with his lower lip juttied out.

“Monsters don’t pout.”

He flopped on his back. “This one does.”

“One day, Zee, after you get to know me. We will have our forever.”

“I do know you. It feels like I’ve always known you. Since you walked into my room, I knew you were different.”

“In a few months, you’ll know me even more. I hope you still like me then. Vivian says I’m a little rough around the edges. Stubborn, ill-mannered, and brash at times.” I ticked off the words on my fingers. I was sure there were more, but he didn’t need to hear all my faults. He’d find out soon enough.

“You’re also brave, kind, and patient. How did you stay sane locked up for so long in the dungeon?”

“Lots of prayers,” I said, my eyebrows high. “And maybe stubbornness that I didn’t want to die at the enemy’s hand. Speaking of which, whatever happened to Gorgton?”

Alizar tucked his arms behind his head. “Alive, unfortunately. But at least he’s rotting in his own cell for being a traitor. It’s better than what he deserved.”

“Were you really going to kill him for me?” I swallowed at that. I didn’t want any more bloodshed in my life, even

Gorgton's blood.

"Maybe? I don't know. When I heard his name, I saw red. It also didn't help that he had his hands all over you. But then when you disappeared . . . nothing else mattered until I found you."

I fought my smile at that and stood to start locking up for the night. His eyes tracked me as I moved, watching every step I took until I crawled onto the other mattress.

"No more stabbing people. Promise?"

He sucked in a breath. "I can't. If it's between your life and someone else's—I'm always going to pick you. But I'm willing to not stab anyone if they're not threatening you . . . unless you want me to."

I mean . . . that is progress.

We lay on our sides, staring at each other in the firelight.

"I can't believe you're here," I whispered.

"And I can't believe you're all the way over there."

He held out his hand for me, and I took it without hesitation. The soothing brush of his thumb over my skin lulled me to sleep faster than I thought it would. So I wasn't sure if it was my dream or Zee I heard next.

"I love you, little sparrow,"

Either way, I smiled, so thankful I wasn't alone.

When the morning light shone through the window, I sat up in shock at how late I had slept. Even more startling was Alizar's bed, rumpled and empty.

Gone. He's gone.

"Alizar?" I screamed, suddenly scared that I had dreamed him up yesterday.

I rushed outside, calling for him over and over.

He came barreling around the house, his eyes wild and jaw set. "What is it? Is someone—"

I threw myself in his arms, clinging to him as if he might slip away. My shoulders sagged as I caught my breath, adrenaline rippling through me.

“Sparrow?”

“Sorry. I didn’t see you next to me and I panicked.”

“I was out gathering breakfast.” He groaned. “Not that it matters now.”

He twisted his hands, and a cold sticky goo leaked through my dress. I jerked back to see the cracked eggs cradled in his hands, the yolks slipping through his fingers.

“Oh, goodness.” I made a face. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just find more.”

“You need more clean clothes.”

“So do you.” He laughed.

We finally found a comfortable rhythm between us as we continued throughout the day. He accompanied me as I scouted the woods for Vivian and Thatcher and held me close when we still found no sign of them. It took me longer to fall asleep, worry eating at my insides.

When I woke the next day, he was sitting at the table waiting for me.

“Good morning, little sparrow. My internal clock is still a little off. I’m used to being awake at night.”

I rubbed my eyes, blearily staring at the sunrise through the cottage window. “Should we go fishing today? We’ll get a ton of bites at this early hour.”

“No.”

“Oh, uh. That’s fine. I need to add new seedlings to the garden, anyway.”

“What are you doing, Fiona?” he asked, his tone serious.

My eyebrows shot up. “I’m planning my daily chores. We probably need more firewood too.”

“No, I mean here, in this forest, hiding away.”

“It’s my home.”

“You had another home before this. One your parents fought for.”

I whipped back my blanket and rose to my feet, not liking the direction this was going. “What brought this on?”

“I’ve spent the last hour staring at your family crest, and I realized as I looked around the room that you don’t have a large collection of sentimental items. No decorations, no books, no frilly girl things—just the things that are barebones for survival.” He turned to stare at the raven banner. “And this. Why would you have kept it if it meant nothing to you?”

“Hey! I never said it meant nothing to me. It’s my legacy, my family.”

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

“I—I—I don’t know.” I ground my teeth and dashed for the door.

He caught me around my waist, not letting me pass. “I don’t say these things to upset you. In fact, you said some very eye-opening things to me that had me reflecting too. Now it’s my turn. What do you want out of life, Fiona?”

“Peace and no more deaths, especially to any Illusionists still hiding in fear.”

“And can you accomplish that here in this cottage?”

I sighed, bowing my head. “No.”

“Then how can you accomplish that? Tell me what we need to do, and I’ll do it.”

“Even if that means leading a rebellion into Taika?”

“I meant what I said. I’ll be by your side no matter what.”

“But Taika is your home.”

He laughed, a harsh sound. “The only time that place felt like home was when you were there. I am a pawn in my father’s game. If I can even call him Father. When I was brought before him after years of not speaking, the first thing

he spoke of was planning my wedding to one of the princesses from Glenton. No kind words or whatever one would say to their son. It was strictly politics, a king speaking to his subject.”

I wrapped an arm around his shoulder. My heart ached at the regret behind his words. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? You can’t help how he was made. He’s never cared about anything but himself and how he would be portrayed. My childhood sickness was an embarrassment to him. He’d rather fabricate some lie about a monster stealing me away than let the kingdom know the truth.” Hatred glinted in his eye. “So I became the very lie he spread. I was the monster. And the more he fought to restrain me, the more I fought back. You should too—it’s the only way he listens.”

I bit my lip, slinking away, but he grabbed my hand.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I guess it’s the doubt.”

“That the rebellion would be victorious?”

“No, that I’d make a good queen.”

He shot up from the chair, the wooden legs squealing as it scraped the floor. “Impossible.”

“You’ve lived in the castle, I have not. I know nothing about protocol or running a kingdom. Ask me to set a bear trap or make rope from vines. But talk of peace treaties or hold a royal luncheon?” I threw my hands in the air.

“That’s why you have advisors . . . and me. I won’t let you fail. It’s a big chess game.”

“But it’s not a game to me. These are real people, and their lives are in my hands. What if I fail?” I scrubbed a hand down my face.

“You asking that question is what makes you a good queen. You have heart. And I think that’s what these people are missing. Yes, they’re living, but there’s no connection between them and the crown. The king places more value on keeping his throne than on caring for the lives of his people.

Why do you think the dungeon is so full? Anyone that's a threat is removed . . . including me. If there were an invasion tomorrow, would the people rally under the Taika banner? I think not. Why fight for a king who won't fight for his people?"

"Neither would they fight under the Ravenwood banner. It's a lost cause."

He grabbed my shoulder. "It's not. Believe in yourself. They have been brainwashed to believe Illusionists are evil. Show them the truth."

"Be the hope," I mumbled under my breath.

"Yes," he agreed.

Thoughtful, I sat on the stool and rested my chin in my hand. "Roland said the rebellion meets when the moon is full. That's tonight."

"Who's Roland?" His back stiffened.

"He's the candlestick maker who snuck me out of the kingdom." I eyed him from the corner of my eye.

"Oh. Where is this meeting?"

"The other side of the island. It will take us all day to reach it before nightfall. Not to mention I don't even know where in the woods they're meeting."

He pulled me to my feet and kissed my forehead. "Then we better get something to eat before we leave. You can't lead a rebellion on an empty stomach."

Hope for Taika



We trudged over another hill, the afternoon sun searing my skin. I had wrapped a sky-blue scarf over my head and neck while Alizar wore a floppy straw hat, one that Vivian had worn while working in the garden. He made a face when I popped it on his head for a disguise, but it also kept his pale skin from burning.

If only it protected the rest of his body. My long-sleeved frock with flowing cotton skirts were woven for the tropical months, but the prince's exposed arms were already pinkish and made my own skin tingle to look at. Luckily, I had packed a salve for emergencies.

For the hundredth time, he wiped the sweat from his brow, but other than that, he hadn't complained once during our journey. So inquisitive, he peppered me with questions, engaging me in conversation with one topic after another. It was touching that he was so interested.

"I have many hobbies," Alizar said and shrugged. "Knife throwing is one of them. I had to stay sane in that dusty ballroom."

I shook my head. "I can't believe the king allowed you to have weapons."

"It was quite the collection too. I collected blades from all over Hanalla. After I pinned a guard to a bookcase, they confiscated them. I didn't even hurt him." He huffed. "It actually takes more precision and skill to hit so close to a target and not draw blood."

“I’ll try to act like that’s not concerning.”

“Nothing to worry about. It’s an art form. No different from my other hobbies that require proficient practice in order to excel in.”

“Music, reading, chess, oil painting, woodworking, botany, and knife throwing. Goodness, that’s an impressive list of hobbies.”

He grimaced. “Maybe take botany off the list. I killed more plants than I kept alive. What about you?”

“Fishing? Farming? I’m actually quite skilled with a bow and arrow. I’m not knowledgeable of the typical ladylike activities.”

My eyes caught the silhouette of the castle in the distance, barely visible in the dusky hours. An unexpected pressure dropped into my stomach as another wave of doubts circled in my thoughts.

Can I do this?

“No needlework or watercolors?” Alizar asked, drawing my attention back to him.

“I’ve sewn up a cut once. Not sure if that counts.”

“I say it does. Many wouldn’t have the stomach for that.”

“Once I had—” I stopped, realizing we were less than a mile from our destination. The thin pines rose up like arrows to point at the darkening sky. “You’ve been distracting me.”

“If your mind is busy, it doesn’t have time to be anxious. But I actually enjoyed talking to you. So far you’ve been wrong. The more I learn about you, the more intriguing you are, fueling a desire in me to learn more. I don’t think I will ever tire of talking with you.”

I grabbed his hand, thankful for his understanding. “What would I do without you?”

“I try not to think about it.” He glanced down at our linked hands and squeezed.

I pulled his arm over my shoulder so I could tuck into his side. He needed no further encouragement, keeping me close as we entered the Eastern Woods. It had a different feel and scent than the woods I had grown up in, but the distinct aroma of a campfire brought my eyes skyward until the smoke trail led us straight to a clearing full of people.

“Ah, new recruits. Welcome,” a tall man said, wearing a worn leather vest. “I’m Arnie.” He held out a hand.

Alizar stared at it. “I don’t like to be touched.”

I grabbed the man’s outstretched hand and shook it. “Hi, sorry about that. I’m Fiona and this is Zee.” I hoped Alizar’s other name would be enough to keep his royal identity a secret. The rebels probably wouldn’t appreciate me bringing the prince to their meeting.

Arnie squinted at him. “Have we met before?”

“No.”

“Zee doesn’t get out much,” I added.

“Well, we’re glad you’re here. You can wait with the others. We will be starting any moment.”

We headed over to the throng of waiting people, a mix of men and women. There were even a few children playing tag, giggling as they ran. Chatter rumbled noisily through the crowd, spiked with excitement. None seemed forced to attend and were actually impatient to get started.

Alizar wrapped his arms around himself, edging closer to me.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“There are a lot of people here.” He frowned when a man accidentally bumped into him.

I pulled down the brim of his floppy hat so I could only see his pinched lips. “There. Now you see nobody.”

He chuckled and tipped it up a notch with his index finger. “I still want to see you.”

I placed my hand on his chest, ducking under the brim.
“Did I ever thank you?”

“For what?”

“For coming with me. You didn’t have to.”

He placed his sunburnt hand over mine. “I wanted to . . . I just wish there were fewer of them.”

“More people in a rebellion is a good thing.”

“I suppose.”

He narrowed his eyes when another friendly man approached, and the stranger pivoted away. We’d have to improve Alizar’s social skills.

“Stop glaring at people and hand me the jar in the bag.”

He slid the rucksack off his shoulder and retrieved the jar within. I took it and opened it, aloe gel from the plants from the drylands of the island. Scooping out the wiggling goop, I swiped it across his forearm.

He hissed, trying to pull out of my grip. “That’s cold.”

“Because you’re burnt. You haven’t been in the sun for years. What did you expect?” The more I rubbed up and down his skin, the more he relaxed. His muscles tensed under my fingers, stronger than I thought for a man locked away. I spent maybe a minute more than I should have, letting my hand slide from his elbow to his fingertips.

“This one too.” He offered his other arm expectantly. “And maybe my neck.”

“But you were wearing a hat.”

“It still tingles a little. Just to be safe, you should rub some on there too.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

“Do you . . . need me to do the same for you?”

My eyes met his at the low rumble in his voice.

“Excuse me,” Roland’s voice rang out. He stepped up onto a wide tree stump to clap his hands and quiet the talkative

crowd. “Thank you all for coming to our lunar meeting. I had hoped we’d have a special guest tonight, but the night’s not over. Does anyone want to start us off?”

“Should I reveal myself?” I murmured to Alizar.

“No. Wait to see their plans first. If it’s lunacy, we’ll do our own thing.”

I turned to him in shock. “You’d help me overtake Taika? Just the two of us?”

It would be a death sentence.

“I’d do anything for you.”

I grazed my arm against his, and he smiled.

“Someone said the prisoner who escaped was an Illusionist,” one man shouted.

“I heard that too,” agreed a woman with a sleeping toddler on her hip.

Others joined in with the same assessment.

“They say the prince is hunting her. That he killed her lover and is after her next. We have to find her before he does.”

“So far, I’m not impressed,” Alizar grumbled.

I hushed him.

“She might not be who we’re looking for—”

“I saw her with my own eyes,” Ms. Taft said. Silence pressed down on the crowd, and we all leaned in, waiting for her to finish. “She had the glamour of an old maid who died during the pox a few years ago. On her wrist was the magic brand, not just any Illusionist’s symbol, but the mark of the raven.”

“I saw her too,” Raimen chimed in. “It’s her . . . the one we’ve been searching for.”

I perked up at his appearance on the other side of the circle, but he wouldn’t recognize me in Gertrude’s disguise.

“But she’s not here, is she? How long must we wait for the stars to align before we take action? These meetings do nothing but waste time.”

The people roared into multiple conversations, an overlapping of voices that was too chaotic to follow.

Roland clapped his hands again with stiff motions, his lips pinched.

“Listen, I know this plan has been a long time in the making. But that’s how these things must be done. In the years that we have gathered we’ve collected weapons and planted spies inside the castle. We know the schedule of the king down to how many sugars he prefers in his tea. Rushing into anything is suicide.”

Then what are we missing? Everyone turned toward me, and I startled back a step. I must have uttered that aloud.

Roland’s face lit up when he found me in the crowd. Eyebrows high, his smile could barely be contained on his face.

“*You*. We were waiting for you.”

“Her?” someone said. “That’s just Gertrude.”

“Let me through.” An elderly woman pushed her way through the crowd. Her slender arms waved frantically over the heads of the rebels. “If you don’t let me see if it’s my girl, I will wallop the lot of you.”

Just hearing her voice, my eyes filled with tears of relief.

“Vivian,” I screamed.

“Let her pass,” Alizar commanded. The people obeyed, parting enough so that a narrow path formed between me and her.

We met in the middle and threw our arms around each other.

“My sweet girl,” she mumbled into my hair. Somehow, she could always tell it was me through my glamour. “You had us so worried. You were there one moment and gone the next.”

“The guards took me—I’m so sorry. They gagged me before I could signal.”

She cupped my cheeks, her eyes narrowing. “Let me look at you.” She tsk-tsked. “You lost more weight, but you have a new glow about you. Could it have something to do with the young man hovering nearby?”

“Oh, this is Zee—”

“Fiona?” she interrupted, her lips puckering in confusion. “Why is he wearing my hat?”

Alizar whipped it off his head, a blush darkening his cheeks. “You may have it back, madame.”

The woman across from us screamed. A shrilling noise that startled the sleeping toddler into an uncontrollable wail.

“It’s him—the prince. I saw him in the market.”

More shrieks and screams as the crowd gave us a wide berth.

“The king sent spies,” Arnie spat.

“Let’s kill him before he kills us.”

“No, stop,” I cried when the burly men closest to us whipped silver daggers and swords from their belts.

I threw myself in front of Alizar and tore the scarf from my head. Tingles coursed over my face as my glamour dropped, and their bloodthirsty attention snapped to me.

“Do not touch him. He’s with me.” I glared at each one of them. “I’ve not come for more bloodshed, especially his. The prince is the reason I’m here today. He wants change as much as everyone else does.”

“But he’s a Taika royal. He’s not to be trusted.”

“I trust him. If you want me as your queen, you have to take Prince Alizar as well.”

Raimen ran up to the opening of the crowd, his arm wrapped in a sling, his red curls bouncing as he kneeled. “You have my allegiance, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you . . . for everything.”

The wind was knocked from my chest when an elderly man strode forward next, his sweet face full of more wrinkles than I remembered.

“Thatcher,” I whispered. I reached out a hand for him, and his sturdy hand found mine, solid and warm just as I remembered. Relief hit me in an instant, and my emotions bubbled up, stinging my eyes. “Thank Ruah you’re safe as well.”

“We were coming to break you free, but I see you made it out on your own. You’ve never been patient.”

“He helped,” I said, pointing behind me to the quiet prince.

“Not much, I’m afraid. Your queen is a sight to behold when she sets her mind to something. I can’t wait to see what she has planned for her monarchy.”

I grabbed his hand, lacing our fingers together, and he sank to one knee.

“Zee?” It was a half sigh and half gasp.

“I swear allegiance to you, Queen Fiona. You will get your throne back, or I will die trying.”

A murmur floated like an undercurrent through the crowd, more people dropping to swear their fealty to me. Humbled, I rested a hand on my heart.

“It sounds as if we’re all in agreement,” Roland declared. “Let us not waste another minute. Go home, rest, and be prepared for an attack at sunrise.”

“Wait.” I let out a shaky breath. “I meant what I said—I don’t want bloodshed for us or them.”

“What you’re asking is impossible,” Lyonel said.

Roland nodded. “The king won’t relinquish his crown without a fight.”

“It’s true.” Alizar squeezed my hand, surprising me that he was still holding it. As much as I was thankful for his

continued support, I wanted the people to see I could handle the weight of the crown on my own.

I took a breath, knowing this was one of the first battles I'd have to face.

“Tomorrow will be the beginning of my reign, and my people will be watching, forming their expectations and assumptions on my actions. I don't want more innocent people to die. They are no different from you: guards performing their duties, servants in the wrong place at the wrong time, or loyal subjects who let fear dictate their choices. I must protect them all too. So, when you raise your sword in my name, remember what I have asked. Defend and protect. We aren't out for blood, we're here for change, for a new monarchy that can bring hope back into Taika.”

Heads nodded as I spoke.

“Hope for Taika,” Raimen chanted into the clearing.

“Hope for Taika,” the people around me repeated with enthusiasm, fists pumping in the air.

Alizar crossed his arms, a knowing smirk on his face as if he had no doubt at all that I'd win them over.

I twisted my fingers together. “Can I say one more thing? I am honored to be your chosen, that despite your fear of me—of my magic—you've placed your trust in me. I'm in awe of you.”

“Of me?” a young child said standing off to the side.

I chuckled, and the others joined in.

“Yes, you—all of you. I may be the raven, but you're the wind lifting me up in the air so that I may fly. I promise to do all in my power to deserve your respect and be worthy of this great honor.” I bowed my head, lower than a royal should, offering my respect to these people who would risk their life in my name and for my cause.

“Long live the queen,” Thatcher cried.

Their voices boomed in an echo, their sentiment etching on my heart and filling me with strength.

Plans were drawn in the dirt, ones that would have the least amount of casualties. A brute force entry was bound to incur more deaths than I liked, and I wanted this time of peace and healing to start as soon as possible.

“Not like this,” I said again, shaking my head.

The others sent me doubtful glances, but Alizar placed his supportive hand on my shoulder. “No blood unless she’s in danger.”

“I’ll use my magic. We’ll only fight as a last resort.” But I hoped it never came to that.

The others agreed to this and set off ordering the others home to prepare.

Alizar and I, along with a small group of loyalists, followed Roland in the moonlight back to his cottage near the castle. He offered me his own bed, but I declined, preferring to sleep with the others on the floor. This monarchy would be different, and I could tell by their surprised expressions that I was already proving that point.

“You should eat something,” Alizar said, offering me a plate of cheese and meats. “You need your strength for tomorrow.”

I pushed it away, my stomach revolting. “I’m too nervous to eat. There’s some truth in my impatience. I’d rather just get it over with than sit here on pins and needles.”

He lifted a lock of my hair, black as the night outside, letting his thumb brush along the grain.

“It’s good practice for you,” he said as if he had all the time in the world.

“Funny coming from you.”

He chuckled. “I know. Without the mask, things are less intense and my emotions are easier to control. Well, except for this constant need to touch you.”

I met his eyes, heated topaz that burned like the embers of a fire. He had a way of looking at me like I was the only

person in the room and nobody else existed but us in this moment.

His eyes shut, and he tilted his head as if listening to a noise no one else could hear.

“Are you writing another song?” I quipped a little breathier than I intended.

“You’re my muse. I always hear music when I look at you.” He hummed a few bars before opening his eyes. “When I have some paper, I’ll write it down.”

I leaned in to kiss him goodnight, but he stopped me before our lips touched and whispered a question that nearly stopped my heart.

“Will you marry me?”

“You’re asking me this now?” I was too shocked to say more.

“I know this may seem sudden for you, but I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Nobody else saw through my mask. Even without your magic . . . you always saw me. In case something happens to me, I didn’t want tomorrow to come without me asking. I want forever with you.”

“Nothing will happen to you,” I said almost like a command, which made the corner of his mouth pull up.

But I couldn’t look away. My heart raced at the suggestion. A life without Alizar? How could I survive losing him now that I had found him? In just a short time, we had become so close, filling the cracks in each other’s lives. He understood me in ways nobody had before. We were the same—monsters that only wanted to be loved.

“Don’t fret.” He scooped my hair off my shoulder, his hand sliding up to cradle the back of my neck. “I’m too determined to give you up without a fight. I only wished you to know that it wasn’t the queen that captured my heart but the brave prisoner who refused to cower or bend to my will. You opened my eyes and made me feel things I didn’t understand . . . sometimes I still don’t. But I want to. So I can

keep listening to music only you can sing into my soul, the melody that healed me in ways no other has.”

“You believed in me . . . when I couldn’t even believe in myself. It’s like we were meant to find each other in the shadows. Two broken halves that became whole.”

He lifted my hand, pressing a soft kiss to the back. “I’m trying my best to be patient for your answer . . . but it’s killing me.”

I laughed, squeezing my eyes shut. “Maybe you’re still a bit crazed if you think I’d answer anything but yes.”

His mouth crashed into mine, still smiling. Then he pulled back to say, “You made me nervous.”

“You should probably get used to that. I tend to do what you least expect.”

“It’s one of the things I like best about you.” He grinned, his dimple deep in his cheek. “Besides your kisses, of course.”

We fell asleep inside our rolled-up pallets, our hands still entwined. The hope for the future bloomed in my chest, and I thought I’d float away from pure happiness.

But then the morning came, and the tension of the day settled upon us.

“Stay close to me,” Alizar whispered as we walked outside. “I won’t let anyone touch you.”

My eyes widened as he tucked his borrowed daggers into the sheaths strapped across his torso. “Do you need all of those?”

“I’d like more . . . but this was all they had on hand.”

I nodded but prayed he wouldn’t have to use them.

“You shouldn’t feel this . . .” Calling my magic, I hid the weapons on his person and glamoured a golden mask onto his face—Zee’s face. Then I distorted his features, morphing him into the hideous monster I had once seen in his mirror. “There’s the monster I remember.”

He laughed, his topaz eyes twinkling. “Now your turn.”

Magic tingled across my skin, a midnight gown materializing over my cotton dress just like the one from my memories. The black waves of my hair curled on their own, draping over my shoulders and down my back where they wouldn't go unnoticed.

His mouth hung open, speechless.

“Remember, it's just an illusion.”

“Not after today . . .”

“I hope.”

“I know.” He held out his hands. “Last part. No one will believe the monster came back willingly.”

Frowning, I conjured the thick rope around his wrists. Even though it wasn't real, my stomach clenched at seeing him bound.

“Remember, it's just an illusion,” he repeated.

Word had spread faster than dandelions on the breeze that today the raven would take back her crown. As we crossed through town, loyalists stepped out in the street, holding their quills in support while others watched in curiosity and the rest huddled back in fear. I smiled at them, knowing it'd take more than a crown to win their hearts.

Those who were part of the rebellion stepped forward into the cloak of invisibility to join the army marching behind us. To the crowd, it appeared to be only Zee and me, but in actuality, it was more bodies than I could handle.

I gritted my teeth to maintain a steady hold over the strain of my magic. Now was not the time to fail. The element of surprise was a necessary part of the plan.

The rest of the rebels were already inside the castle, servants and guards who were waiting for our arrival. They did their part, clearing a path for us, including Raimen, who left the castle door open as instructed.

Two guards approached as we continued down the hall, and they immediately drew their swords in recognition.

“Halt,” they commanded. “Who let you in?”

“I did,” Lyonel said from behind them. “The king is waiting on their arrival.”

Frowning, the guards stared at one another, scrunching their brows in disbelief. The one on the left eyed my hair, still debating.

From the corner of my eye, Zee’s hand twitched, inching closer to his hidden blades.

“I’d love an escort,” I said sweetly. “The king is sure to be pleased at the return of his monster.”

Zee scowled at me, expertly playing his part.

With a shrug, they turned, motioning me to follow.

I found myself in front of the throne room door for what I hoped was the last time to see King Ernesh seated at the end. Lyonel pushed the door wide as the surrounding guards were captured and gagged by invisible members of the rebellion.

My teeth clattered from the weight of the illusion, but I pushed through, drawing strength from within as I marched through the doors. I led Zee down the red carpet, his rope loose in my fingers as he matched my pace. I wasn’t sure who the royals feared more, the masked man, or me, the Illusionist.

“How dare you barge into my court,” the king ground out, his hands clutching the arms of his chair. He darted worrisome glances at Zee. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’ve come for my crown,” I said, my tone even. “The one you stole from me after murdering my entire family in the middle of the night.”

“It’s my crown. Your family has long since been dead to claim it.”

My eye twitched, and Alizar’s shoulder brushed mine, a small touch of comfort. This king was truly a cold-hearted man.

“Unless you’ve come for another fight . . . but you appear to be outnumbered.”

The guards behind him chuckled.

“I’ve come in hopes that a battle won’t be necessary. These people are innocent.”

The king sat forward, his lips twitching. “Wait . . . you think I will just hand you my crown and title because you ask it?”

“Yes.”

Now everyone in the room laughed, jeering tones that made me stand taller.

I snapped my fingers and released the illusion of the rope around Zee’s wrists. In a blur of movement, he pulled out a dagger and threw it at the king, the tip sinking into the back cushion of the throne with a thwack, only an inch from his father’s face.

Screams broke out, the royals less confident than before, plastering along the wall in terror.

“This joke has gone on long enough. How dare you bring this—this monster in here and attack me. Guards, kill these traitors immediately.”

But the guards eyed the empty spaces around me, not sure what other tricks I had planned.

“Did you not hear me?” He pointed at me. “Kill this—”

Alizar was fast, too fast for me to even see, before another knife plunged into the back of the throne.

“How has the monster returned? I have his mask. When did he get another?”

“He didn’t.” I lifted my fingers, easily removing the glamour from Alizar’s face and body. The court gasped, surprised to see the prince’s true identity. “The prince has been locked away, forced into hiding, and for what—so people won’t think there’s a weakness in the monarchy?”

“Weakness leads to attacks. We have to keep up our image.”

“At the cost of your son?”

“You sacrifice everything for the crown. If you were a real queen, you’d know that.”

“Shut up, Father.” He lifted three more blades, fanning them out like a deck of cards.

“You impertinent, ungrateful child. I did everything in my power to make you into a successful heir.”

“Did you love me, Father?”

The king blanched, unprepared for the question. “Who could love a disappointment like you?”

“Me,” I growled. Stepping forward, I lifted my hands, altering my glamour. The mantle of my feathers unfurled around my neckline like a peacock, my father’s sword weightless in my grip. I swung it up, holding it with two hands in an attack position as Thatcher had taught me.

“What are you going to do with that? You’re no one’s queen—stop playing pretend.”

With a shake of my head, I released the illusion in the room to reveal the hundreds of armed rebels flanking us and pouring out the door and into the hallway. I sighed at the instant relief of the pressure of my magic.

“As your queen, you may only refer to me as *Your Majesty* from this moment on. Do I make myself clear?”

“And if I don’t?” A fine coat of sweat dotted his face.

“Then I’ll charge you for treason.” I smirked, daring him to call my bluff.

“Guards,” he bellowed. “Remove this crazed woman from my sight.”

The men on the dais glanced at one another, unsure.

“If you drop your weapons, no ill will befall you. I want no bloodshed during this takeover—

“Reinstatement of the true monarchy,” Alizar suggested behind me.

I nodded.

“Where does this leave you, Alizar? You think to take my throne?”

“It was never mine to begin with. But I’ve already pledged my allegiance to the queen. This kingdom needs change.”

“If there were complaints, someone would have told me. My subjects love me.” King Ernesh turned to the royals pressed into the wall. They glanced away, eyes downcast.

“Maybe nobody speaks up because the consequence is death. The people of Taika have lived in fear for too long. I’m here to be their reign of hope. Now, this is the last time I will ask before you’re forcibly removed from your seat.”

“I would rather die than see *my* crown on *your* head.”

Alizar crouched, blades in hand, as fury rippled out from him.

“No, Alizar. Don’t kill him yet. Let him live as you did, locked in the darkness and his name forgotten,” I said and turned to the king with a sneer. “The Taika name will be *mine*—I will rip your presence from the history books, so when people look back at this date, they will only remember a nameless king . . . if they even think to look for you at all.”

To my surprise, Hanson limped around the dais, his presence hidden in the cluster of guards. He slapped a set of iron chains over the king’s wrists. The other guards followed suit, dragging the king from his throne as he kicked and thrashed, but still not one guard, servant, or royal offered him aid.

When the king passed me, he spat on my dress, cursing my name and family with a wild look in his eye. Alizar didn’t hesitate, slamming his fist into his father’s face and knocking him unconscious with a single blow. “You will respect my queen.”

While he said it to his father, it was a notice to all. Of his allegiance. Of his protection. Of his love and devotion.

A few claps sounded at that, moving into cheers and whistles.

Alizar surveyed around him, surprised that all the ruckus was for him. “I guess I should have punched him earlier.”

I shook my head at him, laughing despite the serious occasion.

“My queen?” Hanson called from the dais. “I believe this seat belongs to you.”

There was nothing separating me from my birthright besides the nerves twisting in my stomach. I silently walked down the carpet, the pressure of a room full of eyes on my spine. My blood rushed in my ears as I climbed the stairs and stopped in front of the throne.

My father’s throne. I let out a long, trembling breath.

“I’ve seen what you can do in chains, Your Majesty,” Hanson said over my shoulder as I took my seat in my father’s chair. He placed the crown on my head, which filled me with a sense of victory. “Now I can’t wait to see what you’ll do with a crown.”

I smiled at him, touched that he believed in me despite not being part of the rebellion. “Thank you, Hanson.”

Light filtered through the windows on the west wall, illuminating the room in golden hues more dazzling than I could imagine. My new subjects probably assumed it was another of my illusions. But no, it was the hope of the new day bursting into the room just as the same hope shone in my subjects’ eyes.

As if my dream had become a reality, I sat on my throne in awe, staring at each face before me. There were no more shadows or ghosts from my past, only the future of possibilities that lay ahead.

A future where I was Queen of Taika.



Dancing Under the Stars

EPILOGUE



From the moment the crown was placed on my head, my new life began . . . and so did the renovations around the castle.

Ravenwood had been gone for more time than I cared to admit, and it wasn't worth digging up the heartache from my past. I had to do what was best for my people, and changing the kingdom's name because of my sentimental reasons, despite the justification, would only benefit me. I could never resurrect Ravenwood from the ashes of my memory and return it to its former glory, but I could build something even more magnificent out of the damaged pieces of Taika. Something that would mean more because it was built on hope and love and not vengeance.

So, we kept the name Taika for Alizar but took daily strides toward the Ravenwood lifestyle and philosophy. By melding the two kingdoms, we hoped we could rebuild the bridge between the crown and its subjects.

Alizar and I agreed a fresh look and new banners would help convey our hope for change. We selected a new color, bright and cheerful yellow, along with a new crest with a sparrow sitting on the hilt of a dagger.

A perfect symbol of the unity between the past and future monarchies.

We invited the entire kingdom to our wedding, and we took our vows on the steps of the castle surrounded by our people in the warmth of the summer sun. Alizar surprised me

with tame sparrows that flew over us with yellow streamers in their talons. He was notorious for surprising me with little things just so he could make me smile.

I was truly so lucky he was mine.

The first task on my agenda now that we were settled was to bring back the enchanted balls that my mother hosted in Ravenwood. In theory, it should be an easy matter, but the amount of strength needed to hold an entire room of illusions for hours was too strenuous for my body to handle.

So I practiced, months of gaining strength and endurance until I was sure I could make the entire kingdom disappear without a second glance. Not that I needed to. Taika was already a forgotten piece of Hanalla, and only traders came to visit.

But I had bigger plans for us. One that would force the queen of Hanalla to take notice of Taika. We were just as valuable as the other territories on the mainland.

“You don’t have to do this,” Alizar said. He adjusted the crown resting on my black curls, worry lines creasing his forehead. “There’s no rush if you’re not ready.”

“I want to. It’s a tradition I wish to continue.”

Standing next to my throne, I swiped a finger down my glittering black gown, almost too elegant to be real. Satin hugged my curves, a strange sensation since I was used to more simple frocks. It took weeks for the seamstress to complete my mother’s gown from my memories. Though it wasn’t the exact dress, it still reminded me of her, forming a connection through the tangible silk fabric. No illusion could replace that.

I traced my invisible raven’s wing, repeating my practiced speech in my head. This was the first of many balls, and I desperately wanted it to go as smoothly as possible.

“Stop worrying.” Alizar grabbed my fidgeting hand and threaded his fingers through mine. “You’ll do great.”

I blew out an unsteady breath as a response.

“Do you want me to sit here and wait?” he asked, scanning my face.

“Oh, I had hoped you’d stay by my side. We should be a unified front, even more so with the merging of our kingdoms.” I squeezed his hand. “And just having you near makes me feel better.”

He smiled, a soft one that made me want to lean in and kiss him. As if he read my mind, he leaned closer to mumble, “If I didn’t think it would distract you, I’d kiss you. But for now, I will behave.” Lifting my hand, he brought it to his lips in a chaste kiss, but his eyes promised something more later.

I blushed despite myself.

His thumb rubbed over my knuckles, and I yanked it away before he made me forgo this whole ball entirely.

“Zee, you’re not behaving.”

Whenever his mischievous side came out to play, I couldn’t help but call him so.

“Am I not?” he purred.

I went to whack his shoulder, but instead a rush of emotions hit me, and I wrapped my arms around him instead, burrowing in for a tight hug.

His arms carefully enclosed me, tenderly holding me against his chest.

“What is it, little sparrow?”

“I’m just so happy that you’re here and I don’t have to do this alone. I love you so much, and when I think my heart is overflowing, you fill it up more.”

His arms tightened, squeezing me to him. “I don’t deserve you, my love.”

“Don’t say that—ever. We were two broken pieces looking for our other half. Maybe that was the real reason you could remove the mask. It wasn’t that Zee and Alizar merged but that we found each other. A hidden love in the most unexpected place.”

“I still find love every time I look at you. Not just in your beauty, but in your kindness to others. Who else knows all the names of the guards in the castle?”

“Definitely not you,” I joked.

He tucked my hand in his arm and led me down the dais to the middle of the unadorned ballroom.

Our guests waited in a variety of gowns, some bejeweled and others in simple frocks. Tonight’s invitation was for everyone, the spots filling up faster than the ink could dry.

Couples moved freely about the room, pointing out various heirlooms I had dug out from the attic. The elaborate chandeliers dangled overhead, gleaming and freshly cleaned. Tables of sweet cakes and cookies lined the wall, all thanks to Ms. Taft and the valuable kitchen staff who worked all day. They left a delicious scent of fruits and chocolate that made me wish I had snuck a treat earlier when nobody was looking.

I cleared my throat, and all eyes snapped to me in expectation, eager for the festivities to start.

“Thank you all for coming to our Inaugural Ball of Illusions. As you read in the invitation, the theme is a surprise. I dedicate this one to my mother, the queen of Ravenwood. She taught me to see the good in others even when there was none to be found. I hope these fun gatherings will renew your trust in me and magic and erase the rumors that have slandered the name of my people.”

I took a step forward, the tension in the room thick with excitement. Raising my fingers in the air, magic tingled through my skin and bones and eventually through my entire body as I summoned the night sky on the ceiling, the chandeliers disappearing in the darkness. Misty clouds swirled along the dance floor as if they had a mind of their own, circling the guests around their ankles. The guests gushed over all the details, craning their heads back at the endless sky above us.

“You outdid yourself, Fiona,” Alizar said, just as surprised as the others. His mouth hung open as he eyed the starry

masterpiece.

I flicked my fingers, and a comet tore through the sky, sending the guests into squeals of delight.

“Just when I thought you couldn’t impress me more.” He cupped a hand at the base of my neck and tipped my head up to kiss my forehead. “It’s beautiful.”

I glanced up again with a smile, remembering my mother. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Almost as beautiful as you.” He took my hand in his and rested the other on my waist. “But you’re not the only one full of surprises tonight.”

We stood on the floor, waiting for the music to start, and when the first few notes played, my eyes welled.

“You didn’t,” I whispered.

He grinned, and his grip on me tightened a second before he swung us into motion to the music, the song he had written for me months ago. We spun around the dance floor as others joined in, his topaz eyes glowing in the starlight.

“You say that like this is the only song I wrote for you.” He nuzzled into my ear. “It’s just the only one I have played for you. You, my muse, are the notes that beat in my heart—music so wonderful that I’m too greedy to share with the world. There is a melody in each of your smiles, when you wake in the morning, and when you laugh unexpectedly. But most especially when your lips are on mine—for that one is the most exquisite of all.”

His fingers tapped unconsciously on my waist as if he already heard the notes. His lashes lowered to his cheeks as he listened to the tune.

I lifted onto my toes to press a soft kiss on his lips, one he refused to let end.

“Are you trying to convince me to dance us right out of the room?” He chuckled against my lips.

“And leave my first ball when it’s only begun?”

“Then don’t tease me.” His eyes glazed over as he fell under the spell of the music. “When I hear this song, it reminds me of all those feelings I had when I first met you. When I didn’t understand that I was losing myself to a girl who smelled like a pigpen.”

I frowned at him. “That part of the story could be left out.”

He whipped me away, then pulled me closer to spin me under his arm to catch me in his other. The music was always in him, flowing as simply as one drew a breath of air. He dipped me back and hovered in closer, his eyes on my lips.

“Left out? Absolutely not. It’s my favorite part. Nobody argued with me until you walked into that room that day, shaking like a leaf but with a determined gleam in your eye.”

Chuckling, I swayed with him to the melody, the two of us lost in our own world again. “Only you would fall for my stubbornness.”

“Your violet eyes might have won me over too, my love.”

A warmth spread through me, one that only he could summon. He had loved me—all of me—seeing past my glamour and cherishing every chipped piece of my soul, which made me love him all the more.

In the starlight, sunshine, or even in the dusky shadows—it didn’t matter where we were as long as we were together.

I lifted my hands and lowered stars from the ceiling, the lights twinkling like floating candles in the air around the dancers. The guests gaped, reaching out to touch the constellations. Their awed whispers and smiles were everything I could hope for.

No whispers of hate or black magic. No expressions of terror on their faces. It had been a short amount of time, and already we had made great strides in teaching them the truth of my people. History books would be altered and the past corrected. Ravenwood would not be forgotten. Neither would my family or any of the Illusionists who’d died due to prejudice, including those dating as far back as the Battle of the Bones in Bressal.

Their memories should be honored too. And as soon as I could schedule it, I'd take the first ship to the mainland and fix the lies of the past. Perhaps the queen of Hanalla would see reason once I explained the truth of the matter.

The Castle of Illusions deserved justice so all their ghosts could finally rest in peace. It was the least I could do.

Alizar's lips pressed into my forehead. "Let us fly, little sparrow."

The music of the night swelled, the tempo picking up just as Alizar spun me across the misty floor, the two of us tangled in each other's embrace. I couldn't help but laugh, almost as if we were flying through the sky, the shimmering stars casting a warm glow on our skin.

It was the perfect moment . . . and that was no illusion.



Mask of Deception and Sacrifice is book 3 in the Sacrificed Hearts multi-author series, a collection of stand-alone fantasy romances inspired by monsters of legend, each tale packed with strong heroines, swoony heroes, and sacrificial themes. Read the next adventure in [Island of Secrets and Sacrifice](#) by Deborah Grace White.

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Ember's defiance has always been a frustration to the rest of her island community. But even she didn't expect to be selected as the next sacrifice, years before another is due. And she can't help but wonder if it relates to the strange new ability that's just begun to stir within her. She doesn't intend to go down without a fight—in fact, the chance to confront the monster demanding sacrifices is a more welcome path than the marriage her parents had arranged to a

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****Don't forget to turn to the end of the book for a sneak peek at the first chapter of *A Forest of Stolen Memories!***

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About the Author



Callie Thomas is an indie author who loves all things fairy tales—including twisting tales of her own. Her favorite stories have a mix of sweet romance, laughter, and a pinch of magic. When she's not writing, she enjoys playing board games, reading at the beach, and traveling the world with her husband and two boys. Since she can't live at Disney World, you'll find her near the historical battlefields and lush woodlands where her family lives in Fredericksburg, VA. She recently published her first Vella series, *[A Forest of Stolen Memories](#)* & *[A Sea of Golden Chains](#)*, and has more stories on the horizon.

Learn more: <https://www.authorcalliethomas.com/>



Sneak Peek

A FOREST OF STOLEN MEMORIES

Enjoy this sneak peek of the first chapter from *A Forest of Stolen Memories*, book one of the Backward Fairy Tale Series!

What if the end of the fairy tale was only the beginning . . .

Happy Reading!

Callie

Forgotten



And they all lived happily ever after . . . wait . . . no, they didn't.

Words stuck to the tip of my tongue, then disappeared as if they had never existed in the first place. Every thought, every memory disintegrated from my brain, leaving nothing but a searing pain in their absence. My eyes flew wide as the pain spread like fire in my head. My eyes watered, and I reached for my scalp. But my hands were stuck, gripped in another's as they held my fingertips.

Where am I? What am I doing here?

A masculine face came into focus. A foot taller than me, he hunched down, his silver eyes clouded with concern. His grip on my hands remained, even as I gave a few tugs for him to release me. He was speaking, but the pain in my head was bright, all-consuming.

Until it wasn't.

As quickly as it started, it stopped.

I blinked. My eyes fixed on my white-gloved hands. Diamonds sparkled from my elbows to my fingertips, tiny but numerous. They shimmered with each ragged breath I took. Dazed, I stared at them, confused why I couldn't remember a single detail about my gloves. Or about myself.

Who am I?

Even the most basic question I couldn't answer. Something was terribly wrong.

“Rose? Darling?” the man whispered, his words warm like honey, coaxing my eyes to his. So familiar . . . those silver eyes lined with impossibly long sandy-brown lashes. They matched his styled hair, which curled around his golden crown, not a strand out of place. My eyes stayed on his crown, solid gold with a massive oval ruby in the center. A prince or king? He seemed too young to be a king.

As if he could read my thoughts, he smiled with teeth so white and straight I felt I might be in a dream until his cream-colored glove squeezed mine and snapped me back to reality.

I shook my head, trying to understand, but my mind felt sluggish. Too many sensations were happening at once, my mind overwhelmed by the onslaught of details around me. I willed my brain to wake up, my spine tingling in alarm.

Who are you? And who is Rose?

I licked my dry lips and asked, “Who?”

His right eyebrow twitched—a perfectly sculpted eyebrow that matched the other to the point of distraction. In fact, all of him was symmetrically perfect. His nose, not too big and not too small, centered on his chiseled, tan face. A sensual mouth, turned down at the corners, frowned at me. His thumbs rubbed in a soothing motion across my knuckles, still trapped tight in his grip.

I tugged my hands again, this time so forcefully he swayed in my direction.

“Roselyn,” he scolded. “If this is one of your games, it’s not funny.”

Rose-a-lyn? A name—my name? My lips formed the word, dragging out the syllables, but still not a flicker of recognition. My insides felt rattled. Like a thief in the night, something had come and left complete chaos in its wake.

His glossy black boot stepped toward me, brushing the white of my dress with it, the fabric rustling with the movement. Yards of white lace, patterned with roses over a white satin gown, clung to the top half of my body, then fanned out around me. More diamonds winked up at me

through the white lace. Even to me, it was too much. I twinkled like a star in the night sky.

Distracted by my dress, I didn't notice as he slid closer, so close that his warm breath caressed my cheeks, and I inhaled his lemon scent. Fear rooted me in place, the feeling of confinement strangely paralyzing. His silver eyes trailed over my features with heated possession, stopping to linger at my lips. Releasing one of my hands, he reached his gloved fingers for my face. On instinct, I slapped it away, a loud pop that echoed in the silence. This man assumed too much, touching me as if he knew me. Did he think he could also kiss me just because he wished it?

Not if I had anything to say about it!

The bubble of fog popped in my mind, self-preservation sending me into motion, and I truly began to fight. I pulled frantically at my hand still locked in his grip, twisting and moving backward, yet not moving anywhere at all. Strong fingers held my waist, pulling me closer instead.

“Don't touch me,” I hissed. “Let go!”

“Is this about yesterday? I thought we settled this. You made me a promise and I expect you to keep it. No more talk of doubts.” His eyes narrowed, his fingers becoming painful.

“You're hurting me . . .”

“Then stop being so difficult!”

I hit his chest with my free hand, sending the golden tassels on his coat swinging. He pinched his lips and stared down at me as he stood to his full height. Then he grabbed my wrists and gave them a good shake.

“Roselyn. Stop it!” His voice boomed through the room.

A gasp, followed by a murmur, became a tidal wave of voices. I turned to the crowd of people behind us, surprised I hadn't noticed them during my struggles. More than a crowd, there were hundreds of people in pews of the church and in the balcony, clothed in colorful dresses and tunics. They whispered behind fans and gloved fingers, their pointed looks full of suspicion.

Even in a sea of people, not one face was familiar.

Details from around the chapel sharpened into focus, like puzzle pieces snapping together in my head. *A church, a prince, this white gown . . .* they were forcing me to marry this prince.

I froze. A mistake, for he immediately wrapped his large arms around me and drew me close. He tangled me in his embrace, his nose pressed into my temple as he whispered comforting words.

“Oh, Rose, I’m sorry.” He pressed a soft kiss on my hairline.

I leaned back, as much as he’d let me, and glared at him.

“Sir! Excuse yourself!”

He blinked at me, his mouth dangling open. Now, instead of concern, his eyes were wide with terror. He swallowed loudly.

“I am no sir, madam. Do you . . . not know me?”

“Of course I don’t! I’ve never seen you before. Please, release me immediately,” I commanded.

But no matter how hard I fought, he only tightened his hold on me. Why wouldn’t he let me go? What did I have to do to be free of him?

“Your Majesty,” another man said from behind the perfect prince. His hand held the hilt of the sword on his hip while he inched closer to us. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Rowan, stand down. She is only pretending.” He then added under his breath to me, “Tell him you are only jesting.”

I shook my head, the weight on top of my head heavy and unfamiliar.

“How can this be? Only this morning—” he gasped, his body stiffening, “—could this be the Sorcerer’s curse?” Fear laced his hushed words.

A curse?! Alarm bells sounded in my head.

“I don’t know. Is that why I can’t remember anything? Because someone stole my memories?” I asked, finally voicing the reason behind my panicked state.

What had I forgotten? Or who had I forgotten? And would I gain my memories back over time? Or was I stuck in this ghost-version of myself? I pinched my lips together, blinking back unshed tears. His shoulders relaxed as if my sadness alone could melt him in a puddle at my feet.

“My love, my love”—his fingers clenched my waist—“I can fix it. I *will* fix it.” His desperation had him lost in thought, mumbling incoherent phrases I didn’t understand.

“True love’s kiss,” he said, his attention back on my lips. My nerves buzzed across my skin as I realized his meaning. Why didn’t he understand he was a stranger to me? For all I knew, he could be the reason why my memories were gone.

“No, please don’t.”

He pulled me closer, a hand cradling the back of my head even though I resisted.

“If it’s a spell, it’s the only thing that will break it.”

A fresh wave of panic coursed through me, screaming at me to get away. My hands were trapped between us, useless, but my heart thudded in my chest as his lips neared mine. So, I used the next best thing and brought my knee up to slam between his legs.

He let go, falling to one knee with a wheeze, somehow his crown still secure on top of his head. Twelve men in red tunics darted from the sides, creating a barrier between the prince and me. Their swords whistled as they whipped them from their scabbards, aiming them in my direction, the tips glistening from the light through the stained glass window.

“Wait,” I said, raising my hands.

“Treason!” Rowan shouted.

He lunged for me before I could explain the misunderstanding. I twisted away, my slippered feet steady, and ran down the long aisle, kicking up pink petals as I went.

Screams and shouts filled the sanctuary. Boots thudded around me as people darted out into the aisle to block my path. Hands reached for me, strangers in the pews, but I dodged their searching hands, running full speed until I made it to the large double doors. Pink roses adorned the wooden frame, an overly sweet smell that stuck in my throat, choking me.

The name, maybe my name, raged on a long syllable behind me. A scream so loud it blared over the surrounding ruckus. I burst through the doors anyway, breathing in the fresh air, and came to a standstill at the throng of people waiting outside the church. Perhaps even more people than there were inside.

Their voices raised in a cheer, a deafening noise that accompanied handfuls of birdseed they pelted in my direction. I gripped my skirts and rushed down the stairs. The people parted, leaving a path for me to run through, though a few reached out in awe, fingers touching my hair, my gloves, and the hem of my long dress. The roar of the crowd started to lessen, changing into grumbles and whispers of confusion.

“Where is Prince Alexander?” someone asked. This question rippled across the group of people.

“Why is she alone?” said another.

“Did they not marry?”

“Is she a princess?”

“No, see, she does not wear the sash.” A hand touched my sleeve, and I ducked away from it, the gravel crunching under my feet.

“I think she is running away!” This one louder than the last.

“Catch her! Don’t let her get away.” A rally to the crowd that had them moving closer to me. Hands grabbed at me, ripping fabric and shoving me to the point of dizziness. My hair sprung from its clips, red ringlets contrasting against the white of my dress. Another heavy shove knocked me on my back, and I went rolling in the dirt. I coughed at the metallic taste of blood in my mouth.

“Don’t touch her,” a familiar voice boomed. A decree that demanded to be obeyed. The crowd backed away, allowing me to lift myself up, tripping on my torn and now dirty dress. The perfect prince from the church was racing toward me, a determined look in his eye that had me backing away.

