
A
CAGED
ANGEL
ASHE NIGHTINGALE

# A Caged Angel

Ashe Nightingale

# Content Warning

This novel contains sexual violence, physical and emotional abuse, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, torture, and graphic violence.

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# Chapter 1

Slowly opening my eyes, I'm met with vivid golden sunlight. At first, its brightness overwhelms me, leaving everything in a hazy blur. It's only after a few seconds and some steady blinking that everything starts to sharpen, and the image of a clear, calm, light blue sky finally comes into view. It's a very relaxing sight, yet the chill and dampness of the snow that I now realize I am lying on top of quickly take away from it. So, naturally grabbing onto my legs, I proceed to pull myself up. It feels a little warmer now that I'm not in direct contact with the snow. That doesn't change the fact though that the overall temperature is still fairly cold outside. This comes as no surprise given the weather and the quick realization that the only thing I'm currently adorning is a snow-white silk dress, one with a fancy gold embroidery woven at the end of the skirt.

It's perplexing as I have no idea how I happened across such a dress, though it is exquisitely beautiful, particularly the gold embroidery, which I hold in my hand feeling and admiring the craftsmanship especially well. It just would've been nice, though, if my attire had been something more befitting for the winter. Hmm, the thought does raise a very good point. Why have I just awoken in the middle of an open field and why can't I remember any details of who I am? Who am I? Who am I? This question comes in as quickly as a burst of lightning, delivering just as great a shock, one that leaves me utterly speechless. The combination of this thought and the icy breeze passing by has sent a soft chill up my spine, causing an eerie shiver. I try one last desperate time to pull out any type of memory, but the effort is altogether fruitless, still nothing but a complete blank.

This realization isn't scary and by no means has left me disheartened. It has nevertheless left me in a state of utter perplexity. Another icy breeze blows by, this one softer than the last. Still, everything is starting to build as it feels like the cold is gently creeping up on the warmth of my body more and more. It's rather clear that standing here perplexed

won’t help revitalize my memory, so it would be best to get moving. Dusk will be settling in soon, and with the sun hanging as low as it is, If I don’t find somewhere to stay before it settles, there’s a good chance that there won’t even be a tomorrow to worry about these unanswered questions.

Thus, without much thought, I begin trudging through the few inches of snow in search of somewhere safe. Examining the surrounding area as far as the eye can see, I get a sense that the surrounding landscape is decently flat and vast. My best guess is that I’m most likely in a large meadow, but given the little bit of snow covering everything, it’s nothing more than a dubious guess. Whatever I’m in, there is a forest behind it all, so I know that I’m on the outskirts of it. With the choice of the wide-open space or the forest clouding my visibility, the easy decision to trudge through the open is made.

It’s really such a shame that it has to be winter right now. The spring flowers would have been absolutely positively beautiful to gaze upon. Even though I can’t actually recall any flower types, I just know that without a doubt the beautiful colors and fragrances would have made this situation more bearable. The meadow could have been enjoyed, and maybe I could have even spent the day just relaxing. Yet instead, I’m stuck in this current predicament. It should be mentioned that the blanket of white snow might not be as beautiful as a field of flowers; it still is a marvelous sight. Sadly, it itself isn’t fresh powder, and the cold does happen to take away some slight appreciation for it.

However, again, I shouldn't be so negative. Even with these things dragging it down, the sight is still a nice distraction as I’m trying my best to not think about the current situation. Yet with so much uncertainty in the air, it is exceedingly hard not to feel butterflies in my stomach. This, coupled with a lightness in the heart that could almost be mistaken as a hole, creates a dastardly duo. Luckily enough, I’m able to push the thoughts aside enough to be able to shift focus back to the sky. With the magnificent sunshine and pristine sky, the sensation is almost enough to just bring warmth to my body and forget about the cold… almost. Things could be worse, though. I could not have such a nice sky

to accompany me on this day of uncertainty, and it also could be significantly colder. Ah, but again, it's something that shouldn't be focused on.

After a good while of walking through these snowy fields, it becomes apparent just how much more massive the area really is. The forest is no longer in view, and there's decidedly nothing in front of me. There's simply the open cover of snow stretched out all around. Well, in truth, possibly there is something. It is uncertain, as it is too far yet to tell, but from the looks of it there is some sort of drop-off on the horizon. As the distance continually wanes, walking more and more towards it, this evidently is the case. Hopefully something, or more specifically someone, happens to be over the sharpness of that dip. Again, after walking a little more, it all eventually comes into view. Gazing over the drop down onto the expanse below, something besides this nothingness comes desperately into view.

There is a small placid lake with a thin layer of ice covering it and more snow-covered fields off in the distance, though these seem to be somewhat hillier and uneven. Finally, last and most important of all, there's a nice little, I don't know if a cottage would be the right word, but oh well with the semantics, cottage lying in the center of it all. The sight easily brings forth a small smile and almost causes a tiny jump into the air for joy, though I do end up containing myself. With this fresh revelation, like magic, in an instant the butterflies and empty hole disappear.

My mind can't help but flutter with thoughts about who lives there and what they might be like. I'm just about to take my first step down the gentle hill when, unexpectedly, our eyes meet, and we now acknowledge each other's presence. With our eyes locked with one another, for what is a brief moment we are nothing more than two chilled icicles melded into the frozen landscape. Unfortunately, I can't make out much detail from where I'm standing, that is except for how tall he is, which from the look of it is pretty decent.

Inquisitively, I begin my careful descent down the steep hill with slow and steady steps towards him. Meanwhile, he curiously approaches

as well. We are finally close enough that we can see the whites of each other's eyes plus the rich dark brown that accompanies his. He is young as seen through his soft complexion, but he isn't too young as told by his strongly defined features. Most likely he is a young man in his late teens or early twenties. Now that I can see all of his features, the half-boyish, half-masculine look of his face is actually rather quite cute.

This really doesn't help though. It has the opposite effect, if anything, as it gives me a slight tinge of nervousness. I'm worried that he might be alarmed by a girl magically arriving from out of nowhere like this. His expression is at least warm, which helps alleviate some of the nervousness. Having an unorthodox situation sprung out of the blue like this leaves me at a loss for what to say. It's just so weird, but something must be said soon before it goes from unorthodox to awkward. So, acting quickly, still trying not to act too urgent or anxious, I look into his eyes and try my best to give a warm smile. The silence finally becomes broken.

"Excuse me, but… are you an angel?"

"Ummmm, sorry, but I don't know exactly what that is," I say, while still trying to keep up the smile.

"Oh, well, please don't find me rude for asking this, but what are you exactly? It's just that I have never seen someone with violet eyes, silver hair, and feathered wings before."

What is he talking about? Slowly turning my head to look over my shoulder, there it is. I really can't get a good look from this angle, but without a doubt there is certainly a set of wings. This is by far the most surprising thing of the day. I really have no idea how I couldn't have noticed them before. Now that I know to look for it, I can notice the soft chill and a diluted feeling of numbness just barely emanating from them. They are probably just worn out from lying on them in the snow… that's why they are still numb.

"Ummm, would you believe me when I say I can't remember anything? It seems I have lost my memory."

At this moment, another cold wind comes dramatically swooping in. It easily sends chills up my spine and in a natural reaction I start to shiver.

“I’m sorry, but would you mind if we went inside? It's terribly cold and I don’t think I can bear it much longer.”

“Anything to help an angel in need. It must be freezing out here for you, being dressed like that. We can talk more inside.”

He takes off his coat and places it around me, which he didn’t have to do since his house is right there. Still, the sincerity of the gesture is appreciated. So far, he seems warm-hearted; if only that created actual warmth, all this snow would be melted.

“It’s just my mother, my father, and me. I know our house isn’t much, but I know they will be more than happy to help a lost lady in need like yourself,” he says as he opens the door. “Mom, Dad, I’m back and I’d like to introduce you to someone.”

I follow in right behind him. The interior is on the smaller side but looks cozy enough. Most important, though, is that they have a fire going. This along with an assortment of some kind of animal pelts covering the windows has the cottage feeling nice and warm. Both his mother and father are sitting in front of the vigorous fire in wooden rocking chairs accompanied by two empty ones. They both turn halfway around to see who their unexpected guest is. It’s hard to make out their faces as the only source of lighting in the whole cottage is the burning fire. They, however, emanate a friendly air. I’m a tad nervous, which is to be expected considering the circumstances.

I mean, I am an unannounced guest after all. Despite them being complete unknowns and the situation’s potential to go any which way, I feel strongly that they are indeed warmhearted people like their son. So as best I can, I give out an affable hello. Despite the effort, it comes off timid and is accompanied by an equally anxious nod. With the young man taking the lead, we walk more into the cottage and join his parents around the fire.

“William, I know you gave her your coat, but the poor lass still looks freezing. Would you please be a dear and fetch one of the extra quilts?” His mother asks.

With haste, William scrounges around in one of the two other rooms and fetches me a black and white checkered quilt, while also returning with another coat for himself. Before returning to his spot in front of the fire, his father speaks up.

“So, William, where did you find such a lovely young lady like this at this time of year? This should be good,” he ends with a jolly chuckle.

His father's charisma is enough to make one feel at ease, so I decide to speak instead. “Actually, sir, I would say that I was the one who found him.”

My anxiousness is mostly gone, but I do feel like they might be able to detect a hint of it still residing in my tone.

“Well, young lady, I’m interested to know what brings you to our neck of the woods? It is warming up, but we usually don’t get visitors this early in February.”

William chimes in before I speak. “She is lost and she is unable to recall or remember anything, it seems.”

Both parents nod their heads and look to me for confirmation of this. “Yes, I just woke up in the middle of the snowy fields back there. Please believe me when I say I can’t remember anything about how I got here or even who I am for that matter, as strange as it sounds.”

I’m pretty confident they both have a quizzical expression on their faces right about now.

“Oh no, dearie, don’t worry, we believe you. Just understand that this whole thing is a bit unusual,” his mother remarks and continues, “Whatever the reason may be, we are always willing to lend a helping hand to those who are in need.”

Honestly, I never really considered the possibility that they wouldn’t help me. Still, I feel more relieved hearing her words and feeling the much-needed warmth in them after trekking through the cold. I just hope that I will be able to somehow, someway, repay them for their selfless hospitality one day in the future.

“Thank you for your generosity. I deeply appreciate it. If there is anything I could do in the future to repay you, please let me know.”

His father replies, “Ah, don’t worry about that. Just be good company for us while you stay, and if your heart is still set on it at the end, I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

“Now I’m sure you’re definitely hungry, dearie. I think now would be a good time for me to get dinner ready,” his mother remarks while proceeding to get up.

She makes her way over to the front of the cottage and with consideration, almost like a shadow, I get up following her to offer my help. She smiles appreciating the offer and speaks.

“Don’t worry, dearie, I can handle it.” But I persistently insist. After a bit of back and forth she eventually yields, deciding to show me the ropes.

It takes some getting used to at first, but eventually I get the hang of it, and by the end I am peeling and dicing the vegatables as though it were second nature. Everything is coming along nicely. With the addition of some meat from an unknown animal, we finally get a hearty stew ready. All that is needed now is for it to cook over the roaring fire. So, grabbing the pot, Mary sets the stew over the lively fire, and we rejoin William and his father, whose name is still unknown.

When we rejoin William and his father, they seem to be in the middle of discussing how much longer the winter season has left. They stop abruptly, once we rejoin the semicircle and decide to change the conversation to something a bit more interesting. Since our rejoining, there’s a strange, slightly unshakable sensation that William’s attention has been more focused on me. Hmm, the fire is burning bigger, so there is greater light to see. Still, the visibility is so low. Being realistic, I’m sure I’m just letting my imagination get the better of me. So, decidedly, I push the thought aside. During our short wait, while the stew comes to a boil, we happen to have some delightful small talk while the fire roars.

The main points that end up being covered are just some general things, like that the land I’m currently in is the kingdom of Ardisia, and the winter shouldn’t be lasting much longer. Lastly, the family happens

to be farmers, which then leads to an obvious question. If the fields I had woken up in were indeed the wonderful meadow I had hoped for? Unfortunately, the dream that when spring came rolling in there would've been a vast, beautiful meadow is dashed. They heartbreakingly confirm what was probable and that the land is their fields. When they hear this, they can't help but find it charming, and all share a small laugh when I seem a tad bit disappointed about it, one that's almost like how a parent laughs at a child for their naivety.

In good spirits they don't let the disappointment set in, as they reassuringly tell me that at the edge of the fields, right before the forest, there is a nice band of flowers that bloom in the spring called Sunshadow. They supposedly start off a stunning violet, transform into a nice deep blue, and then right before dying become a vivid shade of red that's comparable to that of a rose. Learning this has easily washed away some of the discontent about the fields. It has now been replaced with a new, stronger eagerness for spring to come rolling in so that the Sunshadow will be around. No doubt they are as pretty as they say. Hopefully, with such beauty, they're coupled with an equally sweet ambrosial aroma. Speaking of smells though, the stew has begun to give off quite the hefty aroma now. William's mother asks William's father, whose name I now find out is Henry, to check to see if it's done cooking. It must undoubtedly be, as he barely needs to give the stew more than a moment's glance, let alone a gaze, before he begins to serve it into our bowls with a wooden ladle.

I swear I catch William staring at me again, but the fire has died down, and the visibility has gotten even worse, so the chances of determining whether this is true or not are almost null. So again, I just pretend my imagination is playing foolish tricks and push the thought aside. After I take a few bites, the stew turns out to be quite good. Even though I've only had a taste, it does a good job of warming me up. Despite having warmed up a good amount by the fire, my wings still strangely have very little feeling in them, which is concerning.

Regardless, most likely it is nothing more than a trifle. Maybe they're still just a bit numb from the cold. I just wish they fit better into this

jacket as they're all scrunched up causing some minor discomfort and annoyance. With my focus now on them, the thought occurs that perhaps they have warmed enough to move. So, with another solid effort, I try again to move them, but once more nothing happens, not even a twitch. It is as though they were made of stone, or perhaps, given the cold, ice would be the better comparison.

Shifting thoughts back, I'm such a scatterbrain. The Sunshadows are going to be beautiful though. I can almost just imagine the beautiful shades of violet accompanied by their magnificent smell. I'm guessing the blue and red will be nice to see, but I'm looking forward to the violet most of all, since it happens to be my favorite color. It takes a few moments to connect, but after it goes through my mind, I guess that thought is almost like a memory! It's not like I actually pulled out an event from before, but it is indeed a preference. Who knows, maybe with time everything will come back. In this brief moment, during this realization, the short silence that was held while eating is broken.

"So, isn't there something you'd like to share with my mother and father?" He says, exceedingly casually, with just a hint of knowing that the subject might be uncomfortable to broach.

"Um, I don't know," I say in response, weakly trailing off at the end.

"Oh, come on. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Mother, father, it turns out she's an angel from heaven. She has a set of real wings." In his excitement, his father makes an attempt to calm him.

"Now William, it's not polite to lie even if it is a joke."

"No, really, I think she might be an angel. Would you please show them?"

His mother adds in a surprised tone, "Really, dearie, you have wings?"

Everyone's attention has now turned to me, which makes me feel severely uncomfortable. It feels weird showing someone a part of your body that you feel self-conscious about, but I'm in no position not to, considering they are going to find out about it sooner or later. So, setting my stew down, taking off the quilt, and getting up out of the chair, I start

to slowly take off my jacket with a hint of sheepishness. That's when William's father intervenes.

"Please don't take off your jacket, dear. It's still too cold in here, even with the fire. We wouldn't want you to catch a cold considering we just got you out of the cold," he states, all while shooting William a little bit of a look of disappointment. He continues, "We believe you about the wings. I'm sure we'll have time later when it isn't freezing out to take a gander at them."

Relieved by this saving grace, I eagerly take hold of my quilt again and settle back down to enjoy the hearty meal, almost as if nothing had ever been said. More than anything, I'm grateful that I didn't have to expose my body before I myself had even gotten a proper chance to look at it. From first impressions, William's father seems like a great man. Silence resumes like before the interruption was made. It is nice and tranquil, but isn't absolute, as you definitely couldn't hear a pin drop. It is held all the while until the end of our meal, when it's broken by William's mother.

"Before the night draws to a close, we would like to discuss the accommodations for you. As things stand now, you don't have any place to go, and the weather outside is a bit brutish. We've come to the conclusion that it would be in everyone's interest for you to stay with us, at least until spring comes around."

"Thank you so much for your generous hospitality. I'm sorry to spring this upon you out of nowhere. I promise that I'll try and help in whatever ways I can around the cottage." They really are such lovely people to help out a stranger in need. I'm graciously blessed to come across them.

Mary continues, "Don't worry about it, dearie. Since you're staying with us, however, it would be polite if you did tell us your name at least."

Hmm, surprisingly out of all the questions or thoughts that have occurred today that one hasn't come up yet. "Umm, I actually don't quite remember my name. I really can't say I remember anything at all about myself."

“Hmm, that is a dilemma for now. If it’s alright, how about we give you a name for now? That is until you regain your memory. What about Elizabeth? How do you like that?”

I shake my head sideways. “Not really, sorry.”

Mary in response says, “Well, how about we give you some more suggestions and you can pick whichever one you like?”

“I think that would be a grand idea.”

Sure enough, though, after a good number of suggestions ranging from Abigail, Julia, Leah, Ruth, and Anna to, finally, Zillah; each is followed by either a no or something that hinted at it. This has caused them to have ultimately given up on the suggestions, which I don’t blame them for. It makes me feel a tad bad for causing so much trouble by being so picky, but if it’s something as important as a name, you want it to be a good fit and a true reflection.

This leads them to ask what I myself would like to be called. Personally, I don’t know any names myself. My brain is stuck in a haze, until finally it comes to me. Flowers… flowers, flowers. Of the few things that I actually know about myself, I do know that flowers are something I adore.

“Are there any names that have to do with flowers?”

A brief pause passes through the group before William speaks up excitedly. “Oh, I know the perfect name. How about the name Violet? It is the name of a sweet-smelling flower which is perfect since it shares the same hue as your beautiful violet eyes.”

They aren’t able to see it, but I blush and look away in a brief moment of embarrassment. The suggestion is so bold, almost like an arrow struck my heart. I realize as soon as the words hit my ears, that’s probably the perfect name.

“It sounds lovely. One question, though, do violets bloom anywhere around here?”

Picking it up as though it never left his hand, William responds. “No, Violet, they don’t, but they are a big deal around here on the account of how rare they are. I’ve only ever seen one once. It was a long time ago

at the market in the city with my father. We couldn't afford them, but never had I smelled a nicer flower in my opinion."

"That's such a shame. If they are as magnificent as you say, I'll make it my goal to see a meadow of them, and maybe one day I'll be blessed enough to get that chance."

They all laugh a little with me. "You and your meadows, dear. Now finish up your soup. It is getting dark and we all should be getting off to bed soon," William's father tells me.

With all of us almost done, we finish up our stew. Upon finishing, Mary and I both get sincere compliments on it from both William and his father. I also thank William's mother since she really did most of the work. She kindly rejects the compliment at first, but after some back and forth, thankfully pockets the compliment, saying I am "too kind." Once we have all helped clean up, William guides me to my quarters, which coincidentally happens to be his room, which, except for the main room and his parents' room, is the only other room in the cottage.

I can't help but notice a tad bit of nervousness on his part which is a bit strange, but I overlook it as he has been somewhat weird since we've settled. Before the night is over, he ends up doing the kindest thing for me by giving up his bed for the night. Instead, he sleeps on the floor beside it. It is by far the sincerest gesture of the day as it takes actual sacrifice, even though the other generous acts were just as important. This definitely makes up for his earlier outburst, and instantly all is forgiven. He says a comforting goodnight as he blows out the last candle lit in the room and lies down on the motley pile of blankets he has laid out. I lie in his bed and shut my heavy eyes and drift off into dreamland with a warm heart.

# Chapter 2

It’s a beautiful day in the month of May. More specifically, it’s a wonderful afternoon on the first day of the growing season. Looking around, one can easily see the little green plants like yams, carrots, and cabbages beginning to bud and sprout their little stems and leaves. With the crops showing their first signs of life, this of course means that the flowers in the surrounding area are in full beautiful bloom as well, which is what brings us to the middle of the fields today, as the sun hangs high at its midpoint.

It’s worth mentioning that this isn’t my first time going to see the flowers. In truth, a year and a couple of months have now passed since my first encounter and subsequent kindness of being taken in by the Lyttons. Since that fateful day, we have all grown quite close. So much so that I feel like I can truly say that I am like one of their own. Sadly, with all of this passage of time, not everything has been pleasant. The one somber note to mention is that my memory has made little positive progress. From this point I would have to imagine it won’t be coming back. Believe it or not though, it doesn’t really bother me much deep down. Do I really need my memories to be me? The person I am now is who will define me going forward.

Besides that, there is still one last unfortunate note to share. Still, I am unable to move my wings with much strength. The only thing I can currently muster is some weak fluttering. Still, it is a better situation than when I first woke up, when I wasn’t able to move them at all. The thought that they are most likely just for show and will never truly tread wind has been tossed around by Mary and is most probable. Still, a tiny part of me deep down hopes that one day, maybe I’ll be able to soar high through the sky with the tiny brown finches as their equal.

Even if the dream doesn’t come to fruition, they are still exquisite in their own right. I don’t want to be ungrateful for them, but as of right now the inconvenience that comes with lying down, bathing, and tailoring clothes to accompany them just might outweigh the benefits.

Even if they are an inconvenience, they are something special and something that makes me, well, me. So, with this little moment of inward reflection I guess I wouldn't get rid of them even if I were given the opportunity. I guess I should be less negative and try to be more appreciative in general.

Clearing the last patch of crops, we now have the big beautiful band of flowers in sight. William had to do some crop inspection, which caused a little detour. The delay doesn't bother me much though as it's just more of an excuse to enjoy this gorgeous day. At this distance, the Sunshadows look perfectly like one enormous wave of purple. Despite getting to see them in this phase last year, my excitement hasn't taken a step back in the slightest. Beauty will always be beautiful. This time, though, it is slightly later in the year. It wouldn't be surprising if some of them had already started their transition into their blue phase.

Approaching now, walking towards the forest and almost into it, we get swallowed and engulfed by the sea of purple. It feels so relaxing, taking in their beautiful colors and sweet fragrance all at once. This, coupled with the smooth tickles of the petals that rub against the skin of our calves, creates a sublime experience.

First things first, we both in unison, almost like it is second nature, pick up one of the Sunshadows and take in a deep smell of its sweet scent. The smell easily puts a smile on my face. This day so far has just been great, but ending on this note puts the icing on the cake. I can see out of the corner of my eye William cracking a smile. I think it has to do with the smell, but part of me feels that it's also on account of knowing I'm happy or at least I want to believe that. Brushing my silver hair behind my ear, I take the flower in hand and place it behind my ear. I turn to William to inquire about his opinion on the look.

"What do you think?"

He turns to look for a second and, with confidence coupled with a sincere tone, says, "You look beautiful."

I blush and turn away slightly embarrassed. I've heard, though, what I was hoping for. I respond with a sincere "Thank you" back. I continue my inspection, walking through the natural paths in the bands while

William doesn't follow suit, deciding instead to just inspect the ones along the front. I end up getting decently deep within the wave but decide to stop before stepping out into the forest. As expected, the forest looks like its usual self. Each time I have seen it, it has always looked calm and vacant, with the trees seemingly unchanged every time. Because they aren't too thick and are decently dispersed, the light breaks through only partially, almost creating an atmosphere that resembles that of a twilight.

My attention shifts back as the forest is the same as last time. I'm back now, focusing on the centerpiece of this trip, the flowers, and how my assumptions earlier were right. A good amount of flowers have already begun turning deep blue. It was probably a good thing William and I came when we did. A week later, and we most likely would have missed the purple phase. I finish up with my little walk through the band and rejoin William. For the next hour, all we do is lie down on our backs watching the puffy clouds float by as we relax. We don't really talk much, but when we do, it is usually just about what the clouds look like or something trivial like what is going to be for supper. To answer both, we are having chicken with potatoes, and William said that the clouds looked like a fox, a cross, and a house.

It's funny because to me, I could have sworn that they were a dove, a tower, and a carriage. That's the fun of cloud watching, though, everyone always sees different things. Sadly, the drawback of such a beautiful sunny day is that there aren't many clouds to watch. We have our little hour of relaxation and with it, the sky has begun its transformation into a nice soothing pink and orange, meaning dusk will be settling in soon. Having had our fill of fun, we decide it's about time to head back. Before we do, though, I make sure to pick up some Sunshadows to bring back. In childish fashion I make sure to grab only the purple since it's my favorite color. Again, in even more childlike fashion I continuously smell them on the way back. This creates an easy opportunity for William to poke a little fun at me, saying, "You remind me of a bee." I giggle and in response say, "Watch out, then. I'll poke you with my stinger if you keep making fun of me."

The walk back isn't that bad. By the time we reach the cottage, the sun is still up so there's still some time left to spare before dusk comes rolling in. While coming down the bend, immediately we notice something out of place or maybe, in place better describes it. A strange carriage stands parked in front of the cottage. Extremely ornate, it's quite an interesting sight to behold. Every nook and cranny is colored with a deep, rich purple, with gold woven into each detail for ornamentation. It is pulled by two interesting animals which William calls horses. They look uncannily similar to our donkeys, yet they are bigger, appearing more muscular and sculpted.

We both stand in befuddlement over who could possibly be visiting at this time, when it finally hits William.

"That's the insignia of the crown."

William, meanwhile, points to the decal on the side that is of some type of bird holding an unknown flower in its mouth. I've known that Ardisia does have a King and a Queen, but the Lyttons have never really talked much about them or the kingdom itself. So, no gravity of the situation strikes me. Comparatively, when I look at William, his heavy countenance easily signals that this is a serious matter.

After we are done with our few seconds of inspection and pondering, we make our way down the hill.

"I wonder why the crown is here? It's not like we have done anything terrible or anything worthy of merit for that matter."

"I don't know. Maybe they could just be going around?"

William is about to open the door. As he turns the knob, I take one more look back at the carriage with more curiosity, trying to get a better sense of this special crown. From a distance, it looks fancy. Up close, you get a much better sense of just how ornamented it is, with the smaller gold decals chiseled in and the fluffy, red-cushioned interior now visible. Once done, I follow behind William into our home. It is still fairly lit outside, but it appears William's mother already has a few candles burning for when the visibility will disappear along with the sun.

Four strange men, as in they are strangers, from the Kingdom of Ardisia sit alongside Mr. and Mrs. Lytton. Two of the men are decked in gold armor, probably guards, while the other two men are wearing long robes. One wears a plain black one and has long black hair to accompany it, while the other is either shaven or bald and instead wears a white one with a gold circle stitched into the middle.

“Ah, good you’re back. Violet and William, these are Father John and Sir Dalibor. They are here visiting from the capital city of Dryad,” William’s father remarks.

In good manners I curtsey and William follows alongside with a bow.

“Why don’t you two join us and I’ll take those for you, dearie,” William’s mother says as she takes the flowers from my hand and then proceeds to place them in the vase on the table.

The Lyttons only have a total of five chairs, so William courteously gives the extra to me and decides to sit on the floor between his mother and me, unlike the two guards who attentively stand.

“Do you know why we are here, children?” Sir Dalibor says in a shrewd tone while he glances sharply at William and me.

William responds, “No, sir, I really can’t think of any reason why the crown would grace us with its presence.” There is the briefest of pauses while Sir Dalibor collects his words.

“I see. Well, I’m guessing you are indeed curious about the reason for this visit?” He takes one more pause to collect his words again. Even the pace at which he speaks is moderately slower than everyone else’s. “You see, we at the capital have come into the knowledge that you have been harboring an angel in your lovely home. Seeing with my own two eyes the girl sitting to your right, I believe we were informed correctly.”

Firstly, I’m shocked. The fact that word of me, a simple silver-haired girl with a small pair of wings that are still only for show, somehow reached the crown is astonishing. The fact that it was intriguing enough to actually warrant action is even more staggering. What could they possibly want with a girl who’s as mediocre as me in the fields?

I respond, “What interest could you possibly have in me? I don’t think I’m what you are looking for. If I were so special, I’d think I’d be able to notice.”

Bluntly stated by Sir Dalibor, “So those wings don’t make you special? They adorn only the Lord’s special creatures.”

“Trust me when I say I’m not special, Sir Dalibor. I don’t exactly know what I am or even for that matter have recollection of who I am, but I just don’t believe that I am a holy being like you say.”

Finally, Father John chirps in, “Trust me, dear, I’ve worked for the ministry for quite some time and have been lucky enough to meet an angel before. Trust me when I say you are in fact authentic. It is actually quite common for angels to be missing their knowledge of the heavens when they do happen to come down here, dear. It’s just another added part to the Lord’s wise plan for you.”

His words come across as enlightened about the subject and are interesting enough to have my interest piqued, somewhat. Naturally, my interest has waned this past year as the question has slowly lost its relevance, but the curiosity of who I am has never fully gone away.

“What do you mean you have met an angel before? You have met someone with wings like me?” I ask, eager for an answer.

“Ah, yes. It was long ago; about twenty years, to be exact when I first joined the ministry. An angel came and passed through our monastery on his journey. He didn’t stay for long, but, chiseled in the same design by the Lord’s hands, he was like you. Silver hair, violet eyes, and of course a set of white feathered wings. Trust me, dear, I am a high priest for the church. I am one of the few authorities in the realm that can give the seal of approval as to whether someone is truly a holy being, and there is no doubt in my mind that you, my dear, are one.”

I’m at a loss for words. Am I really that special? I mean, he is a high priest for the church. I doubt anyone would come all this way just to lie. To save the conversation from the silence that has settled in, Mr. Lytton comments.

“Well, isn’t this a nice predicament. Thank you for letting us know. Before you get going, you should join us for dinner. I’m sure your trip will be long. Best not to leave on an empty stomach.”

Sir Dalibor speaks in response, “Thank you, but there is more business to handle than just confirming whether the girl was genuine, Mr. Lytton. We were also given the task of taking her back to the capital, by decree of the King, if the girl was indeed genuine.”

My heart drops and I can see the bewildered look on William and his parents’ faces. Nothing but silence resumes for a long time.

“William, I think it would be a good time for you and Violet to go fetch some water for us to drink from the well for dinner.”

I can see on William’s face that he doesn’t want to go, but he trusts and respects his mother enough to not disobey her orders. William grabs the bucket near the door, then we proceed outside. The sky is like dark velvet now with the exception of the stars and moon, which are its embroidery, weaving an elegant design. Following the theme of a pleasant early day, with the full moon out tonight hanging high, it makes for an equally pleasant night. Sadly, it’s nothing more than a distraction that currently helps to keep our minds off the cold fact that it might be our last time stargazing together. There are no words to speak. We both know the sorry situation that’s going on in our home. Hopefully, William’s parents will be able to persuade Sir Dalibor and Father John to let me stay where I belong.

I can easily see that a good part of William wants to be back there helping support the cause, but he understands that this situation needs delicacy. Despite being young adults, we are nothing more than children right now. Even if a valid point happened to be made on our end with no doubt, they would just look down on such a suggestion given our inexperience. So, with paleness and pail in hand, we walk painfully slowly, almost at a turtle’s pace to the well behind the cottage. Despite such a slow pace, almost no time passes at all before we get there. William dutifully begins to lower the bucket down with the rope that is left to the side.

He continues diligently until he hears the signaling splash, which has been the first sound to pierce the night air since we have come outside. After a few moments of letting it fill, he begins to pull it back up. It isn't that heavy, but it takes some effort on William's end. It's only a few more seconds before it reaches topside. I can't help but feel that this uncomfortable but almost obligatory silence needs to be brought to an immediate end. It makes it feel almost as if we have already lost, and that simply just isn't the case yet.

"The sky sure looks beautiful tonight, especially the full moon."

William reaches in and grabs the bucket out of the well. He then turns to me and says, "Yeah, it sure is. Still not a cloud in the sky, aren't we lucky?"

He gives me a smile at the end, but I can easily see that his mood is that of melancholy. He begins to turn back, but I grab his hand before he takes another step. "Could we maybe go down to the lake and just enjoy the night? I don't really want to go in just yet."

He turns around and our eyes meet. I try as hard as I can to show in my eyes a tinge of sadness if he were to say no. He easily picks up on this and with a warm expression says, "Sure, why waste such a nice night out?" William sets the bucket at the well so he can just pick it up on our way back instead of lugging it around. We both decide that it'd be best to just enjoy the moment by taking a seat at the edge of the lake. William doesn't follow through though with my idea of taking off our shoes and having our feet take a dip. That's really such a shame since the water is just the right temperature and feels somewhat soothing.

"Tonight reminds me of the first night we went stargazing together. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and again we were in a similar sort of predicament. We were trying to avoid going back inside because of something unpleasant," William says with his gaze fixated on the stars, while my gaze is fixed on him.

"Yeah, I think that was the only time I have ever seen your parents argue. I can't help but feel a little guilty, since they were arguing about me, whether I could help with the housework yet or if I should still take

it easy. Your mother really did put up a good fight, though. I guess she truly wanted my help, since I was offering."

"Yeah, but it didn't weigh on our thoughts too much since we both knew in our hearts that the argument would be over shortly. Mom and Dad are just too perfect a match to stay mad at each other."

The conversation dies down for a bit as we both try to locate our favorite constellation, well, technically the only official constellation we both know called Caoranach. Stargazing has been one of our pastimes over the past year and a half despite the lack of knowledge. William, however, knew enough to at least teach me about where they came from. Supposedly famous scientists in the realm were given the important task of coming up with the best combination of stars by the King's decree. When asked why though, he couldn't help but respond with a cocked eyebrow saying he really didn't know himself.

He said it probably was just what the King had wanted and thus was law, nothing more, nothing less. In the end, it doesn't matter if there are official ones, since we just make our own for fun, almost like cloud watching. Most of the time we don't even remember them. It is more of an ephemeral kind of thing. Hmm, almost better in a way. It takes a while of intense concentration on both our parts, but eventually I happen to notice it, the first star for Caoranach. From then on it's child's play to locate the rest and put them together. I let William know that I found it and try to point it out to him. It takes him a moment, but eventually he too puts it together.

"Good job, Violet. It's so great that we were able to find it tonight."

The statement almost feels half-hearted and gnaws at my heart slightly. He seems happy that we were able to find it, but deep down he shows that he feels this will be our last time doing so. It's almost like the quiet before the storm. Whatever William says next, given the seriousness in his brow, already tips me off that the words are going to be important. Nothing would make me happier than for time to just freeze, but unfortunately no such wish happens.

"Violet, I promise you that regardless of where you or I might be, we will always be friends. I love my parents, but until you came along, I

never really had anyone who I could call a friend. I just wanted to stress how much I have enjoyed this past year and a half."

From the moment the statement leaves William's lips and reaches my ears, it has me split. On one hand, his heartfelt appreciation touches me. On the other hand, the statement itself is the epitome of defeat. My suspicion was correct that William truly believes this could be our final hours together. Lashing out after how open-hearted his words were would be the wrong way to go about this.

"I just want to say I feel the same way, William. I'm blessed to have met your family and especially you. I promise that we'll be friends no matter where we are."

He looks at me with his eyes closed and gives a big smile, knowing that his feelings have been reciprocated.

"Though not like these feelings need to be said, because your parents are going to make sure I don't have to leave."

William turns his head to return his gaze to the stars. Afterward, he says with much conviction, "Don't worry, you won't be going anywhere."

My intuition tells me his words are empty, but I want to believe in them so badly that I accept them at face value. A thought so childish, nothing could be more appropriate for watching the stars glisten. Time passes as we sit here under the moonlight, almost like we have been here for an eternity. Nothing important comes up again in conversation, just a bunch of small talk with a good amount of silence. That's the perfect ending for it though, nothing more, nothing less.

When we finally decide enough is enough, which to be precise was when our stomachs started to growl, William and I start making our way back to the cottage. First, we stop by to pick up the bucket of water William had fetched before. The first thing that catches my attention once we enter is that Father John and Sir Dalibor, along with their two guards, have left. It's just William's parents sitting down with a couple of candles going. Their expressions seem to be a bit off, but I'm guessing they're just tired considering how much work was done today on the farm and that we'd usually be asleep by now.

“Ah, good you’re back. It was starting to get late,” William’s mother remarks, uncaring that we were late bringing back the water they had asked for.

“Sorry for coming back so late, Mother. We decided to enjoy the stars.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It is such a beautiful night; there’s no need to apologize, but it’s getting late, so I think it’s about time we all got to bed.”

Both William and his father give each other a little nod of the head. What about the whole meeting with Sir Dalibor and Father John, though? What happened? Why are we going to bed with uncertainty in the air? Doesn’t William want to know what my current situation is, or is he that confident that his parents have secured my stay?

“Um, wait, before we go off to bed, I just want to know what you, Father John, and Sir Dalibor talked about.”

“Dear, that is going to take a while to go over. I think we are all tired, especially myself. Don’t worry, we’ll talk about it in the morning.”

William’s father and mother both do look dreadfully tired. By comparison, William looks better; still, from the looks of it, he definitely wants to go to sleep too.

Taking this moment to reflect on myself, I would like to say I’m fine, but it’s clear the events of the day have added their unaccustomed weight and I’m feeling rather tired too. I contemplate whether or not just going to bed would be the right choice, but the answer, like the last pastry left on the plate, is tempting me. Not with hunger, obviously, but with curiosity. It would be impossible to try and go to sleep like this.

“You’re right, Mr. Lytton. It’s too late into the night to discuss such intricacies. I hate pressing, but can I just know what the final verdict was?”

“Like I said, Violet, we’ll talk about it in the morning. It is more complex than just giving you a yes or no answer.”

“But please, the feeling of uncertainty is just killing me.”

“No, like I said, we shall discuss it in the morning. It is late now and you need to go to bed,” he says, slightly aggravated, which is one of the

few times Mr. Lytton has spoken to me in such a way. He has been through a lot, so I can understand why it came out like that.

"I understand."

William waits outside our room for me to change, and I do the same for him but grab a quick snack of bread to try and quell my hunger. Despite it not being much, it seems to do the trick. Sadly, my heart still feels drenched in distress, a feeling that will most likely continue until the morrow.

# Chapter 3

Swallows chirp as the sun rises. The sunlight filters through the window coverings, spilling into the room softly. Normally I awaken with William to the sound of his mother's gentle knocking on our door, but the butterflies in my stomach have been rustling around all night and it's caused a premature awakening. As I sit alone in deep thought, there's no escape from brooding over the fear that I'll possibly be leaving for the capital today. This is how the torturous morning continues on until a familiar knock graces the door, finally telling us that it's time to get up. A needed saving grace.

William wakes easily from this and is his usual groggy self. It will take him some time for him to fully wake up; a night owl he's always been. We greet each other with our customary good morning and then he quickly leaves the room so I can have some privacy to change. Slowly, not wanting this day to progress, I try to cherish these uncertain moments as I undress out of my pajamas. Taking it out like it is a delicate heirloom, I carefully slip on the white and gold silk dress I was wearing on that fateful afternoon I first met the Lyttons. Still, to this day I can't help but fawn over the craftsmanship of it. That's why I've made sure over the past year to have scarcely worn it, so that when a special day did arise, it could be in mint condition. Unfortunately, this wasn't what I had in mind. Hopefully, it still isn't.

Regardless of the outcome, it is best to be prepared for the worst. That is why, despite having only been shown how to apply it once before, I'll be putting on makeup today. It is one of the few luxury gifts I have received from the Lyttons this past year. In generous fashion, Once spring rolled in last year, William's mother made a trip to a town nearby to buy some special herbs. While there, the small kit happened to catch her eye and, on a whim, she decided it would make a nice gift. She did make it very clear that day, though, to only wear it for special occasions. That is why today will be its christening day, and why it is truly quite an ordeal to apply since there is a severe lack of experience.

Eventually, after some toil and trouble, a missed stroke here or there, and rubbing out a couple of mistakes, the job is finally complete. Despite the hassle, feeling a touch prettier is worth the work. Even so, I know I'm beautiful and extraordinary enough without it. I exit William's and my room with a patiently waiting William outside the door. Without any exchange or cue between us, he understands that it is his turn to get ready. He passes me by hurriedly without even noticing how I look and closes the door behind him. Most likely, he's eager for breakfast with his empty stomach. As I walk into the main area, I see William's parents have already beaten us to the breakfast they have laid out. Each sits at opposite ends of the table. They have already started enjoying the wide assortment that's spread across the table like a blanket.

I sit down and join them, and we all greet each other with pleasant good mornings. At a glance, it seems William's mother has brewed some tea while William's father has gone through the trouble of confecting pastries, which they munch on generously. Decisively, I pour myself a cup and grab a pastry. One bite in and I can already tell that I'm definitely going to have another. The filling is nice and sweet, but what really completes it is the flakiness of the bread. The tea is a bit hot, so I don't take a sip yet, not wanting to burn my tongue. Once the vapor dissipates or at least isn't rushing off, then it will be a good time to indulge in that too. Hmm, it's hard to even take notice of the vapor considering how illuminated the room is.

Light floods in through each window with enough of an effect to give the rather dull cutlery some shine. It's easy to get the gist from this that it's a bright and wonderful day out. There still isn't a cloud in the sky, just like yesterday. William comes in and joins us now that he's finally finished changing. He's dressed in a nice milk-white blouse and fancy black trousers, both of which are surprising, considering they aren't suited for work in the fields. Overall, though, it does suit him and does make him look that much more handsome. Silently, he joins us, having probably already greeted his parents earlier while I was in the middle of changing. I delicately finish my second pastry, making sure not to

smudge any of my makeup or get it on my dress. Now that my hunger is satisfied, the thought finally floats into the open fields of my mind. Why is this breakfast so quiet? Normally things aren't terribly talkative, but they are never this lifeless.

This realization does nothing to quell the anxiousness in my heart, but at least the pastries have helped with the butterflies. Busy feeding on the sweet pastry nectar they are. Finally, William's mother speaks.

"Violet, since you're done eating, I would like to have a little talk woman to woman. I'll meet you in your room. Just give me a second."

I give a slight nod in agreement and proceed to my room. There I casually sit on my messy bed with the covers tossed to the side. After a few moments of waiting, Mary comes in with a chair from the common area, coupled with some weird metallic-looking object. She has a spring in her step and is most definitely looking forward to some alone time between us. She sets up the chair in front of the metallic object, which she has hung in the center of the room on one of the structural support beams using some leftover rope from the fields. She motions me over to sit in the chair and I oblige. Standing directly before the strange object, I can see my reflection with uncanny clarity as if it were water itself from the lake, but instead with vastly better quality. I'm stunned. I didn't know that such a thing existed, let alone that we owned one. William's mother can easily see my amazement from my reflection and decides to let me out of the dark.

"It's called a mirror, dearie. I don't know much about it myself; all I know is that they are quite rare and that it happens to be a family heirloom from Henry's side of the family."

With astonishment, I respond, "Wow, it's a marvel, but why are you showing it to me?"

I keep studying my reflection, trying to take everything in, because the moment feels almost surreal. The most interesting features that still have my attention locked away are my vibrant violet eyes. Never before has there been the opportunity to inspect their true coloring. They are so much brighter and richer in their hue than expected.

“Dearie, I know that you can’t tell, even now as you gaze into the mirror, because of your inexperience, but you didn’t apply the makeup correctly. Nevertheless, the blame rests solely on my shoulders. From now on, Violet, if you want to apply makeup correctly, you will either need someone to do it for you or need to carefully apply it yourself using your reflection.”

Hearing this now and realizing just how ridiculous I could’ve looked, it’s fortunate that the only ones who saw me were the Lyttons. I could almost blush through the blush right now at the idea of having looked like this in front of others in the capital.

“I’m sorry, but could you please show me how to do it?”

Mrs. Lytton kindly obliges, and with damp cloth in hand, begins to gently wipe off the light makeup on my face. The drips give a slight chill, and with six strokes of the cloth, all the makeup is off. Looking into the mirror, it wouldn’t be surprising if one almost mistook the beads of water as tears as they trickled down softly. Mrs. Lytton now sets the wet cloth down and picks up an identical one, the only difference being that this one’s dry. With that and a few light pats, the water droplets are gone.

“Two things before I begin to apply the makeup to your face again. First off, Violet, I just want to stress that you are one lovely, beautiful young lady and don’t you dare, I repeat, dare let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Secondly, it’s nice to put on some makeup for a few special occasions, but don’t ever be fooled into thinking that you need it, Violet, because you don’t,” she insists in a strong motherly tone.

“I understand, and I promise you and myself that I will always believe in those words.”

“Now there is one last thing that we have to talk about.” Her tone shifts to that of some regret and of sorrow which turns the mood somewhat somber.

I decide to turn to her. Our eyes meet, and I try, as best I can, to convey comfort and give her a feeling of empathy and understanding.

“Whatever it is you have to say, it's okay. I can handle it. I know you’re here for me, and I am here for you.” These words calm her and help bring back that strong motherly expression into her eyes.

“Violet, as you can tell, this isn’t easy for me to tell you. Believe me when I say Henry and I tried all we could to keep you from leaving, but the crown just has too much authority! To be truthful, it has absolute authority. We tried to plead and bargain, but they weren’t going to have any of it.”

The words sting like a rose’s thorns. This moment with Mary has been truly beautiful, and I can feel deep in my heart just how much I mean to her and the family. But alas, such warmth has come with a steep price. I try hard to fight back the tears and give a fake smile that definitely comes off as half-hearted to Mary. Tears are beginning to roll down her face now, at first only a bead, but then a mighty river. I keep my composure up until she leans in and embraces me with a comforting hug, pressing my head against her shoulder. It is at this point I can no longer contain myself and it floods. I latch on tight, and for a good while we just sit there crying together, one for the loss of a mother and one for the loss of a child.

It comes out halfway, choked by sobs. I am openly weeping now. “But why, why is it so important to them that I go? Just because I have wings doesn’t mean that I can help or be of any importance. Why do I have to be stripped of my life here?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Violet. I won’t… I won’t have it. You are a wonderful woman, and they want you to help with the teaching of the religion in Dryad. Father John has told us that a divine being such as yourself is above all in teaching the ways of the Lord. It is your duty, he said.”

If there is one thing William’s father has made sure I learned throughout my stay here, it is that our purpose while being alive is to help others. I can still easily remember the first time he bestowed that piece of wisdom upon me. The memory is still as clear and vivid as if it had happened yesterday. Going back to last year, it had only been about a month since that fateful day I had first met the Lyttons. We were

having dinner as usual, munching on some nice fire-roasted mutton along with some roasted potatoes when, out of the blue, three weak knocks graced the door. When Henry opened it, one of the neighboring farmers appeared in the doorway, much to our surprise.

Tired and meek, he told us his story of how his family was in desperate need of food after a serious blight had stricken their crops during the harvest season. With little harvest in hand, they quickly burned through whatever little rations they had set aside for the winter. So, in characteristic fashion, Henry gave away whatever extra food we had stored for the winter. The man in shambles broke down, kneeling at Henry's feet and thanking him over and over again with humble gratitude, leaving with tears of joy in his eyes. Right after that, William's father sat me down and told me those words and in that moment they just really stuck with me. It’s something I think I’ll always remember for the rest of my life. Remembering this, I understand that I might not want to leave, but who am I not to accept such a task for those in need?

“I understand now. The people of the capital require my help. If this is what is needed, then I will go. Who am I to deny their request for help?”

I begin to wipe away the tears from my eyes with my wrist. I’m done crying, as it's time to move forward. It was good to get my emotions out, but I really don’t want my final moments with the Lyttons to be sad. When I say that final goodbye, I hope we can all have clear eyes and full hearts. The washcloth from earlier is off to the side, still hanging halfway off the edge of the nightstand. While still in Mary’s embrace, I reach with slight difficulty and grab it. Loosening her embrace, I back off a little and lovingly wipe the tears off her face gently with the cloth. At first this does the opposite of what I intended, and a rush of tears flood her eyes again. Soon enough, though, it helps and brings her back to her more composed self with a dry face.

“I think it’s about time I got to showing you how to apply the makeup, dearie. Sir Dalibor and Father John will be here soon, and I know Henry and William still want to spend some time with you before you go.”

After some toil and some trouble in applying the foundation, concealer, eye shadow, and blush, the job is finished. Mary pulls back to let me examine myself in the mirror that's in central view. It is instantly noticeable, without even more than a quick glimpse. The transformation is apparent like that of night and day. My features are accentuated, and my skin flows smoothly. My cheeks emanate a soft warm red, the same as the shade the sun casts as it sets in the distance. Lastly, my purple eyes have been further enhanced. Like vibrant moons, their white and vibrant purple are brought out further by the darker, stronger purple surrounding them. 'Tis an exquisite job Mary has done, to say the least.

Mary decides that for this final touch she won't actually be applying it herself, but will instead leave it to me. She takes the red stick of gel and gives a brief demonstration. With slight ease she glides the stick around her puckered lips using the mirror to make sure not to miss any spots. "See, just like that," she says while she places the deep red stick into my slightly anxious hand. It's not too big of a deal if I mess up; it would just be nice, however, to get it on my first try since Mary does believe in me. With my lips puckered and with deep concentration I begin to glide the stick around them.

For the most part I do a good job, and every inch of my lips gets evenly covered throughout. There is one slight mishap towards the end, as I get some on the edge of the right side of my lip. It's no big deal as once I finish, I just grab one of the cloths from before and wipe off the inconsequential mistake.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lytton, for the help. I deeply appreciate it, not just for this, but for everything throughout this past year and a half."

"I know, dearie, don't worry. Now go spend some time with Henry and William while I clean this up."

I oblige, but before I go, I do take one last glimpse into the mysterious so-called mirror. I really can't say for myself if I look good or not to others, but what I do see, though, is a lovely girl with silver hair that's accompanied by soft violet eyes and a beautiful smile. I don't know if others believe this girl to be pretty, though I sure do.

I rejoin William and Henry as they are having their last bites of what are the last of the pastries. Satisfied would be the best way of putting it. I can tell they aren't reeling yet over my departure, yet they aren't in a chipper mood either. It seems they have been deeply concentrated in thought whilst staring at the pastries. Henry methodically taps his finger against the table in an anxious habit. They notice from the creak of the floorboards that I am approaching and turn to me.

"Even though she doesn't really wear the stuff, Mary has always had a knack for it. You look great, dear," Henry says while William adds in, "You do look lovely, Violet, even more angelic than before."

I blush a little. It's hard to look up at them, but I pull through and give them a well-mannered response. "Thank you both for your kind words." I proceed to sit down with them. "May I have the last pastry, please?"

"Don't worry, I made sure to save it just for you," William says happily at first, but finishes like a breeze on its last legs.

Contently in the moment I take the last pastry and try to savor it as best I can. It is quite tricky to eat with the lipstick on, but is manageable. Sadly, with the passage of time as I go to take a sip, the once warm tea has turned lukewarm. I take a final bite of the pastry and down it with what remains of the tea. After the moment passes, I reflect that it was a mistake as nothing but bitterness and lukewarmness was there to be met, ruining the last bite. It brings the despairing reality that I'll be leaving at any moment rushing back.

"So, has Mary broken the news to you yet?" Henry asks cautiously just in case I haven't been informed yet. A few words can at times be more impactful than a paragraph. With a "Sadly, yes," it is almost as if I have already said more than enough for them to know how I truly feel.

Henry responds, "I know it isn't what you wanted, Violet. It's not what any of us wanted, but I assure you, Sir Dalibor gave his word that you will be well taken care of at the capital."

The thought had never occurred that it would be anything but the case. Well, I guess the reassurance is still a nice thing to hear though. William's father is just trying to make me feel more reassured, but the

comment almost feels nonexistent. I can't help feeling that I'm definitely giving off an air of melancholy as I don't really respond, and my once attentive gaze has floated out the window. Whether or not it is because of this aura or the silence, William chimes in now.

"And I'm sure you'll make lots of friends." Hmm, you know what? That's right, it's time to stop being mopey. This is a new adventure with new people to meet and some good to accomplish in the capital. With this realization, my moment of melancholy is behind me like a flickering fire dying out.

"That's the right way of looking at it, William," I respond with an upbeat attitude and a full smile that puts both William and his father at ease. I'm terrible, just terrible. Moments ago it was made clear how these last moments with everyone were meant to be joyous, yet unknowingly I go and do the opposite, and in such a distasteful manner too. It's one thing to put oneself in a state of melancholy, but to give off an aura that could rub off or worry others is rather selfish.

So, putting it in the past, for these last moments the world is going to be just this cottage, the Lyttons, and myself. With a more chipper mood in the air now, the three of us begin to reminisce. With all the topics to choose from, of course the first thing brought up happens to be that fateful winter day when we all met. We only get halfway through reminiscing about the memory and the unexpectedness of the whole event until we are eventually rejoined by Mary, who has just finished cleaning up from before. She herself now sports the purple eye shadow from earlier, and I have to say it looks simply marvelous on her. Like a sun that has just set, the purple is the calm before a nice night sky.

She takes a seat and can't help chiming in too about how unexpected that day was and how she had her subtle doubts about me, but I turned out to be an angel in disguise. The rest of the morning continues to be spent just simply reminiscing, whether it's over the first time they took me out on the lake or the time we took a family trip into the nearby town, but my favorite aside from the first day I happened to meet the Lyttons has to be when William first took me to see the band of Sunshadow. I think I must have picked close to thirty flowers. As the

gentle atrocity unfolded, William, in his wisdom, stepped in before I could take another. He gently grabbed my hand and delicately interlocked his fingers with mine, and in a stern, caring voice said,

"I know how tempting it is to keep picking flowers because you want to capture their beauty; however, isn't it better to only pick a couple and to preserve the flowers themselves instead?"

That moment always stuck with me. Let beauty remain untouched. A lesson that is still there today in my heart. As we chat and laugh, a purple dot crosses the horizon beyond the window. Before long, the regal carriage comes into view, its horses pulling it along at a nice, easy trot. If only ice storms could happen in spring. Oh well, if time cannot freeze it is time to take a nice, easy breath, relax, and enjoy this final moment to the fullest. With a few final laughs about how I went from a clueless girl to the lovely young woman I have become, it truly feels like my time here has come to a close.

No sooner has the clattering of the horses' hooves ceased than it is followed by the expected knock at the door. Mr. and Mrs. Lytton get up to answer, but just before they do William's mother shoots William a look that was most likely a signal. He takes me by the hand and quickly brings me back to our room while Mr. and Mrs. Lytton converse with Sir Dalibor and Father John. From the few opening words exchanged, it sounds like they'll just pass the time and talk about how wonderful a day it is. William quickly reaches under his bed and, to my astonishment, pulls out three generous gifts, one from each family member.

"We all knew that you don't really have anything to take with you, so before you depart we each decided to give you something as a parting gift."

With arms outstretched, the first lovely gift he hands to me seems to be a pair of knitted wing warmers. To explain, normally my shirts are tailored by Mrs. Lytton with holes for the wings so that they can hang freely. However, in the winter I have just had to incommodiously scrunch them under my coat. With these, I can get my coats tailor-made as well to be more comfortable.

“I’m guessing this is your mother’s gift, as she has always had a way with knitting. It's simply lovely.”

“She’ll be happy to hear that. She wanted to be able to get them finished before last winter ended, but was unable to, so she was saving them for the next. The next gift is my father’s.”

He hands me what seems to be an adorable pair of pink shoes. Rotating them around, I examine them closer in my hands. They definitely have some age to them, judging by the inside, but on the outside, you wouldn’t be able to make any distinction between them and a brand-new pair. They aren’t made of silk or anything luxurious, but the material is still exquisite. They’re just as perfect a gift as the wing warmers. I wonder how William's father was able to acquire them?

One by one, I take off my shoes that I have on now and slide on the pink slippers. I have to look my best for when I first get into the capital. As one would guess they feel as comfortable as they look which is quite comfortable, to say the least. Once I’ve finished slipping on the slippers, William finally hands me his gift.

“It was rushed, so this was the only thing I had that I felt was worth giving. It was supposed to be a gift for my mother, but I can take a trip back into town before her birthday rolls around.”

With his arms outstretched earnestly, there, in his hands, is a small, peculiar wooden box. I can’t imagine what it could be, and without sufficient time to think, there’s not even a possible guess. Eagerly I lift the wooden top off, exposing the charming silver necklace inside. I carefully take it out and examine it in my hands. It is very thin and isn’t anything extravagant, though the thought behind it means the world to me as I know the Lyttons don’t have much extra spending money lying around. So knowing how much it took for him to get this means the world. I ask William if he would be kind enough to do the honors and he humbly accepts. In moments, the necklace is on in a breeze, and I give him a nice big hug as a thank you.

We both understand that there’s going to be quite some time before we see each other again, so we hold on for a few extra precious seconds. Being held tight in William's warm embrace, it hits even harder how

much I'm going to miss them. Through these past couple years, he has been a true friend and even more. Truly, the Lyttons are more than I could have asked for in a family. We finally let go and exchange a doleful look, knowing that it is time to rejoin his parents with Sir Dalibor and Father John. We reemerge from our room and join the little party in the doorway. Both William and I properly greet Sir Dalibor and Father John, William with a bow and I with a full curtsy.

"So, Violet, are you ready to leave? We have a long trip and we would like to make it to the capital as soon as possible."

"Father John, just one moment. I am ready to leave, but I would just like one final moment to say my goodbyes to the Lyttons."

"That is fine. Just make it quick. The less time we spend riding in the dark, the safer the trek will be. We'll be waiting in the carriage," Sir Dalibor says in his usual flat monotone voice.

They retreat to their fluffy red seat cushions of the carriage that just exudes luxury to a naive person like me that has never laid eyes on servants of royalty before.

"Violet, now that we are alone, I would just like to apologize for my wrongdoings." Mr. Lytton says, his voice full of remorse, that has a touch of sadness in the back.

"Don't worry, Mr. Lytton. You have done nothing wrong. There is nothing I hold against you. I understand about last night."

"No, dear, it was wrong of me to raise my voice at you. I was just stressed, but that is no excuse, but sadly there is more that I feel the need to take responsibility for."

There is absolutely nothing you have done over this past year that has hurt us in any way. He has been a model husband and caretaker, so the statement is in itself odd. "What do you mean? You have done nothing wrong, don't worry."

"No, Violet, it's because of me that you are in this predicament of being stripped from your home. I wasn't thinking that day we brought you into the nearby village. Seeing you, someone must have reported it to a member of the crown, and you piqued the King's interest. It is all my fault."

Irritated with himself, he clenches his right hand into a tight closed fist to try and displace some of his frustration. It releases once the small fit is over and contorts back to powerlessness in the form of remorse. This is ridiculous. A mistake is a mistake and should never be held against someone. It must have eaten at him all night like the anxiety did with me. So, with a gentle understanding expression I try and wash those worries away.

“Please, Mr. Lytton, don’t beat yourself up over it. You didn’t know; besides, maybe it’s fate. Who knows? I mean I don’t want to leave, but remembering your lesson of how we should try and help others, I want to go so that I can try and make a difference. So please don’t be too sad, it's always tough saying goodbye, but let's not focus on the sad and instead focus on the good that can come about from this.”

It eases him slightly, but the guilt still has some remnants left on his face until, by letting go of the past and focusing on the present, it morphs into a happy mask hiding the sadness that this is indeed goodbye, hopefully just for now. The mood has finally set in. It can be felt by us all that in moments I will be gone. The air is still and almost stale.

“Well, dearie, I had my talk with you before. All I want to say is be safe and try and do as much good as you can.”

With arms open, Mrs. Lytton gives me a big hug, and with it finally coming in like much-needed rain in a drought, both our tear ducts start to flood. After we have had our appropriate fill of the moment, we release from each other’s warm embrace. She takes a step back and now it is Mr. Lytton’s turn to say his goodbye. His embrace isn’t as close and personal as Mrs. Lytton’s, but I can still tell that he valued our relationship. His words aren’t long, “You be good, Violet; we’ll miss you.” I can tell by the sincerity in his voice that I really meant a lot to him. Releasing and stepping back, he looks over to Mrs. Lytton who is already halfway facing towards the cottage. From the signal, Mr. Lytton can tell that it is time for them to leave. They head back inside, I assume, so that William and I can have our final moments alone.

“I guess this is goodbye for now, at least,” William says casually with his gaze off into the distance, avoiding me because of the emotions of the moment.

There are still so many things that I would like to ask William, like whether he has ever been to the capital before, what the King of Ardisia is like, and whether there might be a way for me to find some violets in the capital. Alas, I know now is not the time to ask any of that with such a fleeting moment. What comes out of my mouth isn’t much better and instead is the worst thing I could have said.

“Yeah.”

It feels terrible coming out, but the moment is weighing too heavily to think, and the silence itself was building. At least it leaves William his chance to say his final words, the words that try to encompass what I was to him or at least what the time we spent together meant. William begins to open his mouth after a moment, waiting to see if I am finished. He gets halfway but closes it with a slight look of contemplation. Clearly he is trying to find the right words to express himself. He finally comes forward with a response.

“Violet, truly this last year and a half has been special. It pains me to see you go, but I promise that I’ll visit you someday, and surely, they might have you stay, but I can’t imagine that your service will keep you there for a lifetime. So, when you are finished, please come back here to where you belong, I… I love you, Violet.”

Like a dammed river bursting free during a mighty storm, his words fill my heart with a rush of emotion. Joy and sadness swirl together in perfect equilibrium, and before I can stop myself, I leap forward and latch onto William tightly. Leaving has turned so much more painful now. There had always been that feeling like I was a part of the Lyttons’ family, but no words have ever officially confirmed it. It had only been hinted at before, but now, now I know that William views me as the sister I hoped he did. It takes a few moments, embraced in the hug, but it finally comes out.

“I love you too.”

I kiss him on the cheek before letting go. He puts his hand gently up to his cheek and with a bittersweet expression, gives a smile goodbye. I turn and wave, the tears still coming down but starting to calm down somewhat, and he waves in response. I completely turn around now and walk briskly to the carriage with what little I carry in hand. I wipe away the very last of the tears still left and bring myself to a state of false composure right before stepping up the golden steps that lead to a new life. Sir Dalibor and Father John both ask whether there is anything left I need to take care of before we leave and I give them a solemn no. With that they instruct the two guards whose names I still haven't heard to prep the carriage and commence our return to the capital.

The carriage hasn't been trotting along for very long yet. The Lyttons' house is still barely visible in the distance. Sir Dalibor and Father John talk about capital business until Sir Dalibor commends me on my perfect posture, but says that I should relax and not be so stiff since it will be a long journey.

"Oh, I actually have to sit like this with my wings. If I lie against them, it would hurt. Don't worry, I'll be fine, but thank you for your concern."

Both, reassured, ask if I need anything like water or food, but I decline, having eaten already. Truth is, even if I didn't eat breakfast, I doubt I could eat anything right now as my previous world slowly vanishes. Beneath tranquil blue skies, birds chirp as the wonderful spring day continues to flourish. Any distraction along the road to help alleviate the storm of emotions in my mind is a blessing.

# Chapter 4

Dawn creeps in slowly like petals effortlessly falling through the breeze of spring. The sun ever so slightly peeks over the horizon, giving off enough visible glow to be able to call this morning. With that, the sunlight refracts off the tiny bits of dew scattered about on the grass, causing them, in effect, to barely radiate. Besides the two guards that have been switching on and off in shifts to steer the carriage, I am the only one who is awake so far.

Maybe it's because I am not used to sleeping in a carriage or for some other reason. Still, it doesn't change the fact that, based on an educated guess, Sir Dalibor and Father John won't be waking anytime soon. Like twins, they currently lie with their heads hung back high in what one could only assume is a deep sleep, for neither budges even when we traverse over a sizable dip or bump. Alas, without their company, and with every whimsical idea already gone over the day before, the problem arises that there seems to be nothing left to ponder over at this point.

The only option left to quell this building boredom is to go over everything again. Yesterday, this was indeed fun, but rethinking the same things over and over inevitably causes the ideas to lose some appeal. So, as I continue on in this precarious state, this unyielding boredom is almost enough to make one crave even Sir Dalibor's company. Despite this slightly low comment, which I am ashamed of now that it has come out, I'm sure he's a nice man. It's just that he seems to be more of the reserved and non-sociable type. Someone who's strictly down to business. Not someone who would inject some much-needed fun into this stagnant morning. He does have wonderful manners, though. So, I sincerely apologize for my comment as it was quite rude.

After more unyielding thoughts, defeat is eventually accepted. Since no other possible distraction is in sight, I go back to pondering about Dryad. It isn't ideal and goes on for what seems like an eternity, maybe

an hour or two, but a few new thoughts do happen to spark. Examples include what the King and Queen could be like, where I'll be staying, and even who I'll be staying with. Hmm, oh hmm, that's definitely the best choice, to ponder who I'll be staying with.

My best possible guess would be the church, which isn't bad, but by far isn't the most appealing for obvious reasons. It would be nice to be around some people who are more around my age than the elderly Father John. The obvious best-case scenario, though, would be to get taken in by a family. No one could ever replace the Lyttons in my heart, but a nice family with a few daughters close in age would be a wonderful situation to go into. William as a roommate was great. Still, I did just wish that the Lyttons had a daughter as well. A sister compared to a brother is just a different kind of bond, you know? Someone there who would have dealt with similar experiences to mine. Mrs. Lytton was a wonderful maternal figure, but again, a much different bond than I would have with a woman the same age as myself.

Hmm, the floodgates have opened now. The thought won't leave and is currently entrenched in my mind; thus, the boredom for the foreseeable future has been happily quelled. Excitedly, I now envision living in their nice, big, spacious two-story house. My two caretakers in their glory are two respectful guardians of the city who work hard and cater to many things. Sadly, this usually causes them to have long absences. However, in their virtue, they always try to make up for it.

To accompany this picturesque vision, my caretakers also have three lovely daughters, all slightly younger than myself. Coming in, I would find it improper to take over a leadership role in the household since I'm a guest, but I would adore being the big sister figure who they could lean on from time to time for advice. Then lastly, to tie the fantasy all together, they would have a son who is slightly older than me. Someone who was strong-willed but also soft and caring. On one fateful night, it would just so happen that a spark occurred, and I would be lucky enough to get my first taste of young romance under the gleaming stars.

My now palpitating heart is filled deeply with desire for this, and I realize I'm currently gushing a little over this thought. Oh well, though,

it’s not a bad thing to daydream with nothing else to do. So, fantasizing about it for just a little while longer, I do so until the first signs of life begin to emerge from the once statuesque Sir Dalibor. With this, everything starts to come back to reality. He starts off with a dazed look in his eye, which quickly morphs into his usual inscrutable face. From there he proceeds to wake up Father John, and just like before, it is strictly back to business yet again. This time, however, there is greater emphasis placed on making sure I understand the situation I will be entering.

From then on, the rest of the carriage ride just consists of lessons in manners and what to expect when we get to the capital. It is nothing really interesting, just the usual curtsey and lady stuff that I had already known from my time spent with the Lyttons. The thing that really grabs my curious attention, though, since it answers one of my earlier questions, is that I’ll be staying in the royal castle during my stay. I was aware that I am the King’s guest, but I wasn’t expecting anything as special as this. It does, however, put a serious damper on the dream of living with the family I had envisioned earlier, though the castle should be just as nice. Again, I should try being more appreciative about things.

Continuing on, they have been going at it now for a while. Unintentionally, I have been fading in and out of what Sir Dalibor has been saying, which is quite rude, and I’m deeply sorry for it. But believe me when I say I’m trying as best I can, honestly. It’s just that I can only listen and nod attentively for so long. The fact that it’s too beautiful a day for dreary conversation doesn’t help with the effort either. Overall, there’s just a touch too many clouds out for my taste, but it still is gorgeous out on account of the still-bright sun gleaming through it all. Considering that we seem to have finally reached Dryad, even if we continue on in a similar fashion for the rest of the ride, there won’t be much left to bear through in Sir Dalibor’s lecture.

Poking my head out of the window, I gaze upon Dryad in amazement. It is something that could not have been imagined before seeing it. The gate we are fast approaching now must stand at least ten people tall and is only this small slit in a much grander expansion; one

that stretches out so far, the end cannot be seen. In peculiar fashion, the gate already happens to be open on this fine morning. It seems odd given that it defeats the purpose of a gate, but then again, what does a young lady know about running a city? Sir Dalibor has quieted down and now proceeds to sit silently and stare out the window, joining Father John who had already fallen into silence a little while ago. Either he was done with what he had to say or picked up on the fact that I wasn't really listening. As I never hope to offend, hopefully it's the first.

With the lecture over, my gaze eagerly fixes on the view outside the window. Now that the silence has settled, there is no use hiding it. Can you blame a person for marveling at the moment they first set their gaze on a marvel? We pass the gate, and with it, get the first glimpse of the interior, which turns out to be a tad disappointing. What I had expected, I guess, was unrealistic. Somehow, I had gotten the notion in my head that everything in the capital would just emanate a sense of regality, like how our carriage does. It isn't really that bad or anything, that is, unless you look at it from an angle of disappointment. The streets are tidy and are well kept while the houses and buildings seem sturdy and well built. It's almost reminiscent of the one time I went into the nearby town with the Lyttons, just with everything a tad more packed here. Well, actually, change that to considerably more packed. The buildings aren't jammed into each other, but enough people are condensed together in the street to call it a healthy crowd.

We have slowed down now from a gallop to a trot. Meanwhile, the crowd opens up and shifts to accommodate the carriage. Sir Dalibor mentions that this is the main square and is where the best shops that have not been granted regality status are. I nod as if I were a worldly young lady who is well-versed in such things as regality status. He takes the nod blindly at face value and doesn't explain further.

Normally I would be my more inquisitive self, but taking in everything is so astonishing that I'm still caught up in the affair. Please don't blame someone for not being caught up in the smaller details of it all when there are wonders afoot. Gazing around, it is hard overall to make things out from the crowd, but two interesting things do jump out.

There is a pair of newlyweds holding hands, probably off to one of the many stores, while the other is a young boy and his cheerful dog playing together in the middle of the square.

Outside of that, people just go along their merry way in one direction or the other. I'm sure they're all off to exciting things, their stories just turning their first page, but alas with just the view of the cover, a girl can only guess. As we progress out of the square and start to move onto the hillside, it should be noted that the manors progressively get larger and more ornate. The main square houses were finely built but were simple in structure. These are clearly in another class.

Father John mentions that, given the side from which we entered, we won't have a chance to see the church, but I shouldn't worry, he'll personally escort me there tomorrow. Personally, I was hoping for something more exciting. Still, if I'm to be shepherded through the day by Father John, there's a chance we might help some people out along the way… So, reflecting on it, whatever tomorrow entails, I'm sure it's all a part of the Lord's wise plan for me.

We start to approach the top of the hill and, with it, what I assume are the manors where only the highest of the nobility reside. These nice, vast, almost castlesque manors contain enough space to fit six of the cottages within them from around the main square. It does seem like the nobility rejoice in a bounty that is considerably more than the peasants, but from what I saw in the square it doesn't look like their circumstances are all that bad. So, I guess it can't be that much of a problem, can it?

With each passing hoofbeat, with each clattering trot, we have finally gotten close enough to the castle to admire the extravagance that it is. Looking now, one can see the beautifully crafted stained-glass windows depicting what seem to be scenes from the one book, the many carefully crafted glossy buttresses, the beautiful gardens surrounding the place, and the overall massive scale of the whole thing. Dare I say, almost thirty of the cottages from the main square could fit within it. I guess it is a tad shameful that I stare at it for so long, yet it's not like it's a person; it won't be offended. Additionally, there isn't any indication that Sir Dalibor or Father John have really given my unshifting eyes any

thought. Still, they definitely think it's a tad bit childish considering my expression is probably comparable to that of a youngling getting a glimpse of their first rainbow.

We end up pulling onto a red brick road that leads into the grounds and ends in a circle. Situated in the middle is a fountain of stone cherubs pouring water ethereally down from their mouths. This interesting display captivates my attention until out of my peripheral vision I see Sir Dalibor motioning for me to get out. I oblige and follow suit. Meanwhile, Father John stays in the carriage. He parts with a goodbye and a "I'll see you tomorrow, Violet. Please be ready for when I arrive." With that, as soon as the carriage has pulled in, it heads back the way it came.

I follow Sir Dalibor into the castle, entering what seems to be its reception chamber. In an attempt to welcome its guests, it happens to be decorated with a handful of vibrant ornamental pieces that vary in size. There are too many to count, and the flashiness of them all taken in at once is enough to overwhelm. Besides the pieces, something else catches my eye. There happen to be these tall, floor-standing vases. They are elongated to an extreme degree as each reaches up to shoulder height. Inside them sits a healthy variety of beautiful, exotic flowers I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing before. The yellows and oranges they're painted in almost scream of a warmer foreign climate.

Outside of the vases, the room is situated with a variety of chairs, tables, and tapestries done in the same regal fashion as the carriage. As soon as we have entered, Sir Dalibor already has us making a left to leave the room. So there is no time for additional admiration besides this brief moment. Lagging behind his brisk pace, I quicken up my steps to eventually catch up after being initially unprepared. In amazing fashion, considering how many different hallways and corridors there are, the course we take the rest of the way is a straight line. At least it will be simple to remember on the way back.

It would be nice if we could have conversed along the way, but I can tell Sir Dalibor likes the quiet. He seems too stiff, too displeased by frivolous things, to warrant making an attempt at small talk, so one

doesn’t happen. Eventually coming upon a door similar to the rest, with nothing that would scream this was our destination, Sir Dalibor abruptly comes to a sharp halt and, three steps later, so do I. In a dull monotone voice, he says,

“This is your room. You will have an audience with the King in one hour. Your attire is proper enough, so we won’t arrange a change. Please don’t wander about until then. I will come to grab you when the time comes.”

“Of course, Sir Dalibor, I’ll be ready by then and will be on my best behavior.”

After he turns and leaves for now to attend to whatever he has to attend to, I eagerly open the door and walk in. To my pleasure, I have been given a rather large room with a huge bed that happens to be decked out in the same regal purple from the carriage. Dark-blue pillows adorn the top. I walk in and set what little personal possessions I have with me on the nightstand beside it.

With the curtains drawn, the room is rather dark. In an easy decision, I decide to open them up. With a flick of them to the side, a stream of light pours in and illuminates the room. Looking outside, the lovely grounds are revealed. A majestic weeping willow stands tall and mighty outside the window. Given the size, it’s safe to assume that it has much age. To accompany the willow, in an exciting sight, there is also a garden further down the grounds. Once I have some free time, visiting it will have to be my top priority.

The last notable thing that can be seen is the surrounding mighty stone wall of the complex, which stands about two people high. After having my fill of gazing out the window, I retreat to the luxurious bed, pondering what exactly there is to do to kill time for an hour. The correct answer to the naive question was nothing, absolutely nothing. For the unbearably lengthy break, the time is spent either staring at the ceiling or pondering useless nothings to distract my mind. At one point, a nap is attempted, yet despite the lack of sleep from the previous night, it doesn’t take.

As the eternity of waiting eventually passes, the long-awaited knock of Sir Dalibor graces the door. Eagerly I jump up and out of my bed. Hurriedly I brush down any hair sticking up before swiftly opening the door to reveal the usual Sir Dalibor. Well, might I add, a Sir Dalibor who is now sporting more regal-looking dark-purple attire instead of the black clothing he was wearing before. It gives the slight impression that he is almost warmer. Still, with his unwavering stoic look on his face, he says,

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, Sir Dalibor," I say in response.

"Good. Follow my lead. Today's introduction is going to be short, but I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to get to know the King and Queen while you are here."

It takes a while to make our way through this maze of a place a second time with all its unshifting twists and turns. Later on, I'll definitely need assistance getting back. However, I doubt that'll be a problem since assistance will undoubtedly be provided. It is unfortunate how it seems it will be a constant necessity. I imagine these first few weeks will prove to be somewhat problematic. We eventually come upon what is most indubitably the throne room. There could be no other explanation for the gigantic set of doors decked out in dazzling clear stones that stands before us.

Two guards stand attentively. Again, they are covered head to toe in gold armor. With nods exchanged, they begin to open the doors. With the doors swept aside, we enter into a grand hall of sorts. Inside, the floor is covered in a regal, red velvet carpet and there are two rows of balconies stationed up top that almost touch the ceiling. At the head of it all are two illustriously large thrones that have been done in almost the same style as the carriage cushions, yet are much showier with a hint of intimidation thrown in.

Sitting atop them, side by side, are Their Majesties. The doors make a loud thud as the guards close them behind us. There is an undeniable stillness in the air, the kind that makes even Sir Dalibor's modest voice carry when he raises it.

“Now presenting Ms. Violet Lytton from the Kiserd province, Your Majesty.”

It was a nice touch adding Lytton. I never thought about having a last name before. I’m sure the Lyttons would be honored if I held it while here. I give a nod of the head and a deep curtsey, my knee almost touching the ground.

The King speaks, “Ah, so the rumors were true about the angel girl in the Kiserd province. Good work, Dalibor, you old dog, you. It is a pleasure to meet you, Violet.”

The Queen follows suit with a quick “It’s a pleasure” like a shrewd august wind. I respond, “No, the pleasure is mine, Your Kingship and Queenship. I am honored to be a guest in the capital, let alone a guest in your own home.”

The King responds, “No, the pleasure is ours, darling. One question. Is it true that you can fly with those wings?”

“Sorry, no, Your Highness.”

“That’s marvelous in more ways than one, darling.”

“Tsk. How boring; all flash, no substance,” the Queen chimes in.

No matter who you are, you should really try and make a good first impression. The Queen seems to be in a really bitter mood. I won’t read too much into it, though. It could have been a rough day for her. I turn around in response to at least try and show off my measly wings, giving them a few flaps in the process.

“Well, regardless of whether or not you can fly.” The King takes a moment to look at the Queen... “your services will be important to the Church and to the Crown. You have met Father John, correct?”

A slight nod of my head confirms this. “I won’t go into the details. He’ll walk you through it all tomorrow, but you will be a great asset to the Crown and to the Church, and trust me, I think it’s almost better your wings don’t work. Delicate things are so much better as just ornamentation.” He leans forward and gives a grand, eerie smile.

It’s difficult to come up with a reply. It’s still doubtful how much a small girl can really contribute. Nevertheless, I’ll give it my best try. Secondly, his comment and demeanor can’t help but feel a tad creepy. It

is most likely nothing to be worried about as the delivery just came off wrong. I mean, he is the King after all, a nobleman.

The King concludes, “Sadly, we are busy today, but I’m sure we’ll have much time to spend together while you are here. We look forward to seeing you at dinner tomorrow.”

“Of course, Sir. We’ll let you and Her Majesty return to your busy schedules,” Sir Dalibor replies.

With the meeting concluded, the two guards from outside swing the large doors back open. They see to it that we are ushered out. Once they close the doors from the inside this time, the familiar loud thud leaves me and Sir Dalibor alone in the empty hallway. Well, that was interesting.

# Chapter 5

I am awakened from my light slumber by a knock on the door, almost as if it was Mrs. Lytton herself. Without any hesitation or any kind of signal that confirms it's indeed okay to enter, with indifference, she turns the knob and comes in anyway. She is presumably Joan, the chamber maiden I have been assigned. Despite my telling Sir Dalibor many a time yesterday that there'd be no such need for one, he adamantly insisted that it'd be a requirement with my stay here. Something about it being necessary as he couldn't see how I'd be able to attend to my schedule as he saw fit by myself. So, without my say, I guess it was settled.

I'm still basically in a daze here, but that doesn't matter to her as she uncaringly shoos me out of the bed. From there on, she snappily helps me get ready while simultaneously informing me that Father John will be here any moment and that it'd be rude to keep him waiting. I try as best I can, I really do, but I'm not the best morning person. I end up meeting Father John outside the south gate, fashionably late. I greet him in what Joan had brought out and instructed me to wear. It is a rather plain, simple dress, one that's colored in a calm, light purple that comes down to about mid-calf. Overall, it suits my taste well and feels perfect for my first day in the city. Though it is a bit tight around my wings, it was a good first try by the tailors nonetheless.

Father John greets me and doesn't mask the fact that he is somewhat annoyed with my tardiness. I apologize accordingly, and he forgives the mishap easily. We quickly get on our way, since my little delay has cost us a few minutes. "Nothing a little urgency by the drivers won't fix," he quips. Despite his words, the ride goes rather slowly and is comparable to yesterday's, especially once it starts getting crowded in the lower district. Again, the people shift like the tides, making room for us when they see the carriage coming. Following in the same footsteps as yesterday, I eagerly gaze out the window, trying to see what interesting sights there are to be had.

Wading through the thick sea, my lucky eye happens to catch an adorable family with two small children buying groceries. Along with them, I spot a pairing of the city guards helping a shopkeeper whose cart has broken down on his merry way. With the variety of hammers and leather that he's carrying, it would indicate that he is most definitely a cobbler. As we now move out of the main square, further we stray into the heart of the city and away from the nobility district. With the wheels continuously turning, the first glimpses of the church can now be seen, as the tip of the cathedral hangs over the other buildings.

In similar fashion to yesterday, the church from a distance is interesting, yet the close-up view is even more magnificent, in another league, one would say. The architecture happens to not be as appealing to the eye as the castle's; however, it is by far superior with how much more art is worked into the design of the building. Its beautiful, intricately crafted stained-glass windows amazingly seem to be double the size of the castle's and carry a greater rainbow of hues kissing them. Lastly, to push it to heights above, scattered about are these almost lifelike statues that convey such deep emotion that without seeing it firsthand, one would believe it a feat impossible with imperfect human hands. It makes the stone cherubs yesterday look exactly so, like stone.

We arrive right outside the front of the church and proceed to step out of the carriage. Before we enter, a fellow priest, seeing us, scurries over to greet Father John. They begin to converse about some event that, with no context, is impossible to follow, so I let my mind wander onto other things. They take longer than one should with someone waiting, but it doesn't bother me while I'm in my daydreaming state. Finally, a pleasant glance and the words "So, this is the divine gift the Lord has sent us" shake things up.

I step out from behind Father John and we both introduce ourselves. He says his name is Father Edwin, and with that, before I even have a chance to reply, he humbly drops to one knee and lightly bows his head. Softly, he chants some inaudible whispers. Getting up, he asks for my holy blessing in a surprise twist that wasn't expected. This ends up causing me a bit of an abrupt panic as I have no knowledge of what to

do, and I don't want to be confronted as some sort of false angel. So, after a long pause… then giving it my best guess, I take a closed fist and put it up to his head sideways and say, "Bless you, child." The moment after feels like an eternity, but a happy-faced Father Edwin puts the heart at ease as the palpitating dissipates.

I kindly request that he just treat me like everyone else, but he gives an earnest head nod sideways in response, saying that treating me any less would be a disgrace to the Lord. He then informs us that he has business to attend to, but that it was nice meeting me. I give a slight sigh once he's gone.

"I really don't like being treated better than others, especially if the person doesn't actually know me."

"It's going to be a daily occurrence. Sorry, I guess, but get accustomed to it. It isn't a bad thing."

"Yes, Father" comes out in a defeated tone.

The first steps inside the church and the interior in and of itself are also a sight to behold. With all the stained glass scattered about, the fresh light pouring in gives off an almost mystical atmosphere. Father John leads me up to the altar and gives me a sweeping hand motion over the room, almost implying that this will be all yours.

"It is still many days into the future, but one day you'll be up here saying Mass at this very pulpit."

I just nod in response, trying to keep up my angelic aura. It really isn't as captivating a thing as he makes it out to be. I guess I love the Lord and like the church, but my whole goal of coming here was more for the intended purpose of actually helping people as opposed to lecturing.

"But alas, there are still many days away before then. Tell me, Violet, during your time in the country, did you ever learn to read or write?"

"No, Father, I have not."

"Because, as a member of the church, it is critical that you have these skills and that you are educated. We are the light for the people. If we are not divine illuminati for them, then that trust is misplaced, is it not, child?"

At first thought, the idea didn't sound like something that would be interesting, but when Father John speaks with such confidence and energy, it stirs up some emotions of enthusiasm. It's understandable that there are different ways of helping people. I definitely will help physically, but I guess people need guidance too. I'm really in no position to judge what needs to be done. If learning these things will benefit others, then I will do my best to learn them.

"I understand, Father. I will try my best then to learn these skills. For the good of the people," I say with an earnest tone.

"Good. Once I'm done giving you a tour, we'll begin something of a short introductory lesson before you depart for the royal feast tonight."

For the rest of the tour, we end up scurrying along many hallways, studies, and numerous quarters for various priests. Nothing really to take note of as it was mainly uneventful. The one takeaway, though, is that the church is intricate in itself, yet is still not as big of a maze as the royal castle. Thank the Lord. We end up wrapping up the tour in a little over half an hour. We sit now in the underground level of the church, nestled in a dim, small room.

Without much of an intermission, we immediately transition into the writing lesson Father John talked about earlier. From the get-go it's pretty straightforward as we just go over the various characters from what he calls the alphabet and how to write them. It really is such a fussy task, though, as when I try to write them out, Father John makes me write them out again and again, saying that they are too crooked or the size isn't correct.

It's a nuisance. Nevertheless, since I don't have knowledge on the matter, I abide by his instructions and don't get easily upset since he is probably just teaching me the way it is supposed to be done. After a long slog, we finally wrap up. In the underbelly of the church, there really is no true sense of how much time has truly passed. If I were to guess, though, most likely a few hours have passed since we started. Normally, in this kind of circumstance, my mind would've floated off into the clouds as usual, but I guess since it was for the goal of bettering myself and others, I was able to stay fixed like a rock.

Before we make our way back to the castle, Father John informs me that we need to do one last important thing. He quickly wants to introduce me up on the altar during the Mass that's currently underway. This is to make sure that the Lord's gift is known to the masses. Walking up the flight of stairs, we quietly join the main hall during the moment of a peroration. The church, as expected, has become flooded with many attentive patrons. From the looks of it, it's only comprised of what seems to be the upper district as can be ascertained by their fancy garments. In all probability, this is a certain Mass that has been set aside for them that fits into their schedule since the royal feast is tonight.

As we are now, we currently stand at the front of the church off over to the side, still masked by the shadows. At this point we're definitely not noticeable to the audience given their undivided attention on the priest speaking. He is rather old, given that you can easily discern his age from his mere complexion. Additionally, being bald does parade the fact further. He is Father John's senior, but is he the head of the Church in the capital? Finally finishing up, he immediately looks over to Father John and gives a signal that it's indeed time to usher me up. With our hands clasped together, we approach in a meek walk and step onto the altar with him.

It is impossible to gauge any kind of reaction from the crowd with the lighting being so dim at this time of day. I guess since the church is quiet, they don't really pay any mind to my appearance. Just your typical girl, they think. It is the capital after all; guests are definitely common.

"Patrons and members of the first church of His Majesty King Gale, it is my great pleasure to introduce our newest member and our divine light, the Angel Violet."

The announcement is followed by various murmurs and gasps, followed by a rustling sound in the seats, leading finally into a synchronized om.

"This girl will be the key to ushering in a new path of enlightenment for the capital, and from what I've heard from Father John, how she behaves and how she acts can only be described as the epitome of

angelic behavior. Please give her your undivided attention as she says a few words."

My conviction is as cold as ice. My face with unwavering commitment and gentleness is unmoved right now despite being thrown into a fray without warning. Inside, instead, my heart is tense as butterflies roam my stomach and there is plenty of self-doubt in the back of my mind. I have to be unwavering, though, for the people, so I can do my best to help them. This, this unearned respect and admiration hit me but slide off to be dwelt on for later. The task at hand is more pressing and requires my full mental focus.

With such a long pause, regardless of whether I'm ready or not, it's time to give them at least something. "Hello, everyone." And with that, my conviction leads to nothing as my statement comes out low and sheepish. Clearing my throat, I begin again with more strength.

"I am Violet, and I just want to let you know I'm going to give it my all. I will try my best with the fate you entrust to me, and please don't think of me as above you. We are all the children of God. Thank you."

It isn't thundering; however, it is loud enough to surmise that my short speech reached the back of the hall. A round of applause comes flooding in response from what seems like at least the majority of the church, which does wonders at easing the heart.

Father John and I then proceed to get off the altar once they finish up. Again, off into the shadows we go. He lets me know that I need to do better, but also that it was a good first try. He continues on, telling me that with our announcement wrapped up, it's about time for my departure for the royal feast. Since time is scarce, he will just have to introduce me to Father Paul another time, who, from the inference, seems to be the old high priest leading Mass today. So as to not interrupt what's going on, we detour through the side outlet of the church to get out.

"Merely letting you know, Violet, you are never to leave Mass until it is finished; remember to keep that in mind."

"I will always remember that, Father John, but if you will excuse me, might I ask why today we are departing early then?"

“Ah, that is a special case, Violet. I can’t have you missing the royal dinner. Since His Majesty King Gale is a divine being like yourself, it is okay for you to miss your duties if his heart feels it.”

When we get outside, it still seems earlier than what was anticipated, considering how long of a slog the lesson was. Still, the sun is fairly high up and it can’t be much more than high noon. I’m assuming this excess time is more illusion than substance since if it weren’t, I would’ve stayed for the Mass, unquestionably. The carriage is off to the edge of the plaza around two house lengths away. Father John, being courteous, accompanies me over to it. We get about halfway over when out of the corner of my vision two children, not toddlers, but more on the younger side, seem to be lost.

From the looks of the tatters on their clothes and the thin patches of dirt on their faces, it’s easily discernible that they’re not from around this area. This is one of those defining moments where it’s time to make a difference. It won’t be world-changing, but a little good can even be impactful. So, without saying anything, I decide to be proactive. Without hesitation, I break off and make my way over towards the younglings. Immediately Father John shouts out after me, but doesn’t follow, “Violet, where are you going?”

“Hello, little ones. By any chance are you lost? Where’re your parents?”

The little boy and even younger little girl just stand there, wide-eyed in disbelief at the stranger who has just approached them. Now that I’m over here and up close, it becomes apparent that the situation is even worse than previously thought. They are slightly underfed, and they have a mildly unpleasant odor emanating from them. This only confirms further that my feelings were right for coming over.

“Are you an angel lady?” the little girl blurts out still in astonishment.

“Yes, I am, little one.”

“Can we touch your wings, please?” the little boy asks, with an innocent face.

The request isn’t something I would normally allow. I’m not self-conscious or anything about my wings anymore, but it doesn’t mean

that personal space still isn't nice to have. Looking down at them and their innocent expressions with eager eyes, I can't help but grant their request. Once consent is received, with no wasted time, they both decide to have a go at it. The little girl to the left wing and the little boy to the right. Both gently run their hands up and down with long strokes. They are well-mannered enough to only help themselves to a few and stop after the fourth one. The whole experience didn't feel bad. Actually, the experience didn't bring any feeling at all except the warmth brought to the heart from the smiles on their faces.

To this day, the feeling in my wings has never fully healed from the cold of that unorthodox day, or angel wings just naturally aren't very sensitive. Father John, huffing and puffing, has finally followed over now. He has brought with him an expression that Mr. or Mrs. Lytton would on rare occasion give me, which isn't anger, but annoyance with an undertone of disappointment.

"What are you doing, Violet? We need to get you back. You can't be late for the dinner now, can you? The King would give you and me a bit of a, um, lecturing if his guest of honor were to be late."

"You're right, Father John, and I'm sorry for veering off schedule, but I just had to come over to these younglings. They seem to be lost and in need of assistance in quite a few ways."

"Children, are you hungry?" With saddened expressions that similarly accompanied the man who Mr. Lytton spared some of our extra food for on that fateful winter day, they both nod their heads.

"See, they are simply starving. Is there any way you could give them some extra food from the church? If you really need reimbursement, I can give you some money from my allowance for it tomorrow."

"I'm terribly sorry, dear, but we don't keep extra food in the church. I hate to reiterate this, but could you please be on your way? You mustn't be late for the royal dinner."

"I know, I know, and I'm terribly sorry for that, but I'm not leaving these children until they receive some form of assistance. Maybe I'll just have to bring them back with me to the dinner."

Stressed and hurried, Father John says, “Uh, no, you couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Why not?”

“Um, well… it would be rude to bring a guest yourself when you yourself are still a guest at the dinner; actually, the guest of honor. So, let’s get on please.”

Father John starts to gently push me from behind. It is rather rude and I go with it a few steps until I decide to be proactive. I understand that Father John is getting anxious about me being on time, so I turn around softly, take his hand off my mid-back and give him an awkward smile.

“Just one last second, I swear; then I’ll meet you in the carriage.”

He gives a defeated sigh. “Just make it quick.”

I walk back over to the younglings with a spring in my step as time is of the essence. Crouching down to their level and giving them both a gentle rub on their heads, I tell them:

“I’m really sorry that I have to go. It deeply pains me to be unable to do anything right now, but I promise that if you come back at this time tomorrow, I’ll have not just some food, but a lot for the both of you. How does that sound?”

“Good!” they say in unison as they both shake their heads up and down eagerly like cute puppies.

“Good. If you have any problems, just go to the church and ask for Violet.”

With that, I part with a nice broad smile now. Walking away, I feel my expression wear out and can’t help snowballing into a feeling of despair, knowing that I couldn’t do anything for them today, despite the condition they were in. I’m able to rebound slightly, though, because I know deep in my heart that tomorrow I’ll make up for it. With a flick of the reins, we’re off back to the castle. Truthfully, the dinner has me slightly anxious.

# Chapter 6

Quite some time has passed now since the church. Well, in truth, more like a lot of time. With its high-hanging crescent moon, night is firmly set and is in no hurry of changing anytime soon. Despite all this passage of time, final touches are still being made to get ready. Not for perfection, but to meet the minimum requirements of being suitable.

Joan, my chamber maiden, and one of the other hands of the manor are currently flustering about to finish up my hair. The task is rather odd as it encompasses them taking these wooden dowels and placing them atop my head. This is so they can braid my hair around them to make rolls until a small wedge is formed on top. Assuringly, I'm told by them that it is all the rage right now amongst the nobility of Ardisia, especially in the capital. There's no real reason to doubt them otherwise, and I'm sure they are making me look as beautiful as they can. It's just that in my own opinion, my normal hair would have been suitable enough and much less of a hassle.

This whole thing just seems unnecessary for everyone involved and is the reason why I passively tried more than once to get out of it, but they were supposedly ordered by the Queen to put it into this fashion. So, who am I to demand something else, and who are they to disobey orders? It is relieving, though, that this is the last thing left, as the hunger in my belly has been growing rather monstrous with each passing moment. The only bright side is that it has devoured any possible butterflies that could be roaming about. With it nearing its end, it's no stretch to call the passage of time an eternity really.

The list of inconveniences to go through has been quite extensive I have to say. The events, to name them, came with an intrusive bath to start. Then came the frivolously elongated task of fitting into the dinner dress meant to be worn tonight, which, with all its superfluous elegance, required multiple hands just to fasten properly. All this fuss, despite the blue dress from earlier being gorgeous enough that it should have been sufficiently fine. The reason? They inform me that this new one is

supposed to be meant for formal occasions, while the other was nothing more than casual wear. It too seems unnecessary, except I will say that with an open back it's much more comfortable on the wings.

Now if it had only been those two things, as it was assumed, I would already be at the dinner. Except this wasn't the case, as silly me was ready to grasp the door handle; they informed me that my hair and makeup still needed to be done. My delivery to the dinner would have been already set in place instead of this current tardiness that pursues. Despite the lecture from Father John earlier about how missing any of the actual dinner would be treated as unacceptable, here we are.

The makeup application was an interesting process as it has been done completely by Joan and the other house maiden without me raising a finger. I'm not fully aware of particularly what they have done or how it looks, but my trust is with them. The one thing that is noticeable, though, is how much longer the process has taken than just a couple of days ago with Mrs. Lytton. At least three times as long, which is rather shocking.

The Lyttons easily float into my mind from this, as I wonder what they are doing right now. Probably having dinner themselves or at least about to. They definitely think about me from time to time like I have with them when the days are in a lull. The fact that I haven't made any new friends so far through these first couple of days has done nothing to ease my homesickness, but at least people have been friendly. My whole ambitious fantasy about living with a couple that had a bunch of daughters, and a dreamy son was bound not to happen. Still, it unfortunately does nothing to quell the mild disappointment of it not coming to fruition. However, things might change at this dinner, fingers crossed! Hopefully there will be girls my age, but someone a tad older or younger wouldn't hurt and if there are gentlemen like William that would be fantastic too. Regardless, there is confidence that things will work themselves out.

With the final dowel in place, both maidens take a step back to inspect their work. I stand up and work my way back over to the dresser mirror to inspect for myself. By their mirrored, smug, satisfied

expressions, their faces say it all. It's interesting, maybe because it's only been a few times that I've been able to truly see my own reflection, but my head is shrouded in a fog that creates this sense that the girl that stands before me is almost a stranger. Compared to the time with Mrs. Lytton, there is so much more makeup on.

The once-light overtones of violet around the eyes have been replaced with a deep, dark purple like that of the carriage instead. My eyelashes have been extended somehow, by some means, and the way they have applied the blush has really changed the angle of my face, making the already slim oval face look ever so sharper. Shockingly, overall, it looks like I'm a woman in her mid-twenties in the prime of her life. It is hard to not be deceived by appearances as even now it takes a moment to realize that the girl in front of me truly is Violet Lytton to some degree. It is too late to change it now, and it isn't right to criticize someone else's work after so much effort has gone into it. Next time, though, I'll have to let Joan know to go easier with the makeup.

"It looks lovely. Thank you both for your efforts."

"It was no problem, Lady Violet. I'm glad you liked it. We think the Queen will like it even more. Sir Dalibor will be here any moment to escort you to the reception, so we'll take our leave."

The door closes behind them ever so silently, leaving behind nothing but the shadows from the candlelight. For the next few moments my eyes just lay fixated on the door in boredom waiting for the ever-late Sir Dalibor. Experiencing his dullness firsthand and being as plainspoken as he is, it's surprising he isn't punctual tonight. My unyielding, bored gaze remains placed until the familiar rattle of the iron doorknob leads into a twist of the handle. The door gets pushed aside and with it comes in Sir Dalibor. He is decked in his unsuited for tonight's festivities, usual black attire.

"Good evening, Sir Dalibor," I say and accompany it with a curtsy given the occasion.

"Good evening to you too, Lady Violet. Are you ready to attend the reception?"

I give a head nod, and he takes it upon himself to lead us there.

“So, I like your attire for tonight, but I’m surprised that you aren’t more dressed up.” Normally it isn’t like me to pry into things, especially with Sir Dalibor given his usual aloof composure that creates a natural distance; however, the question really piques my interest considering how much of a fuss was made over my own attire.

“If you must know, I won’t be attending the dinner. I have work to attend to. It is imperative that I meet with a few important officials from outside the capital who will be there at the reception briefly, yet that will be all.”

Silence ensues as I try and quicken up my steps in order to keep up with Sir Dalibor’s brisk pace. Luckily, I was able to convince my maidens to let me wear the pink slippers I had received from Mr. Lytton, which can easily be assumed are more maneuverable than those foreign shoes with the spike on the bottom they had to offer. Otherwise, most likely I’d be down a full hallway’s pace from the speedy Sir Dalibor. Strangely enough, after the little break, Sir Dalibor speaks up again. The hope of actual conversation is instead dashed with something rudely uncalled for, condescension.

“I’m surprised that you haven’t realized it yet, Violet. Don’t be offended, but you’re naive even for your age.”

In a quizzical tone I respond, “What do you mean?”

“I am technically your legal guardian while you are here. The King has put me in charge of your wellbeing during your stay. Why do you think that I’ve been here and continue to be since the beginning?”

“Hmm, never really put much thought into it. By any chance, do you have any daughters my age?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Stop… I hope you do wisen up while here, Violet. It would be in your best interest.”

I wonder if he knew I was going to ask if he had any sons or even a wife. Even so, it’s quite rude to interrupt me like that, but it is Sir Dalibor. I don’t know what he has gone through today or in general. Maybe he didn’t mean for it to come off the way that it did. I’m sure

under that thick shell a compassionate person is in there hiding. Still, I hope he doesn't stay so aloof considering it isn't how a legal guardian should behave. Uninterestingly enough, the rest of the walk continues in utter silence. Sir Dalibor seems like a man concerned solely with business, so there is no effort on his part to keep the conversation flowing. Normally I would make an effort myself, but I really don't know where I would even begin given how things have been going.

As we exit the back doorway, we step now out under the tranquil night sky, with its slightly porous dark velvetiness that stretches to the edges of the horizon. There are a few storm clouds that are off in the distance, but they most certainly won't intrude onto tonight's festivities. It's a nice sensation to step out into as there is an ideal briskness in the breeze to accompany the mellow spring warmth. The lights of the reception can be seen off to the side over the groves and flowers of the garden.

With our little moment of taking it in over now, we make our way towards the inviting lights over the hedges. Walking through, we approach the reception through a long hall of hedges where circles of people enjoying themselves can be seen waiting at the end. Before we enter, Sir Dalibor gives me what I would expect from a legal guardian, "Be respectful and be mindful. Just remember not everyone here is your friend," and with a swiftness that matched how the words came out, Sir Dalibor breaks off into an obvious straight-line path towards a group of elderly gentlemen with white beards that hang low.

I stand near the entrance still like a flimsy flower. Sadly, being here now in the heart of the moment, some of the air under my wings has left. The thought that I know absolutely no one here has a strangling grip around my legs. I mean, I already understood that coming here, but gravity finally hits when gazing at a mountain of challenges. How am I going to meet anyone? I assume it's rude to intrude into an already active conversation and from the looks of it, that's all that seems to be happening.

“Attention, attention, everyone. Obviously, besides yours truly, the guest of honor has arrived, Lady Violet, everyone,” King Gale announces.

Claps accompany it, as well as bows or curtsies. Everyone gives a warm expression which helps lift me back up. King Gale waves me over to come join him next to his personal regal throne. Like a timid white field mouse, the ones William would sometimes try and catch in the summer for fun, I scamper across the party. Gracious for this saving grace.

“Aside from the old-fashioned hair, you look marvelous tonight, dear. I’ll be sure to compliment your chamber maiden for you.”

“Uh, thank you, King Gale, but I already did so myself.”

“Well, it was really that fine of a job that it needs to be commended, yet again. Now please sit and make yourself comfortable. I don’t bite HAHAHA.”

Denying his request would be impolite, so I take my seat next to him in the only other chair situated here. From the looks of how it is adorned in garden flowers and that each inch of each crevice is made entirely with gold, there is no uncertainty that it’s the Queen’s chair. A peculiar feeling seems to arise in the air. It’s something that has been continuing to nip away at me since yesterday. The best thing that it’s comparable to is the feeling of when a storm is nearing. The feeling that something uncontrollable is approaching but even calling it that would be incorrect. It’s hard to snuff away and to no avail it just sits on my mind as to what it truly is.

There isn’t much conversation between the both of us. He seems to be inebriated and doesn’t offer much engagement because of this. He just politely nods in agreement when telling him about my stay and thoughts of the capital so far. While I’m mid-sentence, the enchanting thought of violets does unexpectedly pop into my mind. With a stutter, followed by a complete dropping of the topic about the difficulties navigating the castle, I ask.

“Hmm, something just occurred to me. Don’t think it childish of me please, but one goal of mine is to be able to see violets firsthand while here. Is there any chance that some are in the royal gardens?”

“No,” he boasts in a loud chuckle that is clearly hearable from outside our vicinity. “Come on, surely you find it somewhat comical, Violet wants to see some violets.”

It isn’t. The laughing makes the request seem belittled and makes my feelings seem like a joke. With my eyes turned downcast, he continues until finally he interjects again, “To answer your question, we don’t, but I’ll make sure to have some brought in soon enough for you.” This goodwill helps make up for the previous outburst.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, that would be wonderful.” It comes out flat despite trying to keep up my elegant persona with his grace. The hurtfulness from before still stings and I want to hold onto it, but eventually the thought of him getting the violets coupled with a forgiving heart makes it impossible. So immediately I bounce back, ready to enjoy the rest of the night’s festivities.

A servant approaches us now with what is presumably wine. The Lyttons never once in all the time I was there served it. I only happened to recognize it because Father John showcased it to me during our lessons earlier. He mentioned that its main purpose was for ceremonial uses, which in this circumstance makes it seem rather odd that it’s being served as a beverage. It wouldn’t be good manners to reject, so I accept while King Gale sloppily chugs down the last sip from his current glass before grabbing another.

Before leaving the servant politely informs me that Queen Elizabeth would like for me to grace her with my presence.

“We’ll talk more later tonight,” the King bellows.

With an earnest expression, I nod my head at the notion and follow the servant down to the left where the Queen’s sitting. She is accompanied by someone who is most likely another Lady and no one else. They sit chatting at a small circular table where the metal has been

intricately woven to resemble the leaves of a tree with the base made to look like it's a trunk.

"Lady Violet, Your Highness."

She brushes the servant off with a flick of the wrist, and I take a seat next to her. If it wasn't for the fact that everything so far since coming here has been meticulously crafted, I'd be more impressed by the slightly porous table made up of realistic leaves.

"So, child, are you going to say anything or are you just going to let the servant greet us for you?" The Queen snaps. Finishing with pursed lips.

The realization shoots like lightning down my spine. Flustered I get back up and hastily give a curtsy, but despite this as soon as I get up, I see the Queen still has a look of disappointment chiseled into her face.

"That's not a proper curtsy again!"

The yelling does nothing to quell the nervousness and only amplifies it. Shakily I complete another curtsy which takes twice as long because of this.

Happy with herself, the Queen wears a smug look of satisfaction; meanwhile, the other woman doesn't introduce herself or say anything. As I sit back down, it takes a few moments after the whole thing to even notice this as my attention was too fixed on the Queen. I doubt her friend thinks that was a little harsh. If a person makes a mistake, there is no reason to get upset like that. I mean, I was truly sorry, so why did she have to act that way? My left hand is still shaking a little bit, so I clasp it with my right hand that's in a more stoic state, which happens to be enough to get it to stop. With a deep breath, I recollect myself. My marble shell received a hairline fracture today. I'm not mad that it happened and it will be repaired with time. It just bothers me first off how easily it was done and that the Queen did it so carelessly. I really hope this isn't going to be the bedrock of our relationship.

Once I finish gathering myself, it's clear that both the Queen and her friend have made the whole thing an afterthought. They are now engrossed in some type of deep conversation, paying me little mind. Listening in on the conversation, it's about the politics of the province

where the friend is from. It's above my knowledge so I can't really follow which relegates me to the part of the invisible spectator. Overall, I do a good job of the role. With a calm empty head, I just nod my head occasionally and keep an expression of interest despite my mind fluttering through the night sky. The thoughts switch on and off between what's for dinner and which people I should look to talk to next. There are no women my age, but there are a few men conversing who look just slightly older than myself. They seem to be the best candidates to have something in common with.

Finally, after some serious breezes passing back and forth between them, the gift of invisibility vanishes.

"So, child, what are your thoughts on the kingdom, so far? Be honest."

"Everything seems really nice. The people at the church, Sir Dalibor, the maidens, His Majesty, and you, Your Highness."

She says, "God, I detest liars," while she piercingly looks deep into my eyes.

A long moment passes before she presses her wine to her lips, finishing it. When she pulls it back, a darker hue of red is left upon them.

"I guess the truth is still the truth in the moment before it's fleeting. But be warned, child, if I ever do catch you lying to me there will be hell to pay. You can run along now, I'm done."

Ugh, this whole experience has been entirely surreal. The Queen's attitude and the pointlessness of this summoning is baffling. Definitely it's just a blue moon. I'm confident it's not a sign of things to come. It takes a moment for it to set in that I'm free. When it does, I try not to offend them by leaping out of my seat; I instead gently hoist myself up. Still, with no time wasted of course. I don't make the same mistake twice and make sure to give them both a proper curtsy and farewell. The task and focus as of now is to casually work my way towards the small group of young men around my age mentioned before.

Again, it'd be splendid if it were a group of young ladies, but anybody to make friends with is still good. Looking around while

approaching, the party so far seems to be in full swing. The atmosphere feels more energetic and people are starting to dance. Along with this, from the looks of it, some servants are beginning to set up the grand table, so the feast should be starting soon. To reach the young Lords, I would have to travel in a horseshoe pattern around the darn thing. Halfway around, my hopes of meeting the young lords get dashed.

A tall man, slightly chubby, easily recognizable from the way his under chin hangs, dressed in a befitting dark yellow jacket with a white blouse underneath approaches. Presumably, he's a Lord.

"Hello, Violet, I have been looking forward to the chance of meeting you. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Lord Chestnut of the Chestnut province."

I give a smile and respond, "Pleasure. Are most Lords' provinces named after them?"

"You're pleasantly funny, Violet. No, King Gale's great-grandfather named them all. There's an anecdotal story about how the province got to be named after my family but that's a story for another day."

"So, is there anything I can help you with, Lord Chestnut, or did you just want to make my acquaintance? I'm content with either."

"Hmm, an interesting question you have given me, Lady Violet. I'll let you be the decider of that one tonight."

The statement is confusing and easily goes over my head. All that can be pulled from it is that this is going to take up the rest of my time, so sadly no young lords will be met tonight. He seems affable and very friendly. Maybe this will instead be better. I give a slight, enthusiastic response.

"Okay, well, what shall we discuss then?"

He turns to a woman around the same age as him from the group he was just in before and gives a look to tell her that he won't be returning soon. This is presumably his wife. She takes the look with a plain face of acknowledgement and turns back to her group.

With a guiding gesture, he leads me and we start walking aimlessly.

"A little birdie told me you like flowers, Violet."

"Huh, who told you that?"

“Oh, the life of the party and I were chatting before… ha-ha, I’m referring, of course, to Sir Dalibor. He had some business he needed to discuss with me before.”

As easy as it is for him to slip into the scenery, I forgot that Sir Dalibor was here. I take a quick survey of the party again and am unable to find him mingled in with the crowd. He did say, though, that he wasn’t staying for long.

“Oh, what kind of things did you discuss?”

“Nothing that is for your ears, but since the topic of you came up, he told me that I should make your acquaintance tonight.”

I guess my mind was too caught up in the flowing conversation as I notice that we have taken a little sidestep out of the party. We don’t descend into the heart of it, but as we are locked in stride together, we tour around the outer edge of the garden. We end up having an interesting discussion mainly about flowers that then trickles into more personal details. I sing high praises of the Lyttons to Lord Chestnut and tell him what life was like in the Kiserd province. After some more back and forth, he shares a delightful little snack, the confirmation that Sir Dalibor likes me despite his aloof composure. That’s how I’ve felt in the back of my mind despite him not being very expressive. It was uplifting finally having any concerns laid to rest.

It was disappointing that the best part of the night had to come to a close so hastily, but it would have been gravely disrespectful to not be present at the start of the feast. Rushing back, we end up cutting it a tad close as there are only a handful of guests that are left unseated. Just before we part, Lord Chestnut leaves me with a courteous, “I guess this is goodbye for now, Violet, as I doubt I’ll be seeing you again tonight, but I hope to see you again in the near future.”

“It was a great pleasure meeting you, Lord Chestnut. Hope to see you soon as well.”

I take my seat right next to King Gale, which is also across from the Queen, who is still with her companion from earlier. Once seated, it takes about a quarter of an hour for the servants to each make their way around the vast elongated table to serve everyone. Once everything is

set, King Gale stands up and gives somewhat of a toast thanking everyone for coming. He concludes by saying that it is an honor for his special guest to be present. The statement can't help but make me blush and look down when his gaze fixes upon me. It's annoying to be made a fuss over. The Queen from the corner of my eye definitely has a sour expression, but I do my best to not look over or make eye contact. The best thing to do is ignore it and apologize tomorrow.

Once finished it strikes me rather odd how King Gale didn't give any mentions of thanks to our gracious Lord. Now that I am supposed to be an authority in the church, this is the perfect time to take it upon myself as a divine being to correct that.

"I would just like to add in one more thing, King Gale. You forgot to thank God for our blessings."

"Oh, how clumsy of me, dear. Surely, we couldn't eat without saying thanks to him, and of course thanks to God, everyone."

He ends with a smirk on his face. The Queen, meanwhile, has calmed down and sits across with a stone face. Everyone else seems to have a look of approval of the toast and of my statement, which is accompanied by their gentle clapping. Are you satisfied with me, Lord?

I'm happy I could fulfill my role. I haven't done much this first day, but small steps soon will lead to something bigger like with the younglings tomorrow. The actual dinner turned out to be enjoyable as the food was simply ambrosial. It was a three-course meal that started off with a deep, dark-brown stew so murky you couldn't identify what was in it, but was quite good. After that, the main course was served, which happened to be some unidentifiable bird too small to be a chicken. It was cooked in some peculiar fashion called a glaze; it too was delicious. Lastly, to wrap it all up, each guest was served some decadent sweet tart which I could recognize as being filled with blueberries. The company, however, sadly didn't match up as well as the food...

The whole thing can be summarized as me being the invisible observer as the Queen gossiped haughtily to her friend, all the while King Gale was putting away abhorrent quantities and quantities of food.

As great as they all surely are, the atmosphere felt a bit unpleasant. Literally, my head could have sprouted wings and flown off and neither would have given the absurd moment any thought. It's a shame that Lord Chestnut and I couldn't continue our little chit chat, but one shouldn't be so greedy with a good thing. His wife surely wants to spend the rest of the night with him as do others. When everything is all said and done, King Gale gets up one last time and gives an ending toast, which was nearly identical to the first barring my little add-on. Most of the guests depart after the meal while making sure not to leave without first giving their parting adieus to King Gale.

The only few that remain, I assume, still have some sort of business left or will be staying here at the castle tonight. There really isn't very much for me to do at this point, and I am dreadfully tired. I approach King Gale with an intent of saying my goodbyes, trying to put on a thankful face despite a mask of drowsiness. I start off with a curtsy before opening with my statement.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for the ambrosial food and the unbelievable party. I'm starting to feel a tad drowsy, so I'm going to be excusing myself to my chamber for the night, thank you again."

"I'm glad to hear you enjoyed the festivities, but I'm sorry there is actually one last thing you need to attend to. It won't take much longer. Please try to bear through it."

One last thing, I guess, won't hurt, but continuing when the night is in a lull is so tedious, though it would be best to not go against His Majesty's orders.

"Surely, whatever does His Majesty have in mind?"

"Oh, it's a surprise. Hindred will escort you," he states as he points to the servant presently helping with the cleanup.

I turn to approach him ever curious as to what this will be, leaving King Gale with what seems to be a small grin on his flushed face. Hindred shows us back into the castle. We twist and swerve through the infinite number of gloomy passages and halls. I try to make small talk, but every exchange is very short and to the point. This doesn't create a sense that he dislikes me, but it's clear he definitely wants nothing to

really do with this task. It's probably for the same reason as everyone else leaving that party. It's late and he just wants to finish his work and get some rest. So, the questions decidedly stop flowing out of my mouth and instead begin to fill my thoughts. Whatever is the surprise? Maybe flowers, maybe a pet, maybe even some jewelry? Even though William's necklace is all I'll ever need as I hold it now in my hand inspecting the silver piece. The thoughts have made me jittery, nothing like coming here or meeting the King and Queen themselves, but a hint of it.

The servant comes to an immediate abrupt halt. We have arrived at our destination after quite the walk. Hindred doesn't show me into the room; instead, he informs me to wait inside. Once said, with no wasted time, he departs to be gone with the night, leaving me almost stranded in this maze. I take a turn of the knob and slowly push the door open to reveal, to my disappointment, nothing but a bedroom. A rather regal bedroom to be more exact as the bedding has been done in a similar fashion to the interior of the royal carriages. There are no seats, so unsure of what to do, I take a seat on the edge of the rather large bed with an awkward feeling.

The silk covers feel nice, but on the other hand the whole thing just doesn't sit well, being here all alone in the dark. If this is what the King has asked for, there is no way around it though, so I sit and linger. Surely once the surprise is revealed, the whole thing will lose this sense of uneasiness. The worst part has to be the darkness; the second would have to be the waiting. If the result is something good then the latter usually isn't that bad and can be easily dealt with.

Comparable to an eerie phantom emerging from the shadows of the night, the slow creaking of the opening door finally happens. Appearing through the doorway is, as expected, King Gale, carrying with him a lit candle. Staggering in, he rests the candle on the nearside nightstand and proceeds to accompany me on the bed. He happens to sit just a little too close for comfort. Because of this, I decide to shift over a tad. Still no words out of him. The situation leaves a weird feeling. It's a bit uncanny.

“Ugh, King Gale, is it finally time for that surprise that I have been so looking forward to?”

“All in dueged time’s de (hiccup) dear.”

The realization hits me that King Gale has indulged in even more wine than before. His drunkenness has achieved new heights for tonight. I want to try and put a positive spin on this and try and work through to the surprise, but another part of me desperately wants to leave and just receive it in the morning. Overall, I decide to stay and entertain him slightly so as to not be rude before leaving.

“Okay, then what do you want to do before then?”

“Just taks, so so hows are youz liking it heres so far?”

“I like it very much, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, don’t give me any of that horseshit. What do you really think!”

“I really do like it though. The people seem friendly, everyone has been so nice. The banquet was lovely.”

“Don’t lie to me! I see how the Queen loazes you. There won’t be any rep-percush-ieons if you don’ts justs because I’m the King I swa I swwears.”

Like the prick from a wasp, the statement stings a little. The Queen and I have simply just gotten off on the wrong foot. It’s doubtable that she even dislikes me enough to use the word loathes. Next time I see her, I’ll make an effort to clear up any misunderstanding, and it will all be like water under the bridge. Secondly, with the raising of his voice, this conversation has taken a harsh turn to the left, to which I have no intention of entertaining. I shouldn’t have to tend to a grown man so consumed by drink.

“No, I believe that the Queen and I have just gotten off on the wrong foot and that it will get patched up, and I most certainly do like it here,” I say in an assertive tone, but failing to raise my voice leaves the desired effect falling flat.

I proceed to stand up to try and depart and bid an over-the-shoulder farewell, when after one step I can feel it viciously impeding my movement. A forceful tug on my right wing sends me plummeting back towards the bed. With my wing in shooting pain, he says,

“It’s a little rudez to tries and miss (hiccup) out on da surprise.” He lets out a greedy chuckle.

With his pressure now off the bed I’m unable to see what he is doing as I’m on my stomach with my face in the comforter. The pain in my wing is deep and seething mainly at the junction where it meets my back. I’m able to tell that nothing is broken and is most likely something that will heal. Finally working through it enough, I am able to sit back up and to my dismay, Lord Gale has stripped. I quickly turn my head back into the covers as a reflex.

“Now that isn’t very nice, Violet, you’ll (hiccup) you’ll makes mees self-conscious abouts mies body if you kep that ups,” he says in a joking manner.

He continues. “It’s times to lets you in on the sur surprise. Of course, I brought you here to be the spiritual leader of our people. The hidden fact is that I also brought you here so I could experienceses your body and soos you too could have the luxury of experiencing mines.”

“What do you mean by experiencing your body? Please, Lord Gale, I just wish to leave. I beg of you, I just want to go to sleep.”

Tears roll softly down my cheeks while fear rushes through my veins. I’m still in terrible pain. I try one last time to stagger towards the door and finally learn my lesson after another swift tug, this time on my left wing, sends me crashing back down.

The pain is now completely unbearable as it now feels like my entire upper middle back is holding a bed of fiery coals. This, coupled with a rough stinging pain in my kneecaps and forearm from landing on the unforgiving hard stone floor, only adds to it. This time he grabs and pulls me back up roughly with a full clench of my hair. I’m up on my knees now with my eyes forced upon his floppy fat midsection. Seeing this sight with its full might, I shut my eyes tight while simultaneously giving out a shriek in pain.

“Do you hate me, Violet?”

The fear is at its peak now. What is he going to do to me? Am I going to die? Why is this happening? I get lost in the flurry of emotions and don’t even notice the question.

“Do you hate me, Violet?”

“No, King Gale, I don’t hate you.”

“I’m sure after this you will, but I know in my heart that soon enough you are going to embrace this and come to love me. Now like a good whore, open your eyes and suck, suck like your life depends on it.”

I don’t dare say no. My fear won’t allow it. Instead, I just kneel unresponsively trying to imagine that the things unfolding before me aren’t real. With an angel weeping her tears though, they indeed are. Suddenly I feel a strong strike on my head and with a natural reflex, I open my eyes. Before I can even react, another hard strike comes again and as an instinct to live, I begin to suck on the object before me.

Hot tears flood my eyes. Everything is a blur. The once floppy object stiffens, making it difficult to keep up. At this point it is just more coughing on the unknown extremity than sucking. Why is this happening? What does he even gain from this? God, please, just please, someone save me. Only a brute tortures an innocent girl, but alas, the awful torture goes on for what seems like an eternity. Seemingly forsaken, this monster's chest is devoid of a soul, let alone a heart. With no end in sight, this dark world only consists of sucking and the occasional sparring break of desperately gasping for air before being shoved back on.

In a sudden moment, his muscles and body tense; suddenly and disgustingly, my mouth fills with a sour-tasting goo that I immediately cough up in a violent fit. I feel violated, forsaken, and just down right awful everywhere. The worst part of it all, my completely shattered spirit. Through my downcast eyes I see that King Gale’s legs fly up as he groggily falls back onto the bed, signaling that the nightmarish trauma is over. One final time he tells me I did a good job tonight as his personal whore. I don’t know what it means, but with the tears fading only because there is no more water to be wept tonight. Whatever it is, sadly I’m a worthless one at that.

# Chapter 7

It’s been a few days since the unmentionable event took place. The horrific reminder is still and forever will be etched into the back of my mind. At least it is all over now and I’m out of harm’s way. That’s all that matters, right? Right? After the party, no major events have occurred these past couple of days, which I guess is good? The focus has just been on studying and learning what I need to know about the church, which is what brings me to the church’s underbelly today as I sit here studying with Father John. He compliments me on how nicely my reading and writing have been progressing so far, but I still have a way to go, especially with my handwriting itself.

Still, there was one small mercy over these past few days. The younglings did come back for a visit, and their faces were the embodiment of pure joy when they received their warm meals and nice baths. It did the heart good, and it was a desperately needed lift to my spirits given what happened. Once my usual studying with Father John was over, the rest of the day I was able to play and talk with them to my heart’s content. While time was limited, we did end up making the most of it. From the conversations I was able to find out a bit more about them.

My initial guesses were unfortunately confirmed true. They are indeed young orphans without a place to call home, simply heartbreaking. I asked Father John if they had any extra space at the church, but with a sorrowful expression he explained again that all the space was currently being used up. He informed me further that even if it weren’t, it would obviously go to me since it’s already a big deal that the spiritual leader of the church itself isn’t living there. It is being tolerated only because I’m currently staying with His Majesty King Gale and the Queen. It’s unfortunate; however, that does not mean that the search to find them a home is over just yet. Even though I haven’t seen Sir Dalibor since the party, which is odd, we’ll see what he can do about

the whole situation. Surely, he can do something given his position in court.

But that is for a later time. After wrapping up our brief history lesson for today on the kingdom, Father John escorts me up into the main hall of the church and ceremoniously passes me on to the two guards who will be escorting me back to the castle for the day. We depart and make our way at a brisk pace up the long roads and corridors in back. After about half an hour we find ourselves at the heart of the hustling and bustling opening square. The two guards are not especially talkative, as they speak only when spoken to, and even then, keep the interactions short. With my duties taken care of for the day, the rest of the time before the sun falls is mine to spend at my leisure. With that in mind, the goal for the rest of the day will be to pick out some food and possibly some better clothes to provide to the younglings for their next visit to the church.

It has rained the past couple days, but today, Lady Luck is on our side as the weather has taken a turn for the better and has really let up. There are only a few clouds in the sky, and overall, it's a nice day. The first store we come upon is one of the many bakeries within the square. It has slightly more age to it as can be seen through the faded color in the stones of the facade, but that's even more a reason to go in as with age comes experience. Plus, one of the guards was the one who suggested it. He says that the owner is a family friend, and he swears strongly by their sweets. He piqued my interest with that one as it sweetened the errand. As soon as our feet are through the door, the guard whose name still sadly escapes me sees the owner and immediately makes his way to the counter to speak with him. They start chatting animatedly, discussing normal things I assume one discusses with people they haven't seen in a while. How's the family? How's the bakery? Easy conversation with a pleasant touch of warmth.

The other guard soon follows, wanting to be a part of the festive fun, giving me currently a lull in my protection. I mean, not like it is necessary though, the people of the capital all seem so nice and righteous. Why I even need an escort in the first place is beyond me.

With that brief thought out of the way, I turn my attention to the alluring sweets at hand. In small moments like these still the unanticipated question of what the Lyttons are currently up to and what we will discuss when we see each other again pops in. A small bit of melancholy grips my heart, but the thought of bringing the Lyttons here soon dispels it. I imagine their faces before the bewildering display of jewel-bright berries and pastries unlike any we knew at home. With all this splendid selection, it is rather ironic how disappointing it is. The main reason I came here was to grab bread for the younglings with dessert being relegated to just an afterthought. So, because of this, I must make the difficult decision of choosing just one.

Finally, after some hard consideration, I come to a decision and choose a nice-looking yellow-filled one that is called a lemon pastry according to the label. Embarrassingly, I made the choice based purely on color. It looked the brightest, so that of course makes it the best. The nice baker still happens to be chatting with the guard, so the nice older lady who is probably his wife helps me out instead. She packages up the bread and pastry exotically, with many folds in such a way that it will be quite a shame to unwrap eventually. When everything is all said and packed, unexpectedly the lady says to me.

“So, you are the angel I have been hearing all the rumors about?”

The statement strikes me with curiosity. I don’t really like the attention, but her warm face tells me that she’s just trying to be positive.

“Yes, ma’am.”

At first, I restrain myself. I don’t want to be flashy or to inspire any uncanny gazes. After a brief moment to recollect myself, I lift my right leg up slightly and twirl around on my left, showing off my wings and the stunning green floral dress I’m wearing.

She flashes a bright smile at the show of my enthusiasm. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you, dear.”

“Violet, ma’am.”

She beams. “Violet, what a nice name for a young woman. I do hate to trouble you while you are a guest in our humble shop, but could you do me the honor of blessing me?”

I return her smile. “Gladly.”

Just like how Father John showed me yesterday, I take my left hand with my thumb between my index and ring finger, forming it into a fist to begin the ritual. From there, I take the thumb and run it down the middle of her wrinkled forehead down to the tip of her pointy nose, saying, “Lord, bless your daughter and grant her peace and happiness. Amen.”

While still retaining her enthusiasm, she thanks me and hands me my baked goods with a joyous farewell and an invitation to come again. I walk back over to the guards who, upon seeing me finished with my purchases, begin to wrap things up. As they take a few last moments to say their goodbyes, something catches my nose for a moment. It’s subtle, like the fresh dew leftover from the previous day’s rain, yet beneath lies something darker as it is also woodsy, with a note of aged spirits. In a flash, it’s gone and I’m not quite sure what’s happened. Somehow the moment skipped ahead. The guards have wrapped up with the shop’s owner, and they stand attentively now, staring slightly amused. I shake my head a bit, get my bearings, and start walking out as we move on to the next store.

We work through the list, shop by shop. When everything has been attended to throughout the day, the checklist reads as follows; we have gone to the chandler, the baker, and the tailor. Yet through it all, besides the pastry from the bakery, I leave with nothing of my own. The errand’s real goal was to mainly pick up food and clothing for the younglings as well as the things Father John instructed me to fetch along the way. That brings us to our current and final task now.

Yesterday upon telling Father John that I would be running these errands, he told me that since I would be in the area anyway, he wanted me to pick up a bottle of the ceremonial gold wine we serve during mass. Supposedly it can only be bought by a member of the church or crown, so since I’m free and meet the requirements, I might as well be useful to our cause. Interestingly, in an unforeseen event when we arrived, we were informed by the brewers that the barrel of the ceremonial wine had accidentally fallen and spilled while being

unloaded. They said they'd get a batch ready as soon as they could, but that we would be leaving empty-handed for the day.

So, the last leg of the trip was just a lazy stroll with nothing to show. It was, however, a most enjoyable day, so the last part, while bad news, doesn't detract from it. It was nice getting to see more of the city despite the company being of the silent sort. The best part would have to be the friendliness people show me by either smiling at me or saying hello as we have made our way about today. It's weird. Normally attention isn't really something that I desire but experiencing the warmth from everyone in the capital somehow tempers my discomfort. When we get to the church, the area is mostly empty, the result of no masses today coupled with the priests having the day off. Upon seeing and greeting Father John, I ask if the younglings had shown up yet.

In an uninteresting manner, he said that a single visitor has come in today. This didn't strike me as odd upon hearing it, but now as I sit in the dimly candle-lit altar on one of the chairs for the accompanying side priests during mass, I can't help but worry that possibly something has happened to the younglings. It has been about a full hour, and yet there is still no sign. It throws me into a state of melancholy despite it being such a pleasant day until now. Thoughts of what could have happened dance in my mind, slowly creeping toward darker corners until I realize it's the capital. From what I have seen, the people here are rather nice, just a step behind the Lyttons. If they have gotten into any trouble at all, someone would have certainly helped them out. Eventually, after waiting two hours, it is time to leave… defeated. Before I leave, though, I go and mention the fact that the wine order will be delayed. Father John mutters something in a sharp way under his breath and tells me it's alright. He has some clear angst on his face. It is not directed towards me, just in general.

Father John already has the habit of making sure to tell me if I have disappointed him so that I can correct it later. As I turn and take a few steps in the opposite direction, Father John calls out to me.

"Violet, wait. You did come all this way; there is something you should really do as I sense your spirit is clearly troubled."

With some surprise in my voice, I reply, “What, Father?”

He ends up introducing me to a woman who he calls the church’s healer. It comes as a surprise since I thought I was the only woman around here. Supposedly, she is Sister Jessica, the church’s midwife and the one who takes care of the sick if they come to the church’s doorstep. Father John states that she is supposed to do some work on me so I can be rejuvenated from any stress sustained while here.

She approaches me. “You look slightly unwell, child. You are clearly vexed.”

Hesitating a brief second, I say, “I do? That’s surprising. I’ve felt perfectly fine today.”

She nods her head sideways with conviction before she reaches out her hand towards my face. I don’t know what comes over me as I slightly flinch and grab a handful of my dress tensely with my right hand. I was feeling just fine before the cold sensation works its way down the side of my face.

“No, child, something is clearly off. You’re fine because your body has fought it off, but it has expended a great deal of energy in doing so. Take this. It will relax and heal you.”

She reaches off to the side and comes back, extending a cup of some herbal drink. I take a few healthy sips, and in moments, I melt down into the chair off to the side. She begins to work her hands over my wings. My mind is still in doubt, but deep down, I know everything probably worked out with the younglings.

# Chapter 8

With time flying away, I blame this wild maze of a castle for my current predicament. The Queen will most certainly let her displeasure hang… then be known, because not everyone was there on time for her generous garden luncheon. Of course I tried my best to arrive on time, honestly, but it just seems luck currently isn't on my side. As I take my brisk elongated steps, my mind trails off to what the view will be like from the Queen's special terrace overlooking the garden. There will be some slight discomfort from my misstep during the event, but at least the view should be exquisite. Hopefully, it makes things better, if only slightly.

It was supposed to take place on the second castle level within the left wing; however, only knowing the direction and not the specific turns has made me the jester. As all seems lost, the Lord, in his benevolent nature, seems to have gifted me a gracious helping hand. A male servant with curious narrow shoulders, a full beard, and a bit of age has come across my path like a wise sage.

With the practiced regal air of a palace attendant, he says, "Lady Violet, good afternoon," finishing the statement with a proper bow.

I reciprocate the gesture with a friendly curtsey. "Good afternoon."

With a bit of shock, he responds, "I'm not a lord, Lady Violet. I would advise you not to do that again."

"We are all children in the eyes of the Lord, sir."

He pauses and looks like he is about to say something but decides midway that it isn't important, it seems. He then looks off to the side for a brief glance then back at me. "Excuse my assumptions, milady, but are you at all lost?"

Unashamedly, I respond, "Yes, if it isn't trouble, would you be able to help me out? I'm looking to make my way over to the Queen's luncheon."

By a stroke of luck and through the Lord's good grace, he's on his way over to the luncheon himself. With a polite smile, he motions for me to follow him to the terrace. Adding to his goodwill even further, he

reaches into his left coat pocket and hands me a few mints that he has on hand. I don't really care for the taste, but they're sweet and the gesture is too. This turn of fortune foretells that today is going to be a good day now despite the early troubles.

We step out onto the terrace, and he announces my arrival. "Now presenting Lady Violet."

I give the appropriate introductory curtsey with added depth almost as a form of apology. If I'm truly sorry, I doubt that a few minutes really bothered the Queen. I proceed to sit down and can't help noticing that the Queen has this peculiar look as if she is pondering something. This goes on for a bit while the kind servant whose name still escapes me serves me and the two other women besides the Queen our tea. One of the women is easily discerned as the friend from the royal feast, while the other is an unknown woman with much age and character in her skin. She wears a regal air befitting a queen mixed with the shrewd eye that I have only had the pleasure of seeing in Sir Dalibor.

With a stiff back, the servant announces to the group, "I shall be departing, Your Majesty. If a need does arise, please ring, and you shall have me back at once."

With the servant departing, Elizabeth pays no mind and barely registers the event. She is still stuck pondering whatever it is, and you can tell it's really hard by the few little grooves and indents etched into her forehead.

Turning her attention towards me, she remarks, "Do you think you're special or something?"

"What?"

"Gosh, child, you are making me repeat myself? Do, you, think, you're special?"

The question is dreadfully confusing. She's bothered by the slight tardiness, but the specific point of her question is unclear. I take a brief moment to think as the breeze blows by.

Thinking back to Father John's teachings from the day prior, I think I have my answer. "Yes and no, I wouldn't call myself special, but everyone is special in the eyes of the Lord."

I obviously didn't understand the question because the Queen's face has an eyebrow cocked upward now higher than the noon sun, but what did she really expect by asking vague questions like that?

The older woman chimes in, "Well, that little altercation was quite amusing, but you really should just move on, Elizabeth. You're a fool if you expect the expected from unexpected creatures. And, Violet, a lady is always on time. Don't let it happen again."

Like a calligrapher with their brush, she has an unusual way with words. Given her air and the look in her eyes, it's not the least bit surprising. Elizabeth gives a slight glance at the garden and doesn't address the remark. I wonder what the relationship between this Queen of Hearts and Queen of Clubs truly is. With the moment subsiding, she and the Queen's friend now take the opportunity to both introduce themselves. The Queen of Hearts being Judith, and the chubby friend from the feast before being Paula. However, as the conversation begins to meander downstream, I am yet again subjugated to the duty of the silent observer. At least it is interesting listening this time, given how skillfully Judith juggles the conversation between Elizabeth and Paula.

To break up the monotony, I take a few careful glances at the garden down below. The assortment of colors really stands out; seeing it from above is remarkable. From the purple shades to the right to the red shades to the left and everything in between, I understand I'm fortunate for this experience. With my final glance, my ears do perk up in an instant as the conversation has shifted from gossip to something more enlightening.

Despite the intrigue I'm unable to follow given my lack of knowledge on the subjects. All that can be discerned from it is that they're currently touching on topics of trade with other kingdoms and the taxation rate, which Judith advises Queen Elizabeth to hold steady despite Lord Gale constantly raising it. Finally, and surprisingly, the conversation does make its turn towards me.

With a slight smile out of the corner of her lips, the Queen says, "So, Violet, you little flower."

A soft smile appears on my face at the little description.

“I heard quite the story about you. Supposedly your pet-als got a bit shook?”

Elizabeth holds the end of shook, enunciating the K hard. She knows about the incident with the King? My heart starts to constrict, my lungs feel like they are drowning, and I grab my dress tightly with my right hand. No, how could she possibly know about that nightmare? If she did not, though, then why did she say it in such an odd way? Only a truly cruel person would press against such a wound. Since I arrived here, there has been an icy chill to the Queen, and I just don’t know why. I know in my heart that we could have a beautiful relationship if things between us could just be worked out.

I have done such a good job so far of protecting my sanity by pushing those gruesome memories aside. The fear is beginning to seep back into my once calm mind. With a listless stare and utter quietness on my face, the moment sits, and there is a long pause between the four of us. This creates a satisfied look on her majesty’s face while the others now seem intrigued by this tempting morsel of gossip.

Eagerly, the Queen continues, “I heard from King Gale that you had quite the fall about a week ago. Someone had just a little too much wine that night and couldn’t help stumbling down the stairs making her way back.”

Judith chimes in, “Honestly, Elizabeth, you need a better handle on this girl. This falls on your shoulders. Unsurprisingly for a country girl, she is rough around the edges, but I’m disappointed you haven’t taught her proper etiquette yet.”

Elizabeth’s face turns crookedly from satisfaction to a slight disgust after getting lectured by Judith, like she has sipped on some bad wine. Judith’s statement stings my way as well as I feel she has insulted the Lyttons somewhat. If it wasn’t for the thought of that vile man’s hands on me that forsaken night creating rampant chills down my back, there would be a polite rebuttal defending them. Instead, I continue to sit in silence, detached. The whelming gloom grows in my mind.

The only silver lining about this moment is that the Queen didn’t reveal the actual truth, so maybe and hopefully she doesn’t know. To

keep the lull from permanently setting in, the ladies move on to other topics of conversation. The time comes and goes, and yet again, despite my chance to contribute something, I leave the page blank. Just another example of being unable to truly connect with people while here. Despite the lack of friends so far in the capital, I don't really mind it. In my heart I believe I'm a kind and likable person, at least someone worth tolerating. I'm sure in no time I'll have my own social circle sitting about chatting about our own affairs.

The best thing for now is to just watch the clouds drift about the calm sky. They have no real shape, only exquisite fluff. It almost makes a person or, well, an angel, wish they could fly. Finally, with much time having passed, the main reason for this luncheon comes about as the food arrives now. In a rare sight, a girl who seems to be around my age serves the food instead of the previous servant. She is on the taller side, with a slim oval face framed by beautiful dark curls that fall to her shoulders. If I wasn't already in love with my own long white locks, those would be the locks I'd want for my own.

She doesn't say anything and her presence to the others is barely noticed as she sets down each plate in front of us. For each lady, nothing more than a small salad stands on the plate. From there our wine glasses are filled to the brim. The Queen makes a jest at my expense about going easy on the wine. I give a small laugh, as do the others, and try to push the thought aside before it vexes my mind further. Out of habit, I clutch my dress again tightly with my right hand. When the girl finishes, I make sure to mind my manners and give her a sincere thank you. An expression of gratitude appears on her face, and Judith follows up with a thank you as well. Meanwhile, Paula and Elizabeth are in a debate over some unknown Lord's recent scandal.

The girl leaves unnoticed even by me. If I am nothing but a ghost, that girl was nothing but a passing breeze. With the finishing of the paltry food, the luncheon has finally concluded with both the Queen and Judith having affairs they need to attend to. We all get up, give the proper goodbyes according to proper capital etiquette, and make our way back into the castle. As we depart, my mind goes back, dwelling on

the small interactions the Queen and I had. Most definitely, she seemed to be in an unpleasantly bad mood, even for her, I hate to say it. I won't blame her fully for her maliciousness. She should give more leniency to a guest, but I'll concede that I was late today. Things have just gotten off to a rocky start; even the most jagged mountains become sand with enough time.

Unfortunately, with the Queen and her friend having broken off with the previous fork and Judith doing the same just now, inevitably I fall back into Lady Luck's hands. As I walk about figuring out which way to go, a simple yet satisfying thought happens to cross my mind. That, of course, is to try and find that servant girl from earlier and hopefully make my first friend here. Sir Dalibor doesn't count; he's a guardian. It is tricky of course not knowing my way around that well, but luckily enough I run into another servant yet again. This one a younger man, though he is still with some age about him. He has dark black hair and stands about average for height. He has a friendly demeanor like the previous servant.

With a generous bow, he goes, "Lady Violet, good afternoon."

I respond with a small curtsy. He gives a somewhat awkward smile, and a brief silence sets in.

To fill in the empty space, I request, "If it isn't trouble, would you be able to escort me to where the kitchen is?"

"Of course, milady."

With a few twists and turns, the time goes fast when you know where you are going. When we come upon it, the kitchen is huge and extravagant when compared to the Lyttons' simple one in the cottage. With many pots and pans hanging across the room and stacks of fancy ceramic tableware prepared all around it, the kitchen almost seems like an absurd waste of space considering what the Lyttons can accomplish with so little. Since lunch was rather light and no one else besides some Lords and the King would need lunch, the kitchen is in fact desolate except for a few hands. One of them is the servant girl from before.

I try to approach meekly so as not to give off the wrong impression as to not suggest there was any trouble with the lunch. It is unneeded,

though, as she is currently talking to another kitchen hand completely unaware of my presence. I kindly interject, asking the other hand if I could possibly talk to her for a bit. He easily obliges, saying he should be getting back to work anyway. Taking the hint, he quickly darts off.

Taking my chance, I introduce myself. “Hello, nice to meet you. I am Violet.”

With a tad bit of surprise, she responds, “Pleasure to meet you, milady. Please don’t think me rude, milady, but even if you haven’t formally met them, all the servants within the castle already know who you are. So, there is no need for introductions. But I am still grateful to make your acquaintance.”

How embarrassing. “Oh, well, please don’t let their words sway you; treat me as you would anyone else.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t,” she says with a tone that is mixed with conviction yet not rebellious.

“Please, it would really bother me if you didn’t, Miss?”

“It is Gina, Lady Violet. Forgive my curiosity, but why is it that you have come to speak with me?”

It is a tad bit strange that this whole visit and interruption isn’t private as the kitchen staff blatantly can’t help keeping an ear peeled towards the conversation. Although that would normally be considered rude, I guess everyone can’t help doing strange things from time to time.

“Nothing in particular. I just wanted the pleasure of introducing myself and meeting you. There isn’t any other woman around our age within the castle.”

Upon hearing the statement, she realizes that it is of course a peculiar request, though she does seem flattered.

“I have never heard of a servant befriending a Lord or Lady before, milady. I mean, Violet.”

The notion puts a comedic smile on my face and draws a slight giggle from me. “I mean, a bit uncommon, I’m sure, but I don’t see why it never could have happened before.”

It seems we are alone now that the other hands have just left. Since the one man from before talked about getting back to work, they most

likely had other errands to attend to. Regardless of the reason, it has currently given us the chance to speak more privately. To think that this girl and I could possibly bloom into one of the most beautiful flowers of all, friendship. This day has done a great job of supplying me with many flowers to gaze upon, and yet friendship has been the rarest bloom.

# Chapter 9

With the transition of spring into summer, new life is transitioning into full bloom. Little birds have grown and are starting to leave the nest. The temperature has picked up with no signs of slowing down. The hot and humid air of late calls for a lot more open-back, sleeveless dresses. This isn't bad, as it helps let the wings breathe, giving my body the freedom it has been looking for this past winter.

The conditions rekindle memories of Mrs. Lytton concocting her sweet mint cold tea. It was always a splendid treat once William and I had finished our daily chores in the fields during the summer. To this day I have never had any food or beverage that has quite been able to match its taste. Even the delicacies of the capital fail to match its crisp sweetness.

Today I decided to adorn myself in a lovely backless light indigo dress, Mr. Lytton's pink slippers, and, as usual, William's necklace. With each article of clothing coming together, a familiar sensation almost envelops me now from the sense of nostalgia. The chilly, crisp sweetness hits the tip of my tongue for just a moment in memory. I close my eyes and relish the moment, perhaps a little too long.

I'm unsure of what the time is, but after the lessons from Father John it is definitely far into the day. As I sit with subtle boredom, I do wish I had some sort of plans for the rest of it. Well, at least there is time to spend. Whatever way in which it is used will be far better than another boring dinner with the few Lords and Ladies visiting the castle. It pains me to say it because it's quite a mean statement, but it is the truth of the matter, sadly. Luckily, because the King has gone on a hunting trip and the Queen prefers her personal space, such a dinner won't be happening tonight.

Maybe this would be an opportunity to visit Sir Dalibor since he has been scarce around these parts since the royal feast. Most likely he didn't join on the hunting trip as he doesn't seem like one for sport. The only issue is that I don't know where I would even begin to look high

and low for him through this maze of a castle. As I sit and ponder more about how to proceed, it crosses my mind that it is really such a shame that Gina has the day off. When last we spoke, I'd suggested we pass an hour in one another's company, but she already had plans of spending it with her family.

I wish it weren't the case. It is a selfish desire, of course, and not one I would ever truly wish upon her. It would have been nice seeing her again considering how well things went a few days ago. It wasn't long, yet it felt like the right amount of time, just one go around the garden, which delighted her since she had never gotten the chance as just a kitchen hand. We talked about a few things, mainly about ourselves, like the foods we favored, the chores we hated most, and the little dreams we were embarrassed to admit aloud. We did surprisingly almost get on the subject of gossip. While harmless, it did make me feel a bit awkward talking about others in such a way, so after a few bits here and there, we moved into other things.

Overall, it was a good time and such a treat since this place seems to be devoid of young women. Surely, though, new friends will be coming in the future; patience here is the key. Reflection only does so much to alleviate the boredom and conundrum of what to do. Some time passes with just the simple enjoyment of staring off into space and pondering things. That is, until a soft meow rings out and evidently a cat is off to the side. The unexpected visitor, covered in black except for its little left paw, comes up and greets me gently.

"Hello, Mr. Kitty."

The little creature hops up onto the windowsill and brushes smoothly against my resting elbow. In response, I softly stroke it from its head to its back in a repeated motion. In no time at all a new little friend has appeared. When it rains, it pours, or so they say. Keep a good outlook and the storm will subside, and you will be illuminated by the Lord's gold beams of sunshine. The time eases by quickly as the cat and I play around or as it gently rubs up against me. Only idle thoughts drift through my mind, as they often do. Nothing to really write about, just

living within the moment. Mr. Lytton used to always say those were the best moments, and he was right.

Things go well, though not all the storm clouds have been dissipated. A familiar sensation of butterflies in my stomach arises as I remember that there will be a special social event in a few days. I haven't been told what it entails. At least Father John's lesson will be cut short. Which reminds me, with my knowledge growing, I wanted to try and read a book on my own for the first time.

The book is called Sunset of the Faeries. I don't know much about it, but I got it from Sir Dalibor the other day on one of his rare visits. After we finished our brief walk through the garden, he handed it to me with his usual aloof composure.

Afterwards, he said, "It's a bit of an old book and not well-known, but a bit of a special tale. The story was an oral tradition for a long time until someone had decided it was worth having written down. Some of the details, I'm sure, have shifted through time, but there is a bit to learn there."

I thanked him with much appreciation for the gift. Shortly after, he departed, saying he had to attend to some capital council business.

There are a few words that are still unfamiliar, so I don't get far, though it is a good read. The premise is that there is a flourishing faerie kingdom. Peaceful, prosperous, and secluded, they have built themselves up high within the mountains as a neighboring kingdom to the surrounding human lands. The tale has barely begun, yet it has already revealed one curious piece of mythos in that faeries are thought to be reincarnations of humans.

A brief passage from the book reads, "Green grass, brown dirt, mixed mostly with grey rocks. The kingdom lay high on top of the mightiest mountain overlooking the lands. With plentiful wealth in their hands and an ethereal-like command of the skies, they were the great envy of their neighbors to the south, east, and west. Though with gentle ways and eternally echoing songs, ones that could turn the most envious ears friendly, peace was held through the land for many centuries."

Quite interesting. I wonder if faeries and angels have any relation? As night has slowly crept in, I'll pick the book back up later. Meanwhile, Mr. Kitty left some time ago to scamper off into the night. There's a feeling in my heart that he'll be back again, so it doesn't sadden me. With one final turn and flip of a page, I put the book down and decide to get something to eat before bedtime. The upcoming festivities still leave me a bit vexed, but I know it's just in my mind and everything will probably work out.

# Chapter 10

It officially marks the second time the unspeakable atrocity has happened. After the first, I was naive enough to believe that it wouldn't happen again. Now, with clear eyes, as I ride alongside Sir Dalibor and the two guards steering the carriage, it's all too easy to see the circumstances of this reality are all too harsh and forsaking. My body feels worthless and vile. My world is in pain. Even seeing Sir Dalibor does nothing to make things better. I'm naturally an optimist, yet I know there's nothing left to hope for.

It is rather ordinary that there isn't much conversation as we ride along. Despite this normalcy, the carriage almost seems as if the air has been sucked out. Unusual given his nature, Sir Dalibor does try to make some effort at small talk. Possibly he sees the signs that I don't have it in me today to kindle it myself. For now, though, things lie silent. He just stares out the window, lost in thought. I, on the other hand, have my eyes fixated on the ground, specifically the little space of wood between the dark blue carpet and the purple cushioned seat.

Only once does my gaze shift out the window. There's nothing worth noting except a slumped man who happens to be doing some sort of hard physical labor. Since nothing catches my interest, I avert my eyes back to the floor and don't peer out again. It is inevitable that with no other distraction to think about, my thoughts sit on the tragedy that transpired last night. I'm not going to get into specific details. I will say, though, that I was too horrified to sleep a wink and that a two-hour bath this morning did little to make me feel clean again.

As for what happened, it was an uncannily similar performance to the night of the royal feast in terms of both actions and onslaught. One day he swears, absolutely swears, that I'll crave him back in the same way in how he craves me, how disgusting. From there he says I will then consensually give up my sacred fruit to him. Until that day, he says he'll let me keep it for now. Why is sex even a thing when it is so horrific, so

dominating? Why others would do such a thing for pleasure is unfathomably bizarre.

My mind returns, unwillingly, to the task at hand, since we have almost arrived. Today will be an important day of duty for Sir Dalibor and me. He is supposed to be my chaperone today as I meet with various Lords and Ladies to reconfirm their funding to the church. A straightforward task. Once we are done, we will meet with Father John to preach to the masses in the main square the good word of the Lord. This is to bestow the Lord's wisdom but to also let more people know who I am. It most certainly will be a boring day, it's clear, from gloom soaked into the grey clouds.

With some final clops of the horse's hooves, we have reached our destination at the edge of the city, near but not quite up against the main wall. Once we step out, immediately a lovely attendant comes out to greet us. With no wasted moments she escorts us up the steps into and through the three-story manor. Two notable things easily catch the eye during this. First is how beautiful the attendant is with her flawless youthful skin, sun-kissed in color. Second, despite the manor's height, it lacks ideal width, making it a smaller manor. From the teachings of Father John, this indicates they are only a family of middling standing in the capital. Not surprising, according to Sir Dalibor, besides the Royal family, only three other family branches within the capital are major.

When we reach the lounge area, we are introduced by the woman to a couple whose age is clearly evident by the sag in their faces and the silver gray that consumes their locks. Like a bell ready to toll, it's straight to business as soon as we sit down. With a pleasant change of pace, we are served tea instead of wine, which is rather refreshing and ironically seems more refined. With no shock in the slightest, I let Sir Dalibor handle the bulk of the conversation as usual. Under normal circumstances, I at least would have enjoyed some small talk if it came my way, but I'm in no mood for such a thing today. Nothing more than some sips of tea while listening to dull banter is what my heart is content with. I mean, who cares for all this? Certainly, they don't either.

From the gist of the conversation, even if half of it is coming in while the other half's going out, it's discernible that they are going over recruitment numbers for the army and the overall condition of the wall's foundation. From there, in a shock, it takes a turn of getting even duller when for a good eight minutes, Lord Thickwood just goes through a list of areas that need repair. It isn't only myself who feels this way as Lady Thickwood no doubt would agree, considering she hasn't uttered a word since they both began. We aren't reintroduced into the discussion until the focus gets shifted to the church, making us relevant to them. My eyes are heavy from the lack of sleep. I consider trying to perk up now that I need to talk, but, oh, really, what's the point?

With a look from her husband, Lady Thickwood begins to shift the conversation. "Might we both just say that it truly is an honor for you to be in our home, divine one?"

The statement is utterly shocking and unsettles me. Despite not wanting to, because of it, I do perk up.

In response, I say, "It is nothing really, please don't treat me special. We are all children in the eyes of the Lord."

"Oh, we know, Lady Violet, but we wouldn't dare treat the one who is supposed to usher in a new religious golden age so casually."

I'm glad someone is at least optimistic around here. There have been no successful steps taken towards such a thing while I've been here. The statement feels like a bit of a joke. Reflecting on that day I left the Lyttons, it resonates with the good that I wanted to achieve while here. Maybe I have been too somber today. It is a bit selfish of me. With so little training, though, does me having this pair of decorative white wings really give me the right to be a prophet?

There really isn't a retort for that statement. Sir Dalibor also doesn't seem to care about the comment and without much thought he isn't going to honor it. With that, a graceless silence sets in that kills the conversation for a subtle moment.

Forcing a bright tone, I ask, "Um, so what business are we here to discuss today? I want to do everything I can in my power to help your spirits."

My eye fixates on the decorative yellow flower sitting before me. The thought distracts me from their hearty chuckles. “So earnest you truly are, Lady Violet, but that’s a rare trait nowadays and a good one in fact,” Mr. Thickwood interjects.

His wife adds on, “We appreciate your help, Violet, but we are already devoted followers and have already been saved. We were hoping that you could spread the faith to those, um, well less fortunate and spark a revival.”

“Oh, but I have been to the square before. Maybe everyone there isn’t as devoted a follower as you are, but all seem to be believers.” Sir Dalibor brashly interrupts, “That’s not what... There is business still to attend to. I presume that the offering is ready?”

Sir Dalibor and Mr. Thickwood dismiss themselves, leaving Mrs. Thickwood and me alone to ponder trivial matters with friendly smiles. However trivial the topics may be, they are still hard to create for conversation when the person is unfamiliar. Is it ok to converse about the flower on the table or is that too boring? Is it rude to bring up children? Maybe they never had any but always longed to. No matter what I say, I just know I’m going to mess this up. No, remember the words of Mrs. Lytton. “Violet, you are beautiful on the inside and outside, don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise.” William’s necklace is around my neck giving me strength.

After working myself up the words finally emanate from my throat. “So, what kind of flower is it that you have in the vase there?”

“Oh, that there? That happens to be a daffodil. They are quite a special flower around these parts.”

“I do love flowers. I have been trying to see as many as I can while here. Would you mind sharing how you were able to obtain them?”

“I can’t, dear...”

“...Well, besides the flowers, you have quite the lovely home.”

“Oh, spare me. You don’t have to pretend to be so cheery and nice all the time. Don’t you look down on me.” Her tone tightens up as if it were warm iron cooling down, striking an uneasiness into my heart. It is such a sudden and rash change of demeanor. Maybe it is a misunderstanding.

To calm the moment down, I say, “Surely you jest, Lady Thickwood. I’m not looking down on you. Sincerely, I just want to be your friend.”

“I’ve heard the rumors. Walking around haughtily every day within the tall castle walls. Looking down on everybody, servant and Lady alike. You’re nothing but a wolf in sheep’s clothing pretending not to be the little whore you are and how the city just eats it up. I’ve known Queen Elizabeth for a long time. She offers you her home and that’s how you show your gratitude? You make me sick.”

My heart is in knots and feels like it’s about to burst. The warm sensation in my tear ducts is becoming all too familiar again. No, please, no more tears. The footsteps of what one would assume is Sir Dalibor and Mr. Thickwood are increasing in intensity of sound. With all the strength I can muster, my flaming emotions lock up, and my face goes from the verge of hysteria to a docile expression as cold as the metal on my neck.

“Well, that is all the donations. Be sure to send my regards to Father John.”

Sir Dalibor states, “I’ll be sure to do so.”

Mr. Thickwood turns his attention towards me now and asks, “Oh, Violet, before you go, would you do the honor of blessing us from your hands?”

It’s hard to deny such a request from Mr. Thickwood. As much as the yearning to leave flows through me, I respect it. I easily replicate the time at the bakery with the women. Taking my closed fist with my thumb jutting out between the index and middle finger, I run it down both their foreheads chanting the words, “Bless you, child, in the name of the Lord.” They both thank me with sincere faces of gratitude, but, truthfully, just how much real emotion penetrates through shrouded masks? I depart with the quickest curtsy in recent memory and a walk that gradually picks up pace until finally out of sight it transforms into a jog.

Soon enough it transforms into a run and is the closest to flight I’ve come to in my life. With wings pressed up high and back from the resistance of the wind, I finally reach the carriage doors and slam them

shut behind me. I tell myself I'm strong, I'm friendly, I'm beautiful, I'm not a whore, but the monument of lies falls and comes crashing down on my spirit tenfold. I guarantee it wouldn't have been the case if I hadn't tried to fight it. The all-too-familiar tears of last night come rolling in again. Surprisingly, the well hasn't dried up, but then again, a drought can only occur when the sun is out. Despite all this, Sir Dalibor must come in and interrupt it.

Sir Dalibor says, "I'm sorry, Violet, but we need to get moving to the next task. We can't deviate from schedule… I don't know what happened but if it is any consolation, you carry yourself well through these tough times."

It's hard to tell if he really is empathetic at all. If he is, that must have taken a lot for him to say, given how closed off Sir Dalibor is. Still, it does little to calm me down and change the heavy breathing from the tears. Why can't I just be back home with the Lyttons? Why did I have to come here and have this happen to me? I haven't helped a single soul while here. I should have been more proactive with the orphans; their blood is probably on my hands. How am I good enough to call myself an angel, even? The only thing that dams the tears is the fact that there is nothing left to come out. I lay there propped against the side of the carriage, the hard wood of it digging into my temple. Mascara runs down my cheek and fleeting breath is beginning to return.

Sir Dalibor says to the guards, "Get her a washcloth with some water to clean herself up, I'm going in ahead. When she is ready, she is to join us. Her presence is critically needed."

It takes some time, but who cares how much time passes. Eventually, one of the guards opens the door and looks down on me with complete disdain. The cold eyes linger for a frozen moment. He tells me to get up so he can clean me up, and that I'm disrespecting my position like a child.

With icy breath right back, I tell him I can clean myself up and that I'm not a child. Apathetic to my response, he begins to wipe my face and passively I let him, I fucking let him. In the end, what's the difference? This moment of despair stands still yet moves forward

somehow. The time hasn't been counted, but Sir Dalibor has handled most of what needs to be done, I assume. When the guard finishes and the mess is cleaned, I ascend the steps of the average-sized manor for the nobility district. Average doesn't do the depiction justice; the place is still colossal. It is strange that we went out and then came back here instead of coming here first but then again, does it really matter? Does anything?

The servant attending the entrance offers to show me the way, and after I decline, he thoroughly insists. So again, I give in and let someone else get their way. The manor is set up so that a significant portion of a hallway has been half removed and is open to the outside. In fair weather this would be optimal, but the temperature isn't bad, so it is bearable. At the end of the hall, without a door or any divider, the hallway morphs into an open square patio area with a roof supported by columns instead of walls.

"Ah, Lady Violet, so good of you to join us," the lord of the family says, causing Sir Dalibor and the Lady to turn.

It is hard, but I muster up a smile followed by a curtsey before going back to my impassive expression.

The woman introduces herself. "I am Lady Lereck and this is my husband, Lord Lereck. It is good to finally make your acquaintance."

"Likewise, Lady Lereck."

"Sir Dalibor said something came up. I'm glad you could join us now that the tiresome politics are over."

Regardless of the topic most conversations around me feel like dull nonsense anyway. An array of fruit is before us and is adorned with a few peculiar ones. Its contents contain blueberries, apples, and lastly grapes that have been finished. Nothing but the barren rough vines remain, do they care? No, nor do I? Somewhat, but oh well does it really matter? The ball has been playfully tossed into our court, yet neither Sir Dalibor nor I really care about the return. How droll. And so, an awkward moment arises in a most ungracious way, to put it in a perfect description.

Sir Dalibor finally asks, “Shall we move on to the matters with the church?”

Lord Lereck responds, “Oh, Dalibor, you old dog, where is the fun in that? Maybe learn a few new tricks. Why don’t we get a better chance to get to know Lady Violet?”

Again, why does unnecessary attention fall on my shoulders? Maybe they are just trying to be nice though.

I respond, “You have a beautiful home, Lady and Lord Lereck. The design is very unique yet functional.”

Lady Lereck says, “Well, aren’t you the perfect little guest. Since we are trying to get off on the right foot, it’s amazing that you really don’t need makeup, Violet. Your complexion is stunning, especially how your purple shading of the pale skin around your eye gives off an almost natural eyeshadow.”

Is she making a statement about my crying, or is she just trying to be nice? Her demeanor seems normal and unlike Elizabeth when she is throwing daggers at me, though her words feel hollow. I’ll take them at face value, and I tell her thank you. A flicker of a smile appears which then yields into impassiveness, making it seem ungenuine. They can probably tell that things really aren’t going my way right now. I do a quick glance onto the overlook of the city and back.

I ask, “So, are you both closely tied to the church?” They both share a look of amusement between themselves with a hint of not wanting to disappoint.

Lord Lereck responds, “Let’s just say we both love and support the church in its entirety, but we aren’t regular attendants.” It really is a contradictory statement and leaves me befuddled. Maybe they are busy with work? It’s really the only way the statement could make any sense.

Trying to be nice, I say, “Oh, well, if you want, when I have finished all my lessons, I could give you a private sermon sometime if that would help?”

Lady Lereck graciously says, “Thank you so much. That is so generous of you, Violet, but we will have to decline. We have only one

request, just please take this city under your wing and bring in a new age of spiritual enlightenment."

Again, there is a strange sentiment in the air. With my inexperience I'm not sure exactly what the mist is made of, only that it is present, sadly. Lady Lereck's point stings. All I want to do is to at least help, be of some service to the Lord. How can I lead the people to be pure, though, when I have been sullied and dirty? I grab hold of my dress in my right hand, a hole fills my heart, and I know deep down I'm not worthy or good enough for the task. Her smile of hope penetrates through for a moment. With it, there is just enough to spark and rekindle the flame on my end. Maybe some good can still be achieved. In response, I crack a soft smile back.

With an earnest expression to Lady Lereck, I say, "I promise I'll do my best."

With cheers from them both, and Sir Dalibor staying stoic as ever, it's not exactly what was needed before the speech in the main square but in its own way, it has helped. Lady and Lord Lereck accompany us to the door of the manor and respectfully say their goodbyes to us as we do to them. The carriage ride back is silent, unsurprising. Again, I stare at my little spot of wood on the floor. Peculiar little thing. It seems out of place in such a regal and extravagant vessel. It is just easier to let my mind wander about frivolous things like what to do with Gina after the speech is over than the heavy weights on my heart. With this being a good enough distraction, the carriage ride feels short the rest of the way.

Before we get there, Sir Dalibor naturally breaks the silence. "Again, Violet, I don't know what happened today at the Thickwoods. Whatever it was, I'm sorry that you had to go through it. Thank you for continuing today despite it."

As we start to pull into the square, I silently acknowledge the statement and show subtle appreciation. Normally, the square is packed. With how many people are stacked shoulder to shoulder against one another, it is absurd how many people have gathered today. Peering out the window no one in the crowd really happens to catch my eye as I scan for Gina or possibly anybody else from the small list of people I know.

The only people who happen to catch my eye are some strange couple arguing and bickering with each other. They continue on until they erupt into a tizzy and storm off dramatically in different directions.

Despite our arrival, everyone is unusually quiet though that's not a bad thing. They are, however, seemingly in high spirits looking forward to today's event. As we approach the thick of the crowd, now at a rapid pace, it's surprising that we aren't slowing down even slightly. Nearer and nearer, we draw. We are about to burst into the crowd when fortunately, right before that point, the people swiftly part. A path opens to a plain stage with a single podium. When we reach it, Sir Dalibor and I get out while the two guards we have been stationed with don't do the same. Royal Guards have already been dispatched, it seems, so they aren't needed. On and around the stage alone stand eight. The actual number scattered throughout the crowd seems difficult to gauge. Father John and Father Paul are there to meet us at the top of the stage. Sir Dalibor and they say a proper formal greeting to each other. It's different when it's our turn as members of the church. We greet each other by taking our middle and pointer fingers and tapping the right eye, left eye, and closed lips in that order in unison.

Father John asks, "So, Violet, are you ready to give your speech?"

Honestly, I'm a little nervous. The events of the day haven't helped. With there being no choice in the matter, I tell Father John that I am.

Before I walk up before the crowd, he tells me, "Don't deviate from the script, even a word!"

Before I proceed, Father Paul contributes some last words. "Just remember, Violet, you are the Voice of this religion. Even more than myself as the high priest. Don't mess this up, child."

That spurs me to unfurl my wings and step forward. The only problem is that once I reach the top, the eyes from the shadows in the forest lurk. Every single person's gaze is fixated on one focal point, me. For the second time today, I have turned cold, but in a different aspect, as I am now frozen in fear. The thoughts come rushing in of what's so special about me, and why was I chosen? Couldn't someone else do this? What if they all hate me? No, most of them already do. The weight

slowly builds up, causing the earlier lift to be offset. The best thing as of now is to just survey the crowd instead of just staring and being still. I desperately want to bolt until finally my eyes meet a young child. With such a warm, joyous expression across his face, a ripple effect occurs. The weight hasn't been lifted, but causes some strength hidden within to manifest.

With my attention split between the crowd and the boy, I begin, "Greetings." An ahem from Sir Dalibor interrupts and his expression, with raised eyebrows, tries to hint at something. With a moment passing between us, I realize I started off too soft. After inhaling deeply, I enunciate better from my chest.

"Greetings, all devout followers of the Lord. I have come bearing the guidance of the Lord and to officially announce my presence to the city. I am the angel Violet, and I plan on ushering in a new age of divine enlightenment upon the city of Dryad."

I pause and survey the crowd again, giving it a moment before continuing. "Please, if you have a problem, the church is there for you as you are both mine and the Lord's children. Please treat your neighbors with kindness and love. Lastly, King Gale is our Lord's divine representative made in his very image. He has the mandate of heaven; shaming him is shaming the Lord who loves you all so very much. All praise the Lord and His Majesty King Gale, and all praise the church."

Applause and cheers follow as I step down from the podium. Meanwhile, the high priest passes me on his way up to take it next. Now that the moment is over, the pressure has been lifted off and the cheers pick me up a little despite them being undeserved as all I did was read from a script of someone else's design. The only remnant of uneasiness that still persists strangely is a newly emerging feeling of hollowness. The word "fake" comes to mind as reading words from a script is almost like a lie. Why didn't they just want me to speak from my heart? I'm sure I could have accomplished it with the same results. Unless they have their doubts about me? Maybe I'm not really deserving of these wings? I figuratively shake my head. Storm clouds ruin a fine afternoon,

and these ones will ruin my day with Gina, so I push them to the back of my mind.

Father Paul begins his own speech. “It truly is great seeing everyone gathered here to welcome in this new angel to the city of Dryad. For those who don’t know, the last time we had an angel in the city was six hundred years ago. I’m sure you all will give her the respect she deserves. If you see her on the streets, treat her almost as you would your own mother. The last thing I would like to address is that this upcoming Saturday is the holy day of Quantum. Please respect our Lord and His Majesty King Gale by attending mass on Saturday and contributing a generous donation. Bless you all and thank you for coming.”

The masses again applaud and cheer. They overall seem joyous. Father John doesn’t add any final words, and the masses begin to slowly depart, as the square returns to its late-midday numbers. With the clearing out, it is rather easy to spot Gina approaching. She is at first stopped by the guards, but Sir Dalibor calls them off. Sir Dalibor does chime in though, “It seems I always must be the bearer of bad news. You shouldn’t get too close to commoners, Violet; there could be bad consequences to those around you. I advise that you soon end whatever is going on here.”

It was far too soon to even imagine that my relationship with Sir Dalibor had made progress these past few months. This and the inability to fully leave behind the hollowness from before create a feeling of specters dragging me down. Gina approaches with a friendly disposition and excitement. My face is in a toss-up; will the lips turn up or down? Focusing my spirit on the silver around my neck, William gives me strength, and the battle has concluded. It is a draw. Greeting her with a neutral expression, Gina stands before me in a slim-fitting lavender dress much different from her bulky black and white servant clothes she customarily wears.

She says in greeting, “Violet, you did absolutely wonderfully with your speech, I loved it!”

In guilty response, I say, “It was really nothing but thank you nonetheless.”

“So, what do you want to do today? We can go for a nice stroll, or we could visit the gardens outside the walls?”

“I really don’t know. You know it better than me, how about you decide? I’m sure we’ll have a good time regardless.”

“Well, how about we get something to eat first at the bakery?”

In agreement with that, we begin our little outing on our way to the bakery.

“Hey, I’m surprised I didn’t notice this before. Maybe because of your dress today, but you have a subtle hint of blue in your eyes.”

Sadly, a scared Asrai must be trapped in my tear duct. More tears of both joy and sadness will fall tonight as Gina takes my hand in the thick of the crowd.

# Chapter 11

’Tis a late morning that’s starting to wane into the afternoon. On this joyous holiday of Quantum, it is deflating to see the church in such a dim state. It was expected to be a somewhat sunny day; instead, it’s a rather sullen day filled with many clouds…

Because of this unexpected drawback, the church is currently going through with its lesser arrangement for the festive occasion. Multiple priests go around lighting candles, and though their scent is ambrosial, they don’t hold a candle to the ambiance that would have been brought about by the beautiful stained glass had the weather cooperated. Despite the circumstances, it should be looked upon as still a blessed day as today is going to be my first mass in full attendance and participation. It is strange that there isn’t more joy in my spirit. Maybe it has to do with the constant misunderstandings with the Queen, the horrific violations I go through, and no small victories within grasp.

I won’t get into it, but the book I was reading, The Sunset of the Faeries, naturally with how things have been going lately, ended tragically. All the Faeries ever wanted was to live in harmony with the human kingdoms. It was an innocent dream, and a foolish one. Jealous, the humans united to overthrow the faeries, driving them out of the lands. Never to be seen or their songs to be heard from again. Maybe that’s why there aren’t any Faeries around anymore? Outside of the book, I have not heard one person mention them while here.

Regardless, it was a depressing tale I didn’t need. They didn’t deserve that… no one deserves that. Why couldn’t I just have this one small grace with how bitter things have been as of late? Again, with the small losses, Sir Dalibor was also supposed to come for today’s mass. After some quick glances, he isn’t visible in the crowd; another childish hope seems dashed. Just when I felt we had a moment earlier in the week, that day too had to end on a sour note with him. Since then, he has been scarce as usual. The only two bright spots of the week so far have been my time with Gina and the delightful surprise of the kitty from

before, whom I've decided to call Velvet, visiting me again yesterday. He slept with me for the night. He left before I woke, but it was just nice being able to feel the loving touch of something. I'd like to say he'll visit again, but I'm lowering my expectations so as not to be disappointed.

The last candle is lit. The priests take their places. Father John, my co-priest today, steps up, stands at the forefront of the altar and begins the opening.

"By the North Star, the King, and by the Kingdom of Ardisia, we solemnly swear to serve our Lord."

The crowd bows their heads toward the large crystalloid sphere hanging over the altar.

Father John continues, "How does everyone fare today? I hope the donations haven't weighed on your spending too much."

He gives out a low chuckle, slightly amused with himself as the crowd does the same despite there being no humor whatsoever to be found in the statement. Father John is the one person I have met here who, you know, tries to squeeze in a jest here and there to preserve an atmosphere.

He continues again, "Anyway, I'm glad you could all make it. Sadly, his grace has not blessed us today with his presence on this lovely holiday and has opted for a private ceremony instead."

He pauses for effect, then continues, "But let us begin."

In unison, led by Father John, everyone in the church chants, "By our Lord, please guide us through the darkest of times and the lightest of times. Let your hand be the guiding Morningstar in our lives. We pray and send our love to you each day. Please bless us."

Father John then transitions into a small story about the whole meaning of the day of Quantum. Sadly, however, I've heard the story before a few days ago during a rare lesson from Father Paul. The story isn't the slightest bit interesting hearing it a second time. It is about a boy who lives in a faraway harbor city who is the son of a merchant.

The city in the story is in a golden age, blessed by its place as one of the few central locations for many sea routes. Ships from distant shores

come and go from its harbor, their bellies full of silks, spices, wines, jewels, and every shimmering thing that makes men believe fortune has chosen them. The boy's father is one of those fortunate men, running a successful trading business and having accumulated a vast fortune of his own. He is even lucky enough to own not just one ship, but a few. One day, the father and son decide to go into the bazaar to buy many and various things, when, among all the noise and wealth of the city, a young boy around the son's age catches the son's eye. Despite all the coin flooding through this golden age, the malnourished boy stands alone, dressed in rags.

The son asks, "Father, why is that boy wearing rags?"

"Because he is poor, my son."

"Why is that, father?"

"From the looks of it, he is probably an orphan who has had the misfortune of losing his parents. Specifically, how so, I cannot say."

With sorrowful tears, the son asks, "Isn't there anything we can do for him?"

The father, recognizing the soul in need of rescue, approaches the boy, offering him food and a place to live, so long as he assisted him in his day-to-day activities with his business. They live for many years together, the three of them, until eventually both boys become young men. With help from the old merchant, he sets off on his own seafaring journey eternally grateful to the benevolence of the man. He wishes to repay him, but the man declines.

In his old age, he says, "You are like a son to me. Do not disrespect me in such fashion. If you wish to repay me, do so by coming back once you have had your fill of adventure and help my other son with the house's affairs while I'm in my old age."

With a hugging embrace the orphan sets off and the story ends. I'll concede that it is a rather heartwarming story and had really touched me until I had to open my mouth. Father Paul mentions at the end of the story that the father's goodwill is the embodiment of the donations on Quantum. Of course, the church is benevolent, but I wondered and asked,

“Why does that money go to the crown instead of going to the less fortunate?”

What came next was a hard smack to the face that left a stinging hot sensation on my left cheek. It was supposedly disrespectful to say such things against our Majesty King Gale. Saying that he doesn’t deserve the offerings is insinuating that he doesn’t take care of the subjects of his kingdom. I guess the statement was out of line considering almost all the people I’ve seen have been doing well, the only exception being the younglings. Still, the fact that Father Paul did that to me sends my eyes down towards the floor.

If that’s really the case, though, then why am I even here? I’m not really making that much of a difference. I couldn’t even help two young children that desperately needed my help. Lord, please let them be alright. Why did such a fate have to fall upon two innocent little children? This feeling consumes me. I was already withdrawn from Father John’s story, but now I’m not even in the church. Nothing exists anymore except the sinking sensation into the sea of blue. It’s weird; never had I experienced these feelings until a month ago. ’Tis truly a strange thing how a color can just describe a mood so well.

It all comes ringing back when I hear “Violet… Violet!” A calm but urgent hand finds its way onto my shoulder. Sadly, I am pulled out instead of up. Father John has finished speaking and is now giving me a displeased expression while shifting his eyes from me to the front of the altar. The crowd of people all have their judging, alert gazes on me. With the uncrossing of my legs, the widening of their base, and my arms bracing for support, a branch bends to its limits but does not break. The walk to the altar isn’t anxious or fearful. What is there to be worried about when the words have already been selected for me?

However, it leaves a familiar hollowness like with earlier in the week. Promptly reading off the script that’s been prepared at the podium, I begin.

“Greetings, Lords and Ladies of the realm. I am happy that we have all gathered here today on this holy day of Quantum. It is always good to reflect, but especially towards the Lord.”

I pause for a second and continue, “What the father did is an example we can all live by. I know it is hard to not give in to our selfish desires as we all are not perfect like the Lord our God; however, it is good that we not give in to this temptation. In tough times, look to the church and use it as your guiding Morningstar.”

After one final pause, I look up at the crowd and, after a moment, begin again, “That is why it is very necessary that you donate to the Church and to the Kingdom today. Not just for my sake or King Gale’s sake, but for the Lord’s sake. Look within you and avoid temptation by being generous with your coin. Thank you.”

The script is done; my part is over. I step off the podium and feel the eyes of the audience weighing burdensomely on me. Can they tell those words really weren’t mine? Do they feel the same irony about this holiday? The only thing that is for certain is that the weight in my chest continues to sit and drag me down. As I retire back to my seat, Father John goes up before the audience. In passing, he feels distant, and his eyes look right through me.

He begins the final prayer, “Oh, my Lord, thank you for our bounty. In appreciation, I give you these gifts on this day of Quantum to show humbleness and thankfulness to you, our Almighty. With these gifts we are also reminded that we are your forever faithful servants. Please help guide us through the darkness, amen.”

He talks briefly then about certain recent events going on within the kingdom, nothing that is all that important until, finally, he thanks everyone for coming before dismissing them. Slowly and steadily the main hall empties as the churchgoers exit the main gate. Once the last person leaves, I go around with Father John to put out the slowly dripping candles. The fragrance is wonderful and is one of the few silver linings of today as the occasion calls for them. It was something that the Lyttons couldn’t afford, most likely, but then again, they aren’t a church. They don’t have people donating coin to them.

Slowly, one by one, Father John makes his semicircular round trip. Just as slowly as he makes his steps does he maneuver the long metal candle snuffer. He must still be in that mindset of eyes upon him. The

silence, however, is awkward but also feels like what I really need. When the task is finished, the main hall is drowned in darkness. What little light that pours in from the windows does nothing to illuminate it. Again, there's an uneasy feeling, almost the feeling of something grabbing you with its clutches from the unseen, but the weight in my chest can't be bothered. Father John, still without a word, is grabbing and wrapping up the various ceremonial scriptures and ornaments like the wine for storage.

The question still gnaws at me. With disregard for myself, I dare ask Father John, "If Quantum is a holiday of giving, why are the donations made to the crown instead of the poor? The whole matter seems reversed from the story."

"Well, Violet, I will let that remark slide, but you shouldn't be saying such things about His Majesty. For your sake and mine. Are you saying he doesn't take care of us?"

"Um, no, that's not what I mean."

With a tense, stern voice, Father John poses the question, "Then what did you mean? The people here are prosperous. Have you seen any poor people since you arrived?"

"Well, not really. There were those younglings."

Father John, with a face full of retreat, turns away to pick up the last of the scriptures.

"Ah, yes, but that was because they were orphans, and didn't I tell you we found them a home?"

"No, I don't believe you ever told me that. You just told me they never showed up again. Is that really what happened?"

"It is. It must have slipped my mind or something, child."

Given how much grief this caused, I doubt it. My spirit doesn't have enough strength to push back. In the end I accept the statement at face value and cling to hope that it is indeed true. Once everything has been gathered up, we take it down to the lower level of the church, into the room next to where the lessons are held. Again, it's been floating around in my mind, but one should not tread so lightly around difficult topics.

With the fire already started from the last question and the mood still warm, there really isn't a better moment to ask.

"Father John, I was wondering if in the future I would be able to prepare my own speeches? The scripts you prepared are marvelous, and I appreciate the effort; however, not speaking from my own heart feels hollow."

"Ah, it is much too soon for you to be doing such tasks, Violet. I promise maybe sometime in the future."

"But."

He gives me a soft, stern look, one that I understand all too well. The conversation is over. The pleas don't continue. As we finish up, Father John sends me on my way back to celebrate an uncomfortable Quantum with His and Her Majesties.

# Chapter 12

An abrupt noise stirs in the middle of the night; that's accompanied by the swift opening of the bedroom door, followed by the same door closing a quick moment after. I'm currently groggy, still half asleep, while getting tugged along in some unknown direction. It takes some time before the slits of light become wider windows since apathy accompanies dreariness. Despite being taken and dragged along by some unknown person, no natural reaction has kicked in to even assess if the situation is dangerous or not, let alone question it.

Once some time passes, enough to wake up, my consciousness starts to kick in and the first thing that comes into sight is a dark hooded figure. Obviously, a frightening sight to wake up to, so with a sudden reflex, I instinctively try to tug my hand away from him. It's counterintuitive, though, as this only causes his grip to tighten harder. At least resisting has caused us to slow down somewhat. Noticing the situation, the hooded man turns around abruptly. Taking down his hood, he reveals his face to be that of Sir Dalibor. My nerves have been calmed by the revelation, but more questions have now been raised which need to be answered.

He is calm and stoic as ever, which really conflicts with the current situation. Before I even have a chance to respond to this small surprise, he quickly tells me,

"We need to keep moving. I'll explain along the way."

I oblige as we pick back up to more of a jog now that Sir Dalibor realizes my cooperation is no longer a problem. The knowledge isn't fully there yet, but there's enough of an awareness of the castle to understand that we aren't heading towards the front gate or the west gate. Instead, it seems our destination is out back toward the garden, and considering all this urgency, it's a rather bizarre move. We come out coincidentally through the same door we did the night of that first party. Sadly, the horrific circumstances created that night changed things forever moving forward. This is a heartbreaking place to be, considering

how much happier I was and how much better things comparatively were back then.

Making our way down the steps, it's noticeable that the night is a sheer spectacle. There are only a few clouds, and the stars are bursting with light. With a strong feeling in the air, I know there is going to be good fortune with whatever this night holds. This is because my eyes are lucky enough to come across part of William's and my favorite constellation. Hopefully the Lyttons have been well and have fared better than myself since my departure. Maybe even right now, William is looking up at the stars wondering the same about me.

With the final step off the stairs, I can't help but ask, "Where are you taking me?" But alas, Sir Dalibor does not entertain the question. A few more steps go by, and I ask again, but before the words can even flow out of my lips, a brash hand has been placed over my mouth. As I'm tugged back behind a hedge, this uncontrollable fear and stress builds up due to a familiar sensation. It has only been a moment, yet I'm already suffocating and starting to hyperventilate uncontrollably. The sound of steps slowly becomes apparent as the noise draws ever closer, closer, until finally the source is on top of us from across the hedge. As the source walks away with a break in the hedge, I can see the back of the figure, which, unsurprisingly, is a royal guard.

My faint struggle finally comes to a stop as Sir Dalibor lets go. A deep gasp for air follows despite not being out of breath, force of horrible habit. Though why are we hiding from a guard? This gives a feeling of suspicion to the whole thing and casts doubt on what Sir Dalibor's intentions are. The previously interrupted words finally can breathe life now.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Shh, there is too much to explain. Just be quiet and don't get seen."

He tugs me back up and we are back to our fast-walking pace. A left, then a right, and then another right follows. The garden is a maze like the castle, though at least this is a familiar maze. It doesn't seem like Sir Dalibor has taken us for a midnight stroll to smell some daffodils. As clear as day, he is trying to make his way to the edge of the garden, more

exactly the edge of the premises. There is a certain part of me that wants to trust Sir Dalibor, but this unsettling feeling in my instincts, trudging through the back of my mind, needs addressing. With one swift unexpected downward swipe of the hand, I'm free, but I don't dart.

"Please, Sir Dalibor, I just want to know, I have a right to know."

With a solemn expression he contemplates whether to answer the plea. With a turned back that doesn't get past halfway, he calmly says,

"It isn't safe for you here. Without much thought you can see that for yourself."

He takes a glance around to survey for any more guards before he continues. "We should get moving. I'll explain more on the way."

He firmly grasps my hand again, almost as if he were hanging on for dear life. His words have struck home. I've almost been fooling myself a little by trying to think of this as home and that things really are fine. The harsh truth is that Dryad will never be home. A confliction of emotions arises now, that of fear for being caught, relief for the idea of going back to where I belong, sadness for having to leave Gina, and lastly a lot of shame and anguish for the knowledge of the things that have been done to my body. To hell with these damned wings. Without them, I wouldn't even be here. They truly are a curse. I'm deeply sorry, God. Just why did it have to be me!?

The swift-paced walk has now trickled down to nothing but a few cautious steps as we come across two more guards patrolling the main square of the garden. The large patch of flowers that stretches horizontally parallel to where they're standing is enough to provide adequate cover. We just need to make it to the other side without stirring up any noise and we are in the clear. It takes a while at the dreadfully slow pace, but eventually we get far enough across to make a clear path for the wall.

"So, what is the plan to escape, if we can manage to even scale the walls?"

"We aren't scaling anything. I'll be helping you over. From there you will hitch a carriage unseen and be out before your chambermaid even has time to wake you."

“But whose carriage?”

“You remember Lord Chestnut, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ve known for quite some time, Violet, even before you came here, the atrocities that were going to happen to you… I…” His voice cracks, signaling the struggle of his emotions. “I’m sorry I couldn’t prevent them, but there was no way with Father John accompanying me to get you out of the King’s grasp.”

It’s a bitter truth to swallow, that this man, this wolf in shepherd's clothing, had forsaken my innocence. I want to look past it and think of a reasonable excuse, but there are none. Streets during a plague are more desolate, but the right thing to do is to not bring up these feelings of resentment. Instead, I shall put on an all-too-familiar mask to spare his feelings. The news also hits me more in a depressing manner than angry. His once warm grip has started to fade and turn cold. It is almost iconic of this fading summer on its last stand.

“I understand that you tried your best. There was nothing that you could have done. Please don’t worry about it, Sir Dalibor. What part does Lord Chestnut play in this affair?”

“He is helping us by supplying us with a means of escape and a safe haven.”

“But why?”

“You’ve talked to him before. Despite it being only once, I can imagine you can easily tell he is truly a benevolent man.”

Talking with Lord Chestnut was the only enjoyable part of that evening. He isn’t the Lyttons, but at least he is a friend. Maybe he even has a garden that we could take an enjoyable stroll in like before.

“I have to ask, Sir Dalibor, was Father John also aware of the circumstances he would be bringing me into?”

“He wasn’t originally, but he became aware of the true goal once we brought you back to Dryad. It is something he would rather not have, but he feels more indifferent towards it so long as it doesn’t affect him.”

“That is most regrettable.”

As my relationship with Father John has waned, I have at least held him to be a man of character. It seems I was mistaken. If I ever see the man again, I will not bring it up. However, I will hold onto this feeling of betrayal deep in my heart, never to be forgotten.

It has been a short yet seemingly prolonged journey as we arrive at the garden wall. With a quick hoist up from Sir Dalibor, I'm able to scale the dividing wall effortlessly. The only difficult part from here on out, it seems, will be getting Sir Dalibor hoisted up as well. I go to extend my hand out to him. Unexpectedly, he only meets me with an uncharacteristically heavy smile. It masks his sadness for my traumatic horrors here and displays his remorsefulness.

"I'm sorry, Violet, but this is where I leave you."

"Why?"

"It will attract more suspicion if I leave also. I don't think our paths will ever cross again, and I hope they don't, given what it would mean. It is difficult for me to express emotion, but I'm truly sorry, Violet. I know correcting it doesn't make up for it. You were a wonderful person to meet, Violet, and I'm fortunate to have had the chance. Good luck."

Wanting to display the right attitude and being able to are two entirely different things. So, I crack a half smile and part with, "I'm glad I got a chance to meet you too, Sir Dalibor, and don't worry, I forgive you."

Without much grace, I do not land softly, nor quietly. Luckily, it seems that the road is desolate. Looking onward, a carriage painted in a deep red that's cloaked in the darkness of the night waits for me. The rest of the way out of here should be easier than a slow waltz. So, naturally I don't walk with any haste in my step. I approach the carriage at a nice leisurely pace, enjoying one small final moment in the capital. A lot has happened, mostly bad, but there's been some good at least. Strangely enough, as I get closer, a peculiarity arises as nobody is in the carriage. This is extremely strange. Either this carriage isn't the one, which would be an improbable accident, or something has gone hideously wrong.

I look up and down the street but there is still nobody. I guess the only thing that can be done is to hope and wait patiently. I mean, where could I realistically run off to? At least I can wait in the carriage. With my elbow against the door and my chin resting on my hand, I stare into the velvet sky, bored. Half an hour goes by with no one, friend or foe, appearing. I have half a mind to fall asleep since, regardless of what happens moving forward, it won't change anything. With eyelids heavy, moment by moment slowly fading away, my vision goes black for an indistinguishable amount of time.

That is until, finally, an abrupt grab and harsh pull out of the carriage causes my eyes to reopen. Again, in a foggy daze, it takes time to focus in but eventually the image of a cluster of royal guards standing before me comes into view. With the mind still in flux, the gravity of the situation doesn't strike me. That is, until I finally try to stand up from my knees and in an instinctual reaction one of the guards smacks me violently across the face with the bottom of his pike. The strike leaves a harsh stinging warmth behind and causes me to crash onto my forearms. When the pain finally subsides, a much worse feeling floods my heart as I realize what this situation means. An icy shiver crawls up my back and leaves me frozen when I hear his voice.

"Fucking fools, if you do absolutely anything to scar that face, all your heads will roll."

The fear is enough to break off the daze. He casually walks into view as the guards open to make way for him. He is accompanied by two guards carrying two men. The first is a man who I have never had the pleasure to meet while the other is Sir Dalibor. What little life is left inside is immediately sucked out through the hole in my chest. The cage has closed; the cage has closed.

King Gale keeps walking until he is standing right on top of me.

"Ah, see that's why I got you in the first place. Not a speck of makeup on you and still far more beautiful than Elizabeth ever was dressed up," he says as his slimy hand slides down and caresses my face, sending my wings into a flurry of shudders, the most movement they have experienced yet.

“Get comfortable, you’ll be in that position later tonight. I suggest you get the crying out now while I allow it.”

I have no response as my violet eyes must reek of death staring deeply at the cobbles of the road.

Sir Dalibor roars. “Don’t you touch her, you disgusting pig of a king.”

“Oh, who is going to stop me now that your little plan has failed, Sir Dalibor? Considering your position, I’d think it wise to not speak so freely.”

“Regardless of what I say, you are going to have me killed.”

“Ah yes, but you have forgotten how you die is still being decided. Isn’t that right, Lord Whittshire?” he states as he has turned his attention towards the man beside Sir Dalibor.

He is, like me, devoid of hope. He just stares at the floor, not wanting to grasp the reality of his fate. The King turns back around with a crooked smile, pleased with the state of Lord Whittshire. For a while he just paces back and forth, most likely contemplating his next move. Despite having all the pieces captured, his slow wit hasn’t thought of what his concluding move should be.

“Ah, it will take some preparation for tonight’s festivities, Violet. I think I’d like to have a little fun before then and what better an audience than the man who tried to prevent our love?”

My body shudders again and tears begin to flow freely as I weep despite it not having even begun. Shockingly, Sir Dalibor doesn’t seem invested in the King’s claim, assuming it as a shallow threat. The guard tugs me up by my wings, sending a sharp pain through my back. Still, my wings themselves feel nothing, the only silver lining of the curse they bring. With a slowness like snowflakes falling, though without the same grace, King Gale leans sluggishly in with a pursed mouth. The sensation can only be described as vile when our lips finally touch. When he firmly thrusts his tongue into my mouth, it must be what eating a slug would be like, yet more repulsive. His hand moves down towards my bosom. With no subtlety, he grasps it hard, uncaring of how aggressively he violates me.

My tears eventually stop rolling, and I assume the form of a statue frozen in a feeling of blissful listlessness. The fear sweeps away from my eyelids, which, once closed tightly shut, are now open and stare unmoving at His Majesty's face. His Majesty is deeply disturbed, as he seems quite content with groping and kissing a lifeless statue for quite some time. Sir Dalibor can't watch and has an expression of sorrow while looking away. Lord Whittshire, meanwhile, still just stares at the ground in despair. When he finally stops, I once again regain some of my humanity, though it seems each time with less.

"I'm glad that you stopped crying. Like I said, this is the last time you get the chance. If so much as a single droplet falls later, there will be consequences."

He can't help giving a satisfied grin. "How'd you like the show, Sir Dalibor?"

He is, of course, nonresponsive to the taunt, trying not to show his defeat. "I mean, come on, Sir Dalibor, you really aren't going to get a chance to speak your mind again after tonight."

"I might have failed today, but one day I swear by our Lord someone is going to come along and put an end to your wicked reign, I guarantee it."

"Those are mighty big words for a quiet stoic like yourself. Sadly, I think by tomorrow morning I'll be seeing that confidence gone."

He waves his hands, signaling the guards to hoist and shove Sir Dalibor off. It's still so hard to imagine the events of such an unexpected night. If I were to wake in my bed currently and the whole thing turned out to be nothing more than a dream, it wouldn't surprise me. With one final effort, with all his force, Sir Dalibor fights back from the grip of the guards, managing to break free and gain a step or two back towards us.

"Violet, I have failed you. Don't lose hope; hope is the last thing you have left."

After a hard blow on the head, he hits the floor hard and goes limp like a doll. As he is dragged away into the alleyway, I know it will probably be the last time I ever see him. All I could do was stare

wide-eyed in disbelief. It creates a strong feeling of self-loathing for not being able to help physically and emotionally.

“Now that that’s over, it’s time to prepare you for the special evening. I do have to say you really don’t need the makeup, but no expense is too luxurious for the King. Now take her to her chamber.”

Two guards lift me up in tow under my shoulders as any energy has vanished from my vessel. My chambermaid, along with some other women servants, has already been summoned and is already prepared. The time flies. The only thing that I focus on in my listless state is how battered, saddened, and dead I look in the mirror. The makeup almost provides a much-needed mask. I am walked to and served up on a silver platter to the Boar King. He is, as usual, as rough and emotionally abusive as ever, calling me a worthless whore and toy. However, a new element has been added into tonight’s affairs. Sir Dalibor’s mangled corpse will be on display tomorrow, he tells me repeatedly while viciously choking me as a form of his sadistic foreplay.

With no time for the statement to even sink in, it triggers my tear ducts despite so many tears having already fallen tonight. With no moment’s hesitation he smacks me accordingly as he warned earlier for this folly. Once he has completed everything to his heart’s content, he finishes. No matter how many times this happens, the sickening taste will never get better. I swallow while resisting the urge to gag. The ordeal is almost over. Unexpectedly, after taking one knee to get up, with the back of his hand, he smacks me brutally across the face in the same spot the guard struck me earlier. It will definitely be bruised in the morning.

He chuckles some more and falls face down into his bed, signaling that it is now officially over. When I finally retreat to my chamber for the night, insufferable insomnia ensues, making sure this nightmare isn’t over just yet. I proceed to toss and turn uncontrollably, all throughout the night until the moment the sun breaks over the horizon. I can’t help but decide to look outside, considering it is better than staring at the ceiling forever. The sun looks beautiful this morning, and the orange hue of it is at least uplifting on the soul. My gaze moves down from it

over to and across the grounds. It takes a moment for it to register. In the garden hang two skinless bodies dripping red with blood. They hang on two newly erected high-lying wooden poles with horrific expressions. The thing of nightmares etched into their faces. I feel consumed by an absence of strength; everything goes black.

# Chapter 13

It’s an unforgiving wintry morning, despite it being only mid-Autumn. A sign of things to come, most likely. When winter does eventually rear her head, she will be an ugly mistress. I’ve no will to rise from bed today; meanwhile, her lingering breath just worsens this heaviness that has been dragging lately. The torture happened again last night. Desensitization has firmly set in as tears from it haven’t been shed in over a month. King Gale still foolishly claims one day I will fully accept him. I claim one day he’ll be chained down burning in hell, but he just laughs and laughs at my blank stoic face.

Unfortunately, today is supposed to be an important party, which will most undoubtedly last the whole day. A lot of nobles and some advisors from the bordering eastern kingdom will be in attendance. Oh, how precious these little fleeting moments are. They truly will be the only enjoyable part of the day, I’m quite sure. I’ll try and enjoy them as long as possible until my chamber maiden Joan comes in and fussily drags me out of bed. Each day, I purposefully resist and make her job harder for her. She constantly serves me up on a silver platter. She is no better than them. Speaking of the “delicate” secret, it seems most of the help has become aware of the whole arrangement between King Gale and me. Given the fact he does nothing to conceal it, it isn’t surprising. Obviously, it is consciously ignored, but some people’s eyes are impossible to mask. They look down upon me, so detached that it’s like staring straight through glass. But alas, I don’t blame them, because I deserve it. An angel shouldn’t be participating in those kinds of sinful activities.

The only one who hasn’t changed so far has been Gina. She remains the one good thing breathing life into me, holding the suffocation at bay. Sadly, I haven’t been able to see that much of her since Sir Dalibor’s escape was utterly crushed. The day after, during one of our now-sparse lessons at the church, Father John uncharacteristically broke character

for a second. He told me he knew about my relationship with one of the young kitchen hands. I won't forget the words he mumbled covertly.

"Those who are close to you shall meet the same fate as Sir Dalibor if you don't distance yourself."

Then immediately he snapped back into character. 'Twas an event that will most undoubtedly never happen again. Considering I was already starting to become apathetic to everything, the words simply passed through my vessel without the slightest effect. Even the mention of Sir Dalibor did so as well; nevertheless, the message was never forgotten because of the implied danger. So, like my lessons with Father John, my encounters with Gina have been sparse, though the latter have obviously been much sadder.

The expected knock finally arrives. I remain indifferently unresponsive, my eyes continuing to stare at the empty vase, not acknowledging the haughty maiden walking in. A few moments pass by as she still naively expects me to get up when she enters. When this evidently isn't the case and she sees that her "politeness" doesn't bear fruit, she quickly rips the covers off me with a displeased expression, all because she doesn't have "time" for this and doesn't want to have to drag me to the gathering. Unluckily for her, though, that doesn't concern me as I have still made no move to budge.

She quips, "I'll have you know King Gale has authorized me to use force to ensure you get there on time."

I remain silent...

The brash movement of her hand comes down striking like thunder upon my cheek, yet my empty expression does not change, nor do I budge. She retreats, and moments later returns with another maiden to literally drag me out of bed and sit me up like a puppet in front of the mirror.

Unfortunately, time flies and does not freeze in the cold; most of the additions and changes go unnoticed until the final picture is finished. The only thing that happens to catch my listless eyes during it all is how the natural purple hue surrounding my eyes has been growing, especially underneath. When they finish up and I get the chance to see

their portrait, the only thing that sits before me is a deathly corpse, well, that and two harpies. Before they escort me to the main hall, with it being nippy, I decide it's an opportune time to slip on and christen Mrs. Lytton's beautiful woven wing warmers. I, along with this, throw on as usual William's necklace. Then, last but not least, I slip on Mr. Lytton's slippers. For a small moment, my mind shifts and I'm back at the cottage sipping on tea with them all in front of the fire, before it all comes sorrowfully slipping back. Both the maidens are already waiting outside because of this. So, when I step out the door, they immediately embark.

The walk is unsettling as they both walk in front, forming a reverse triangle. The garden can be seen to the left as we pass through the hall, but no one looks upon the depressing barren sight. No one in the castle likes to talk about Sir Dalibor's horrid death. The servants have unmistakably passed whispers amongst themselves, as a tense presence on their part occurs now when in the company of King Gale. It has become a cautionary tale to them. It has struck me that perhaps they blame me for his death? Considering how they look at me, they revile me for it. It doesn't bother me though; apathy has already sunk in, creating a home. Plus, one good deed doesn't replace the damage from a bad one; Sir Dalibor's blood is something I will always carry with me because of this.

Having finally memorized every nook and cranny of this maze, I begin to slow my steps as I know what is around the corner. Their lead ahead of me becomes greater and greater until they turn the corner and disappear. After time itself has ended and started back up again, only to almost breathe its last life, do I myself make the turn right into the expected expressions of disdain. With eagle eyes, they make sure I walk into the Grand Hall before leaving themselves to attend to other matters.

The hall is rather subdued for now. Currently, it is just a bunch of social circles standing around or sitting at tables chatting, where the women sit and the men stand around peacocking. Dancing and feasting will probably be ensuing later. Considering that most of these people are

strangers or people I barely know, I just stand around at the entrance hoping that nobody notices and that I can eventually slip away.

King Gale has other plans as he bellows, “Attention, everybody, your Holy Mother has entered into the hall.”

I don’t even bother to feign an expression. I just stare at the ground waiting for the fake caring and fake attention to stop while I walk towards King Gale.

Once I arrive at where he is situated, he remarks, “Hmm, they put too much makeup on you tonight. It doesn’t look as good. They better get that straightened out next time.”

The insult just bounces off. Sadly, the one person who I wouldn’t mind being fake has to be fully genuine with me.

“If it’s too much, I can go back and fix it up, Your Majesty.”

It would have been best to dress it up with some cheeriness, but that well ran dry a long time ago.

“No, that isn’t necessary. What I need you to do is accompany Elizabeth in going around and greeting various lords.”

Silence ensues. Despite my not showing a glint of emotion, he knows that I despise the notion!

He chuckles heartily and continues, “I jest. We both know sending Elizabeth to do that is a terrible idea. I’m going to have you go around instead with Judith.”

He waves his hand in a signaling motion, and Judith, in her magnificence, comes over to the throne.

She asks, “Is it time for me to escort young Violet around the party?”

“’Tis. Please take good care of her, wouldn’t want her petals ruffled.”

Lady Judith shoots me a look, signaling me to follow her lead. “Before we begin today, it’s time for lesson one youngling. Unlike everyone else, I’m smart enough and have been around long enough to understand the truth about the affair between you and King Gale.”

In a monotone voice, I respond, “By what do you mean, precisely?”

“Spare me the pretense, I know you wouldn’t willingly have intercourse with that oaf. I’ve known King Gale since he was a child, so there has been enough time around him to know of his true nature.”

“So, what do you suggest I do then?”

“Oh nothing, you sadly have no cards to play. My advice, if you did have cards to play, would be this; with men like him, make sure to keep your distance until it is ultimately necessary. Then, when you are a few steps ahead, you make your gambit.”

“Wow, how insightful.”

“Again, cut the attitude… I’m being nice, dear, and that’s how you show gratitude? King Gale isn’t a smart or clever man; his moves are filled with lust and immediate satisfaction. Even now it is evident with how he is destroying one of his best assets.”

I snap back for a second, curious about what she says. With some life in my voice, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“In due time, child, in due time.”

We head towards the back corner of the room, to a rather small group of just two lords and a woman I assume is one’s wife. Compared with the larger circles, this corner is a gentler start. Once we reach the outside of the circle, they notice us and in turn bow respectfully while allowing us in. It’s odd, considering usually those who approach bow and curtsy. Perhaps Judith truly holds more consequence at court than I had imagined.

The two men introduce themselves, “It is lovely to make your acquaintance, Violet. I’m Lord Braud of the Chestnut province.”

Lord Braud slyly reaches for my hand, and I acceptingly give it over to him. He kisses it while the whole time he is eyed with daggers. When he comes back up, our eyes meet, and his cocky smile wavers a tad, shifting into retreat. Lord Chestnut’s snare in Dalibor’s plot depresses me, yet this is no place to waver. Tonight is no time to falter over something that has transpired many moons ago just because I have only now learned of it. The other lord and lady then introduce themselves as Lady Braud and Lord Jewell. Getting immediately to business, Judith asks both the lords to leave us to our lady talk.

Once alone, Judith asks, “So, what is the consensus so far since you have been able to get around more?”

“I think you already know the consensus, Judith. There has been no shroud around it except for when the girl is around.” Normally this would be the time when I’d ordinarily drift off for a bit; however, the girl was absolutely a reference to me.

With a bit of a haughty air, I ask, “What is she talking about?”

Judith remarks, “Isn’t it obvious, at least if you look at it critically?”

That wasn’t the answer I was looking for and, despite my not budging a muscle in my face, Judith can easily tell the statement has confused me.

“Well, think about it. King Gale hasn’t really tried to conceal his affairs with you, especially from the servants and guards. Word also travels fast, dear.”

Lady Braud chimes in now, “So everyone here knows that you and King Gale have had sexual relations, and since words get twisted, they think it is consensual.”

These words come as a surprise. One of the few luxuries of a cold morning is that slight numbness you begin your day with.

“So, what you mean to say is that they think I’m a whore?”

Lady Braud elaborates, “Precisely dear, now let me just explain a little deeper. You are the religious icon of Dryad. A tainted image weakens the strength of the church. It really isn’t a big impact on the nobility, but it would still make politics easier especially with the lords not residing in the capital.”

I give a slow, slight nod at the introductory rules to this chess game.

Judith takes the lead now. “But the main problem lies within the fact that the knowledge isn’t only exclusive to the nobility; it is spreading in the peasantry as well. Luckily not outside the capital.”

“But why does it matter that the peasantry knows also?”

“Because the church, along with many other things that we won’t waste time explaining, secures their loyalty to the Kingdom. If the perception is tainted like a chain, it spreads to the other parts.”

“I see, I hate to ask… but why not just get rid of me then?”

Judith gives an intrigued gaze at the response. She understands that the wisdom she is dealing out has sparked new channels of thought in the violet eyed creature before her.

“An interesting notion, one we have already both thought of, but because you are a holy figure, your death would have to appear accidental, or the result would be the same. That brings up the next point that there is no way to do that with you under King Gale’s protection.”

Judith isn’t a cold bitch like Elizabeth, but she’s ruthless. I’ve learned quite a deal about her now through our little discussion. She is more the calculated type that plays the game well and keeps her own interests in check. There is really no reason to hate someone like that since that’s how most in her position would act.

My emotions returning to their usual stillness, I ask in my monotone voice, “So, what is your plan then for tonight and onward?”

“Contain the information as best we can and try to somewhat improve your standing amongst the nobles. I just need a moment with the Lord of Arms before we begin.”

Judith leaves, heading towards one of the few men alone. By alone, I mean not surrounded by other nobles. A maiden is currently attending to his wine glass as he drunkenly tries to grope her, the swine. A silence settles between Lady Braud and me, as though we occupy separate rooms. As I drift inward, as usual, it doesn’t occur to me how much time passes. Obviously, she must ruin my enjoyment of this tranquility; the last enjoyable part this day will bring most likely.

“It seems you haven’t noticed. It isn’t surprising, considering we didn’t formally meet. Still, one would expect you to be more perceptive. I remarried, Violet, I am Lady Chestnut.”

My facade breaks, and I raise my eyebrows high in surprise. Well, maybe this is more interesting than the tranquility.

“Your husband’s death was an untimely demise. I only had the pleasure of meeting him once, but he was a good man.”

The statement creates the opposite reaction of what was intended as her face warps to a mild disgust. Maybe it came out too cold, but I had put sincere emotion into it because it was true.

“Don’t give me that garbage. You’re the reason he’s dead. Some easy words aren’t going to change that. You deserve to be at my feet begging for his and my forgiveness!”

So, she wants a full display of humiliation? Well, who cares? Maliciously, I decide to give the people what they want. My reputation is already so low, could it go any lower by dancing and begging like a dog? Given the atmosphere and what Judith preached earlier about power moves, if she got her way it might create some self-destruction. Time to drag her down to my level. With surprising fluidity, without hindrance from social pressure, I get down in front of her on all fours with my forehead placed against the wintry marble. I’m ready to say what she so desperately wants to hear. She immediately reverses her bravado as she tries to stop me, realizing how it will look. She had fully underestimated the condition of my mind and heart.

“I plead for your forgiveness, Lady Braud and for that of the deceased Lord Chestnut! He was a great man! A man unworthy of his death. In your heart you know this to be true too!”

Despite the plea being over, I purposely hold my position to draw out the scene. In most cases humility would create feelings of fondness, but knowing them, I imagine they’re sneering down their noses at us.

Getting up, I feel no satisfaction, no victory, just a feeling that this was what both Lady and Lord Chestnut deserved. It’s ultimately my fault that Lord Chestnut met his fate. That uncomfortable moment truly isn’t enough to make amends for it, so my heart still aches. As the nearby circles glance at us and exchange whispers, her exasperation becomes apparent. She tries fruitlessly to hide it behind a smile, yet not even a fool would be fooled by so foolish a mask. She is probably thinking, You did that on purpose, you little bitch. No, I accidentally tripped while standing still. How clumsy.

Judith comes back and quickly decides to quiet the scene. She wraps her arm around my waist, probably trying to avoid the wings, and leads us off to attend to our undertaking.

“You shouldn’t be making scenes like that; it only hurts your cause.”

I laugh wickedly, then respond, “Under different circumstances, I would already be dead. How could today’s hell possibly worsen?”

Well, it looks like it’s about time for this jaded masquerade to get started. It will be interesting talking to so many disdainful eyes behind so many masks. It takes a dreadfully long time, yet, alas, the business has finally subsided for most likely the rest of the gathering. All that’s left now in the evening is the dinner which everyone is currently seated for. The day with Judith went as expected, unenjoyably. Judith led and did all the talking while her symbolic doll stood a step to the side in silence. Interestingly, despite the damaged image, most of the nobles were tame enough. It was either because they aren’t malicious in person or because they respect, perhaps even fear, Judith. There was the occasional whore whispered under a lord’s or lady’s breath, though they were never brave enough to say it loudly enough for me to know with certainty what was said.

With the prior events vaguely covered, we return to the present at hand. First, even with the contempt, it was weird how through it all none of them interacted with me unless Judith first signaled it. That is, with one exception, which brings up the other thing. One of the people we had the pleasure of having to chat with turned out to be the Commander of the Wall and his wife. Instead of greeting them anxiously as I had last time, I met them with a cold gaze transfixed at the ground. The apathy at that point was rather high as the repercussions from Judith seemed like a threat in the distance. Lady Stonewall inevitably erupted during the meeting; in return, her outburst was met with a deathly apathetic glare.

The verbal lashing went on for a while. With no clear resolution in sight, the guards entered to calm everything down. They ended up escorting her out gently with an embarrassed husband following behind. With her final words, she shouted at the top of her lungs, “Vile witch!” Like I haven’t heard it before… Surprisingly this scene didn’t provoke any hatred directed at me from the other nobles. Interestingly a few lords and ladies ended up apologizing to me instead on her behalf. The gist of it was that she had always been a lunatic and that most of the nobility dislike her. They try to just tolerate her for the sake of her husband, who,

in their opinion, is well regarded. Remarkably, their words didn't really soothe me. It is hypocritical to try and comfort someone with words that you'll use later behind their back to tear them down in private.

With the prior events vaguely covered, we return to the present at hand. Currently, we are seated, ready for dinner with the servants just having finished making their rounds. Obviously, nausea comes from whom I'm seated beside; however, it should be said that it no longer brings feelings of anxiousness or chills. I am seated beside the King and, you guessed it, the ice Queen Elizabeth is here as well, along with her hanger-on. With the placements and food finally being set, King Gale, with crumbs in and wine spilling from his beard, gets up to commence the dinner.

As expected, he asks yours truly to get up and say some words. Because I have already prepared what I plan on saying, this will be short, simple, and most of all a breeze. Who knows? Maybe with a common admiration for the Lord they will appreciate what it is I have to say. I get up and look over the table, and my hopes are expertly dashed. As I look around into a few of their eyes, I can feel the contempt in their gaze and inevitably begin to wonder what exactly is wrong with me as every single one has this look about them.

"Thank the Lord for these gifts, for he is generous in his bounty. Amen."

Throwing out the prepared speech and opting to get it over with as quickly as possible was the best option. The desire to sink slowly into my chair is strong yet is unattainable because of these cursed wings. King Gale immediately resumes stuffing his fat cheeks again, only taking breaks to catch a howling breath or two occasionally. Despite the uncanny sight, it is a positive since it guarantees I'll be left alone. If only this were also the case with Queen Elizabeth. She and her friend, for the most part, just jabber on and on. Mainly it's just Elizabeth doing the talking as she doesn't tend to eat, as opposed to the friend who isn't yet fat but is slowly sliding down a slippery slope.

To be honest, I think that if they ever happened to switch roles, the other woman would quickly be replaced. She must know this. In the end,

I try my best to tune them out. I nibble as I normally don't eat that much. I'm not restraint with what I eat; I just tend to not be that hungry anymore. The food at the capital really is too rich. Once finished, I just meekly stare at my plate, trying almost to just fade out from the situation right now. Occasionally Elizabeth will be talking and will emphasize a certain word like whore or tramp. Most likely she is shooting daggers at me, but, unyielding for the most part, I just continue in my other world.

Time passes like a blur, but it feels as though it has taken a long time to come to this. I guess my indifference was too much for Elizabeth since she pours a full cup of wine over my head in retaliation. Though it is cold, I do my best to ignore it with my head down as it flows down my back with some beads dripping down my face. Given the already chilly day, my body betrays me and decides to subtly shiver on its own. A few moments of tense silence pass on as most likely she is waiting for some reaction because she remains unsatisfied in her efforts.

"You think you're better than everyone here, don't you? How dare some whore look down upon me? How dare she come into this place as a guest and look down upon anyone?"

I still imagine that the situation unfolding isn't happening as I try to just focus on the floor and pretend I'm physically alone. Still no response to her statement is given. It isn't until the Queen reaches over and violently grabs my hair that our eyes finally meet. She is obviously drunk, having most likely consumed a full bottle more than usual. There is still silence on everyone's part. Although I cannot see him during our staring contest, King Gale remains focused on his food. The onlookers are either happily enthralled or detached from the whole situation; no empathy is alive in this room.

"Look at the sludge run down your face. Only a whore wears that much makeup, but then again you need all the help you can get."

She breaks away and throws her head back in laughter. When she returns, nothing but a dead gaze is there to be met, and for a moment, as our eyes meet, I feel it. A frozen dagger pierces her heart and for the smallest moment she knows what fear is. With one swift movement that, despite its speed, is easily anticipated, the warmest thing I've felt all day

rushes through my face as her slap echoes through the hall. This would be the most appropriate time for tears to be shed. To reiterate, the only problem is there are none left, the well is barren. I remain statuesque, holding the same position after the slap, and gaze apathetically down over towards the rest of the table. Most are uncomfortable trying to ignore us, while some stare on with delight showing through their twisted grins. Then there is one last group; those who are in absolutely no way fazed, carrying on as if this is just a part of the daily routine. They're too desensitized by their own debauchery to care enough when a defenseless girl is being violated.

Out of the corner of my eye, the motion of a raised hand signals that another hit is about due. As I unflinchingly accept the fate before me, something suddenly catches and interrupts the Queen's strike. It is Judith. With a stern look of disapproval, she says in a low voice,

"Understand the circumstances of your situation. You are smarter and better than this."

The Queen looks down subtly, not wanting to admit that what Judith has stated is true. Slightly defeated yet satisfied by her revenge, she sits back down and acts as if nothing has happened. This truly completes the destruction of my expectations, leaving me in a bitter anguish. Judith only did that because of political circumstances, out of her own self-interest, not because she felt compassion or empathy for the girl that stood before her.

With a snap of the King's fingers, some maidens come and snatch me up to take me away so they can clean me up for the night. We head back to my chamber and impatiently they start to undress and wash me down. The girl who appears before me in the mirror looks that much more a disaster than before. Specifically, with her running makeup and battered look, the best way to put it is that she looks like a tramp, an ugly, detestable tramp. The worst part of all isn't the events themselves, it's the fact that the wing warmers got stained tonight from the wine. Most likely they'll be ruined forever. I'm sorry, so, so sorry, Mrs. Lytton. I know you'd detest me for destroying your undeserved gift. A few tears roll down my cheek.

I am delivered to King Gale's chambers as usual; the only difference is he normally awaits me. Time escapes me as I'm off listlessly in my own world, but after a while, as expected, he comes staggering in wobbly drunk. I get up, walk over to him, and greet him with a kiss on the lips and slowly begin to slip his pants off. Everything is done as usual, no emotion, no love, no resistance. At this point, it is basically like a job. He wasn't right about my enjoying it; still, disgustingly, he was close, as I have already accepted it as part of life.

The desensitization that has taken place makes the job no longer disgust or sadden me. It just leaves an empty void. I work my way down onto my knees and begin to suck hard and fast. You eventually get good at something the more you do it, sadly. Occasionally, I stop and, with no emotion or life, state, "I'm your whore." Astonishingly, despite the statement having no legs or life, he still gets a small smirk of satisfaction from it. Perhaps this is because, despite what it is devoid of, deep down he knows in his heart that it's still said with genuine truth.

# Chapter 14

It’s a dull afternoon. Despite the sun being out, the air lacks any vitality whatsoever. It’s a stagnant day, or maybe “depressed” would better describe it. In the end, does it really matter? We ride along in one of the regal carriages, and as usual, one that’s drawn by slow-trotting horses. Father John and I are currently on our way to conduct a Saturday Mass. From start to finish, there is only silence on both our parts. With how things have gone over the past few months, he knows better than to make any attempt at conversation. The only thing that has transpired so far between us has been a quick mandatory greeting, accompanied by a “nice” compliment on my dress that was weaker than a slender branch getting snapped. It wasn’t the way he said it or the words themselves; it’s just that, at this point, what else is there to expect from Father John but a lie?

All it comes down to now for him is to keep our relationship in check. He needs the crucial advantages of having an angel, along with the ability to keep his hands clean. At least by dealing with him, I get the privilege of being able to inspire hope as an escape from the castle, even if it is just as a worthless doll. We are currently pulling up to the church, a sight forever encapsulated in grandeur, its runic architecture exuding wisdom. Surprisingly, there seems to be more people gathered around the church at this time than expected, considering we arrived early to prepare.

Father John and I step out of the carriage. Before there is even a chance to do anything, Father John instructs me to stay calm as we make our way towards the church. It doesn’t hit me until something grossly peculiar is noticed in the mix. With what this place is, with its malice so commonplace, it takes a lot for my attention to be grabbed. That changes when something hard and solid strikes me upon my right temple. It isn’t until I turn and get a more precise look with better focus that the whole picture breaks apart. Now, gazing upon them as individuals rather than

as a group, I realize they aren't ordinary churchgoers from the upper district.

With their gaunt figures and dirty, tattered look about them, they look eerily reminiscent of the younglings. They carry with them what looks like garbage, which, upon further inspection, consists mostly of rotting produce. Curious, considering they could be throwing rocks. Then again, maybe that is to keep our retaliation to a minimum. Chaotically the assortment of things begins to fly towards us like a flurry of hail. The two guards with us do the best they can to try and protect us but are failing miserably. As expected, Father John clearly gets more protection despite most of the stuff being aimed in my direction. Maybe it's because they don't feel like protecting someone who won't even make the effort to dodge? Then again, it's most likely because they look down upon me like all the rest.

Making progress, they begin to outpace me. Their shields barely miss as a decaying apple core grazes my cheek, making sure a small slime path of rot leaves its mark. One, then two, then three, then four. Things begin to pile on as I slowly straggle behind. As I lower my eyes, the shame and melancholy that has caused this position grows stronger. I am unable to see the catastrophe that is being reeked upon my silver dress. The only silver lining is that, with the recent temperature drop, the dresses have now been tailored with long sleeves and closed backs, which prevent most of the filth from touching my skin at least.

However, my normally snow-white hair and wings must look disgusting covered in filth. It doesn't cross my mind that they must be throwing other things as well, as I push the reality of what's happening away. Finally, I stop. The guards and Father John are unaware that they have left me behind, as they continue without me. My gaze can't help shifting to the top of the church, specifically the star that is used as the symbol of God, gleaming in the sunlight. Ironically, it is somehow the one thing bursting with life this afternoon. Under my breath, or perhaps only in my mind, I say, "I deserve this punishment, Lord. I'm sorry."

As I sink into this feeling of forsakenness, I resume my prior position of staring meekly towards the world. It just piles on and on. It seems a

moment in time can last for eternity. The only words that come out of their malicious mouths throughout the attack are either whore or bitch. When the throwing subsides finally and the shouting draws into a lull, I turn my head and decide to meet their faces. It is strange how the nobles look down upon me, but in this moment, I am met with faces like those of children who have caught a parent sinning. They feel let down, which has caused them a deep sadness that has contorted into rage. I have truly failed them and my mission of coming to Dyrad.

At this point, Father John is yelling out to me in astonishment, asking what the hell I'm doing. In truth, I really don't know what I'm doing, but in the end, what does it matter? Isn't what's deserved being brought forth? He should be standing here with me. He, too, plays a part in this twisted sin. Silence settles in except for the city's usual sounds; murmurs and the trotting of horses, which never fully cease even in the latest hours of night. At this point, someone gives my shoulder a deliberately hard tug. I don't turn, and the throwing commences again. The hand roughly moves down to my arm and begins to tug, but I resist. Still, I get dragged a small distance till the debris becomes too much for the guard, so he abandons me. Soaking and drenched now, every nook and cranny on every surface of my body is riddled with some form of secretion.

It is at this point that an elderly man makes his way through the crowd, and with this, the throwing ceases once again. We make eye contact, though he is unable to sense my emotions. He can't see into my heart as a wall of preconceived notions blocks any possible connection. With a stone face that shifts into that of bitter disappointment, he begins.

"The Lord blessed you with such bountiful gifts. He created you with divinity in his own image, and you dare turn your back on him by committing sins of the flesh. What do you have to say for yourself?"

There really isn't anything to say. They won't believe anything that is true, and lies will only create unrest. I sit in silence before he begins again.

“We have petitioned for a trial from the head priest for these unholy acts. We are not worthy of deciding matters of the church, so they will decide your fate.”

“…”

“You really don’t have anything to say? You don’t care that you have betrayed the Lord and have corrupted our just and righteous King?”

“…”

He moves slowly away from the crowd and stops about a step right before me, positioning himself almost on top of me, deeply imposing his body upon mine. In a low tone that can be heard only by both of us, he says.

“You are a fallen angel now, Violet. May there be swift mercy on your soul.”

Holding the L and never closing his mouth, he ends the sentence by spitting into my eye, causing me to wince in both irritation and disgust. Ironically, the spit slides slowly down my face like the first tear I have felt there in weeks. With that, he recedes back into the crowd and again the chanting picks back up. The same insults are uncreatively thrown back out. At this moment it finally kindles in me the urge to leave. Staying here will obviously lead to nothing good, and it is impossible to recognize when the Lord’s punishment for me is truly enough. If it isn’t, I’m sure there will be more than enough in store for later then.

With all the secretions oozing down my body and dress, Father John and the guards meet me with disgusted looks. Half of their disgust is instinctive because of the natural impulse to vomit from the putrid smell. The other half is judgmental, questioning why I did such a moronic thing. They say nothing to me, but Father John, without looking directly at me, is deep in thought. He is presumably pondering what is to be done about the Mass and the mob. He doesn’t speak until his session inevitably ends in frustration.

“Violet, you have no consideration for other people. At this point, I need to discuss things with Father Paul, and you are going to sully the insides of the church. Enough. Come along.”

He opens the ornamented door, and we follow in. Sister Jessica, the church's midwife, takes me to change and freshen up. In the meantime, Father John goes off to find Father Paul. Going down into the recesses of the church, she draws a warm bath for me. It's going to take some time to let the sludge and filth wash off. Once finished she withdraws with my dress in tow, carrying it off in a cloth sack to burn it as quickly as possible. The bathwater is lukewarm, which is to be expected when a bath is drawn without any notice. Still, the water feels soothing and heals my skin of the filth, so it shouldn't be complained about.

First things first, I dip my head under the water and run my fingers through my hair to get out the worst of it. After a struggle, it is finally clean, yet the water now has transformed from its nice pristine state to a deep murky color. This isn't the kind of bath to really soak in and relax given the circumstances. Considering this is supposed to be a punishment, it seems appropriate. I end up working my way down, and the rest doesn't end up causing me much trouble since the dress absorbed most of it. It is quite impossible to keep one's head empty during a bath. Luckily, because of the current task, it isn't as full as usual, but still thoughts flutter.

For the most part, I try and keep things away from the negative aspects. With little to focus on, I zone out. Finally, with no other recourse, my mind decides to recall the Lyttons. It is strange how only a little over half a year has passed; time goes so quickly. Hopefully, all is well. Winter will be coming soon, but I know William and Mr. Lytton must have reeled in a good haul from the farm, enough for Mrs. Lytton to make some fine stews for the winter. Oh, how I wish I could just be back there right now. There'd be a nice fire going while I'd be helping fix dinner. Then we'd all eat and reminisce about our days. Hmm, the water almost resembles a stew, and for a moment I try to imagine it as just that. In fact, it has the same rich, hearty aroma of Mrs. Lytton's stew. The attempt fails miserably, as the unavoidable smell cannot be transformed, rendering the effort futile. All that gets inhaled is the putrid smell of filth, which the water has done nothing to muffle.

I just stare at the water now. Time seems to slowly slip down into a frozen state like an icicle as the gravity of today's events and everything up to this point compresses on me. It isn't until Sister Jessica has returned that my body budges. She tells me I am still somewhat dirty, but that it cannot be helped. She hands me a towel and a bland brown dress, which, once on, is refreshing not because it is clean but because it isn't as flamboyant as the usual attire arranged by the chamber maidens. The fabric isn't designed or embroidered in a special pattern; it just has some correctly fitting sleeves, back, and skirt. It is much like something that Mrs. Lytton would have made back home. Once I am dressed, sadly, I have nothing else to do but go meet Father John and Father Paul. As I slowly approach them, I can easily discern the sound of their voices coming up through the stairway channel. Father John must have met Father Paul in his quarters but decided to discuss events while making preparations.

It doesn't draw my attention until I finally hear them say "Violet". I'm at the end of the channel with my presence still unknown. Had I arrived a moment later, I wouldn't have had the chance to hear this. With a few steps back down and my head pressed against the side of the bend just for good measure, I keep a keen ear as their words bounce off the walls.

"We need to be rid of that girl, John. She is dragging us down with her."

Father John responds, "I know, I know, believe me, I'd be fine with it, but the King has commanded not a finger be laid on her head." The irony knows no bounds as my torturer is also a savior.

Father Paul asks, "Is there any way then for us to deal with this without public execution?"

It truly is a surprising thing that some adultery would warrant such punishment. What is even more surprising is that Father John would be willing to forsake a young, innocent woman for his own gain. His vanity, it seems, has been underestimated to this point.

"There is simply no loophole to exploit. If we managed to fake her death, the King would still want her kept with him and some of the

servants would have to be made complicit. They would keep quiet, but enemies of the crown could generously make them reconsider."

At this point, Father Paul just seems to grumble, most likely upset that the circumstances seem unavoidable.

"Forget it. We'll find some way of improving the public's opinion of her. For now, we need to prepare for Mass. Go snatch her from wherever she is and get her ready."

The patter of footsteps can be heard now as they ever draw nearer. No instinct or care that tells me to hide or leave. Does it matter if I was eavesdropping, considering they already want me dead and gone? What can they even do if I know? Nothing, fucking nothing. After a few steps down the channel, his head comes into view, and as I tilt mine upward, our eyes meet. Immediately, Father John looks away, not because I heard what they said, but because I feel, with certainty, that he peered into the darkness of my pupils, and all that was there was death. With it now hitting him that everything they talked about in secret is out in the open, he says, nervously avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, Violet, there you are. Glad to see you're looking better. We, uh, need your help with the preparations."

All that comes out is an emotionless "Yes," after which I follow Father John. Would the Lyttons forsake me if they had been cast into those roles? Is everyone truly so wretched?

# Chapter 15

In a surprising turn of events, ’tis a pleasantly mild late autumn day. Gina will be accompanying me on a leisurely stroll today through the city that should bring much joy to the heart. It has been a little over a month since we last saw each other. Strange how in such a short amount of time things have changed so dramatically. Still forever in the back of my mind are Father John’s words to keep my distance. Obviously, today the rule has been broken, but is justifiable as it’s for good reasons. Money isn’t the perfect tool to get things done; however, my allowance for the week should be enough for today's guards accompanying us to keep their little mouths shut.

Today isn’t a carriage day, as we currently make our last leg of our trip from the downhill toe of the noble district into the main square. The square is much sparser and more tranquil with its crowd than it usually is, which I guess is to be expected considering winter is knocking close. The people that are left about seem to be in a more serious mood, with their heads down and hurried paces. In contrast, shop owners during the summer have most of their stock ready at hand to meet the surplus of visitors. Now with copious amounts of free time they don’t quite know what to do with themselves and seem lackadaisical.

The one nice thing about the lack of people is that it makes Gina easy to spot. Not that it is really needed, as she is easily recognizable by her unique beauty. She adorns a cream-colored puffy blouse accompanied by a long draping brown skirt, which are both much lovelier than her normal work clothes. Meanwhile, the guards are in their usual flashy regal armor, while I sport a black slim sleeveless dress that’s accompanied by long black gloves that almost take the place of the sleeves. Not to say this in a hateful or discriminatory way, but the difference in our clothing is as different as night and day.

I almost wish I could be matching her for three reasons. First off, it is something like what I would have worn with the Lyttons. Second, it would have been nice to not be treated like a doll being told what to

wear. Lastly, this whole afternoon she will constantly be mistaken for my accompanying maid, which is a shameful way for a friend to be looked at. These are unfortunate, unavoidable things. Our eyes finally meet, and immediately she greets me with a big smile; in response, I can't help but crack a small, reserved one myself. The smile is truly infectious, one of the few good kinds. We make our way through the small crowd until we come up to the front of Gina's and my favorite bakery.

"You look stunning as usual, Violet."

She is kind as always, but all my beauty comes from these extravagant clothes and makeup. You have much more true beauty than I, Gina. Knowing this, I can't help but look away and reject the compliment and end up giving her one instead.

"I don't think stunning is the right word; maybe ridiculous would be more precise. You are the stunning one!"

"Well, thank you, but how about we just agree that we are both stunning."

Along with that, she hits me with another warm smile. This time, she tilts her head and closes her eyes, only making it feel that much more sincere. There is no rebuttal for me to make and in my heart, I like letting her win. She is the only person who deserves it. The argument is settled. Part of me just wants to enjoy the moment slightly longer. After a moment, I realize that's unrealistic and ask.

"So, would you like to get some sweets to get our late morning started?"

"Surely," she responds.

With the guards following promptly behind us, we proceed into the bakery.

"What do you think you are going to get, Violet?"

It would deeply bother her if she found out I spent all my allowance on the guards just for the chance to see her. I clearly don't have the heart to tell her, so a white lie never hurt anybody.

"Um, I actually just started this diet, so no sweets for me today."

“Oh, come on. You look so slim, especially in that dress. I think you can spare one day.”

“I’m sorry, I really can’t.”

A fake smile would be a better disguise, but as time has dragged on, it has been increasingly harder to recreate, so instead, as a defense, I look away and try to change the subject.

“Those are new. They look good, don’t they? Maybe you should give them a try.”

She surveys the sweets and is stricken with a hint of curiosity. She looks back at me, stricken with the same curiosity as to what’s wrong.

“Please,” I say.

Finally coming to accept my stance, she goes over and discusses what she wants with the baker. Since I’m not buying anything, I naturally stand towards the back of the store. In the back of my mind, I know that’s just an excuse. The real reason is that since the encounter in front of the church took place, I can’t help questioning how different people will receive me.

The guards casually talk about a jousting match held the other day and how it was the last of the year, with winter approaching. Normally, the guards really aren’t allowed to converse while on watch, but obviously they don’t respect me enough to abide. That’s something that I could have told you even before the maidens had gotten me out of bed today. The interaction between the baker and Gina seems to be going well. Laughs and jolliness are abundant between the two. He most likely noticed who I am but is either kind enough or apathetic enough to not care. What I really am more concerned about is his wife since she is a much more devoted follower and big supporter of the church.

It is strange how a woman whom I had met on such friendly terms, friendly enough that she even requested a blessing, could possibly hold such strong contempt for me despite not doing anything to her personally. It is interesting how an act against God is considered an act against all, or maybe it is just an excuse as they need something to sneer at. Their cold, disdainful gazes try to take away the wind from under my wings. It’s as if with their attitude of greedy self-righteousness, they

fully believe they're taking back the wind that they feel is deservedly theirs. In the end, it doesn't need to be understood. It just needs to be outlasted.

It should also be mentioned that the troubles that have befallen me have been deserved. There is no argument against it, I am a sinner, but how people go about forsaking me while simultaneously believing they walk without sin is an utter joke. Every man walks with sin; their deluded attitude is enough to almost turn this self-loathing against them. As expected, she appears from the back of the shop. With an overlooking gaze, she inspects to see how business is doing and who has graced their shop. She first looks over to the side and sees her husband attending to Gina.

With a side-to-side glance, her gaze eventually falls upon the eyesore... me. Making sure to give me a cold, flat glare of disdain followed by a rolling of the eyes, then ignores my very existence because in her mind she is leagues better than me. She proceeds with the basket in hand she is carrying and stacks the shelves of the displays with various types of bread and baked goods. I can't help but look at the ground and feel slowly enveloped by this dark cloud strangling me, crushing my wings. It is strange, had that been Elizabeth it would have passed right through me. I would have been Ice. I would've been as apathetic as stone without a care to it at all. So how can the Ice Queen have less effect than a simple baker's wife?

Is it because Elizabeth had never treated me kindly? No, because even still her approval was always sought. My eyes take a moment to wander off the floor almost as if they're trying to look for a beacon of light. They look to Gina who has finished selecting her sweets and is now paying, when an epiphany occurs. Gina is almost like a double-edged sword. She has been the one warm, kind, and good thing about the capital lifting me up, so to speak. The problem is at the same time she melts away my shielding ice, exposing me to the plethora of other emotions that I try to keep at bay. She cheerfully walks back to the guards and me, carrying all the sweets she's bought.

“Come on, Violet, I know you are on a diet but just get a taste of this. It’s the last blueberry tart they’ll have for the rest of the season. You’ll regret it all winter if you don’t.”

The tart looks ambrosial, despite the weekly sweets being one of the few saving graces here, they too are starting to lose their appeal. So, Gina’s statement won’t hold any truth in a few months’ time, however in this moment the tart looks irresistible. Subtle steam comes off, so there is no doubt it is fresh. It is Gina’s tart though, and I shouldn’t impose my burden upon her.

“It looks delicious, but no thank you.”

“Oh, come on. You even said it looks delicious. Stop obsessing so much over your body, You look healthy; now eat it.”

In a friendly but stern way she forces the tart into my hand with a face almost saying you are going to eat it and like it. It easily transforms back into a smile once I’ve taken my first bite, and what a first bite it was. The warmth and flakiness of the crust mixed with the subtle tartness and sweetness create a festival of taste. Thank you, Gina. It was a small gesture but something no one else in this city would be willing to do. With the business at the bakery done, we head out to move on to our main objective for the day. Just one more detour before we get onto it though. We must make a quick stop by the local winery. Although it is my day off, Father John has instructed me to pick up some of the divine wine and drop it off for him.

It doesn’t take that long, but the storage house is rather flooded with barrels since with it being near the end of the harvest the stockpile is almost full for the winter. Gina waits with the guards and casually munches on her sweets. By the time I arrive back, she has gone through them all but is clearly satisfied and delighted with the purchase. One of the guards goes to grab the barrel and lowly mumbles something about how this wasn’t agreed upon and that it’s going to cost extra. Considering it wasn’t loud enough for Gina to catch wind of it, it doesn’t upset me. The damn oaf can bicker all he wants; he isn’t getting another penny out of me. Without the carriage, the barrel is quite the

carry, and the simple trip to the church takes longer than what was assumed.

There is still plenty of sunlight out, but the delay will cause our plans to run close to dusk. The people, like the sun, seem to slightly dwindle and dwindle with each hour that passes. Finally, despite the little trek, we have arrived. There are two types of things in the world, those that change and those that are everlasting. From the first time I looked upon the church until now, it has remained just as beautiful with its artisan-crafted stained glass, even if much light doesn't bounce off it on this late autumn day. The angels depicted in their glory seem so far away from what the truth is in this city tonight.

One of the many priests, conveniently enough, happens to be outside of the grounds, either returning from business or on his way to attend to it. Either way, it doesn't make much difference, he's still a member of the large number of unknown priests belonging to the church. I signal to him and in a neutral way and he reciprocates it, coming over. The talk is short because he easily realizes what the guard is carrying. Not wanting to do the manual labor, he decides to lead the guards in to show them where to dump it. Not asking, he instructs me to also accompany them, but I'm able to work my way around it by explaining that Gina shouldn't be left alone. It doesn't really matter to him as long as he doesn't have to carry it. Thus, almost as soon as the encounter starts, it ends with him leaving with the two guards, departing without really an impression being left.

His name is Father William, and because we will most likely meet again under similar circumstances, he probably opted to keep our interaction neutral. He has most definitely heard the nasty rumors about me. Word spreads throughout the church quick unless the head priest and Father John have made a strong movement to crush it. Most likely, that is just wishful thinking as there is no real point in suppression anymore if even the common folk already know of it. The word will eventually reach everyone. That brings up a sadly unavoidable question. Has Gina heard it herself, and what does she truly believe? It is something that if one had a choice, they wouldn't bring up out of the

blue. Standing outside alone together, though, we may not have another chance like this for the foreseeable future.

The best choice is to have a heart-to-heart before the toxins can decay our bond. “So, the sweets were good?”

“Yes, they were delicious. I’m upset you didn’t have more.” She says it almost with motherly concern.

“Ha, you know I’ll just make up for it next time, you worry too much… There is something I actually wanted to talk to you about since we are finally by ourselves.”

Quizzically, she responds, “What?”

Before climbing a mountain, one knows the task will be hard, but one does not fully grasp the difficulty until the challenge is finally underway. It is a challenge that can only be met with a brave heart. Before my lips even part my body language says it all and she can easily tell I’m anxious.

“Well, what I wanted to talk to you about was, um….” A deep inhale is followed then by a deep exhale. “Have you happened to hear any kind of rumor or gossip going around the castle?”

And in one fell swoop, her cheeriness vanishes and a more serious expression settles over her. “I have, quite a few times. I’ll give you a chance to speak your mind before I judge. Violet, you are my friend, and I do give your word considerable weight.”

Anxiously, I respond, “If the roles were reversed, I’d trust your word too, Gina. I honor our friendship with only truth.” A deep inhale is followed by a deep exhale again. “What you have heard is just what it is, gossip and rumors. The King and I have not committed any sins of the flesh. I swear there is no proof but my word, but alas there is no proof on the other side either, just words also.”

The deep conviction in my eyes passes like lightning into hers, and she understands my heart. Closing her eyes and exhaling a breath of relief, Gina believes me. “I believe you, Violet, but there is just one question I must ask. Why, then, have other maidens and guards claimed they have seen you entering or leaving the King’s chamber late at night?”

A major problem has just arisen. Most likely Gina will believe me when I say that he has raped me, but is it fair to cloud away her sunshine by placing a burden like that on her heart? This ominous cloud over me is mine alone to bear. The fact that she brightens it up makes her the last person here that deserves to carry it too.

So, this is life or death, do or die. Drawing on the emotion of those wretched nights, I'm able to coat myself in a veil of false emotion and lies. Holding fast to my conviction, I tell Gina.

"I bless the Queen and King, sometimes giving them a private Mass on days when they have been busy. They truly love the Lord and can't bear to turn their backs on him even for a second. I am merely there to help."

It takes time for the thoughts to work their way through her head. Eventually after some time pondering, she does blindly accept it. My aching heart feels a pain it hasn't felt in a while, instead of feeling a depressed hole where the heart is, it stings instead, harshly. Without a doubt it's punishment in the form of regret because I just silently betrayed the trust of the only friend I have. In the end, it all evens out. Taking on more storm clouds for her is the least I can do since she has brightened me up already. A deeply pathetic excuse, I know!

"This wasn't something I was going to bring up to you, Violet, but I feel much better now that we have had this conversation."

The guards come back promptly from their errand. They missed our conversation by mere moments; had they returned a tick sooner, they would have heard it. Their return means it is time to move on. The sun is just beginning its descent from its high point, so time is precious. With the ordeal of the last Mass, my eyes have been opened. Understandably, they keep me in the dark. In my naivety, Judith's speech seemed to shed light on things, but there were still dark cracks hiding out of sight.

They told me that the square was the lower class of the capital. Technically, they're a "lower" class, but with that stretch they have hidden the fact that even below them lies yet another. When I asked about the poor in the city, Gina told me about their plight in detail. She too found it eerily strange that their existence was unbeknownst to me.

She claimed that everyone, even Nobles, despite not interacting with them personally, still understood that the poor suffered harshly in the capital.

When this was revealed, with an earnest heart I told her that I wanted to see for myself what it is like for them. She easily obliged under the condition that we would have some form of protection. Hence the presence of the two guards, who are now suited in full, gleaming armor. Still, I'm a tad anxious. What really makes my heart palpitate is the possibility that the conditions are worse than what has been imagined. We have traversed a few blocks so far. After several turns to the right and left, we travel farther from the square and therefore farther from the noble district. It is clear as we continue to walk deeper that two easily noticeable changes occur around us.

The first is the slight deterioration of the buildings, and the second is how the people seem to look sicklier. The deeper we move away from the square, the worse the state of everything gets. With this, filth and trash now litter the sides of the streets. It is only reasonable that the people here would look as they do under these conditions. Blue shadows lie beneath most of their eyes; others have pale faces, and some suffer both. It is evident we are now in the thick of it. Two men, skin and bones, are lying down on the side of the road, on the verge of being corpses. Are they dead or sleeping? It is impossible to tell, if it is the latter, the former is soon to follow.

Alas, we continue to wander aimlessly. The guards have been dutifully tasked with remembering which way is home despite all these twists and turns. A great deal of trust to place in two strangers. At this moment it is easy to note that Gina does have an air of tension about her, and she isn't to blame considering some of the men have given us glances that scream of lust and animosity. My emotions remain calm as there is nothing to worry about given their weakened states. It's sorrowful that that must be our comforter though. Looking at Gina, it is interesting to compare our different states of mind. Whatever happens to me is wholly deserved, I feel. She on the other hand, is instead a gentle, innocent soul who fears naturally any undeserved punishment.

We would be mirror images of one another if the time with King Gale hadn't been so cruel. The horrors that once desensitized me leaves no room for fear of their sins. I have no doubt that, were I raped, it would be like drinking a glass of water; I would taste nothing, and holding my breath for a moment would not be enough to suffocate me, unfortunately. Going back to the guards though it is interesting to note that they carry a feeling similar to myself. Maybe it's because they know that, clad in all that golden armor, they would survive even if we were attacked. Ultimately, we would perish while they would still most definitely be able to go back and live another day, the swine.

The sights are still sinking in. It's not quite time to turn around yet but it is getting close. Unexpected but unsurprising, two children run up to us, grabbing onto Gina's and my dresses with hungry eyes. Gina starts to cry while uncanniness takes over for me. A boy and a girl. They aren't the same two, but they are still reminiscent of the two younglings I met outside of the church. My head sinks down in defeat knowing I couldn't save them and knowing that these two forsaken souls will eventually meet the same fate. My heart becomes cladded in ice despite the warmth Gina has provided me with today. With a dismissive posture and an expressionless face, I drop down to eye level and say.

"We don't have any more money or food with us, I'm terribly sorry." With hungry eyes that swiftly contort into hate, they foretell their intention to lash out in wrath. That is, until their rage is quickly subdued with the realization of the guards standing behind us. They leave, disappearing somewhere into the porous crowd of the street. Their quick feet make easy navigation through the lifeless, shambling crowd.

We are unable to continue as Gina is still weeping and can't get a proper hold of herself. It takes Gina about a quarter of an hour before I can get her to continue on with the journey. Her tears have yet to cease. For this pure soul, perhaps they will keep falling for forty days and forty nights. The sun has dipped down now considerably. There is no sunset yet, but most likely the sky's hue will start to seep through with an aggressive pink and mellow orange soon enough. We finally approach a small opening not as spacious as the square, but enough for a small

gathering. Coincidentally with this statement, there is such a gathering taking place at the opposite end. Besides the housing complexes, what was once a market has dwindled to nothing but mostly barren, decrepit shacks.

Not much is available in the form of wares and what remains seems either dingy or broken, none of it worth a shilling. For the most part, I have seen enough of the district to understand the truth of the suffering within the capital. There is no point in continuing unless I really wanted to be a monster and continue Gina's sorrow. I raise a flat hand, and the guards realize it's a command to stop. With a non-authoritative tone, far from it, I request them to turn around. Before I finish speaking, an ominous cry pierces the air, "You!" Without so much as a signal or sign of who it is directed towards, it is clear to everyone in our party that it was directed at me. I try and pretend that the words were almost never conjured up and continue, until finally a clear message is shouted, "Vile angel, show yourself!"

We all stop short knowing the suspicion's confirmed. One of the guards leans in and whispers into my ear, "We had best move along and avoid the confrontation."

This is most undoubtedly true, but it escapes the guard's mind that leaving abruptly might cause the same effect. They might give chase, and Gina and I wouldn't be able to outrun them. I deserve whatever happens. If they were to attack us and my death ensues, it would be most deserving. However, whatever sins I have committed, I cannot allow Gina to suffer because of them. The only sure-fire way to not create this outcome is to approach the crowd alone. If anything happens, they will be focused on me, and the guards can leave with Gina without a second thought.

Without another word exchanged and with complete disregard for the guard's advice, with surprising conviction I make my way towards the group. Their motley faces are the only distinction amongst them, as they all wear the same filthy tattered rags. They deserve better, much better than this, but my mind isn't focused on that right now. I can't help but just curse these damn wings. It is the only way people easily distinguish

me. Yes, the exquisite black dress and good hygiene immediately mark me as a noble, but they wouldn't be able to specifically realize it was me.

A man comes to the forefront now. He wears something slightly better than the others, a dark brown robe that is at least clean, while still tattered. He shouts again from across the clearing.

"Ah, finally come to face retribution have ye now, vile angel?"

I respond with nothing but stoic silence. There isn't any good way to rebut that. It'll just turn into my word versus his word, which will only agitate them further. I keep some distance before stopping at the outskirts of their little group. The robed man and I stand in front of one another. His eyes and everyone else's, but especially his, meet mine with this contempt, this disdain, as if they were all something above humanity looking down at something beneath them.

I break the silence. "What business do you have with me, sir?"

"I've never been a sir in me life. Cut the fancy speech. We understand, you are better than us."

I respond with an annoyed tone. "What do you want? Better?"

He rebuts it. "Honestly, luv, what we want is to see your pretty little neck hanging from the rafters. Anything less won't satisfy us."

A chill rushes down my spine as if a cold winter breeze passes. It isn't the man himself or his words that do it, it's the prospect that this will most likely be the outcome of this encounter.

"Well, why don't you? No one will stop you?"

"That isn't for us to decide. Only the Lord can judge."

An unexpected answer. Then again, their faith has brought them here; why betray it now? The question now, though, is this; once their request gets denied by the church because of the fear of what Lord Gale would do, what will their next gambit be?

"Then take that up with the church. May I please go?"

The air thickens with malicious intentions. They all, without exchanging a word, know what to do next. In an instant, like a lamb, minus the innocence, I'm jumped by vicious wolves that are starving for blood. Men seize me from every direction. Sensations of pain run up and

down from the nape of my neck to the tips of my toes, but by far the most excruciating pain comes from my wings. Still without much feeling in them, it's the junction with my back where the sting feels like razor blades.

"To hell with the church. We'll have our own trial by a lower-ranking priest, one who hasn't been corrupted by the inner fiends of the high church. Until then, you're coming with us."

Gina's shrill screams ensue. Brutally harsh they are as it sounds as though she were shrieking directly into your ear. I cannot see through this pack, but even so, I don't need it to know the guards won't be coming. They will be dragging Gina back while she either faints or flails… it's the right decision. This is most likely the end; not yet, but sometime today. It is what I deserve. I am deeply sorry, God, for all the sins I've committed against you in your glory. Please, if one wish is allowed, let my death be quick, an unworthy request, but a last one at that. I'm sorry, Mary, that I've let you and Mr. Lytton down. I'm sorry, William, for forsaking those younglings as their blood is on my hands. Your best efforts were wasted on a vile, vile angel. You all deserved better.

With these last repentant thoughts, the tears begin to come out not in sadness but in something approaching acceptance and healing. Surprisingly enough, no hair pulling has occurred yet, but once they pick themselves and me back up, the robed man with no need of it makes sure to yank my hair from behind, causing me to stare into the sky.

"Weep for the Lord. It won't do anything, but still a vile angel needs to repent."

The deep blue sky has finally begun its transition; the faint orange is almost entirely consumed by the dark pink, which is teetering on the verge of red. It's unnatural, yet for some reason the sight feels just right. As the commotion dies down and Gina falls silent, most likely from losing her voice, the unmistakable march of armored feet can be heard. Everyone stops as they all realize that something is coming towards our

way. It comes to a halt. Unable to move my head, I cannot see them; whoever they are, they have arrived.

“What are you doing with the holy angel of the city, you lowly scum?”

The voice is immediately recognizable as Father John’s. With my hair released and movement unrestricted, I gaze over. He stands there menacingly along with Father Paul, who is accompanied by two full squadrons of armored guards. If they so willed it, they could effortlessly wipe out this entire block, then easily carve a way to the square with sheer brute force without so much as a drop of blood drawn on their end.

“This angel stands here with the sin of adultery, and with the sin of corrupting another holy being! She should stand trial for these very acts, have judgment passed upon her and be executed promptly.”

Father Paul barks, “No such thing will take place. You have one chance, release her or bear the full brunt of the consequences.”

The guards take this as the cue to mobilize into formation with swords and pikes drawn. There isn’t the slightest hint of a bluff on Father Paul’s end because, well, there isn’t. Whatever happens, Father Paul prevails. If they kill me in the crossfire, his problem is solved; if not, he still deals with the peasants. A sudden stillness overtakes the people surrounding me. Out of fear, hesitantly, but then with full-fledged commitment when gravity sets, they release and push me towards Father John.

Before I even cross the halfway mark, the high priest with full conviction commands the guards to “dispose of the trash.” Charging in a roar, they storm past me. I turn back to see with uncaring eyes the crimson blood beginning to fly and spill in all directions. It is an absolute slaughter. The peasants put up no fight. Stupefied, some do not even know what struck them. The others drop to their knees begging for forgiveness from this damnation only to have their heads sliced off. Having become so desensitized since coming here, I am not even fazed.

When the bloodbath ultimately ceases, I finally look over to see Gina’s condition. She is slumped unconsciously with the guard carrying her in his arms. He tells me that he knocked her out while I was being

taken so as to “shut her up,” to use his words. So, fortunately, she didn’t see any of the carnage… good. Thank you, Lord, for not allowing someone whose soul is still pristine to fall further, amen.

# Chapter 16

The night is cold and unforgiving. The temperature has dropped substantially since the little journey today. After the violent demonstration, Gina was taken home safely to where her mother answered the door and took her from there. Seeing the sorry state she was in, her mother probably cursed my name afterwards. At least that's what her eyes told me before closing the door. When I first got back to the castle I made straight for my room. Normally, for the past few months, I have been good, but the pressure of everything was too heavy to bear. I shove my head into the pillows, and a crying fit emerges that goes on for longer than it should. The water spills from the guilt of living in luxury while those poor souls live in squalor; from the guilt of putting Gina through that undeserved torture; and from the general despair caused by the weekly violations of my body, which strip away parts of my soul. The mind puts it all at bay, but it doesn't go away. Being ice to it all isn't realistic.

I grieve for the life and the world I lived in, for being stripped from my sweet dream of the cottage with the Lyttons. I was once a child who believed that the world was a good place, that most in the city lived happy lives, and that sick and fucking vile men didn't exist. Like rain battering the streets during a flood, I'm at my breaking point. The current paradigm will continue. What's even the point of continuing then? While Gina cherishes our friendship, depressingly I will only drag her down. Outside of Gina, no one truly values Violet, just the body she bears and what she represents. No one would care if I died. Most would actually relish it as I have become an "inconvenience."

Drifting back to the moment at hand, it is time to wake up. As I traverse this maze with my resolve, the destination is known yet unknown. The halls almost echo with the pitter-patter of my bare feet against the marble floor. It is past the high point of the night and everybody except maybe a handful of guards is gently snoozing, tucked in, warmly blissful without a care in the world. Normally I'd be a part of

that, but some business needs to be attended to at the garden tower. With every step through the darkness, it envelops me increasingly until we are finally both one.

When the tower is reached, the spiral staircase is quite a trek. I guess a tower should be tall though, despite it not even being needed in the first place. With a few slip-ups since visibility is low with limited moonlight, I eventually make it to the top. After peeking my head in to make sure the coast is clear, I casually waltz inside. The lone guard is tossed back in his chair asleep. That was to be expected because this tower is functionless, as this castle would never get attacked. The only exception would be an attack upon the city, so… still no use for a watchtower in this particular courtyard. Despite its uselessness, what a view it is to behold. One can easily see the whole city's skyline. Well, given the time, the shadowy buildings. Luckily there is just enough moonlight to be able to observe the architecture of the noble district. That is, if one had an eye for such things.

At this height it feels ethereal as you are almost able to get the sense of being able to reach out and nearly touch them. I try to find William's and my favorite constellation for old times' sake. The effort is fruitless, though, as he once said that the stars supposedly move throughout the year. Evidently, this is true, as after much looking, I'm unable to find it. As the moment of pleasure subsides and I sink back to earth from this high, it is time to stop distracting myself and let my emotions surface. It feels freeing in a sense. I thought I would be scared as things drew close to this conviction. Instead, it feels like a weight has been lifted off my wings. When the current place is so appalling, the unknown can't be any worse, I guess. My heart tinges with needles knowing I am leaving Gina without really saying goodbye, but again this is for her sake as well.

Lord, I am deplorable for my actions and repent of my sins. I'm sorry that I didn't help those in need with the gifts you bestowed upon me, for being a vile whore, and for desecrating this body further through the act of suicide. I understand that there is truly no way to make up for the things I have done. Please just have mercy on my soul when all of this has come to an end. Amen. Finally, to you, King Gale, you wretched

swine, and to the rest of the nobles and scum of the city. I regret that you aren't here atop the tower with me. Actually, that would be too sweet a death and one undeserved. I change that; I greatly regret that before my death, I did not get the absolute pleasure of seeing you all burned at the stake like the late Sir Dalibor. I curse you all with these last breaths; a plague on all your houses.

With everything finished, it would be comforting to cry one final time, though tears are undeserved for a sinner. So, I don't weep in my final hours. I hoist myself onto the ledge, first with one leg, then with the other. The moment itself feels almost surreal as if none of it is actually happening. When one final gust of wind subsides, I descend with weak muscles and sweet release, whispering, "See you all in hell."

Everything goes dark and cold. A sea of emptiness envelops my very being. No hate, no sadness, no emotion, only hollowness ensues. For how long this stasis goes on is unknown, but eventually a warmth starts to slowly edge in. It never fully takes hold, but a light that first starts off as a speck grows and grows exponentially until it inevitably shatters the world. I open my eyes and gaze into the velvet sky encrusted with the gleaming stars. The grass has an unfamiliar sharpness and dryness to it as I lie upon the ground. Whoever tends to it should feel strongly ashamed of themselves for their incompetence in letting it get to such a mess.

A fire is to my right and is what must have been responsible for that warmth that interrupted my sleep. The fact that breath still fills my lungs does not strike me as odd until I get up and see the person before me. With low-lit flames and thus low visibility, it is hard to figure out who this stranger is. Peering more closely through the veil of darkness, I can discern only his high cheekbones and slim, defined jawline. None of his other features, such as his eyes or hair color, can be recognized because of the angle and weakness of the firelight. While still staring in fruitless effort, again like an oblivious child, it doesn't hit me until now that we aren't at the castle anymore, nor even in the nobility district. Hell, we aren't even within the city walls.

We stare at each other, both filled with questions. His face cannot help but exude a brooding, downcast air.

“Who are you?” is really the most important and mysterious question, so I go with that.

“I’m, well, I’m me.”

“Don’t get clever.”

“I’m not trying to be. It’s just that I haven’t had a name for so long. I don’t know what to tell you.” He ends the statement with a smirk.

“Fine, then stop being vague. Just get to the point. You already had the audacity to interrupt my plans. I deserve an explanation.”

“How about I show you, then? It should be a good starting point, princess.”

He places his hands down as though preparing to push himself up, then thinks better of it. The flutter of something from behind him becomes evident. My eyes still haven’t adjusted to the lighting, but the motion is evident. They are masked by the shadows because they themselves are strangely black, but without a doubt whoever this is, he is an angel too.

He says, “The expression on your face says it all.” With that, he stops exerting himself. Interestingly enough, he seems to have strong wings, nothing like these little things. Even the guards around the castle know my wings can barely flap, so how is there such a vast difference?

I ask, “Are you able to fly?”

Puzzlement turns into amusement as he responds, “Yes, of course, that’s how we got here.”

The condescension in his voice irritates me. No, he irritates me to a high degree. Something about him just seems smug, but he makes a valid point that it’s the only way we could be here now.

“Well, I’d like to say thank you for saving me, but you know that I didn’t want to be saved. Now take me back, please, so I can go through with it.”

“So that’s it? For someone so defiant, you surrender easily.” With a reflex that is as natural as breathing, my hand rips up some of the grass and throws it at him in a sad attempt that leaves it falling before his feet.

“Hey, listen, I’m just trying to help. Would you not rather prevail when all is finished than die defeated?”

With a disinterested glance off into the horizon, I respond, “Fine, go on.”

With a crooked smile, he retorts, “Good. First, I’d like to start off with the history of our people. They most likely told you that you are an angel. Well, princess, that is nothing more than a clever lie used to get what they want. Now most of them probably do indeed actually believe you are an angel. Most likely, only the highest ranks of the church and Crown know otherwise, that you are instead something called a siren. Do you follow?”

There’s no change in expression on my end. The revelation that from the beginning they lied through their teeth isn’t enough to warrant one. With a nod of my head, he continues on.

“The history of our people is an interesting one, but for the most part has been swallowed up by the jaws of time. Because the first Siren Kingdom fell many centuries ago, little is known about sirens. Much still eludes even me; for example, how sirens themselves are born. Basing this on the only other siren I’ve met besides you and on my own experience, let me guess, your first memories are of waking up and knowing nothing. Am I right?”

Again, he says it with this smug smirk like he already knows he’s correct. I let the silence linger before nodding, delaying his satisfaction because I find it even more irritating than his demeanor.

“Well, most likely there is some cause for the mystery… but, again, let us move on to more important points. Since the first Siren Kingdom many moons ago, no siren civilizations currently exist. Since each siren, for the most part, is autonomous, it makes it hard for knowledge to be learnt and passed on to later generations.”

“Why is that though? Wouldn’t it make sense for us to form some sort of civilization or kingdom?”

“I see you are at least somewhat keen. Good, as that avoids unneeded banter. I’m getting to it. Once upon a time the sirens did indeed have a prosperous kingdom in a land now almost forgotten to the ages. I don’t

know much, but what I do know is that we lived in harmony with all. We were benevolent and for the most part kept to ourselves. It was not until the humans, in a fit of envy and greed, since that is all the stupid beasts are good for, they decided to wage war on the Siren Kingdom. Outnumbered and outmatched, we were overthrown, tossed from a pedestal not even of our own design. What few remnants remained were forced to flee and live isolated lives like fucking outcasts, for fear of being killed or used. Well, just like your situation now, princess. It is actually quite common to strengthen one's own hold over the masses by installing a mysterious figurehead and proclaiming its divinity."

The smug smile he brandishes is worn again. He concludes, "Well, at least they would if it wasn't for an idiotic king." A shooting star flies across the sky for a moment, then disappears in a beautiful streak. In the end, true beauty is something that only lasts for a moment.

"Your story is interesting and sheds light on a few unanswered questions, but it just furthers my point. Fuck the people of the capital and fuck this wretched life of being their little whore doll… Take me back so I can end it."

"Well, that's quite the mouth, princess. With that attitude I just don't know." His tone finally exhausts my restraint. I reach over and deliver a firm smack across his cheek. A slight wince of his eyes gives way while the rest of his face stays the same. It's concluded with a disgruntled ouch and sigh. He states, "You know I'm just trying to help, right?" I don't respond. No more words are spoken. Tensions are high on both ends. The blood moon glows ever fuller outside of the walls. The crickets can be heard chirping their songs unplagued by the struggles of humans and sirens.

With one last sigh, he gets up and proceeds to douse the fire. It's a good time to notice more of his features. His body, for the most part, is lean and sharply cut, particularly around his upper back and wings. The last important feature worth noting is that he happens to have the same platinum-colored hair as mine. The only difference is that his is easily seen as unkempt. When the fire resembles nothing more than embers, he turns around and offers a hand to pull me up. Still not really in the mood

to say anything, I grab hold and get hoisted up without so much as saying a thank you in return. He carries me in his arms in a manner befitting a princess—a small luxury, given that I must be carried by this scoundrel. The old me would have blushed at being pressed against his toned body, but unyielding as ever is my emotionlessness.

A hard gust blows, which feels good as it cools the warmth still lingering on my skin. With the strong flaps of his wings, an updraft rises from the ground. Strands of hair play out a whimsical dance on both ends, and in one moment we are one with the breeze. It's almost a shame that it is nighttime. The countryside must be extraordinary to see from the sky. It sparks the thought of what it must be like to be able to be unhampered like this and thus causes a strong yearning to have working wings. However pleasant it is to contemplate such a dream, reality is ever-present and pulls me away from this fleeting enjoyment. Dispassion is now the name of the game. This leads me into a deep brooding over what my next move is.

The whole thing seems different now. I don't feel like I've failed in my mission of coming here, and I place less blame on myself. If anything, my rage has been ignited, as the only reason I was stripped from my home was for their own sick desires. Oh, how it should be the King, the Queen, and all the King's Men who jump to their deaths instead. The city walls eventually come into view as we travel at what seems double the speed of a four-horse-drawn carriage. It is strange that this should be my best opportunity to escape and attain what Sir Dalibor died for, yet I will not take it. In the end, does it matter if I escape? Sins committed are sins that follow. Regardless of where I go, the King would follow. Thinking as Judith would, if I truly wanted to leave, I would need allies; otherwise, the effort would be fruitless. The only thing that awaits me is death's sweet embrace; the place is unimportant.

Gazing at it, the city looks grand. Without piercing through the collective picture, the buildings and structures look amazing together. The walls look sturdy; the buildings look diligently constructed. It is not until we are overhead and able to look more deeply that I see the decay, inequality, garbage, and ever-present filth. Appearances truly are

deceptive. Who could ever have imagined that the beloved Monarchs could be such heinous individuals, or that the church would abandon its own morals and become their lapdog to save its own skin? Regardless, these are not things I should ponder. It is pointless at this moment to think about them, as nothing good will come of it. Enjoy what is enjoyable while you can.

We approach the castle fast. Still no words are spoken between us until he finally decides to tell me what is going to happen.

"Listen, I get you want to commit suicide, and I don't blame you. You have suffered terribly, but I'm not going to let you do that, okay? Okay." With my eyes wide in astonishment, I'm about to protest when we land in the middle of the garden. My mouth is about to open when he discourteously and swiftly puts his hand over it. Despite my biting him, he doesn't let go. In a whisper, he says, "Stupid. The guards at this point are obviously looking for you and will hear you." My expression and demeanor go back to normal.

After freeing my mouth from his hand, I whisper, "I demand you take me up to the tower. I never asked for this. Stop trying to save me when I don't want to be saved."

"Listen, I'm not trying to save you. I'm just trying to help you make a better decision. There isn't much time left. Listen, you are a proud siren who has been used and heinously violated. Don't you at least want to get back at these humans, these abhorrent monsters for what they've done to you? To make them suffer for their sins, make them pay for it with their lives? Then you may die victorious, if you still wish it."

Footsteps in the immediate vicinity are approaching. With that, he looks deeply into my eyes. He has those same violet eyes. "I'll be back soon. I promise." He darts off and, with two flaps of his mighty wings, becomes airborne, disappearing like a gust of wind. Stuck in the open with guards approaching, I have only one card to play. Accepting that I will be taken back to my cage. No punishment will be in store for this, at least not this time. There is the option of hiding, but after thinking about it briefly, I realize there is no point in fighting the inevitable. With heightened security, jumping from the tower will have to be put on hold.

Disgruntled, two guards approach me once I'm spotted and, without a second thought, immediately start dragging me aggressively by the arm. They spout some serious nonsense as they scold me to take out their frustrations. No matter how real their threats sound, I know they're just bluffing. The blood moon still hangs high in the sky, gleaming in its glory, yet the hue of the sky has been ever so lightened. Morning isn't on the verge of coming out but is approaching. My eyes remain fixed upon the blood moon until we step inside, since, I assume, there will not be another while I am alive. Well, that's if things don't go awry again in the spring. His closing words still rattle in my mind. Hmm, they do raise an interesting point. So far, my instinct has been to ignore and outlast. The thought of retaliating has never occurred before, hmm.

Then again, what revenge is even possible? What can one little girl do against Monarchs and Nobles?

"Hey whore, we're talking to you." Caught up in my own thoughts again, I realize they have directed something my way.

"What?"

"Not one word of remorse, not one sorry, has pierced your lips. Are you going to stay quiet all night?"

Why apologize when you guards do the opposite of your purpose? You create uneasiness instead of a sense of safety. After receiving no response—which is what he deserves after such an idiotic conjecture—the guard turns his head to see whether I'm listening, and his eyes meet my loathing gaze. He meets it with a gaze of contempt that transforms into that of patronizing amusement. This little girl can't do anything, he must think.

"You better watch yourself. You wouldn't want to piss us off and make us put those good lips to use. Think they'd get pierced then." He jests, and they both chuckle for a long time.

If you try, King Gale will behead both of you… Wait. Hmm, this kindles an idea. This is definitely what he meant by revenge. Well, at least it will work for these two lumbering idiots. I guess that settles the question for tonight; however, it raises many more. In what way is it possible to make tragedy befall those who deserve it? There are so many

different forms revenge could take, but not enough time to consider them. I shuffle along behind them now, as this isn't the time to think about biting off more than one can chew. Now is the time to focus and take what is sweetly deserved. Like a predator stalking its prey, I keep pace a few strides behind them with an uncontrollable sinister smile contorting my countenance. I get ready to pounce figuratively, since, well, they'll be pouncing on the predator.

With their first steps into my room, their fates have been sealed. Their gold body armor dazzles in the moon's light through the window, but that armor will do little to save them. With a well-placed misstep and a mischievous heart, I faint, putting on quite a show. Neither catches me, and neither seems particularly panicked by my fall, but they do help me up. I immediately go limp, leaning my full weight against them and making sure to cling to the loudmouthed guard.

Loudmouth comments, "That's why you don't run off at night, stupid girl."

With wobbly steps, he steadily assists me to my bed. Falling, still latched onto his arm, I pull the vile man onto my bed. I delicately maneuver my lips next to his ear so that he can feel each breath caressing his skin. His skin prickles as he is sparked with some excitement. "Pwease stay, I think I hads a little toos much wine."

"So, the rumors are true. You might act like a complete bitch and pretend you don't want it, but deep down, you're nothing more than a dirty little whore, aren't you?"

Even the slightest slip can ruin it, yet, with so much practice, none of the rage inside leaks out; instead, my smile remains cheeky and flirtatious, as though he has hit the nail on the head.

"Come on, Alfred, we don't have time for this. We should report back that we found her and get back to our post." Alfred gets up and goes over to the quiet guard. He whispers but does a poor job of it.

"Listen, look at that face, look at that figure. When's the last time you got to stick your damn cock in something that sexy? Answer, never."

The quiet guard's eyes move up and down my slender figure, from the tips of my toes all the way up to my eyes. He is entranced by lust. Femininely I softly bite my lip and stare deeply into his eyes to add wood to the fire.

The quiet guard objects, "What if we get caught though?"

"Idiot, like the whore is going to tell on us. Look at her, she wants it worse than we do."

The quiet guard tries to reason with himself, knowing in his gut it is wrong, but quickly he surrenders to his desires, and all thought travels to his second head. Seeing this, it's time to pounce.

In one quick movement, I join them. The quiet guard is a little shocked, but gently I reach into their trousers and slowly and softly begin to caress them both. As they give in to pleasure, they easily toss aside their objections and every other thought. With their mouths slightly open in pure ecstasy, I ask, "How about both of you be good boys and drop your trousers and your armor for me?" They eagerly get them off like they're putty in my hand. Once the last piece of armor is off, I drop to my knees and get ready. Like a wolf going in for the killing blow, I will soon have their necks. The final decision is whether to go topless, a luxury no man has yet been granted. The thought swirls around, but eventually I decide against it. There is no doubt that, even with it, the result will be the same. I take a deep breath in and out, and then nothing can be heard but my bloodcurdling screams for help. Whoever was asleep is no longer slumbering. More importantly, all the guards stationed on this property have heard my screams, and perhaps a few guards on neighboring properties have as well.

The only part that is left now is to make it look convincing. Meanwhile, the loudmouth guard acts rather brashly and forces himself on top of me, trying to cover my mouth to cease the screaming. It is really a pointless effort, since there's a guarantee that at least someone is already on their way. The quiet guard has done the right thing and is now trying to hastily put his armor back on. It is a better choice; however, it is nonetheless futile. Regardless, he'll still be half-naked when the other guards arrive. Now it is time to add the finishing touch

and bring everything together. In a moment of deep concentration, my body stops resisting. I close my eyes and draw on intense emotions. By the time help arrives and opens the door, my eyes have already welled with tears. The crocodile tears are flowing.

The first person to hastily arrive is my chamber maiden Joan. The sight of the two naked men before her, coupled with the innocent look I send her, is too much for her to bear. With her face slowly contorting into that of extreme horror, she too erupts, causing yet another scream to pierce the night air. The quiet guard desperately tries to get her to calm down in the same manner as his friend. In a few more moments, the other guards finally begin to arrive. First comes a pair; then more arrive until almost every guard on the grounds is in my room. Without even hearing an explanation from either party, the other guards pull the two men off me. They put up a good fight against the first pair of guards but are eventually overwhelmed. They curse at me, then curse the very breaths I breathe, claiming that someday they'll have their revenge. It's a shame I must hide it, but I smile sinisterly on the inside. In the morning, while walking through one of the semi-open halls, I see their hanged and tortured bodies displayed as Sir Dalibor's was. This time, I smile genuinely.

# Chapter 17

Time passes, and slowly but surely, gambits and ploys are attempted. Nothing big, nothing serious. Most aren't successful enough to come to fruition like the first, but that's okay. I know in my heart that something big will soon be brought forth for someone deserving. That's all that's needed and is what brings us here to today, on this chilly late-autumn afternoon, to the vast maze that is the castle's halls.

Even now with so much time having passed, getting around this place is still impossible, but this wretched destination has been traversed enough to get a sense of where to go. Like a fox tracking the scent through the mud, I take a right, then a left, and then a right. With many a hall traversed, I finally come upon a set of stairs that I climb. With the last step traversed, I have come across my target and blood is in the air. The halls are so quiet that I bet even a mouse scrounging around could be heard. I take a look forward and a brief look back, but outside of the unexpected meandering servant, no one should be in this wing of the castle today. The King and Queen will be out today to the shallow countryside to visit a major family for a wedding, birthday or something like that. I couldn't care less what it entails, just that they are gone for the day.

As I stand outside the large double oak doors that have gold chiseled into decals on the facade for ornamentation, I am outside my target, the Queen's room. Despite what I mentioned about this wing being deserted, I should still look to make haste, just in case. I push one of the doors slightly open and slip discreetly into the room. To give a sense of the layout, the room sits directly to the side of the King's room, and it is a mirror image in terms of both lay out and structure compared to his. A large Queen bed sits at the center of it all that's draped in a deep purple cover. To complement it, crimson red pillows adorn the head of the bed. Outside of that, a vanity, which has clearly been cut from the tallest of mighty oaks, and a vast closet fill out the space.

A peculiar feeling arises now that I'm in her space. I grab my dress with my right hand and for a split second lose myself. A surfacing cold envelops my heart and has me focused on everything that has transpired thus far. I contain an uncanny laugh just now. After all those wicked and brutal times, now, it's now that I'm getting cold feet, when all I'm doing is stealing some jewelry. Enough of drowning in my own sea of emotions. It's not his room, and I'm different now than when I first arrived. I make my way to the vanity in a hard dash that is carried on gentle tiptoes. I reach for the drawer and scrounge around, not caring what I displace as I search for what I want. I just need one item and it's impossible not to find one when there is a sea of useless garbage about. The key, though, is that it needs to be big enough to get noticed, but not so big that the whole thing feels unrealistic.

After thirty seconds of going through the drawers, a few pieces stand out, but ultimately I settle on a pair of earrings, each with three rubies surrounding a central diamond. They're not as fancy or as valuable as any of the necklaces the witch has, but they're one of her nicer pairs of earrings. It would definitely fetch a pretty penny on the market in the main square. With the simple treasure in hand, I close the drawer and slip back through the gap between the double doors as quickly as I entered. I look around, and there is still not a soul in the vacant halls. All that is left is to make it down to the live-in servants' quarters.

Now comes the tough part as I do not just get lost once but twice, having passed the same wide grey floor vase a second time now. I take a deep breath and decide to follow every turn I think is wrong. Ironically, this decision lands me where I wanted to go. With the King and Queen potentially spending the night in the countryside, most of the hands of the castle were taken with them in case they needed to be attended to. With so few staff remaining and lunchtime upon us, these halls, too, are vacant. In a similar fashion to before, I rush without running. Despite the importance of the person tied to the previous room, a mistake here will ruin the whole thing, while a mistake there would have only delayed it. As I walk past, I look at the tops of the thick, uninspiring cherry wood doors that all look identical regardless of the room. After walking

halfway down the hall, I finally reach my destination, Joan's quarters. Like a snake entering the henhouse, I slip in with no one around to notice.

There is a sense of urgency, and I waste no movement. I find her simple nightstand with a drawer in the cramped room that can only hold a simple bed and the piece of furniture I just mentioned. In a measured rush, I swing the drawer open. There is a diary, the one true book, plus what looks like a face cloth and a pair of wool gloves. Given the temperature drop, the gloves are now in season, but since Joan doesn't venture outside much, there is the chance they might be the perfect hiding spot. A devilish grin streaks across my face as I toss the earrings in one of them.

With the drawer closed and the deed done, it's time to get out before someone comes across this sacked henhouse and the plan is ruined. I slip out the door and brush my skirt down. The air is cold, and the hall is long. It won't be much longer till I'm back in my warm room. I look right, then left, and bite my lip. Lord, which way did I come from again? I'm stuck for a moment when all of a sudden a black-clad leg hooks around the bend and I bite my lip harder out of habit. The faint taste of metal can be tasted, but it's just a drop. Does this mean the plan won't come to fruition? So what if it's found out? What punishment can they really inflict on me that's worse than what I already endure here?

Acting naturally, I don't turn away but instead continue to stand my ground, trying to put on a saintly aura. By a stroke of luck, the man approaching isn't an unknown guard but is Hindred, the narrow-shouldered servant of advancing years. The one who helped me get to the Queen's luncheon when I was lost earlier in the year. I curtsy to him, and he cocks an eyebrow. He looks back, then forward past me, then side to side.

"Excuse my interruption and presumption, Lady Violet, but..." He looks around again. "Do you happen to be lost again?"

Inside, I'm beaming at this stroke of luck. Why didn't I think to play it off like that?

"Ashamedly, I am indeed, Hindred."

The oaf sighs slightly. “I was just about to rest for the day without much to attend to, but I will happily escort you back to your quarters, milady.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

After a short walk, we reach my room. When you aren't getting lost, getting from room to room doesn’t actually take that long... I give him a proper thank-you that is more for show than genuine appreciation, and the unaware fool departs. With the door closed, I can’t help but crack one more crooked smile. I wonder how long it will take for the Queen to notice the earrings are gone. I wonder what kind of demise they will choose for Joan. Oh, well, meaningless questions to ponder later. The how doesn’t matter when it’s the what that matters. I wonder which book I shall read today in front of the roaring fire to help distract me from the frigidness that has settled in and the harsh realities that have already made themselves at home before winter.

# Chapter 18

I sit upright with a stiff back, in a strangely sanguine yet annoyed mood as we slip deeper into winter. I suppose it's because the scales are finally starting to tip back and forth instead of sitting so firmly against me. Just yesterday, the ruby earrings I had planted on Joan were finally found in the darling's room. Unsurprisingly, it took the Queen a week to notice they were missing, but once she did, a sweeping search soon followed. Caught red-handed, the poor woman was given no trial, nor even a little time for tempers to cool. By the Queen's immediate decree, she was hanged in the garden, made an example of for all to see. A lesson for anyone whose hands might wander where they shouldn't.

Did I hate Joan? No, but given our recent issues and the way she always looked down upon me, I can't help but revel in the thought that I have finally bitten back. At last, I have left my mark on someone here in Dryad.

So that is why, to put it simply, today brings neither melancholy nor despair, but an unusual sense of good cheer. As for the annoyance, I am currently being fussed over by two maidens who have been assigned to me following Joan's rather noted departure. They straighten my dress, fix my hair, and have just finished up by layering makeup onto my face. Like Joan, they too look down upon me like all the rest. I can see it in their eyes, though they keep it tucked behind polite masks and tread carefully. Soon enough, they too will take an inch and then a mile, and whatever passes for a relationship between us will sour.

Besides the ice in their eyes, I see the water underneath as well. They knew Joan, and yesterday's demonstration is still a fresh wound in their hearts.

"Not right, not right. You've laid the makeup on too thick. Why are you both here? Where is Joan? Oh, wait, that's right."

The less composed of the two breaks into a shuddering sob. In compassion, the other rests a hand on her shoulder and gives it a gentle

squeeze. When she turns back to me, her mask has slipped as well. She stares daggers at me even as she addresses the woman beside her.

“Don’t let her get to you, Claire. Then she’s won.”

“You’re right.” Claire struggles to steady her voice. “She has nothing. At least we have each other and Joan’s memory.”

“Enough chitchat. I’m sick of sitting here like a statue. I’ll be quiet, but get back to it.”

The truce takes effect, barely, but they progress and are able to wrap up the affair. Just as one trouble ends, another comes around. A knock graces the door, and I tell whoever is there that it’s fine to enter. To my dismay, the Queen has walked in. Alone, I might add. No formalities are used anymore as we stare daggers at each other until finally, blatantly, I say, “Ugh, what do you want?”

“As much as it displeases me, I’m here to fetch you. A luncheon of noblewomen is taking place, and your presence is required.”

Attitude has been obtained, but choice really is something that is still elusive. The only acceptable reply is, sadly, yes.

“Fine, but why are you the one who’s here?”

“I am here to escort you. Listen, don’t think I like spending my time with a spoiled little whore, but an adult does what she is told.”

With a clap of her hands, more maidens flood in and in an instant are on me trying to make me look appropriate. Will Leya the elf ever find true love? Most likely, since that’s just how the book’s looking to end, but being interrupted is still unpleasant. In the commotion, Velvet hisses and throws a tantrum with all the strangers around. He hurriedly gets picked up, scratching at one of the maidens, and gets roughly tossed out.

My gaze of hail does send shivers down her spine as she immediately looks down and away after coming back. The whole ordeal takes half an hour, but we are finally walking down the hall to one of the many dining areas. We wear matching silver dresses which give me the sensation of wanting to gag profusely. There is one clear difference, though, it seems. Clearly the dress itself fits and moves better on Elizabeth’s more voluptuous body as opposed to this uninteresting, thin, flat figure. The earlier me envied her a tad, but it is for the better as any more lustful

gazes would figuratively kill me with it literally killing them. It is interesting to note how I feel going into this little event. Of course, the displeasure is still there, but at the beginning of all this there was that unavoidable anxiousness. Then came the depression, and now both have vanished, or a better way to put it is that they have been transformed into this consumable wrath I feel towards almost all. I guess the blueness faded to red with no Violet left in between.

We arrive at what is one of the smaller rooms in the castle. To no surprise, it's still an eyesore with its ostentatious floral paintings and floral chairs abundant. No young doves yet again with this event, only aging gulls with one ancient crow. It makes sense considering there is supposedly a society of young noblewomen, but these are the women that are actually in “power.” Influence is the better word since that’s all they can really do, try and sway their husbands’ opinions. When I am a chess piece, why would they pawn me around with players that aren’t worth anything yet? It’s not even a sigh of relief, just a better alternative as I now spot Judith. The last time we talked destroyed any sort of friendship we could have mended, but she at least has my respect. She is the only one smart enough to be capable of any real power around this place.

The luncheon itself is pretty straightforward, as no actual lunch is served. Simple hors d’oeuvres are passed around instead. It’s customary for everyone to just stand, thus making the fancy chairs and tables just for show. Getting back to the task at hand, today they have planned for me to go around with Elizabeth and meet with each of the few small circles formed. Nothing more than various frivolous things to maintain relations will be discussed. Again, it's time to be a silent puppet. Merely here for show and not for substance. I, of course, already know my role as the Queen talks on and on. I only speak when spoken to. Most times it’s a yes-or-no question. Like if the Lord is happy with the latest offerings? Do you still like Dryad? Or a question that is set up to help reinforce something the Queen has already stated.

It really pisses me off, but at the end of the day, patience is a virtue. It is important not to cause waves on the surface, since their hearts are

already filled with disdain and look for any excuse to act against me. I do, however, try to test the waters once. When a clear lull settles, I try to change the subject but get quickly blocked by Elizabeth before the sentence is even halfway done. The bitch deserves to get that smug smile she wears so proudly bashed in, but there's a time and place for everything. Finally, the monotonous activities have ended, and I'm relieved of duty.

Elizabeth chimes before I leave. "That's it for what is required of you. You can run along now or do whatever a person like yourself does. I'm not your mother and don't have time to waste on a child, let alone a brat."

"Well, thank the Lord you don't have children, for even peasant orphans would cringe at the touch of your bony fingers."

We both part emotionlessly trying not to give any satisfaction to the other party. She is clearly feigning, though. You could see in her eyes for a moment that it truly pains her that she hasn't realized that joy yet.

My desire to stay solitary at this kind of event would draw as much negative perception as if I committed a severe social foul. So, briefly, by walking around, I create the illusion of doing something while doing nothing. That is until Judith, being wrapped up with whatever she was invested in, finishes up and is now alone. Swiftly I make a straight-line shot to her. Having already briefly greeted each other, no introduction is needed when I come over.

In a haughty attitude, she greets me with, "You couldn't have made it any more obvious you seek my company, dear."

"Well, Judith, you are the only one here who has my respect."

"I'm oh so flattered, darling, but subtlety is the key in most things, dear."

"True, but all the rest think I'm a whore, so what does it matter? And don't say appearances matter just to be the devil's advocate."

We both observe the roundabouts of the servants and the mingling taking place, thus allowing for a brief lull. She sips on tea and snatches a small pastry from a passing servant. She soaks it in the final drops of her green tea, consuming the last of both in one bite.

“Well, dear, it’s fine if you want my protection, but you at least have to keep me entertained.”

She knows full well I’m not one for conversation and can tell this by how I subtly get frustrated from her statement.

“I don’t need your protection.”

“You do so, since I’m generous, I’ll throw you a small bone. Plus, it delays having to meet with Elizabeth again.”

The conversation really is just filler for the most part. Judith tells me about a certain set of pastries specially made from one of the nobles’ provinces. She describes them as having just the right amount of flakiness, in all truth this is something I am going to probably try as she tells me the proper channels to get them. Something about sending someone to talk to her head groundsman to send a message about sending a delivery to the castle. Simple yet overly complicated for what it’s about. However short it was, it would be greedy to ask for more. She departs afterwards to attend to Elizabeth about what she called dire matters. Something about Elizabeth needing the King to reform certain trade channels.

With Judith gone, I decide to move away from the groups. Out of sight, I now retire to the side. It is unavoidable at this point to not sit off on the outskirts. I decidedly grab a cup of tea and with audacity, actually happen to take a seat on one of the pretentious chairs. As I sip casually, most ladies are engrossed in conversation, but a few glances shift their way over to me. Since most of the noblemen and noblewomen eventually stay in the capital on a yearly rotation, only some are concerned by the weird behavior. They have definitely heard the rumors but are still on the fence about yours truly. They are considerably less obnoxious compared to the one group mainly comprised of capital women who too eventually notice. They each only look over one at a time, making no effort in being discreet. Once they have their fill, they all simultaneously snicker about something, most likely the ostracized pariah. Shallow bitches will be shallow bitches as a siren and humans are destined to clash.

It really isn't worth the effort guessing how much time passes, but eventually something interesting happens. Gina, along with some other servants, brings in what is an assortment of food. Glazed duck, pheasant, mutton, and a variety of stews, along with a variety of gaudy cakes, are all set out on the tables now. The whole thing, however, is nothing more than a vain tradition. The food at this kind of event is just for show. First, it's for the royal family to boast how much decadent food they can serve, and second, no one touches the food to keep up the appearance that the appetizers and the pastries were enough to fill their stomachs.

It's hysterical how every single woman wants to eat but can't, as even someone as thin as myself will be looked upon as a cow for giving way to temptation. But what's even more hysterical than that is the fact that they actually give a fuck about the opinions of people they don't even like. What a comedy, enough so to be featured on the stage at the theatre tonight. Time to get out of this dreadfully uncomfortable chair and say hello to Gina while also grabbing some food. Sir Dalibor's words are not forgotten as it is still dangerous getting too close to Gina. However, in a moment like this, the conversation will be quick and casual, so there should be no risk, right?

"Greetings, Gina."

"Greetings, Lady Violet."

An almost involuntary look of a raised eyebrow is given to her over the fact that she addressed me as Lady. She understands this and gives a look of what was I supposed to do.

"The food looks delicious, want me to sneak anything back for you later?"

"Oh, uh, no thank you."

She leans in close, hand cupped over my ear, and whispers, "You do know that the food is kinda just for show, right?"

"So, is it not real?"

"Well, no."

"Okay, I'm definitely sneaking you something later, no ifs, ands, or buts."

I turn and head off towards the duck, which looks glazed to perfection. After the first two steps, Gina pleads, “But the other women.” I turn back and give her one of the most serious, determined looks I have ever given Gina, and she says no more.

With knife penetrating into beast, the eyes are already falling on me. Their disdainful gazes and whispers try to pierce my veil, yet my heart is as unyielding as ever. Before my plate has even been finished, which it now has, chirping has led everyone to know that such a treacherous act has been committed. Should I be hanged for all to see from the gallows? Haha, I can’t help but give a whorish smirk, as the Queen would put it, at the thought that without a doubt all those hushes and all those whispers are at my expense. The walk back to the ridiculous chairs and table is interesting as their haughty expressions have mostly turned to ice-cold contempt with envy leaking through. Anyone who was still on the fence has easily turned on me now. I sit and eat what turns out to be simply ambrosial cuisine. One of the few saving graces of the capital is the food, good enough to die for no, but good enough to have a room full of bitter hags despise you… yes! This feeling just feels so good, it can almost get addictive, the feeling of coming out on top that is.

Bite after bite passes, not hastily but with healthy vigor the plate has been cleaned. Not one person has their attention fixed on me clearly, but something as big as an event like this won’t be easily forgotten and most definitely, they are still chirping away. There is no point in moving from this spot anymore as the social is now a lost cause. Like it wasn’t from the beginning? Gina can’t and won’t be approached again until after. So, I sit glued as time passes and as often as not my mind obviously wanders. How will I sneak out Gina’s food? Will that other siren show himself again soon? What are the Lyttons doing currently? All these questions that float around, yet none come with simple answers, but then again that would ruin the fun of the wander.

The blissful escape comes crashing to an end when a painful cry is enough to bring everything back to focus. Everyone’s eyes turn toward the back, where most of the servants are placed. It takes time for everything to sink in as Gina is just standing there, face looking towards

the ground and hand placed up against her right cheek. The Queen's friend Paula stands in front of her, disgruntled, in a malicious stance. In this moment, everything hits you and you just don't know how to react to something like this. Logically the best thing to do would have been to think rationally on how to save Gina, but tempers flare naturally instead and in a brash reaction I'm already on my way over there.

"How dare you meet me with those eyes, wench. I am your better."

With a far wind-up, another blow strikes Gina now on the opposite side of the face. She lets out another cry as she falls hard onto all fours now to the marble floor.

"I'm sorry, my Lady. I'm so sorry."

She begs with heavy sobbing.

"Good. Beg for forgiveness like the dog you are. Don't ever have the audacity to look at me like an equal again."

At this point, there will be some repercussions if I act. They won't hold a candle to the enjoyment of the sin, though. Of course, this will be some deserved revenge against Elizabeth as well. So, while she is completely unsuspecting, I latch on to a healthy chunk of her hair from her blind side. It's a strange feeling experiencing it from the other side as I rip her down in full force. Easily she comes crumbling down like a decaying column. The back of her head hits the marble floor unforgivingly; she looks dazed and still is unable to comprehend what exactly is transpiring. Finally, her brain realizes this familiar sensation, the sensation of pain. Right before it can reach her mouth, a swift kick to the jaw silences her, blacking her out.

Gasps sweep the hall. They have seen catfights but have yet to see such brutality. Not just from one of themselves but just in general from within their sheltered lives. Horrified eyes fixate on me. Good… I don't want to be the innocent little girl that gets saved in the end, moving forward I'm in control of my fate. With no guards present since the ladies like their privacy, they are too stunned to deal with such a monster. Judith and Elizabeth, as expected, have dropped their tedious conversation dead in the water. With all their might, they're in the process of rushing over here. My eyes pierce back at everyone else like

a wolf being surrounded by farmers, I accompany them with a set of stone-cold lips and cheeks.

I break for a moment to look at Gina with curiosity, and my heart shatters. She is petrified with fear. Her kindhearted demeanor doesn't know how to handle this. It's like back in the slums all over again. In the end I saved her, but only to drag more of my storm cloud over her. This needs to be corrected immediately after. Too stunned by and focused on this side effect from my rash actions, I don't realize what's happening. With sly subtleness, like a guiding hand, Elizabeth and Judith are leading me out of the hall and begin to escort me. By the time it is noticed, there is not enough time to stop it as we are already out of the hall. Elizabeth glows and emanates smugness and a happiness that has never been present during my entire stay in the capital.

"I knew you were idiotic, but I didn't expect things to go this well. Simply amazing. Do you understand how enthralled I am by your little performance?"

"Elizabeth, you idiotic bitch, just shut it. You're almost as bad as the girl!" And in that quick moment her happiness comes crashing back down as she rolls her eyes at Judith, yet she still complies. My heart is still in disarray. I can't smirk at this fact or even find any enjoyment in it. Judith looks extremely stressed and is deeply brooding about something important. Hmm, why?

"This is bad, the two of you. Why in the bloody hell can't you two just get along? At least have the common sense to leave your dirty business in your closets."

"What's the big deal? They already despise me, and they already know the Queen's a bitch. What is there to hide?"

A firm smack is given by Judith for the disrespectful tone and comment, which intriguingly with my heart distraught feels somehow soothing, this aching sting. There isn't enough apathy to care as much worse has happened in the past, but hate, which was formerly suppressed by sorrow, has come back in the form of deviant playfulness.

"Try that again and you'll pay it back with interest."

Judith just looks back with an unyielding look that a parent gives a child when they threaten them. To her, the words are nothing more than an empty promise. To her I'm not even a player on the board, but like all wild cards they come when least expected and cost you the game.

"Both of you don't truly understand the gravity of our situation. We are at a tipping point, ladies. Any division amongst the nobility, any more reason for the peasants to have Violet's head on a spike and a civil war could break out."

"Well, why don't we just give them what they want, Judith? Why even keep the mongrel alive at this point?"

"It's dangerous to divulge your plans, ya know."

"Quiet, sweetie, the adults are talking now."

Elizabeth responds in the perfect way to get under my skin. To drag her down and smash her face in is evidently possible, but it's best to wait. Good things come with time.

"You know very well that Gale won't let his little trophy get tossed aside. The rumors from before we can manage, however this new problem I don't know. The rumors will get out quicker than water slipping through cracks… They will use this unprovoked attack on an innocent Lady to not only show that Violet isn't suited to lead the church but also go further, insinuating that she is a demon spawn. A false savior in a way. The chaos that will ensue among the peasantry will be the perfect catalyst to finally spark a civil war from the ever-growing division within the nobility. With the state of things, that might be inevitable, but making sure today's events don't get out will give us more time to ease over the peasants and delay the war. Elizabeth, every servant and non-noble that knows anything about this is to be executed."

"What!"

"I understand you have the little bourgeois servant girl as a friend. I don't like to spill innocent blood, but there are still exceptions to everything. It's what needs to be done. Next time, think before you act, child!"

She concludes, ending the argument in a stern voice. She won't get away with this let alone have it happen.

"I swear, no, your blood will be the blood that spills!"

In full stance, ready to strike like a hawk with prey in sight, I cock back fully cocksure. Once everything is ready to unleash, a hand works its way blindly into my hair and reins me down, prohibiting any further aggression. The rest of the walk back is like this, like the fucking bitch Paula earlier I am getting strung along by my head yet again by Elizabeth.

Judith remarks as we progress. "In all honesty, dear, I've felt a sense of pity towards you. Who wouldn't have when you first got here? You didn't really have any likable traits, but you were at least an admirable, docile young lady. At this point I'm just so apathetic that pity isn't even a luxury that you are worthy of. You are nothing more than a beastly girl who we'll find some way to be gotten rid of."

With a struggle I get tossed into my room and stumble gingerly in. Without a wasted moment, I'm back on my feet. I turn back with vicious anger but get met with the door being slammed in my face. My hands fly out, and with all my might, I shove and push until the clicking sound of the lock finalizes the defeat. Elizabeth chuckles while Judith finds no pleasure in this, though even with the wooden door separating us, there is knowledge that she is fully satisfied being in control.

I scream at the top of my lungs. "I swear one day both your heads will roll!"

# Chapter 19

Since the events of the dinner unfolded, I have been strictly banished to my room. At this point there is no longer any advantage to having me come out for social affairs, as any part of my image has become toxic among the nobility. Even for the ones who aren't in the capital, news travels fast as the events of the dinner have already reached them, causing their opinions of me to turn ghastly. Judith has convinced King Gale that this isolation along with all the precautions taken are the best course of action. As long as his little toy isn't disposed of, he couldn't care less what's done with me. The only inconvenience and possible problem that has arisen from such a plan has been my evident absences from church services. To conceal it, they say, however, that I am sick and, without much effort, have the perfect excuse; at least for the short term. Besides that, there are no other obligations that could raise a problem. So, one could say things are going rather smoothly for Judith.

At the end of the day, ironically, the only thing keeping me alive is the lust of that swine. The same lust that caused so many torturous nights and made my body worthless. With all those past hardships and now this isolation from Gina, the only comfort left to keep me going has been Velvet. His visits have been sparse; still, any contact is better than nothing at all to soothe the heart. Even so, they really haven't done much to fix this driving spike in my chest. The real problem isn't the reality of dying or being locked away alone forever, but the all too real reality that Gina has already breathed her last breath.

What, though, can a girl do whose skin is so pale she resembles death, with a face so slim she looks like a wedge, with eyes so blank she looks like an idiot? What in her power can she do to save an innocent angel? Nothing, for she is a pathetic, lowly, worthless whore. You disgusting bitch! The cover of the book smashes into the mirror as I throw it. The result creates ruptured cracks throughout, distorting the image of the girl even further, making her look that much more the malignant monster. A light tapping on the glass gives an excuse to divert

my vexed attention away from the fiendish woman. Expecting Velvet to come through for another visit, I instead get a suspiciously unpleasant surprise. The other siren from before stands outside, making an annoyingly facetious attempt at humor by trying to exaggerate his shivers. Yet the way he is dressed and the temperature outside suggest that if he truly does stay outside, it would be dangerous.

I proceed over to the window and meet him eye to eye with an expressionless stare. It is unfair to blame him for the misfortunes that have befallen Gina since they arose from actions of my own making. However, if he hadn't stopped me from killing myself, this wouldn't have happened either.

With some annoyance in his voice, he remarks.

"So, are you going to let me in or are you just going to keep staring at me with sheer happiness?"

"You jest, yet why should I let a fool in?"

"Because it would benefit you to let this fool in."

At the end of the day, he might have some underlying scheme, but I guess our goals do align. He shouldn't be fully trusted, though the potential should be investigated. I lift the window and the cold air comes flooding in, followed by him hastily getting in. It really wasn't that warm to begin with since my room lacks a fireplace. However, it is now absurdly cold despite the window having been open for only a moment.

I sit back down on my bed and ask him, "So what do you want?"

"You know you could at least sound a little more enthused."

"Answer me or else I'll scream for the guards."

"Always straight to business with you. Okay, your situation isn't good. You have zero allies, and a lot of people want you dead."

I exhale heavily and say, "Your point?"

"True, you don't care about dying. Isn't there someone close to you that you have a strong interest in saving, though?"

In a split second, the tables have turned, and my undivided attention has now fallen into his clutches. He gives a dastardly smirk.

"How in the Lord's name do you even know about that? Regardless of what I must do, you are helping me save her."

“Slow down, princess, I was going to help you out regardless. What you want is what I want. As for how I know, let’s just say the church has a good network of informants. Like I said before, only the highest in the order know that we aren’t really angels. So, most are easy to manipulate.”

“But doesn’t that expose that there is another siren lying around the city?”

“The priest I have been in contact with has kept his silence. All I had to do was tell him some lies about the higher-ups being corrupt, which he easily believed, considering current affairs.”

That makes his words reliable then. Something strange arises now, hope. An uncanny sensation that has been absent since Lord Chestnut and Sir Dalibor’s failed rescue attempt, begins to take hold.

“I’m still dubious of your intentions but at least interested in what you have to say. Continue.”

“Well, it’s time to rally the people and ignite a civil war.”

As I presumed from his demeanor, he turns out to be a complete moron. Literally all hope was destroyed in one fell swoop. Aggravated, I naturally smack him.

“Tsk… what was that for!?”

“For getting my hopes up.”

“Still doubtful, I see. Hmm, it is understandable, but at least let a fool finish, princess.”

A death stare and a nod signal him to continue.

“The people are on the brink of revolt, and a civil war would be easy to ignite. The whole city would crumble; everyone and everything that you loathe so much would face destruction.”

“Of course, all those brutes, liars, adulterers, and gluttonous fools should feel the wrath of what they have sown in a blazing ball of hellfire, but none of that matters if Gina is going to die. If that isn’t accomplished, then it would be all for naught.”

His look of persuasion has changed into a closed-eyed chuckle. Patronizingly, he says, “You can do both.”

I go to smack him again, but, keeping a keen eye on me this time, he easily dodges.

“Listen, siren tales have been mostly lost to the ages, but one common element in the myths about us is that we can hypnotize people with our singing.”

“Then why haven’t you done that already? Why would you need me then?”

The more a fool talks foolishness, the more you just want it to finally shut up. It’s at least understandable why King Gale goes through so many. It becomes tiresome very quickly.

“Well, I’ve tried and failed. The thing is that it might just be a myth. I don’t fully know how it works.”

Abruptly, I interrupt. “That’s it. I’m honestly sick of you wasting my time. You’re partly to blame for Gina’s predicament and on top of not caring, you spew foolishness. Guards!”

Losing his carefree demeanor, he hastily rips open the windows. With the powerful thrusts of his wings, he ascends from the danger effortlessly. Because of that one night, the guards arrive in good time, but not quick enough to see any trace of him. If they didn’t already know me well enough and already have a strong distaste for me, it would help if I threw on a farce of trying to play helpless and dainty.

Since no attempt is made, the interaction itself is strictly bare-bones and business. I tell them someone tried getting in through my window and was the reason behind the scream. Without a hint of doubt in their words, they say they’ll get a patrol going and catch the man. With that, the door closes and the locks click again. However, with the window still open, the room has an even icier chill enveloping it. I will undoubtedly have to sit under the covers for the rest of the night which will do little to alleviate it even then. I reach out and grab the windows. Just as I begin to pull them back in, his voice travels through the night air directly above. He is still around on the castle roof.

“Listen, I’m not angry but that definitely wasn’t nice, princess.”

He remains playful, yet it is no more than a front, as I can easily discern that he is angry. I continue to close the window until only a little space, enough to fit a hand through, is left open.

“Wait, listen, you didn’t leave me enough time to explain everything. I’d rather not resort to this now, but if you want to save Gina, take this.”

He drops down quickly, and before I have enough time to react, he has already placed something wrapped up in cloth in my hand.

“Slay the King and ignite the war. They will execute you, and there will be no reason for Gina’s execution, since they are just keeping her locked up to keep her quiet.”

Before I have any chance to respond, he has already taken off, most likely for good this time. The window has been shut, and I unwrap the gift. With pristine shine, it is revealed to be a simple dagger. It’s nothing fancy or special, not even big enough to fight an armed opponent with. No matter how plain it is though, driven into flesh, it will kill. I don’t think it through; my mind is already made up. The only step now is to have one of our “hot and passionate nights.” So yet again another shout for the guards has them coming back. This time, they are displeased, as they don’t like being summoned repeatedly by the likes of me. To help the cause, it will be important to lay it on with some feminine daintiness. There cannot be too much contrast from before, as it could raise suspicion.

“Can you please ask the King if I could join him tonight? It’s so cold in here because the windows were opened when the intruder barged in.”

“We have been given strict orders to leave you locked in and not let you out.”

“Pretty please? Ask the King then if tonight could be an exception. Just tell him I’m finally ready and he’ll say yes.”

Irritated, they oblige and carry the message. There is no doubt that oaf, unable to control his lust, will nullify Judith’s order. Little does he know his usual prey has been replaced with something a little more deadly. The knife is neatly tucked away in my dress, particularly in my undergarments. One of the few advantages of these superfluous dresses is that there is no need to make an effort to conceal something. With

everything set, the only thoughts able to manifest now are the thoughts of pure ecstasy of finally being rid of that fucking scum. The realization in his eyes when his life is slipping away will be the most satisfying moment. The only shame is that even though his death is assured, there is no room to drag it out and add to his suffering. I guess that, in the end, as long as I get some form of retribution for all those twisted, hellish nights, I can't ask for more. Afterwards I guess I'll either be dead without a care in the world, or through a miracle of the siren song I will still breathe air.

A sinister smile forms upon my lips that's accompanied by delighted eyes. Without turning back, I thank them, and with that, the guards walk off relieved that their guard duty is over. With the nuisance attended to, they will probably nod off at their stations for the night. As they are a few steps in, I hear one of them whisper "whore" under his breath. In this moment I can't do anything and let the statement slide. If the shoe is ever on the other foot, in terms of power, I'll make sure he remembers what he said. I guarantee it.

As I press forward, the thick and heavy oak door seems unfamiliarly light as it swings open. This whole experience almost seems brand new with fresh light shining in on it. On the nightstand beside the King stands a pitcher of wine which is almost all finished, unsurprisingly. Yet it's a good thing that things haven't strayed from their norm tonight. He, too, himself is in high spirits as the grin that he wears proudly is more one of amusement than enjoyment. His eyes display the drunkenness of a fool even as they meet mine, which are filled with hate. Saying the right words would be enough to persuade him, but no. The more buildup there is, the more forcefully it will all come crashing down, making it that much more enjoyable. So, everything needs to be authentically false, a pleasant contradiction.

"My King, my handsome, masculine, wonderful King. How I have longed for your company, for your touch since being locked away by those two ice queens."

A hearty laugh leads into slurred words, "I… I tolds use one day… one day from your own desires use would come."

“Yes, looking back I don’t see why I was so blinded. With each day this infinite passion has grown, and I could no longer bear being away from your side.”

I begin to walk over and sit beside him on the bed, all the while he belts out more hearty laughter.

“Imp’s understandable we all get budderflies from times to times but this isn’t love dear.”

The statement doesn’t sting. It fucking irritates me. I might not be the most sublime girl in personality. In all honesty, if my heart reflected my face, I’d be one homely wretch right now, but the fact that this fat pig would take for granted someone’s declaration of love is ridiculous. It’s as if he is too good for it, when he himself isn’t even fit enough to kiss the feet of the Queen’s sow friend Paula. It is laughable in a sick way. Just for that moment, my eyes falter, but no lashing out or rage ensues as everything must stay composed.

“My King, you don’t love me?”

And with eyes on the verge of tears and a quivering lip, he fumbles trying to find the right words to stop it. Eventually failing, he decides to be apathetic to it. It’s a hard endeavor trying to be so innocent given our history of horrid abuse. With so much fiery conviction from my deep hatred for the swine, I just manage to get out a few disheartened tears to keep up the charade. He reaches for the last of the wine and gulps it down. Finally, finally, as if it would kill him, he puts his grimy hand on my shoulder and says with confidence.

“There are different types of love. You’ll experience that firsthand tonight.”

This man truly is detestable scum. Basic human emotion obviously escapes him. The fact that statement was supposed to comfort my distress ends up showing just how delusional an idiot he is.

“I’m nervous, but I trust you,” I say with a spark of doubt but a splash of curiosity. He begins to position his hands to rub down my shoulders. It is most likely more of an attempt to loosen me up than actually to please. The idea gets shut down as it is hard for him to try and maneuver around my wings. It is a saving grace offered by the

cursed things. I speak too soon, as his failed attempt is instead replaced by an even more gruesome fate, as he now leans in for a “passionate” kiss. I nearly gag. As his chubby face and double chin slowly inch closer along with his drunken slobber from his last glug of wine, my gruesome fate awaits.

After taking a moment to brace myself, I follow his lead with an impulsive lunge in so as not to get squeamish halfway through. Locked now mouth on mouth, tongue on tongue, we dance. He tastes putrid. All the ambrosial desserts in the capital wouldn’t be worth this treacherous experience at the moment. It is at this point that I realize there can be no more building it up. It is too disgusting to put up with King Gale’s foulness to get only some additional subtle sweetness in the end. Foresight would have been handy as in this moment any type of rejection will arouse suspicion.

Time goes on more and more. Finally, the charade has been drawn out enough so that the kissing can be played off as tedious. I gently push away and resist again a strong urge, this time to inhale like I was suffocating. I toss out the playful suggestion to move on to better things. Hearing this suggestion easily excites the King. Seeing what he wants to see, he imagines a young, lustful girl ready to surrender her flesh for his enjoyment. Gently pushing his back down onto the bed, I then get up and proceed to get undressed. It’s interesting how, when things draw to a climax, time seems to slow down almost exponentially.

When the last string is finally loosened, the back of the dress opens up and effortlessly slides down and off my wings onto the floor. All that is left on my body is a thin gown as an undergarment with the dagger hidden in the discarded dress. Strange attire indeed for regicide. As I bend down at the foot of the bed away from his stupefied eyes, slowly but steadily I unravel the dagger from its cloth. In this moment before the predator strikes and kills the prey, I feel no uneasiness or anxiousness. As one might expect, I have played out this scenario enough even before the events of today to feel nothing but a committed readiness.

When I first got here, there was some remorse at the beginning of the thought of killing this monster; however, given the events that have transpired over these past seven months, it carries no weight, for it is lighter than air. With my hand and the dagger behind my back, masking ready fangs like a wolf, I crawl towards him. He wears a buffoonish expression accompanied by eager eyes of anticipation as he waits. I crawl from his feet to his waist and then climb fully on top of him, straddling his belly. He is still unsuspecting of the dagger hidden behind my back. Our eyes meet; despite the cold hate and detestation in them, he still either can't comprehend how I feel or maybe chooses not to see it. In a moment I begin to bring the dagger out from behind my back but stop abruptly when he speaks.

"You know so many women beg me to get into bed with them, many."

I roll my eyes at the statement and begin drawing the dagger again, but he continues.

"All I wanted to say is that it is finally nice having a woman desire me for me and not the crown." It would be a sorrowful statement had he been a decent man, but considering the vileness in his heart, angels couldn't sympathize with his pain.

In a strange, unexplainable way, though, it hurts my heart. With a second thought, the sad realization occurs that his words don't express a desire for love. His pain doesn't emanate from lack of love in return but instead from a lack of lust. It's repugnant, truly sickening.

"Shh, no more talking. I'm going to give you the night you truly deserve, and it, will, leave, you, breathless."

My hand gently draws his eyelids down. My full hand then gives way to a single finger, which traces his lips in a hushing gesture. Slowly and precisely the dagger is pulled out and placed on the side of his neck with scarcely a hair's breadth between the blade and the hollow of his throat. Whispering like Death himself, I say.

"I bet if these wings could fly, you would have had them clipped like I was your fucking pet peacock. Now, ironically, get your throat slit like the fucking beast you are."

With that, in one instant the dagger slashes deeply across his windpipe. No sound, no air can travel out. Instinctively, he keeps his eyes closed tight out of fear, unable to breathe let alone scream. Assuming this, I move my free hand away from his mouth, but even the prospect of him screaming would have been fruitless. In the end, it'd be impossible to stop our two fates from being sealed here tonight. His struggling grows weaker and weaker until no movement is left. Even the rustling falls silent, making it feel almost like the outside world is nothing but fantasy. A slight rush turns into a steady calm. Blood soaks the white pillows, turning them cerise red and the already red sheets a deep crimson. Only a slight amount has gotten on my hands along with a few specks on my right cheek. As a slight fuck you, I slide his eyes back open. There will be no rest for the wicked, and with that I retreat over to the fading fire.

My mind is blissfully blank almost as a way of coping with it all. No matter how much hate, sadness, and sorrow envelop my soul, whatever dirty sins I partake in still inflict suffering on my soul. So, for about a full, uninterrupted hour, I sit down and just stare at the flames dying as a way to retreat back to somewhere safe. There is firewood to the side, but it would be unnatural to prolong, so I wait until the fire dies down to embers. With them finally dying off, I now gather my belongings and begin to redress when more apathy sets in. I instead choose to walk back in my nightgown. It's better to finish this my way, comfortable and free without the ostentatious dress's restrictions on my body. I slip out and into the enveloping darkness of the hallway, leaving every possible clue behind.

Lord, I'm sorry for my sins. Tonight, coupled with everything that has been done leading up to this, makes your retribution rightly deserved. Although my prayer begins meekly, it is impossible to keep at bay the frustrations that extend beyond myself, causing my attention to shift to this ugly city. The self-indulgence and mutual hatred are what drive this city full of sinners. God, how I hate them and how I hate myself in that I am the angel they deserve. But please, God, let there be a happy ending for the one soul who is deserving of it. Please just save

Gina, save the real angel that this city hasn't blackened. Please, God, my tears are falling freely and, shamefully, and are the only thing I can offer in this moment. They aren't enough for repentance, but please just don't make an innocent soul have to suffer for the sins of another.

I have one last plea, but right before I can make it, I arrive at my room. It has slightly warmed up, but a night covered in layers of blankets is in store. Velvet isn't around. A good thing, for they might try and skin him alive as emotional torture the moment they discover the King. A goodbye would have been nice but is undeserved. In the end, it's only natural for everyone to leave a whore. Lord, before the events of tomorrow commence, there is only one other request, besides my plea for Gina, that I could make. Let me drag the sinners of this city with me to hell. Amen.

# Chapter 20

Like the wail of a ravenous beast that's hungry for the first flesh of the day, the roars of the crowd can be heard even this deep into the nobility district. The harmony from the union of it all is uncannily similar to all those previous times crowds gathered in the main square. Backed by the same ardent emotion, ironically, a different feeling is backing it all.

Ominously, nowhere in sight is there any carriage to carry our little old party down into the heart of it all, despite me being weighed down considerably with iron shackles wrapped around my hands and feet. There is just enough slack left with each one to slowly shamble around, but strictly nothing else. That is the least concern, though, as the weather has only slightly warmed up. Adding onto the oppressiveness of the chains, the metal runs deep with a cruel chill. The only consolation for it is a chilled expression to match.

The convoy of guards is standing alert at their usual twelve soldiers, ready to escort their prisoner today. They are plated in their, you guessed it, usual garish gold-clad armor head to toe. This time, however, they wear their oh-so-special ceremonial helmets for the occasion. I'm deeply flattered. The sunlight from the cloudless sky vividly bounces off their heads, leaving them with an almost saintly aura. More fitting irony for the occasion. With them aligned six by six in a line on both sides, the only thing that keeps us waiting to commence is the royal bitch. There is no rush to get this execution over with, obviously, but the fact that everything has to stop just for her makes me want to bite my tongue. Just another personal frustration to chalk up to the growing list for today. Since the moment I was awakened, today has been quite the frenzy.

It was truly oh so spectacular being woken up by being forcefully ripped from my bed to start the day, but what was even better was to have shackles violently slammed onto my extremities while I was still in a daze. Like a hammer hitting glass, the sensation was simply exquisite. So far, though, the best part of the day had to be the oh-so-pleasant visit

by Father John. While everyone was scrambling about to handle the sinking situation, he came by while I was caged away for safekeeping. Without a word or expression of sympathy for me, he went straight into business explaining the circumstances surrounding King Gale's unexpected death. From testimony from the guards and the blood found in my room, it was in the crown's opinion that the evidence pointed overwhelmingly toward me as the perpetrator. Despite some lingering uncertainty, there would be no trial; the matter would proceed immediately to execution. Of course, there was nothing to hide and thus I did come clean about the swine's deserving retribution.

Father John brushed off the revelation as though he had barely heard it. Even someone as poor at reading people as me could easily tell that Father John didn't seem all there. His mind clearly was focusing on other things. To conclude, he gave a slight nod of confirmation and, with empty, meaningless eyes, said goodbye. At this point, he didn't hate me or love me; he just didn't care. He regarded me with a gaze reserved strictly for a lifeless corpse.

Getting back to the matter at hand, I see Elizabeth finally approach with Judith in a sea of black that's coming in at low tide. They are accompanied by three other unknown noblewomen and five maidens. Deciding to have some fun with it at the end, I make a statement of saying, "Oh, I'd curtsy, my Queen, but I guess I'm such a threat I need to be chained up hahahaha." The guards, unyielding in their body language and with their faces covered, are impossible to gauge for their response. Due to this, they will be left out. Amusingly, everyone except Judith and Elizabeth shows downcast, chilled eyes. They are scared by the show as they cringe with fear in response. Yes, that's right,fear the demon that's going to reconcile your sins.

"Sigh, Violet, how delusional you are. Even at the moment of your death, you aren't able to contemplate your own situation," Judith remarks.

With a pouting lip, Elizabeth says in a patronizing tone, "It's sad really, but if you are a good girl and at least say you're sorry, maybe we'll unchain you."

Both of them need a brick through the teeth. “Hmmm, nah, the icy chill really feels nice ya know. Plus, all the more motivation for my revenge against you both later on.”

Elizabeth and Judith can’t help finding amusement in the statement at the absurd notion of escape. The others don’t join in, but after looking at Judith’s and Elizabeth’s amused faces can’t help but feel the hilariousness of the situation. Once they think about it a bit, they start to ease and relax.

With a wave of her hand, the guards begin to march, but not before one of them from behind drives the bottom of his pike down hard on my lower back to get me to move. It happens not once but twice. The second attempt is even more vicious. It’s hard to walk straight after, but by the third step forward, the sheepishness goes away while the pain lingers. Just when it seems to have dulled, another strike comes, then another, all for lagging behind. Yet it’s an impossible task to keep up as the shackles only allow for slow shambling. Considering how everyone else moves with such swiftness in their step, lagging behind is inevitable. Something must be done to slow them down or at least cause something worth a break to occur.

“Don’t you think that it’s overdoing it with all the black, Elizabeth? Are you really even upset about this? Judith obviously isn’t.”

At first it seems that the attempt was for naught and that it won’t be dignified with a response. After a bit of silence, she does indeed bite.

“True, Gale’s and my marriage to this point was merely a charade for politics. That, however, doesn’t mean that I wanted him to die.”

“Why?… Why? Why!”

Judith interrupts, “Because she will lose her position as Queen once a new King is ushered in. She has no children and it is unheard of for a woman to rule the Kingdom. The Queen is still a subordinate at the end of the day, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, that’s smart and idiotic at the same time. Obviously, Elizabeth isn’t intelligent enough to rule, however, ah!”

The same guard strikes me in the same spot on my lower back again. The blow most likely comes at Elizabeth's signal, and most likely she is reveling in it since it was the first time I broke.

"But if the King dies with no heir, the Queen should still hold power given the bloodline?"

"Don't you think we know that, but the people won't accept this."

Judith turns now and grabs my face and pinches my cheeks in her grasp. "I hope you understand what you have done. Everything is crumbling because of you. Not only are the peasants out of control, but the nobility is divided and about to commit bloodshed in a power struggle. All of it will now crash and burn because of one spoiled brat."

I spit in her face, and, with a wave of her hand, the guard strikes me. This time, though, he does not strike my lower back; rather, he strikes behind my knees, which causes me to buckle immediately. To finish it off, he sends an extra violent crack across the face resulting in teeth flying out and blood being coughed up in a wicked manner. My mouth shot off and emotions flared. That's why it backfired. This pain is deserved. Without a moment's hesitation, once I'm up, they quickly guide me back to walking with light pokes, but even the softest touches erupt with a sensation of pain.

At the very edge of the nobility district, it can be seen that a sea of people starts to begin. It's held back by another squad of twelve guards. Once we reach the boundary, the sea parts, enveloping our little party. They are all beastly, even the women and children alike. You can tell easily that every woman in our party has a strong sense of fear, while the guards, despite all that armor, look tense and alert. There is no more to be said, no more to be acknowledged. Words can't be heard through this uproar of being called a demon spawn, a whore, a bitch, and, lastly, a succubus.

It is at this moment that it is time to retreat, no wait, withdraw from it all. I shall become emotionless. I shall become nothingness to this world and escape onto other things. And with that, the yelling and the noise slowly fade away. Not even the occasional peasant trying to break in to serve out his own justice, causing us to stop while he gets beaten

mercilessly, is able to penetrate my thoughts. My eyes fixate on the cobblestones of the thin pathways. My mind can't at first help but spring back to the Lyttons. It has been now close to a year, give or take a few months, since we parted. Looking back, it almost seems as if it were nothing but a dream, or maybe this is just a nightmare. No amount of daydreaming or wishful thinking will change this situation; all that's left is possible execution. With it comes divine retribution and peace.

At the end of the day, their humble hospitality and charity will be all for naught, forever to be unpaid back or forward. It's interesting how the final moments with them were about how I was going to make a difference, bring benevolence to this city. Meanwhile, in the end, no such thing was ever close to being accomplished. In reality, this city is nothing more than a farce that deserves nothing more than malevolence. Such generosity, if it could have been bestowed, would have been wasted on these vile sinners. The rich do nothing more than beat down the poor, yet despite harsh treatment, the poor are quick to beat up anyone who isn't one of their own, despite possibly being an angel lurking.

Through it all, I have only one simple wish, to see the Lyttons one last time. It is an undeserved, fleeting one. Hopefully, though, they are nestled around a nice warm fireplace right now with Mrs. Lytton preparing a nice stew while William and Mr. Lytton tend to the fire. I grab onto the side with my right hand and dig my fingers into the fabric tensely. I'm sorry that I failed you all. I'm sorry I can't return to you and be a family again. I remain lost in the thought, oblivious to the unfolding events, until eventually I get jostled to the side abruptly. I gaze back up from the ground and see an attempted coup by the peasants unfolding. Remarkably a few from the surrounding crowd have actually been able to break through our gold-clad defense.

From the looks of it, it was an orchestrated plan given some thought though not considerable. Each guard is either fighting two peasants or has already dispatched his attackers. Five bodies lie on the ground. Those engaged are only a mere distraction as a few have snuck in behind the lines into our party. From the commotion, three filthy peasants grab

two of the defenseless maidens and Judith's unknown friend. This plan took headless thought clearly, as most of their men are dead. Absurdly, only two of the three captors have some sort of weapon. The other uses nothing but his bare hands to try and detain one of the maidens. How do you take a hostage without a weapon? So apparently, I guess the plan was to just rush with numbers from all sides, each one stupidly agreeing thinking that eh most likely the other guy will die. Then again, if it weren't for their numbers, Judith wouldn't fear them.

So, the situation breaks into an interesting standstill. The surviving assailants retreat beyond our circle and hold daggers to the hostages' throats. They want blood, but they want specific blood. It is interesting to note how the crowd hasn't decided to join in on this affair. The only explanation is that they have been deterred from risking their own lives after seeing how quickly five of the assailants went down. You could say it was with so little ease; 'twas like shoving a knife through butter. Second on the list of things to take notice of, if one is keen, is how everything is now, for the most part, quiet, even the peasants in the distance. News must have traveled down the network of people as if it were lightning. The captive audience is now transfixed entirely on this surprise crux.

Hmm, hmm, hmm, things are getting intense and my blood is pumping with so much excitement it might excite a tizzy. Who will win this little battle? The military advantage goes to the guards since they have the high ground on the hill, but strategically with hostages the peasants have the advantage. Judith breaks first. "You want the girl, don't you?"

"Yes, we demand the girl. She will pay retribution under the true church and not under this corrupt farce. If you don't hand her over, we'll kill the hostages."

With a nod of Judith's head, the guard covering our rear strikes me again in the lower back as I stumble forward. Maintaining the same grim focus, two other guards join him. Unexpectedly, something just feels off as they keep following along. It's strange, but I pick up on it. Judith, you heartless wolf. I quickly duck down and the guards go charging now into

the rogue peasants. I get up swiftly and glance back as it's already in action. All three captors in a heartbeat get piked dead center in the face. Amid the carnage, the noblewoman and one maiden have their throats slit, and crimson blood cascades down.

That power move by Judith is the perfect representation of how calculatedly ruthless she is. She realized most likely that even if she were to hand me over, they would still most likely have killed them. It wasn't a sacrifice, as in her eyes she already saw two of them dead, but one could still be saved. Although the one Judith saved was a maiden rather than a noblewoman, she followed the tactically sound plan regardless of status. With the spectacle being over, we begin again inching ever closer to the heart of the event. The display was enough to keep the crowd quiet, and its silence continued to linger. With a final turn left, we come to the final stretch as the open square can be seen up ahead.

Two things about today's event. First, the main square was too small to accommodate the entire city, so that plan was abandoned. Currently, we walk towards what is an unknown section of the peasant district, the only place empty enough to house what seems like every soul in Dryad's walls. Second, as I gaze across the vast area, the true size of the gathering finally becomes evident. Places like the square have been packed before, yet the density of this crowd is still surreal. It is interesting how people come when a divine creature gives a speech, but when a monster is to be hanged, every pig and fat rat comes crawling out of every nook and cranny.

With the rest of the walk being uneventful compared to the earlier show, we now come through to the foot of the hill. Standing at the bottom are both Father John and Father Paul. They formally greet Elizabeth and Judith by the customary anointing of the face. Meanwhile, they ignore my existence. They speak some details and I am switched over to their custody. I turn and walk with them and their own set of guards, leaving the previous convoy behind. As we walk toward the massive square, the lack of shops marks a stark contrast with my previous journeys through the main square. Additionally, what few there

are are badly worn, decayed, or constructed from cracked stone. The designs of all the buildings have been oversimplified, having no extra beauty worked in. It's nice to get a break from the ostentatiousness of the nobility district, yet switching to the dullness of the peasant district isn't any better.

Sadly, the one building that could have been a saving grace for the area, the church, is in a similar state. To be more precise, it lacks any extra details whatsoever. No baby angels or statues of any kind are built into the stone. The windows stand inconspicuous as they are plain, as in unstained. Everything looks solid and sturdy with only some cracks and no decay. The last thing I'll note about the area is that a set of gallows has been constructed. For what was hasty work, it looks sturdy, eerily akin to the stage used for my speech on Quantum not so long ago. These, however, are easily distinguishable because they are taller and appear more sinister. Yet the stage's purpose appears, ironically, less daunting than the one that was used for the speech. Once we make our way through the thick square, we enter into the church through its humongous oak doors that thud behind us once closed.

Some precursors must be necessary before the execution. 'Tis a much darker church than the other. So, the windows at the other place aren't just for show and do serve some function, it seems. I continue to follow the two priests' lead until we are on an altar much bigger than our normal one and less ornate. They break the silence.

"You understand the circumstances surrounding what is about to happen?"

"Yes."

"Okay, good. That saves a lot of talk; however, there is one other aspect to discuss; something that we want you to go along with before it's all said and done."

"Judging from your expressions, you are actually serious? Umm, why would I do that?"

Father John chimes in, "We know that you know that we were aware of the despicable acts that King Gale committed against you."

Father Paul continues for him, “But the church in no way has been responsible for these actions. We are supposed to draw our power from God, but things aren’t so surreal. We are more an extension for the King than an extension of God in reality.”

The dubious bastards act like they aren’t responsible. In the end, though, standing by and turning a blind eye is the same as forsaking someone.

“I’ll at least hear what you have to say before outright rejecting it. So, what do your greedy hands want?”

Father Paul simply says, “That’s your cue.”

With his black wings visible, he swaggers toward us with an overconfident stride, for he knows the true goal of today. From his appearance, I can tell he’s aware he has his bets placed with all the pieces on the board. Somebody will lose today, but it is not him.

“This is Nakir; he will be your replacement after today.”

“Okay, so what does this have to do with me? Like, what? You want me to give him advice? Be a good little doll and they won’t toss you aside, or some similar garbage?”

“No, no, Violet.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

Father John continues, “He will be your executioner. Along with that, he will also be taking your place, claiming that you were a false prophet, while he himself is the true savior of this city.”

A joke worth laughing at internally. Him a savior. This city saved, ha.

“Still, what do you want from me?”

Father Paul responds, “We want you to go along with the act. Proclaim how you were a false prophet. Proclaim the evil you have done. There is going to be a rush for power, and if this goes through, we will most likely win.”

“But why should I help you?”

Father John remarks with huffy justification, “We treated you justly. Who else are you going to give an advantage to? You detest all factions, but we were the most tolerable to you.”

“Neither of you actually believe in the religion, do you?”

They both pause, and Father John goes to continue with his justification, but the question is interesting.

“Neither of you believe in religion, do you?”

They both look at each other realizing that they’ll have to give this question some appeasement. Wanting to return quickly to the point, they simultaneously say, “No.”

“Two flesh-and-blood angels stand before you and you question your faith?”

“Well, the truth is, Violet, you aren’t an angel. Shocking, I know, isn’t it? The two of us and the King have known this the whole time. You weren’t smart enough to catch on that you were just a tool being used as a figurehead?”

Obviously, but I didn’t know whether I was the lie or if the whole thing was. Faking outrage and making a good show of it, I throw my head back. Snootily I turn away from them and head towards some of the pews. They become frantic, scared they have lost their stake today. Unbeknownst to them, the whole thing is nothing more than a shrewd farce to get away from those two idiots. Hopefully, whatever his name is takes the hint and comes over. It takes a few moments though he eventually bites like the chivalrous prince he is and comes over. Laughably, the fool tries to be debonair with his body language. With a patronizing smile, he gently asks, “What’s wrong?” I don’t answer. He sits next to me, both of us gazing up at the large hanging orb representing the Lord. He needs to work for it. I’m genuinely displeased at this unexpected surprise. It has cast serious doubts on his intentions. Was replacing me his plan all along?

He averts his eyes from the hanging orb and turns to me. “What’s wrong?” he asks again, sadly and sincerely.

I finally respond, “What’s wrong? Constantly your intentions have been in doubt. Being vague in your plans doesn’t help either.”

“The plan is still the same. I want this city to come crumbling down just as much as you. This is just some insurance since, well, I’ve been

reading through the Church's archives. The singing talent is really rare amongst our people. Usually only one in a lifetime gets it."

"That's why our civilization was eradicated, because we were attacked at a time when no one possessed it. So, if it fails, I might as well start off in a high position, if you understand, Princess."

Well, he has said it before. We aren't friends; our goals just happen to align.

"Well, it's going to happen. So, this little gambit will be all for naught. Trust me, later you will be punished for it."

The words are in the end an ostentatious show for the fool. Who really knows what will happen? My hope is fleeting, and my heart is sinking. Despite this, my conviction will not buckle. I will save Gina even if doing so consumes my final breath.

"Oh yes, all hail Queen Violet," he says, making a jest at the threat.

"No, I'm not their Queen; I'm the monster that will show them their retribution."

He responds with raised eyebrows and slightly straight-out puckered lips. That, accompanied by a mocking roll of the eyes, shows he doesn't take any seriousness in the threat. Again, for somebody so calculated, it's so stupid since the chances that it won't come back to bite him are low, but silence wouldn't cost him anything… Wanting to get this event done with, I walk back and rejoin the priests. I tell them I'll comply, which obviously is a lie, but they probably wouldn't let these events get underway otherwise. With joy in their countenance and greedy eyes now fulfilled, they dismiss themselves as I have asked to be alone to have a moment. They are so caught up in their celebration that they don't question why I decided to make such a request. Alone in the vast and empty church, not one soul but two are in this room. Kneeling before the orb and running my thumb down the center of my face from forehead to lip, I begin.

"God, I just want to say I am sorry for everything that has transpired to this point. I am sorry for failing to save the younglings, for being a worthless whore, for failing Lord Chestnut, for failing the Lyttons, for failing Gina, and, most of all, for failing you. I deserve this divine

retribution, but before that comes, please give me the strength to save Gina. Why must the angel of this city suffer the hardships that I deserve? Whatever happens, I still love you, but if you forsake an innocent soul I will fucking curse your name for all eternity!"

The words echo up the walls and into the dome. With a sigh of relief, I rise, fully resolved to face the gallows. While I am walking to the door, though, the Queen with a haughty face comes barging in with four gold-clad guards, most likely from our escort.

"Don't worry, I'm coming. You don't need to get yourself in a bind." Emphasis is placed on *bind* to show my disdain.

"Oh, no, we aren't going to get started till at least the sun is at its highest point."

"So why are you here? And why did we come early then?"

She slithers her way up and around my neck like a snake. When she is finally nuzzled over my nape, she whispers into my ear, "Well, you didn't think we were just going to let you get off that easy now, did you?"

"After all the vile mouth work with that wretch. I'm sorry, well not really, but it's laughable that you think you can put me through worse after my soul's been so desensitized."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself, we know a whore like yourself would enjoy that. So, we have something better in store."

To any other girl, the words would send chills down their spine as within this church hell is about to commence. Seeing as this might be the last chance for me to get back at the ice bitch, I take my opportunity. In one swift motion, I turn around and headbutt her straight on the bridge of her nose. I feel no pain, while she gives a weak yelp and goes down hard. Fresh crimson blood oozes from her face. The enjoyment, though, is short-lived. With something as hard as a diamond, one of the guards bludgeons me on top of the head. The next half an hour can only be described as nothing less than wolves on a lamb in terms of defenselessness, not innocence.

Repeatedly on the floor they bludgeon me with dense wooden canes. Occasionally, when they get tired, they take a break and instead decide

to spit onto the bloody mess, that is physically and mentally beneath them. After they have gotten their gluttonous fill, it finally stops. My body is utterly destroyed, so much so that the very air against it causes aching. Some parts cease to feel pain, having gone numb with so much damage. My wings with their advantage of insensitivity don't feel that bad but are most likely broken in multiple places. Unfortunately, it seems it is not over. After the brief reprieve, one grabs me up and just drags me agonizingly around by the hair, violently enough that some clumps break free. Through it all, I still haven't cried. Their smug looks and downcast gazes would only see it as a victory. On the other side tears are a comfort undeserving of trash like myself. My emotions have been cast away; nothing but ice remains... enough ice to freeze this city a thousand times over if my fading consciousness doesn't give out, that is.

The guard pulling me brings me over to the stairs leading up to the pulpit at the center of the church. He tosses me onto my stomach and two of the other guards kneel down to hold my arms in place.

The Queen follows suit and says, "You were never a prideful one, Violet, but you did adore your wings. You liked being the angel of the city. Let's see how you feel when you are brought down to our level."

With the guard's powerful boot, he firmly places it in the narrow section between both wings. Gradually, he pulls back on each wing while thrusting forward with his boot. As he stretches my wings farther, pain spreads through the muscles of my back. The muscles and tendons grow so taut that they seem ready to snap. That is when the pain reaches its climax. The sensation can only be described as a bunch of blazing knives repeatedly stabbing in and out at the connecting point viciously. Sweat and perspiration begin to flood my face. Nothing but a painful expression is displayed for them, which is at least somewhat of a victory. Unexpectedly, the guard starts increasing his power immensely now. It is at this point that defeat is ultimately met and screams of bloody murder sadly ensue.

Before I can understand what is happening, the sharpest pain yet brands a burning path through my body. With a snap, I fall over

halfway; my right side now ever so slightly just grazing the ground. One of my wings has just been ripped fully out now. He lays me back on my stomach now. The degenerate proceeds to stomp down hard on my back and, adding a twisting motion, he rips the other wing clean out. The halls, without a doubt, echo out with a shriek that's reminiscent of a fawn having all of its legs crushed simultaneously. With the last of my energy, I look up and see the Queen's proud grin, and with that, everything fades into darkness.

The next sensation that comes into view is the roar of the crowd through slits of light. Eventually they adjust and everything breaks through into full view. The crowd is in an absolute tizzy. Everyone from children and parents to the elderly have gathered. They come from every class of wealth within Dryad. Despite all these differences, they're all here for the same reason; this primal urge for bloodlust flowing through their veins. The way they sway and the way the sound collectively seems to harmonize transform them into one bellowing giant beast. Yet still it is only an illusion. They aren't all the same as a few do seem more civilized than the rest. Again, they appear from all walks of life. Instead of shouting and letting their natural instincts take over, they just gaze onward with their disparaging and disdainful eyes.

It is interesting how so much hate, so much disapproval, so much disdain can be felt towards an individual you have never met. They want to slowly drag me down and make sure I fall from grace. I am the canvas onto which they paint their self-doubt and self-hatred. Who am I kidding? That view is delusional. I am a ruined girl about to be beheaded by a guillotine taller than a house, its blade wider than a long sword. The same girl who probably resembles a corpse right now, only has herself to blame for her own demise. My wings have been ripped out; I have fallen. Never had I been truly an angel; never before was I truly better than any of them. My sins have led me up to this point. Still, deep in my heart I want to drag us all down even lower, into a coffin breathless and lifeless inside. It is the only befitting punishment for the defiled whore and the city that made her.

Victoriously, Judith walks up onto the gallows followed by Elizabeth hysterically crying. They are nothing but crocodile tears, but they're done well enough to earn the crowd's sympathy. "He" also follows them up now, wearing something similar to the armor that the guards wear, but more elegantly crafted. The armor plainly favors ornament over protection, as certain parts are missing armor while decorations have also been added. At the surprising unveiling of the new angel, the crowd falls to silence.

Judith addresses the crowd. "People, we have come today to bring this scourge to rest. To elevate our city from the grace it has fallen from. To punish the demon who has brought so much misery to our lives."

The look from their eyes. She is instilling pride. A sense of community. Judith coming off as charismatic and creating a common enemy is using this guise to try and stabilize the situation within the capital. She has them eating out of her hand as she takes a short dramatic pause.

"Our dear lovable King was seduced, corrupted, and inevitably killed by this monster."

Elizabeth breaks out into even more of a fit, trying to draw pity for herself and the crown.

"So, in the name of our Lord and Savior, we shall behead her. The Lord has even sent one of his very own to destroy this false prophet."

She motions to Nakir, and he pumps his fist to the sky as if he is the champion they deserve. He conceals it so as not to break the moment. Beneath that determined expression, however, he undoubtedly loves this. He loves the cheers of those rats. His own egotism overrules his inner hate. The crowd's cheers inevitably turn into bloodlust yet again, as they know what's coming like a bear that smells the blood of an injured calf. He turns back and assumes his position to the right of the guillotine, ready to pull the lever and send the blade falling. The crowd's roars don't die down, and there is nothing more to say. Time starts to pass ever slower now in this twilight. My heart pumps slower and slower until in a moment it stops. The beastly roars stop, and the only things remaining in the world are Gina's memory, the Lyttons, and the

sweet tinge of death. Everything is almost at a close, but not yet. Life must still be drawn from these lungs and with one deep breath the last hope is unleashed.

Why do angels cry?
Why do people lie?
Lord, please
Hear my plea
Save the soul
Of the one I love
From the heart of coal
For she is but a dove
And the others are trolls
Walking through this field of hate
I promise to carry the weight
Upon my sinner's head
In the end lying here dead

Cah! Cah! Cah! Another round of liquid gets coughed up as the slimy secretion of blood and mucus hasn't been able to flow down the back of my throat with the singing. At first, the words are nothing more than noise caught up in the crowd. Slowly, though, like moonlight peeking through the clouds, they shine through more and more as the night progresses. First, only a few of the closest people who peek just over the edge of the gallows react. Soon enough more and more do as well. Without the first row's strength, the crowd dies down, but not out. The song most definitely doesn't reach the edge of the vast crowd. Still, enough people fall silent to cause the rest of them to stop and go quiet too. Something absent for so long is finally present again… hope.

An ugly smile breaks out across my face. Gina, today you are freed from your shackles. Who knows where to go from here? Still, happiness fills my heart. There is no time to be sinister or cynical. Strangely, it seems only the men of the crowd are mesmerized as the women appear to be fine. In disbelief, Judith and Elizabeth can't help staring wide-eyed over the unexpected turns tabling. Judith is the first to react. Why it hasn't left them mesmerized in any way is odd. Frightfully, it now

creates an opportunity for this newfound light to vanish as Judith understands that this moment ultimately defines everything. In a dire attempt, as the monster before her is about to birth, she moves into action. Easily, she takes away the listless guard's long sword as if he were a yielding child giving up his toy. Taking the weapon, she charges with deadly conviction. It looks like even with the song, things will still be all for naught.

In a response Judith never expects, Nakir brings his pike down savagely across her collarbone. Blood rains down upon me. I'm already drenched from head to toe; some more doesn't matter. In an instant she collapses and it is decided. The reign of Bloody Violet, Queen of Sinners and wearer of the crown of thorns, has commenced. "Serve me" leaves my lips. The words barley reach out and don't carry, yet speaking them takes all my strength. With that, everything goes black for the final time.

# Chapter 21

I awake. Before I can get a glimpse of my surroundings, it is already clear that someone has cleaned away the blood and tended to my wounds. Across stands a mirror. I gaze into the it and see a young woman before me. Well, maybe a young boy would be the better term. To make up for the unevenness in my hair from getting some of it torn out, it's all been whittled down to short strands. Besides that, bruises cover my arms, left cheek, and most definitely my back, but that's out of sight. The contrast between the extremely fair skin and the deep black and blue is the perfect symbolism of my corruption. The last thing that is checked after a full-body examination is my teeth. No smile can be seen as the front ones have been displaced. Most befitting for a whore, I dare say. It's as if almost a little faerie has run off with them. Unfortunately, prior events weren't that pleasant. All too sure of the events that are about to pan out, the girl in the mirror is downcast. Her purple eyes, once teeming with dreams, are now pessimistic in nature. Despite her youth, she looks as though she has aged far beyond her years.

As I prepare to leave the unfamiliar castle chamber, this is my last chance at getting a glimpse of my once-ethereal wings. Even the slight sensation of something present there is no more. In my heart I know looking back would only deepen an already steep fall. First, the thought is dismissed and the door handle is cranked halfway, but something resonates inside. In these moments it's time to face everything head-on. I turn decisively back toward the mirror, forgetting that I am now wearing a normal dress, one without holes for wings. I dissociate for a moment and walk out the door without ever catching sight of them.

A little walking around this once-vast maze and Nakir is eventually found. His noisy, echoing laughter reveals that he is sitting in one of the dining halls used for smaller lunches. Despite having gone to so many, this one has still not been graced with my presence. There's no surprise when you walk in, it's a joke, garish and ostentatious like all the rest of them. Honestly, why would anyone ever think that a room covered in

mirrors would look beautiful? With so many reflections, it just raises the level of vanity of all those in it. Besides the tacky furnishing, the room contains only a small circular table that could seat about five people. Nakir sits there sipping on some tea, trying to be worldly, but instead comes off as pretentious. He is accompanied strangely by Father John and Father Paul. They turn once they become aware of my presence. My skin prickles with goosebumps, however, when our eyes meet. Their gazes give an uncanny feeling.

Nakir overconfidently boasts, “I see someone’s feeling a lot better.”

Daggers are thrown back at the statement. “Like you genuinely care. Ugh, why are they here?”

“Well, the situation is rather sweet. Like a freshly picked apple or so they say.”

“Stop being vague, better yet, stop being yourself.”

He pretends to cry in a jocular way, which annoyingly takes a brief moment to subside. Each moment here delays saving Gina, which isn’t ideal. Time is precious, so it aggravates me to no end. When he finally stops, we glare into each other’s eyes. He considers his own interests as well and realizes that it’s time to get things progressing.

“Here’s where we stand. Luckily for you, you have the gift. Your little song was powerful enough to bring a large number of guards to our side, and we were fortunate enough to get these jesters under your spell as well.”

Now that he mentions it, I look into their eyes. They seem devoid of more than just consciousness. It seems more like their souls are absent. Well, more so than before.

“So basically they’re puppets now?”

“Oh, come on. When you put it like that you make it sound like we turned people into lifeless dolls.”

“You’re joking, but saying that shows you are caught up in semantics when only the result matters. But go on, elaborate more on the conditions of things. You said the song only reached some of the people?”

“Well, here is how it goes; the city is in disarray. Fragmented factions of nobility are fighting for control of Dryad. With the guards you entranced and my ability to direct the crowd through these two jesters, I was able to secure our return to the castle. I wouldn’t recommend leaving these walls. The peasants are consumed by bloodlust. All societal structure has broken down within the city. I imagine that, outside these walls, Ardisia itself is divided but organized. I imagine for some time the nobility will be busy with each other before they turn their attention to the capital.”

“As much as it pains me to say this, thank you for handling things.”

“No problem, princess. We might not be friends, but our goals do align.”

“Speaking of handling things, why did Judith not succumb to the song?”

“Ah, good perception. Nothing less from you should be expected.”

“Stop patronizing me; eventually, you are going to regret it.”

“We’ll see about that; but as for the question? The reason is simple. The spell doesn’t work on women, never has, never will.”

He shrugs his shoulders. Tapping my pinky finger against my chin, I realize that some sort of next strategic move should be made, but that doesn’t matter right now. Any plans will take time to formulate, and the fact that Gina can finally be saved takes precedence.

“Has Gina been set free yet?”

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t want to steal the precious moment from you when you come in like the gallant knight you are.”

“Ha! You just keep pushing your luck. You honestly don’t think it is going to catch up to you?”

“Eh, it’s too much fun to pass up. Plus, what’s a severely beaten-down girl going to do to me?”

I respond by licking my lips into a smirk and raising my eyebrows like a predator. In response, he again makes a mockingly frightened face. With that departing statement, it is time to leave as anything

further would be a waste of time. Hmm, if Father John and Paul really are basically just dolls now, it's kind of disturbing that he is having tea with them. Then again, what else would be expected from a freak like him.

The passage leading to the dungeon is dank and darker than what was expected. Torches are usually lit for light. Following the gruesome events, nobody has come down to tend to them. All of the flames except two have been extinguished. The chamber is rather small and consists only of a very narrow hallway that leads directly from the stairs. There are about eight cells in total, four on each side. My heart is distraught yet is ready for the worst. She has been locked away in such a horrific place for so long. Only those who have the toughest of souls could bear this torture. In what condition will she be in? Each cell seems to hold a prisoner, but the darkness and the bars masking each small window leave me unable to tell which one is hers. I have no choice but to shout.

"Gina."

"Violet," comes the faint reply from the third door on the right. With the keys from Nakir, there is no trouble opening the cell. The heavy metallic door swings open. Gina falls out weakly into my embrace. My heart feels like it is on fire with the amount of warmth that is surging through it right now. As expected, Gina is visibly worn out. Aside from being dirty and stressed, however, her condition is fortunately not severe. She wasn't handled roughly and she was at least fed. Still, this isolation is too cruel a punishment for such a sweet girl. If Judith were alive, she'd be whipped savagely for her folly. It has been a hardship, but at least it is in the past now. The most important thing in this hell has been saved, her innocence. There has been a slip or two, but she hasn't fallen from grace. The one virtuous thing in Dryad remains, even as the city itself is about to crumble.

"Don't worry, Gina. Everything is going to be alright. I'm making sure that those who have done this are facing proper retribution."

"Violet, what do you mean? What's happened since the dinner? Your hair and your teeth?" she says with deep concern.

"Don't worry about that."

Her face shows a longing for things to be simple again, though she tries to hide her sorrow in that she has to be shown the light.

“Violet, what do you mean? Something is obviously wrong.” Her voice is now strained with anxiety.

“Gina, this isn’t the time for that. Are you alright? You are definitely famished. Let’s get you into one of the dining halls, away from this damp, dingy dungeon.”

She softly pushes herself away from me. If she had just slightly more strength, it would have been easier for her to resist. Still, I let her go. She has this determined look in her eyes, which feels strange since it has only been directed before in a positive way.

I look away, off to the side. My eyes are downcast. “Gina, please.”

She just shakes her head with saddened eyes. Now is not the time to drag her into this while chaos ensues. Plus, there is something else that has to be said. After everything that has happened, my feelings for her have never been expressed; now, it seems miraculous that I might finally share them. Looking now at her dimly lit face, the candlelight illuminates her right side while it leaves her left in darkness. She is everything that one would picture in a goddess or an angel; radiant beauty. I gaze deep into her hazel eyes, and they gaze back into mine. The mood softens as the silence stretches. At first, it never crossed my mind. Actually, a better way to put it was that it wasn’t even conceivable. The idea was just too abstract, yet as time progressed it became more and more subtly evident. How to even express this feeling is completely alien. This feeling has been absent from the city; only a distant cousin of it was present with the Lyttons.

The nervousness is back. That I have kept a heart of ice through regicide, beatings, and beheadings is a testament to my resolve. However, in her presence, everything melts away. I look down and away again. She can sense the nervousness, but she doesn’t grasp why. She connects it with the circumstances surrounding the moment when it has nothing to do with that whatsoever.

“Please, Violet, I’m just worried. How is it that you personally have come to my rescue? You look terrible and have clearly suffered an

ordeal worse than mine. Lastly, our parting moment, I'm not going to lie. The way you acted, the viciousness of it, made it seem as though the Violet I knew had been replaced."

The last statement stings and gives even more of an argument to not tell her about everything until it has come to a close. This is Gina, though. Do I really have so little faith in our bond that I can't trust in her heart to understand my sentiments when I share my horrible blight? If things are explained with full conviction, I'm sure she'll understand. As long as I don't waver and show strength, it won't weigh on her mind. This will ultimately cause Gina's innocence to be lost, which is selfish, but moving forward is impossible from the looks of her resolve.

"Fine, Gina, I'll explain everything that is going on as long as it is said in its entirety without interruption."

She gives a committed nod. Where to start is a difficult question, but naturally, instantaneously, and without thought, my words just somehow know where to begin. It starts from the very beginning with the arrival of Father John and Sir Dalibor and the excitement it brought. The utter disappointment when arriving but how still a starry-eyed Violet remained with more than enough naiveté to handle pushing on. I continue on to our unusual meeting, which was "the best thing to happen in this godforsaken city." I briefly touch on but try to gloss over the rapes inflicted by King Gale. A pause is needed before moving into what the current situation is, as she has started weeping and is seeking comfort. Despite my demons being dormant, her empathy has brought their wrath back to life.

Gently, almost with a mother's touch, I lead us up and out of the dungeon, unusual since through this journey she has been my foundation instead. The other prisoners, realizing this, start to wail and moan as their cries echo through the hall, but now isn't the time for their problems. Gina needs my comfort and is fortunate to have such a consoler with her. Once we are away from the harsh dungeon and in the pleasant hallway, time begins to ease her weeping. Her red eyes show, though, that it hasn't fully subsided. The light illuminates everything. It

makes her hardships that much more evident as the dirt and deterioration of her condition are more apparent.

“I’m sorry, Gina. I understand that it is depressing, but I’m here for you. Everything up till now has been fine; nothing will change that.” She hugs me hard, trying to simultaneously comfort us both. This very act ironically creates deep sadness from seeing how distraught she is, then creates even more sorrow with how empathetic she is despite what she has gone through. It’s time to finish showing her the light; afterward, I’ll take her to a proper room to get some rest.

“Gina, the city is in a state of turmoil. A great civil war is going on; soon all the sinners of this forsaken city will be killed. In a strange twist, I’m not really an angel; I’m actually a siren. A siren with special powers. It all so tough to explain, but that isn’t the important part. Everyone, the brutish peasants, the self-indulgent nobles, that bitch of a queen; they are going to receive what they deserve. Then we won’t have to worry about them anymore. Their torture, their sins, we’ll… we’ll be free from it all. It will be just us two and we’ll finally be happy.”

Staring off into the distance at the now barren garden, I’m completely oblivious to Gina’s reaction. The assumption was that it would trouble her, but in due time with some comfort she’d get over it. How wrong this assumption was. It shows that I still have some illusions left. It becomes first apparent when she pushes herself away with all the remaining force she can muster. She stares back, a petrified look of desperation fixed on her face. Anxiously, I try to fix this, to not lose the one thing that is precious to me.

“Gina, please don’t be startled. I know everything is tough to bear, but I’m fine now. We will be safe, I promise. I won’t let the noble factions get to you.”

“You aren’t the Violet I know. You aren’t her. What kind of monster has taken the form of my dear friend?”

“Gina, it’s me. What are you talking about? I would never do anything to you. You aren’t like that filth. An angel like you could never even be mentioned in the same breath as that scum.”

She backs away still frightened for dear life. She turns desperately in the other direction, fully prepared to run.

“Gina, I never was able to find the right moment or the courage to say this, but... but I love you. I love you. Please don’t do this. I have wanted to say this for so long; you have been the only good thing, the only reason to live in this godforsaken place. I love you completely, no, absolutely; with all my heart.”

It is no use; her mind is in a tizzy. Filled with fright, she darts off with the speed minus the grace of a young doe.

“Gina, I love you. I can’t live without you… I love you!” With all my might I scream out the last words to her, but it’s still useless. Tears begin to fall once she turns the corner. The ugliest, hardest cry of this whole ordeal seems to force its way out. I cough up thick mucus and saliva that drips from my mouth and down my chin. Nothing is visible. The tears become too much to even bear as my eyes squeeze tightly shut. The wails echo and echo, so loudly that maybe the whole world can hear them now. This despair, this scream, is so deep that maybe it would even be strong enough to penetrate the cold heart of Elizabeth.

“Fine, I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone!”

“I”, a sob cuts me off, “don’t need anyone.”

Why, then, why does my heart ache so much? … I don’t need anyone.

# Chapter 22

“Moping, I see.”

Daggers quickly find their way over, locking onto his smug face. He wears it so proudly that it’s simply detestable.

“No.”

“Oh, come on. You put up this unfeeling look and can keep a face devoid of emotion, but I can read you well enough to know that for you this is moping.”

He’s right, and it drives me up a wall that there’s no rebuttal. The only course of action left is to walk away with a cold shoulder turned. It’s out of view, but he is most likely subtly snickering at his little victory. That’s fine; let him have it. In a little bit he won’t be sporting any sort of smile, the prick. We are currently in the high tower of the garden where this little affair all began. It has been two weeks now since the failed execution. A raging fire off in the distance burns in the peasant district. It’s hard to tell from this distance, but the fire seems to grow stronger each day as its black plumes continue to thicken. It sends a feeling of death into the mind with how black it is in its eloquence. Good. They deserve their slow, untimely demise, just like the nobles.

In comparison, if one were to look upon the nobility district, they would see a lone light unscathed in all this damnation since the district is under our control. No, fuck that inconsequential gnat. It’s under my control. Whether they come from either side of the civil war or from some ragtag peasant squad, one angelic song from yours truly is all it takes to stop them dead in their tracks. How foolish the jesters were to need more than one lesson before understanding the situation. You’d think after the first time with so many troops not returning, it’d be painstakingly obvious to stop. Still, I’d wish they’d come considering it’s a real shame that our forces now aren’t getting any bigger. Before, recruitment was effortlessly simple. Now, well, it’s still simple; however, it’s no longer truly effortless. A trip to the peasant district might be in order soon.

“What is the status of the latest skirmishes, Nakir?”

“Well, if we take into account that recent victory minus that loss plus those advances, seemingly perfect. Their only shot of winning was while you were unconscious. With their forces stolen and bloodshed across both sides of the civil war, only small pockets remain.”

Simply superb. This city’s reckoning will be over soon. Only one thing is left to be taken care of. Well, one major thing.

“Good. Are the preparations ready?”

“Yes. Care was taken to make sure she was secured alive.”

This last little bit is figuratively the icing on the cake, reminding myself that hopefully that baker’s wife has succumbed to all the slaughter. To my delight, most definitely she has since the square was one of the first things that got ransacked in the chaos. Teach her to look down upon others when she herself is lower than a helpless worm drowning in the muddiest of water. Like strings, thoughts, or more precisely, memories, are connected. Did the younglings ever make it? The wind nips at the nape of my neck as we proceed down the stairs. So naïve I was to actually believe Father John would help those poor meekly children. Turn your back unless there is something in it for you. The law of the land in these depraved streets. In the end, though, it was for the best. In a few years, just as an apple left out soon becomes rotten and undesirable, so too would those children.

My joints are still stiff, and the ache of my black bruises turns the slightly troublesome steps into a real ordeal. Yet, with what could be called a “splendid” hop, skip, and a jump, we retreat back into the mirror room to pick up the guest of honor. It is ostentatious, of course, with all that reflective silver, isn’t it? But what is even worse is the high level of narcissism that protrudes from this room. With a copy of all of us, it is impossible for any of us to not gawk at our own form. The mirror is nothing but an illusion. In the end, it lets each person fall in love with the reflection of his or her own evil. There she is sitting, keeping her head held up high despite deep down knowing this is inevitably the end. She wears tattered clothes that are partially ripped and has a patch of dirt here and there. Overall, though, she isn’t roughed up badly.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in. Excuse me, coughed up. Ha! You look real bad. Not terrible, but still definitely bad.”

Her vigor is gone. Naturally, she wants to say something back, but with the loss of her power, her luxury, and her place, there isn’t enough life in her to bring the words forth. Our eyes meet first in the mirror walls. She darts hers away immediately. When they do meet again, when we are face-to-face, she holds my gaze. She is defeated, but she just doesn’t know what to do with herself. Her expression is blank, not stoic, but vacant, because she is lost.

“Well, come on. Chop-chop, Elizabeth; it’s time to get things underway. ’Tis the beginning of the end, you might say.”

With a delay, she eventually puts her arms to the side and pushes herself up. She doesn’t gaze into her reflection in the mirror. The knowledge of her state is already known. I have her escorted by the two doll-like guards that stand attentively as her keepers. She already knows where we are heading. The place where any execution took place in the castle, the garden. We walk into the surrounding area of the dead, barren, somber garden. What was once filled with heavy green life has been reduced to an enveloping, hideous brown. All the noblemen and noblewomen that have been unfortunate enough to meet their fate here by our hands here have their heads placed on wooden spikes. They stand like pseudo-trees to make things seem more “alive” despite it being winter. Soon enough, her head will be accompanying all theirs at the top of it all. Their closed eyes and pale, pasty faces make them all look so peaceful, like they have ascended to a more perfect realm. Maybe a little sick, but who cares in this city of sin?

Having already been beckoned beforehand, six other guards stand side by side, attentive and ready like statues. The sky, washed in a pinkish-red haze, is beginning to darken into night. The guards wear simple iron armor, having gotten rid of the atrocity that was that gold armor from before. Well, that is all except for Nakir’s, who acted like a child and decided to hide his armor from me. He doesn’t dare wear it in my presence and thus currently adorns a nice luxurious silk robe instead.

“Ah, feels nostalgic, doesn’t it, Elizabeth? Kind of reminds me of when I first arrived. You remember that? Ha, I was only a minor annoyance in your eyes back then. I doubt both of us could have foreseen that this would be the final conclusion to our lovely relationship.”

I put a hand on her shoulder, and she quivers at the initial touch. Her heart surely is rapidly palpitating. She immediately, however, straightens up and goes back to being somewhat strong. Her resolve will weaken again, though; everyone’s does when the reaper is about to lay his icy hand upon your cheek. I lean in and whisper, moving my hand from her shoulder to her ear, cupping it.

“We have had our ups and downs throughout this whole ordeal. The one thing that hasn’t changed is that I will always detest a witch such as yourself. There isn’t an exact word for it because rivals isn’t a good enough fit for what we are, but there is some sort of respect there. So, if it is within reason, I’ll grant you a final request. Now think hard, because there is something I need to attend to first. Good luck.” The luck ends in a high pitch to add a hint of fake friendliness like salt into an open wound.

Before our eyes even meet, instinctually he is already spooked. Both of us knew that this was inevitably going to happen. The only thing that was left up in the air was exactly when. He takes a few careful steps back as I draw nearer. His hand is on his sword, ready to retaliate like a cornered beast. His mighty wings begin to outstretch, readying him to take flight. Before the first swoop comes down, I snap my fingers, and the six guards surround and charge him. By the time they are able to reach him, though, as expected, he has already gotten his third thrust down and is now slightly airborne. He unsheathes his sword in one sublime motion that is too swift for their reflexes to react; he deals a deathly blow to the heads of the two in front. By the time the other guards raise a blade to him, he has taken his fourth thrust and is already high enough to avoid the strikes.

It is interesting because, as predicted, he doesn’t leave. Instead, he decides to put on a show by floating ethereally in the sky. Like a greedy

rat searching for morsels of food to steal, he is unable to leave as this will be his only chance to grasp what he truly desires. Seeing a despair-stricken flower, his thoughts were to use her and you can most likely discard her when she's been used. All you have to do is keep her alive until the city is brought under your thumb; however, somewhere along the way, he surely realized that wouldn't be the case. He basically hoped I'd be unaware, and he'd be able to toss me to the side like an ignorant lamb. How sweet.

Maybe, just maybe, it would have slipped my vision; doubtful, but his unavoidable mistake was that someone had to direct the followers while I slept. The only explanation for this, since only I can enchant them, is that any siren can control them. One can only imagine what he wants with an army this size. Hell, maybe he wants to spread the scourge. Given his underlying greed and pride, however, the truth is most likely more self-serving than that.

"Having fun, are we?"

"Always with you, princess."

He is too busy to come up with a good enough response as he maneuvers the swings. He's dancing in the sky like an amused child; how befitting of a jester. His smile suggests that he assumes that with this many guards and their limited fighting abilities, he has surely won. Does he really think that lowly of me? With a powerful thrust up, followed by a contraction of his wings to streamline himself, he goes up then back down with extreme speed. The gust is powerful enough to effectively knock the four guards back a step. Without time wasted, he is already on the offensive. With weak footing, none of them are ready for the recoil if they block.

Nakir comes down hard with both hands. In response, the guard holds his blade horizontally above his head. He manages to divert the blow, but its force sends him plummeting to the ground and knocks the sword from his hand. The three other guards are fast advancing now. A smirk appears on my face. In a whirlwind-like motion, he pivots on his right foot, anticipates them, and spins to strike their swords aside. But a good defense leads to offense as he is already coming back around now

in full circle, ready to decapitate the puppet. In another circumstance a good move but right here, right now, overzealous. A word that fits him as a person all too well. Before the climactic moment where metal pierces flesh, what has been properly prepared beforehand finally unveils itself. The repeated clanging of blades, coupled now with the force from the swing of this strike, now causes the blade to fly off its garish, bejeweled hilt.

My face breaks into a full malevolent smile now as nothing is better than having an ace up your sleeve. He can't believe his eyes. The shock has him paused, unable to grasp what's unraveling. By the time he decides his only option is to retreat, it's too late in the game; the knights and pawns are in place. Checkmate. They all jump and force him to the ground. Two hold down his arms, while the other two his wings. I laugh wickedly and say, "It is quite the spectacle to see that sparkling eye pride get stripped." He looks back angrily. The first hints of it ever breaking through his smooth demeanor. "Well, there's some pride left, but that will soon be fixed. I bet you are dying to know exactly what I did, aren't you?"

"You bitch! I'll kill you."

Empty threats, more devoid than a doll's soul.

"You know, maybe if your blade wasn't so pretentious this wouldn't have happened. What's the value even of such a shoddy blade? Yeah, it looks good, and metal is metal, but it's not as sturdy, you know. Be a real shame if you let your guard down in front of one of the dolls and he just so happened to loosen the tangs on your sword. Oh, wait, that is what happened."

He's still struggling, but it would take two of him to overpower four sturdy men.

"Argh… when?"

"Hmm, hard to recall, but most likely during one of the times you decided to have some, you know, fun. Again, your viceful actions are your downfall. There was no need for you to slaughter the rebels, but you just had to indulge. Knowing how highly you hold yourself, you just had to give your sword to someone else to be cleaned after the carnage

because you thought it was a lowly task beneath someone of your prestige. If you weren't so fucking lazy, your downfall could have been prevented."

It is a shame how people have to indulge, isn't it? This being thought while simultaneously I run my hand through his hair, caressing his scalp as though massaging it. There's resistance at first until it is eventually snuffed out. For each head yank away, my nails dig into his scalp until he finally submits. Finally, finally, his spirit is gone and his pride depleted. His head now is down, staring aimlessly into the barren ground. A little blood is left upon my nails. Its warmth somehow contrasts with the frigid breeze, but in a way complements it. I lick my fingers so the blood won't dry on them. Surprisingly, he begins to monologue; perhaps he has some last words after all.

"Honestly, the plan at first was to take you as a wife, use your power, and dominate the region. I had it all laid out for us; we could have had it all. That quickly became clear it wouldn't work, so then maybe a co-conspirator, but that idea was crushed also… You are simply too deranged, too destructive for any of that."

His anger has gotten the best of him now, and it seems life has come back, predominantly through his lungs. With a snap of the finger, one of the guards beats him hard over the head, and his anguish begins to set in again.

"Oh, don't flatter yourself. Gina was the only one who was worthy of my love, at least in a romantic way."

With a pause ensuing, it's safe to assume that's that. With a snap of a finger, the guards respond sharply and precisely. The two holding his arms sweep them down and position themselves diagonally across his shoulders, using their bodies to press him flat against the ground. The other two guards currently grab and pull his wings back straight. She may be a bitch, but Elizabeth is at least good at what she does. She hasn't looked over at the events unfolding once so far. It's her loss, but then again, watching the same show twice can be somewhat tedious. Slowly they increase their force. With the gradual buildup, it takes a few

moments before his discomfort sets in, but soon enough the slight tinges of pain that are all too familiar start to set in.

His face is covered by the ground, but the twitches of his scalp confirm this. The wings are starting to get pushed to their limits as the tension in them looks heavy. In a flash like lightning, his right wing is ripped jaggedly out of his shoulder blade. The screams of bloody murder send a euphoria of that like music through the air. The only two real souls that are left in the city could hear it, but that scream definitely echoes a few manors down. He pants heavily, yet the constriction of the ground must make that an ordeal. With the wing out, the guard tosses it to the side. The guard is emotionless, still soulless, as nothing of the deed at hand resonates within him. No remorse, no pleasure, absolutely nothing. He moves over to help the other one, and with one final combined tug, it, too, gets ripped out. Interestingly, it does not come out as cleanly, as the root is still in and a gruesome-looking stump remains. With the job completed, they get off and stand aside.

Even with his motions unrestricted, he doesn't make a last-ditch effort to lash out at yours truly. He doesn't even have the will to get up and stop the ground from asphyxiating his face. It would come with bitter pain, but it is still something achievable since his body is intact.

"Is it evident that you are scum? So vain, so prideful, your only fit punishment was to have your wings ripped from you and thus your pedestal. You're on the same level as me now, a whore."

Still no response on his end. The rustling of the wind shows more of a presence. At this rate, the ominous clouds overhead will be upon us in the coming day, how fitting.

"At this point, it really doesn't matter to me what you do. Leave, stay around for the destruction of the city. Burn in the flames. Just vacate the noble grounds. Normally I'd kill you, but since your punishment is to walk the earth fallen, that'd be counter intuitive. If you don't comply, don't worry, you'll be removed harshly."

As I begin to move on to the next task, he moans, "You bitch." Without even so much as a glance back, with a snap of my fingers, two of the guards pick him up and know what to do. Give him to the next set

of dolls and then those dolls dispose of him. It takes some time for this to happen. To kill it, I run my hands through and play with Elizabeth's hair. That's the one puzzling thing. Why, when the King had such a beautiful wife, did he require a whore? During this time, my skin prickles with anticipation. The revenge will be as sweet as one of the homemade tarts Mrs. Lytton would make. Such an unfair trade was forced looking back at it now. Despite her beauty, one hundred gorgeous, cold shrews aren't equal to Mrs. Lytton's pinky finger.

Putting personal matters aside, today's purpose is not just revenge; today's purpose is to also force her to see her actions in a different light.

"Any final wishes, Elizabeth?"

She still appears as lifeless as ever. I can't blame her after Nakir's torture. Pulling my hand out gently from her hair, ironically almost like a mother-daughter relationship. I back away and, with no wasted movement, I contort it into a snap. Like well-trained beasts, the guards immediately pounce upon her with lust-filled eyes. You can take the soul out of a man, but the lust will always remain, or so it looks like. They aren't violent with her in the traditional sense. They are still horrifically forceful like King Gale, but one of their commands was to not inflict anything out of the way to make it physically painful. As they pin her down, she looks over at me in extreme distress.

"Please, just kill me instead. My wish is for it to be painless and quick then. I'm begging you! Please!!"

"No! How dare you! How fucking dare you! You don't get to fucking ask that! You are going to understand what it was like for me here! Understand what you turned a blind eye to! Then you are allowed to die."

One starts to rip her dress apart down below, and she starts to scream, but does it make a sound? I can't stand the sight. It feels all too uncanny. I turn to the side as it is still too brutal for my eyes despite this abhorrent heart I now wear on my sleeve. I bite my lip, and I can feel the warm crimson blood in my mouth. I dissociate for a bit, and I snap back to the present moment. Without realizing it, the ugly deed has been done. As the vile dogs get off her, she lies there with listless eyes and a

meandering river of tears. The sight feels sweet, that is, bittersweet. Normally, it is fun to revel in the suffering of us astray sinners, but as a woman, the suffering is all too familiar. If time allows it, this moment will be reviled by future Violet.

I walk over, and we exchange glances. She wears a sorrowful look that's combined with just a hint of empathy; she ultimately comprehends what an ordeal it was living here, or at least that's what I want to believe. This final moment isn't really to exchange words. Left unspoken, our shared feelings remain more idealized that way. Maybe she sees now that, instead of hating the meek girl who stood before her, she should have adopted a motherly role or at least formed some sort of relationship with her. Instead, Elizabeth despised the girl for her own shortcomings and transferred her hate-filled heart onto her. The moment is fleeting. Crouching down beside her and embracing her in my arms, I console her. She speaks.

"I wish things could have been different." She chokes halfway through, wails, and the breaksdown after finishing.

"Shh, shh, shhh. That doesn't matter now. Right now, you are my mother and I'm your loving daughter."

She partially accepts the embrace after hearing this and begins to calm down a little. Ironically, the roles are reversed right now, but why ruin a pleasant dream? The dark clouds in the distance look ominous enough that a harsh storm will be moving in. Does it matter, though? Everything after the obliteration of this forsaken city is meaningless. There's nowhere to go, nobody to see, along with no purpose in this current state. There is no tomorrow.

Giving her a fake smile that does mask a little regret, a lighter but similar feeling arises that was felt the last time with Gina. I get up and turn away, ignorant to whatever look her face is wearing, whether it is that of blissful ignorance or painful reality. By the end of the snap, it's already replaced by the sound of metal cutting through flesh, followed by the sound of the thud of the corpse. Then the lighter thud of the head. In reality, too bad your daughter's a false angel.

# Chapter 23

Once a place of hustle and bustle, the city now stands still as if frozen in time. Appropriate since it is snowing modestly on this cold midday. The fire that had been running rampant throughout the city has finally been calmed, naturally, as all things must come to an end. What a life it had though, taking out the majority of the Dryad with it. Only the nobility district remains unaffected by it. After I dealt with the last of the thorns, Elizabeth and Nakir, the only thing left to do was to subjugate the rest of the people. Now not a soul is left in this city except for mine, well, I guess not really... The cold air weighs on my tired body like a blanket. The hate has been what's driving me these past weeks; with it gone, nothing but emptiness remains.

As was stated, if you could read between the lines, it is evident that somewhere along the way Gina perished, as no trace of her has been found. The same can be said of Velvet. Most likely, they were consumed in the blazing hellfire, a grim demise. Does it matter, though? In hindsight, she was an inconsequential girl. The only real reason I cared for her was that there was a picturesque fog surrounding her. Strip it away, and she really wasn't that great. At the end of the day, she was nothing more than a worthless human… so why, why then does her memory still linger? It's no use to sit here lying to myself to avoid the pain in my chest. The truth is that the blood of the one person who mattered, the one person who was too good for this city, blood is on my hands. The blood of the one person that I loved is on my worthless hands. The tears freeze. How could an angel love a monster? Nakir had me blinded. Gina should have been saved, and immediately afterward, I should've ended myself right then and there.

Revenge without her is meaningless. In the end, this conclusion is a curse. At this point there is no reason to commit suicide. There is nothing to escape from; no abuse, no ugly society. The only pain now is that of rejection for being a monster and of Gina dying. But monsters don't kill themselves for being monsters, and you can't kill yourself

over the death of a girl who, in the end, was fearful of you. So, sinking lifelessly into the grey of the garden tower's stone and the ominous storm clouds overhead, I stare off into the distance of the scorched ashes that were once all the men, all the women, and all the children. When you are in a listless state, the time flies by. Who knows how long it has been? With the clouds already making it a dark day, the change in light doesn't signal the passage of time; the change from dark to slightly dark is too obscure to care about. Nothing breaks this trance until something catches my eye.

At first it seems nothing more than a mirage or a mistake, but then it happens again. Movement inside the city. It is distant, and the details are hard to make out, but there's no doubt that multiple objects are moving right now in and about the city. The only question is: Who can it possibly be? The few traders and visitors who came during the turmoil were all killed, never to return from where they came. Maybe looters or grave robbers? If so, just the right kind of scum to torture. It'll be enough to at least give me purpose, even if it will only be just for today. God, it has been a while, but please let me make these lowly bandits suffer for their sins. Please, just after this is over, bring retribution to my sad life, Lord. Amen.

Taking twelve guards along, we set out from the noble district into the ruins of the decimated streets. It takes some time to get to it, but the most obvious place to start off with is the square since it is the major opening to Dryad. There are no souls along the way, but once the square comes into view from the descent of the hill, a few moving bodies can be seen inspecting the rubble, unsure of what to make of it. The head count is ten from the looks of it. There are definitely more around, since soldiers wouldn't operate in such small numbers. The others are just not here right now, so in the interest of conserving troops, these ten won't be meeting their grim demise today. Instead, they will be subjugated. Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do. Ah, everything is ready to go… Wait.

That long hair. The narrower stature. The softness in their faces being masked by determined rage. These warriors clad in makeshift iron armor are women? They have their sights set on our little posse. Tis an

interesting turn of events that still has me stumbling over my next move. Sure, we outnumber them and have better weaponry, but if more show, it will be dangerous. We get down to the foot of the hill, and with a snap, the guards halt and a stare-down commences. It is almost a mirror image; a reflection from a concave mirror is the best representation. The mirror doesn't create evil; it distorts the very image of our souls. For the longest time, nothing happens. It's weird; any normal regiment would have attacked or at least retreated. Instead, one of them finally shoots another a glance. The other's head nods sternly, and finally, one of them retreats. The remaining women draw their weapons and prepare to die, holding their ground. Anyone would instantly realize that she is going to notify the rest of them.

The only question, and what a pressing question it is, is how many have come to lay siege to this hell on earth? The battle that ensues is interesting, to say the least. Dolls that have lost the skill and dexterity they once possessed face obvious novices in battle. What they lack in skill, though, they more than make up for with heart. Heart might win wars, but it doesn't win a skirmish. Outnumbered, they do a good job of holding us off. But with steel clashing, if the first blow does not kill, the next will usually spells a death sentence. That is usually what catches them. They parry fine, though they lack the practice and skill to be consistent. Eventually, one fails to catch enough of a blade, and it finds its way through.

At the end of it, two remain standing, with four dead dolls on my end. All hope seems lost for them. You can see it in their grim expressions until their fellow warriors come charging from the distance. There are too many to count, but enough to call them a military unit. An ominous feeling dances in my mind that this most likely still isn't all of them. If this is indeed just a battalion and there are more around, they might outnumber the dolls. It is important for morale, their morale, that we don't immediately retreat. Standing fierce and gallant, the guards come to my side and form a wall with weapons pointed. They are too far away for them to catch us despite this delay. We hold, hold. An arrow comes crashing down before us and then another one. If it kills me, so be it. But

it never does. After a few more moments, we retreat, having made my point.

# Chapter 24

Line by line, all the toy soldiers within the kingdom have been called to defend the noble district from the siege. Haplessly, I hate to say, as the dolls have been assembled hastily and sloppily. Worst of all, what was imagined is correct. The women's army outnumbers mine by a strong margin. When the only thing you have going for you is the high ground, you know things aren't going your way. I underestimated their power, and I guess I'm paying the price. The skirmish has been going on now for about half a day or so at least. Snow has started to fall and sticks to the ground like an enveloping blanket in the garden. With all the dead flowers, there is no violet, no blue, no red here. For now, it's just pure white that blesses this plane. It's important to retreat to your most comforting place in times of great stress. How nice it would be to have Lord Chestnut, Sir Dalibor, and the Lyttons here. It would be the best teatime this fucking castle had ever seen, or second best, if Gina did the honors of replacing me.

Sadly, it's too late for any of that. The best thing to do now is prepare for the worst and enjoy how the tiny snowflakes fall ever so slowly and gracefully, only to be sullied upon touching the ground. It isn't visible, but each one has dirt forever attached to it in its short existence. In hindsight, it would have been better to convert more people than to behead them. The moment, though, was enthralling, and who could have seen this coming. Hindsight is always clearer. Plus, it was a more deserved fate for most of them.

At least in the end, if they do succeed in killing me, which is inevitable, it will be the death most befitting a monster. The only shame is that the monsters that do it will still breathe life. Maybe they aren't, though. The Lyttons were all good souls. Maybe it is just this hellish city that corrupts people. Only an angel would not lose their way living here. Even if they didn't, Dryad would eventually forsake them, swallowing them whole like a beast taking one foul bite.

Just now, a faint sound echoes from the doorway. Since the dolls can only speak when spoken to, this spells that death has shown up on the doorstep, ready to rear his ugly head. It takes a while for the intruder to finally find their way through all the series of endless halls. It's almost reminiscent of my first few weeks staying in the castle, having to find my way through the mase. By a surprising stroke of good fortune, the figure who steps through the door and calls out 'Violet' does not have the voice of a woman but instead a man. Strangely, his voice seems almost familiar. Nevertheless, life appears to have gifted me a little more time.

I get up, ready to unleash an enchanting melody and turn around to meet him. To my surprise the man is instantly recognize the man as William. No, it can't be. But when he runs over and embraces me with an uncanny hug, I feel his warmth and his newly sprouted, ragged beard. There is no doubt this is genuinely real and that it is genuinely him. Digging my fingers into his back, I latch on like the leech I am. This pains him a little, but he allows it, knowing full well I need the embrace. He seems unbothered by my state and is still gentle with me like the William of old.

Still, despite this luck, it is easily taken for granted as my hysterical wicked laughter unintentionally pours out when I let go. It really is just too perfect, first Gina, now William and Mrs. Lytton, who is most definitely fighting right now. Not only have I caused them the misery of having to come here, but now they also get to see what I truly am. Everything must be stripped from me as I fall farther and farther, until the moment of impact destroys me. In the end, it is what befits me. God, I understand. I'm sorry for being an awful creation. Lastly, thank you for this retribution. Blessed are those who suffer for their sins in this life.

"What's so funny, Violet?"

"Hahaha, in the end, everything is crumbling, and just before it ends, you have to see me in this sorry state. It's just too rich."

He looks at me from head to toe, and in a perplexed, comforting way, he consoles me.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You look fine. The bruises will heal. Your hair will grow back, and you’ll be looking even more beautiful than you do now.”

He never was a good liar, but the sentiment is still nice. Let’s be honest, though, at this point, beautiful lies are for children. Being orally raped and living in this roguish city leave not an ounce of innocence left in my bones.

“Your words are too kind for me. Most wouldn’t call a girl with no front teeth beautiful.”

We both give each other a look of recognition, and I give a melancholy half-smile.

“So, can you please explain what exactly is going on? What brings you here to this forsaken city?”

He sighs heavily. The warm reunion has been drawn to a halt by the very person he desperately wanted to see.

“Well, I assume it took a while for word to get out, but once it did, it spread swiftly. The rumor was that the city had been thrown into turmoil by a civil war started by an angel, but that there were two angels, a false angel and the Lord’s chosen.”

His eyes show a new feeling, a fear of losing something important. They, along with the contorting of his lips, show he is readying to react in agony or relief, drowning in uncertainty, waiting for me to explain exactly what has happened over these past two weeks.

“Well, William, I’m not an angel.”

“Just because your wings are gone doesn’t mean you aren’t an angel. It doesn’t change who you are. You are still the Violet I know.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about. It turns out that I’m actually what’s called a siren.”

The statement puzzles him as it should. He looks down and then back up, appearing ready to ask a slew of questions, but yours truly cuts him off.

“Yes, I know what you are going to say. How did you find out? What’s a siren? Why were you the holy figure of the city then?”

It’s tough to explain it all, especially to someone who has never had to have dealings in his life with a hellish environment like this. It will take a while, but he needs to know. We get out of the frigid cold and end up taking a stroll through the various places of the castle while I explain what’s happened since I departed the shire. It’s interesting that despite trying to tell him all of what happened, we are only able to cover about half the rooms of the castle before eventually coming back outside. Selfishly, I don’t make the same mistake as I did with Gina. I smooth over some parts for my own benefit, but I still take him through the full story. He knows it all in full knowledge now. I tell him everything; the anxious beginning, the befriending of Gina and Lord Chestnut, the graceless fall into sexual abuse, the isolation and hatred from the people, the eventual meeting with the snake Nakir, the execution day, and the recent turmoil. It is a heavy burden, and I can see it weighing on his countenance.

We sit in silence at an icy table as the cold has made the metal harsh. The diluted effects can be felt even through the gown that is currently adorned. The snow is picking up and the storm looks like it is about to go into full effect. A brutish gale of wind comes roughly through, brushing against our faces. The sensation sends a chill up and down my spine, scattering a sense of foreboding throughout the rest of my body. For a second I disassociate. William interrupts the silence.

“It’s going to take time for me to sort through all this. I don’t know how to feel about it. My heart is all in knots. Honestly, Violet, I feel that what you went through was rough, and there is really no way to truly understand. Let’s save that, though, for a later day. I’m just glad that you are safe now.”

He leans in closer in this moment, and tension builds. He is directing the moment a certain way as he grabs my stone hand, unaware of my rock heart. Our eyes meet, and considering who I am now, I’m not bashful at his lust. He closes his eyes and begins to slowly lean in. His lips look like soft clouds, safe havens in this ominous weather. I look down and away. The moment sours, and it becomes evident that, through all this separation, my heart no longer feels the same way about

William as it once did. He will never truly be my brother, nor I his sister. It’s even clearer now that our relationship, like me, has become uglier through time. This needs to be put to a stop. I put a hand to his lips. He opens his eyes and takes the hint. His heart aching from rejection causes his lips to curl in disappointment.

“William, I’m sorry, but there is only one person I could have ever loved that way, and she’s dead… sorry.”

He tells me it's okay and embraces me in a warm hug that is still full of love. I cry a little, latch on tight to him, and he tells me, “Let’s go home.” It’s the way that I wish it could end. Maybe it could have ended that way had I been better or lived in a better world than this one. Instead, he just turns away selfishly, causing my heart to crack and feel rejected. We sit there in silence. The nails in my right hand dig into the flesh of my left palm. Did I ever really matter to him…?

Mom, is that you? In the distance? I guess, in a way, I really am going home. My heart eases; there is a certain peace.

# Chapter 25

After a long silence, she finally makes her move. Firmly resting her head upon my shoulder, she makes it nearly impossible to move past the moment. She's such a brat. She rejects me; my heart is aching, yet despite that, she is the one that needs to be comforted. She really has changed since coming to the capital. Honestly, what she has done here still needs to be absorbed. I'm sure with time, Mom, Dad, and I could forgive her. I mean, she is Violet, after all. Deep down, she is a gentle soul. Being away from this hell on earth I'm sure will change everything. Who am I kidding? There is no chance the rebel army is going to let what she did go with no consequence. Maybe we can blame it on that other angel; I mean, siren, she mentioned. Somehow, someway, what's right will work itself out.

We are still embracing, and the view in the distance looks rough. The snow has been falling hard and impairs the sight and those storm clouds are getting darker and blacker. Why is it that everything always falls on the man's shoulders? I have to console Violet while I am the one who is hurt, all while figuring out a way out of this. At least when she lifts her head from my shoulder, her cute, innocent smile lifts my spirits. She makes it at least seem somewhat worth the hell it will be.

"William, we are going to run away together, right?"

She might not have been wise to the world back at the cottage, but she was never dull. She already knows what needs to be done.

"Yeah, Violet, don't worry. We'll escape this. I swear to God that the rebel army won't get you."

"You shouldn't swear to God… It's a childish wish, but we'll make it work. Tell me about the wonderland that we'll be going to."

Again, it falls on my shoulders to decide where we should go, but she acts so coy that tending to her like this feels good.

"Oh, the place we'll go will be amazing. It's going to have all the flowers you could ever want, violets, sunbursts, roses, you name it. The sun will be shining, and the birds will be chirping a lovely melody."

“Will Mom and Dad be there too?”

“Yeah, they’ll be there, and we’ll be one big happy family, like what we were a year ago. This time we’ll be close to a quaint little town, and all the townspeople will be jolly. There will be children cheerfully playing in the streets. Everyone is kind and helps their fellow man.”

“That sounds perfect. Can Sir Dalibor, Lord Chestnut, and Gina be there too?”

That’s a really weird statement, one that’s hard to handle. It’s a little unnerving as she said that they all perished leading up to the civil war.

“Huh. Yeah, sure. Why not?”

Her reply is simple, “Good.” We sit back in silence as the snow falls harder, though the wind has calmed down. Some of it is getting in my eyes, causing me to shield them and blink a lot. We eventually make eye contact through the falling flakes that are oddly peaceful. Too peaceful given the uncertainty in the air. We are still in desperate need of a plan, and I hate to say this, but this constant tending to her is delaying us. After some moments of deep thought, nothing useful comes through. Ugh, it’s useless.

We’ll just need to leave soon and just come up with something as we go. I was able to sneak past the chaos while both sides were engaged, but the army is definitely almost upon us. Firmly grasping her hand, my attempt to get us to move fails as she doesn’t go along with the initiative at all. Staring up, she is still peaceful, still serene. How ridiculous. Has she forgotten about the danger?

“Violet, this moment has been nice, but they are going to be here soon, so we need to leave now.”

“Soon. Just one last thing.”

She gets up, takes my other hand, and holds both of them down in front of us, almost as if we are sitting beside the lake in a romantic moment instead of in this war zone.

“William, I’m glad to have met you. Tell Mom and Dad that I love them too with all my heart, all right? Also, I forgive them. If they ever feel bad for how things went, none of THIS was their fault. They did

nothing wrong. Other people are to blame for everything; that needs to be stressed."

"Okay, fine, good, but we need to get going."

One tear slips through. It isn't evident that she is fighting it back, but she most likely is.

"I'm sorry to you too, Lord. In the end, what I was, was an abomination."

Her laughter builds up, getting ghastly. Like a meadow fox screeching, she keeps it low and soft, never truly letting it unleash itself. Never before has my heart been so eerily frightened.

"There won't be any lies. In the end, Lord, you'd see right through them. You know I am a sinner. I denounced the crown's crucifixion, then happily sacrificed others instead to take my place. Don't trade the bread of life for rocks. It says it explicitly in your teachings, and I did just that. I was supposed to be an angel that brought good to the city, not forsake it. I had the corrupt view that humans in this city were all just like Gale, Elizabeth, and Judith. However, there were good ones, just like Gina, Lord Chestnut, and the younglings. Yet I raised the blade to all indiscriminately. I hated what was done to me, yet like a hypocrite, I lowered myself to be like them. In this moment of terminal lucidity, I have enough clarity to see and reconcile that innocent blood stains my hands."

She takes a big inhale and exhale. This rambling needs to be put to a stop. I try to interject, but a cold gaze stops me dead in my tracks. She continues.

"Again, nothing will make it past your gaze, Lord. In the end, I won't lie; I enjoyed killing, no, slaughtering those people, those who deserved it. It would be going against my heart to say it didn't feel good that their last breaths were because of me. Despite the retribution, my heart still deeply aches. For many reasons. The angel brought forth to bring grace brought wrath. I am the false prophet, and I wear that crown of thorns unfortunately proudly. In hindsight, I wish things had been different. None of this is what I actually wanted, none of it, and you know that! But I'll be damned to ever feel an ounce of remorse for that pig, the fat

rats, and all the other scum in Dryad. I'm torn by the horror I inflicted on this city's angels in my effort to forsake its demons, but in my heart, I regret neither the bloodshed nor my fall. I love you, Lord, and accept fully my punishment, for it is the price I pay for my sins in this life and for whatever comes next. Amen."

With that, she pushes away, wearing a serene smile with her eyes closed. Everything happens so fast that it feels surreal, yet the moment also seems to last forever. First comes the sound from behind me. Then the image rears its hollow face of death. An arrow with precision strikes her face.

"Violet!"

I lift up her limp body and shake her erratically. Blood flows from her lifeless body and through my hands. In the back of my mind, I know her fate is sealed. Still, I continue believing that somehow, someway, she'll revive back to life. The tragic scene drags on as I continue to shake her and scream like a desperate child, as if either could do anything. Eventually, I come to my senses and accept the gravity of the situation. Her body is still warm, and the crimson blood is still ever dripping. She knew she was going to die and knew the brutality of it, yet she met her fate with a stoic face and absolute calmness. Tears are rolling down my face, accompanied by my uncontrollable wails and coughing fits. The only question plaguing me is just why this had to happen to her. She was such a sweet, innocent girl. Why did she have to be the one to have her perception and reality blighted by these wicked people?

Regardless, no matter how harsh a hand reality deals you, you have to accept it. The fact is that what she became in the end was a monster. There is no denying her heart had become vile while here. Her maniac eyes and laughs showed she would easily welcome cruelness as a means to cope, no matter who she hurt. It's harsh, but maybe at this point this was what was best for her. There was no going back to the happy, simple days that had once passed. One day my heart will accept it, though that acceptance will be only a mask hiding the pain. As the snow turns to hail that batters everything, the darkest of the storm clouds has

finally fallen over the city. The sun has begun its descent, and the city is in a shadow of darkness.

The sound of clanging metal has suddenly subsided. Nothing except the sound of the storm can be heard. Everyone and everything is silent, not knowing how to react. The state of everything, the ashes, the still-flowing blood in this city. By no means is this a victory. The whole thing just leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. As I depart, Violet's corpse is half masked by snow already. I take one last look back at the girl I loved. That we loved. Just what could turn something as beautiful as an angel into such a twisted, hideous monster? One who fades into the masking flurry that is her burial.

# Author’s Note

First and foremost, I hope you enjoyed the book. Honestly, A Caged Angel was something I started at twenty and got put on the back burner once I graduated college. I wrote it over the course of a year and a half and then realized I needed to edit, edit, and edit. Before college was over, I went through it five times and would repeatedly come back to it through the years from time to time to edit a chapter. Recently, about a year and a half before this will be published, I had the realization that as you get older, you need to try and finalize things with the time you have in life. The book was so close, and I am happy that, regardless of success, I will have set out and accomplished creating a novel.

Adult life is busy, and the novel sat for many years. Honestly, part of me kind of looked back on it and almost didn’t want to finish because of what it is. I mean, the story does not justify Violet, I hope that is clear, but I was afraid that people could walk away thinking that. It’s the ultimate reason why the final chapter is so heavy-handed. Additionally, it’s the reason I will publish this with a pen name, but ultimately, I set out to write the book I wanted, and I myself do adore the story.

As I write this, I hope it does reach people despite how most first self-published novels perform. It does not need to be a commercial success, but I at least know that what I will write next will be read by people. It’s the unfortunate reality of having other priorities in life and not living a life of leisure. If it does, the next book will be a surrealist modern-day fever dream. In my biased opinion, it will be a great concept, but in terms of A Caged Angel, it will be a different kind of story. If people are reading this and you are looking forward to A Caged Angel number two, I’m sorry to tell you that won’t be coming next. I have changed a lot through the years, and surrealism and the state of society call to me. That call might not be answered, though. I guess we will see.

If you have reached the end, thank you so much. I hope the book was a ride and a story you will remember.