



ALEXA SAINT

THE PRISONER
& THE PAWN

BLOOM SISTERS SERIES BOOK TWO

THE PRISONER AND THE PAWN



ALEXA SAINT

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THE PRISONER AND THE PAWN

Lady Iris Bloom watched, helpless, when her sister was snatched from her wedding by a Magix, the Fae enemy of her people.

Kastors despise Magix for stealing their magic, but now one of them, the Fae known as Barracuda, has been captured for trespassing into Ecleshax and taking a valuable artifact.

Enraptured after a chance meeting with Barracuda, Iris sneaks into prison to see him, hoping to learn more of her sister's fate. But when she finds the Magix prisoner holds answers to more than just her sister's disappearance, her whole world changes.

Iris always thought she was Kasted - barren of magic. But Barracuda knows different.

With the Magix locked up in prison and facing execution, Iris will do all she can to free him and get him safely home.

But her self-serving Grandmother's opposition is stronger than she anticipated, and Iris will need to rely on more than just her love for the doomed Fae.

With Barracuda's help, she'll have to draw on the magic buried within her...

The Prisoner and the Pawn is Book 2 in the Bloom Sisters Series. Delight in the blossoming of an eager and insightful heroine, an oppressed yet hopeful love interest, and a cast of characters to love and loathe in a world forged in fantasy, fervor and fate.

CHAPTER ONE



My grandmother blasting through the bedroom door is what ‘rouses’ me from my feigned sleep, and I sit up, rubbing my eyes and scrunching a hand through my hair so as to look confused by being woken in the middle of the night. Barely a few moments ago I sent my eldest sister Violet off with a heartthrob of a Magix because he needed her for whatever reason, but the main thing was he was saving her from a terrible union with Lord Bergamot Swunt. I still shudder at the thought.

Not that my own fate is any better.

“Where is she?” Grandmother barks, flinging back the covers of Violet’s bed. It’s obvious she isn’t in it, but I guess Grandmother feels it’s necessary to confirm. Even only dressed in her nightgown and silk robe, with her graying hair twisted into a long braid, my grandmother still cuts an imposing figure.

“What?” I say in what I hope is a sleepy-sounding voice.

“What’s happened?” adds Poppy coming from her own bed, her red hair suitably tousled. I join her, making sure to put myself between her and Grandmother. With Violet gone, it’s up to me to make sure our sisters are protected now. I know it wasn’t something she intended to bestow on me, but it’s a role I’m willing to step up to in her place. If only for the meantime.

I hope she returns soon.

“Where’s Violet?” demands Grandmother. “Why isn’t she in her bed?”

“Did she go to the bathroom?” I suggest. “Or maybe she’s getting a drink of water.”

“She isn’t *here*,” Grandmother hisses through her teeth wheeling around to us. “Where *is* she?”

I push Poppy further behind me. “We’ve been asleep,” I argue. “She’s probably just gone to the bathroom.”

She marches past us, barging past Lily, Rose, and Daisy who have come to see what’s happening since the volume of Grandmother’s voice hasn’t reduced to

inside level the entire time.

“It’s going well, then,” says Lily softly while Grandmother is still making her displeasure known in the sitting room.

“We’re all going to be punished for this,” says Rose.

“No we’re not,” I say sternly. “Stick to the plan. Keep your mouth shut, and it will be fine.”

“*Where is she?*” Grandmother demands again when she comes back into the bedroom, this time she flies right past us, flinging back the curtains, and opening the balcony window. She steps out, looking over the railing before she turns to look up the wall as though expecting to see Violet scaling it. Either Violet or the Magix.

The staff, the few we brought with us to bring Violet back, have abandoned their beds and I see the maids tucking hair under their caps and tying apron strings.

“Call the Guards downstairs,” she barks and one of the maids, happy to escape our grandmother’s tirade, hurries off to carry out her order. In minutes the town will be crawling with them. When she initially went after Violet, she enlisted a veritable army of the Guard to find her and bring her home.

It becomes apparent that we won’t be getting any further sleep, so I direct my sisters to get dressed. Violet’s lady’s maid, Imra, and my own, Adepelle, were the only lady’s maids brought along for us. Of course, Grandmother would never think to part with her own lady’s maid, Rubarae. But even with the lack of staff we manage some semblance of decency in good time.

It’s likely at first light we’ll be shepherded into carriages to return to Bloominace Manor. Besides, Grandmother has another wedding to plan. Lord Clematis Blouting’s parents have accepted the match. And though our official period of courting has only just begun, I do wonder if Grandmother will see to bring the wedding forward. Having Violet run off with a Magix, twice, she will want to ensure I’m safely married in case anything untoward upends her plans any further.

The hotel staff have brought up tea and sandwiches so while we wait, and our grandmother thunders about like a threatening storm, we at least have an

occupation. We're all too scared to speak in case we say something that will implicate our sister. I ensure to consistently glare meaningfully at my twin, Rose, and she sullenly, but obediently, presses her lips together.

My mouth is too dry for food, but the tea helps. I pinpoint my fear to not just my own situation, but the hope that Violet does manage to get away. If she is caught, she can continue the ruse that the Magix took her by force, but I dread to think what would happen to *him*. It was clear he made her happy. I never once saw her look at Bergamot the way she looked at Python. It saddens me that I won't have that, but I do wish my sister well, and hope she finds a happiness that otherwise wasn't to be.

A knock on the door causes us to look at each other, but Grandmother, being on her feet, answers it and one of the footmen enters followed by a Guard.

"Madam Bloom," says the Guard, bowing slightly to her, then turns to us, bowing again. "Ladies."

"Yes, yes, what news?" demands Grandmother. "Has she been found?"

He has trouble looking at her. "It would appear the Magix has eluded us at this time. Reports state they were cornered, however word has it that a spell was used since a group of Guards was found sleeping near the edge of town."

"Sleeping?" she balks. "That Magix dares flaunt his stolen power here in Ecleshax!"

"The search continues, Madam Bloom," the Guard continues.

"I want her found!"

"Of course," he says, backing away with another subtle bow before he hurries from the room and the footman closes the door behind them both.

Grandmother then turns around to address us. "Be ready to leave, girls," she says calmly. "The moment your sister is back with us we return to Embervale."

When no word is forthcoming after several more hours, the night's excitement takes hold and our sleep deprived bodies succumb. We allow ourselves to nap on

the sofas or armchairs, managing to catch a dream or two before another knock and we all start, sitting up suddenly from our positions of slumber.

It's past dawn, and the sun has begun its journey into the sky. One of the hotel staff brings in breakfast, and though we're all still tired, we help ourselves to jam and crumpets, toast and fruit all washed down with tea.

As the staff push their delivery trolley away, a Guard takes opportunity of the open door and enters our room. Any other time and Grandmother would give him a dressing down on proper etiquette, but I can see she's too on edge to care.

"And?" she says, glaring at him while he stands waiting for permission to speak.

"I'm afraid we've lost them, Madam."

"*Lost* them?" she says as though the words don't make any sense.

"Yes, Madam. Reports are that the Magix took Lady Bloom to the Serrula River and dragged her in. We fear they may have drowned."

I drop my teacup. The liquid spills across the carpet, the delicate cup saved from shattering by the thick plush of it. My breakfast wants to make a reappearance, and I frantically search blindly for something to hold when my hand catches the arm of a sofa and I sink into it as my legs fail me.

"Drowned?" I whisper.

"It's not confirmed," says Lily hurriedly, out of Grandmother's earshot. "We assume she's alive and well until we're told otherwise."

"He won't have let anything happen to her," reassures Poppy quietly.

"And besides, with his help she has her magic, remember?" says Lily.

That's true. We saw it with our own eyes. Violet was able to enchant our grandmother, and perhaps she played a part in sending the Guards to sleep last night too. The knowledge manages to mollify my heart and I breathe easier. My sister is alive and in the company of a powerful Magix. I have to believe she's alive.

“You fools!” says Grandmother to the Guard. “She hasn’t drowned. Do you think that Magix came all this way to steal my granddaughter only to have her drown?”

“Madam Bloom, they were swept downstream—”

“Well of course he dragged her downstream. He’s kidnapped my granddaughter to perform whatever heinous ritual his kind do to innocent Kastors. He’s not going to just hand her back. Not when he’s taken her twice! You find her, and you bring her back to Embervale, is that clear?”

“Yes, Madam,” he says with a short bow before he heads back out of the room.

She takes a minute to collect herself, a deep breath, and her tongue running over her teeth, bulging out her top lip, before she speaks.

“Get your things, girls,” she says quietly. “We shall await Violet’s return at home.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” we all say in perfect unison.

If nothing else, I’m grateful for her conviction that Violet’s alive. I have to believe Python wouldn’t deliberately put her in danger, and he would do everything in his power to ensure her safety. I saw how he looked at her, there was no malice, only adoration and what I could see as being love. My heart squeezes when I think how they only knew each other for such a short time, but already they had found the one they needed and wanted to be with.

In less than an hour we’re getting into carriages, and without even thinking I follow Poppy, far too late to realize that Grandmother enters the carriage after us. Trapped in a confined space with the one woman capable of making the journey exceedingly horrible.

Poppy and I sit on one side, and Grandmother the other. It’s clear what her intentions are, and with our hands hidden under our skirts, I hold onto my little sister, fingers squeezing.

CHAPTER TWO



“**A**re you two telling me that neither of you heard your sister leave the room last night?” Grandmother asks in a seemingly placid voice, but I can sense the seething rage bubbling under the surface of her calm exterior.

“As I have already told you,” I say weary of having to answer the same question over and over. “We were asleep. If Violet was taken by the Magix, then he was able to do so without rousing us.”

“That hulking lump of effluent waste couldn’t move silently through a padded room of cotton wool,” she snaps rubbing her forehead in frustration. “River or not, they can’t have gone far. Violet isn’t used to living rough, she’ll slow them down and leave evidence as to the direction they went.”

I do hope our sister has managed to get as far from Twifton as possible, and that they both manage to avoid capture. I’m not sure what would be in store for Python, but I know Violet would be dragged back once more, to be married as soon as possible to Lord Bergamot Swunt.

“What’s to be done if they’re found?” I ask tentatively. If anything it would allay my fear that my eldest sister hasn’t in fact drowned, but the last thing I want is to stir up Grandmother’s temper. Even so, I’m curious to know what her corrupt mind has planned.

“For a start, word will be sent that Lord Swunt and his parents meet us in the next town, and he and Violet will be married immediately. I’m not taking any further chances that this match won’t go ahead. The Magix will face the full strength of Kastor law and find himself without his head.”

Beheading is at least a swift death, but I don’t think our grandmother intends to allow the Magix to get away so easily. She might not say it out loud, but I know if he is caught, all manner of torturous pain will await him.

“Will there be a Collective Elder available to marry them though?”

“Not officially,” says Grandmother with a sniff. “But every town has a local House of Justice, or at least an officer with the capacity to witness their

registration. Then we can have the proper ceremony once we're all back in Embervale."

"Why did he look so different to the pictures in our textbooks?" asks Poppy.

I give her a warning glare, but she ignores me, her question directed at Grandmother.

"Who?" asks Grandmother, her brows creasing.

"The Magix," she says. "When he was riding the Brantahart at Violet's wedding he didn't look anything like the pictures in my academy textbooks."

I admire my little sister for broaching a subject I'm sure all of us were curious about. All the pictures of Magix that we've been shown were hideously nasty looking beasts. It was our romance novels that painted them in what seemed a far truer light, which makes the whole question that much more valid.

"No doubt an illusion spell," says Grandmother primly. "More flaunted magic. But once that fails, Violet will see him for the monster he is and will do everything she can to escape his clutches. A simple, quiet life producing Kastor children as wife of a Kastor lord is a far better prospect than succumbing to whatever evils that wretch has in store for her." With a frustrated sigh she gazes out the carriage window, and for the moment at least we have a reprieve from her constant glaring stare.

"He wouldn't hurt her," whispers Poppy and I'm forced to pinch her leg. She winces, looking at me with indignant confusion, but all I can do is scowl at her. She's getting too close.

"We don't know what he's likely to do to poor Violet," says Grandmother, resuming her watchful gaze over us. "I know she has strength, but the size he is, anything is likely to happen."

She's worried her eldest granddaughter will become sullied, that the Magix will have his way with her and she will then be considered damaged goods. It sickens me that such an ideal is tied up in this hope to restore Kastor magic. So many

archaic notions have been kept alive by the Collective, and helped along with the likes of my grandmother doing everything she can to accelerate her own ambitions.

“So what?” I say boldly, feeling my cheeks flare with heat. “It’s her fault, is it, that she was kidnapped? And if he forces himself on her, she’s then considered less of a person?” I firmly believe it’s the last thing he would do, but with the concern that Violet might still be brought back, I have to consider her future if they do get around to, well, loving each other.

Grandmother’s eyebrows rise, and she regards me with her steely gaze. “Violet’s marriage to Lord Swunt will go ahead regardless of her physical condition. Once they’ve had their wedding night, all will be as it should. The sooner she carries his child, the better.”

Ah yes, the baby that will surely bring about Kastor magic. I barely manage to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“Of greater concern then, is if she falls pregnant with the Magix’s baby,” I say blithely.

My grandmother’s face goes beet red in an instant. “*That* will not be of consequence,” she says through her teeth.

As sisters, our unspoken, and yet greatest pleasure is to bring as much *displeasure* to this woman sitting before me. And right now I’ve given her a lot more to think about than a missing granddaughter. A soiled granddaughter, sure, she can take care of that, but a *pregnant* granddaughter? That’s going to take a lot more sweeping under the proverbial rug.

Smugly satisfied, I lean my elbow on the edge of the window, my head in my hand while I give a great yawn. The disrupted night followed by Grandmother’s endless stream of questions has caught up to me, and I soon nod off.

The jolt of the carriage as it stops wakes me and I open my eyes to see Poppy also waking up, and our grandmother sitting still as a statue until her eyes snap

open.

“Madam Bloom,” shouts the driver as he jumps down from his seat. “A rider.”

He opens the door and she climbs down just as a Guard on the back of a bay horse pulls up suddenly, the horse struggling at the bit. It’s been ridden hard by the looks of the flecks of foam on his flanks.

The Guard dismounts and hands over a small square letter. I can see the red wax seal, but not the insignia. Once delivered, the Guard remounts, turns the horse and gallops off as quickly as he arrived.

Grandmother breaks the seal, opening the missive to scan its contents all the while standing in the road. Her expression changes at once, her countenance of irritability is overcome by an unnerving smugness. She reenters the carriage, nodding to the driver that he continue.

As the carriage pulls away, she carefully refolds the letter, slipping it into her reticule. “It seems the Fae that took your sister wasn’t alone.”

“There’s another?” I ask, immediately intrigued.

“Yes, and he’s been captured and sent to Embervale’s prison.”

CHAPTER THREE



A captured Magix seems to be the only thing keeping our grandmother's temper in check. She's still furious our sister is gone, but knowing there's a culprit she can take her vengeance out on makes her a great deal more amicable.

It's disconcerting.

"What will they do with him?" I ask on the final leg of our journey. Having been away from home for over two weeks, I'll be glad to get back to my own bed. As much as I love my sisters, a break from their company will also be just as welcome.

"It will be awaiting trial for theft, *and* trespass," says Grandmother. "I made it clear that should the Magix be captured, nothing was to be done until I returned with Violet."

"But this is a different Magix, isn't it?"

"It is, but my orders were for any Magix found. If they're working together, I want to personally find out what he knows. And why they are trespassing on Ecleshax soil."

I've never felt sorrier for someone I've never even met. It's also a glimpse as to the power she holds, and I wonder how far away she truly is from achieving her Collective Elder status. It worries me that she might simply be waiting for Elder Maple, Element of Wind, to die.

The first thing I do when I get home is to take a well-earned bath. Constant travel and limited wardrobe leaves an uncleanness that only a good soak can resolve. I have a small bundle of missives which I take with me to peruse through while the hot steaming water works its own magic. Being Element of Water, I often wonder if soaking in it would somehow help to restore my own magic. For all the thousands of baths I've had in my life, it hasn't so far.

Most of the letters are from Lord Clematis Blouting, or Clem as I generally refer to him, my betrothed. He speaks of his love for me, which I find terribly hard to believe since the engagement is still in its infancy. He also writes extremely bad poetry. In fact, with each letter it gets worse. If he's an aspiring poet, I dread to think what our evenings will be like. Me sitting at my easel painting a still life in watercolors, and Clem spouting awful metaphors about love, trying his best to explain how desirable his cock is with descriptions like: *You will be blessed/ by the unwavering Tree of Life,/ blushing red and sprouting/ from a silken thicket.*

Snorting with laughter, I drop his letters to the floor, opening the last of my mail to find an invitation to a charity ball. Grandmother will be extremely unimpressed since she's always taken great pride in organizing any of the fund-raising events set to assist Embervale's poor. It's perhaps the one attribute of hers I can tolerate. Aside from the fact that she only puts them on to flaunt her own status in society, I do appreciate the fact that at least there is some good coming out of it.

From a young age she instilled in her granddaughters a sense of goodwill, and that we use our station as a means of helping those less fortunate. A few times we've visited the poor houses with gifts of blankets and food, and clothing we no longer need. I remember her taking us to the prison...

The prison.

That's where the Magix will be. The one they captured. The one who might know where Violet is being taken and why.

I sit up in the bath, my previous thought trail forgotten as I consider how I might find out more about Violet's situation. I trust she's all right. It was her decision to leave with Python, but I need to know he will keep her safe, that his reason for taking her isn't simply one of kidnap and pillage.

I climb out of the tub, and my lady's maid, Adepelle, assists by drying me off and helping to dress me quickly. It's still an hour before the dinner bell, but she makes sure I look pristine and presentable all the same. If I'm to undertake my own agenda I have to remain on Grandmother's good side to avoid suspicion.

Lily is reading on her bed when I enter her room. Of all my sisters, I know she feels the same about Violet as I do. Rose and Daisy are still unconvinced, believing our best lot in life is to marry whomever Grandmother selects for us. They won't, however, go against my instruction that they stay silent. That leaves Poppy, and though she's only seventeen. I know her heart's in the right place, but she could still be easily swayed. Sure, Lily's still quite young having just turned eighteen, but I trust her judgment.

"Riz," she says in greeting, not even bothering to look up from her book. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this intrusion?"

"The jail, Stranglewood Prison," I say without preamble. "Do you remember the last time we went there?"

She eyes me warily, one eyebrow raised. "Depends, are you considering a brief visit, or a more permanent stay?"

"Lil, be serious."

She bookmarks her novel and lets the book fall beside her. "I think it was the year before last. I know it was during winter because it was freezing, and the prison was awful and drafty. I don't think Poppy came," she says, trying to remember the day. "Actually, I think it was me, Rose and Violet that went with Grandmother on one of her crusades. It stank, too. Why?"

"There's a captured Magix there, and if anyone would know what's happening with Violet, it would be him."

“Really? Another one? Well, that would explain our unusually cheerful Grandmother. An unsuspecting fly for her to sink her fangs into. I wondered why she seemed so happy once we got home.”

“I know, I dread to think what she’ll do to him to get the answers she wants.” I come to sit next to her on the bed while she sits up.

“Torture him, obviously,” says Lily matter-of-factly. “Poor thing will be begging for whatever means she intends to end his life with.”

“He’ll be given a trial,” I say.

“Which we both know will only delay the inevitable. He’s already sentenced to death regardless of what happens in the House of Justice,” she says, hugging her knees to her chest. “How stubborn he is will be what keeps him alive. Once he’s divulged whatever Grandmother is after, he’s as good as gone. Unless she decides to kill him out of frustration.”

“That is true,” I say, considering her remarks. He might be given a trial, but it certainly won’t be a fair one, and Grandmother’s greatest quality is not patience. “Then we don’t have much time.”

“We?”

“I can hardly go to Stranglewood on my own, Lil.”

“What makes you think *I* want to go? I don’t understand why you’re so keen to visit the place, it’s an absolute pit. Besides, the crazy Magix doomed himself the moment he set foot in Ecleshax.”

“Yes, but what if he came with Python? That would mean he’s our only link to Violet. Don’t you want to know why he’s here?”

“Death wish?” she says offhandedly. “You don’t know that he *did* come with Python. Maybe they planned to take more of us,” she says

conspiratorially, her eyes wide and her smile broad. “Which one do you think he had his sights set on? Ooh, maybe he was here for you?”

“Lily,” I say resignedly. “I hardly think he’s here for me.” Although my heart gives a funny little jump. Romantic ideals of being swept away by a handsome Fae from an otherwise dreary life is a situation best left to those terrible romance novels...and obviously my sister, Violet.

“All right, look, for the sake of finding out whether he does or doesn’t know what’s happening with Violet, I’ll help you,” says Lily. I move to give her a hug, but she holds up a quelling hand, stopping me mid-lean, with my arms outstretched. “Just be mindful, I’m only doing this because I know it will piss off our grandmother no end.”

She lets me hug her then.

“Of course,” I say, squeezing her hard. “What point would there be to do this otherwise?”

CHAPTER FOUR



Dinner at Bloomance Manor has always been a formal affair. I have attended dinners at other residences and seen first-hand how different it can be depending on the host or hostess. We have always been expected to dress and present ourselves to the highest standard and to be seated at the table before the last ring of the dinner bell.

After meeting up with Lily, we head downstairs to the formal dining room. It hosts a table that seats ten, with high-backed brocade chairs of deep mahogany that match the polished table set beautifully with perfectly aligned place settings of gleaming silver, and sparkling crystal. A large white dinner plate is positioned atop a crisply pressed brocade place mat at eight of the chairs, the receptacle for each course of the meal. Three courses, every single night. It's easy to assume we would have packed on the pounds with that kind of routine, but the portions are little more than dollhouse sized, so we're not in any danger of putting on weight.

Another of Grandmother's stipulations.

"Here we all are again," says Lily walking around the table to take her place opposite me. I can't help but glance at the place still set for Violet. Without her in attendance, and because of the circumstances in which she's gone, I know it will cast a shadow over the whole meal.

"It's been *so* long," says Poppy with a smile.

"Is this how it'll be now?" asks Rose. "We're just going to make jokes and ignore the fact our sister is missing?"

Lily and I exchange a quick look. "It was her choice," I say quickly and as audibly as I dare. Grandmother isn't in the room yet, but I hardly need her walking in on this kind of conversation.

"Come away with me, princess," says Poppy in a deepened voice, her hands clasped next to her cheek while gazing at the ceiling.

All of us laugh then, and I'm glad to see both Rose and Daisy smiling.

"Laughter at the dinner table?" questions Grandmother when she saunters in. "I don't believe I ever taught you that was proper dining etiquette, and what could there possibly be to make light about with your sister gone?" Silence falls and we all bow our heads demurely. "Much better. Where is your father?"

"I haven't seen him," I say. Now that I'm eldest I know a lot of what had been left up to Violet now falls to me, including speaking for all of us when none of us know the answer.

Grandmother takes her seat with a loud sigh. "I do not understand why it's so hard to come to dinner before the last bell. It's rung three times, and can surely be heard in all corners of the house?"

"Perhaps he's otherwise detained?" I offer, trying to politely suggest that he's using the bathroom. It wouldn't be the first time he's missed dinner, either. Unlike us, Garland Bloom has a special dispensation to miss the most important family meal if needs be. We'd have to have a damn good excuse, like having died, before *we* could ever think to pull out. Though nothing was said, I did notice his absence in Twifton.

"Perhaps he's grieving," suggests Lily boldly, but a glare from Grandmother silences any further attempt at offering excuses for Father.

"I'm sure he'll be along in a moment," says Grandmother. "But we may start without him." She takes up a small silver bell that's always positioned in front of her place setting, and rings it sharply to signal the staff that they may begin to serve.

Tonight's first course is soup. The serving staff, two pencil-thin men, bring out a creamy shrimp and crab bisque that is finished in three mouthfuls. While they clear the empty dishes the wine is poured, but since none of us

is of age, only Grandmother is served. Rose and I are still a few months away from turning twenty-one, but I remember Violet took great pleasure in being poured a richly dark glass of wine.

The main is roast pork with apple and apricot stuffing, served with steamed spring vegetables. It's then that Father walks in, taking his place at the other end of the table opposite Grandmother. My sisters and I are seated either side, but where Violet would have sat opposite Poppy, my youngest sister now has to look diagonally across the table to engage in conversation. That, or attempt to exchange a dialog with Father, which is painful to watch.

"Good evening girls, Mother," he says, laying his napkin across his lap before he begins serving himself from the platters in front of him. "How are we all this evening?"

"Well, thank you, Father," I say, giving him a smile. He's never been harsh or uttered a word in anger to us, but on the flip side, we've never had much to do with him either. I don't recall ever playing with him, and certainly never witnessed him doing so with any of my sisters. Even Poppy, where my memories of her as a baby are a lot clearer than my own years as a toddler. I couldn't even say how he truly feels about his eldest daughter's disappearance.

"Well, thank you," says Rose primly.

"Fine," says Daisy, her eyes downcast.

"Same as always," says Lily, waving a hand of nonchalance.

"Do you know why the pictures of Magix in my textbooks don't look anything like they do in real life?" asks Poppy.

Again, I admire the girl's bravery, but it's going to get her into trouble.

Father momentarily hesitates, the serving spoon held midair before he resumes filling his plate. I didn't miss the quick glance he afforded Grandmother before he continued serving himself.

"I told you it was an illusion spell, Poppy," snaps Grandmother.

"Is that what the one in prison looks like, or is he more like the pictures?" she continues. I'd all but forgotten she'd been in the carriage with me when Grandmother received news of the Magix's capture.

Grandmother clutches her fork, her knuckles turning white. "I can assure you the monster held in the prison is no threat to anyone."

"What will happen to him?" I ask. If my baby sister can be so bold, then so can I.

Much to my delight, I watch as an angry blush creeps up Grandmother's neck. "I would like to understand the sudden fascination with these creatures," she seethes. "Has it not been made perfectly clear they are a malicious parasite, that stole Kastor magic?"

"Perhaps it's because not too long ago, the girls saw with their own eyes, one such creature grab their sister and take her away," says Father, barely looking up from his meal. In that moment I could hug him.

"And where was her father?" accuses Grandmother, that flood of heat now at her cheeks. "While his daughter was being kidnapped before society's highest? Where was the man who should have been stopping it?" She pushes back her chair, throwing her napkin on the table before storming from the room.

Father doesn't even watch her leave, but continues to eat completely unperturbed. "Standing in front of her," he mutters to himself.

"She does have a point," says Rose quietly.

He does look up then, directly at my twin. “Do you blame me for Violet’s disappearance?” His voice is soft, and in no way is he being defensive.

“No,” she says, turning away.

“None of us blame you, Father,” says Daisy quickly.

He sets down his fork and looks at each of us in turn. “Perhaps I should have done more, but you have to understand it happened all so fast. And on a Brantahart!” He stops, appearing to consider his next words. “I want you to know I’m doing everything I can to ensure Violet is safely returned to us.”

We nod congenially, his smile acknowledging that he’s been forgiven this slight. Grandmother was right. Violet was taken and her father was nowhere in sight. But Father is also right. Bergamot, the man Violet was about to marry, did nothing to stop it either. I remember his blubbery face staring goggle-eyed when Violet was lifted into the Magix’s lap before the Brantahart leaped away.

Dessert is brought out, a thin sliver of fruit flan served with Chantilly cream, and with Grandmother still gone, I figure now is my chance.

“Father, Lily and I have a charity visit planned for Stranglewood tomorrow,” I say in as regular a tone as I can muster considering what I actually *have* planned.

“Don’t miss dinner,” he says when he regards me. “Your Grandmother will have me flogged if she finds out I let you stay out too long.”

“Of course,” I say sweetly. “We’ll be seated here before the last dinner bell.”

I look across to Lily keeping my face as neutral as I can though my excitement unfurls inside me like a blossoming flower.

CHAPTER FIVE



The smell hits us the moment we disembark from the carriage, a fetid stench of unwashed bodies, old food, and excrement. I hope the latter is well taken care of but considering the hygiene of the place I can only assume it's how the prisoners are living, not the staff.

"Remind me again why I agreed to this?" asks Lily as we approach the entrance with our goodwill bundles. We've brought old clothes and food. I'm not sure how much will reach the prisoners, but it's the only excuse I have to get inside without raising suspicion.

We're greeted warmly and our efforts to assist those less fortunate congratulated. The governor isn't available, but the Marshall Guard, a human like the Guards, but senior to them in rank by the name of Mikol Kratas, accepts our call and after looking us up and down asks if we would like a tour. I'm not sure if he's assessing our looks or because we're Kastors.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Kratas," I respond eagerly. Smiling at Lily who is barely managing to feign interest, she gives me a look of indifference, hiding a yawn before Kratas indicates the direction for us to follow.

We're shown the Guard quarters, interrogation rooms, exercise yard, everywhere and anywhere except the cell blocks. "Perhaps you would like to see the women's wing?"

As the Marshall Guard leads us back through the prison towards the staff areas, I give Lily a less than subtle shove with my elbow, and though she regards me crossly, she remembers what the signal means.

"I heard you were holding a Magix here," she says, her voice full of concern. "Is that true?"

"It is, my lady," says Kratas. "But don't you fret, we have him well secured in isolation. The South Wing is reserved for inmates of questionable character. He's not allowed to mingle with the general populace, but remains confined in the basements. More for his own safety, of course."

“Of course,” she says with a beaming smile.

“Has anyone found out why he’s here?” I ask hoping to glean any further information he might have about my quarry.

“Hasn’t spoken a word since he was captured, my lady,” says Kratas, pausing at a large gate while he sifts through his ring of keys. “The Guards have had a good go of it, but he won’t make a sound. Even under torture.”

“Torture?” I question, my heart picking up its tempo. I shouldn’t be so concerned, he shouldn’t even be here, but I have to know if he knows about Violet. As improbable as it might be, I can only hope I get the chance to speak with him.

“I apologize, my lady, I did not mean to convey the atrocities of housing criminals, especially those who are considered foreign and dangerous to our respectable society.”

A loud clanging bell sounds, which is soon followed by a lot of shouting, mostly profanities, rising up from the prison’s bowels like a putrid fog.

“Oh, please forgive me, that will be signaling the end of shift.” He finds the key and fits it to the lock. “Allow me to escort you back. This is no place for ladies.”

This isn’t working. I had hoped to find out more about where the Magix was being kept, but it was perhaps naive of me to think I would be introduced, let alone shown to his cell.

With the gate unlocked, Kratas swings it open to allow us through, but suddenly goes pale when he sees something behind us. Turning, we’re exposed to the reason for his discomfort. Coming towards us, shuffling in chains that are shackled to his ankles and wrists, with a Guard either side, is the very Magix in question.

Head bowed, he’s led along the walkway, with his feet bare and wearing a pair of tattered trousers and a threadbare shirt that no amount of mending would be able to fix. Like Python, he has white hair, or it would be white if it was clean. The

tip of one horn has been chipped off, and I wonder to the extent of his torture while residing in Ecleshax's finest of establishments. His skin is blue, pale like an eggshell with mottled spots along his brow and cheeks in a darker, almost sky color. It only accentuates the bruises on his arms and legs, and the rivulets of dried blood that also stain his clothes. He's as tall as I remember Python to be, and when he eventually looks up, he regards me with soft, honey-brown eyes. In fact, he watches me the entire time he's taken past us before he's forced to look away.

"That's him," I murmur.

"Come, ladies, please let me accompany you well away from here," says Kratas, sounding mortified.

"Where are they taking him?" I ask, not caring for sensibilities anymore. I came here to see the Magix.

"Perhaps interrogation," says Kratas. "Or the governor may have requested he be brought up. His trial is to begin in a few weeks' time." We follow Kratas back out to the offices. "May I offer you refreshment? I'm aware such an ordeal can be quite harrowing to one's sensitivities."

"Thank you, that would be much appreciated," I say, hearing Lily's sigh of resignation.

Tea is served with tiny sandwiches and cakes and we sit in Kratas's office speaking of nothing in particular until one of the regular Guards enters and Kratas stands.

"I apologize, my ladies. Do excuse me, I shall be but momentarily detained while I sort out an issue."

I set down my teacup the moment he's out the door. Lily practically throws hers.

"Now's our chance," I say, standing.

"Chance to what?"

“Find the Magix.” I’m already at the door and checking the hallway. “Come on,” I urge her. “I need you as lookout.”

“You do realize you’re going to owe me such a phenomenal debt after this. You’ll be writing out my lessons for weeks!”

“Much as I’d love to,” I say, slipping from the room and taking a gamble that they have in fact taken the Magix to the interrogation rooms. “I’m afraid I would set you up for failure given everything I ever learned at the Academy was for Element of Water, and you, my dear sister, are Element of Earth.”

“Any excuse,” she mutters, but is close on my heels as we pass down another hallway and I can hear exasperated shouting. Someone is not getting the answers they want.

A door slams open and we press ourselves up against the wall. A Guard appears, but he’s facing away from us, then he stomps away before disappearing around the corner.

“You stand watch down there,” I whisper. “I’m going to see if I can find out if he knows about Violet.”

“This is insane, you know that don’t you?” says Lily, rolling her eyes as she heads off down the corridor, but I see her look into the room before glancing back at me worriedly.

My palms feel clammy, so I run them down my skirt before clenching them into fists, and make my way to the open door. If it’s not the Magix and happens to be some other random prisoner, this has all been for nothing. But Lily saw him, and she would have said otherwise.

The room has no windows, nothing to dispel the smell of strong body odor and uncleanness that hints at more than the need of a decent bath. Had it not been for the lanterns hanging from the ceiling and the candles in sconces, the room would be in total darkness.

He looks up when I reach the doorway, and I step into the room slowly, as though approaching a timid creature. His chains are secured by brackets built into a heavy wooden chair that's bolted to the floor. I don't know what magical powers this one has, but I'd rather not be on the receiving end of any of his spells. I'd only seen Python use magic when he was with Violet, and he may or may not have been responsible for putting those Guards at Twifton to sleep, so I dread to think what this one can do. What's heartening is he apparently can't shift heavy chains.

Since he was brought into the room, having initially seen him barely an hour earlier, he's been hit across the face a few times. One eye is threatening to swell shut, and there's blood trickling from his mouth.

"Do you know a Magix called Python? Do you know why he came for my sister, Violet?" I ask shakily. He might be in chains, but I still find his size oddly intimidating. I do sympathize with his plight, but I have a far more pressing agenda, and little time. I suck up all the courage I can muster and take another step closer.

At first, I don't think he's going to say anything, but he sits back in his seat, his irons clanking against his body.

"And here I thought you an angel finally come to release me from this abhorrent life," he says, his voice rasping. He spits out a glob of blood.

It's red. They bleed red.

I hurry to a small table situated to one side where a jug and cup sit. Pouring a small amount of water into the cup, I bring it to him. His chains are capable of sliding through the brackets, so he's able to take the cup from me with a dirty, calloused hand. He sips tentatively at first but must consider it drinkable because he drains the rest in one swallow, handing it back to me. I pour again, and though he holds out his hand, I hold back.

"My sister," I say again. "A Magix called Python took her. Do you know why?"

“He has need of her power,” he says, eying the cup. So he *does* know about it. Wait...

“But we have no power,” I argue. “We’re Kasted.” It makes a lot more sense that it was Python’s magic running through Violet. Is that what’s happening here then? Magix need a Kastor to channel their own magic?

He smiles, and my heart skips. He’s actually quite striking in appearance, and would be exceptionally handsome once cleaned up. It’s interesting how terribly wrong our textbooks recorded their looks while our frivolous romance novels were far more on point.

“We know Kastors are being taught untruths.” He lifts both his hands then, open and waiting for the cup of water.

Since there’s little resistance in his speaking to me, I hand it to him, and it’s emptied as quickly as the first.

“What untruths? What has that got to do with Violet?”

“Iris!” comes Lily’s urgent voice and she pops her head in the doorway so she can still watch down the corridor. “We have to go.”

“Please, tell me about my sister,” I demand urgently.

“Leave me, angel,” says the Magix. “But I am glad Python was successful.”

“Is he taking her to Duskmore? Will he keep her safe if they cross Torgotha?” I do wonder how Violet will manage in the desert wasteland if that’s Python’s intention. “Won’t they come back for you first?”

He shakes his head. “It’s too late for me. They know to go on without me.”

I place the cup back on the table then move to the door where Lily is making all sorts of urgent faces to get me out. She grabs my hand.

“What’s your name?” I ask as she begins tugging fervently at me.

He rewards me again with that smile. “Barracuda,” he says. “Take care, Iris Bloom.”

CHAPTER SIX



TT

Hurrying from the room, we make it around the corner and back to the Marshall Guard's office before he even knows we were missing.

The moment he comes back, I make my decision.

"Tell me, good sir, how might I arrange for more regular visits? It seems apparent the souls condemned to reside here could do with a margin of compassion."

Confused, he sits at his desk, regarding me warily. "My good lady, why on earth would you want to associate yourself with the likes of thieves and hooligans? Some have committed murder."

"Is it not our duty as the more upstanding and honorable class to lead by example and show some level of kindness to those destitute and in need of reform?"

"Stranglewood is not a resort. The very idea of prison is not to pander to their needs. This isn't a vacation, but punishment in the hope of deterring those who might otherwise consider offending."

"And yet offenses are still being committed," I say coolly. I'm well out of my depth here; a pushy young woman with no real social influence other than her family name, attempting to beguile a prison officer into letting her attend the prison on a regular basis.

Grandmother will have a fit.

He glares at me along his nose. "We do have a few committees who have pledged goodwill to the prison," he says stiffly. "Perhaps you should consider joining one of those if you're so inclined to lend your support."

"Oh, that would work very well," I say, my heart lifting as the next opportunity to attend the prison presents itself. "Would you know the name of one?"

He opens a drawer of his desk, fishing around what sounds like papers when he pulls out a crumpled pamphlet and hands it to me. “This one is quite a regular contributor and focuses on the plight of less fortunate Kastors.”

Taking the pamphlet, I stand, as does Lily.

“Thank you for your time, I look forward to meeting you again when I next visit with the...” I quickly scan the pamphlet and read the society’s title aloud. “The Kastor Care Committee for the Better Days Relief of Persons of Good Character Who Have Fallen on Bad Times.”

“Quite inspiring considering they spend their time on a bunch of questionable inmates,” says Kratas. “But we can only commend their work, if for nothing else than to fill their day.”

I straighten my back, clutching the pamphlet firmly. “Good day to you, sir.”

He breaks protocol by indicating that we show ourselves out and with Lily directly behind me, we leave Stranglewood, walking further towards the city to hail a carriage.

“He’s not wrong,” she says as I look along the street for a vacant carriage. “Persons of Good Character? In a prison? Wouldn’t it be good character that kept them out?”

“It doesn’t matter who,” I say waving as I see a driver heading towards us. “As long as I can get back into the prison without raising suspicion.”

“I think you’ve already accomplished that.”

“How so?”

“You asked him about the Magix, then made queries about visiting the place. By now word will have gone around the city letting everyone know

there's a Magix in their midst. And you have to know we're not the only family with daughters who grew up on a steady diet of romance novels crammed with notions of handsome Fae and unsuspecting heroines."

My hand drops as Lily's words sink in. I had been considering Grandmother's suspicions, but I have to admit she has a valid point. I'm hardly in it to find my fairy tale ending, I just want to know about Violet. I look at the pamphlet again. No, I have due cause to speak to the Magix, and from what I've heard, I'm the only one he's spoken to.

I read the pamphlet in more detail once home, and it helpfully advertises their schedule of events, with a prison visit due to occur in two days' time. Donations of clothing, blankets, books and food are welcome.

At least two days gives me time to organize some good will items. Lily and I had to scrounge around for the meager offering we took in the first place.

It's not until I'm sitting in the main parlor to paint that I realize he knows my name. Lily, of course, hissed it when alerting me to the Guards, and I guess he knew Violet's last name would also be my own since I'd told him she was my sister. With this realization comes the small thrill of how he said it. I repeat his words over and over in my head, the way he sounds, his deep tenor of a voice.

"Are you all right?" asks Lily, looking at me quizzically over the top of Father's morning paper which she pilfers every morning once he's finished with it.

"Never better," I say perhaps a little too enthusiastically with an added smile. I glance back to my easel, but I have no idea where I'd been about to place the next brushstroke.

"What did he say?" she continues, setting the paper down and finishing the last mouthful of her tea before she pours herself a fresh cup. "Did he say

anything about Violet?”

That brings me back to the present, and the reason I'd taken the risk to find him. I place the brush in the jar of water on the side table where I have my paint pans, and wipe my hands on my artist's apron.

“He said Python needed her, needed her power.” Which makes no sense.

“The power she used on Grandmother that night at the hotel? I thought that was Magix power because we're Kasted.”

“I thought that too.”

He'd smiled when I'd said that, when I told him we were all powerless. It would make sense they he perhaps knows something we don't. Trying not to get ahead of myself, I suppress the bubble of excitement threatening to unleash the hope that perhaps our powers might be restored. If it means we don't have to go through the unnecessary unions...

I ignore the bubble. I can't let myself cling to something I've only assumed to be possible. The Magix didn't actually say we had power.

I'm basing this all on a smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN



I here's news of Violet.

She was spotted at Torgotha, the border between Ecleshax and Duskmore. A terrible place that everyone knows to be a death trap. My stomach sinks to my shoes, turning my legs to water while my heart flutters like a windswept leaf. The message said she'd been taken through, that the Magix with her dragged her inside. Is he leading her to her death?

I should have asked Barracuda more questions, demanded he tell me where she was being taken, and would she be kept safe. It's been months since she was taken, and it's taken them this long to reach the border.

But by the time we received word, Violet could already *be* dead. My desire to know more, to understand why becomes an urgency. I want answers *now*!

"Could she really be dead?" asks Rose, as we sit in the gardens at Bloominance Manor with tea. Summer has given over to fall, but it's still warm enough to enjoy the outdoors. The trees are already beginning to change, but the gardener and his staff sweep up any leaf that dares mar the impeccable lawns and flowerbeds.

"How can you say that?" asks Poppy, her eyes frantically seeking me out to allay her fears.

"There's no point in speculating," I say coolly. "Until we have more information, we are to believe our sister is alive and well, understood?"

Much to my surprise, they all nod in solemn agreement. I just wish my words gave me the same level of confidence.

After dinner, I'm about to mount the stairs leading up to the bedrooms, and my own sanctuary, when Grandmother corners me.

"Iris," she says. "Might I have a word?"

I hardly have a choice, but if she has further news of Violet, I'd rather hear it. I follow her into the sitting room off the main entry hall.

"Is everything all right?" I ask politely. I do my best not to think that the worst has happened and it will be left to me to pass any bad news onto my sisters.

Grandmother indicates that we sit, and my next thought is that she's going to tell me my wedding is all prepared and I'm to be married in the morning. It's crazy since I haven't even gone for my first dress fitting, but I wouldn't put it past her.

"Let me start by saying that what is discussed here is to remain between us. There's no need to concern your sisters with information that will only cause undue worry."

I give a hesitant nod, but more because I'm unsure as to what her motives are rather than sharing any details she'll divulge. "Of course."

"Good," she settles further into her chair before aiming those piercing eyes on me. Grandmother is Element of Wind, and her pupils are ringed with a circle of yellow, the same as Daisy. But where Daisy's eyes shine like sunlight, Grandmother's eyes give her a decidedly predatory appearance. "As we're all well aware, Violet was last seen at Torgotha, and I don't need to explain what that could potentially mean. However, further to her being seen, we also know the Magix took her into Torgotha, but we have no knowledge if she survived."

I do my best to remain composed, but I can't stop the tears burning, nor when they well up. Blurring my vision before they spill down my cheeks. I search for a handkerchief to blot them away. I refuse to believe Violet's dead. There's no way Python took her to her doom at Torgotha. I know Kastors are unable to cross the border, and there's the whole situation of

how Magix *can* cross. But the way he looked at her in the hotel bedroom that night, was not the look of a man seeking to kill. Barracuda said Python needed her, and I can only assume he needed her alive and would have done his utmost to protect her.

“I know this is most distressing,” Grandmother continues in a tone as though merely advising me of inclement weather. “But of greater concern is the Magix we hold in Stranglewood Prison.”

“How is *that* of greater concern?” I ask incredulously. Violet could be dead, and she’s worried about Barracuda?

Grandmother stares at me, perhaps realizing what she’s said. “The concern, Iris, is when an attempt was made to extract information from the Magix, he gave us nothing as to why your sister was taken to Torgotha. It’s apparent her abductors wish to take her to Duskmore, but we don’t know *why*. The only thing that gave any indication that the Magix here had even heard us was his reaction to hearing they reached the border.”

So, they don’t know Python took Violet because he needed her power.

Not that she has any, but that’s another conversation.

It seems he’s not spoken to anyone at all, and only gave me the few crumbs he did when I found him in the jail. If nothing else, at least he knows his people made it. But as for Violet, I have to believe they had some means of keeping her safe.

“I suppose he came to realize that he was truly trapped here, that his people left him behind.”

“Perhaps,” says Grandmother. “But he did finally speak.”

She pauses, and I wait for her to continue, but I can see she’s watching me, gauging my own reactions to all this information. I have to be careful.

“What did he say?”

“He said he would only speak to one person.”

Again she stops. My brows crease in consternation. Does she want me to ask at every turn? “Who?”

“He specifically asked for you.” Once more she deliberates, her eyes never leaving my face. What she can’t see is the sudden racing of my heart.

“Me?” I ask in alarm, my mind also running through the possibilities of what this could mean. “Why does he wish to speak to me?”

“I was hoping you could answer that. How is it he knows your name, and why he has this interest in you? That’s two granddaughters of mine entangled with these vile creatures. I want to know what’s going on!” Her previously calm countenance is flushed and flustered and clearly frustrated that she knows nothing as to what *is* going on.

That makes two of us.

Sure, when I went and spoke to him, I wanted to know what happened to Violet. I still have questions because he wasn’t all that forthcoming with answers.

“He asked for me by name?”

“Unless you know of another Iris Bloom,” she snaps. “Against my extreme better judgment, it has been arranged that you will attend the prison tomorrow. I will give you a list of questions to ask. I want answers.”

“A list? You’re letting me see him?” I can’t believe she’s letting me go.

“Much to my absolute dismay, he advised that he would only speak to you.”

“Oh.” My heart’s rhythm hasn’t altered in the slightest, my pulse galloping like a frightened wild horse. I’m going to see the Magix, and Grandmother is allowing it. I’m still trying to fathom why me, but then perhaps I’ve been the only kindness he’s seen since being captured. I gave him water. Maybe he thinks he’ll win me over and use me as a means of escape. Though I don’t see how.

“It was argued, but when it became clear you were the only means of getting it to talk, I agreed, albeit reluctantly. He will, of course, be heavily restrained.”

“I see.”

“I will accompany you to Stranglewood, and we will see then as to whether you must see him alone.”

Alone? Alone with the Magix. Alone with Barracuda. Goosebumps flush across my arms and chest, but I maintain control and simply nod.

“If he’s requested that I speak with him alone, then there will be little gained by you being there.”

Her eyebrows rise. “If it can be made to see reason, then I would rather be with you.”

Of course she would want to be there, but if I’m to get anything out of him, she’s the last thing I need.

I raise a placating hand. “There’s no sense torturing him further when so far he’s given you nothing.”

She’s deliberating, her mind calculating to try and figure out how she can be there with me while I speak to him. She seems to come to some internal conclusion as her face settles and she regards me contentedly.

“If you’re able to gain the information from him, then all will be well.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



“Remember Iris, I need you to ask these questions of the creature,” says Grandmother tapping the top of her boiled egg with her teaspoon to break it. We’re breakfasting early, before any of my sisters are up so we can get to the prison first thing. She lays a sheet of paper next to me and I take my eyes off my own breakfast to glance at it. It’s quite a list.

“Why was Violet taken, where is she being taken, how many spells he’s cast, the strength of his magic, how do Magix use Kastor magic,” I say reading out a few of the neatly scribed questions. “Do they intend to breed her?” I look up, my cheeks flushing hotly. “I’m *not* asking him that.”

“We need to understand their intentions,” she says after finishing her mouthful. “We’re having a hard enough time trying to reestablish Kastor magic without our efforts being tainted by Magix blood.”

“Grandmother!” In spite of my education, it was perhaps the romance novels that enabled me to view Magix in a different and far less prejudiced light than our textbooks. A notion helped along when I actually met one. “What’s not to say that by joining with them we *do* manage to restore our magic?”

“What a preposterous notion,” she scoffs. “We’re quite capable of restoring it ourselves.”

“Yes, and we’ve had so much evidence of our success,” I mutter rolling my eyes in disgust. Utterly absurd.

After breakfast, Grandmother and I take the carriage to Stranglewood. The butterflies in my stomach have grown to full birds by the time we enter the drive and stop in front of the prison.

Alone with Grandmother in the carriage for the journey to Stranglewood is one big tedious lecture of what I should ask, what to ask if certain answers are given, and reiterating that I obtain information regarding the Magix’s purpose in being here. Anything and everything we could possibly talk about. I almost want to ask if he’s read any of our ridiculous romance novels.

The trees that line the streets are turning with the change in season and many a golden leaf is being swept along the road.

“I can’t stress enough, Iris, how crucial it is we learn of the Magix’s purpose in being here. Why was Violet taken? And it concerns me greatly, this interest he has in you. Is there a plot to have you also taken to your death at Torgotha?”

“I hardly think so,” I say, only just stopping myself from rolling my eyes. She can be so macabre when she wants to stir up drama.

“How are we to know? I’d like to go in with you to get some answers.”

“And what then if he clamps up tighter than an oyster the moment you step over the threshold? Wouldn’t that be a roaring success,” I say sarcastically.

“But why you? Why this sudden interest in *you*?” she continues. “First Violet, now you? Have they been watching us, watching the family? And how long for?”

“You’re speculating,” I say witheringly. This trip feels like forever. “Maybe he found out who I was when he was with the Magix, before he was captured. We don’t know that he didn’t meet Violet.”

“And that’s what you need to find out,” she snaps. “Who’s to say what they’ve been planning. And to think my precious family is at the center of it all.” She lapses back against the carriage seat, her eyes staring out the window, her mind an apparent whirlwind of what ifs, and hypothetical scenarios.

When we arrive at the prison entrance there’s already a group of women gathered, and I recognize them as The Kastor Care Committee for the Better Days Relief of Persons of Good Character Who Have Fallen on Bad Times. I was meant to be joining them, but instead I’m on some puerile quest to extract information from a Magix.

There's a chill breeze when I step out of the carriage and follow Grandmother to the visitor entrance, the same door Lily and I were admitted into when we came a few days ago.

"Ladies, welcome," says the Governor of Stranglewood, Mr. Oleander Enro, a Kastor without title, but being Kastor he holds a position of relatively high profile. "Madam Bloom, such a pleasure to have you here as always. Lady Bloom, welcome."

"Mr. Enro, we don't want to waste any time, I assume the prisoner has been made ready for our visit?"

"Indeed," he says, smiling. "Now I am in total agreement that Lady Bloom *not* be subjected to him alone as that would be far too dangerous."

"I, too, share your sentiments," says Grandmother nodding sagely. "Surely we can get the thing to talk regardless of the company?"

Enro shares in her nod. "We have means of...encouragement, shall we say."

"He won't speak, and you'll be hurting him for nothing," I say pointedly.

"Hush Iris, if all it wants is for you to be there, then you will be there."

"To witness these thugs beating him?" I glare at her indignantly. "I want no part of it!"

Grandmother's steely gaze settles on me. I keep my chin up, but the birds in my stomach are turning to ice. "You will do as you're told," she hisses.

My heart twists. I just know Barracuda won't speak if I'm not there by myself. They'll beat him and torture him and I won't be able to do a thing. He has the answers I need to find out what's happening with Violet, but this was never how I expected to find out.

I'm taken to see him with Grandmother's hand firmly around my wrist, dragging me to the room with both Mr. Enro and a Guard as escort.

It's a similar room to the one I initially found him in, but this one has a wall of all manner of contraptions hanging within reach. I want to be sick.

They're instruments of torture.

CHAPTER NINE



Barracuda sits in the center of the room, his wrists and ankles bound to the and legs of a chair. Head bent, his hair falls in filthy tendrils, his horns grimy. His clothes are in no better state, and I can see still more fresh bruising mottling his cool blue skin.

He lifts his head when we enter and I see him take in all of us as we troop in single file. Then his eyes settle on me.

“I said alone,” he murmurs, his voice gruff.

“You requested Lady Bloom to attend, she is in attendance,” says Enro. “You will answer her questions, or remain silent and suffer the consequences.”

He doesn’t respond to that and I end up looking to Grandmother for guidance. She merely glances at the paper I hold.

With his eyes still on me, I refer to Grandmother’s sheet of questions. My mouth goes dry and I feel a slight tremor in my hands. I don’t want to do this; I don’t want this for him.

“Why was Violet taken?” I ask reading off the first question. He doesn’t answer, and I didn’t expect him to. “Where is Violet being taken?” I continue, a small shiver running through me when our eyes meet.

But Grandmother is getting impatient and snatches the paper from me. “How are you using our magic?” she demands. “Do you intend to breed her?”

He doesn’t blink, doesn’t move, his eyes stay on me though I want to sink into the ground at Grandmother’s intrusive question. It’s all I can do, hold him in my gaze. Those honey-gold eyes are softly comforting in spite of the situation we’re in, and the commotion of my grandmother losing her temper beside me.

“Get it to speak,” she barks at Enro. He nods at the Guard who steps up to him and punches him squarely in the face.

I gasp at the blatant violence, Barracuda's head whips back and blood trickles from his nose when he straightens. He finds me again, his eyes no less consoling.

The Guard punches him again, and a third time until he's flexing his hand and shaking off his own pain. He now has blood at his mouth and a gash across one cheek, but he doesn't say a word.

"He's not going to talk," I say desperately. "There's no sense in hitting him."

"He will be made to speak," says Grandmother. "Try something else," she says to Enro.

"Get her out of here," Barracuda murmurs through the blood and spit flooding his mouth.

I step forward. "Wait, no. Nothing will work. If you all leave, he will talk to me."

"No granddaughter of mine is going to be left alone with a savage Magix." She nods to Enro who indicates to the Guard with a tilt of his jaw that he step it up. Little does she know I've already spent time alone with him. When we first met.

"No," I say, trying to put myself between everyone and Barracuda, but Grandmother grabs my wrist and pulls me aside.

"Don't be a fool, girl," she snarls. "We can get this creature to talk, we just have to find the threshold."

I yank my arm out of her grasp. "Until he's a bloodied pulp on the floor? This isn't working. Let me speak to him alone."

"We would be right outside the door," says Enro. "If anything were to happen, we could—"

“I’ll tell you what isn’t happening,” says Grandmother. “Iris being left alone with this foul creature.”

“He made his terms,” I say, trying to make her see sense. “He’ll speak if I can do so by myself.”

“Continue,” she says, ignoring me.

“Get her out!” Barracuda growls.

The Guard takes a length of cord from the wall and goes to stand behind him. He doesn’t flinch, but grunts when the cord is suddenly around his neck with the Guard pulling firmly. His eyes find mine.

I’ve heard of garroting, mostly in books, but seeing it first-hand brings a whole other level of disturbance. In moments, Barracuda’s face turns red while he struggles to breathe.

“Stop it!” I say urgently. “Stop it this instant!”

The Guard is pulling hard, but eventually lets go and Barracuda pitches forward, coughing and taking in great gasping breaths.

“Again,” marks Grandmother.

No!” I cry, but the Guard begins pulling on the garrote, forcing Barracuda back and making him jerk in the chair. His hands clutch desperately at the arms and his feet struggle against the bindings at his ankles. “Stop this at once!” I shout, hurrying forward I give the Guard a shove. Off balance, he lets the cord go and again Barracuda is left spluttering and fighting to get air.

“Iris!” balks Grandmother.

“Enough! I won’t stand for this. He’s not going to talk with all of you in the room. Get out! Now!”

“Iris, you have no auth—"—

“You would have him incapacitated when he’s our only link to Violet. Get out and let me ask him where she’s been taken. You might find you get your answers a lot sooner than this barbaric nonsense.”

My grandmother glares down her nose at me, her arms crossed and I can see she's struggling between accepting my logic or seeing Barracuda suffer further.

“Maybe we should give her a chance,” says Enro quietly.

I’m glad the Governor at least can see their tactics are futile. Perhaps there’s some small shred of decency in his conscience.

Jaw working, my grandmother doesn’t move her eyes from me, and though I’d like to think it’s a battle of wills, I also know I can’t very well stop her if she decides to continue torturing Barracuda.

“Five minutes,” she says between her teeth. “If I hear so much as a peep of trouble...”

“I’m well aware you will burst in here in less time for a heart to beat,” I say, allowing myself to feel the slightest sense of relief that I’ll be able to speak to Barracuda alone.

Her glare then falls to Enro as she thrusts the page of questions back at me. With a subtle nod to the Governor she files out of the room first followed by Enro and then the Guard. I close the door after them, and give myself a brief moment to steel my nerves before I turn back around.

CHAPTER TEN



“ ”

“**A** lone at last,” says the gruffly croaking voice of the man behind me.

I turn to face him, my heart doing all manner of back flips to see him tied to the chair, his tangled hair spilling over his bruised and bloodied face.

He shakes his head in an attempt to clear the hair, but it’s mostly stuck to the blood. He’s never been a threat to me, not when I first met him, but I hesitate nonetheless. He flicks his head again, still trying to clear his vision since the hair is across his eyes, stuck fast in the blood dribbling down his chin and in the savage cut made across his cheek.

Tentatively, as though approaching a startled horse, I slowly step up to him and gently pull the tendrils back, the white strands become stained with red.

“Are you terribly hurt?”

“Not as badly as I perhaps look,” he says. “Nothing feels broken.”

As close as I am, I can see the damage done to his face. His nose still bleeds and the Guard split his lip, and there’s that wound on his cheek when he was hitting him. I try to assess his throat, but other than a line of bruising, I can’t really tell if it hurts to speak or swallow.

I rummage for my petticoat, tearing a strip from the hem. Adepelle will be sore about it, but I’ve plenty of others. There’s a jug of water on the side table and I use it to soak the cloth before I carefully begin dabbing away the blood. He keeps still as I work, turning his head as I need.

“I’m sorry they’re treating you so poorly,” I say aware that he’s probably suffered a lot worse before this.

“The moment I was captured, I knew I would be subjected to whatever punishments your authorities considered suitable to fit my crimes.”

“You’re a long way from home in a foreign prison, I would think that punishment enough.”

“Then you have a kindness I have not yet experienced here.” Those soft golden eyes look to me and something shifts, causing my hand to still momentarily. I rouse myself, focusing on my task, wiping away the worst of the blood and making sure he’s not continuing to bleed.

“I’m expected to ask you several questions,” I begin, placing the bloodied cloth on the table. There’s no cup, so I bring him the jug and help him take a drink from it. “I was told you asked for me, that it was only me you would speak to.”

Thirst slaked, he regards me with a look I can’t define. “You’re not the one demanding I tell you of my purpose in Ecleshax. You only asked after your sister. Everyone else here believes my intentions to be with regard to Kastor magic.”

“But taking Violet was your purpose. I know you have need of her power that I’m not even sure exists. I’m concerned for her welfare, and perhaps selfishly if I’ll ever see her again.”

“I know your sister is our only hope.”

His admission is startling. “Only hope?” I ask. “I don’t understand when we are little more than, well, human when it comes to our power.”

He doesn’t say anything but he moves his hand so the palm faces upward. An invitation that I hold it. I reach, aware that I’m trusting a man I know nothing about, but since he holds all the answers, I’ll just have to take the plunge and see if I can learn more of Violet’s fate.

His fingers are cold, but there’s a strength when they curl around my hand. He doesn’t squeeze, but he grips me firmly.

“Can you feel it?” he asks softly.

“No, I—” Wait...what is that? Something begins to unfurl inside me, like the moment the water begins to refill a stream after it’s been dry.

“Say a spell,” he says all the while watching me.

Confused, I regard him but there’s no denying that *something* has happened.

“But I have no magic.”

“Say a spell,” he repeats.

Since my Element is Water, I look to the jug on the table and begin drawing my spell in front of me like I have hundreds of times in school, not expecting anything to eventuate. When I add a few incantations, a thin stream like a thread of water appears, molding to the pattern I’ve been creating, and I almost falter.

I yelp, pulling back and yanking my hand from his grasp. Glaring at him with what I hope is an expression that he gives me an explanation, he merely smiles.

“What is going on?” I demand.

“Keep going,” Barracuda murmurs.

“I want to know what—”

“Try again,” he says patiently.

Clenching my fists, I consider refusing him until he tells me what’s happening, but since this is the first time I’ve ever seen the power of Element of Water, I’m also just as eager to see more of it.

I slip my hand back in his and he gives a slight nod that I continue with my spell. It’s the first that came to mind due to its simplicity.

Regaining my focus I continue, excitement bubbling in my chest, my hands shaking, but I maintain the spell as it forms fully in its pattern before I send it to the jug. The water leaps from the vessel and begins to swirl in a continuous loop directly above it.

“Ha!” I cry in elation. “I’m doing that?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Not you?”

“It’s all you.”

“It’s just a simple one to manipulate water,” I say, but I’m fascinated that this is what my power looks like. This is what it would be like to truly be a Kastor.

“Water is your Element,” says Barracuda. “As it is mine. You have power, Iris; I am the means for you to tap into it.”

“Really?” I say, almost gasping. The spell we saw Violet use on Grandmother at the hotel was her own as well.

“While in Ecleshax, yes. My own power is limited here, but together the magic can be brought forth. I can teach you.”

I know I’m smiling, I can’t help it, this is the very reason I am to be married to Clem, to create this. But all the while I need to be with Barracuda. The realization causes me to lose focus and the water drops from its swirling pattern, splashing over the table and flagstones.

“I did design a lot of spells while at school. I don’t even know if half of them will work. Will I be able to try those too?”

He’s smiling now, in spite of his circumstances, and it’s infectious. I’ve never felt so exhilarated. “That might be difficult with me locked up in

here.”

“Oh, of course.” All my hopes and excitement drop through me like a stone. I let go of his hand and step back. It had been such a wonderful discovery, but one I can only experience in this moment. “For a brief second, I saw a whole other life for myself.”

“Your authorities seem to think it was Python who sent those Guards to sleep when he escaped.”

“That was Violet too, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, and being Element of Mind, her magic is extremely powerful.”

“That’s why Python needs her, because she’s Element of Mind,” I guess that makes sense. “But he took her to Torgotha.”

“She is safe. I was able to procure the means for her to safely travel through before I was captured.”

“How? We’ve always been told that Torgotha is a death trap for Kastors.”

“It’s partially why I’m being held here. Not only am I being charged for trespassing in Ecleshax, I took something of significant value. A stone.”

This is what my grandmother wants, what her demanding questions asked for. “A stone? A stone for what?”

“It’s called a Hiraeth Stone; there’s one for each Element. They are extremely powerful and it’s what will have enabled your sister to travel safely through Torgotha.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I'm relieved. Violet is safe. I'm still no closer to finding out why Python needed her - other than for her power - but at least I know that she made it safely through Torgotha. That formidable wall has been a part of our education since we began at Ospepper's Academy. In a similar thread to learning about stranger danger, and look both ways before crossing a street we were warned to keep well away from Torgotha because to enter it meant certain death.

I remember the boys in class boasting how they would overcome Torgotha's power, but every so often we would hear news of someone foolish enough to try, never to return, or their body found as though the wall regurgitated their remains. Because that's all there was left...

Remains.

It's enough for me to know Violet is alive and safe. I would dearly love to see and speak to her again, but from what I witnessed between her and Python, she's found a man who loves her as much as she seemed to love him.

The door crashes open with Grandmother almost throwing herself into the room. She first glares at Barracuda, then at me as though expecting to have burst in on us doing something untoward. Or at least she would have expected it of Barracuda.

"Is the time up?" I ask.

"Well?" she says ignoring my question. "Where is she? Why was she taken?"

"Oh," I stand as tall as I can with my hands behind my back. "He hasn't told me."

“Those were the questions you were meant to ask,” her voice is rasping with frustration, her face reddening with exasperation. “Has it said anything?”

“He’s advised me that Violet is safe,” I say simply.

“Safe?” she squawks. “She won’t be *safe* until she’s back in Embervale and married to Lord Swunt. Any other situation and she is in terrible danger.”

She grabs my wrist and yanks me out of the room, striding along the corridor towards the prison exit.

“Make sure it understands that the further delays it causes, the more pain it’s going to feel,” she growls at the Governor who is trying to keep up beside her. “Iris and I will return tomorrow to see if your means of persuasion have worked.”

“Do not beat him,” I say, trying to pull my arm free, but Grandmother has a viselike grip.

She stops suddenly, turning me with a vicious yank of my arm, making me wince.

“For every moment it refuses to talk to you the result will be excruciating pain. Either you get it to talk or I will turn its body into a bloody pulp, is that clear?”

“Beating him senseless will only clam him up further. He told me Violet is safe, can’t we be satisfied that at least we know that?”

“I want her found and I want her squared away with Swunt. There is no compromise.”

She storms off again with me in tow.

“Madam Bloom,” says Enro. “Perhaps we should give Lady Bloom a day or two more? She wasn’t in there for very long before you—um—before she was interrupted. If the Magix told her that much, perhaps he is willing to tell her more.”

“Do whatever it takes,” she snaps. “It might be more inclined to speak if it knows what’s to follow should it not say anything of use.”



I don't know how many times Grandmother wishes for me to repeat the conversation I had with Barracuda, but one thing's for sure, I've kept the magic out of it. If she were to learn that I can perform my spells I don't know what that might mean for him. Though I'm well aware it might save me from having to marry Clem, I just can't shake the feeling that Barracuda would suffer all the more at her hands.

"I don't understand how you gleaned so little," she says, her exasperation clear in her voice as we make our way back to Bloominance Manor in the carriage. "You were in there a good ten minutes. He asked to speak to you, why then would he refuse to speak?"

"I still need to build a rapport. He only knows me by name. And perhaps because he knows I would have to relay everything he said to you," I say shortly.

"Well of course, I hardly think it would have made the deal blindly, thinking you would be allowed to keep the information to yourself."

"Then I don't know what else to tell you. That's what he said. Violet is safe."

She makes a frustrated noise. "Yes, I know this, he was the one apprehended for taking a Hiraeth Stone."

"A Hiraeth Stone?" I say feigning the knowledge that Barracuda already gave me.

"Yes, it took a Hiraeth Stone, that's what they needed to get Violet across. So my concern is their purpose for taking her in the first place."

"Unless you give me more information, I might be asking questions you already know the answers to," I say, feeling my own frustration gather in a hot ball. What else is she hiding? I might be keeping my own secrets, but

mine stem from self-preservation. Grandmother is only about ambition and what she needs to do to climb the Collective ladder to achieve her goal of obtaining a seat as an Elder.

“I gave you a list of questions,” she says primly. “Stick to those and I’ll get the answers I need.”

I fall back against the carriage seat and glare out the window.

“Now, tell me again from the beginning exactly what the Magix told you.”

My frustration erupts in a loud and grating sigh. “The story won’t have changed no matter how many times I tell it.”

“Please do not utter that noise again, it’s most unbecoming and extremely unladylike. Besides, you may have forgotten a detail, and repetition helps with the recall.”

“My recollection of the conversation is quite sound. It wasn’t for very long, and he wasn’t all that forthcoming with answers for your questions.”

“I see.”

Seeing Grandmother in a temper is truly a sight to behold, and quite a terrifying one at that, but I sometimes would prefer the tantrum to the controlled silences she has, like the pending eruption of a volcano.

“Tell me, Iris,” she says in a voice that’s as threatening as it is soft. “What of your own questions that you asked it?”

“What?”

“You say it gave you little in response to *my* questions, but what of your own curiosity? I know you’re just as concerned about your sister as I am, so what did you ask it to allay your own fears that Violet is in fact safe and well?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say hoping I haven’t given some detail to lead her into what actually occurred. I haven’t said anything about Violet having power, but did I say something that Grandmother has latched onto?

“It’s never sat well with me that it insisted on only speaking to you.”

“Perhaps because he knows I’m not going to beat him,” I say, then hoping to divert the conversation and Grandmother’s question. “Why torture him more?”

“You really have no idea what it’s violated by coming here to Ecleshax and stealing from us, do you?”

“I know he seems harmless.” Other than the fact that he can bring about my magic.

“Fool girl,” she says. “If they can travel to Ecleshax and simply snatch away whomever they choose, what’s to say they’ll stop at your sister? What if they decide to target our leaders?”

“Your opinion of them is certainly changing. I didn’t think you considered them to be so organized.”

“It took a small group to take Violet. One radical soon becomes two, then three and then a group. They don’t have to be organized; they just have to have a strong enough belief in their agenda.”

“Their agenda?” I say in as withering a tone as I can manage. “You think they plan to take over Ecleshax?”

“I don’t know what they intend, but that’s why you are to get it to talk.”

“He’ll only tell me as much as he wants me to know. I can’t force him to speak.”

A look that I've seen before, but never directed at me slips across her eyes.
Predatory and startlingly frightening.

"I believe you can."

CHAPTER TWELVE



TT

Hiraeth Stone.

I write the words in a careful note in my grimoire. I'd found my original notes and sketches for the spell I'd completed with Barracuda, adding in descriptions of the sensations and feelings using my magic conjured up inside me. Our teachers had never explained that emotion played a part of it, so I jot down as much as I can remember.

Closing the book I sit back in my chair and gaze out my bedroom window to the forest beyond the gardens that are just beginning to lighten with the pending dawn. Will I get the chance to try more of my magic?

Having barely slept, my eyes feel heavy the next morning and I stumble my way through getting dressed and breakfast, which I can scarcely stomach. Grandmother shepherds me to the carriage and before I know it, I'm once again being hauled to Stranglewood Prison to try and get answers from Barracuda.

I know it's futile. There's no point in me trying to have him talk. I have no clout, nothing of value that he might give up information to have returned, other than his freedom back to Duskmere. I know he's all but accepted his fate and he'll never see his homeland again.

When we reach the prison, we're greeted by the Governor and taken directly to the same room he was in the previous day.

The noise I make on seeing him is full of pity, disgust and horror. Whatever has happened between our visit yesterday and today, it was brutal.

Fresh cuts score his face and the one eye that was swelling has completely shut. Bruises cover his skin, darkening the blue to an almost mottled purple in patches that look painful. His hair is terribly matted and tangled and the smell of him in the confined space of the room signifies that he has not washed for several days, or more likely weeks.

“Was this really necessary?” I ask stepping towards him until Grandmother’s hand lashes out and she catches me by the arm.

“Of course it was,” she says with an unsettling note of satisfaction in her voice. “Well?” she says, looking to Enro. “What did you get out of it?”

“I’m afraid that once Lady Bloom and yourself left yesterday he didn’t utter a single word thereafter. I had several Guards work him, but he didn’t say anything further.”

She makes a noise of disgusted frustration.

“Then we shall try a different tact.”

“Different, Madam Bloom?” says Enro, sounding wary.

“Which of these instruments inflicts pain, but does the least amount of physical damage?”

“I’m not an expert in the act of interrogation, Madam. Let me have the prison’s surgeon brought in. Mr. Nedrarn can advise which instruments would best serve your purposes.”

“The prison surgeon?” I say worriedly casting my eye over the various gadgets lining the wall. Their collective appearance gives an overwhelming sense of one with a mind solely focused on inflicting pain.

Grandmother sighs impatiently. “Fine, I do require a certain result and I’d much rather not settle for trial and error if it can be helped.”

“Of course, Madam,” says Enro and sends our accompanying Guard to find this Nedrarn.

It’s an awkward few minutes of silence.

“You plan to torture him in front of me again?” I ask. Her hand is still holding my arm, but no matter how much I try to pull away, she simply tightens her grip. I’ve seen elderly people, and met several over my lifetime, but Grandmother, though still perhaps considered young since she’s barely in her sixties, is just as strong and capable as any woman half her age, or man for that matter.

“Perhaps seeing your distress will make it talk,” she says. “If it has such tendencies towards you, why not use that to our advantage.”

“What tendencies?” I say, confused. “There are no tendencies. I don’t know why he asked to speak to me.”

“You don’t think that he would be interested in the sister of the Kastor they took?”

“Then why not take me at the same time they took Violet?” I counter. Barracuda isn’t here to kidnap me, because surely they *would* have taken me at the same time.

“Your naivete in the ways of these creatures is startling, Iris. I would have thought you’d understand more given the books you were issued to study.”

“Books that showed a completely false representation of how Magix look? It actually makes me wonder what else was given over to inaccuracy. If the pictures were wrong, what of the words that went with them?” I gasp when her grip tightens even further.

“Since we’ve never had a specimen to study thoroughly, our illustrators are to be commended for their interpretation since they only had secondhand reports. But I’m not about to argue our history with you, Iris, you know it as well as I do.”

“No matter how untrue it might be,” says Barracuda.

We're all stunned into silence, even Enro, not that he was speaking, but there's definitely a stillness that overcomes us on the Magix speaking.

"It *does* talk," says Grandmother.

"You heard him yesterday, when he would only speak with me," I say.

"Yes, but in this instance, it's spoken of its own accord because it could no longer contain its emotion."

"Even those with no voice would speak out against the terrible lies Kastors are teaching their children," says Barracuda, his eyes fixed on Grandmother.

"And what would a simple, savage beast know of education and knowledge?"

I see him smirk, but not in mirth. It's pity.

"They're the ones who found a way to get through Torgotha," I say quietly.

She pulls me cruelly, her nails biting, causing me to wince. "They're nothing but savages, primitive and simple in their ways. The moment they lost contact with Kastors was the moment they fell into disrepute and struggle to make an existence for themselves in that barren wasteland they call home."

Barracuda's smile widens. "How little you know."

"If you do not tell me what it is I *want* to know, I shall—"

The Guard returns with Mr. Nedrarn, and he takes in the party of us in the small room of the prison. Dressed in a shirt and trousers, he wears a thick leather apron over them, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and a pair of circular spectacles.

"Governor," he says with a nod. "You needed my instruction?"

“Ah yes, Mr. Nedrarn, if you would be so kind as to advise Madam Bloom which of these instruments can inflict pain, but does the least amount of actual damage.”

“I would prefer the subject wasn’t visibly wounded, such as cuts and bruising,” clarifies Grandmother in a tone as though she were merely discussing the weather. “Is that possible?”

“It is, Madam, but when you remove that kind of aspect, the device becomes a little more complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“Oh yes, indeed. But I haven’t used it on a prisoner for quite some time. The Lightning Scythe is exceptionally effective. Terribly painful, and in most cases only results in a headache after, but certainly no physical damage that I’ve observed.”

“Excellent,” she says and I can in fact hear her glee which makes the situation even more dubious. “In that case, please organize to have the Lightning Scythe ready so we might actually get somewhere with this creature.”

“As you wish, Madam,” says Nedrarn and he dismisses himself to retrieve the device which means it’s not one of the contraptions on the wall. He has to set it up. This is not good. Not good at all. I’ve never read or heard about forms of torture, so my mind is running wild trying to determine what they have in store for the Magix.

Barracuda on the other hand seems resigned to his fate, sitting calmly as he is, strapped to the chair in the middle of the room.

“Just give me more time with him,” I implore. “I can still find out about Violet.”

“We’ve wasted enough time already. The longer we wait the further Violet becomes out of reach.”

“Here we are,” says the surgeon cheerfully, pushing a heavy cart back in. There’s a lot of wires sprouting from it like a terrifying plant, and several dials are in neat rows along a flat panel at the top. Hanging from the side of the cart are a number of long sticks of metal, each attached to the cart by a thick cord. “The Lightning Scythe,” he says with a flourish, proudly showing us his achievement. “Now, who’s this for?”

Before anyone answers, Grandmother steps forward. “Is it ready for use?”

Nedrarn takes hold of a crank and begins turning it in rapid circles while the needle of a dial swings from one side to the other. He then flicks a switch and the Lightning Scythe begins to hum with the distinct sound of crackling.

“Armed and ready,” he says, still jolly in spite of what he’s just delivered to us. Whatever it does, I know I’m not going to like it, and even less so when it’s used on Barracuda.

“Excellent, thank you, Mr. Nedrarn, that will be all,” says Grandmother, dismissing the surgeon even though Enro is Governor.

Confused, but compliant, he departs, not even seeming to be concerned that he’s left a *live* contraption in a room full of people. What if, I don’t know, it explodes or something?

Giving the machine a cursory once over, my grandmother seems to put together exactly how it works, simply by looking at it. She takes careful hold of the handle of one long rod hanging ominously from the side. The length of cord it’s attached to extends, and unravels as she steps towards Barracuda.

“Grandmother,” I say hurrying to her, and I reach to grab the rod, but her reflexes have her grasping my hand mid-stretch.

She jabs the rod directly into Barracuda’s side. It sparks and crackles loudly. Barracuda lets out a cry of pain, gasping for breath when Grandmother pulls it back, eying it with fascination, and unnervingly, delight.

“Stop it!” I yell. Barracuda is trying to clutch his side, with his elbow pressed against it since his hands are bound to the chair arms. He glares at my grandmother, their usual honey softness darkening to that of a threatened lion.

That’s when she does the unthinkable.

“What about now, Fae?” she says and swaps the rod from one hand to the other and holds it right in front of my face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“ ”

“**M**adam Bloom,” squawks Enro. “I must insist that you desist immediately. She is your granddaughter!”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at her,” says Grandmother. “He has his sights set on her; he plans to take her like that other one did Violet.” She hasn’t stopped glaring at Barracuda, but I saw his eyes widen the moment the rod was pointed at me.

“You think torturing me instead will get him to talk?” I say, and though I do take a step back, I’m blocked by the cart. I’d like to be as far away from the charged rod as possible, but I also don’t want to take my eyes off it to find a clearer path in case Grandmother does decide to use it on me. “If you so much as come within a hair’s breadth, you can say goodbye to your plans for restoring magic.”

“I don’t think so,” she says, still watching Barracuda. “I think this one cares for you enough that it will tell me what I want to hear so that I won’t inflict pain on you.”

I try to swallow, but my throat has clammed up. I can feel beads of perspiration forming along my brow and my hands are beginning to ache from holding them in fists for so long.

“Touch me and I will *never* marry Clem!” It’s the only card I have to play.

She turns to me then, but the rod drops. “You *will* be marrying Lord Blouting, be sure of that, dear girl.”

With the threat of the rod gone, I turn on my heel and leave, but not fast enough when I hear Barracuda’s cries following the crackling sparks of the horrible rod.

I take the carriage home alone and send it back to collect Grandmother. Never in my life have I felt so betrayed, just a pawn in her pathetic game to become Elder.

A soft knock on my bedroom door, and Lily peeks her head in.

“Are you all right?” she asks tentatively. “You raced up here the moment the carriage stopped.”

“Grandmother,” I say. If I say anything more, I’m going to lose it. As it is I can’t get the dreadful sounds of Barracuda’s pain out of my ears. It’s shredding at my heart, and I’m angry at myself for leaving him. I don’t understand why I’m feeling

so furious about the whole situation. He's one of those responsible for taking Violet, but he showed me my magic! Do I have to make a choice between my sister and my magic?

Without even asking why, she comes in, sits next to me on the bed and puts her arm around my shoulders. It feels strange to be comforted by my younger sister; surely being the elder, I should be comforting her. She rests her head on my shoulder, her glorious dark hair brushing along my back. My hair is still tied up from the day's outing, but it's such a soothing thing to feel hair along one's back, even that of my sister.

"Did you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." I don't know if I'm in shock, or if I'm just numb. I never would have thought our grandmother capable of such behavior. Have I been so truly blind to the seriousness of her ambition? She told me to keep the arrangement to myself, but I know I can trust Lily. Since the moment she agreed - although reluctantly - to accompany me to the prison, I know she is the one I can confide in and know she won't go speaking out of turn to the rest of the family. Especially Grandmother.

"That's fine," she says. "Whatever you need." She seems to have understood my need to simply be held, but now I feel compelled to tell her the truth, to let her know what our grandmother has the potential to do to us.

"No, I need to tell someone, Lily, and you're the one I trust."

"You know I won't tell anyone."

"I know," I say, smiling and putting my arm around her to squeeze her close.

"Not to get all snarky, but can the rest of this conversation be conducted without the hugging?"

I fail to stifle my laugh. "Of course," I say, releasing her as she does me. We kick off our shoes and move to sit cross legged on the bed. In spite of the age difference, with Lily only eighteen, she has a maturity that far exceeds her age, and a wisdom I'll forever wonder where she acquired it.

“It’s about the Magix, isn’t it?” she says before I can even start explaining.

“Yes,” I say with a nod. “He said I was the only one he would speak to. Grandmother was furious of course and even wrote out a list of questions she wanted me to ask. She thought she could stand there while I read them out, but Barracuda made it pretty clear that it was me alone or nothing.”

“You were alone with him, again?” Lily says, bouncing on the bed.

“There’s more to it than that,” I say, this time I hold her hands because I need to ground myself for what I’m about to tell her. “Lily, he showed me my magic.”

That stops her excitement in an instant. “Your what?”

“My magic, it was right there, right in front of me. I was able to conjure a spell and I made the water float above its jug, it was incredible!”

“Are you sure?” she says dubiously. “We’re Kasted.”

“I know! But remember with Violet at the hotel? It’s the Magix, if we touch, they can help us to channel our magic somehow. We *have* magic, we just can’t, I don’t know, reach it.” I’m so excited to be telling someone.

We all saw it first hand, but I can understand Lily being dubious. We’ve been Kasted our whole lives, so to suddenly be told we have power is a lot to accept.

“And what *of* Violet?” she asks stiffly, letting go of my hands and leaning back on them.

“Violet is safe,” I say, hoping to get her feeling as hopeful and relieved as I am.

“That’s part of the reason too that Barracuda’s in prison. He was caught stealing a Hiraeth Stone, that’s what enabled Violet to cross Torgotha safely.”

“A Hiraeth Stone, so Violet’s in Duskmore?”

“Well, yes, I expect so, but think about it. If Magix can help us get our magic back we no longer have to go through these dreadful marriages that will be for nothing.”

“You were able to move water?”

“Yes!” Now I’m the one bouncing.

“And we won’t have to marry?”

“No! Can you imagine? The Magix are the answer we’ve been looking for. Those Guards outside of Twifton when Violet ran off with Python. He didn’t send them to sleep, *she* did.”

“So let me guess,” says Lily sitting forward, her hands clasped as though in prayer, but she leans her chin on them. “You want to get back to this Magix so you can do more magic?”

“Definitely.”

“And Grandmother?”

“She doesn’t know, she can’t know, not until we figure out how to have our power without having to touch the Magix. If we have it on our own, then there is absolutely no reason to marry.”

“And how do you expect to see the Magix for these magic lessons? Is Grandmother still wanting you to ask him questions?”

I think about Grandmother’s actions in the prison, how she threatened me in front of Barracuda. I can’t return to the prison under that pretense anymore. It’s likely I won’t be allowed to be with him alone anymore anyway, since Grandmother has gone to extreme measures to get answers.

“I don’t know,” I say in answer to both Lily’s questions. “I mean, I could still go there with the Committee, but I can’t get to him. The place is locked up with Guards everywhere.”

“Then we need to find a different way of getting in.”

“How? It’s a prison.”

She taps the side of her nose and I’m close to rolling my eyes.

“Madam Clover Flunock,” she says conspiratorially. “*Née* Lady Clover Enro.”

“Oh my word,” I breathe.

Our good friend Clover is the daughter of the Governor.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The arrangement I had with Grandmother to question Barracuda dissolved moment she threatened me with the Lightning Scythe. No words have been exchanged, but I've made it quite clear with my silence, that I will no longer be attending the prison with her to do her bidding.

Whether she believes she went too far, I'll never know. I also know I'll never receive an apology.

On the other hand, I've made arrangements to meet with Clover, though it's distressingly almost a week before she can receive me. The baby had caught some sickness or other and she was refusing all visitors until the little precious was feeling better.

Standing at said precious's cradle, I muse as to whether children are something I'll ever truly want.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Clover gushes, dipping her hands into the cradle to stroke the infant's head, readjust the blanket, and fuss about her.

"Gorgeous," I lie with a beaming smile. We all know Clover birthed a human, and now seeing her firsthand, it can't be denied. Her eyes are distinctly brown, very brown with no ring of color to denote her parents' Kastor heritage. There should be a ring of red, but all I can see, and when Clover's back was turned I shoved my face in close to give the child a thorough inspection, is a deep beetle brown.

"Can you believe Spruce wanted to call her Sassafras? I mean, I understand it's his grandmother's name, but she's not ninety *yet*," she says in a cascade of giggles.

"But you ended up calling her Periwinkle?"

"A sweet as pie name, for a sweet as pie precious," she coos leaning into the cradle to kiss Periwinkle's brow. The baby responds with a loud sneeze and I

feel breakfast beginning to resurface when Clover is suddenly hurrying to the bureau of drawers. “Let Mommy clean up that mess.”

When the child is finally allowed to sleep, Clover takes me into the sunroom for afternoon tea. Fall is beginning to give way to winter, but with the trees all in their splendor it does make for a spectacular view. With the oncoming chill, it’s nice to sit in Clover’s glass conservatory to soak up some captured warmth since the sun has been out since late morning.

“And how have *you* been?” Clover asks. I know what she’s really asking, how have I been since Violet’s disappearance. Clover had been more Violet’s friend than mine, but I do recall her attending all our birthday parties, and vice versa. In fact any kind of celebration we had; Clover was invited to it. We were also Clover’s bridesmaids at her wedding to Lord Flunock since she had no other relatives that were suitable.

“Managing,” I say, pretending to smile to give the full effect of a grieving sister. I’m well aware Violet is fine. I’d love to see her and speak to her, but with Barracuda’s reassurance, and seeing first-hand how Python was with her I’m willing to allow a small part of me to believe she’s happy and safe.

“Of course,” she says in an overly soothing voice. “I can’t imagine what you and your family are going through.”

“We hope to be reunited very soon,” I say, wanting very much to end this part of the conversation and move on to my own motives for being here.

“Daddy said they were holding one of those beasts at Stranglewood. He’s certain to receive the death sentence. Such a terrible blight in our fair city.”

“About Stranglewood,” I say, trying very carefully not to divulge my intentions. “How often did you visit your father there?”

“Oh, mother never cared to take me, she said it was no place for children, ladies or madams.”

“You never saw where your own father worked?” My surprise is not hidden and I take a sip of tea to remind myself to keep my cool and remember why I’m there. Try a different tack. “Poppy has an assignment for school and she’s chosen to do hers on Stranglewood and its history. You wouldn’t happen to have any inside knowledge she could use?” It’s a terrible lie, but as much as I hate to deceive my friend, there’s higher stakes than her sensibilities.

“Oh, how quaint. Didn’t we have the best of times when we were attending Ospepper’s Academy?”

“Indeed,” I say, once again pinning my faux smile in place. Things might have settled to a neutral courtesy, but I have very clear recollections of Clover telling me to find someone else to play with. There was a distinct hierarchy at the school, and she considered Water to be a lower Element, like Leaves, while being Fire she felt she was more powerful, Kasted or not.

“I have a few of Daddy’s books about Stranglewood. I’d be happy for Poppy to borrow those if she likes.”

“You do?” I can’t believe my luck. Maybe this won’t be as difficult as first thought.

“Absolutely!” she says with a wave of her hand. “No trouble at all. Fire sisters need to stick together.”

“Thank you, Clover, that would be most kind and very helpful.”

Having been brought up to be a respectable guest, I continue to make small talk, not that I have to supply much since Clover holds up the lion’s share of the conversation, mostly about the baby. It’s then I realize that perhaps she’s a little bit lonely being holed up in this gigantic home with no one but the servants and her squalling daughter.

Soon enough, Periwinkle makes her demands known by screaming loud enough for us to hear at the other end of the house in the sunroom, from where

her nursery is situated.

“The nanny will reach her before me, but I know she’ll want Mommy.”

“That’s understandable,” I say, not understanding at all. I hold the three books Clover found for me and we give each other farewell air kisses before she hurries off to tend her screeching infant and I give the doorman a humble nod as he lets me depart.



After dinner, Lily and I hide away in my room, and begin to look through the books. They're all beautifully bound in soft leather with thick paper. We check the contents looking for any clues as to the entrances and exits of the prison.

"Here," says Lily triumphantly. She turns the book she's looking through towards me, her finger pointing to a floor plan of the prison. "I think it's an old delivery door, back before the prison installed its own kitchens. The day's bread and meals were brought to this door to be taken for distribution among prisoners and staff. It hasn't been used in well over a century, so it might have been taken out."

"But it's a start." I say considering the drawing of the prison. "It's on the basement level, that's where they keep Barracuda. Maybe he'll be in one of the cells here." I run my finger gently across the paper where a row of square cells are denoted on the page.

"You have to get inside first," Lily reminds me.

"Fancy going on another field trip?"

She practically deflates. "Are you kidding? You want to drag me back to that place again?"

"I can't go alone, Lil," I implore.

"I'd like to know exactly what I get out of this. You're becoming more and more indebted to me and I'm not seeing any reward so far."

"All right, all right," I say, rolling my eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want to see your magic."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Since we can still attend the prison under the guise of being with The Kastor Care Committee for the Better Days Relief of Persons of Good Character Who Have Fallen on Bad Times, we arrive with a spare blanket each. Unfortunately, there was no spare food or clothes we could bring without causing too much suspicion, but one of the maids gave us blankets in need of mending.

“Now what?” asks Lily, eying the Guard who’s walking along a balcony on one of the upper floors.

“The door was around the back, wasn’t it?” I hastily refer to our crude sketch, copied from the actual drawing in Clover’s book. “Yes, it’s around the back, we should be able to find it if we go around that corner.” I point towards the south end of the prison.

“Not that we don’t look at all suspicious,” says Lily.

“There’s plenty of people wandering about. It mightn’t be considered a reputable part of town, but at least we don’t stand out too much.”

“Not at all,” she says. “We’re just loitering outside the city prison with a drawing of it trying to figure out how to get in without being noticed!”

Aware she does have a significant point, I take Lily’s arm in my own, glancing this way and that with a friendly smile and the occasional nod to anyone looking our way, and calmly and serenely make our way towards the south corner.

“There,” I say as we walk. “Nothing to see here, just two sisters taking a morning stroll.”

“In the bleakest of weather and around the wart of Embervale’s ass!”

“What choice do I have otherwise?” I say in exasperation. “I know they’ll eventually kill him, but I’ll be damned if I let that happen without finding out about both Violet and my magic.”

“At least you’ve got your own needs covered. Poor man is going to lose his head, but hopefully we’ll know where Violet’s been stashed, *and* you’ll have mastered the Element of Water.”

We round the corner and continue to walk along the prison wall where it’s shaded by tall trees and slightly colder. It isn’t snowing yet, but the wind has a significant chill to it in anticipation of what is to come.

“When you put it like that,” I say, biting my lip in thought. Am I simply being selfish? Using the Magix for my own hopes and wants? “Well, I can’t exactly use my magic without him anyway.”

“Ah, good to know he’ll be granted a stay of execution because a Kastor has need of his abilities.”

“Lily.”

“What? It’s true, isn’t it? Maybe not the stay of execution, but have you considered how Grandmother might act if she were to learn you can conjure spells with his help?”

“I have considered, and that’s why I haven’t told her. I don’t trust her in the slightest to think her knowing would be a good thing. She certainly won’t allow me to have any association with him, least of all in that aspect, even if I need him for my magic.”

We come around the next corner to the back wall of the prison. A cloying smell, which I can only imagine would be a hundred times worse in summer, exudes from a deep ditch several yards from the wall’s base. It appears to be the receptacle for the prison’s refuse, and though I’d initially thought the prison smelled bad, this is a whole other level of stench.

“Delightful,” says Lily, covering her nose and mouth with the blanket she’s holding. “Why do I say yes to you? I must have completely lost my mind in that moment.”

“You said yes, because you love your older sister,” I say. “Look there, the door!”

Hurrying closer, we find a simple wooden door that probably hasn’t been opened in several years. Hanging on big iron hinges that are rusted with age I see the handle and below it a typical lock.

Curiosity overcomes me, and I give the handle a test. It doesn’t budge.

“You honestly thought that would work?” says Lily.

“I had to give it a try,” I say dismissively as I continue investigating the lock.

“It’s not going to open by the power of your mind. You’re not Violet.”

“No, but I do have a way to get in.”

The clerk directs us to sit on a couple of wooden chairs outside the Governor’s office while we wait for him to return from his lunch. Our blankets relinquished, as I told the clerk we were here as part of The Kastor Care Committee for the Better Days Relief of Persons of Good Character Who Have Fallen on Bad Times, I stare at the wall opposite in the hopes that I can pull this off.

“You really think he’ll let you speak to him?” whispers Lily beside me.

“I can only hope,” I say looking up and down the hallway. “Grandmother set this arrangement up, so I’ll see if I can use that to see him.”

“This will be interesting,” says Lily her head shaking.

“Lady Bloom,” says Enro when he comes along the hallway. Lily and I both stand. “Oh, and Lady Bloom, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“It would seem our grandmother’s tactics in attempting to extract information from the Magix were excessive and, as we both know, unsuccessful. In order to assist the Collective with their enquiries, I’m here on their behalf to hopefully gain further intel.”

“I see,” says Enro, looking from me to Lily and back again. I keep my back straight and pray I’ve schooled my features to look as stern and business like as I can muster.

“I hadn’t been told anything regarding further interrogations,” he begins, shepherding us into his office and gesturing to the chairs situated in front of his desk. “I’ve not received word from Madam Bloom that this was to take place today, either.”

“It would seem you were left in the dark with a lot of what my grandmother planned,” I say calmly, though my hands are sweating profusely and my stomach as twisting almost painfully. “I’m not at all surprised you haven’t been informed. Would you prefer I explained to her your reluctance to assist?”

He balks at that. “No, no, far be it for me to stand in the way of the Collective’s wishes.” He presses a button on his desk and a loud buzz sounds outside the office. The clerk who had initially seated us to wait, opens the door.

“Yes, Governor?”

“See to it that the Magix prisoner is brought to the interrogation room promptly.”

“Of course, sir.” He immediately disappears down the hall.

“This will take a few minutes; can I offer you some tea?”

“Thank you, tea would be most welcome,” I say. Anything to settle my nerves. But at least the first hurdle has been cleared.

Even after multiple sips of tea, my nerves refuse to settle, and I stumble through the awkward small talk with Lily giving me concerned looks. Eventually, and after what seems an eternity, the same clerk returns advising that the prisoner is ready.

“Excellent,” says Enro. “Now, it’s understood that Madam Bloom was quite against the idea that you speak to the prisoner alone—”

“Yes, but we both know how those interviews turned out,” I say hurriedly. The last thing I want is for the Governor to insist on being present. “He is more likely to speak if I am alone.”

Lily reluctantly agrees to stay in the Governor’s office, and Enro accompanies me to the interrogation room.

“You only need call should you wish to leave at any time,” he affirms with a nod towards the door.

I give him a nod in return, but my mouth is too dry for any words. I should have finished my tea.

A Guard opens the door for me and I step inside.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



He looks up when I approach, the door closing heavily behind me, and a look of surprise crosses his honey eyes.

“I was not expecting to see you again, angel,” he says. Some of his wounds are healing, but as always there are fresh ones to take their place.

“They’re still beating you?”

He shifts in the chair, the chains clinking with his movements. His hair is tangled around his horns and he’s covered in grime and sweat and filth.

“No more than usual.”

The same jug and cup are on the side table, and I bring him some water which he greedily gulps down.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for.”

“I don’t think I helped much last time. I mean, she hurt you.” My voice falters when I remember his screams of pain at the hands of my grandmother and the Lightning Scythe.

“You’ve come without your guardian, why are you here?”

“I—I—” I hesitate and almost pour myself a cup of water. “You know I want to know about my sister, and you can help me with my magic.”

“All that is true,” he says. “So will this be a regular occurrence then? You coming to see me strapped to a chair?”

“Oh, no, I mean,” I falter again, but this time I reach for him, unraveling his hair so it hangs about his face. It’s still in knots, but at least it might not be pulling. I then do as I did last time, but this time I came prepared with a cloth which I dampen and I begin wiping down his face.

He doesn’t say a word until I take up one of his hands and begin to scrub away the dirt between his fingers.

“You’re here to ensure I maintain some level of cleanliness?”

I look to him then, and my heart all but lurches in my chest. “It pains me,” I begin, unsure of what I mean to say. “That you’re here, alone, abandoned, injured...” I don’t know what I want to say. I’m here because of Violet and my magic, aren’t I? Where are the demands and questions that he tell and show me?

“You’re certainly the only one to have shown me this much kindness.”

I finish wiping his hands. “Will you tell me about my sister?”

He regards me for a moment, but seems to come to a decision because he settles back in the chair, as best he can, given his wrists are chained to the arms.

“Python, the Magix who took your sister, has a younger brother called Wolf. Several months ago, perhaps longer, Wolf was struck down by a curse. We don’t know why, and we don’t know by whom. We searched everywhere to find answers, but it seemed nothing would break it.” He pauses as though expecting me to interrupt, but I nod to encourage him to continue. “Then Python learned of a powerful Element of Mind Kastor who could perhaps break the curse. We were running out of time, Wolf was dying, so we made the journey to Ecleshax. Python went after your sister, and it was my mission to find the Hiraeth Stones.”

“They could have been anywhere,” I say. “That could have taken months, years even to find them.”

“We had clues,” he says. “They used to belong to Magix, and we understood through various stories, histories learned as to where they would most likely be kept.”

“I’ve never even heard of Hiraeth Stones before I met you.”

He nods at that. “A close-guarded secret considering their power, and that only six exist here. But we took the chance that the stories held some truth to them. What choice did we have? Wolf was going to die if we did nothing.”

“Your gamble paid off, you found them.”

“Yes, and sent the Element of Mind Stone with my team so Python could get your sister to Wolf.”

“And you were captured.”

“I wanted to avoid it, but it was all I could do to save the mission.”

“And they left you here,” I say softly, but a small part of me is thrilled that he trusts me enough to have told me so much.

“I knew they would, angel.”

“For that, I am sorry.”

He lifts his hand slightly. “You needn’t be sorry,” he says. “We acquired the Stone, and Python reached your sister. Had it not been for my capture, I would not have otherwise met you.”

My heart flips over and over, beating erratically, and I almost forget to breathe.

“They, um, they made it to Torgotha. I believe they made it to Duskmore,” I say, giving him all I know since he’s been so trusting of me.

“Then it hasn’t been for nothing.”

I step forward, closer, and take his hand in my own. “No, your sacrifice saw to their success.”

His fingers squeeze mine and still more thrills ripple through me at his strength even in the face of all this adversity.

“Now,” he says with a bold smile. “Since I’ve told you about your sister, I suppose you’d like to learn more magic.”

Smiling, I nod eagerly, since the look he’s giving me has rendered me speechless with his handsome face, long tangled hair, his body wounded and scarred—but his spirit is not broken.

A loud knock sounds at the door, and I manage to pull my hand away in time when the Guard opens it, and in strides the Governor.

“Lady Bloom,” he says. “Have you had any success in getting him to talk?” He eyes Barracuda with what I think is meant to be a menacing glare, but he doesn’t have the ruthless countenance of my grandmother.

“He remains reluctant,” I say carefully. I don’t want him to be punished on my word. “But he has spoken of Violet and that she will be treated well.”

“I see,” says Enro. “Not exactly useful, but I appreciate your effort.”

I want to argue that I haven’t been given enough time, but I can’t raise any suspicions, and as it is I don’t know if I can rely on the Governor keeping his mouth shut about this, or if he’ll inform Grandmother of my visit.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I say when he steps aside for me to leave first. I look to Barracuda who simply sits in the chair, his face impassive, and I already miss the spark of life he radiates when he smiles.

I want to reassure him, or at the very least say goodbye, but anything I do towards him would be totally inappropriate and a sure-fire way of having Enro tell my grandmother.

“So,” asks Lily when we’re back outside to enjoy our own liberty. “How’d it go?”

Aside from the fact that I want to see him again, if only just to talk? “Very well,” I say aloud. “The Magix have need of Violet since she’s Element of Mind. It seems Python’s brother is cursed and they believe she can help.”

“That certainly makes for an interesting twist,” says Lily. “What now?”

“I want to get him out,” I say, the idea only coming to me in the moment. I can’t stand to let him languish in that squalor. “I want to try and help him to get home.”

“That is insane,” says Lily and I can feel her startled eyes on me. “You’d have to get past the Guards and find him, not to mention have keys to get through all the different sections.”

I give a loud sigh. “In that case, how on earth does one make a key?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



In fact, I need *three* keys.

After looking through Clover's books a little more, I soon discover I'll need a key to the wooden back door, another for a gate that sections off the basement, and then finally a key for Barracuda's cell.

Easier said than done.

There are several locksmiths located in Embervale, but there's too much risk that Grandmother might inadvertently walk into one of the closer ones, so I choose one I believe Grandmother is least likely to go and visit, no matter what the situation of needing a locksmith might call for.

Though I'd managed to wrangle the books about the prison from Clover with a relatively innocent lie, how does one ask a locksmith how to make keys?

Chip Off the Old Lock & Son is quite literally on the other side of the city. Rather than take the family carriage, I walked the half mile to get closer to the city's edge and was able to hail a carriage to take me across town.

A quaint little shop situated between a women's clothing store and a bookseller sits along a main road and appears clean and neat on the outside with the windows sparkling and the step swept. A bell tinkles above the door when I push it open and a moment later an older man, with gray hair and rolled up sleeves appears behind a tidily organized counter.

"My good lady," he says, adjusting a pair of spectacles on his nose. "How may I be of service?"

I step closer to the counter, smiling, but it falls the moment I see his pleasant countenance slipping.

"I don't want trouble, please, I don't think I'll be able to assist," he says with a trembling voice and taking a step back.

I know I've come to a part of the city where Kastors seldom enter and none as far as I'm aware reside. It's in these pockets that humans have created an existence without concern about Kastors and what we have the potential to do. The potential we *once* were capable of doing. But even after the years of Kastors having no magic, humans founded their own beliefs about us, and though we have countless relationships with humans, there are those who fear us.

"I mean no harm, I'm not looking for trouble, I simply have an inquiry I hoped you might help me with." I try to keep my voice low and gentle. It's like trying to settle a spooked horse.

"How could I possibly help a Kastor?" he says, this time taking a more significant step backward away from me.

"You're a locksmith, I just want to ask about keys." I don't move, I certainly don't get any closer. If he's really that frightened, one wrong move on my part and he'll disappear out the back and I'll have wasted the trip.

"Keys?" he repeats, though he now sounds more confused than fearful.

With the conversation so far conducted with caution on my part, I can't exactly explain my need to break into the prison. But I'd come prepared and so I relay my request to the anxious locksmith.

"My grandmother has an old desk that belonged to my grandfather before he departed this earth. She has since lost the key and it contains a number of letters he wrote to her. I am simply asking if you know how I might open the desk to retrieve the letters."

"A locksmith is your best choice for assistance, but I am booked solid for the next several months," he says in a hurried breath. In spite of being a locksmith himself, it's clear I would have little chance of getting him to physically attend the fictional desk.

I take a careful breath, aware I need to be patient, and just weed out the information I need as best I can. "I'm perfectly capable of dealing with the situation myself, I only seek guidance."

"Then you need a key blank, preferably iron, but at a pinch you could use bone."

"Bone? How surprising."

"Indeed," he says, and seems to be a little less fearful at my naivety. "You'll need to have the blank fit the lock, but apply soot to the bit, that's the part with all the notches, they're called wards. If you apply soot, or hold it over a candle so it turns black, you slide it into the lock and turn it as far as you can. Jiggle it a bit and the pins in the lock will mark the key. Then you carve the wards and the key should fit. It might take a bit of back and forth work for a perfect fit."

I'm almost speechless with the simplicity of his instruction, but also the fact that he's given it.

"That is incredibly helpful," I say, remaining where I stand so I don't worry him any further by attempting to thank him with a handshake, or anything that might be considered threatening. "Thank you for your assistance...good sir," I say since I don't know his name.

"Should that not work," he continues hurriedly. "You only need a key or length of metal that will fit the barrel. A good, solid hit and the lock should spring open, but it does mean permanent and irreparable damage to the lock."

The locksmith clearly does not wish for me to return and obviously thinks that if I don't succeed with forged keys, I might return to request further options.

“Thank you, sir,” I say, turning to leave, and hurry to the door in case he further believes I might suddenly cast a spell, and calls for back up, like the mentioned son in his shop name.

“Please do not recommend my shop to any of your friends and family,” he calls after me, a distinct squeak in his voice.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I say, still with my winning smile before I push open the door and step out.

Having consulted with the locksmith, I endeavor to figure out the best way to make the keys. He’d said to use bone, and I remember Grandmother has a number of carved bone brooches and figure perhaps a jeweler would be a good place to start.

After the trying experience I’d had with the locksmith, I choose a small jeweler who I can only hope isn’t frequented by Grandmother, or any of her cohorts.

“I do have a few slivers of bone that might do the job,” says Mr. Ardreth, the jeweler. “What were you wanting? A pendant, a brooch?”

“Keys,” I say absentmindedly, only realizing what I’ve said once I’ve said it. “I mean, ornamental keys,” I add quickly. “As keepsakes.”

“Lovely,” he says without seeming the slightest bit suspicious of my request. “Let me see what I have to show you.”

He brings out a number of bone shards, all grayish white, and I select three of them and proceed to explain my designs. Since I’m going with the ruse of them being keepsakes, I may as well make them look the part by giving them a touch more flair than what I’d initially considered. The bit, the part of the key that the locksmith explained would insert into the lock, I ask to remain as a plain square. I’ll need this to fashion the wards he’d also

mentioned that turn the lock. I've access to candles at home to generate the coating of soot required.

"If you can give me until the end of the week, I'll have them completed by then," says Mr. Ardreth once we've finished discussing the designs.

My heart sinks. I'd hoped to have them much sooner, today in fact, but if I'm to keep all this secret, I can't bring attention to myself, and word travels around the city very fast. Everyone knows Grandmother, and even in harmless conversation, I wonder if she'll soon find out about this.

"Thank you," I say with a smile that probably conveys my disappointment. "I'll return at week's end. Good day to you Mr. Ardreth."

"And to you, Lady Bloom," he says with just as much congeniality.

I step out of the shop and almost run directly into Lord Clematis Blouting.

My betrothed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



///T

“**I**ris,” he says, sounding startled at both me almost running into him, and my coming from the jeweler’s shop.

“Clem,” I say as demurely as I’m able since the surprise of seeing him has momentarily robbed me of breath.

“My love, what brings you into the city—” he glances around us, “—and quite alone I see. Have you not brought someone to accompany you?”

“I have the barest of errands to run, and with the family all occupied I took it upon myself to simply get things done.”

He takes my hand, and I notice how soft and pliant his fingers are, unlike the rough strength of Barracuda’s. He draws my hand under his arm as we begin to walk along the sidewalk, away from the jeweler’s and into the bustle of city life. In the moment, I have no hope of thinking of anything I could use as an excuse to slip away. With all the lies I’d been sharing around it seems my quota is up and I’ll have to tolerate Clem’s presence for the time being. I’m actually quite surprised he’s alone himself and not being shadowed by the otherwise permanent fixture of his mother.

“Now, let me be quite frank,” says Clem, in what I think is meant to be his stern voice which I can’t help but compare to Barracuda’s far more authoritative tone. “If ever you are in need of someone to accompany you to run errands, please be sure to send word to me directly. I won’t have my darling dearest wandering about alone. Better still, if you advise me of your needs, I will make certain your errands are duly completed by one of my trusted staff.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” I say quickly. The last thing I need is for Clem’s household to start talking about anything *I* need doing - especially the creation of a set of bone keys!

“Now, now, I insist,” he says, patting my hand that’s tucked into his elbow. “It won’t do for my wife to be seen about town without her husband to accompany her. You might as well get used to conducting whatever business you have via our staff. Far better to have them running ragged than you, my dear.”

Smiling uncertainly, I look up at him. Though his eyes appear kind, I can tell my life as Lady Blouting is going to be extremely dull if I'm to be imprisoned in the house, never to set foot outside of it.

Clematis Blouting has been considered an eligible bachelor for as long as I've known the family. Older than me by almost two decades, he was passed over by a lot of prospective Kastors for the simple fact that he is boorish, gluttonous and cringingly awkward around women.

Grandmother had always had Clem on her list of prospectives for me, but that changed the moment Violet left and he was selected because he was available and came from a decent family.

"So, you were coming from the jeweler's just now, what possible errand would you have had there?"

Imprisoned and watched, apparently. Married to this sot, I will very soon be out of my mind with boredom and paranoia. Either that, or charged with murder.

"Finding a trinket for Grandmother," I say, my ability to lie hasn't quite failed me just yet. Besides, I figure Clem won't look to pry into my grandmother's affairs.

"How accommodating of you," he says smartly. "She couldn't send one of her own staff?"

I'm beginning to wonder at Clem's obsession with sending staff to do one's bidding, but given his size, and that of his parents, it's little wonder all they have to do is eat. Imprisoned, watched and fattened up like a prize pig. The list of how my life will turn out once I become Lady Blouting so far has few pleasures in it. I wonder if I'll even be allowed to paint!

"Why don't I take you to lunch and we can go through anything else you have pending? I can send a boy off to complete the rest of your business which will then free up your afternoon, will it not?"

"I hope you're not suggesting we spend the afternoon without a chaperone?" I'm clutching at straws. Given my current mission of creating keys so I might break

into the prison to spend time with Barracuda, it's the only excuse I have to *not* spend any more time than necessary with Clem.

"Of course not, mother is here with me—in fact, there she is, just coming from the florist."

Madam Blouting's rotund form parts the crowd like a wide ship and though her face was beaming when she caught sight of Clem, she fails to disguise her clear disappointment that I'm with him.

"You're running errands also?" I ask, confused. "I thought you sent staff."

"Mother insisted on selecting the flowers to be displayed in the house. The ones delivered in previous weeks have been substandard in her opinion, so I said I would accompany her. I was taking a quick stroll while she talked of dahlias and chrysanthemums, when I bumped into you."

"How fortuitous," I say ruefully. Had I been a moment or two earlier or delayed I might have been able to miss him entirely. Or at least see him before he saw me.

"Clem!" calls Madam Blouting waving a tiny lace handkerchief. "Clemmy darling, Mommy's coming!"

"We were about to have lunch, why don't you join us?"

It occurs to me that lunch was probably already a part of Clem and his mother's plans for the day, but I have little doubt Madam Blouting was not expecting to have to share her son over the meal.

"As long as it's of no inconvenience, it would be my pleasure to have the company of you both." My heart sinks. I hadn't had any actual plans for the rest of the day, but spending it with Clem and his mother had not even made the list of possibilities.

"Excellent," he says with a smile that pushes out his round cheeks, the broken veins appear so prominent they have a purplish quality to them, making them look like a pair of ripening plums.

“Lady Iris,” says Madam Blouting, her tone of voice sounding as though she hopes I have to hurry along to some other engagement.

“Madam Blouting,” I respond, my hand still firmly tucked in Clem’s elbow.

“Iris has agreed to join us for luncheon, Mother,” he says to her, and indeed I see the joy leave her eyes as she regards her son, then me.

“I see,” she says, her eyes now calculating. “Surely Lady Iris has more pressing matters to attend? With the wedding so close I would think her quite busy with preparations.”

“Indeed,” I say with as much positivity as I dare since my mother-in-law-to-be has handed me a fairly good excuse.

“Nonsense,” says Clem. “I would be elated to have the two most important women in my life in my company whilst we dine.”

“Yes,” she says, doing little to hide her despondency. “Most elated.”

“I can’t stay long, Clem, Madam Blouting is quite right,” I begin and see his mother’s face light up. “I do have a great deal of wedding matters to attend to. I have to make sure our day is perfect.” The last is an extreme exaggeration, but at least my faux enthusiasm should convince him to let me go once I’ve at least had a bite of lunch. I don’t need to then have my grandmother raining down her displeasure should word reach her that I was less than cordial to my husband to be and his mother.

Perhaps I should have tried harder, or taken Madam Blouting’s out with more gusto. There have been few times where I’ve been with Clem in the whole courtship since most of our meetings have been large social gatherings. And in some ways, I’m glad they have been.

We’re seated in a reputable and well renowned hotel with stunning crisp white linen, an abundance of fresh flowers and gleaming silverware. I’m not given the opportunity to order for myself. Clem takes the reins of the whole affair, ordering

food for all three of us. At least, I thought it was three, but when the dishes start to arrive, and continue to fill the table, I wonder who else might be joining us.

Sandwiches, plates of delicately sliced meat, tiny canapes, squares of dark bread with swirls of cream, dozens of little pies, tiny stuffed quails, curls of shrimp on beds of lime-green lettuce, oysters, chicken legs, and even a savory jelly full of meat cubes that wobbles unappetizingly as my two companions begin on the food.

In fact, my own appetite all but flees as I watch in horrified amazement at the total lack of dining etiquette on display. I wonder if they missed breakfast, or dinner the night before, or any of the dozens of meals over the past week given the sheer salubriousness they're exhibiting.

I manage a few mouthfuls of soup before I can no longer stand to watch, and listen to Clem and his mother eat with mouths open, hands stuffing, the pair of them barely coming up for breath.

"Forgive me," I say hurriedly, leaving my seat before Clem has the chance for proper protocol by also standing, but I need to get out of there. Fast. "I really must be getting along as I just remembered I have appointments with the dressmaker and florist." I don't even give them a moment to respond, but turn away, an empathetic hand to my stomach, and make my way back out into the street and the fresher air.

"I'm marrying a pig," I murmur to myself, and clutching my reticule, I hail a carriage.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I've almost forgotten the events at lunch until I'm seated at the dinner table. "I heard that you abandoned Lord and Madam Blouting at lunch today, Iris," says Grandmother sternly. "I would like an explanation for your actions."

Cheeks hot, I realize that if she knows I was out with Clem, does she also know about my having gone to the jeweler?

"I had no appetite," I say.

"You could have had tea, why let such an opportunity to be together slip away?" says Rose, and in that moment I've never wanted to slap my twin so hard.

"I don't think I could have stomached tea," I say tartly glaring at her vehemently. She immediately looks away, but I'm satisfied when I see her cheeks redden.

"Are you ill, Riz?" asks Daisy. "I've heard a few of our friends have come down with sickness."

"No, I'm not ill, Dais," I say, sounding tired, which will probably cement her idea that I *am* sick. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I wish the meal was over so I could just go to my room and figure out whatever it is I need to figure out. The keys are with the jeweler to be carved, but I then have to calculate the best times to get to, and enter, the prison. There's little time to spare, especially when the date of Barracuda's trial is drawing closer, even if it's yet to be confirmed.

"Then what possible reason could you have to leave your fiancé so abruptly?" Grandmother's voice interrupts my thoughts, but I'm far from worrying about lunch with Clem and his mother. I take a long and shuddering sigh.

"To say nothing of the manner in which they were conducting themselves would force me to be untruthful. Not only was the majority of the menu

ordered, but the pair of them proceeded to consume their meal as though it were their last.”

“Iris!” Rose gasps. “He will be your husband, regardless of his...manners.”

“Indeed, and I suppose to an extent the father of my children who will soon learn from said father how to behave at table. How delightful *that* will be when we have guests.”

“Iris!” snaps Grandmother. “That is quite enough. When you are wed it will be your duty to ensure Lord Blouting is presented as fitting of his status—”

“That will be a feat in its—”

“Let me be quite clear,” she thunders. “You will behave as is appropriate for a woman engaged to be married. If your betrothed takes you to lunch, you join him, if he takes you to an associate’s for dinner, you go. Not only do you attend every event and function he wishes, you stay until such time as *he* decides to leave. Your behavior was abominable, humiliating, and unconscionably rude. If I hear of such a scandal again, there will be severe consequences. Let me again reiterate, *do* I make myself entirely clear?”

My mind flashes over the kind of consequences my grandmother could enforce, and the moment she pointed the rod of the Lightning Scythe at me is the first thing that has me reconsidering my options. There’s also the possibility of her locking me in the basement, which I have little doubt she would actually do. Life as I currently know it could very well be a total nightmare until the dreaded day when I’m handed over to the Bloutings.

And then I might never see Barracuda again.

“Very clear,” I say in as even a tone as I can muster.

“Excellent,” she says. “I think it prudent that you apologize profusely to the Bloutings. I won’t have this marriage jeopardized by a misunderstanding.”

“I hardly think Clem is going to call it off,” I say smartly. He’s been sitting on the bachelor shelf for at least two decades. The chance to be with a woman is going too far outweigh anything I might have done to offend.

“That is not the point, it is good manners, and will clear up any concerns Madam Blouting might have fostered about you.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine.”

I attend the Bloutings home the following morning for the only reason of getting the humiliation over with, and the fact that I need to occupy my hours or go mad waiting for the keys.

“Iris, my love, what a lovely surprise,” says Clem when I’m brought into the grand sitting room.

A huge fire is roaring in the fireplace, making the room overly hot. The grandeur of the room itself is almost claustrophobic with enormous oil portraits of past and present family members glaring down at us. I recognize Lord Blouting Senior and Madam Blouting and Clem, although it was completed quite a number of years ago since he looks a lot slimmer and younger in the painting. The others are members of the family no longer with us, but there is a distinct resemblance between them, with round cheeks, small eyes and having been extremely well fed.

“Clem,” I say in greeting and accept his kiss on my hand, to which I have to struggle not to wipe the residue off on the nearest bit of upholstered furniture.

“Please have a seat, I’ll order tea.”

“This won’t take long,” I say, taking a seat on a chaise lounge anyway. “Is your mother in residence?”

“No, she’s taken the opportunity to attend a friend’s house. Did you need to see her?”

“I hoped to, but I hope I can trouble you to pass on my message.”

“Of course,” he says with a smile and goes to a bell pull on the wall, giving it a hard yank. A serving girl immediately appears and is given the instruction to bring tea and refreshment.

Clem joins me on the chaise lounge, and I fight to keep from shifting back when his knee brushes against mine.

“I must apologize for my behavior yesterday,” I say quickly; might as well get it over with. “I allowed my own needs to get in the way of time that could have been spent with you and Madam Blouting. It was selfish of me, I’m sorry.”

Clem’s face does that face splitting thing when he smiles. “Nonsense,” he says, slapping his leg. “Mother and I were still able to have a delightful afternoon. You were sorely missed, but there was certainly no wrongdoing on your part.”

“You’re most kind,” I say, but I’m trying to think of an excuse to leave now the apology has been delivered. “Please pass my apology on to your mother. I’m glad you were not inconvenienced, but I worry Madam Blouting thinks less of me as a consequence.”

“That won’t be a problem, and I know she adores you as much as I do,” he says, but this time, instead of patting his own leg, his hand lands on my thigh and gives it a firm squeeze. His eyes are locked on mine and I can see in their beady depths the lust and want of a man, who for all I know has never been with a woman. “You are so beautiful, Iris,” he says huskily. His hand travels further up my leg, and I’m too stunned to move when the serving maid comes in with the tea and Clem immediately pulls back.

I leap from the chaise lounge. “Thank you for your hospitality,” I say quickly. “I really must get home.”

“But you’ve time for tea, surely,” says Clem, his hand on the cushion I’d just been occupying.

“Grandmother is expecting me,” I say, turning as fast as I can without seeming to run from the house. I don’t wait for anyone to open the door for me, but hurry from the house and down the street at a brisk pace with thoughts of taking a hot bath where I might scrub my leg raw. How am I expected to marry this man when the very idea of him touching my skin repulses me to the core?

Barracuda’s hand had been rough and cold, and granted he’d been restrained, he’d still opened his hand in invitation, not taken such liberties as to go grabbing at me. I’d been close enough to him that he could have, but instead his grip had been gentle, almost like a caress.

Thankfully though, I have no further cause to see Clem so my fears are, for the moment, allayed. What is exciting is I know my keys will be ready, so I make the trip to the jeweler after breakfast the following morning before Grandmother can start making plans of her own for me.

“Oh, Mr. Ardreth, they’re beautiful,” I say, turning the largest key, the one that will be for the big gate I have to get through, in my hands. He’s done a marvelous job with the bow, the head of the key, ornately decorated with delicate vines and flowers, and a small hole that he’s embellished with a small length of blue ribbon.

“You’re Element of Water, yes?” he asks. Not all humans are frightened of Kastors, but it’s rare to find one who genuinely knows about our culture a little more. “Hence the blue ribbon.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you Mr. Ardreth, thank you.” The other two keys are just as beautiful, both also adorned with blue ribbons. He’d probably be mortified to learn of their true purpose, but I’m lost in the amount of care and consideration he’s taken with them.

I leave the shop, carefully checking the street to make sure I'm not about to run into anyone I know, my heart light as I begin planning my first visit to Stranglewood alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY



三

The hour is late, with everyone having gone to bed, even the servants who always the last to retire because of their duties. I sit on the edge of my bed, the key blanks clutched in my hand. I haven't undressed, nor attempted to sleep while I waited for the silence to ensue.

The sooner I get the keys forged, the sooner I can see Barracuda.

My heart trips, and I want to tell myself it's because it's the opportunity to learn more about my magic, but that's not the first thought that comes to mind when I consider what it is I'm about to do...break into a prison to see a man. A Magix.

Perhaps Lily was right, perhaps I am insane, but why then does my blood angrily rush through me when I consider the thought of him suffering in there at the hands of thugs and ruffians using the excuse that they want him to talk when I know it's just so they can simply hit him.

Staring out the window, the darkness is all encompassing, a void of nothing that could harbor anything. I try not to consider what might be out there waiting, lurking in the dark as though given prior knowledge of my intentions even though I only decided to actually embark on this task at dinner. I've told no one, not even Lily. I know she would be disappointed not to be involved, but should anything go wrong, I've at least protected her from any consequences.

Steeling myself, I rise, my legs watery with fatigue, and the wash of apprehension that's funneling its way through my very bloodstream. I should abandon this lunacy, but that would also mean abandoning Barracuda, and he's already been abandoned by his own people. I might still be forced to marry Clem, but at least I will have enabled a man the hope of returning home.

With my cloak around my shoulders, and holding my shoes, I tiptoe down the staircase, alert to any noise that might indicate someone is about to discover me. The door is large and heavy, but I need only pull it slightly ajar so I might

pass through and thankfully it doesn't utter a single sound and I thank whoever's job it is to see that it is well maintained, its hinges oiled and smooth.

I tug on my shoes and hurry down the drive. I'll need to find a carriage or face the prospect of a long walk. If that were the case, I would reach Stranglewood at dawn and I wouldn't then have a chance to return home unnoticed.

The carriage drops me off a few blocks before the actual prison, because I don't need to alert the driver of my intentions either. A lone young woman, out so late and asking to visit the prison is sure to generate all manner of gossip. Gossip I know will eventually reach the ears of my grandmother.

"You be careful, my lady," he says when I've alighted. "Young woman such as yourself shouldn't be out alone."

"Thank you," I say as I pay him. "I will be fine."

When I reach the door at the back of the prison, I pull out the first key and a small box of soot sourced from the ash in my bedroom fireplace. The locksmith had said to use a candle, but since I have no means to light one, I figured using ash would produce the same result. Fingers blackened; I rub the end of the key by the light of a small lantern hanging high up on the wall. It's able to be accessed by the Guards should they patrol along the walkway, but given this side of the prison also holds the refuse ditch, I assume few if any Guards come here.

I find the lock and line up the key, relieved that it slides in relatively unhindered. Of course it won't unlock the door, but as the locksmith instructed, I carefully turn it, gently jiggling it back and forth to ensure the pins make their mark along the bit.

Initially, I thought I'd have to return to the prison three times to mark the keys before taking them back to the jeweler to have them carved, but I feared that would only make him suspicious. A quick test of my own using a small rasp

I'd borrowed from the maintenance shed on the manor grounds meant I could carve the wards at the prison. It's long and slender with a tapered end and looks almost like a thicker ice pick if not for the roughened shaft to shave away the bone.

It's tediously slow work considering I'm standing behind Stranglewood prison in the middle of the night. When I consider my circumstance, I have to stifle a hysterical giggle. It's so absurd a situation, no one in their right mind would even consider this, let alone attempt it. I continue carving and testing until, with a delighted shock, the key turns and the lock of the door springs open. I want to cheer aloud, but instead I afford myself a few jumps of success before once again composing myself for key number two. I'm not even halfway.

Inside, the prison is dark as a cave with the only light afforded by a narrow window high on the wall. I have to feel my way along the stone wall until I reach a large gate, which although still in gloom can at least take advantage of the lantern light that spills down from an upper level.

The second key is larger, chunkier, but it has fewer wards to carve and they are mostly simplistic so I manage to finish it a lot faster than the first. The gate shrieks loudly on its hinges, but with all the noise of the prison, it's just another sound that joins the rest.

The third key is the smallest I have, and I worry it won't be enough when I begin searching for Barracuda by the dimly lit lanterns that hang about the walls of the prison basement.

Thankfully, there are fewer cells down here with the majority of prisoners residing in the cells above ground. It's dank and smells appalling, and even in the gloom I can see the walls coated in slick slime.

Glancing quickly through the barred windows, I go from cell to cell, until my heart leaps. Hunched up against the wall, his arms around his knees and head bowed, is a man with a pair of horns protruding through the white locks of his

tangled hair. He appears to be sleeping, but rather than disturb him, I soot up the key and carefully slide it into the lock.

The clinking of the chain shackled to his ankle indicates that he's woken and I momentarily cease working to look through the window.

"Lady Bloom?" comes his surprised response to seeing my face.

"I'm here," I say.

He shifts, gets to his feet, and comes as close to the door as the chain will allow. "How are you here?" he asks, glancing left and right in search of Guards.

I hold up the two carved keys, then the one I'm working on. My hands are covered in soot, the keys looking almost black with my handling.

"If they catch you, I'd hate to think what would happen."

"I know, but I haven't met anyone yet," I say hurriedly scraping at the key with the rasp. He does have a point. If I'm caught, I won't necessarily be taken to the Governor first.

"They'll be on their rounds," says Barracuda, still looking down the corridor. "It won't be long before they're here."

"Then I'd best hurry," I say, refusing to break my concentration. Nearly there. I can feel the pins finding their slots in the key, just a little bit more. "Once I've finished this key, I'll be able to get into the cell."

"You don't want to enter here," he says softly.

"I do," I argue, and I almost add it's because I want to help him and get him out, but when I look up at him those honey eyes gaze back at me and I cling to the door to stop myself from swooning since my breath hitches and my heart is doing somersaults. "I do," I say again.

With the third key finally finished, I slide it into the door lock once more, my heart soaring when it turns and the lock clunks free.

The moment the door opens, I hurry inside, pulling up short when I realize he's right there, standing in front of me. I'm used to him being in a chair, but standing he's incredibly tall, almost intimidating. Other than the chain around his ankle, he's not restrained either...

Gods, what was I thinking?

"You've soot on your face," he says, not moving even though I can see there's still slack in the chain.

"I—I do?" I say nervously, and do my best to scrub at my face with a sleeve being sure to keep an eye on him. But as much as there's black on my sleeve, I wonder if I haven't made it worse.

He reaches, but I take an involuntary step back and his hand falls.

"Please," he says softly. "Don't be frightened. I've no intention of hurting you."

"It's rather ridiculous," I say with a nervous laugh. "I'm the one who broke in."

Steeling myself, I step closer. I have no reason to think he would hurt me. He reaches again, this time I allow him to brush away the grime with his thumb. In spite of my initial fear, my eyes close at his rough, but gentle touch.

"Tell me then, angel," he says, his arm dropping away. "Why is it that you have broken into Stranglewood?"

"I..." I know I was having doubts before I began this escapade, but now I'm here I'm at a loss to know what to do, or say. "I mean to break you out."

His eyebrows rise. "I'm flattered," he says. "I had no idea someone cared that much."

“Of course I care,” I say boldly, stepping closer to him. “They beat you for no reason, you’re thousands of miles from home, and in a land full of people who would see you dead.”

The sound of jingling keys and a screeching gate has us both turning to the door which I hurriedly close as softly as I can, using my key on the inside this time to lock it.

“The Guards,” says Barracuda. “They’re on their rounds.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I'here's nowhere to hide. If I leave now, the Guards will see me and though first thought is my hope that I might get away with a stern talking-to given my social status, I can't imagine what they *could* do.

"Will they come in here?" I ask, already looking around to see where I *can* hide in spite of there being nowhere to go. Other than a few broken bits of stone lying in one corner, the cell itself isn't very big. I was able to see most of it when I looked through the window.

"No, they only check through the bars. Unless they wish to beat me, which they have done on occasion."

"They just come in and beat you?"

"On occasion," he repeats a smile toying with his mouth. "Crouch behind the door. They will shine the lantern to see that I am here, but they will not see you." He turns to go and sit against the wall again. I do as he says, huddling up against the cell door, curled in a ball with my arms around my knees, balancing on my feet as best I can.

Footsteps and idle chatter get louder, someone trails their baton against the wall making a rhythmic thudding sound as they continue their rounds.

"All right in there, Welra? All comfy for a good night's rest?" Considering the hour, I would think Welra was already asleep. The Guard laughs as he moves away, but they're only coming closer.

A bright beam of light stretches across the cell. I don't breathe, squeezing myself tight against the door, my only protection being the circle of darkness the light can't reach.

"How about you, Fae? All cozy?" The Guard then bashes his baton against the bars making a ringingly loud clang that echoes through the cell, and down the corridor since several of the cell inhabitants tell him to shut up. "I'll be glad the day they stretch your neck. You'll be getting what's coming to you."

I glance across at Barracuda. He doesn't move, doesn't make a sound, his face hidden since his forehead rests on his arms, in turn supported by his knees in the same position that I found him. I almost want him to react, to use me and my power to make them regret saying anything. But to react would give them cause to come back, again and again. The life of a Guard can't be all that exciting, so taunting prisoners is perhaps one of the few pastimes they have to get through a shift. Even so, I would very much like to cut this idiot down with a blast of water.

The light vanishes, shrouding us in dark save for the weak beam from the lantern out in the corridor. The clinking of the chain is signal enough that it's safe for me to move, and I straighten, watching as Barracuda gets to his feet.

Alone again. Alone with a Magix.

"You shouldn't have come," he murmurs. "It's too dangerous."

All I can see is the glinting of light in his eyes, the shadows otherwise obscuring my view of a face I know to be handsome, though beaten. I see the chipped tip of his horn, wondering what that means for him to have one not matching its twin.

"So you were saying you mean to break me out?"

"I..." I stall. My decision to come here had been terribly spontaneous and I didn't even have an actual plan for getting him out other than reaching him with my keys. And now standing here with him, the venture in this moment is probably a little too ambitious. What do we do if I *did* manage to get him out?

"Though I would very much like to, I fear it would be too difficult and dangerous for you."

"But..." and even then, I don't know what my argument would be, because he's right. It's all but impossible, surely. I've never considered breaking anyone out of a prison, let alone actually tried to accomplish it.

“You need to get out of here, angel.”

“I can’t just leave you,” I say, my throat feeling raw with fear and panic. Panic that if I leave him his one hope of freedom and safety will be gone.

He steps closer, only this time I don’t step back. The clinking of his chain a dreadful reminder that even though I made it in here, I hadn’t anticipated that he would be chained up in the cell. Even if I wanted to, and he agreed, we’d have to deal with the chain at his ankle.

I have to look up when he’s this close, the shadows across his face almost bring about the terrifying creatures of my old schoolbooks, but I know this just to be a man. A man I’m having trouble trying to keep as a goodwill case, since my heart is determined to make this something more.

“The moment I first saw you, when you stumbled into that room with your sister as lookout, I truly thought I was dreaming. A Kastor so beautiful and charming who only cared about her sister’s safety. Every time they beat me, and tortured me, and threatened me, and your fiery determination when your grandmother threatened you gave me cause to keep strong. To see you again was my salve. I thought of you and the pain didn’t seem as bad. They can beat me to oblivion and still your face would make me smile.”

Oh my.

My mouth goes dry. “I want to see you safe,” I murmur. He’s so close, I just have to lift my hand and I could touch him. I know there’s a connection, that he can give me access to my magic, but in this moment all I care about is saving his life.

“You need to get out of here, angel,” he says gruffly. “Please.”

A small part of my heart tears away at the pain I can hear in his voice. But he’s right, it’s dangerous for me to be here, not only for me, but especially for him.

The clang of a gate has us jumping, turning towards the door, but the Guards aren't here yet.

"Please, go," he whispers roughly and he takes a step back.

"I will come back," I say, and though it aches like a knife through my chest, I'm bolstered by my own determination. Nothing will keep me from Barracuda.

"Don't," he says, and again I hear how it aches him to say it. "I won't see you come to harm because of me."

"If there's the slightest chance that I can get you out, that we can get you home, that we can..." I falter. Do I mean for us to be together? How? We're from two separate worlds, and yet I know he is all I want in this life.

The echo of more gates opening sounds along the corridor.

"Go, angel," he says softly. "Be safe."

Reluctantly, I unlock the door, but before I slip out, I feel his fingers at my back. I turn, and there in his eyes I see the same want as my own, the need to be even though our circumstances have us miles apart. "Soon," I say. "I will come back soon."

"Stay safe," he says.

The noise of the Guards gets louder. I exit the cell, locking it behind me before I hurry along the corridor, back to the big sectioning gate, then along the dark passageway, up a set of stairs, along another passageway that at least has windows allowing the moon to shine in until I reach the wooden door to the outside.

I hurry along the street, getting as far from Stranglewood as I dare before hailing a carriage. Dawn is touching the horizon by the time I reach Bloominace Manor. I scurry upstairs, barely making it past the servants as they begin to get the house in order for the coming day.

I securely stow the bone keys in my jewelry box, the box of soot I place in a trinket box and I search for the small rasp, but it's no longer in my reticule. I glance hurriedly around me, but I know it won't be in my bedroom. I've managed to lose it between carving the keys and when I returned home. There's nothing for it, I've lost it.

Stripping down to my shift, I check myself in a mirror to find I am liberally covered in soot. I haul off the shift, and scrub at my face, making a mess of the garment, but at least I've made progress. Unless I take further action, Grandmother is going to see and questions will be asked. I've time enough before breakfast.

I pull on a robe and open my bedroom door, checking to see who might be about. One of the chambermaids, Orli, comes up the stairs and along the hallway.

"Orli," I whisper-call. "Might it be too early to request a bath?"

"My lady," she says, looking me up and down warily. "I can certainly see to having your bath made."

"Thank you, oh, and please sort this out," I say, handing her the pile of clothes which are quite obviously soiled with black streaks of soot and ash, not to mention the grime added from time spent in the prison.

"Of course, my lady," she says, bobbing before she turns back the way she'd come.

The moment before I close my door, a hand reaches, stopping me from pulling it closed.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me why you were absent from your bed last night and are in need of a bath this morning?" says Grandmother. Even in her dressing gown with her hair tucked under a white cap she looks every part as formidable as a fire breathing dragon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



My stomach drops to my feet and I feel my blood drain away, perhaps even making the soot stains stand out even more prominently on my cheeks.

“Grandmother,” I say in as calm a voice as possible. “You’re up early.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if you’ve even inhabited your bed at all.”

“Well,” I search my mind for an excuse, any excuse, just some stupid reason that might end this conversation and direct her suspicions away from me. If she finds out I went to the prison, I know I’ll never see Barracuda again. “You see, I took your advice to heart. It was dreadfully rude of me to leave the Bloutings as I did the other day.”

“Frightfully rude,” she interjects, but even though I feel it was totally justified, I know I need to play the part of the reproved granddaughter.

“Terribly,” I say with a nod, and with my heart in my throat I fumble through. “As you know, I went to the Bloutings the day after, but I was only able to meet with Madam Blouting. So I thought to make amends by ensuring Lord Blouting understood my...affection for him. I suppose I should have let you know, but I have heard that spontaneity can often reinforce one’s devotion. It was perhaps poor judgment on my part, since I was without a chaperone, but since Clem and I are to be married I see no reason why I can’t be with my fiancé without any prying eyes.” The thought of being alone with Clem sends a flush of heat that I hope looks more blushing bride to be than wanting to throw up.

“Those prying eyes are for your protection,” says Grandmother. “Your reputation is also a valuable asset, Iris. Do not squander that. Yes, you and Lord Blouting are to wed, but there is still time for gossip to spread that could damage even the most well-intended of matches. Please tell me you have saved yourself for the marital bed.”

I press my lips together. I knew this would be her first concern, that I’d allowed Clem to have his way with me even though I’m to do just that after we marry.

“Of course,” I say firmly. “I would never let him touch me...that way.” Not in any way if it can be helped. I can still feel his thick, heavy hand on my thigh, and the memory makes me shudder. The man definitely makes my skin crawl.

But Grandmother takes my assurance as truth and smiles in approval. “Good girl. Though I would rather you made these arrangements properly, I am pleased you are making the effort to add a little...what did you call it? Spontaneity to your relationship. It’s important you stand together as a united front. It will only improve your chances of restoring magic for all Kastors.”

“That was my intention,” I say, keeping the smile on my face, though my insides are trying to put themselves to rights. I move to close the door again, but Grandmother’s hand stops it again.

“Perhaps next time you could meet your betrothed in a less...grimy location,” she says and wipes her thumb across my forehead before rubbing at the streak of black it’s left on her fingers as though trying to flick it away. “Where *have* you been?”

“We met at Clem’s estate,” I say without hesitation. In for a penny, in for a pound as they say. “But I have to admit we were wandering quite idly before I noticed we had strayed quite far from his home. He was kind enough to find us a carriage and left before we roused the staff.” It’s not even that good of an excuse, lie or otherwise, but I just want her gone.

“No more late-night liaisons,” she affirms. “I’m aware you meant well, but there’s more at stake than just keeping Lord Blouting in good standing.”

“I understand,” I say and lower my gaze to appear chastised.

“Good, but for now, wash from your own basin, and go to bed. We’ve the ball tonight and I want each of you bathed and dressed prior to our arriving. I want everyone fresh and looking their best.”

“Of course, Grandmother,” I say with a smile and I let her leave first before finally being able to close my door. I lean against it with a sigh, both grateful and

elated that I was able to get away with meeting Barracuda. Now that I have my keys, I'll be able to come and go as I please.

I wash my face and hands as best I can from the basin, and even take out the keys to give them a thorough clean since I don't want to be sporting sooty fingers every time I use them. The water is filthy when I finish, but for the most part I'm clean enough to slide between the sheets. With my mind a tumble of thoughts about Barracuda and the prison and when I'll next see him, I think I'm too worked up to sleep. But after the night of excitement and Grandmother's discovery of my having absconded, it all suddenly leaves my body and as I snuggle under the covers, my lids grow heavy and with images of a tall blue Magix settling my mind, I'm soon drifting off.



It's my hunger that awakens me, my stomach protesting in a series of tight cramps and loud growling. The small ornate clock that sits on the mantle tells me it's early afternoon, so I dress as quickly and as best I can with Adepelle's assistance to hurry down for lunch.

"Good afternoon sleepy head," singsongs Poppy when I enter the dining room. It seems all my sisters are home for lunch, so I take my usual seat and begin helping myself.

"I'm surprised Grandmother allowed you to sleep so long," comments Rose as she butters a slice of bread.

"Where is Grandmother?" I ask.

"At the House of Assembly," says Daisy. "You know how she is with these charity balls. Nothing is done without her direct approval."

"And Father?" His absence from the table isn't unusual, though I haven't seen him in a while. He spends his days conducting business with his friends at the gentleman's club, and will often make the effort to be home for dinner.

"In the city I think," says Poppy. "With his associates, he wasn't all that forthcoming when he left this morning."

"So why were you so late to rise?" wheedles Rose.

"I had rather a late night," I say. I don't like lying to my sisters, but I can't alter the story between them and Grandmother. "With Clem."

Lily looks up from her food, one brow raised in confused curiosity.

"Not exactly the proper etiquette, but it's nice to hear you're getting along," says Rose, a slight smile as indication of her own approval of my behavior.

"Perhaps," I say, looking to Lily with wide eyes hoping to convey that what I'm saying never occurred. "But after the disastrous lunch, I felt compelled to make it up to him."

With a subtle nod, she resumes eating. She will, however, be keen to learn the details of what I've been up to.

"Well?" she asks the moment we depart for each of our rooms to 'rest' before we begin our preparations for this evening.

"Yes, all right, I went to see Barracuda."

"Are you quite insane?" she says, ensuring my door is securely closed before she comes to sit on my bed. "If you had been caught by anyone!"

"Quite frankly, the prison was the easy part," I say, brushing out my hair. I'll be first to bathe and have my hair done. "It was getting past Grandmother when I got home."

"She caught you?" She leans forward, eyes wide.

"That's why I had to come up with the Clem story. I was in my room and had given Orli my dress to clean when Grandmother was just suddenly there in the doorway. She knew I hadn't been in my bed."

"That woman has eyes everywhere."

"I know she bribes the staff, but I shudder at the thought of one of them checking on me in the middle of the night."

"I caught one once," says Lily. "He's not with us anymore, I don't think he was coping with Grandmother's demands."

"She sent a *he* to look in on you?" I'm truly horrified. I wouldn't have thought she would stoop to such levels, especially when she's so driven on keeping us all 'pure' for our husbands.

"I asked him what he was doing, poor kid practically peed his pants," she says with a giggle. "I never saw him again after that."

"She probably gave him such a dressing down for having either woken you, or actually getting caught that he thought better of his employment here."

“So, tell me about this adventure of yours to the prison. Were you scared?”

“Scared?” I say indignantly. “Lil, I thought I might pee *my* pants!”

She laughs, and while I continue with my preparations with face and hand creams, I relay to my younger sister what I *actually* did last night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I stretch lazily in the bathtub, the bubbles dripping off my legs and feet when I lift them from the delightfully warm water. I don't get to bathe as often as I would like, but I do ensure I wash thoroughly each day. A bath, however, is the epitome of relaxation and I intend to soak up every minute before I'm kicked out and the water refreshed for Rose.

Before Violet was taken, I would follow her, so it's small consolation that I get to be first since I'm next in line, a full ten minutes older than my twin, and therefore considered the oldest now. It's times like this that my heart seizes in memory of Violet being with us, but I know she's with Python, that she's safe and hopefully has achieved what she needed to with her power.

"At least *you* were able to escape," I murmur to myself. Granted she was kidnapped, but having seen her with Python I know she is happy. Far happier than what would have been her fate had she stayed and been forced to marry Bergamot.

A sharp knock on the door and Rose peeks in. "Do you intend to be there all day? There are four more of us to get through."

"Yes, yes, all right," I mutter and reluctantly leave the sanctuary of the bath.

Once dry, I have a quick, simple dinner in my room, then Adepelle begins on my hair. The voluminous mass of chestnut waves does take some taming, but Adepelle's skill with combs and pins is excellent and in a matter of a couple of hours she has my hair neatly braided and twisted in becoming loops about my head. She applies subtle but enhancing makeup, a touch of rouge and lipstick to give me a glowing complexion, before we begin the task of getting me dressed.

We start with my shift, a freshly laundered one that smells of lilacs, then my stockings which Adepelle fastens with a pair of silk ribbons. I hold one of the bed posts when she tightens my stays, and I'm grateful my lady's maid has a gentle touch when it comes to tightening lacings. Many of my friends have

told horror stories of chafing and wounds from stays that were laced far too tightly. She then slips the petticoat over my head, held at the shoulders by two lengths of ribbon.

My gown is new, and a gorgeous shade of blue, like a sapphire, deep and resplendent as the actual gemstone. It has an over-skirt of chiffon that I'm delighted to see sparkles in the light when it moves, like shimmering water. It seems Grandmother thought to give us matching shoes since they are the exact same color as the gown.

My gloves are also blue, and once Adepelle finishes sliding them onto my hands, they end at my upper arm, encasing my elbow. I'll collect my cloak before we leave since the weather is not conducive to the short, puff, almost non-existent sleeves of the gown. The venue of the ball will be warm as Grandmother won't allow for the discomfort of ladies when the gentlemen are suitably dressed in their shirts and suits.

Lily comes in just as Adepelle takes her leave. I smile when I see her dressed in a lovely gown of tangerine orange, like a beautiful sunset.

"You're dressed and ready so soon?" I ask. Adepelle had taken forever with my hair. Not that I begrudge her, there's a lot of it. And I had bathed first, so perhaps Rose and Daisy had taken shorter baths.

"I didn't take hours in the bath like *some* people," she says, giving me an accusatory look.

"Oh come on, it's one of the few perks I get being the eldest."

"Vi's the eldest."

"Yes, I know, and if she were here, it would be me booting *her* out of the bath."

"Do you think she's happy?" she asks suddenly, and I'm quite taken with how small her voice sounds.

I take her hands, squeezing firmly to reassure her. “Yes, I think she’s very happy, and safe, and with the man she loves.”

“Does she miss us? I mean will we ever see her again?” Tears are welling, and for someone so strong it touches my heart that Lily has been so affected by Vi’s absence.

“Oh, sweetness, of course we’ll see her again,” I say, pulling her close and gently stroking her hair. “I think...no...I *believe* that once she has achieved what Python needed her for, she will do everything she can to either come back, or send word, or something so we know everything turned out for the better for her.”

I pull back, clutching her upper arms. She brushes at her eyes, staining the fingertips of her gloves. “I wish I had your hope.”

“Believe me Lil. Vi will be doing her utmost to get back to us one way or another.”

She nods and I give her a handkerchief to fix her face and blow her nose. “I miss her.”

“I miss her too, very much. She knows that too, and I know she’ll be missing us just as much.”

Composed, Lily and I join the rest of the family downstairs in the foyer. I marvel at my sisters, and in spite of the embarrassing cliché we present being in our designated Kastor colors, we do look striking. Rose’s gown is a similar style to my own to highlight the fact that we are twins, in spite of us not being identical. I think Grandmother hopes people will see us together and immediately think of a sapphire and an emerald. Daisy, dressed in sunflower yellow is as cheerfully bright as the flower. Trimmed in white and yellow lace she will have the men orbiting around her, each begging to be on her dance card. Poppy, though the youngest, is still allowed to attend, but her gown is

more a dress, even so, Grandmother has ensured the deepest of red fabrics was sourced and used to show off her granddaughter.

“Have you your dance card Lily?” asks Daisy as she holds hers up. “I’d already promised Cypress, and then Alder was practically on his knees.” She’s blushing furiously. It’s so unlike Daisy to be given so much attention, but I have to admit she’s blossomed in the last year, and perhaps her beauty and quiet charm hasn’t gone completely unnoticed. If Grandmother catches wind of it, she’ll be sourcing a suitor before Daisy has even finished her first dance this evening.

“I have the card, and thankfully it’s quite blank,” says Lily in response.

“Your card is empty?” says Rose. “How pitiful.”

“Yours should be empty too, Rose,” I say coolly. “Mr. Bromeliad Crank will be in attendance. Do you really want him seeing you dancing with other rivals?”

My twin lifts her chin defiantly. “Nothing has been confirmed.”

“No, but there have been...discussions. Far be it for you to disrupt anything before it can come to fruition.”

“I assume you’ll only be dancing with Lord Blouting?” she snaps, her cheeks almost matching Poppy’s dress.

“Since we are already betrothed it hardly seems appropriate that I affiliate with anyone else.”

“Do you think Grandmother might allow me to dance?” asks Poppy.

“You’re a long way off from finding a match,” says Daisy.

“Yes, Lily is before you, and Grandmother is in for quite the challenge in finding *her* a suitable Kastor husband.”

“That is *not* going to happen,” says Lily through her teeth.

“What isn’t going to happen?” asks Grandmother as she joins us. Resplendent in snow white, in spite of her being Element of Wind, she looks every bit the part of the Ice Queen that she is.

“That Daisy will find true love at the ball tonight,” I say quickly.

“Of course she won’t,” says Grandmother as she adjusts her gloves before allowing one of the maids to assist her with her cloak. “I’m already in talks, but I’ll allow her to socialize this evening.”

Donned in our own cloaks, we trail out of the house and head for the pair of carriages to take us to the ball.

“Talks?” squeaks Daisy under her breath to Rose, but I pick up on the note of panic in her voice. “What talks? With whom?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



After her throw-away comment back at the house, I am curious to know who Grandmother has lined up for Daisy, as I'm sure Daisy is very eager to find out too.

We arrive at the ball at least a half hour late since Grandmother always prefers to make an entrance and ensure we're noticed when we walk through the doors of the House of Assembly. A strict stipulation of Grandmother's since she also likes to remind everyone what we represent.

The House of Assembly is a large hall with several enormous chandeliers, tall floor to ceiling windows that also double as doors, and tasteful portraits depicting patrons of long dead Collective Elders.

Grandmother's plan works, as if it wouldn't, when all eyes turn the moment we enter, and I can see heads tilting towards each other, whispers being exchanged as they talk about us, how we're dressed and no doubt the fact that one of us is still missing. The fact that Violet would have been married and not in attendance anyway is beside the point, so I don't worry too much about that piece of gossip. Regardless of the situation, I'm not about to share what little I know with the likes of these people just to stop a harmless rumor.

Even though I'm in the process of courting, and therefore forbidden to dance with any of the gentlemen already eying us off, I'm here because it gives Clem and I the opportunity to socialize with our peers without the need for a chaperone. We had the company of his mother at lunch the other day, and though I'd made up the story of meeting him the night before, I can allay Grandmother's fears even further by dancing with him tonight. My thoughts once more remind me of his hands and how he'll take great joy in mauling my body with them while we dance. My stomach clenches and I suddenly want to be anywhere but here.

Tonight is also Grandmother's chance to introduce Rose to Bromeliad Crank as a potential suitor and eventual husband. I don't think Grandmother is fully sold on the Element of Leaves contender, considering his family is not in the same social standing as us since they have no title; however, Mr. Crank's father is

regarded as a Gentleman, meaning he holds a good deal of land and lives off its provided income. They live in Piamak, a province several day's travel from here, but Element of Leaves is not a common trait among Kastors anymore, so Grandmother's choices for Rose's suitor were extremely limited. Seen as not that extraordinary, since plants are capable of growing on their own, the Element has been slowly weeded out, pardon the pun, but I couldn't say if it was intentional.

Throughout the afternoon, and when she wasn't being haughty, Rose was excitedly nervous, and perhaps even eager to meet the man Grandmother was mulling over. I feel nothing but pity for her, succumbing to Grandmother's wishes as she is, as all of us are. I envy Violet greatly in these moments, when I'm reminded that she managed to escape with a man she clearly loved while we're set to languish with whomever Grandmother chooses.

I see Clem waving to me from across the room, rather than wait for me to make my courteous circuit, a small plate of cakes and sandwiches in his other hand. I glance away, noting his mother tapping his arm to bring it down. He might as well have shouted to me across the hall. It doesn't escape my notice that his mother also has a plate of food in her hand.

My sisters have all excitedly dispersed, but I see Grandmother sticking to Rose's side, guiding her to a corner where the presumed Mr. Crank stands waiting with his parents. I can't tell from here, but I do hope he's at the very least pleasant enough to look at. Clem, with his dimpled cheeks appears more boy than man, even though he's almost forty. A sun-bleached pumpkin sporting a mop of blond hair on top. His mother continues to tend him, plucking off lint, fixing his collar, and as I draw near, I can hear her high-pitched bird voice peeping incessantly to him.

"Lady Iris," says Clem with a stiff bow, his grin splitting his face into shiny apple cheeks and his eyes almost disappearing into them.

"Lord Clem," I respond with a simple bobbing curtsy.

“I was worried you weren’t coming,” says Madam Blouting sounding as though she’d like to have made a more scorching remark.

“Nonsense,” says his father, Lord Blouting Senior, gruffly. “The Bloom family is always present on such occasions.” I know Clem’s father was good friends with my own grandfather. Cedar Bloom was a presence unto himself. If half the stories I’ve heard about him are true, I know I would have loved to have known him. I sometimes wonder what life would have been like if he’d been the one to outlive Grandmother.

“Would you like some punch?” asks Clem once he’s finished his mouthful.

“I would love some,” says his mother.

“Let the boy go, Myrtle,” says his father in exasperation. “He’s here for *her*.”

“Yes, but I wanted—”

Thankfully, once I’ve taken Clem’s arm, he steers us towards the refreshment table so I don’t have to hear his mother’s excuses for wanting to keep him close. When we reach the table, he hands me a small glass of punch, then begins to diligently refill his plate, not that it was empty. I can see our days as husband and wife are going to revolve around mealtimes.

“You’re looking lovely this evening,” he says when he finally realizes the little plate isn’t going to hold much more. “Your dress matches your eyes.”

“Thank you,” I say. I’m well aware my dress, as with all my sisters’ dresses tonight, corresponds to the color ringing our pupils.

The conversation stalls and my thoughts turn to Barracuda, alone in his cell waiting to be taunted by the Guards, waiting to stand trial. My mouth goes dry and a sudden lump catches in my throat.

I’d much rather be in that cell dancing with him.

We sip punch, watching the crowd of young singles. Some, like myself, are already engaged to wed, but have come to enjoy the social aspect, while others

are here to find a potential partner.

Since I'm officially betrothed and courting Clem, I'm definitely not allowed to dance with any of the other men mingling about the room. Grandmother would certainly confine me to whatever dungeon she has access to until my wedding day if I were to be seen dancing with anyone other than my intended.

Clem smiles at me again when I happen to be looking in his direction. His eyes, like mine, have a ring of blue, but I do notice it appears very pale and almost washed out. I may in fact be doomed to birthing a human like poor Clover. The thought makes me internally shudder. To be forever pitied simply because the child has no ring of color in their eyes. No status to be considered Kastor.

Our magic might be gone, but to lose our identity as Kastor seems an even worse fate.

Surreptitiously, I slide my hand into my reticule and curl my fingers around the three bone keys nestled inside. My presence will be missed if I leave, but surely I can be absent for a few moments while people consider my whereabouts, believing me to be dancing or chatting with friends?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I t's still relatively early in the evening, and I've yet to dance with Clem, but he's been forever filling up his plate. The moment he returns to his parents to check on their welfare, I slip into the background, behind all the guests watching the dancers from the sidelines and make my way to the cloakroom before I slip out of one of the side doors that opens onto the gardens. The House of Assembly is utilized for all manner of ball and party, or any gatherings of the townspeople, even the occasional wedding. Set in simple but elegant landscaping of trimmed hedges and neat flowerbeds, it does make for a lovely venue.

I hurry along the manicured lawn between the rows of zinnias and carnations until I reach the road and use the shadowy cover of tall conifers until I feel I've reached a safe distance to hail a carriage. It takes me further out of the city, but soon I see the dark outline of the towering walls of Stranglewood.

"Young lady such as yourself shouldn't be out so late on her own," says the driver. He's not the same driver as the one before, but they both clearly share the same sentiment.

"I'll be careful," I say, aware that what I'm about to do is anything but.

He lets me out before the jail's driveway, and I draw my cloak around me against the chill of the night. It seems colder here, or perhaps it's just my nerves considering my location. I hurry to the shadows, making my way to the back of the building to the nasty ditch of refuse. I won't be walking in it, but the ground is muddy and my shoes are soon ruined. I'll do what I can to save them when I get home, or trust that Orli has some way of restoring them.

Using my keys, I let myself into the dark confines and feel my way along the cold stone walls, reaching the gate and finding the lock by touch. I'm amazed how well I remember where everything is situated since I've only had the keys for a short time, and used them the once.

“Cuda!” I call in as loud a whisper as I dare through the barred window of his dungeon cell. The clinking of chain answers, and I quickly open the door and slip inside before I’m noticed by any of the Guards.

“Angel?” he says, confused. “Am I dreaming?”

“No,” I say softly, finding him in the dark since the moonlight through his window is paltry at best. “I’m here.”

“I told you not to come,” he says, but his voice says otherwise. “Why are you here?” he whispers.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be.” He looks cold, in spite of the fact that he’s already blue, but I would imagine he’s always cold. His tattered shirt and equally ragged trousers do nothing to ward off the constant chill. I go to give him my cloak, but he stops me.

“I’m sure there are plenty of places far better than this rank pit,” he says, a slight chuckle to his words.

“I want to be here, because...” I try to breathe. “Because you’re here.” He smiles at that and it lifts my heart greatly considering the situation we’re both in. “I enjoy dances, but they’re dull and tedious, and quite frankly, I’d rather be anywhere than near that constantly eating man-child and his overbearing mother.”

“Ah, yes, your betrothed. So you’ve come from dancing with, what was his name?”

“Clem, Lord Blouting, I should say. And no, we didn’t dance since he was too busy eating everything in sight.”

He laughs, a deeper chuckle in his chest and as he shakes his head in disbelief his perfect white teeth flashing with his smile.

He steps closer to me, and though my heart jumps to the speed of a fleeing rabbit, I keep my ground, I don't need to fear him.

Tentatively, he puts one hand to my waist, and gathers up my other hand to hold aloft, then he begins to gently sway. There's no melody, no beat to count steps to, but his hand slips down to the small of my back, and he pulls me across the floor.

I can look at him then, and even in the gloomy cell I can see his eyes on me which makes me all shivery inside.

"You know how to dance?" I ask, marveling at how smoothly he's taking us around the small confines of his cell.

"Not by choice," he replies, one corner of his mouth upturned in a half smile. "But since my family was of noble standing it was a requirement for when the king and queen held banquets and parties."

"The king and queen?" I'm already intrigued. We had a king many centuries ago, but he was overthrown and the Collective Conjuring of Elders was established to govern over Ecleshax.

We continue our slow dance in the dark, our bodies swaying as far as the length of his chain allows us.

"Python's parents," he continues quietly. "They died some time ago, but I hold fond memories of them."

"Python is a king?" That will have been a shock to Violet. "Does that mean she will have become queen?"

He chuckles. "Assuming he asked and she accepted to marry him."

"I don't think my sister had any idea she was being kidnapped by a *king*."

"There was many a heated argument that as king he shouldn't have risked coming to Ecleshax, but His Majesty can be quite stubborn."

“Why does *that* not surprise me,” I mutter with a shake of my head. His pursuit of Violet was certainly evidence of his determination. “But you were saying you grew up with Python?”

“Yes. We schooled together, and in our spare time, when we weren’t expected to attend lessons, we were always together or sought each other out.”

“You were close, then,” I remark. “Friends.”

“Brothers is probably the more appropriate term. Of course, we both had actual brothers, but we decided that parentage didn’t matter. As far as we were concerned, we came from the same family.”

“That’s incredibly sweet.”

“Then the king and queen were gone...”

“And Python needed to be king.”

He nods, and even without him having to say I know it changed their lives. Best of friends, then suddenly one is stationed higher than the other and is responsible for the running of a kingdom.

“He still would have needed you,” I say gently.

“There was nothing I could do to help his brother, Wolf,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “Everything we tried, every province we searched, nothing could rouse him.”

“Then Python learned of us, of Violet?”

He stops swaying, and his hands fall away from me. He moves back to the far wall, his usual spot where he spends day after day trapped here. The chain clinks, like stinging darts to my heart. I want nothing more than to free him and get him back to Duskmore.

“You must be angry that your closest friend would leave you behind,” I say tentatively. It’s something I’ve always wondered. A betrayal like that can’t be so easily forgiven.

“He had no choice,” he says grimly. “Wolf was running out of time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



I go to him, pulling off my cloak and settling it across his shoulders. It's far too small, but at least he doesn't shrug it away.

"He could have sent someone after you," I counter.

He turns. "The plan was that if any of us were taken we would be left behind. I know it would have pained him greatly to do so." The grip he holds on his agony at having been abandoned by his own people is wavering.

We don't speak for a moment; I try to let him gain some measure of composure. This isn't why I came here; I didn't mean to upset him.

"I'm sorry," I say after a time, my voice sounding loud in the confined cell. The prison is far from a quiet place, all around are the cries and calls of other inmates, the rhythmic marching of Guards on patrol, and bells tolling the hour.

"You've nothing to be sorry for," he says simply.

"You shouldn't have been left behind. I'm sorry that you were because it's landed you in this mess." Mess is an understatement. We both know his fate if he stays here.

"Perhaps," he says in a low voice. "But then I'd never have met you."

His hand slides into my hair, cupping the back of my head and he draws me to him, his lips settling on mine and everything around us melts to nothing. A thrill of delight washes through me when our lips meet. I touch his face, light caresses so I don't add to the hurt of his wounds. He holds me close then, his arms enveloping around me while I slide my arms around his neck and the kiss deepens. I thread my fingers through the hair at the base of his skull. He groans, pulling me closer, and I open my mouth to allow him admittance, his tongue demanding.

This is why I came here, why I risked leaving the dance and Clem and Grandmother. To be with Barracuda. He feels cold under my hands, but it's him and I don't care that he's filthy and smells like a privy. All that matters is we're together and I savor every moment we have until the day we can be together.

Together? Is that something I can truly consider? An hour or so ago I was succumbing to my fate with Clem, now here I am hoping and wishing for the day when I can wake up every morning with this Magix.

My mind is running away with me. It's just a kiss. My first kiss, but a kiss that holds so much hope and promise.

His mouth leaves mine and he kisses along my jaw to my neck. I tilt my head slightly, a moan escaping when I feel his feather light nips of pleasure running down my throat.

"Oh, yes," I sigh. My body is as taut as a harp string. I want his touch so very badly, I ache for him, for his desire to take me to places I've never encountered.

It's then that I believe one day we *will* be together.

He makes a noise of frustration, his hands squeezing my arms as he reluctantly pulls away.

"I can't, angel," he grates. "I can't expect you to save me from this fate."

"And I won't accept that this *is* your fate," I say finding I'm still breathless from the kiss.

His forehead presses against mine, and his eyes close as he shakes his head.

"Show me your magic," he says softly as though to use my power might help soothe the ache of his burdens.

“All right,” I say, stepping back from him. He holds out his hand and I smile when I grasp it. Our link to enable me to use my magic.

I think about the spells I have all written down in my grimoire. I should have brought it with me, but that would have been quite impossible. Even so, I remember a good many of them considering the amount of time spent creating them. Once all for nothing, now I can see them to fruition.

For this spell, my design appears in segments before forming a whole and I guide it carefully until it hovers horizontally above the floor. There are pools of water everywhere and the one I’ve chosen reflects my spell in the moment before it clouds over forming a thin sheet of ice.

“Very impressive,” says Barracuda and I get a sudden rush through me that I’ve managed to amaze him with my ability.

“Let’s try something different,” he lets go of my hand and the spell crashes, disappearing before it hits the floor. The ice remains because it’s so cold in here, but it will start to melt. The chain allows him to reach one of the puddles and he crouches next to it. “Come,” he says, indicating that I join him.

I scoop up my skirts and hunker down next to him. He places a finger into the puddle, a brief look that I do the same.

“Do the spell again.”

“You need to give me your hand,” I say, holding out my hand that isn’t touching water.

He shakes his head. “Do the spell.”

Shrugging internally, I do as he asks, gasping when the spell appears just as it had moments ago. “How is this possible?” I say, fascinated that I’m able to use my magic without touching him.

“The water is a conduit. We are touching through the water.”

“I had no idea that was possible.”

“Water is one of the more powerful Elements. Elements of Water can form great spells if they join as one *with* water.”

Something rises and blooms inside me causing tears to form that spill down my cheeks. Learning so much about my repressed power is beginning to make me understand what is truly at stake here, and perhaps a glimpse at what Grandmother was hoping to achieve. For so long Kastors have been without magic, to physically see it, to create it, my emotions are finding it hard to hold it together.

I feel his thumb against my cheek, wiping away a tear. “I never would have known about any of this without you.”

We pull our fingers from the chilly water before it fully freezes, and again the spell disintegrates. He holds me close while I allow myself to release a few muted sobs. His hands rub up and down my back, and he lets me simply hold onto him, saying nothing.

“Thank you,” I say when I pull back, wiping at my eyes with my tiny handkerchief.

“It’s a great pleasure to see you discovering your power,” he says.

Leaving him is a stabbing pain of ice through my heart when I look to the cell door. But he encourages me to go, concerned for my own welfare, and sometimes inciting his own safety should we be caught together. It’s this logic that does drag me from his arms and I slip out of the prison, mindful of the Guards, and back out to the main street.

I find a carriage, but instead of going back to the dance, I direct the driver to Bloominace Manor. I’ve no desire to deal with Clem, and when I see the

state of my gown, marked with streaks of grime and mud, it's probably a good thing since I'll only embarrass Grandmother. I'd also have to explain my bedraggled appearance with the state of it too.

My face also hosts a couple of dirty stripes, so I strip down to my shift without Adepelle's assistance, and wash from the basin, before pulling my hair free and brushing out all the braids. It swings down my back in a tumble of soft chestnut waves.

Sitting at my desk, I open my grimoire to the pages of spells designed to create ice. I write down the fact that my power can be brought about via water when also in the presence of...I hesitate. Do I write Barracuda, or simply the title of Magix? I settle on Barracuda, because I only ever want to create magic with him.

I'm climbing into bed when I hear them return, the first voice being that of Grandmother, screeching my name.

Shoulders slumping, I pull on my dressing gown and make my way downstairs to face the onslaught.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“**W**here on *earth* have you been?” snaps Grandmother the moment she sees me coming downstairs.

“I had a headache, and the music and constant chatter were making it worse,” I say as I reach the entrance hall. My sisters give me quick glances before stealing up the stairs I’ve just come down. They won’t go far since I know they’ll hide just beyond view so they can hear Grandmother’s tirade.

“And not a word to let your family or the Bloutings know?”

“I left a message with one of the serving stewards to pass onto everyone. Is it *my* fault he failed to do so?”

“Who?” she demands. “Which steward?”

“I didn’t ask for his credentials, Grandmother, I just wanted to leave so I could find some relief for my headache.”

There obviously was no such steward, but without a name she has little hope of retribution in that regard. I wouldn’t put it past her to go so far as to inspect my gown for any ‘evidence’, but I know the dirt stains are not the kind she’s looking for. I’d still be questioned, but at least she would be content in the belief that I remain ‘intact’.

“In that case, off to bed with you. I’ll have Mrs. Frobisher bring a tincture and sweet tea.”

“Thank you,” I say, turning towards the stairs.

“The Bloutings were most concerned when Lord Blouting Junior was unable to find you,” Grandmother continues. “That’s the second time in as many days that you’ve abandoned them. You’d best go there in the morning so they may see for themselves you are quite well.”

I manage to stop myself from wilting in exasperation. The last thing I want is to be in the presence of my fiancé and his wandering hands. Holding Barracuda’s hand feels right, holding Clem’s is like holding a handful of wet laundry.

“Of course,” I say perkily. “An excellent idea.”

I also keep my smile in place until I know she can no longer see my face and I let it fall. I almost trip over my sisters where they’ve been loitering at the top of the staircase, just around the corner.

“Are you well, Iris?” asks Poppy worriedly.

“I’m fine, precious, no need to worry,” I reassure her.

“Lord Blouting was practically inconsolable,” says my twin, Rose.

“He was stuffing his face,” says Lily.

“Madam Blouting asked me if I’d seen you anywhere,” says Daisy. “But I wasn’t sure where you’d gone.”

“Headache,” I reiterate, because as much as we’re a united front against our grandmother, I don’t need any reason for them to accidentally slip up in front of her. “Go on, off with you.” I say, and when Lily hangs back, I give her a cursory nod. She returns it before heading to her room.

I have no stomach for breakfast the following morning. Watching my sisters cracking into their boiled eggs, eating toast, or requesting more tea only has my stomach roiling when I consider what I must once again do.

See Clem.

Grandmother accompanies me, which only adds to my discomfort regarding the whole visit, but we’re both greeted warmly. In perhaps the first time in forever I’m actually grateful that she’s there. It means I won’t be left alone with Clem since his mother sets us up in their formal sitting room with tea and cakes.

I get the apologies over with first thing, again reiterating my inconvenient headache that forced me home. I also remember to add in the part about the fictional steward who failed to mention my leaving to all and sundry. I keep my gaze to the two women, being that of my grandmother and Madam Blouting, which manages to keep me distracted since I can feel Clem’s eyes boring into me the entire time.

“Perhaps I could take Iris to see our newest acquisition?” he proposes hopefully, once I’ve been forgiven. “In the stables,” he adds, the suggestion in his voice is not lost on me when it’s said with a sly smile. My poor stomach is not going to last much longer.

“Nonsense, dearest,” says Madam Blouting. “Iris will catch a dreadful chill out in this weather and the last place she wants to go is the filthy stables.” Thank the gods for Madam Blouting’s prudence. “His father recently bought a new gelding. I’ve no clue about horses, but apparently, he was a good purchase.”

“What men find interesting can be often seen as positively trivial,” says Grandmother. I don’t know if she meant to insult my fiancé, but since both she and Madam Blouting have saved me from being alone with Clem, for the rest of the visit I’m able to smile and chat quite amicably.

I’m not so lucky though, when Madam Blouting and Grandmother do leave me, with the excuse of showing off some linens and their exquisite embroidery. I’ve never attempted embroidery, that’s Rose’s thing. I’d much prefer to paint, or even sketch, and I do enjoy visiting the House of Masters when an exhibition is showing.

“I thought they’d never leave,” says Clem. He’s seated across from me, the low table between us that holds the refreshments.

I pick up my tea in the hope it will fortify my nerves. The last time we were alone he touched my leg. The memory still makes me shudder in revulsion. To think I will have to be with this man for the rest of my life, share a home, and worse, share a bed, has me internally cringing so badly that I almost choke.

He leaps from the chair when I start to cough, his hand at my back, patting ineffectively as I manage to set down the cup and saucer and search for a napkin.

“I’m fine,” I splutter. It’s more embarrassing than any concern for my physical state. But once composed, Clem’s hand remains pressed between my shoulder blades.

“Are you certain you’re all right? I can send for the doctor,” he says, his hand moving then, coming to my shoulder, his finger lightly stroking along my neck.

I stiffen, and try to pull away, but he grips me then, his fingers splayed across clavicle and throat. I mentally beg for any of the servants to come and interrupt us.

“Since we are to be together,” he says in a low voice. “Might I steal a kiss of promise from my betrothed?”

His fingers haven’t stopped moving, their clammy lengths constantly shifting in jerky movements over my skin.

“That’s highly inappropriate, and against all etiquette,” I say quickly, desperately.

I’m suddenly pulled against the back of the chair with an indignant yelp, turning my head just in time before a pair of very wet, flabby lips press to my cheek in a soggy

suctioning of moist horror.

“Lord Blouting,” I cry, managing to push away and get out of the chair, using the napkin to wipe at my face as I glare at him.

“You wipe away my affection?” he says as though what he’s just done isn’t the most dreadful of broken protocols, not to mention abhorrently disgusting.

“Indeed,” I say, flustered. “How dare you take such advantage? We might be engaged, but I still have my reputation to consider.”

“We are to be married. There is no harm to your reputation,” he says stiffly, but he comes around the chair, effectively pursuing me. “The wedding is merely a formality. I can just as easily bed you now and no one would be the wiser.”

“That will *never* happen,” I say between my teeth.

“Won’t it?” he says and in spite of his child-like features I can see the malicious intent in his eyes. “It’s expected of us to produce children. You *will* perform your duty to me and to the restoration of magic.”

I open my mouth to fire back, but both Grandmother and Madam Blouting re-enter the room, and though I’ll be forced to resume my seat, I do allow myself a small sigh of relief. Clem takes the opportunity to grasp my arm, his fingers again sliding over my skin before he guides me back to the chair.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” says Grandmother when she finishes her tea. “Although we could spend the day in your wonderful company, Iris and I have many a pressing errand before the wedding.”

“I was advising my darling Iris the other day that I would be happy to supply a boy or maid to run your errands,” says Clem. “I’d hate to think of my sweet fiancé having to toil away in the city.”

“Though I appreciate your offer, my lord, I simply cannot trust the judgment of the serving staff. Nor would I expect them to make such decisions over fabrics and flowers, as I am sure you can well understand.”

“Of course, Madam.” He might appear outwardly calm, but I have a feeling Lord Clematis Blouting is fighting against his desire to have his own way over that of my

grandmother.

I've never wanted to get out into the cold air fast enough, and am glad when we do so, returning to our carriage for the trip home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



No wonder people give up hope. Having to spend countless months waiting to front a judge, knowing you're innocent, or just waiting for your sentence. The waiting is enough to crumple the resolve of even the strongest of minds.

I want to get Barracuda out, and my initial thought was to make another key for the chain around his ankle, but I know I'm being watched by Grandmother. Very closely. Over the past few weeks I've only managed to see him a few times as circumstance have stopped me from seeing him more frequently. Keeping my visits to the prison a secret has also come at a price. I'm forever in a state of alert nervousness, wondering if or when I'll be discovered, and what it will mean if I am. But I can't let Barracuda down. I can't leave him to sit in that godsawful place alone and abandoned by his own people. His crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and though I know he was an accomplice in the taking of a Hiraeth Stone, I also know he took the fall so the rest of his people could escape. I should be angry, the Stone was to ensure Violet could go through Torgotha, a place I know to be the stuff of nightmares. But from what Barracuda has told me, my own loyalties are with that of the Magix. If the king's brother needs Violet's help, then I know she would do what she could. I just wish I could speak with her, find out she's all right, and let her know she isn't to worry about us here in Embervale.

Approaching the small, secret door, I hold my breath to stave off the smell emitting from the ditch below. Ever vigilant in this moment, I keep my eyes on the top of the wall listening for any sounds of Guards.

This morning's disastrous visit with the Bloutings plagued my mind the rest of the day. My skin itched, crawling with revulsion at the memory of Clem's hands on my skin, his vulgar mouth on my cheek. I don't know how Clover was able to accept her husband on their wedding night, but I know I will never succumb to Clem's advances, duty or otherwise.

Withdrawing the bone keys from my reticule, I slowly and as carefully as I can, release the lock, a sound I can neither silence, nor reduce in volume. I know it's

not necessarily loud, but it sounds like the clash of cymbals in the otherwise quiet location. The door too, squeals on disused and neglected hinges. In the few times I've used this clearly forgotten entrance, not once have I come across a Guard loitering near it.

The prison itself is not that much better smell-wise, but it's a damn sight better than the cloying stench of the ditch, and I take a tentative breath once inside, allowing my eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom. Small windows set high in the wall afford enough light to see, but there are no torches or lanterns, another aspect that makes me think no one comes down here.

The fortuitous part of it all is the door is on the same level as the basement dungeons where Barracuda is held. Then it's the large key that gets me through a gate, sectioning off the basement cells from the rest of the prison. And finally, it's then only a matter of navigating my way carefully along the few corridors to reach his cell where I use the last and smallest key to gain entrance to his cell.

"Angel," he sighs when I enter. "Always a delight to see you."

Seated on the floor, his ankle secured to the chain that's pinned in the center, he hugs his knees, releasing them when I come close.

Kneeling in front of him, I set my basket down, covered with a blanket which I immediately shake to unfold to wrap it about his shoulders, before giving him a gentle kiss. I don't need to touch him to know he'll be freezing, but his lips are like ice and I would dearly love to be able to make a fire. I'd considered bringing him lots of blankets and even mentioned the idea at our last meeting, but he said that if I did, the Guards would only take them. Though I argued I would simply bring more through The Kastor Care Committee for the Better Days Relief of Persons of Good Character Who Have Fallen on Bad Times he said not to because it would be that the Guards believe him to be conjuring them. Not that he could since his magic is limited here.

Rummaging in the basket, I bring out the food: fresh baked loaves, a jar of pickled beets, a couple of apples, a wedge of cheese and a thick slice of ham all

to be washed down with the accompanying flagon of ale.

He munches into the food hungrily, and though I try to bring what I can, I do wonder the last time he ate properly. I'd like to come more often, but it's hard enough trying to get here every few days as it is with Grandmother watching over myself and my sisters like a snake over mice.

"I've been informed my trial begins tomorrow," says Barracuda between mouthfuls.

"Finally," I say, joining him in eating the food, but only taking small portions since I have access to readily available meals. "Did they give a time?"

"I'm to front the judge at ten in the morning."

"Are you nervous?"

He laughs at that, a lovely deep rumble that starts in his chest. "I'm beyond nerves, angel. I'd prefer to get this over with. I know they mean to kill me, but at this rate I will simply keel over with boredom."

"That reminds me," I say, fishing in the bottom of my basket and bringing out a book. "I know it's not your preferred subject, but it might help in understanding why my view of history is so obscured."

"The History of Ecleshax," he says, reading the cover. It's a leather-bound volume, and one of my old textbooks that won't be missed. "'How Society Overcame Adversity.' I may need a pen to make corrections."

I smile. "I didn't think to bring one, but hopefully it'll ignite the fire we need to get you through this ridiculous trial."

"You *want* me angry?"

"Of course!" I say. "This is a total injustice."

"Iris, I was caught stealing," he says pragmatically.

“Perhaps, but you said the Stone belonged to the Magix first,” I argue. “Is it really stealing, or...recovering what was already yours?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



He watches me over the spine of the book, his eyes alight with the smile hidden behind it. “Not mine specifically,” he corrects.

“All right then,” I say, trying to find justification to his actions. “But it belonged to *your* people and definitely not Kastors. Seems to me you were in the right.”

“With that argument, can I count on your representation for me during the trial?”

“I would if the court recognized me as a barrister. Do you even have a lawyer?”

“If I have, I’ve never met them.”

“Well, that’s of no help, how can they build a defense if they’ve never spoken to you?”

“I think that’s the point, angel,” he says, setting the book down on the floor, being mindful to place it in a position of least filth. “If it’s just me in the dock, then the judge need only look at me to pass sentence.”

“That isn’t justice.”

“From what I’ve heard, I’ll be lucky to go out whole. Some of the Guards speculated as to why I hadn’t already lost a hand, or hands. I mean, I’ve lost the tip of a horn, but that wasn’t deliberate. I didn’t exactly come quietly. Apparently, they want to exhibit me in the, what was it? The House of Interesting Artifacts?”

“You’re not serious?” I say, the lump of cheese I’d tried to swallow now caught in my throat.

“Sounded serious.”

“How can you be so calm? To do that, it means they’ll have to *skin* you!”

“That is perhaps why they give me so little food. If I drop enough weight fast enough, my skin will be easier to remove.”

“Cuda,” I snap indignantly. “This isn’t a joking matter. You mean too much to me that I can’t just sit back and watch all this happen to you.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to accept my fate.”

“And you’re happy to just leave me?” My throat constricts and tears prick my eyes with their heat. “That I’ll have lost you and have to marry that repugnant imbecile who only thinks about food, his mother, or...” I falter, unable to voice the third reason for my reluctance since the image it brings to mind sets my stomach roiling. “As it is, I half expect his mother to move in with us.”

With a sigh of resignation, he opens his arms and I move to snuggle into him, concerned that he still feels cold under the blanket. He strokes my hair as I lean against his chest.

“No, I don’t want you marrying a cretin, but if he can take care of you—”

I lift my head to glare at him. “He can’t,” I say with finality. “And what’s more, he’s given me a taste of what my life will be once the vows have been said. I’m not about to depend on someone who is so reliant on his mother, eats like a starved pig, and...and worse.”

He nods and fails to hide his smile.

“Cuda,” I say, swatting his chest lightly. “Please take this seriously. I know you don’t want to die any more than I want to marry Prince Prat. We have to *do* something!”

“Perhaps we could try some more magic,” he suggests. He always changes the subject and I realize in these moments that he truly has accepted his fate. After the trial he will most likely die and that will be the end of it. It pains

me to understand that's how he might feel, but I can't let it happen. I *won't* let it happen.

"All right, then," I say resignedly. I'm always willing to learn more about my magic, and try new spells, but something has definitely shifted and in the back of my mind wheels have begun turning.

He kisses the top of my head. "Come," he says, shifting so we can stand. "Show me your power."

Taking my hand, we move away from our little picnic and the wall. The cell isn't that big, but it gives me room to work. This time I draw my spell on the wall, the moist surface creating a small trail of mud under my finger, but the spell itself appears as a line of water, running along the surface like a trickle. I add an incantation to its progress and that's when the trickle becomes a seepage. Water is drawing out from the rocks, all the moisture stored inside is being coaxed out by my spell.

Cuda's hand squeezes mine, he places his free hand on the wall and into the water that's now flowing down the wall. I'm still drawing along the rocks, but he lets my hand go. I'd expected the spell to fail, but because we're still connected by the water, it holds and continues to draw out more water.

With my other hand now free, I do something I never thought possible, I create a second spell. This one is to deal with the water that has started to make a significant puddle on the floor. I can't believe I'm able to achieve this, *two* spells at the same time! There should be chaos and confusion in my mind, but there's only calm and order. I *know* how to do this. My hands can move to the patterns required, and the words, though completely new, form easily in my mind to control each spell. I bring the water up off the floor, turning it into a big ball above us. I stop the spell bringing the water out of the rocks, and then focus on the one spell, the water ball, and send it

carefully out of the high window to the outside. Once I stop, we both hear the distinct sound of its splash.

Cuda draws me to him, kissing me firmly, his arms around me, pulling me close.

“You are more powerful than I thought,” he says softly, his nose brushing along mine.

“Well, I’ve heard a girl has to work twice as hard to be considered half as good,” I say, pressing my forehead against his. I hadn’t thought it possible either, but what I might have once thought well out of reach is now tantalizing my fingertips. “I couldn’t have done any of it without you.”

“If nothing else, at least I’ve been able to give you a taste.”

But I know it won’t be enough. Even if it might be for my own selfish desires, I won’t let this man die.

CHAPTER THIRTY



When I look to return home, my heart squeezing painfully as I turn the key in the lock of his cell, I'm struggling to come up with how I'm going to just break a hulking mass of blue Magix out of prison!

Easier said than done.

I'd considered a key for the shackle around his ankle, but my every move is being scrutinized, even now I'll have to be careful getting back into the manor. Besides, I'm out of time with Cuda's trial now in the mix since the first lot of bone keys took a week. One key might take less time, but it's time I don't have.

The shackle aside, it is very apparent that careful planning will be required if we're both to slip past the Guards and reach my little obscure wooden door.

Also, anything we might have come up with, we don't have time to implement since I know I'll be missed, and with Cuda's trial being set for the following morning, it means he's under more Guard in case anyone has the idea of doing something radical...

Like break him out.

"Hungry, Iris?" inquires Grandmother.

I don't realize I'm wolfing down breakfast until it's pointed out. My sisters and Father all watch me as I swallow the mouthful I've stuffed in. With deliberate movements, I set down my cutlery.

"The food is delicious," I say lamely. "I'd hate to return any of it." I barely remember anything I'd served myself, but I'm sure there was buttered toast, eggs and cold pork, all accompanied with our choice of tea or coffee. I dab at my mouth delicately with my napkin.

Lily, in her effort to mollify the situation, stabs at her own slice of meat and without cutting it into a more manageable piece, stuffs it fully into her mouth.

"Yum!" she says around her mouthful, egg yolk threatening to drip down her chin.

"Lily!" shrieks Grandmother her piercing gaze now leveled at my younger sister.

“What?” she says, still chewing.

“Little wonder I’m having a time finding *you* a suitor.”

“Good,” she murmurs, catching my eye, and I smile my thank you.

“Now girls, please understand that I shall be out of the house for most of the day. The Magix trial begins today.”

My stomach constricts. Cuda had already told me that he would face trial today, and I knew it was going to eventuate, but to hear the unfettered glee in my grandmother’s voice is causing all manner of turmoil inside me. It only strengthens my resolve to get him out, but I’m at a loss as to how.

When I’m pacing in my room trying to figure out how to get Cuda out of prison, Lily comes in without knocking and flops on my bed.

“So, now you really *do* owe me,” she begins, but only gives me an expectant look.

“For what?”

“I believe children these days are calling it ‘taking the heat’.”

“What heat?”

She rolls onto her stomach, her chin in her hands while her feet swing back and forth behind her. “Grandmother, of course. Honestly, that woman has, I don’t know, arrows for eyes or something. They just penetrate straight through you.”

“I know, I felt them.”

“See?” she says, her eyes wide, eyebrows raised. “So, I took the heat by taking the arrows instead of you.”

“Right,” I say, unconvinced.

“Precisely, therefore you now owe me.”

“Owe you what, exactly?”

“I know you’re planning something; you want to break him out, don’t you? Especially now that Grandmother’s announced his trial starts today.”

My cheeks burn. “Break who out? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh please,” she says. “Ever since we went to Stranglewood all that time ago you’ve been mooning over that Magix. I’m not blind, you’re just lucky Grandmother hasn’t caught on.”

That’s the problem though, I think she has. I stop pacing and come to sit on the bed beside her. She gets up, swinging her legs around to also sit.

“It’s at ten,” I say flatly.

“No wonder she was so happy at breakfast. Even her admonishment of you seemed rather lenient.”

I nod. “Would you come with me?” I ask tentatively.

“That hardly constitutes you owing *me*, you’re only increasing your debt, but yes, this whole drama is fascinating. Besides, I’m interested to see how the old bird behaves in court.”

“She won’t want us there.”

“No, but we’ll just slip in the back where she won’t notice. She’ll be front and center and too busy to care who’s there to see the proceedings.”

“Thanks, Lil,” I say, reaching for her hand to give it a squeeze.

She squeezes back. “Why not have a bit of a dalliance before you succumb to that lump?”

As we’re about to leave, one of the footmen finds me, proffering a silver tray on which sits a letter. Since it’s obviously for me, I open it, my already unsettled stomach becoming even further distressed.

“You’ve gone rather pale,” says Lily, adjusting her cloak as we stand ready to leave in the front entry.

“It’s from Clem,” I say. “He’s inviting me to lunch.”

“Well, that’s hardly a matter of concern,” she says simply. “We can attend the trial and you can probably still make lunch if it’s in the city.”

“No,” I say softly. “He’s home alone. He wishes for me to join him.”

“Ah,” she says as understanding dawns. “So he’s looking to have you to himself?”

“He means to...” I falter, because I know exactly what it means. “He wishes to indulge in marital duties *before* being married.”

“He wants to get under your shift, you mean?”

“Lily,” I scold, but she’s absolutely right. “But you’re right. If I go it means I’m accepting of his...proposition.”

“Surely he’s expecting you to, not that I’m saying you should. I mean, ew! But what does it mean if you don’t?”

“It means what I told him the other day, that I will not have him anywhere near me.”

She takes the letter from me. “This sounds quite demanding. He’s even sending a carriage to collect you.”

“Well, I won’t be getting in it,” I say firmly. “I have a trial to attend.” I don’t know why I’m becoming so worked up. It’s as simple as that, I’m not going. But the sudden spike of dread that flashed through me at seeing his words, his insinuated suggestion has only brought to the fore all the feelings of horror and fear he brought about the other day. “No, I’m definitely *not* going. It’s not even a question to ponder.”

“Indeed,” says Lily. “As eager as he might be, he’ll just have to be disappointed that his cock doesn’t get a dipping.”

“Lily, of all the things!” But I’m laughing at my sister’s crude words.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Having toured and visited Stranglewood as often as I have, I'm well aware are rooms and areas dedicated to legal proceedings within its walls. However, with Barracuda being such a prominent and well-known prisoner, and with the long-awaited trial to be conducted by an official judge as opposed to the Collective Elders, the proceedings are to be held in the House of Justice.

When Lily and I arrive, I worry we might not get inside for the crowd that's converged on the building. Men, women, both Kastor and human have taken a great interest in the fate of the Magix, and my heart squeezes in fear that everything about this trial will be against him from the start. Although, it shouldn't surprise me.

"Come on," says Lily, muscling her way through the crowd.

"Do you think there's still room inside?" I ask.

"Grandmother will already be in there and seated right up the front. He has no family so she'll want to be directly under his nose."

"I have little doubt," I murmur. After her announcement, Grandmother left straight after breakfast this morning, giving Lily and I time enough to make our own way to the House of Justice without her asking questions.

When we reach the door, there's a beleaguered bailiff who's busy explaining to the jostling crowd that the courtroom is full and no further members of the public may enter. That is, until *we* step forward.

"We are Ladies Iris and Lily Bloom, granddaughters of Madam Amaryllis Bloom," I say as sternly as I can manage given the raucous crowd bellowing around me. "She requested we attend today's proceedings."

Our family, and consequently our family name, is well known to Kastor society, and that includes the minority human community that lives this side of Embervale. The bailiff doesn't question us, or ask that we somehow prove who we say we are. Instead, he gives us a short nod and opens the door, his arm out

immediately after Lily enters to stop anyone else coming through. The door shuts behind us, and I'm thankful it blocks out most of the cacophony outside.

It isn't difficult to locate the courtroom, after walking past a few offices, there's the sound of loud shouting and someone starts yelling about rising for the honorable justice something, something. I can't hear them properly, so the name is little more than a mumble in spite of them yelling it.

We find the door, and I hurriedly push it open with Lily as my shadow, and while the audience still stands, we slip inside and find a couple of spare seats at the back, though I can't see Grandmother.

I've never attended a court proceeding before, and I hope to never have to attend one again. All the unnecessary pomp and ceremony to simply drag some poor soul up from the prison to be told they have another twenty years at Stranglewood.

The gavel bangs again, but we don't stand. Instead a door near the front opens and between two Guards shuffles in Cuda, his ankles and wrists shackled by heavy looking iron chains.

My stomach clenches, and my heart triples its beat. In spite of his circumstances, I'm so happy to see him. He has fresh bruises and more raw cuts, but beaten as he is, I only want to be close to him.

"You really *do* like him, don't you?" whispers Lily.

"Don't be absurd," I say, not looking away from the man they lead to the dock, locking his chains in place so he has no hope of escape. I'm uncertain whether I should share my feelings about the condemned Magix with my sister, but so far Lily has done nothing but display complete loyalty.

"Darling sister," Lily continues. "If you squeeze my hand any harder it's going to fall off."

"Oh," I say, immediately letting her hand go.

“I told you to have a bit of fun before you become stuck in a loveless marriage. Well, loveless between you and Clem, I’m not sure about Clem and his mother.”

“Lily,” I balk, but by now I probably shouldn’t be at all surprised by my sister’s bald insinuations.

“What?” she says, her eyes wide with feigned innocence. “In all honesty, Riz, I think you should run off with your Magix like Vi did. You’ll be a lot happier on the run than shackled to that grotesque momma’s man child.”

“Vi was...taken, then she ran off. I can’t just run off.”

“Sure you can.”

Interestingly, it’s what she’d also said to Violet in the moments before her doomed wedding.

Our conversation is quashed when the judge begins the trial. He’s as old as the Collective Elders, and I wonder if he has all his faculties intact when he shakily lifts a sheet of paper, adjusts his spectacles and squints at the page.

“Will the defendant please rise?” the judge calls.

For a moment I think Cuda is going to defy the judge’s order, but it’s more the fact that he’s struggling, the chains are weighing him down. I reach, searching for something to hold when Lily’s hand once again finds mine and I give her a grateful squeeze and smile. He manages to get to his feet, and once satisfied, the judge continues.

“The prosecution may list the charges.”

“Your Honor,” says the prosecution. A be-wigged man looking close in age to Clem in a pressed gray suit, with his right hand gripping the lapel as he begins to pace, and lists off the charges in order of severity. “The defendant is charged with grand theft by larceny, theft of an object of significance, the requisite intent to take property that was not within the defendant’s initial ownership,

unauthorized and unlawful entry of an establishment, illegally crossing Torgotha, unauthorized arrival and subsequent occupation of Ecleshax, failing to acknowledge illegal occupation of Ecleshax, failing to alert authorities of his entry to Ecleshax, and obstructing authorities from apprehending all Magix that had traveled to Ecleshax illegally.”

“Can they charge him with that last one?” I ask Lily, not that I think she is in any way an expert on Embervale, and indeed Ecleshax, law.

“I guess so?” she says with a shrug. “All I know is they’ll throw everything they can at him and see what sticks.”

“That’s true,” I say with a sigh. “I have a really bad feeling that all of it *will* stick. They haven’t given him a defense barrister which means he’ll be answering for himself.” My own knowledge of our legal system is paltry at best, but I have read a few books that mentioned laws and consequences should any of our magic cause a legal issue.

“And they’re not going to believe a word he says, anyway,” adds Lily.

“If he speaks at all,” I say, more to myself than my sister.

“Be seated,” says the judge, and Cuda collapses back into the chair.

So far, I haven’t been able to gain his attention, and I want him to know I’m there. The prosecutor then begins his opening statement, which more or less is just the charges once again listed off, but this time in chronological order as the prosecutor explains to the best of his knowledge what Cuda did, and how he did it. It’s incredibly boring since it would seem the facts are given a little more embellishment than what I understood them to be, but then it all goes to pot when he mentions Cuda trying to manipulate...me.

Grandmother is the first to stand. “How dare you!” she says glaring angrily at the prosecution. “My granddaughter will not have her name in association with that creature.” She points to Cuda, who for the however many hours we’ve been stuck in this room, hasn’t said a single word.

The judge bangs his gavel a few times. “Madam, I would remind you that this is a courtroom, and such outbursts are unacceptable.”

“Your Honor, I would ask that any mention of my granddaughter, Lady Iris Bloom be struck from the record. I will not have the family name dragged into this.”

Then the prosecution begins to argue as to why I *should* be mentioned, to which Grandmother counters his argument, all with raised voices. The judge bangs the gavel so many times, eventually standing and bellowing across the courtroom.

“If you do not desist immediately, I will find you in contempt of court, Madam!”

I’ve never seen Grandmother being put in her place before. Both Lily and I are on the edges of our seats, clinging to each other in both excitement and wonder. Eyes wide, we watch as Grandmother lifts her chin and crosses her arms.

“Your Honor,” she says calmly, though her tone is conveying every ounce of self-control. “The Collective Conjuring of Elders has far greater power in this very room than even you. Need I remind you of the consequences should they be brought into these proceedings?”

Either the prosecution doesn’t know what she means, or he believes the law to be of greater power, but he too, steps forward.

“Your Honor, the accused is known to have requested that Lady Bloom, Madam Bloom’s granddaughter, attend him during the investigation. It is pertinent to the case that this be brought before the court to further show his lack of morals.”

“Quite unnecessary,” says Grandmother.

“Enough!” shouts the judge, the gavel banging again, though both Grandmother and the prosecution have stopped speaking. “We will have a half-hour recess,” he announces to the room, then points to Grandmother and the prosecution. “And you two will accompany me to my chambers.”

“What do you think that means?” asks Lily. “The judge wanting to speak with Grandmother.”

I watch as the Guards take Cuda from the dock. I catch his eye, and he keeps me in view until he’s taken through the door and out of sight.

“I don’t know,” I say after a moment. “But I think we both know our grandmother enough to know it’s likely she’ll get her way.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



TT

Half an hour feels like forever, but I refuse to be anywhere else. We do, however, go out into the city to find something to eat and walk about the nearby park before we're relegated back to our seats. So far, we've managed to elude Grandmother's eye, and we again take our seats near the back of the gallery to avoid detection.

Cuda is once more dragged in, but this time he happens to find me in the crowd, a small thrill running through me when I consider that I am his anchor in this maelstrom of injustice.

The judge, who we learn is called Judge Stamen, re-enters the courtroom and we settle to the business of resuming the trial. At least, that's what I was anticipating, but instead Judge Stamen addresses the courtroom.

"After much deliberation it has been decided that regardless of the charges laid, the defendant is guilty of all."

"What?" I turn to Lily, but all she can do is shrug, my hand held in hers. I turn back, finding Cuda's gaze, already my vision is blurring with tears, but I won't cry in front of him, he doesn't need to see me weak when he needs strength right now.

"The defendant is sentenced to death for the crimes committed," says Judge Stamen. "The execution will be held in the public square seven days hence!" He bangs the gavel and the courtroom erupts when the seated crowd begin to cheer, leaving their seats to hug or simply acknowledge to one another that the Magix will meet his end.

"I'm so sorry, Riz," says Lily, her fingers stroking my hand. "But we both know this was always going to be his fate."

"I guess a small part of me hoped that some measure of justice might have saved him, or at least saved his life." But that was foolish naivete. A silly

schoolgirl fantasy that the hero would be saved regardless of what the villains did to him. I've been reading far too many of those silly romances.

"Come on," she says, encouraging me out of my seat.

Cuda has already been taken from the dock, and people are streaming out, ready to share the news that the Magix will be executed...publicly. Not only are they taking his life, they plan to do it in as humiliating a fashion as they possibly can. My stomach clenches so tight I feel light-headed, but Lily guides me out, and once we're away from the general hubbub of the crowd, the fresh air helps.

Dinner that evening is not the joyous occasion my grandmother had perhaps hoped for. With Barracuda's fate sealed she's exceptionally, and almost uncharacteristically, happy.

"Come, come girls," she says, eagerly serving herself from the plates of food on the table. "So many glum faces, you would think someone had died."

"*Someone* is going to," I sneer.

"I beg your pardon, Iris?" She places a thin slice of mutton on her plate, replaces the serving utensils and regards me with that shrewd look she gets when one of us has spoken out of turn.

"A man whose crime was simply to be in the wrong place at the wrong time is facing a grossly excessive punishment. It's vindictive and unwarranted."

My sisters have all frozen in place, their eyes set on Grandmother to await her reaction to my outburst.

"That *man*, whom I might add is a filthy beast of a creature, has no business being on Ecleshax soil, or breathing Ecleshax air. It would have known the consequences of its actions the moment it dared to enter Torgotha."

“*He* was simply following orders,” I fire back realizing too late I’ve said more than I meant to.

Grandmother’s eyes narrow and her previously jovial demeanor shrivels back to her usual dark countenance. “Is that so?” she says quietly.

“He wasn’t alone,” I say desperately trying to think of a way out of this. “We know he came with others.”

“Am I to believe that the Magix *did* in fact tell you why they came to Ecleshax? Why they took your sister?”

“Only that they needed her,” I say, annoyed at the catch in my voice. I’m furious that I’ve tripped myself up, and what that might mean for Cuda.

“Unless the next sentence out of your mouth is the absolute truth, Iris, I will keep you here at Bloominance Manor, confined to your room until the day of your marriage to Lord Blouting. Is that clear?”

I don’t move, pinned as I am by her piercing eyes.

“Now tell me, for what purpose did the Magix come and take Violet?” Her voice is so calm and yet so full of underlying malice. Her threat is no mere warning. I believe her when she says she’ll lock me up.

But I have to protect Cuda.

“He never told me the purpose,” I say and this time I’m grateful my voice has remained steady.

“You and I both know that’s a lie,” she says between her teeth.

“How would you know?” pipes up Lily, bless her, such a courageous soul in the face of our grandmother.

“Being in such high standing of the Collective, Grandmother knows all,” says Rose.

“She can’t possibly know what Iris spoke to the Magix about, she wasn’t in the room,” argues Lily.

“You be quiet,” snaps Grandmother, pointing at Lily. “Or you’ll be married off *before* you are of age!”

The table falls silent, but Grandmother turns back to me. “Iris is not feeling well and must retire to her room,” she says, her eyes never straying from mine.

“I feel perfectly—”

“To your room!” she shouts. Out of the corner of my eye I see my sisters jump in their seats. “We’ll see if your memory is restored after a few days.”

“Believe me,” I say, standing and dumping my napkin on the table. “It won’t be.” I march from the room and head directly up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door as hard as I can swing it so the pictures on the walls shudder on their hooks. “Bitch!” I huff.

Pacing in front of the window, I watch the clouds scud across the navy-blue sky, the stars peaking in between their fluffy journey. The moon is up and shining quite brightly. Aside from the few clouds it’s a clear night, though chilly now it’s the middle of winter.

I’m to have a spring wedding. It was Grandmother’s idea as was most of the planning; the colors, the cake, and heaven forbid I get married somewhere other than our back garden. That’s where Violet was to marry until she was taken by Python. I would think Grandmother would want my nuptials held in a more secure location.

I look down to the manor gardens, patches of snow showing startlingly white among the darker grass and hedges. There'll be an abundance of flowers of every color, though Grandmother made certain the gardeners added more blue to the palette, and of cause, a lot of irises.

My window opens onto a small balcony, and in spite of the chill air, I open the doors and stand out under the stars, immediately shivering when the cold hits me.

This is how Barracuda feels every night; cold, hungry and probably dreaming of home. It isn't fair that he'll never get to see Duskmore again, and never get to see his own kind. I don't care if I'm to spend the coming weeks locked in my room, the decisions I made were my own. Barracuda was helping his friend, his best friend, and he'll lose his life because of it.

I don't mean to cry, but the buildup of everything, Barracuda being sentenced to death, me being banished to my room, which I'm aware is trifle by comparison, but so much has gone wrong.

How can I make any of it right?

An old and gnarled wisteria vine grows up along the wall under my bedroom window, the vines trimmed and bare for the winter, but they have to prune around my balcony since the tendrils have long since overtaken my window as they travel further up the wall.

I look down and see the thick trunk of it buried in a patch of ground surrounded by the gravel of the path and further flower beds.

I've never been a sufficient climber, but it's never looked that difficult when I've seen young boys playing in the park; climbing trees as they chase after each other. How hard can it be?

I hurry over to my dresser and grab my reticule before stuffing in the bone keys and as many coins as I can find about my room, before slipping on my long coat followed by my cloak. I'm already wearing boots so I return to the balcony, closing my window carefully behind me. Then I hitch up my skirts and swing one leg over the railing, then the other, gripping the thick vines of the wisteria. My clothes, hair and face catch several cut branches which scratch and poke, but I'm triumphant when I reach the ground, short of shouting aloud my success.

Assuming Grandmother and my sisters will still be at dinner, I take the opposite direction to the dining room windows, keeping to shadows in the bright moonlight until I reach the street where I run. It might take me a while, but I'll reach it.

Stranglewood Prison.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



A couple of hours later I'm skirting the prison driveway, hot and sweating under both coat and cloak, but I know to remove either of them will only subject me to the cold night.

"Angel, why must you put yourself in such danger?" Barracuda asks when I enter his cell. He stands, that dreaded chain clinking when he comes to me, and immediately takes me in his arms.

"I will do what I must to see you," I say. Pressing my cheek to his chest. "You're all I think about Cuda. What am I to do if you were gone?"

"Live your life well," he says soothingly.

I pull back to look into those honey eyes. "No, I'm here to get you out."

"Out?"

"Yes, I won't have you executed for their satisfaction. I won't have you dragged out in front of the whole of Embervale for everyone's morbid curiosity of seeing someone needlessly die."

He smiles down at me and strokes my cheek. "As brave and courageous as you are, we would be pursued as your sister was."

"And she got away," I say excitedly.

He kisses my forehead, but I cup his face and bring him closer to kiss his mouth, my eagerness to have him free translating in my urgency. His arms go around me, and we kiss long and hard, mouths and bodies so desperate to be together though we're both trapped by circumstance.

"Come," I say breathlessly. "Let's get you out of here."

"As my lady commands," he says huskily.

But there's one thing I had completely forgotten and made no preparations for. The shackle around his ankle.

“I can get us out of the prison, but how do we get you out of this?” I say in despair, my hopes of freeing him wilting like a dying flower. The chain is heavy, the bolt in the floor secure.

“No key for the shackle then?”

“When I originally had the keys made, I didn’t know they would also chain you in the cell. Since then, with everything that’s happened, I haven’t been able to acquire another.” And now I’m angry with myself that I didn’t try hard enough. It would have been simple enough to have another key carved. I could have had him out weeks ago.

“Do not blame yourself, angel,” he says, stroking my arm. “I’ve long accepted my fate.”

“No!” I snap and even stamp my foot with furious frustration. How did I come so far only to be thwarted by a simple lock? I take a breath and try to figure out the options. “Wait,” I say, recalling the conversation I had with the terrified locksmith. “The locksmith said I could break a lock with a length of metal if it’s bashed hard enough against the tumblers inside to crack them.” Then my heart sinks. “But I didn’t even think to bring a length of metal.”

“What about this?” says Barracuda holding up the missing rasp.

“You have the rasp?” I say my heart suddenly feeling a lot lighter as hope takes hold. “That might work.”

“I’ve been using it to try and get through the chain, but it’s so small and the chain is iron, it’s been extremely slow going.”

“You might have been out before your seven days is up,” I say encouragingly.

“Perhaps, but I wasn’t pinning much hope on it.”

In our attempt to break the shackle, Barracuda sits near the wall, his chained leg up against the stone so there's something hard to strike against.

"I just need something heavy to hit it with," I say turning about the cell, and am rewarded when I spy a chunk of rock in the corner.

"It might work better if you freeze the lock first," suggests Cuda, which only makes me smile.

I position the rasp which slides into the shackle's lock barrel with a little room to spare, and ready my rock. I hold Cuda's hand and conjure the spell to first draw water from the surrounding rocks, then using the water to freeze the lock. Once I'm satisfied with the ice crystals that have formed around the metal, I take up the rock and bash the rasp as hard as I can.

But I'm not strong enough.

"I'm sorry, Cuda, I thought that would work."

"Let me have a try," he says, repositioning himself so the shackle is braced, the rasp steady and his hand holding the rock able to bear down more effectively.

The lock is still frozen, and with a smashing swing, he cracks the rock over the rasp. There's a metallic crunch and the rasp is driven further into the lock. We both stare at it in hope. I take hold of it, and with a jerking twist, the shackle falls open.

His ankle is encircled by a raw wound, but he grabs the chain and pulls it away before getting to his feet and helping me to mine.

"Perhaps I needn't succumb to my fate after all."

"Indeed not," I say joyously.

I give him my cloak, slipping the hood over his telltale white hair and prominent horns. It doesn't cover him entirely, because his lower legs are mostly bare with his tattered trousers, but I figure no one will see they're blue while it's still night.

He has a better view out the barred window now that he can reach it, and with the corridor clear, I push open the door and we both head out. I re-lock the cell door, the gate and then the outer wooden door, figuring to keep our method of escape unknown to the Guards once they find Barracuda is no longer in his cell. And that will be soon.

My first thought is to get out of Embervale and find somewhere safe so we can formulate a plan of where to go. I know I'm leaving my sisters behind, but once settled, I'll figure out a way to get word back to them that I'm safe and well without alerting Grandmother to my location. My own absence will either already have been noticed if someone went to check on me, like Lily, or when Adepelle comes to dress me in the morning.

Either way, the fact that we've disappeared will soon be discovered and once that happens the response will be to send Guards.

We haven't much time to make our escape.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Neither of us are going to survive out here if we don't find shelter soon. Cuda was already suffering in freezing conditions in the prison, but at least he was out of the weather.

The snowfall is getting thicker, making it almost impossible to see. All I know is we're traveling across the estates of Embervale's elite, Kastor family properties, like Bloominace Manor, with great expanses of land and forest. I might have a vague idea of the area, but I have no idea where we're going. I just know we need to reach the forest and some semblance of shelter or we'll both succumb to the cold with our frozen bodies eventually found thawed in the spring.

The night had started so clear when I left my bedroom, but I hadn't anticipated snow. Stupid really since it's still winter with a few more weeks left of the season when a sharp cold snap often brings in snow, blanketing the region in sparkling white. Beautiful as it is, it could be our death trap.

Then I see it, through the swirling drifts of flakes, the tree line of forest. We must be on one of the larger estates that maintains a few hectares of forest. Hope renewed, I tug Barracuda in the direction of the trees, knowing it will be better under their shelter, and that we might find a fallen log, or outcrop to huddle under.

Thankfully, the trees do afford some protection since the snow isn't as prevalent. It's still terribly dark, but my eyes have accustomed and in spite of the snow clouds overhead, the moon is making an effort to gleam through them every so often, enabling me to navigate our way deeper into the forest.

"Talk to me, Cuda," I say softly. We're miles from anyone, but I feel compelled to keep my voice low. "Tell me you're all right."

"I am all right," he says gruffly, huddled as he is under my cloak. I'm also glad I thought to bring it as I'm fairly warm in my coat, but the Magix is also barefoot, the rest of his garments little more than rags.

"We'll find somewhere to hide, then in the morning, once we've had some sleep, we'll plan our next move."

"If we intend to reach Torgotha, we will need supplies."

“I know, but for now we just need to get through the night.” Reaching Torgotha is the last thing on my mind right now. I just want to feel warmth again.

Vision is so dreadfully limited that I’m certain I’m seeing things when a small square shape appears between the trees. As we get closer, my heart almost bursts with relief. It’s a tiny cottage, probably inhabited by the forest warden, or a gamekeeper. Being winter, it should be unoccupied since the threat of snowstorms can isolate people and it’s too dangerous for them to be out alone.

“Cuda, look,” I say, nudging him gently. Glancing up, I know when he sees the cottage since a fresh spur of energy ignites him and we’re soon at the little house’s door. “It’ll be locked up for the winter. But no one will come here until the spring when there’s no threat of being snowed in.” A padlock hangs from the latch. Not that I expected to simply walk in, but maybe we could break a window.

“Do you still have the rasp?” Cuda asks.

“Oh, yes,” I say, pulling it from my reticule and handing it to him. His hands are like ice, but he drives the rasp into the padlock’s barrel and gives it a mighty shove. I’d been in the process of searching for a rock, but the lock practically shatters, falling to the ground broken. “Well, that was a flimsy lock,” I mutter.

“I don’t think the owners expect anyone to come here, it’s probably just to keep animals out.” He opens the door and we step into the smallest room I’ve ever come across. There’s only one window, but through the gloom I can see a neatly made bed, a little stove with a chimney, a large chest, cupboards, a small table and chairs, and even a rug on the floor.

Barracuda sets to starting a fire in the stove, then lighting a couple of candles found on a shelf, and I search the cupboards for something to eat. The cupboards are far from being well stocked, but I find jars of preserved beans and carrots, and another tin with strips of some kind of dried fruit. With the stove going, the tiny room is soon warm, and while Barracuda gets the heat into his hands and feet, I empty the jars into a pot on the stove, and go to explore the chest.

“Well, this should do nicely,” I say, my eyes wandering over the contents. It appears the cottage owner keeps spare clothing here. I pull out a shirt, pair of

trousers, a jacket and even a coat. Underneath it all is a pair of big sturdy boots. I take my find over to Barracuda, and as luck would have it, though a little big, they fit.

“It has been a while,” he says, flexing his arms in the shirt.

“At least you will be warmer when we continue,” I say, smoothing the fabric over his shoulders.

“Indeed, but I do not think you are appropriately dressed for the cold. Your dress is not made for snow.”

“I’ll do,” I say with a smile. “I have my coat and cloak now that you have attire.”

The beans and carrots soon come to boiling and though there’s only one bowl, Barracuda tips my share into it, and uses the wooden spoon to eat out of the pot while I use the pewter one. They’re terribly bland, but have been salted. The main thing is it’s hot and I’ve soon cleaned my bowl. Barracuda goes out and scoops up snow drift to make tea. There might have been only one bowl, but at thankfully, there are two cups.

“Take the bed,” I urge. “You’ve been sleeping on stone for months. I’ll take one of the chairs.”

“I won’t hear of it,” he says, adding more logs to the fire. “I won’t have you shivering on a chair.”

“Then what do you propose?” I ask, my hands on my hips.

“We share,” he says simply.

“That bed is far too small for the both of us.”

“It will do.”

He strips down to his trousers and I have to look away when the expanse of his blue chest comes into view. Other than Adepelle, I’ve never undressed in front of anyone before, and though I know I’ll be far more comfortable out of my dress and stays, I hesitate.

“We’ll be warmer together. Body heat is the best for warmth,” he says, pulling an extra blanket from the chest and going to the bed to turn down the covers.

Flexing my fingers, I manage to get out of my dress and petticoat, but I can’t reach the strings of my stays.

“Um, would you mind loosening my lacings?” I ask shyly, turning my back to him. He doesn’t utter a sound, but I feel his hands on my bodice, undoing the knot before he begins pulling and tugging everything free. I relax as the garment loosens, and hold my arms up when he pulls it over my head. I bend then to take off my stockings, but Cuda is already on his knees.

My heart thrums to racing and I tentatively lift the hem of my shift. Eyes locked, his fingers, roughened from his time in prison are incredibly gentle as he touches the edge of one stocking and begins to carefully roll it down. Mouth dry, I can barely draw breath when he does the other one, one hand cupping my foot when he tugs it from my leg. His fingertips trail up my calf to my knee and he leans forward to place a tender kiss on my inner thigh.

“Oh gods,” I whisper.

He takes my hand then, kissing my fingers and thumb before he turns it with the palm facing him and he kisses the inside of my wrist.

Breath shuddering, all I can do is watch and feel a turmoil of heat swirling inside me. I’d once thought it would happen in the prison, but instead it’ll be here, in a forest cottage. It won’t be with my husband but with a Magix, a Magix I know I’ve come to love in the weeks since we first met.

He stands, and without words, I lift my arms as he pulls my shift over my head. Entirely naked, my body tightens in the chill, in spite of the warm room.

I pull the pins from my hair, letting it fall in a tumble of waves over my shoulders and down my back.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmurs. “My angel.” He strokes my cheek, softly sweeping a tendril of hair back. He undoes his borrowed trousers, letting them fall to the floor.

Having never seen a naked man before, my heart jolts in my chest, my skin flushes both with heat and goose bumps, and a sudden shyness washes over me, causing me to take a step back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



“Please don’t be frightened of me,” he says softly, holding out his hand. After a moment, I take it and he draws me to him, tenderly holding me close, his hands smoothing over my back. I curl into his chest, my hands feeling the hard muscle in spite of months spent languishing in Stranglewood.

My mind is full of all the descriptions I’d read in those romance novels, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of a man completely naked. I can feel him now, he’s not hard yet, that’s how it was always described, as being hard. Even soft, his cock presses against my thigh, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to remember how all the heroines dealt with this moment.

“Breathe, angel.”

“I’m breathing,” I whisper.

He tips my chin with a finger and I look into those beautiful honey eyes that are so full of love. “I’m not going to do anything you don’t want me to.”

I could back out, I needn’t go through with it, but I know if I don’t, I’ll regret it for the rest of my days.

Reaching, I stroke his cheek. “I want you to, I’ve just...you are my first.”

“I’ll be gentle.”

“It’s all right, I know it will hurt.”

He regards me curiously. “You do?”

“Yes, I’m not completely ignorant,” I say smiling.

“I’ll make you feel good, angel. Trust me.”

“I do.”

With my hand in his we go to the bed. It’s ridiculously small, but he invites me into the covers and I squash myself against the wall to give him room.

Once he’s under the blankets he pulls me close again. “It’s all right, lean on me.” I relax a little, fitting my head against his shoulder, my arm across his chest and one

leg daringly draped over his thighs. “Do you want me to touch you?”

We’re already touching, our skin warming under the covers. But I know that’s not what me means. “Yes, please show me.”

He turns, facing me more and gently beings to kiss me. I’m barely aware he’s moved until I feel one hand slip to my breast, his fingers softly coaxing my nipple to a firm peak. He kisses the tip of my nose, watching me, watching my expression when he flicks over the hardened nub, rubbing it between his fingers. A spark of sensation ignites and I gasp, looking to him in wonder as he begins to entice further sensations deep within me. Leaning over him, I kiss his mouth, moaning against his lips when he opens and our tongues find one another.

“Oh, Cuda,” I murmur.

“Touch me,” he breathes and slowly guides my hand to him. Lying on his thigh, his cock is getting hard, and I hesitatingly circle his girth with my hand, relishing the low grunt he emits when I slide along his length. Encouraged, I stroke him more firmly, elated that I have this ability to have him melt under my hand. “Yes, that’s it.” He moans, pulling me to him to kiss me.

His hand then slides down along my side and he nudges my legs apart, which I do willingly. I’ve touched myself before, but it’s something entirely different when he parts my curls and rubs over my clit and I’m groaning against him, my own body beginning to strain as he slips along my wet entrance and back again, his finger now moistened that I feel the fire in my pelvis when he flicks over me in feather light rhythm.

“Oh yes,” I breathe. “Yes, yes.”

A strong urge to be filled by him encompasses my body, and though I know there will be pain, I hope, just like those novels, it will be fleeting.

“Please take me,” I whisper. “I want you.”

Without the ability to separate in such a tiny space, Cuda holds me, rolling us over carefully until I’m beneath him, but he holds his weight on one hand, the other continuing to see to my building climax. Entirely surrounded by the Magix, I’ve

never felt so secure and wanted, that he might protect me, as I would him. His scent is still raw, but I can sense him underneath it and I lift my face to inhale him at his neck. He lifts his head, moaning his pleasure when I lick along his throat.

“I will finish before we begin,” he murmurs.

“Then have me,” I whisper.

He pulls back, kneeling between my legs, shifting my position so my hips tilt upwards and my legs splay either side of him.

“You’re sure you’re ready?” he asks and I can see he’s holding himself, lining himself up to my center.

“Yes,” I say, affirming my answer with a nod and wriggling my hips in encouragement. I feel him then, nudging against me, and I spread my legs further in assent. With a forceful shove he enters me quickly and a sharp tug of spiking pain causes me to wince, but with my lips pressed firmly together, I don’t utter any sound. I feel him then, fully lodged inside me, his hips and thighs pressing up against me. He leans over me, scooping my body against him with one hand taking most of his weight. The warmth of his body envelops me and I take his face in my hands, drawing him closer to kiss him.

“Are you all right?” he asks softly, nosing into my hair, his breath tickling my ear.

“Yes,” I say, lifting my legs to wrap about his waist. “I’m all right.”

“I’m going to move.”

“Oh yes, please, please do.”

He draws back and I’d expect more pain, but he slides out easily before pushing into me again and more wonderment and feeling cascades through me when he fills me with his entirety.

He sets a slow and gentle rhythm for our coupling, and I’m amazed how my body responds to his, accepting him, moving with him in an instinctive dance known only to lovers.

We kiss, and he leans on his elbow, his hand drifting between us until he finds my clit again, his thumb this time swirling over my sensitive flesh and I begin making incoherent noises into his mouth.

He pulls up when I'm close because my moans are getting louder, but I'm eager for him to keep going, and I feel myself opening further to him.

My body shatters and I cry out as Cuda continues thrusting into me, watching me as I come apart beneath him. His eyes close and with an abrupt grunt I feel him spill inside me, his body jerking with his own orgasm until he gathers me to him and we hold each other. Pulling the covers over us, he holds me close, his nose in my hair as our bodies come down from the heights and our breathing slows.

"Are you still all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I say, my fingers sliding over the sweat coating his back. "Are you?"

He chuckles into my hair. "I am perfectly well, angel."

Warm, content and wrapped in the love of my Magix, I soon drift to sleep, for the first time in however many weeks, happy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Sunshine, dappled and streaming through the cabin window wakes me the following morning. The sun is quite high having come through the forest canopy and I know it's shining gloriously across the covering of white powder last night's snow left behind.

"Good morning," comes the deep rumbling voice through the chest I'm lying on. His fingers stroke through the hair on my crown and I lift my head to see his delightful eyes watching me. His other arm is slung behind his head as he half leans on the pillow, the speckled light shifting over his blue hued skin like water in a lagoon.

"Good morning," I say and lean up to claim a kiss. "We've slept in."

"I've been awake for some time."

"And you didn't wake me?"

"I didn't wish to disturb you. Besides, did you have plans for the day? An afternoon tea to attend somewhere?"

I laugh, but lightly swipe at him for his ribbing. "No, but my stomach is telling me I've overslept." I sit up and look around for my shift. His fingers stroke along my back, but I leave the warmth of the bed to tug my shift over my head, then crouch in front of the stove. "The fire's out. Will you show me how to make a new one?"

With a sigh and grunt of having to exert himself, Barracuda gets up and I try not to watch when he pulls on his trousers before coming over to the stove. He carefully puts in kindling, then a couple of thicker branches before taking up the flint-stone and striking the dry tinder under the twigs creating a small flame which he coaxes with his breath to grow. In moments it takes hold and he adds a few more sticks before closing the door to allow its potential heat to radiate through the room.

“Would you like tea?” I ask, taking the pot and donning my cloak to head outside for some snow.

“Allow me,” he says, shoving his feet into the boots, though he doesn’t bother to lace them, and with a blast of chill air he goes out, in seconds coming back inside with snow in his hair, and the pot full.

“Excellent,” I say, taking it from him and setting it on the stove.

“Let’s try something different,” he says, removing the pot and giving it back to me. “You make it boil.”

“Oh,” I say, flushing with apprehension. I place the pot of snow on the small table and reach out my hand to him. He smiles, stepping forward and grips my hand, fingers interlacing before he kisses the back of it, his eyes on me. A shiver runs through me and I feel my body begin to respond and reminisce about the new experience it’s just been introduced to. But first, I really could use a cup of hot tea.

Boiling water was one of the first spells I was expected to design at the academy. I begin drawing the geometric shapes with my free hand, and my usual thread of water I had seen when Cuda taught me in the prison emerges, swirling into a circle and showing the various shapes and symbols as watery patterns in the air in front of me. I expect the snow to melt and boil almost instantly, but something isn’t quite right. Cuda seems to sense it too.

“Remember it’s snow,” he advises.

“Ah yes,” I say, realizing the error, I adjust the spell slightly, factoring in that the snow does need to melt first. It instantly reduces to water in the pot and as I’d initially hoped begins to boil immediately.

“Well done,” Cuda murmurs, pulling me by our clasped hands to give me a kiss, before he takes up the pot and sets it on the stove to keep hot while we organize cups and tea leaves.

“I still find it astounding to see my power come to life,” I say over my cup sitting in one of the chairs at the table.

“I said you had power,” says Cuda. “You just need help opening the floodgate.”

I smile, a floodgate indeed. Grandmother would be beside herself to see my power in the flesh, or water I suppose.

“I would think they know we’re missing by now.”

“Yes,” he says with a nod. “The prison would have found out last night on their rounds.”

“We need to get moving, don’t we?”

“I mean to get to Torgotha, but I’m not leaving Ecleshax without you.”

“You would take me to Duskmore?”

“I assume you would like to see your sister.”

“But what of my sisters here?” And then I see my dilemma. Go with the man I love, or stay to be with my sisters and end up marrying Clem.

“Your sister was taken because she has power to help Python’s brother Wolf. The Hiraeth Stone took her across to Duskmore, but in so doing once the Stone crosses Torgotha it can’t bring the traveler back.”

“Violet’s stuck in Duskmore?”

He sets down his cup. “From what I understand of Hiraeth Stones, yes.”

“Did she know that when Python took her?” Did she willingly leave Ecleshax knowing she was leaving us all behind to face Grandmother and our own dreaded betrothals without her?

“I don’t know, angel. I was captured well before those conversations.”

I slump back in the chair. “I can’t believe she would just abandon us like that.” Given the alternative of running off with Python or staying to marry Bergamot, I can understand why she might have felt she had little choice. But to leave without telling us, without letting us know? The Violet I know would never have done that.

Since the threat of capture is quite real, we have a quick breakfast of more dried fruit, then set the little cabin to rights, making sure it looks as neat and undisturbed as it was when we first entered.

It’s still daylight, but under the cover of the forest, with minimal snow we’re able to continue on. Barracuda holds my hand firmly in his own, his long strides pulling us through the forest as though he might reach Duskmore by nightfall.

“Do you know the way to Torgotha?” I ask between breaths. I don’t want to slow him down, but I do think I’m holding him back with my much shorter steps.

“I have a general understanding of the direction,” he replies. “But of greater concern is getting through it, and not just the Hiraeth Stone, we’ll be in need of a Compassphere.”

“A Compassphere?”

“Torgotha is as formidable as the stories say. Death for Kastors is inevitable, but Magix aren’t entirely immune. We must take a Compassphere or be in danger of wandering the maze of blocks the rest of our days never knowing if we are near the exit before the next reset.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about. A maze? Blocks? And what exactly is a reset?”

“I suppose a Kastor’s understanding of Torgotha is little more than it being certain death?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“That’s the easy part, anyone can attempt to get through Torgotha and die. The hard part is navigating a constantly moving maze that’s inside it.”

“I had no idea,” I say bemused that the terrifying wall holds so much more danger.

“The question you need to be asking yourself, angel, is whether you plan to come with me or not.” He looks back at me then, but I can’t read his expression. Would he be sad if I didn’t go? Would he understand that I can’t just leave my sisters like Violet did? “As I already said, I won’t go without you.”

He would rather face a life of constant worry and fear and to be forever looking over his shoulder, and potentially being caught and even killed by Kastors than leave me here. But for me to leave it means I will be abandoning my sisters. I have until Torgotha to decide, but even then, I don’t know if I’ll have an answer.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



The forest gives us adequate cover, but it would be safer for us to travel at night. So far, we've not heard any sounds of Guards in pursuit, but it doesn't stop us worrying at every sudden noise we hear.

"We need to get to the Stones," says Barracuda after we cross a stream and continue walking through the trees. My side aches, and I'm dreadfully hungry, but I know why he's adamant we keep going at such a hurried pace.

"Where are the rest?"

"Hidden," he says over his shoulder since I seem to only have a view of his back. His white hair is still in desperate need of a good wash and comb, in fact I wouldn't mind a bath myself. "Like I said. When I located them, I took only the Stone for Element of Mind and hid the rest. That's why your grandmother thinks I only took the one."

"You said you found six, is that all there is?"

"Yes."

Six Stones. Six Sisters.

"Wait," I say and I do stop walking, forcing him to turn around and walk back to me. "Are you saying there's a stone for each of us?"

He seems to hesitate, as though unsure how much he should tell me. "It would appear so."

"But what does it all mean?" I say crossing my arms. I want answers because I know it will tell me more about Violet.

"I've told you everything I know; Python was the one who did all the research and went to every corner of the land trying to find a solution."

"To the curse on his brother?" I supply remembering how he'd told me the truth of it all those weeks ago. I wrap my arms around his neck, bringing him

down to kiss me. “I want to say I’m sorry you were captured, but had you not, I never would have met you.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps under different circumstances.” He kisses me back, his arms warm and strong around me.

When we finally break apart, he takes my hand and we continue through the forest, but this time our pace isn’t as hurried, we walk side by side, our fingers intertwined.

“Do you think Violet was able to break the curse?”

“For Python’s sake, I hope so, but it troubles me that we still don’t know why Wolf was cursed in the first place, let alone by who.”

“Does Python have enemies trying to get to him through Wolf?”

“He’s king, he has enemies, but this is different, this is...”

“Magic.”

He nods and I feel him squeeze my hand. “I just have an uneasy feeling about it, even after all the work we did to reach the point of finding your sister. I just don’t think it’s enough.”

“What if you need all of us?” It’s a crazy notion, and as simple as the thought is, I do wonder if it might be truth. “I’m one of six sisters, each of us a different Element. It’s part of our reputation, because in spite of having the same father, who is also Element of Mind, he produced Elements not of his own. I am Water, my twin sister Rose is Leaves, Daisy is Wind, Lily Earth and Poppy Fire. I remember it caused quite a stir when we were children, but since then Grandmother’s ambitions have outshone our uniqueness. Also, the fact that we’re Kasted meant our initial fame soon faded into the background. What if Python needs all of us to break the curse?”

He doesn't answer me straight away, and I know there's probably a lot he hasn't yet told me, but having said it out loud, I can't help but *feel* it to be true.

"Six Stones, six sisters," he says, voicing my earlier thoughts. "Six Elements," he adds, looking to me, and something inside me just clicks.

"If it's true, we need to get each of my sisters to Duskmore."

"We need to get the Stones."

"We'll get the Stones, retrieve my sisters and we can all go to Duskmore together!" Decision made! I won't have to leave my sisters behind, and I won't have to leave Barracuda.

"I think we have the makings of a plan," he says with a smile.

"So where did you hide the remaining Hiraeth Stones?"

"That is going to take some thinking."

"Oh?"

"They're back in Embervale."



The tavern is dark, but I'm still wary of people noticing the man sitting across from me with the hood of my cloak over his head to hide his hair and prominent horns. I bought us a meal with some of the money I'd brought, considering we hadn't eaten since breakfast, and the food goes down very well even if it is a bit bland.

"Do we walk back or find transport?" I ask. I have enough to buy us a ride, but I'm unsure if Cuda is willing to take the chance of being noticed. As it is, I'm thankful for the dark in here as it makes him simply appear pale rather than outright blue.

The small town we came across was out of the way enough of Embervale that it wasn't likely I would see anyone who knew me, and after spending the night in a forest cabin and most of the day walking, I'm grimy enough from the travel to blend in a little more with the locals.

"If it is true that to break the curse we need all six of you, then we haven't much time. Wolf was barely alive when we initially left all those months ago."

"And we can't assume Violet was successful."

"The journey to Torgotha will take several weeks and with there being more of you that will only make it longer." I can see he's getting frustrated by the situation, and all based on a presumption. We could have it entirely wrong, and only be putting myself and my sisters in danger only to find Violet managed to break the curse and Wolf is fine and living his best life.

"Then we need to focus on what we *can* do, what we can control. That is getting the Stones and my sisters," I say reaching across the table to squeeze his fingers. He turns his hand to take hold of mine, squeezing back.

"Agreed, there's little point wondering what might happen until it does."

"We need to get back to Embervale before sunrise," I say. "And that will take a carriage. Otherwise it'll be through the forest which will take more than a

day.”

“I saw a horse and a wagon when we entered. We’ll let everyone settle into their drinks a little more then leave.”

I nod in agreement and scan the crowd. The tavern is full, which might be seen as a problem, but two people leaving with such numbers is less likely to draw attention than if only a few patrons were here.

At Barracuda’s nod, I stand and follow him out into the brisk air. The weather is cold, but fair and at least it’s not snowing. No one’s out here, preferring the warmth of the tavern, so it’s easy work to locate the wagon. In minutes we’re on the road, hurrying back towards Embervale. Though we have a plan of sorts, my stomach clenches at what we must do to achieve it. We’re riding directly into danger.

We reach the outskirts of the city just as the sun begins to breach the horizon. Ditching the horse and wagon we take cover in the surrounding forest, but keep making our way until we’re forced to take to the streets. It’s still early and few people are about other than the morning deliveries of newspapers and milk.

“We’re going to be seen,” I say, keeping close to him. Households will start to waken, and with them, staff who will come out retrieving the morning paper.

The closer we get the more likely *I’ll* be recognized.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Exhausted, we continue along the tree lined streets, trying to remain inconspicuous, but failing since one of us is a large blue Magix trying his best to hide under a lady's cloak. We receive many an odd glance, and it won't be long before one of Embervale's citizen's takes it upon themselves to alert the Guard.

"Cuda, we're going to be seen," I say worriedly.

"I don't think it's much further; this looks familiar." He looks up the street and even over his shoulder back down the way we've come.

"You mean, you don't know?" My worry starts to escalate into panic.

"It was dark, I was alone and I don't know the city of Embervale all that well."

"Then tell me where you hid the Stones and maybe I can help to find them," I say in exasperation.

"They're under a bridge," he says without looking at me, his focus back on the road ahead. A woman with a baby in a pram happens to see him, her face going from calm serenity to abject horror.

"You're going to have to narrow it down a bit, there are a *lot* of bridges in Embervale."

"It was dark," he says again.

"Describe it. Was it made of wood or stone? Was it a footbridge, or one that could hold horses and carriages?"

"Stone. And it had a path underneath next to a stream."

"A path, not a road, so people could walk under it?"

“Yes, I found a drain with a grate over it. The Stones are in a bag tied to the grate.”

“Hopefully, they’re still there. I have a few bridges in mind that could be described like that. But for now, and even though we’re pressed for time, I think we should get out of the daylight and find somewhere safe to sleep. We can resume our search tonight.”

“Agreed, but where to hide?” he asks looking up and down the street again.

“I have an idea.”

I lead him over a crosswalk, then down a lane and along another street as we make our way further out from the city heart as we’d been headed in that direction. The longer we walk the more derelict the area becomes. It was all I could think of, hiding in the less appealing part of Embervale, the part no one ever goes to, the part no one ever talks about. Embervale’s blight, the flaw in Ecleshax’s jewel.

Hollow Haven.

Most of the buildings in Hollow Haven are still standing, but the majority of their windows have been boarded up, their signage weathered and illegible, and the facades covered in filth and grime. I wonder how some of them looked back when they were all shiny and new. Were they celebrated then, just as they are shunned now?

There are people here too, lots of them, though mostly human, or people who were born to Kastor parents but had no ring of color in their eyes and were therefore considered human, like Clover’s baby, Periwinkle. They’re gathered in groups chatting and smoking, their clothes in no better condition than the buildings that surround them. They watch us with careful interest from dirty faces.

“Which one do you think?” I ask nervously in reference to the buildings, though I’m trying to keep from making any eye contact. Having got us here I’m now undecided as to which of the structures might be safe enough to stay in, especially since we both need to sleep.

“Are they empty?”

“Empty as far as being legally and officially leased out? For the most part,” I advise. “I’d say there’ll be people inside, squatters who don’t otherwise have a home to go to.”

“Perhaps seeing a Magix in their midst will distract them from their misfortune for a moment or two,” he says and confidently walks up to the door of a building with shattered windows and crumbling brick.

“Be careful,” I say, hurrying after him. “Some might think their fortunes turned around if they believe there to be a reward upon your capture.”

“I have little doubt there’s a significant price on my head.”

Barracuda pushes open the door that was once locked, but the latch and padlock lie broken and rusting on the ground, slowly being consumed by weeds.

The floor creaks the moment he sets foot on it, and he freezes in place with me clutching at his back, eyes wide as we wait for someone. I see things out of the corner of my eye ducking away out of sight. I assume them to be people who have made this place their home. I hope they don’t mind a pair of visitors for the time being. No one comes into the entryway to see us off. I’m hoping it’s Barracuda’s sheer size that’s keeping them at bay.

I keep close to the big Magix as he takes further steps into the building, looking about us to see where a good place to bed down might be. I’ve never slept out of a bed before, except when I might nap on the occasional

carriage journey. Even last night was in the small bed we found in the cabin, but it was still a bed. This time I'll have to make do with the floor, and though I should be horrified, I'd rather be here with Barracuda than locked up in my bedroom under Grandmother's roof.

"Can I help you?" asks a smooth sounding voice and we turn to see a slender man dressed in mismatched, but what were likely good quality clothes a long time ago, leaning against a door frame.

"We're not looking for trouble," says Cuda, being sure to keep as much of his face under the shadow of the hood as possible. "Just need a refuge for a few hours."

"Refuge you say?" says the man. "That kind of service comes at a price." He eyes me up and down on the word "price", and Cuda immediately pushes me behind him.

"Name your price."

"Your little woman there looks to be well looked after. I reckon she's packing a coin or two. Otherwise we can consider alternatives."

"If you think you're laying one hand on me—" I say as Cuda's arm reaches back, his hand at my waist.

"My, my, she's a feisty one. My good man, I was only suggesting that if she had no money, then maybe she could, I don't know, give us a song or something of the like."

A song? I'm not the singer of the family. Poppy is, with Daisy a close second. I mean, I can hold a tune, but I wouldn't consider myself an accomplished soprano.

But Barracuda is clearly having none of it. He pulls back the hood and shoves his face up close to the man who stumbles backwards.

“You’re a, you’re a—”

“Yes, I am.” He doesn’t need to say anything more, he just grabs my hand, and I call forth the first spell that comes to mind.

I never intended to freeze the man’s hand, but since humans and Kastors are sixty percent water, it was the only water available that my spell was able to take hold of.

The man screams, clutching his hand. “You fucking bitch!” he hollers, glaring at me, spit threading from his cracked lips. “My hand, my fucking hand!”

“We need to go,” says Cuda, dragging me from the building. We run through the street, hurrying around huddles of people surrounding troughs ablaze with whatever they managed to find that would burn, and their only means of keeping warm. Several of them shout at us to stop, one tries to grab my arm, but Cuda is too fast, and yanks me from their grasp.

Heading down an alleyway, we find it’s quite deserted. Planks of wood have been nailed together to form crude, but stable structures. We duck under one, Cuda weaving us in and out of a wooden labyrinth until satisfied we haven’t been followed and furthermore, won’t be discovered.

It’s dark in here, but light filters through from the streetlamps. There’s nowhere to really lie down, but after looking over the cobbled together alcove and finding it to his satisfaction, Cuda seats himself against the wall of the building the structure has been built against, and faces the entrance to our little sanctuary. He holds up one arm in invitation for me to join him, and I curl up beside him, nestled against his chest with his arm around me.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” I say.

“I know,” he says, his arm squeezing me. “You’re still only learning.”

“But I did hurt him,” I say quietly. It’s not sitting well, my heart is thundering in my chest, my insides decidedly queasy.

“It’ll be all right.”

“Will it?”

“If he’s careful, and smart, he’ll be able to warm it up in front of a fire and it should go back to normal.”

“Oh,” I say and feel the weight of my...accident lift a little. “Should we go back and tell him?”

“Considering the company he keeps, I don’t think that would be a wise move.”

I recall the way he looked me up and down. Barracuda’s right; hopefully the man can thaw out his hand and it will be like it never happened. I know I’m finding consolation in an assumption, but it’s all I’ve got.

With all the excitement I wonder if I’ll manage to sleep with thoughts of unintentionally freezing a man’s hand, finding the Hiraeth Stones, if Grandmother has sent out the Guard to find me and apprehend Barracuda, or if she’s even told the Bloutings of my disappearance.

So much has happened, and yet, my eyes grow heavy, and with Barracuda’s steady breathing and the gentle beating of his heart against my cheek, I find comfort and peace and fall asleep in no time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



I don't know what wakes me, but the tiny specks of light filtering through the wooden slats of our shelter are deep orange, creating an almost eerie gloom.

I turn to look up at Barracuda and he presses a kiss to my forehead. "Sleep well?"

"Surprisingly," I say shifting awkwardly as my stiff muscles ache in protest.

"Are you hungry?" he asks. "It's not yet dark."

"I am, but I can wait until it's fully dark."

He takes my hand, pulling me suddenly to him and I collapse into his lap, my legs straddling him. "I'm hungry now."

I squeal in delight when he kisses the tops of my breasts at the neckline of my dress. His arms envelop me and I drop kisses on his forehead. I pull up my skirts, giving him access to the buttons of his trousers, and he watches my expression when he pulls himself out. Biting my lip, I reach for him, taking a firm hold as I admire the different contortions of pleasure that run across his face.

"You—you really like that?" I ask tentatively. Since he's the first man I've been with, it's a valid enough question. I've never held a cock in my hands, and I'm intrigued by how velvety soft it feels, all the while growing deceptively hard. How does something manage to be hard and soft at the same time?

"If you do this," he says, carefully guiding my hand. "Yes, yes like that, then I very much like it."

"I see," I say, marveling that he's almost powerless while I caress him. "Is it the same for all men?"

"I would think so, angel, we spend enough time thinking, pursuing and dreaming about it."

“You mean sex?”

He takes hold of my hips, gently lifting me so I kneel up. With my skirts and shift rucked up to my waist, I keep my eyes on him while he reaches between us, and guides himself to me, finding me wet and wanting.

“I mean being with the woman of my dreams,” he says thickly. Once in line he eases me back down and I gasp as his fullness penetrates me in a slow distending entrance.

“Oh, Cuda,” I murmur, my hands shifting to his shoulders to keep balance. He guides me with his hands, and encourages me to move my hips. It’s like a seductive dance, my body undulating to a rhythm known only to me.

“That’s it, my angel,” he says softly. “Take your pleasure from me.”

I tilt my head to kiss him, and he answers my desire with a tender mouth and exploring tongue. I reach down between us, finding my clit prominent and eager for my touch. I whimper into Cuda’s mouth when I begin to pleasure myself, but it only adds fuel to his own fire when he moans in response, and proceeds to buck up into me.

Gasping, I lean back, arms outstretched with my hands still on Cuda’s shoulders, our eyes locked. One of his hands smooths over my abdomen before he trails down between my legs, and finds my core of sensitivity, continuing to rub me over and over until my gasping becomes cries and my climax claims me as I curl forward into him, holding him like an anchor while my body shudders and quakes with pleasure.

Moaning, I capture his mouth and he keeps me steady, his body taking control now, seeking its own release.

“Angel, my angel,” he breathes, then a loud grunt and I know he’s joined me in the throes of orgasm.

We sit for a while, joined as we are, my head on his shoulder and his arms around me. It's warm in spite of the chill air surrounding us, and as our breathing slows, I know I could easily fall back asleep.

"We need to move," says Cuda gently.

"I know." I would stay forever being this close to him.

Righting ourselves, we stand and straighten clothes, and though I pat at my hair, I can tell it's in desperate need of a tidy. Instead, I pull it free of its style and let it fall free. Cuda repositions my cloak hood over his head to hide his telltale hair and horns.

Hand in hand we exit our little refuge, and though I could have said I was happy, my mood changes the moment we step onto the street to a gang of men holding bats, lengths of wood studded with nails, chains and ropes and whatever manner of weapon they've been able to procure. The only light afforded to the night are the communal fires lit in varying locations along the street since it appears the streetlamps have been purposefully broken. Whatever's burning is making the smoke sharp, the smell acrid and harsh. The gloom only makes our assailants appear even more hostile with their faces covered in black shadows.

The man from the building, the one whose hand I'd accidentally frozen, steps forward. His hand is heavily bandaged with dirty cloths and tucked in a filthy sling around his neck. I'm relieved he was able to keep it, not so relieved that he seems to be seeking vengeance for it.

"You look a reasonable sort," he says to Barracuda even if he is speaking to a large blue being. "Hand over the girl and we won't have to bring in the Bricks. By the look of you I'd say they'd be very interested in having a quiet word."

"It seems nearly losing your hand wasn't enough of a warning to back off," says Barracuda showing no concern over the man's use of the word 'Bricks'. I've rarely heard it used, but I know it to be in reference to the Guards.

None of the men move. “She’s a Pretender,” he says pointing at me. “And it looks like she has a family with money. I bet she’s worth a fair amount if we tell them she’ll be returned to them safely.”

“Ransom?” I balk. “I am no Pretender.” Calling me a Pretender, a name many humans use to describe Kastors, is no longer a fact since I *do* have power, I just haven’t been able to use it.

“All of you Kastors are,” he spits, his angry gaze now fixed on me. “Sitting on your riches in your ivory towers when you’re no different to the rest of us.”

“You just witnessed my power,” I fire back. “I could have done a lot worse.”

He seems to consider that, looking from me to Barracuda and back again.

“Shovel,” he calls behind him, though his eyes stay on us, but one of his men steps forward.

“Yeah, Kul?” A large man, big enough to rival Barracuda steps forward.

“Get the Bricks.”

Shovel immediately runs off, and though I wouldn’t have thought they would want Guards snooping around their streets, Kul clearly believes there’s money to be made by turning either of us over to them.

“We intend to leave now,” says Barracuda. “And I think for everyone’s sake it’s best that it happens without interference.”

“Nah, Big Blue,” says Kul. “I think we’ll all wait nice and patient like for the Bricks to decide what should be done.”

“He’s probably got someone on the inside,” I whisper to Barracuda. I know he’s trying to protect me and get us out of this mess without the need for violence, but we have other pressing matters to get on with. I’m sorry for the man’s hand, but I see no other choice to getting out of here.

I grab Barracuda's hand, my spell at the ready. Water from all the surrounding puddles gathers in a large dirty wave and with a sudden sweep of my hand, it crashes over Kul and his men, knocking them off their feet and even sending them down the street a ways, as though they were caught in a sudden tide.

"Let's go," I say and Barracuda grips my hand harder, pulling me in the opposite direction to where Kul and his men are trying to pick themselves up among the mud and debris the water left behind.

Unfortunately, the wave of water attracts the attention of a lot of people and they all start converging to where Barracuda and I were having our standoff with Kul. Barracuda pushes his way through, with me being dragged along, catching arms and elbows as he forces the crowd to part.

Once free I take a moment to get my bearings, then point down another street, guiding us back to the city. Now we're under the cover of night, we need to find the Stones and figure out how to get Barracuda to safety.

CHAPTER FORTY



On our way towards the inner city, I'd been mapping out in my head where bridges with paths were located throughout Embervale. The hour isn't especially late, so we find a street vendor selling pies since we're both extremely hungry.

The first bridge we come to doesn't look familiar to Barracuda at all, neither the second nor third. Traversing the city on foot is taking longer than I'd anticipated and time slips by remarkably quickly. We're going to lose the darkness if we don't find the right bridge soon. Already I'm starting to worry that there's light on the horizon, or if I'm just too exhausted and I'm starting to see things. My feet ache, and we haven't eaten in hours.

I want to suggest we again look for shelter to pass the daylight hours, but Barracuda starts to get enthused when we trudge along the road heading towards bridge number four.

"I do think this is it," he says with a note of excitement. "I remember things, like that tree with the overhanging branch, and the lamp post there with the flower bed."

"Hopefully this is it then," I say and in spite of being tired and hungry, I manage a burst of energy to speed up my pace so we can get the Stones and get out of Embervale before we're found and Barracuda is recaptured. I try not to imagine what might happen if that were to occur.

"Yes, this is definitely it, angel." He's hurrying now and I have to run to keep up. He was right, the bridge is dark since there's few streetlamps about. We approach carefully. Now we're so close my body is sparking with anticipation of finding the Stones.

No one's about, the hour is very late and I know dawn isn't all that far away. At best we have an hour or two of night left. When we enter the underpass, the darkness is all encompassing and I struggle to see, reaching out my hand to feel along the bridge wall and feel along the path with my feet. The grating hiding the Stones is directly under the bridge, about halfway along. I hear his boot

scrape along metal, but smother the cheer that wants to emit from my throat. My heart is in my mouth, stifling my voice. I just want to know when we have the Stones.

Barracuda is grunting and I hear more scraping, then a thud when something heavy lands on the gravel.

“Are they still there?” I ask, barely able to breathe.

“Yes,” he says with a sigh of what I imagine to be relief. “I can feel them, they’re all there.”

I want to collapse as the wash of relief sweeps through me. I grip the wall harder, steadying my wavering legs. We might have the Stones, but it’s not over yet.

“We did it,” I say, elated that we’ve succeeded.

“Here, take them, one of them is yours to get through Torgotha.” He hands me a wet velvet pouch, but inside I can feel smooth round shapes that clink together when they touch.

“And my sisters,” I say, fascinated as my fingers run over the rounded surfaces. They’re different shapes, each probably denoting its corresponding Element. I’d dearly love to see them, but I’ll just have to wait. “We can make our way to Bloominace, but you’ll have to hide in the forest behind the manor. Once everyone’s organized, then we can leave.”

“You won’t be going anywhere,” says a harsh voice followed by a bright beam of light that illuminates the entire underside of the bridge.

I hurriedly stuff the Stones into my reticule before they’re seen and take a long, harrowing breath. I slowly turn around, shielding my eyes, but all I can see are several silhouettes with the light shining behind them. Even so, I would recognize that voice anywhere...

Grandmother.

“Come along, Iris,” she says, her hand out in gesture that I go to her. “You’re safe now.”

“I’m not in any danger,” I say. I consider taking Barracuda’s hand and using the water in the stream to help us escape, but both ends of the underpass are blocked with Guards who happen to be holding rifles. This is what I’ve always hoped I needed to get out of my doomed marriage to Clem: my power. But would using it here and now stop that from happening? I just don’t know how Grandmother will react if she sees my power, a power that’s very much connected to Barracuda. Do I want her to know just yet? The more grievous concern, is would it get Barracuda out of Stranglewood and back to Duskmore? What if they just simply shoot him here and now? I need to think, but Barracuda saves me the trouble.

“Not yet,” he says as though reading my thoughts. “Save your strength, this is not a battle we can win.”

Two Guards grab each of his arms, hauling him to his feet and pulling him away from me.

“No, stop!” I shout but another Guard takes hold of my arm, dragging me back towards Grandmother. I turn to her. “Stop this at once, just let him go.”

She slaps me hard and fast across the face, the shock and pain knocking the gasp out of my mouth. My hand instinctively goes to my burning cheek and I glare at her through the unbidden tears welling in response.

“I’m not about to let another Magix intent on kidnapping my granddaughter walk free,” she says glowering at me. “This charge will be added to the rest, and I will see this creature pay for its crimes.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” I snap, but tears are prickling my eyes.

“I’m rescuing you from a terrible fate and saving Embervale from the pestilence that appears to be plaguing the city.”

We were so close. I don't know how we were found, but there was every likelihood that if Barracuda had a price on his head, then it would make sense that Kul and all the other people we saw in the abandoned building alerted the authorities. And since Grandmother is making it her business to be a part of every move Barracuda makes, then it stands to reason that she found out and made a point of coming to see the Magix apprehended. A Magix whose only real crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time to be captured and dragged back to the depths of Stranglewood.

I watch the scenery pass by the carriage window, but I'm not really seeing it. A blur of dark, bleak gray as the mist shrouding the night casts its gloom of despair on the land.

Grandmother, sitting erect as a fresh tombstone beside me, stares forward. I can feel the anger radiating from her in waves of deep scorching heat crashing over me in silent fury. I don't think she can speak; her outrage has escalated to such levels that her only hope of containing it is to clamp her mouth shut and not allow any words to pass.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Behind us, in a cage of iron pulled along by a horse drawn cart, is the man I love. I can't see him, but I can imagine him sitting on the floor of it, his shackled hands clasped behind him, head bowed as he accepts that fate has turned the tables again, and not in his favor.

I know the loss of Violet was a bad and bitter pill for Grandmother to swallow, but in that situation she had the excuse that Violet was taken, stolen, a cause that was not my sister's fault, but that of the Magix who took her. Grandmother might eventually come to forgive Violet's absence due to the circumstances of her disappearance, but these transgressions are my own.

And I cannot be forgiven.

My actions were my own doing. My own choices. I betrayed everything she's been trying so hard to accomplish. I helped Barracuda escape, I accompanied him towards freedom, and because of that I'm certain my crimes now outshine his in her eyes.

The carriage rattles along the rough road, bouncing over uneven cobbles and shaking us involuntarily about the interior. Grandmother lets out a sigh of frustration. With the steam seemingly being released, it's enough for me to ready myself for the onslaught, her litany of punishments I know to be forthcoming. Not to mention having broken the law by aiding and abetting a criminal.

Not that he is one. Not how I see it anyway.

"What will happen to him?" I ask. I know I'm inviting the volcano to explode, but since Barracuda's future is in dire jeopardy, the least I can do is bear the brunt of my grandmother's wrath.

"That is no concern of yours," she says tightly, since I can hear the restrained control.

"He just wants to go home," I say, trying to make her see reason. "Everything would have gone back to how it was if he'd been allowed to leave Ecleshax."

For whatever reason, my hope is that if I allow her to vent, then some kind of leniency will be afforded to Barracuda. I'm hopeful, but I also know the improbability of him living past the end of the week.

I fight back my tears. How did it all go so wrong?

"He will never see another sunrise," she seethes. "I see no reason he cannot be put to death the minute we return him to Stranglewood."

"So you can find some level of satisfaction?"

"Mind your words, Iris. He deserves no mercy for the crimes he's committed. I know he was involved in your sister's abduction. He can pay for that too."

I try a different tack. "And when do *I* face sentencing?"

She looks at me then, a glimmer of confusion passing over her expression before she regains control.

"You won't be facing any judges, of that I can assure you. No granddaughter of mine will be spending time in prison. Instead, your wedding will concur with the beast's demise, then you and Lord Blouting can begin the task of restoring magic."

My cheeks flair with heat and my back inadvertently straightens. "That won't happen," I say levelly.

"Oh, but it will," she says. "I will ensure your marital consummation is witnessed, as will *every* time your husband beds you, until such time as you are with child."

My already hot cheeks burn. Even if I did end up married to him, I had intended to keep Clem at arm's length for as long as I could. It's a prospect I regarded as a Lady, however, my confidence that Clem won't try to force himself on me given his behavior of late has left me greatly shaken. Grandmother's words now paint a picture of our bedroom being attended by Collective Elders, watching as he fumbles clumsily at me.

My stomach turns, and the despairing drop reaches my feet as I watch now familiar houses and buildings begin to flick past the window. Dawn has stained the sky peach and plum, and I would look to enjoy its beauty if I found any reason to seek happiness while I succumb to a loveless marriage and my real love faces imminent death.

When we reach Bloominance Manor she escorts me directly to my room. Given the early hour, it's Orli who sees us, and I get a quick glimpse of her confusion when Grandmother shoves me through the door before slamming it shut. I hear a key turning in the lock. I immediately try to open the balcony doors, but they're locked too, the key gone.

With a sigh of frustration I plant myself squarely on the bed, arms crossed, my fury bubbling until the inevitable tears burn, then fall.

I'm going to lose him.

I flop back on the bed, covering my eyes with my arms as I give a holler of indignant vexation. I have power, I can send water crashing into a dozen men and send them sprawling, but I'm lying here absolutely powerless.

I pull off my coat, which has seen better days. Since it was my outermost garment, it's suffered the worst for my travels and is covered in dirt and filth. My dress isn't much better, so I pull it off too, then my petticoat, and finally my filthy stockings. Wearing only my shift, I crawl under the covers and resume sobbing into my pillow.

He shouldn't have to die.

I'm woken by a knock, and it's Adepelle who enters, her expression one of fearful uncertainty when she looks back through the door before it's yanked closed, the lock reinstated. She holds a tray, and fresh clothes are draped over one arm.

"My lady," she greets me. "I was advised that you were to have breakfast and be washed and dressed ready to depart."

“Depart? Where?” I ask as I climb out of bed. The sun is fully up and I think I barely managed an hour or two of sleep.

“I wasn’t told, my lady.” She sets the tray down on my desk, and hungry as I am, I fall on it. While I eat, Adepelle organizes for a tub and water to be brought directly to my room.

Scrubbed and dressed, she does my hair which she’s washed, and chooses my most precious pieces of jewelry: my sapphires. The dress is white, trimmed in blue, so the sapphires are even more enhanced since they’re the only real color to my outfit.

Adepelle curtsies before she leaves, but the door stays open and when I go to it, there’s Grandmother waiting for me.

“Come along, Iris,” she says, turning her back on me as she heads for the stairs.

I follow, though unsure as to what we’ll be doing.

The carriage eventually turns down a road I know exceptionally well, but am surprised to be going down now. We’re headed for Stranglewood.

“Why are *we* going to the prison?” I ask, leaning closer to the window to see my assumption is correct.

“I want to personally ensure this monster is dealt with, now.”

“Then why bring me along?”

“You are to be married,” she says shortly.

“What? Married at Stranglewood?”

“Sweet child,” she purrs, and I cringe at her bright, gloating eyes. “Stranglewood is just as suitable a venue as the House of Justice. Elder Hosta is in attendance presiding over legal matters and is quite capable of marrying you.”

“Married in a prison,” I muse. “How fitting.” Locked into a loveless marriage and watched every time I’m to be with Clem.

I would rather face a judge and be sentenced to life. But my own fate is nothing if Barracuda is dead. I may as well succumb to all Grandmother has incited, because what point is there in even continuing to breathe if I know *he* no longer walks the earth?

“And what of the Magix?”

“He will be sentenced to death this morning, and once you’ve signed the registry, there’ll be time enough for me to attend the execution.”

“They’ll execute him today?”

“It’s the safest course of action given the history of these creatures.”

The carriage pulls up outside Stranglewood, and already there’s a crowd of people. News of Barracuda’s recapture has spread, and with it the announcement that he will be put to death.

Today.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



“Come along,” says Grandmother, after she disembarks from the carriage. I try to smile, Iris. The Bloutings wish to see a happy bride for their son. Make it happen.”

I swallow the pain, at least I try to. All I can think about are Barracuda’s gentle hands on my body, his soft words and sweet tone and what we managed to create between us before some sleight of hand sought to pull us asunder.

We enter the prison via the entrance I first used when I began to make my charitable visits. The sounds and smells are familiar, and though hardly in the same league as perfume, it still sets my skin to flushing with goosebumps, a shiver running along my spine when I recall the days in conversation with Barracuda, the magic we made.

I feel the weight of my reticule against my thigh, holding both my bone keys and now the precious Hiraeth Stones. I’m surprised I’ve managed to keep them all safe and hidden, and that no one suspects I have a means of getting about the prison, or of getting through Torgotha. Emboldened, I cling to my reticule like a lifeline.

We enter the office of Marshall Guard, Mikol Kratas, unannounced, and he eyes me skeptically, though I stand as stoically and indifferently behind Grandmother as I can. Any moves I might consider making can’t be done with so many able to stop me. As much as my grandmother wishes to see Barracuda dead, there is due process to take into consideration. We have laws, and *she* is not above them.

Like the room in which I first met him, he will be held somewhere in one of the dedicated chambers used for court proceedings and urgent matters of justice. The other aspect, and one perhaps Grandmother hasn’t accounted for, is that it’ll be these same rooms she hopes to see me married to Clem.

“I believe Elder Hosta is waiting for us?” she states to Kratas.

“Of course,” he says, immediately setting to shift paper across his desk. “In the matter of...?”

Grandmother takes a breath. “The marriage of my granddaughter, Lady Iris Bloom, to Lord Clematis Blouting,” she says, her tone bordering on anger.

“Yes, of course,” he says, not looking up, but continuing to shuffle paper. “And that was arranged for today? His Elemency is frightfully busy.”

Grandmother reddens.

“He will make an exception,” she says through her teeth, eyes glaring.

I smother my smile, desperate not to giggle or even release a breath of mirth at the disruption to her plans. With the Elder clearly swamped, I wondered how she hoped to organize the union between us, or had she merely expected to bring us all under the same roof and demand we wed?

There’s no sign of the Bloutings, but I have little doubt that Grandmother sent for them. This may have been all for nothing if they don’t appear soon. And if Elder Hosta is pressed for time, perhaps he’s too busy to oversee the sentencing of a Magix.

“Come along Iris, we shall see His Elemency ourselves.” She latches onto my wrist, pulling me through to the corridors that lead to the various rooms utilized by prison staff.

“Excuse me, madam, you can’t just go in there,” says Kratas, hurrying after us.

She stops suddenly, drawing herself to her full height which oddly makes her taller than Kratas.

“I suggest you get back to whatever inconsequential drudgery it is you do here,” she snarls before turning on her heel and dragging me along, leaving the Marshall Guard to stare in confusion after us.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Clem to be here?” I ask. I would think it imperative the man I’m meant to be marrying be present.

“I will have this marriage conducted by proxy if that is the way of it. I’ve already sent a messenger to hasten their arrival. Madam Blouting is sure to comply to guarantee the matching of her son lest he sit on the sidelines for all his days.”

Heels clipping on the cold stone of the prison floor, Grandmother drags me through the corridors, the way unsurprisingly known to her, and I wonder how often she’s attended the prison herself in whatever capacity.

We must reach the courtrooms, because she bursts through the door, startling the clerk badly enough that he drops a sheaf of papers, causing them to flutter in all directions across the floor.

“I believe Elder Hosta is in attendance.”

“Yes, my lady,” says the clerk, already on his knees as he gathers the scattered papers. “But he is currently presiding over a case—”

“Excellent,” she says, cutting him off and stepping over all the paper to reach the door to the closed courtroom, with me along for the ride.

“My lady, the proceedings are closed to the public—”

“Not to me, they’re not.”

I try to keep my feet off the paper, but with Grandmother’s iron grip still around my wrist, I have little chance in avoiding all of them and I send an apologetic glance to the clerk who, flushed and aware he has no hope of stopping her, continues grabbing up the fallen papers.

“Mr. Fishmaw, unless you have—” Elder Hosta stops mid-sentence, his gaze shifting from the lawyer standing in the process of arguing his case, to Grandmother as she continues to stride down the center aisle. “What is the meaning of this interruption, Madam Bloom?”

Elder Hosta is one of the youngest appointed Elders of the Collective. Still older than Grandmother herself, he doesn't quite have one foot in the grave like many of the others do. He's also Element of Leaves, so not exactly in line with both Clem and me being Element of Water, but it shows Grandmother's desperation that we be married and ceremony be damned. Criminal trials are overseen by an officiated judge, however more general matters of a civil nature are overseen by the Collective Elders.

In Barracuda's case though, I can see that Elder Hosta might be pressed by Grandmother's desperation to perform higher duties.

"I request the immediate marriage of my granddaughter, Lady Iris Bloom, to Lord Clematis Blouting. In the interest of the Collective's mission to restore magic, I must insist that this wedding be conducted immediately."

Elder Hosta sits back, checking over whatever documents are set before him, his eyes flicking to the clock mounted on the wall.

"Mr. Fishmaw," he begins, "It would seem you've been given a reprieve and you have been granted a twenty-four-hour recess to consult with your client, should he be able to attend court."

"Thank you, Your Elemency," says the flustered barrister gathering up his own papers as he speaks, and bowing to the Elder as he clears the desk. He clutches everything in a messy pile to his chest, eager to be away and gives us a nod of thanks as he hurries from the room.

"Now, Madam Bloom," says Elder Hosta gazing down at us from his perch behind the bench. "It would appear that we have a bride and no groom."

"The Bloutings are momentarily delayed," says Grandmother. "If we could give them a few minutes more."

"Madam Bloom, my day has been organized from dawn to dusk, and I do not have the time to—"

“Then I request a marriage by proxy,” she says hurriedly.

“By proxy?”

“Yes, I want her married, *now*.”

“I see,” he says and seems to consider her request. “Considering the situation with your other granddaughter, Lady Violet Bloom if I recall, I suppose such an imposition could be seen as warranted. And is Lady Iris Bloom in agreeance?”

“I—”

“With all due respect, Your Elemency, Lord Clematis Blouting was a candidate selected for Iris by the Collective, their approval has already been granted.”

“As you wish,” he says with a sigh of resignation. “Then we require a stand in for Lord Blouting in his absence.”

Either by fate or the universe itself answering the call, in that moment, the door used to bring in prisoners opens, and though he’s surrounded, his wrists and ankles bound by iron shackles, Barracuda is brought into the courtroom.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Grandmother instantly draws me closer, trying to stop me from seeing, but too late.

“Cuda,” I call out.

“Shut your mouth,” she hisses.

He hears me and looks up, and I’m rewarded with his delightful honey eyes focusing on me.

“Allow the prisoner to stand in Lord Blouting’s place,” I say boldly. “I’ll marry by proxy if he is beside me.”

“Absolutely not!” squawks Grandmother.

“Lady Bloom, you are aware he is a condemned criminal,” says Elder Hosta.

“I refuse all others,” I say with Grandmother’s fingernails digging painfully into my arm.

“You will do no such thing!” she seethes.

“I’ll marry the prisoner,” I say to Hosta, deliberately obscuring my words.

“As the lady sees fit,” says Hosta.

“No!” shrieks Grandmother.

“Madam Bloom,” he scolds. “Did you not just request that your granddaughter be married?”

“Not to *that* monster,” she says, pointing towards Barracuda.

“We are in need of a stand-in, and Lady Bloom has requested the prisoner. Since he is due to be executed within the hour, surely that suits as she will then be safely squared away with Lord Blouting?”

“Use one of the Guards,” Grandmother blurts out, her hand waving to indicate any of the men standing about in confusion as they watch the whole production

being performed before them.

“I’ll only sign if it’s done with the prisoner,” I say, stepping forward, my head held high as I look to Elder Hosta.

“As the lady wishes,” says Hosta with a sigh and waves in the direction of Barracuda. Two Guards lead him to us and he shuffles across the floor.

Despite his restraints, my heart soars. He’s filthy and beaten, covered in bruises and half healed cuts, and still more fresh ones besides. Even so, he’s beautiful and strong and everything I know I’ll ever want.

“Unless you plan to be joined with them, I suggest you step back, Madam Bloom,” says Hosta. “Someone fetch the clerk; he can organize the paperwork.”

She glares at me then, and squeezes hard enough that I wince, gasping in pain before she releases me and does as instructed. The clerk joins our group, his confusion clear when he sees the odd mix of Kastor, Magix and human. On Hosta’s instruction he nods and diligently sets to having both register and marriage certificate ready for signing.

Barracuda reaches, lifting his hands and I take hold of them, my fingers caressing the rough, calloused skin, elated that once again I can touch him.

It’s in that touch that I feel my power coursing through me and I realize that in this moment I could use it and perhaps get us out of here. Quickly searching the room, I look for a water source, but there’s nothing that would make a big enough impact that would help.

There is one way, and that would be to freeze the water in the veins of everyone in the courtroom. Including Grandmother.

Remembering how I’d frozen Kul’s hand, my stomach turns. I hadn’t meant to hurt him, and seeing first-hand what my powers can do if used against people I know I could never live with myself if I did the same here. The Guards are just

doing their job, as is Elder Hosta, and though I've had my run ins with Grandmother, I could never physically hurt her in spite of how she's treated me. I won't stoop to her level of control.

"Your name?" asks Hosta, addressing the Magix.

"Barracuda, Your Elemency," he says, giving the Elder a quick glance as he does so. I smile at his use of the Elder's honorific. He's still in terrible danger, but he's mindful of his surroundings.

"I see," he says. "You must answer to the questions asked of you as if you were Lord Clematis Blouting. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Elemency," he says, nodding.

"And your full name, Lady Bloom?"

"Iris Bluebell Hydrangea Delphinium Bloom," I say, my eyes still on Barracuda and I see him smile after I've given all my names.

"In that case, Barracuda, in the stead of Lord Clematis Blouting, do you vow on the Evocation of Sacraments, the Attestation of Elements, and the Keeping of Incantations that you will remain true, honorable, devoted, and faithful to the continued strengthening of Kastor magic by taking this woman as your equal in magic, taking this woman in body, and taking this woman in Element of Water to ensure the power that binds you in matrimony is the power that will manifest from your fruitfulness?"

"As in all these things, so do I promise," says Barracuda, his shining eyes on me.

"Iris Bluebell Hydrangea Delphinium Bloom, do you vow on the Evocation of Sacraments, the Attestation of Elements, and the Keeping of Incantations that you will remain true, honorable, devoted, and faithful to the continued strengthening of Kastor magic by taking this man as your equal in magic, taking this man in body, and taking this man in Element of Water to ensure the

power that binds you in matrimony is the power that will manifest from your fruitfulness?”

“As in all these things, so do I promise.” Nothing could wipe the smile from my face in that moment as I look into Barracuda’s eyes.

“Enough of this, she’s marrying Lord Blouting,” interrupts Grandmother, but Elder Hosta holds up a hand to silence her. She clamps her mouth shut, but I can see her jaw working.

“By order of the Collective Conjuring of Elders, I hereby declare by the laws of the Visage of Connubiality that this man, Barracuda, is now joined to this woman, Iris, in the union of marriage.”

“Kiss me,” I whisper. He leans forward, and before any of the Guards, or even Grandmother manage to stop us, our lips touch and the thrill of him being there, that we were given the opportunity to see our union happen, is enough.

“Do not implicate yourself to adultery so early in your marriage, Iris,” sneers Grandmother.

“They are not fully married yet,” says Elder Hosta. “The prison register needs to be signed and the certificate lodged with the House of Justice.”

I’m convinced Grandmother is about to combust, but Barracuda and I are directed to the nearest desk where the register in question has been placed with a pen and ink pot.

I sign first, my curling signature dancing across the page in my usual scripted hand. I give Barracuda the pen, and he too signs in an incredibly delicate hand, much to the clerk’s surprise considering his raised eyebrows when he admires Barracuda’s penmanship. The certificate is then placed before us, and once we’ve signed both the register and certificate are given to Hosta, who flourishes his own mark upon the pages, then hands the certificate to the nearest Guard who immediately sets off to lodge it with the House of Justice.

Then, and only then does Grandmother sink into the nearest chair with an audible sigh of relief and I almost think she was holding her breath the entire time.

With the ink dry, the clerk takes the register from Hosta. I see him glance at the page before closing it and he instantly turns quite pale, looking back to the Elder in confusion.

“There seems to have been a mistake, Your Elemency,” he says nervously.

“Mistake?” says Hosta.

“Mistake?” says Grandmother, rising to her feet.

“I’ve only seen one other wedding by proxy before,” the clerk continues. “And the register should be the signatures of the bride and her intended groom. The Magix has signed his own name, rather than that of Lord Blouting.” Seems he was too enamored by Barracuda’s writing to have picked up the error at the time.

“What?” screeches Grandmother grabbing the register from the clerk. It’s a heavy book so she slams it down on the desk open to the offending page.

“So? What does that mean then?” she says, her eyes moving over the page before looking to Hosta, then Barracuda, then me.

Elder Hosta appears to compose himself before answering. “With the prisoner’s signature on the register, and the certificate being lodged as we speak, your granddaughter is married to him, and *not* Lord Blouting.”

“What?!” Grandmother explodes. “How is this possible? This was by proxy!”

“Yes, the Magix should have signed in Lord Blouting’s stead,” says Hosta. “But with his own name in the registry and on the certificate, then it is the prisoner she is lawfully married to.”

“Then change it,” says Grandmother, already reaching for the pen and ink, until the clerk hurriedly swipes them up. “Scrub it out and get him to sign again properly.”

“Madam Bloom,” says Hosta. “Though I do share in your grievance at this error, and the inconvenience, to alter legal records is a felony punishable by law.”

“How could you let this happen? What is to be done, now?” She’s pacing back and forth in front of the bench. I want to be close to Barracuda, but he’s once again being held by Guards. “This is *your* doing,” she sneers and points a finger at him. “Can’t this be annulled? The marriage hasn’t yet been consummated.”

“He was only doing what was asked of him,” I say simply. “No one instructed him otherwise.”

“You stay out of this,” she barks at me.

Hosta sighs. “Madam, the prisoner’s death is imminent, perhaps once your granddaughter is widowed, and even had a day or two to grieve—”

“She will be married the instant this foul creature is *dead!*” she snarls.

By then the Bloutings are sure to have arrived at the prison, and with Barracuda no longer in the picture, there’ll be nothing to stop her marrying me to Clem properly.

“He isn’t dead yet,” I fire back. “Elder Hosta has to pass sentence.”

Hosta rolls his eyes and bangs his gavel to get everyone’s attention.

“I’ve had quite enough theatrics in my courtroom today,” he says over the din of Grandmother and my arguing. “Guard, place the prisoner in the dock, let’s get this over with.”

For once, Grandmother seems satisfied that something will be going her way, so she promptly sits in the gallery to witness my husband's sentencing.

Being family, I'm now allowed to sit closer and keep him in my line of sight, so he can see me.

The proceedings are swift, and he's sentenced to death without any preamble. I knew it was coming, but hearing it aloud sends a crushing blow to my heart and my stomach sinks to my feet. I cling to the knowledge that for as long as an hour or two, I was married to the man I truly love.

No sooner does Hosta slam his gavel down again when the Guards take Barracuda from the courtroom.

"I love you, husband!" I call as I wipe the tears from my cheeks.

"Be strong, wife," he shouts back. "I still breathe."

"Enough of this nonsense," says Grandmother, again taking hold of my wrist, but I yank it from her grasp.

"No, Grandmother; I am married now and no longer your concern."

"You will be widowed within the hour," she says maliciously.

"Perhaps," I concede. "But like my *husband* said, he still breathes." I push past her, striding from the courtroom. I've come to know the prison during my visits, illicit or charitable, and am aware of where Barracuda will be taken.

I don't know how, but I'm determined to save his life.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



If Grandmother wanted a swift conclusion to this significant hiccup in her plans, then she was to be extremely disappointed.

With Barracuda being such a high-profile prisoner, the citizens of Embervale are waiting for the executioners to construct the means of his death in the public square located several blocks from the prison. It's been a long time since Embervale witnessed a public execution since most death row prisoners are dealt with inside Stranglewood's walls.

Stalls, stands and booths have been erected along the roadsides so people might profit from the hungry, bored crowds by selling pies, pastries and macabre souvenirs.

The Bloutings arrive at Stranglewood in the midst of all the commotion with the crowds of people swarming thickly outside the prison waiting for the bloodshed.

"This is deeply disturbing, Madam Bloom," says Madam Blouting as we take lunch with Oleander Enro, Governor of Stranglewood. "To have so many baying for blood." She sips her tea, flinching at every profanity shouted outside. It's a wonder she hasn't suffered a heart attack if this is the strength of her disposition.

"The fortitude before the contentment," says Grandmother impatiently, quoting some philosopher or other. "At least we might end the day with the happy union of our families."

"Indeed," says Lord Blouting Senior.

Madam Blouting winces again.

"I do apologize for the disturbance," says Enro. "It has been a while since we've held a public execution, and the people of Embervale are quite taken with the prospect of viewing such a spectacle."

Disturbance is an understatement. It sounds like the fictional Hordes of Maah have set up camp outside Stranglewood's walls.

"Could you not still hold it within the prison?" suggests Lord Blouting Senior.

"I'm afraid that would likely add to the unrest," says Enro. "We hardly need deny the crowds and spark rioting. Once the crowd gets what they want I believe the city will be restored to its usual calm rhythm."

"One can only hope," murmurs Madam Blouting.

"Will our union be conducted the moment he's pronounced dead?" asks Clem. "I am *most* distressed that my betrothed was tricked into marrying that scoundrel. How was it that it happened at all?"

I'm thrilled it happened, but what's more interesting is it seems the Bloutings are more than content to let slide the fact that I helped the accused escape in the first place. Whether Grandmother was able to keep the whole thing quiet, or they're aware but to say or do anything would mean this marriage won't go ahead, I guess they'd rather I was married to the family and any secret scandal be damned.

While we continue to eat tiny sandwiches and sip tea to the accompaniment of the screaming mob outside, it's then that the bleak and gray day fulfills its promise and the skies open. The rain is heavy and steady, and I imagine the crowds will be thoroughly soaked through before Barracuda is even brought out.

Lightning flashes and the crack of thunder has us all jumping with Madam Blouting giving a small shriek.

"And now this," sighs Grandmother as though the day couldn't possibly get any worse.

My thoughts are solely with Barracuda, and it's then I decide that condemned or not, as his wife I have the right to see him one last time.

"If you'll excuse me," I say standing and quickly moving to the door. "I'll just make use of your facilities."

"Allow me to offer you an escort," says Enro.

"Let me accompany you," says Clem, a knowing gleam in his eye that makes me shudder.

"Indeed, I can show you," says Grandmother as she moves to also stand.

"No, I know my way, and I hardly need a chaperone for such an endeavor," I say as politely as I can manage. I just want to be alone and as far away from those that seek to do harm to Barracuda.

I don't head towards the privy, but make my way towards the cell blocks. My big key fits the gates that section off each wing, but the smaller chunky key fits only one door in the entirety of Stranglewood. The few times I've been here, I know the way as well as any room back in Bloominance Manor.

However, since I'm going a different way than my usual route, I'm passing cellblocks that are full of prisoners.

Their cat calls and wolf whistles soon echo around the corridors and news that a lone woman is hurrying through the prison turns the shouting into lewd calls. Thankfully, I'm out of arms reach, but it doesn't stop them stretching as far as they might through the bars, grabbing and calling with promises of a good time. Of course, this is also accompanied with nastier references to my being a 'whore' and 'slut'.

I keep my chin up and hurry down a staircase before I'm faced with a large gate. Rummaging through my reticule, I find my big key, and triumphantly unlock it before hurrying on. I would rather face the gallows with him than

live another moment without. I'm not going to allow it. He is my future, my life, my very soul!

"Cuda!" I call when I finally reach the basement. Word that I've been running through the prison has already made its way down here since the few prisoners that are also locked up on the basement level are shouting and screaming for me.

"Angel?" comes Barracuda's confused voice,

"I'm here," I soothe, hurrying to him, but before I can reach his door, I'm grabbed from behind and I squawk indignantly.

"Let her go!" shouts Barracuda.

I struggle, trying to kick at the shins of my captor, but he's soon joined by more Guards.

"How on earth did you get down here?"

I ignore his question, instead watching, tears blurring my vision as two more Guards enter Barracuda's cell and haul him out.

"Get your hands off her," snarls Barracuda. One of the Guards hits him in the stomach and he doubles over.

"Cuda," I cry, moving to get close, but the Guard holding me only tightens his grip.

They yank him upright, but his hair has fallen across his face which is dark as a thundercloud.

I'm roughly marched out of the basement, but rather than see me back to my grandmother and the Bloutings in the governor's office, I'm taken up the stairway to the levels of prison cells that are above ground.

The cat calls and filthy requests reignite in earnest the moment I'm manhandled through the cell block. Prisoners make kissing faces through the bars, banging their hips against them in obscene suggestion.

"Take her out of here," growls Barracuda behind me.

"Shut your mouth, Fae," says one of the Guards holding him.

Whistles and shouts peel out from the cells, and more hands and arms poke through bars and the Guard, with one hand still wrapped tightly around my upper arm, uses his baton to strike at the clutching hands reaching for me.

"Come on, give her to us, we'll treat her nice and gentle like," says one.

"Hello sweetheart, fancy getting with a *real* man?"

"You need a cock to be a real man," shouts another and the crude leers are given to raucous laughter.

I think of the spells I'd practiced with Barracuda, how we'd made the water ice, and conjured it from deep underground, bringing it to the surface as a puddle. But for my magic to work, I need to touch him, and right now that seems a devastating impossibility.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



The noise of the prisoners attracts more Guards, so to add to the roaring, the Guards are shouting for quiet, batons striking against bars creating a deafening symphony of clashing noise.

I'm taken to an exit, and unceremoniously thrust outside into the driving rain. It takes a moment for the shock of suddenly being soaking wet, that I momentarily forget where I am until I hear the clank of the door closing behind me. The same little wooden door I'd been using to come and see Barracuda.

"No!" I shout, beating my fists futilely against the thick wood. "Cuda!" I could easily get back inside with my key, but then the Guards would know that I have one. They're already wondering how it is I got down to the basement level anyway.

None of the crowds have ventured to this side of the prison and the foul stench of the ditch running along the side of it is strong evidence to suggest why.

Covering my nose with my hand I hurry away, grabbing up my wet skirts in one hand so I don't trip and end up in the revolting muck.

Sure enough, as I round the corner, the shouting, jeering crowd is thick, even in the rain. Many hold coats or cloaks over their heads, still managing to infuse a sense of foreboding despite their disheveled appearance.

The main gates open and I'm forced to skirt the heaving masses as the cart with the cage exits the prison. I know Barracuda to be inside it, and I push as hard as I can through the throng as the noise heightens now the prisoner is in view.

Rather than follow the course of the cart through the teeming streets, I take a different route down the back streets towards the square, splashing through puddles until I am thoroughly soaked. My hair is plastered to my head and face, my skirts hang heavy sticking to my legs, and my shoes squelch with every step. But I keep moving, ignoring the stitch in my side as I reach the square.

All possible vantage points are occupied with people taking up every square inch of standing room, hanging off window ledges, and even sitting on rooftops

to get a good view of the proceedings.

Readying my elbows, I power my way through, shoving aside Embervale citizens, who glare at me with annoyance, interrupting their chants that the Fae should die. I presume most of the people here, the majority of them not being Kastor, will have never seen a Magix before, and depending on their education, might never have known they existed. But the excitement and bloodlust has clouded any sane judgment that might otherwise be found here.

Pushing my way through, I manage to reach the center, coming up short when I see the means of Barracuda's execution. I've seen pictures of gallows in varying constructs, to dispose of one or several people. This one has been specially made. Even under the rain, I can see the wood is fresh, the grain of it still golden before the gray of age claims it.

Guards stand about the square, keeping the jostling crowd back as still others check over the gallows. One man, dressed entirely in black, wears a hood over his face. He's conversing with one of the higher-ranking Guards, pointing at the rope that swings ominously from a thick beam. I can see the lever used to release the trapdoor. Barracuda won't be given the dignity of dying in privacy. The whole structure is open, enabling onlookers to see the entire ceremony.

The cobblestones of the square are riddled with puddles, and the rain continues as though in protest that such a needless death is to be conducted on this day.

It seems to take both forever and no time at all for the cart to rattle into view. The cries and shouting boom across the square, but now the reason for their having stood for hours in the rain has arrived, projectiles are thrown towards the cart. Old fruit and food litters the ground, but there's rocks and other debris hurled, hitting both cage and the unfortunate driver and horse. Following the cart is a procession of striking black horses upon which are mounted the Collective Elders, all six of them. I don't know whether to be surprised or impressed they chose to forge ahead with the weather being as it is.

Unlike their usual attire, today they wear black, their robes trimmed in their designated Element color.

I recognize Elder Hosta who inadvertently married us mere hours before, but also the feeble Elder Gorse who conducted Violet's failed wedding.

Elder Maple is Element of Wind, and Elder Larch is Fire. I can see Elder Fern who is Earth and finally, Elder Sage, who, like myself, is Element of Water. Hosta is the only one capable of dismounting himself, where all the other Elders require the assistance of their accompanying attendants and Guards, and a small set of wooden steps.

Then I see Grandmother, her stern expression framed by the window of the carriage she sits in. While everyone else must suffer under the teeming sky, Grandmother ensured she remained safe and dry by forcing her carriage through the crowds to the best vantage point in which she might view Barracuda's execution.

She hasn't seen me yet, and perhaps thinks I'm still at Stranglewood, though I'd been absent from the Governor's office for at least an hour or more.

The Guards are trying their best to subdue the crowd, but they've been left waiting too long and their anticipation has grown to fever pitch. They won't be denied their entertainment.

It isn't until the cart pulls up to the gallows, and Barracuda is dragged out that they finally succumb to silence, but murmurings follow as discussions about the prisoner's appearance take over.

"I *heard* it was a Magix," says one behind me. "Wanted to see the brute for myself, make sure it was real."

"Evil creatures," says a woman. "Hanging is too good, best remove the head to make sure it can't reawaken."

"Only getting what he deserves," says another.

I want to shout at them that they're wrong, that they have no idea what they're saying, that his sentence far outweighs the crime.

With my heart in my throat, I watch, helpless as Barracuda is led up the wooden steps to stand on the trapdoor. His white hair sticks to his scalp and shoulders, his horns all the more prominent. His shackles have been replaced by ropes around his wrists, with his ankles free.

The figure shrouded in black steps up to loop the noose about his neck. It catches on his horns and because of his height, the executioner spends a moment trying to free the rope causing the crowd to start laughing. It takes him several jerking tugs until it finally releases and settles on Barracuda's shoulders, to the cheers of the crowd.

The Elders step forward then, lining up in front of the gallows to address the masses. Nothing happens in Embervale without the Elders receiving their share of attention. They've each been assigned a Guard who stands dutifully behind, holding an umbrella to divert the worst of the rain.

"Citizens of Embervale," shouts Elder Larch to be heard both over the rain and the murmurings of the crowd. He holds his arms up to ensure all eyes are on him. "And those who have traveled from neighboring provinces to witness this historically significant event." He gives the audience a moment to settle, now the show has actually started.

"Centuries ago, the Magix stole Kastor magic and rendered us vulnerable to our enemies and unable to defend our human brethren. You've heard the histories, you know the consequence, and here we have one of those responsible in our midst."

The crowd boos and several shake fists toward Barracuda. A few rocks and chunks of moldy bread are pitched towards the gallows, most of which fall pitifully short. I stop myself from running out to grab and throw them back.

While Elder Larch continues with his monotonous speech, I try to catch Barracuda's eye, moving along the front of the crowd, trying to avoid the wary

glances of the Guards. There are so many people I'm sure to be lost among their number, but I'm hopeful that by moving, he'll catch sight of me. I don't even care if Grandmother sees me, but when I look in her direction, she's too absorbed in the proceedings.

It works, and when I know he can see me I smile. I can't let this happen, especially when the Collective intend to take his body and make him an exhibit in the House of Interesting Artifacts. I can't let him die because I know my life will be forfeit without him.

I want to be able to conjure my magic, but without Barracuda's touch, without his ability to bring about my power, I haven't the capability of drawing forth a spell to save him. Being Element of Water, how can I possibly stop this from happening?

Elder Larch finishes his lecture, referring to the Elders beside him if they would like to speak, and though Elder Sage opens her mouth to begin, it's Elder Gorse that begins speaking in a surprisingly strong voice considering he looks as though a breeze could topple him.

I can't imagine what Barracuda must be thinking, perhaps wishing they would just get on with it, unless they planned to kill him with boredom. With so many of us standing in the rain, I would have thought they'd keep it short. In fact, Elder Larch does lean in to whisper in Elder Gorse's ear and the old man fumbles in his litany, finishing his speech abruptly.

The executioner then steps up to Barracuda, whispering in his ear. It's odd to see someone approach him so closely when most have tried to avoid him. He keeps his eyes on me, but his lips move in answer with a quick nod. The executioner nods in acknowledgment and moves to the lever that will trip the trapdoor.

I can barely breathe, my heart thundering, my body tingling with a kind of static. It's then Barracuda raises his hands, and I see the drops of rain falling, streaming off his outstretched fingers.

The water.

It's everywhere.

I'm standing in a shallow puddle completely drenched. I remember how he showed me we could bring about my magic with the water and not have to touch. I raise my hand towards him and that's when I feel it, the conduit between us, my power crashes through me in a great tumbling wave, but this time there's something more. Something truly powerful, and almost painful surges through me as though my entire body was filled with boiling water.

Grunting with the ache of it, I manage to raise both hands, my spell forming in front of me like a thread of blue liquid slithering through the air. It's not like any of my previous spells, but I form it quickly, there's no time to waste and the pain filtering along my limbs is intensifying in its strength. The surrounding water begins to ripple, the puddles pulling together to form a larger pool in the center of the square. I shout my incantation and my spell flies out, splashing into the pool just as the executioner pulls the lever.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



The sound that emits and rolls around the square can only be described as a but it's not from any creature or being I've ever heard before. The water on the ground begins to move, shifting as though whole, and the townspeople cry out and scream, pushing back to avoid the coalescing puddles as they meet and join to create a bigger pool, then bigger still as more and more water comes together.

The lever releases the trapdoor, and Barracuda falls, but a large arm, like the tentacle of an octopus lashes out, catching him before the rope has time to jerk taut.

The shouts then become only screams and the people scatter, hurrying away as the water forms into a shape, the long, thick arm holding Barracuda produces further arms at its base before a large swell, growing bigger than the buildings that surround us emerges from the center of the writhing tentacles, and twin shapes, that I know to be eyes, survey its surroundings.

Mud and debris swirl in the creature's bottom half, enabling me to see just how vast a creature it is that I've conjured from the water. The top half is mostly clear, but with stirrings of twigs and stones caught up when the water first came together.

The executioner manages to jump from the platform, but he tumbles onto the cobbles, and must injure himself since he's not able to get back to his feet. A large watery arm reaches, grabs him about the waist and flings him beyond the square, his cry of shock the only indication of his flight.

Guards try shooting the thing with their rifles which is found to be futile, since the balls pass directly through it, endangering the people behind it trying to flee. Rifles are replaced with swords, also swung ineffectively as the blades pass right through. When the creature recognizes the threat, focusing on those that are attempting to harm it, it swoops its great long arms, picking up unsuspecting Guards, only to fling them away with their parting scream of terror. I briefly wonder how it's managing to hold things if bullets and swords are passing

through, but when I consider there's a water monster in the middle of the town square, I figure it's down to the magic and to stop worrying as to its physics.

Realizing they have no way of defending the people or themselves against the creature, the Guards soon join the masses, pushing against the crowd as everyone is still trying to escape the square via the roads and laneways that empty out onto it.

I run to the platform, hurrying up the sodden stairs to pull the noose from Barracuda's neck.

"What is this?" he asks, giving the creature a wary look, in spite of the fact that it just saved his life.

Still secured in the creature's arm, I fight with the knots securing his wrists, but with all the water the rope has swollen and is refusing to budge.

"I don't know," I say, but then a name forms in my mind. "Kraken."

"I had no idea you held such power." He's also trying to loosen his bonds, sawing his wrists up and down, but it's no use.

"Neither did I," I say, then look to find something to help remove the rope.

Abandoned weapons litter the ground, so I go back down amid the commotion and grab up a knife. Returning to Barracuda I'm able to cut through the rope, and once free the arm holding him gently sets him down on the platform before that arm then joins the other flailing tentacles, terrorizing people and knocking away any Guards thinking they can wrangle the creature.

"Let's get out of here," says Barracuda, taking my hand. We leave the gallows, but rather than try to escape via the main street, Barracuda points out a narrow gap between two buildings behind Kraken that no one is brave enough to use.

We hurry along the passage, a loud rush of water causing me to look back and I see a wave of water crashing along after us. Though I should be terrified, I know it to be Kraken following after us.

Barracuda has seen it too. “Seems it doesn’t wish to leave its mistress.”

“You have to admit, it’s an effective deterrent.”

Everywhere we turn people are running, but they pay no heed to the escaped prisoner. All eyes are on the terrifying Kraken that reforms its shape whenever we pause to get our bearings, but when moving becomes a wave of water.

“You have the Hiraeth Stones?” asks Barracuda.

“Yes, I’ve kept them with me.”

“We need to find the Compassphere,” he says.

“Do you know where we’ll find one?” I ask, though it seems a rather silly question to be asking a Magix trapped in Ecleshax.

“I was told there should be one in the very place I was threatened to be sent on my death, the House of Interesting Artifacts.”

I stop running, looking at him quizzically. Behind me, Kraken once again forms into a gigantic octopus, and fresh screams can be heard when people catch sight of it. Having moved away from the public square, people are becoming unsure as to where they can run.

“There’s one in the House of Interesting Artifacts?”

“Hopefully.”

I check our surroundings, looking for street signs or some familiarity. “This way,” I say, hitching up my still-soaking skirts and hurrying down the street. “It’s this way.”

The rain finally eases, and the city of Embervale becomes eerily deserted since most of its citizens have disappeared having run for their lives on seeing Kraken. The sky still looms overcast and gray with the occasional spot, but the deluge seems to have passed.

The House of Interesting Artifacts isn't all that far from the public square, however there are a lot of buildings between and we're forced to take a serpentine route to reach it, all the while followed by the odd wave of Kraken that's insisting on staying incredibly close. I don't know how it appeared, nor do I know how long it will stay. The spell I'd conjured was meant to use the water to wash the executioner away to stop him pulling the lever.

"It's as Python thought when he was looking for a cure for his brother's curse," says Barracuda as we hurry down another street, then make a right into a small lane. "He believed your sister to be powerful, and it seems that might be a trait that runs through the family."

"I've never been able to bring about my power before I met you. Are you sure?"

He makes a gesture towards the wall of water behind us. It's more than just a mass of water, I can see parts of Kraken appearing as the water moves. A tentacle might form, or the shape of its eye, the swell of its head. Standing like an impossible mass like one of those towering jelly confections I've seen, but it is constantly moving and changing as though a part of the sea were here on land.

"Your Kraken isn't proof enough?" he says as we come to a main road and I can see the signs directing tourists to the House of Interesting Artifacts. "I've never seen such power before."

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



“Neither has the whole of Embervale,” I say, and as I look at Kraken, I feel the warmth of pride that I created it from my own abilities as a Kastor.

Like everywhere else we've been, the street is deserted, and glistening wetly when the sun strikes the puddles in moments when it manages to break through the clouds. I imagine people have gone to their homes to await instruction from the Elders as to when it will be safe to reenter the city. For us it means Barracuda and I can wander through the streets without fear of being seen, or for the most part, apprehended. It would seem that even the Guards have taken flight, too fearful to protect those who depend on them to do the job they're assigned.

My dress and hair are still sodden, and I do feel a trifle sheepish walking into the House of Interesting Artifacts leaving a trail of water drops behind me.

"You have the power to fix this," he says simply. I instantly move to take hold of his hand, but my spell begins emitting from my fingers. Smiling with understanding, I focus and my spell instantly boils and therefore evaporates the water away. I still look and feel terribly disheveled, but at least we're both dry. It would seem, since I conjured Kraken, I don't need to hold Barracuda's hand anymore. My magic is with me!

Though a sudden surge of happiness builds up from my stomach, the time for celebration is not now. There's too much at stake, and Barracuda is still in danger.

"I don't recall ever seeing a Compassphere," I say to Barracuda as I run a finger down the directory list in the front foyer. "Not that I would know what one would look like, but admittedly, I haven't been in here since I was a little girl, so I don't really remember much of it."

"It'll take longer to find if it's not on display," he says. "I just know it was rumored that one was here."

"We'll try the historical exhibit first since that might show implements used during the battles between Kastors and Magix."

The directory gives the locations of each exhibit, so we head upstairs to the first floor to a large room filled with glass cases, tables with labeled objects covered by glass, and little dioramas which are also protected by glass.

"How big is it?" I ask peering into a case that shows an old sword and battered shield from a Magix soldier. The paint on the shield is faded and peeling, but the colors

depict a sigil of some kind. It's too weathered to make out properly.

I figure if the Compassphere is small it might be on a table, but if it's of substantial size it might have a case of its own. We separate to conduct our search and I begin wandering through the room, marveling at the pieces of Kastor history that have been around for centuries.

It's not for a while that I realize Barracuda hasn't answered me. Though I continue looking in cases, I become aware that I can't hear him at all.

"Cuda?"

"Here," comes his soft reply.

I hurry to him, stopping short when I see what he's found.

A pair of horns. Magix horns.

"Oh Cuda," I breathe, coming closer to him and gently touching his arm. I'm grateful he doesn't flinch. Knowing the horns are there, and most likely because of Kastor hands, I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd recoiled at my touch.

I read the plaque beside it and find out the horns had been donated by a Lord Philodendron Barkridge some fifty-odd years ago. Apparently, they had been handed down the family as a trophy from the Battle of Klard and Colos not only as a spoil of war but a means for the family to show how they could trace their roots back several centuries. All bragging rights.

Barracuda passes a hand across the glass over where the horns lie on a bed of red velvet. They're beautiful, and similar to his own. But where his are marbled with taupe and the slightest hint of blue and silver, these have veins of gray and a pretty line of pink. A metallic sparkle glistens in a coppery tone and I can only imagine the Magix they belonged to was quite striking in appearance. Barracuda won't have known their owner, but to see something of his people on display in such a vulgar context as though the horns were never a part of someone who lived and breathed.

"I'm so sorry," I say softly.

"We don't have such places as this," he says, still staring at the horns. "Our histories are contained in books and the minds of our scholars to pass on to the next

generation.”

“I would love to read them,” I say, keeping my voice gentle. It’s not that I think I need to treat him like an easily spooked predator, but to have been confronted by such a thing, he’s had no opportunity to view Kastors in any other way but as a horrible, greed driven species. I’m amazed he found it in himself to find a connection to me.

His hand closes over mine and he gives it a gentle squeeze. “It pains me more that your histories are not accurate and that for so many generations the facts have become fiction.”

I could argue that neither of us were there, and so how can he be so sure that Magix got it right? But the more I see the differences, the more I’m convinced he’s right.

“Let’s find the Compassphere,” I say, pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder. He turns to me then, tipping my chin and he kisses me so sweetly. The sorrow he feels is not directed at me, it’s for his people.

We don’t find the Compassphere in the historical exhibit, nor in the scientific where we found an incredible contraption called a Stabilizing Orison Defibrillator that claimed to reawaken Kastor magic by stopping and restarting the heart. I guess it didn’t work.

Next, we try the Other Worldly exhibit, and it’s here that I think we might be close as the artifacts in this room are like nothing I’ve ever seen.

“These are mostly Magix items,” says Barracuda, leading the way into the room. “The Hiraeth Stones were in the House of Justice, but I knew the Compassphere would be located somewhere of greater significance. I was captured before I could retrieve it.”

“We’ll find it,” I say, hoping to sound encouraging.

Again we separate and I’m fascinated by all the objects so beautifully displayed, which I know would only bolster the Kastor ideal that we as a people are above Magix. A lump forms in my throat when I consider the circumstances as to how these things were taken. If Magix kept their histories to books, what does it say about Kastors if we took things that didn’t belong to us to show everyone as though we’re the superior race?

I suddenly find it hard to swallow, and tears prick the backs of my eyes. I know Magix don't need my tears, but I'm disappointed to be a part of something that treated others so heinously.

"Angel," calls Barracuda, and I hurriedly compose myself and go to him. He's standing in front of a glass case sitting on a pedestal. Inside is an object about the size of an orange if it was cut in half. I can see patterns of different colored lines inside as though viewing a map through a lens. "A Compassphere."

"We found it," I say smiling when I look at him. He lifts the glass case off it easily and carefully takes it from the red velvet cushion. The House of Interesting Artifacts was deserted when we arrived. Since the building itself was left unlocked I wonder if those who had been in here simply fled when the alarm was raised about there being an enormous water monster in the city. Even the security personnel, who I remember would wander about the place so people couldn't simply take things, are missing.

"Now I can get us to Duskmere."

Hurrying from the House of Interesting Artifacts, I'm surprised to still see Kraken waiting outside for us. I'm not focused on keeping it in form, so I don't know the extent of magic that's keeping it animated.

"I don't know if we'll be able to find a carriage," I say, still readying myself to hike up my skirts and run down the street so we can get out of Embervale quickly.

"Iris!"

I turn to see Grandmother with several Guards coming towards us. She doesn't seem fazed by Kraken at all, though the Guards are keeping a watchful eye on it as they approach.

"You need to come with me now," she says sternly. "How long have you had your power?"

"Long enough," I say. I don't move towards her, I have every intent to leave with Barracuda, I just need to get in touch with my sisters.

"This changes everything," she continues, her voice conveying a hint of restrained elation. "Once you're married to Lord Blouting, we know your children will have

Kastor magic.”

She doesn’t get it, but I wouldn’t expect her to since she doesn’t understand the connection between Kastor and Magix.

“It changes nothing,” I say. “I will not marry Lord Blouting, Grandmother. Your plans won’t work.” I turn back to Barracuda with a nod that we keep going.

“Stop her!” shouts Grandmother.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



But just as the Guards march forward, Kraken blocks their path, scoops both myself and Barracuda off the ground - much to my indignant yelp - and washes down the street at an incredible speed, leaving my grandmother shouting and screaming at the Guards.

There's nothing to cling to since my hands simply pass through Kraken's limb like the bullets and swords did in the public square, but I'm held securely. An unfortunate consequence of the creature being made of water is that once again, my clothes become thoroughly saturated.

We soon leave Embervale behind, but once we're in the more isolated rural areas Kraken sets us down and though I don't ask, or give a command it dissolves into a giant puddle that runs off the road and into the ground. I'm almost sad to see it go, but I know it's within me, that Kraken is a part of the power I hold. But I'm still dripping wet, as is Barracuda. A problem that's easily rectified. I'm finding that my magic is coming to me a lot more fluidly, it's instinctual and I'm loving it.

"I need to get to my sisters," I say even though we continue walking away from the city.

"I don't believe either of us can return to Embervale at this time," he says, and I know it to be true.

I rub my forehead, trying to think of a way around this. "I can't just leave them," I implore. "I know it was mostly out of Violet's hands, but I can't leave them without some understanding as to what's happened and where I am."

"There's also the Hiraeth Stones. We can't take them with us to Duskmere."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, with one hand, the other feels for the Stones in my reticule, their smooth rounded surfaces in stark contrast to the long lengths of the bone keys.

"How do we tell my sisters what's happened, *and* get the Stones to them?"

“Could you send the Stones with a letter perhaps?” Barracuda suggests.

“You trust they’ll be safe?”

“What choice do we have?” he says with a shrug. “Even if they have the Stones, it will have to be their choice to come to Duskmore.”

He has a point. I can’t assume just on my say-so that my sisters will come willingly. I know Rose is more of a mind to follow Grandmother’s plan, as is Daisy. Lily will fight to the end and Poppy is too young to be worrying about potential suitors or husbands.

“I won’t be able to send them home. Grandmother will see it and that will be the Stones gone.”

“Surely there’s somewhere safe you can send them, to a friend?”

I consider my friends, but I have to think about who I can trust. What I’ve done goes against everything Kastors are endeavoring to achieve. Who would be willing to keep the Stones a secret and get them to my sisters safely?”

Wait...what about Lily?

“Lily,” I breathe.

“Your sister Lily? But she’s at your home.”

“Not if I send them to her school,” I say my heart speeding up when I think the best course of action is to send the Stones to Lily at the Academy. No one will go through her mail; they’ll give the package to her when she’s at school. However long the mail takes, she should get the Stones in a matter of days. “That’s it,” I say, smiling at my solution. “I’ll send the Stones to Ospepper’s Academy for Kastors addressed to Lily. They’ll simply hand it to her the next time she’s there.”

Hungry after walking so far, we end up in one of the small towns bordering Embervale. I still have a little money, but if required I can sell my jewelry. A

matching set of sapphire necklace and earrings should get us plenty to reach Torgotha.

After all the events, I've decided that even though I will be leaving my sisters behind, I have to go with Barracuda. I will forever be under Grandmother's thumb, not to mention forced to marry Clem. I also have to determine my own future and that means following Barracuda and perhaps catching up with Violet. Besides, Violet is alone in Duskmere while my sisters here still have each other. I feel it's only fair to even the odds. Sending word to my sisters via Lily seems sadly lacking. I would dearly love to give her, and all of them a proper goodbye, but it's too dangerous for us to return.

We find a small gift and souvenir shop that also sells tea, coffee and cakes. I go in alone since Barracuda has no means to disguise himself. I wanted to argue that he shouldn't have to hide, but it would only mean word getting back to Grandmother as to our last seen location and we'd have Guards on us in no time.

I purchase writing implements, a coffee and two slices of cake and go outside to sit at one of their tables in the sun. The only evidence of the previous downpour is in the slowly drying puddles on the ground. It's getting warmer with spring on its way which I'm glad about since I don't know how long the journey to Torgotha will take.

It takes me a few minutes to figure out how to begin my letter, but knowing I'll be speaking to Lily, I can be candid because of all my sisters, she's the one most likely to understand. I can almost hear her saying how she told me to have a dalliance. I just don't think either of us expected the dalliance to become an actual relationship. Or that I would be leaving Ecleshax.

Two pages later, I've told her everything I can, explaining the Stones and that should they decide to come to Duskmere they'll need to acquire a Compassphere. I have no idea how she's supposed to find one, but I'll have to leave it with her. What I do know is that Ecleshax holds more than one. The

plaque next to the one we took mentioned that it was one of many Compasspheres taken by Kastors during the wars that split our two races. When Torgotha was young and still developing the formidable force that it is today, Compasspheres were created as a means for Kastors to navigate their way through it. That was before they realized the magic had been too effective and Kastors were unable to cross. Compasspheres were sold, stolen, and smuggled between the two lands, but their significant waned since Kastors couldn't cross without a Hiraeth Stone, which are far rarer.

I return inside the coffee shop to inquire about sending a parcel and the pretty girl behind the counter advises that they send the mail for the small township's residents and that I could add my parcel to the rest. She even finds me a small box in which I carefully install the Stones, padding the rest with the dried, torn hem of my petticoat. It's filthy, but it will have to do. At the last minute, I also put in the bone keys. I no longer need them, and hopefully neither will my sisters, but they're better off staying with them in Eccleshax than in Duskmore.

With the letter stowed, the box carefully sealed and tied, I address it to Lily at the Academy, then, with my heart almost pounding out of my chest, I push the box to the girl and with a cheerful smile, unaware of the precious cargo, she takes it from me and goes to store it with the rest of the outgoing mail.

I leave the shop with Barracuda's slice of cake and a worry that the Stones won't make it, or the school does in fact go through student's mail. But Barracuda was right, what choice did we have?

I find him sitting under a huge tree that's beginning to bud and give him his food which he wolfs down gratefully.

"All done?" he asks as he stands and dusts off his trousers.

"Yes, although I can't help but feel apprehensive about the whole thing. So much could go wrong and until such time as my sisters come to Duskmore, I might never know."

He reaches for me, gathering me into his arms and begins stroking my hair.
“We’ll find a way,” he murmurs soothingly.

I cling to him then, not only holding my love, but the hope that his words have
some measure of truth.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



The day feels as though it's been dragging on forever when the sun finally
With all the excitement, I don't know how my body managed to keep going, but exhaustion hits like a cannon and if I don't rest soon, I'm likely to collapse in the road.

With our coats being our only means of warding off the cold, because as much as spring is on its way, it's still winter and the nights will be frightfully chilly, Barracuda takes us off the road. We find a barn, slipping inside to the smell of animals and hay. A horse looks at us with interest and I see several chickens roosting in the rafters, but other than farming equipment, the barn seems tidy and well maintained.

"The loft will be safer," says Barracuda pointing to a ladder. "In case anyone comes in, we'll at least have warning before they see us."

I'm grateful he had the forethought, tired as I am I was ready to simply collapse in the nearest pile of hay.

I follow him up the ladder, finding it surprisingly warmer with mounds of hay stacked against the walls. Barracuda takes off his coat, lying it on one of the mounds, then indicates I take off mine. With our bed made, I eagerly snuggle into his arms, for the first time in as many days finding the ability to relax, even if our roof is a barn and our bed a bundle of hay.

Then I remember that this is my wedding night. *Our* wedding night. The night I was dreading when I was in line to marry Clem, but now it's with the man I love and in spite of my exhaustion, I want to share in my happiness.

"We were married this morning," I say in the darkness, and feel him shift against me.

"Indeed, we were," he agrees.

I turn to face him, though I can't see him for how dark it is. "Perhaps then we should...make it official?" My voice bubbles with suggestive laughter.

I feel him turn in the hay until he's also facing me, his breath soft and light.

"I believe we both signed ourselves to each other. Surely that's official."

I give him a playful shove and thrill in the sound of him laughing. His hand seeks me out in the dark, touching my cheek and he draws me closer until I feel his lips on mine.

I reach for his face, and I smooth back the loose hair that I find trailing over his forehead. I return his kiss firmly, urgently. With everything we've been through, this is our moment, our joining as husband and wife.

"I'm your wife," I say smiling, voicing my thoughts.

"I never thought I would marry, least of all to a powerful Kastor," he says, kissing my forehead.

Then a thought occurs to me. "I didn't give you much choice. If you'd rather —" He doesn't let me finish, kissing me hard, stealing my breath until I groan against him.

"Do not ever finish what you were going to say," he breathes. "I have no regrets, and I will not be relinquishing you to this land and this life. We are together in the strongest of bonds both lawfully, magically, and if you want this night to be official, then I mean to make it physically as well."

"Well," I murmur, my heart thrumming at his words. "We've already been physical."

"Not as my wife you haven't," he growls, attacking the buttons of my dress as I shriek with laughter. We take a moment to undress, though I need his help to remove my stays, but once naked we curl onto his coat.

Without the ability to see, my other senses seemed heightened. Sound, touch and even smell all compensate for the fact that we can't see each other, but it makes the slow exploration all the more arousing. The rich scent of his skin as

I snuggle into his neck, the way his muscles twitch when my fingers glide over his ribs, and the delightful, soft moan he emits as he presses kisses into my hair.

I taste him, my tongue slicking along his throat and he groans aloud, falling back against the hay, and pulling me with him. Kissing along his collarbone I trail further kisses down his chest, my hand slipping down to his hip until I find him warm and hard in spite of the chill of the barn.

He huffs a low moan, his hips pushing him against me and I clench my fingers tighter, relishing the sounds he makes.

“So powerful, and yet completely in my control,” I purr in his ear.

He chuckles deeply, twisting closer to me and his hand slips between my legs, his touch a jolting spark and I gasp in response.

“Know that you are also mine,” he whispers, his lips touching my own. “Whatever happens, you will only ever be mine.”

“I am yours forever, you are all that I am,” I murmur.

He brings me to climax, my cry disturbing the other inhabitants of the barn, then I feel him shift and I splay my legs in anticipation. His welcome heat presses against my body, and with my breath rasping he sinks into me, the warmth of his hips against my thighs.

His movements are slow, gentle as though savoring, until his kisses become demanding, his tongue eager for possession, and I open to him, my body, my life, my love are all his.

He releases into me his body curling against mine with his mouth at my neck and his arms enveloping me.

“Cuda,” I breathe. “I love you; I love you with all my life.”

“Angel,” he says, his cheek pressed against mine. “I never knew love until I met you. You are and will always be my world, forever. My life is now full.”

Rather than redress, we pull our abandoned clothes over us, and Barracuda pulls me into his arms and the combined heat of our bodies keeps out the chill.

He presses a kiss to the outer edge of my ear.

“We are now complete,” I murmur.

CHAPTER FIFTY



Waking in the early hours, I can see it's still relatively dark outside. I have no concept of farming life, but I do know they are early risers to begin their daily chores. The horse hasn't made a noise, and the hens are all still on their roost, so it must still be very early indeed.

I shift slightly to stretch a bit, inadvertently waking Barracuda. The darkness of night is lifting and I can see him in the gloom of the barn.

"Have you slept well?" he asks, smoothing back my hair. It must be a frightful mess after the rain and now spending a night in hay.

"Like a log," I say, kissing the tip of his nose. He captures me then, his mouth finding mine and a none too subtle moan emits from his throat. "We'll have to leave soon or the farmer will find us."

"Let him see," he murmurs, resuming our kiss, his hands traveling over my body until he settles on one of my breasts and another low moan escapes him.

We'd been fighting our exhaustion last night, but I had every intention of consummating my marriage to the man I love. Besides, I don't even care that we made love only just the night before, my body is already wanting and ready to receive him again.

He kisses me softly and sweetly, using his mouth and fingers to touch and caress my skin as he slowly makes his way along my body. Stopping to suckle at my breasts, I push my hands into his hair, tentatively caressing the base of his horns which elicits a shudder from him, a moan following soon after. I pull my hands away, both in surprise and uncertainty, but he looks up from his ministrations.

"Don't stop," he purrs.

I smile coyly at him and resume stroking his hair, once more touching his horns and I'm rewarded with another deep moan. He continues to toy with my breasts with his mouth and fingers and we melt into each other, our bodies drawing from and giving to the other in delightfully sweet bliss.

Slowly, and perhaps reluctantly, Barracuda moves further down my body, his mouth and tongue caressing every inch, mouthing and kissing my stomach, and

I'm at first confused by his movements until he settles between my legs. He encourages me to part them further and though shy, I obediently do so, a gasp of surprise and pleasure when his tongue flicks through the wetness and over my clit.

"Oh gods, Cuda," I say, my hands again delving into his hair. Knowing what I do know, I deliberately caress his horns in long gentle strokes with my fingertips. He moans against me as he continues tasting me, his tongue generating a warmth that begins to travel through me, right to my toes and scalp. I've only ever read about such experiences, never believing such a thing would happen to me.

As the sensation deepens, I tilt my hips with an encouraging sound, eager to enhance the pleasure, to reach my peak that is growing in heat and intensity at my core.

"Cuda," I groan, my body is on fire and I feel tremors of ecstasy rippling down my legs and across my abdomen. "Oh yes, yes."

My orgasm crashes through me and I cry out, disturbing the roosting chickens. Barracuda silences me with a kiss, and again I experience more of those romance novels, when I taste myself. Such new experiences I never expected to occur. Would this have happened in my own doomed marriage?

I kiss him deeply, further spreading my thighs so he might be cradled between them. He enters me without hindrance and my body accepts him so readily that I believe us to be the perfect fit.

"I love you, Lady Iris," he says and slowly begins to move his hips.

"I love you, my incredible Magix," I say gazing into his honey gold eyes. He continues to make love to me slowly, kissing me thoroughly while he moves above me. He comes with a deep grunt, but gathers me to him to take a moment to simply be together.

We're dressed and ready to leave before the sun reaches the horizon, making our way back to the road to continue our way to Torgotha.

I might not have a home, or know what the future holds, but knowing I'm with Barracuda I've never been happier.

It takes most of the day to arrive at the next town, and we'd had the good fortune of a small feast of wild oranges from a tree growing by the side of the road. I figure it grew from some passersby's leavings, a seed taking root after the scraps were thrown from perhaps a carriage window. Whatever its origin, I'm grateful that it was available to us.

"We need to get off the road," says Barracuda. "But we need to be better prepared, we carry nothing for a journey to Torgotha."

"I can sell my jewelry," I say, voicing my earlier idea. "And there are bigger towns where we can buy clothing and provisions for an expedition. We were in Twifton when Violet came to see us with Python. It's a fair distance, but it'll have all we need."

"Is it near a stream or river?"

"I should think so, most of Ecleshax's towns and cities are located on or near waterways."

"As it is with Duskmere. In that case, we can use the water and reach it faster."

"Use the water?"

"I'll show you."

We leave the road, and though I know the general direction of Twifton, I couldn't say the name of the river that would be situated nearby. The Serrula River is the main river through Ecleshax and the one where Violet and Python escaped the Guards, but there are many streams and rivers that branch off it. But all we need is the fact that we'd have our own network to travel along without having to rely on the roads.

Barracuda leads us through meadows and forests, and I'm almost surprised that he knows the lay of the land so well. We're walking through an area of trees where they grow a little less thickly, allowing for short grasses to grow between since the sun is able to reach the forest floor. We step over fallen branches and logs, many of which are brightly decorated with fungi and moss.

“You studied Ecleshax quite well, didn’t you?” I comment, alluding to the fact that he just seems to intrinsically know which direction to go in. “Before you came here.”

“I mostly studied the way to Embervale from our point of entry at Torgotha. We had limited maps of Embervale, I only knew the general locations of where to find the Stones. We also knew there were a number of Compasspheres located around Ecleshax, but not their exact locations. Our need of one was more an accident than part of any official plan.”

“I know nothing of Duskmore, only that it’s a desert wasteland,” I say. I’ve always known it to be a desert, but I’ve come to accept that if an entire race of people can live there, then I can learn to live there too.

Barracuda laughs. “That’s what your Kastor Elders have told you?”

“Yes, that after all the wars, Duskmore was left barren and desolate.”

“Another untruth,” he says, but he’s still smiling. “Duskmore is not a desert. In fact, the province of Azarshendar, my home, and home to the king, is one of the most beautiful and fruitful areas, often visited by other dignitaries to view its glory.”

“Oh,” I say, suddenly ashamed that I’ve allowed myself to carry on believing the Kastor version of history. “Then I look forward to seeing it in the flesh.”

He takes my hand, pulling me close as we continue towards the stream, and kisses the top of my head.

“And I am impatient to show you.”

I’m laughing and smiling, putting my arms around him. How different my life has become. Only a few months ago I was destined to marry a man I know I would never have loved, or been happy with all for the sole purpose of advancing my grandmother’s ambitions to join the Collective Conjuring of Elders. But now, I’m free and in love with a Magix and looking forward to seeing my new home with him.

The sound of the stream only heightens my excitement and I'm eager to reach Twifton so our journey to Torgotha is better prepared. I start a mental list of things I think we might need.

"Freeze!" shouts a voice.

My heart all but stops and we turn to see a Guard who is soon joined by several more, all armed with rifles that are pointed directly at us.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



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“We have them, my lord,” calls the Guard over his shoulder, and that’s when Clem comes into view, stepping over the shrubs and leaves of the forest floor.

It *can’t* be.

“Clem?” I say, still in disbelief in spite of what my eyes are showing me. For all the times Barracuda has protected me, it’s now that I stand in front of him. They won’t shoot if I’m in the way.

“It’s going to be all right, my dear,” says Clem, stopping short when I take a step back. “I understand this creature has some kind of spell over you, compelling you to follow him, but I’m here to break that curse and take you home. We can be married as soon as we reach Embervale.”

I don’t have Violet’s height, but I stand as tall as I can in an effort to look down on him, which doesn’t really work.

“I am under no spell, Lord Blouting,” I say formally. “And I am already married to the man you’re referring to as *creature*.”

“A forced marriage I am told, one you took under duress.”

“I was being forced to marry you! It’s by pure luck I found myself married to the man I love!”

Clem smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “A mere formality. Once this animal is dead you will be free of the curse he holds over you, and we will be married properly and can begin our lives together.”

I take another step back and brush up against Barracuda. In abject defiance of the danger we face, he puts an arm around my shoulder and across my chest, pulling me closer as though to protect my heart should any of the Guards become a little trigger happy.

“I see he will not let you go so easily,” says Clem. “I’m a reasonable man, I would let him go back to his own hovel of a land should he relinquish his power over you.”

“You’re not listening Clem, there is *no* magic here. I am going with him of my own volition.”

The Guards step closer and I lift my hands, readying a spell. I don’t know how far away the stream is, but I know the ground to be full of the water I need. Though Barracuda is touching me, I have my magic, and it’s my power under my own control that I draw upon.

“Don’t you want to see Kastor magic restored?”

“Of course I do, but the Elders have it all wrong. Marrying our own won’t work, and it’s getting worse. Kastors are beginning to birth humans. Our magic will be lost forever if we don’t stop this madness and look to the Magix.”

“I won’t have you reviling the Elders,” says Clem, a tone of severity in his voice. “And more importantly, your grandmother’s hard work with some fantastical notion that Magix and Kastors should work together.”

“Then you doom us too, Clem. We would never have produced children with magic. We need Magix, it’s the only way.”

“Enough,” he barks and at a hand signal the Guards lift their rifles, each one sighting us down the barrel.

“You would shoot me, Clem?”

“Is the creature such a coward as to hide behind a woman?” he fires back.

“My *wife* holds the greater power here, Kasted,” snarls Barracuda. As much as I love being referred to as his own, I inwardly cringe at his use of the word that defines our inability to use magic, coming from him it seems so much harsher.

But I am no longer Kasted.

I have power, and to get us out of this, I need to use it.

“How dare you!” says Clem indignantly. “Guards, shoot this animal.”

My spell is already on my lips and with a flourish I draw it before the first bullet is fired. Kraken couldn’t stop bullets, but I create a sheet of water drawn up from the

ground with such power and speed that the lead balls are dislodged from the air, tumbling to our feet harmlessly. The Guards will have to take the time to reload, but I send another jet of water towards them, causing each of them to tumble backwards, including Clem.

“Let’s go,” I say, grabbing Barracuda’s hand and turning towards the sound of the stream. Barracuda quickly overtakes, but with my hand in his we hurry along together, reaching the stream before the Guards are upon us.

“This might be a new spell for you, I will be giving over some of my power to direct you, do you understand?”

Not really, but I nod all the same.

Barracuda stands behind me, takes my hands and holds them aloft.

“Produce your spell that manipulates the water to do your bidding,” he says. With our hands held I draw the spell adding my incantation, watching in great delight my watery magic as it moves across the stream and the water within it draws up as though plucked by a giant hand.

Then Barracuda begins his own spell, his words sound very foreign to me and I wonder if the language isn’t from ancient magic, the magic Kastors were taught by Magix in the very beginning.

“Come,” he says, the only word in his litany that I recognize and he guides me from behind onto the water. The Guards have righted themselves, hurrying down the slope to reach us. A shot is fired chipping off bark from a nearby tree, and I turn to look. “Focus,” says Barracuda.

Another shot, this time kicking up the water next to us.

“Cuda?”

We reach the center of the stream, and before us, the water has formed into the shape of a large sea creature. A serpentine body with several dorsal fins momentarily thrashes in the water, lifting a gigantic head to expose a gaping maw with dozens of teeth, before it settles, it’s long tail slowly moving from side to side. It might be made of water, but it still looks terrifying.

"Is it safe?" I ask, hesitant to step any closer.

"We don't have time, angel, get on," says Barracuda.

Though I'm apprehensive, he helps me to mount it, with him sitting directly behind me. He then says another word I don't know and the water moves, the creature beginning to run along the surface of the stream.

I hear the cries of alarm coming from the Guards, but there's one voice shouting above them all.

"I'll find you Iris, you *will* be mine!"

Their voices are soon lost as we slither along the stream, and I'm fascinated at the speed and smooth way of traveling I never knew existed. For all the spells I was told to design at school, none of my teachers said I would have the ability to move on water.

"You're telling the water what to do," says Barracuda. "You can shape it into any form your heart desires. Even a zeklok."

I nod, assuming a zeklok is the very creature the water resembles.

We're skimming along the water's surface at an astonishing rate, swallowing up the miles as we make our way to Twifton. We pass waterwheels and go under bridges which are thankfully named so I have a better understanding of where we need to go.

We stop before reaching a village situated directly at the water's edge so as not to startle everyone.

"Do you think we'll be safe here?"

"Since we took to the water neither Lord Blouting, nor your grandmother can have a definite understanding of our location, and therefore can't have alerted anyone about our movements. But we still must remain vigilant."

The distance to Twifton is great, and we end up stopping at any little village or township, and rather than draw attention to ourselves, we sleep in sheds or outbuildings, anywhere to keep out the cold, but also areas people won't necessarily

come to look in the night. My money is running low and soon I will have to sell my jewelry, but I would rather do so in Twifton.

I pull the Hiraeth Stone from my reticule, and hold it up to the one candle we purchased. It's shaped like a teardrop and would otherwise be mistaken for being black until it was held to the light to show its true color to be of the deepest blue. I sling it around my neck before curling up against Barracuda to sleep.

I wake suddenly from the most vivid of dreams, my heart racing, my body shaking, and I'm even panting for breath.

"Angel, are you all right?" asks Barracuda, his hand on me, and I latch onto his touch to anchor me to reality.

"I saw Violet," I say softly. "In my dream, she was there."

"You dreamed of your sister?"

"Yes, but it didn't feel like a dream, it felt very real."

"She is Element of Mind, so perhaps..." He doesn't finish his sentence. Whether to spare me the heartache of thinking about Violet, or his uncertainty, I'll never know.

What I do know is Violet came to me and told me all she could. She told me that she missed me and our sisters very much.

And then she asked me to come to Duskmore.

EPILOGUE



One month later

There's an ominous cast to the area known as Torgotha, a depravity that emanates from the great wall like a fug of evil. It's taken Barracuda and me almost a month to reach it, and though I'd been preparing myself for the worst, I could never have imagined the abhorrent discomfort I feel being this close to it.

No wonder the Guards are said to go mad and the rotation of them patrolling along it is limited. We've been watching them for some time, determining their roster, seeing when they change over, seeing what happens when someone tries to enter. No one in their right mind *would* enter, but I know many have.

"I think our best chance is the change of Guard at dusk," says Barracuda watching the Guards through a spying glass.

Our venture into Twifton proved fruitful. I sold my jewelry and we were able to purchase a great deal of supplies, including clothing. I've never worn trousers in my life, and was delighted to find how comfortable they were. We also briefly celebrated my twenty-first birthday, although I almost forgot the day. With a heavy heart, I sent a mental wish to Rose, knowing she too, would now be twenty-one.

Situated at the top of a ridge, we've set up camp, ensuring we remain out of sight. But time is running out. I know my grandmother won't have given up hope that she can stop me, and if Clem's words held an ounce of truth, then it stands to reason that they will eventually come to Torgotha to find me. Because we came by stream, our journey was cut by a tremendous amount of time, but to travel the roads from Embervale will be a longer journey, but not indefinite.

“Agreed,” I say, handing him a bread bun that I’ve stuffed with ham and cheese. He gives me the spyglass and I have a quick look before resuming my own lunch.

The rest of the afternoon, we pack up our camp, stowing everything we’ve come to acquire into the two packs we carry. As the sun begins its descent we sit and wait, watching the Guards closely.

Barracuda sits against a small tree, the plant stunted and small, its trunk thick but twisted. He pulls me to him and I sit between his legs, my back leaning against his chest.

“Are you prepared to see Duskmore?”

“Of course, I’m eager to see your homeland.” I toy with the Hiraeth Stone around my neck, my security to a safe passage through the formidable wall.

His arm grasps around my chest, his mouth at my ear. “And I am eager to show it to you.” He kisses me just below my ear and I tilt my head slightly. He takes the encouragement and continues kissing along my neck, then to my shoulder before my blouse hinders his access to my skin. His hand pulls it further aside, but even so, he can only kiss so far along. The hand across my chest cups one of my breasts, his fingers teasing my nipple through the fabric of my blouse and stays.

I moan, leaning further against him as he continues to kiss and caress me. His fingers unbutton my blouse and he scoops my breasts from the cups of my stays, baring me to the cooling air of late afternoon. It’s tantalizing and highly erotic to be so exposed. We’ve made love frequently in all the time we’ve been together, but there’s few places to shelter here at Torgotha.

“I would have you, wife,” Barracuda growls at my ear.

“I am yours, husband,” I say coyly. I turn, kneeling in front of him and he moans at the sight of my bare chest, my full breasts on display framed by my open blouse.

He reaches, touches, caresses. “You are so beautiful.”

I lean forward to kiss him while his hands continue playing and take the opportunity to undo the buttons of his trousers. “It would seem your body thinks so too,” I say stroking him through the thick fabric, relishing his unbridled moan as I lightly score a nail over the head of his cock.

“Are you still the young woman I took to my bed having never been with a man? Your boldness belies your experience, angel.”

“I had an understanding and patient teacher,” I say, kissing the corner of his mouth while I tease him further.

With a loud growl he pulls me to him and we’re both fighting to get out of our clothes so we might come together as one.

Eyes locked, Barracuda enters me swiftly, and I give a breathless gasp, wanting him to be a part of me. He moves with an urgency we both feel, but encourages me to find my release, his hand guiding mine between our rocking bodies. I know he loves to watch me climax, that he can witness the peak of my pleasure. I wrap my legs around his waist, and feel myself reaching my pinnacle, my fingers a flurry where I can feel him driving into me.

“Cuda,” I whimper but it’s enough to send me over the edge and I’m moaning his name when my orgasm tumbles through me.

“Angel,” he says before he joins me, his cries muted as I bring him down to kiss me while his body bucks into me with the power of his own coming.

Though perhaps a little love-drunk, we dress quickly, and by the time we haul on our packs we see the Guards preparing to switch shifts.

Hurrying down to the wall base, we keep out of sight as best we can behind rocks and craggy outcrops until the wall itself is a short distance before us.

“We need an entrance to open as close to our position as possible,” says Barracuda, the Compassphere in his hand. I’m holding the unlit torch that will help guide us through the otherwise pitch-black darkness of Torgotha’s depths.

The rumble begins, a sound we’ve come to expect as the blocks that form Torgotha move, rearranging the pathways within. We wait and an entrance appears, but it’s dreadfully close to where we know a Guard is usually posted.

We take the chance anyway.

“Now,” says Barracuda and we race towards the opening.

“You there!” says a Guard who I can’t see because I’m too focused on reaching the entrance to Torgotha. “Stop! Halt!” he cries and I can hear the jingle of metal as he pulls his rifle to the ready.

“Iris!” comes another voice and I do look then to see Grandmother hurrying towards the wall. “Iris, no!” she shrieks.

Barracuda takes my hand and before the Guards or my grandmother can reach us, we run into Torgotha, the blocks begin their reset and we see the look of angry confusion on Grandmother’s face before the blocks tumble and the entrance shuts.

Once we’re safely ensconced, I use the flint stone to light the torch. I realize I may never see my sisters again, and can only hope I one day get the opportunity to do so.



Torgotha is a treacherous journey, and perhaps one of the few histories Kastors recorded correctly, describing it as a place of death and doom. Unless they were in possession of a Hiraeth Stone, no Kastor has otherwise lived to tell the tale.

Getting through the gigantic wall takes Barracuda and I two days, but they might as well have been weeks for the endless time it seemed to take to get to the other side.

It isn't until we set foot on the other side to fresh air, the smell of nature and the bright light of the sun that I feel lighter and take a deep breath to relish our freedom.

Surrounded by trees dripping with vines, the calls of birds and animals, I know I'm no longer in Ecleshax, but neither am I in a desert wasteland. Annoyed that some part of me still believed it, I marvel at the overall beauty of Duskmere, firmly believing everything Barracuda said about its grandeur.

In that same moment the loudest sound I've ever heard has both of us crouching for the ground, Barracuda's arm going about me, but I'm still forced to cover my ears as it reverberates across the land. Looking up I see chunks of rock falling in the distance, falling from Torgotha as we stand again, we see the cause of the noise.

There's an enormous crack in the side of Torgotha.

"That was unexpected," says Barracuda.

"What's happening?"

"I couldn't honestly say, but it's definitely something we should tell Python. Azarshendar is a few weeks journey from here."

"And I can then see Violet?"

His arm still around me, he draws me close and kisses my forehead.
“Welcome home, angel.”

I wrap my arms around him to kiss him fully. Yes, I am definitely home.



Join Lady Rose Bloom as she discovers a wild love in the third book of the
Bloom Sisters series:

[The Sorrow and the Soldier](#)

Meet Duskmore's heir! [Sign up for my newsletter](#) for an exclusive extra, in
which Violet and Python name their firstborn.

ALSO BY ALEXA SAINT

THE CAPTIVE AND THE CURSED

Bloom Sisters 1

Kastor-born, Lady Violet Bloom has been living under her grandmother's mantra of *marriage, children, magic*, from the moment she took her first breath.

Python, a Magix and sworn enemy of Kastors, snatches her away from her betrothed and her family for the purpose of saving his brother with her magic.

But therein lies the problem: Violet is Kasted and has no magic.

Has everything she was ever taught a lie? And how is it that this stunning Fae has answers that make a lot more sense?

Terrified that her inabilities will only seal her fate, Violet questions her destiny. Is it her fate to restore Kastor magic? Or to be captivated by the man she should rightfully spurn?

*

The Captive and the Cursed is Book 1 in the Bloom Sisters Series. Delight in the blossoming of a troubled but head-strong heroine, an imposing yet determined love interest, and a cast of characters to love and loathe in a world forged in fantasy, fervor and fate.

SAVAGE BEASTS

Monsters of Hearthstone 1

Hearthstone Academy harbors more than just the talented elite.

On my very first day I make enemies of three gorgeous and gifted fiends, the so-called campus Gods:
Oaken, Rael and Jadon.

Who are these esteemed and entitled men? Why have I been singled out as their prey? And why can't
I resist my attractions to these three Gods of Hearthstone?

I know they're hiding something, something I've yet to discover, but for now they'll shut me out to
protect their secrets.

Secrets I'll one day have power over.

*

Savage Beasts is Book One in the Hearthstone Academy monster college romance series. Inside
you'll find one downtrodden but feisty heroine determined to gain a better life for herself, a pair of
seriously awesome BFFs, and a trio of cunning monsters with secrets of their own, all in a school
whose mysteries are yet to be discovered.

En pressant into overtures of scalding steam with a slow burn, enemies-to-lovers romance where the
heroine doesn't have to choose!

DEVIL'S DESIRE

A priest, a fallen angel, and a demon walk into a bar...

Sounds like the start of a terrible joke, right?

Well, here's the punchline: Me. I'm a demon slayer.

And get this: the Prince of Darkness has tapped me to be his baby mama.

Ivy, Jewel and Dru have always been my teacher, my pillar of strength, and my guardian.

But will they accept a child that isn't one of their kind?

And how do I keep kicking demonic ass with a baby on my hip?

*

Devil's Desire is a standalone reverse harem romance. Inside you'll find an unconventionally badass heroine, an evilly inclined antagonist, and a trinity of heroes who face the choice to save a child ... or trigger the apocalypse.

A celestially scorching slow burn, friends-to-lovers romance where the heroine doesn't have to choose!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexa Saint is a fantasy and paranormal romance author hailing from the land down under, where she lives with her family and a horde of pets. Known for her immersive world-building, wild imagination, and sparkling sense of humor, Alexa has been telling stories since she was knee-high to a grasshopper.

When she's not busy crafting fantastical worlds, Alexa can be found practicing her other love as a visual artist. She's passionate about bringing her imaginative stories to life and hopes you'll get lost in her worlds too.

Known for their playful inventiveness and steamy, high-heat romance, Alexa's books are sure to whisk you away on a fun and thrilling adventure.

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