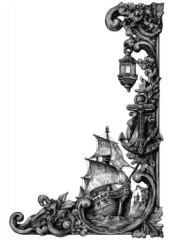




BECOMING LOST



A PREQUEL TO BECOMING HOOK







A
COMPANION
STORY

BECOMING LOST

MARY MECHAM



CHAPTER 1



He louder his father yelled at his mother downstairs, the tighter Jimmy clutched the windowsill, wishing the wind would carry him away to somewhere quiet. No matter how tightly he had covered his ears, the shouts still reached him, and he had long since abandoned hope of being able to block out the noise. How he wished he were bigger and stronger so that he could step between them and protect his mother. If only he could grow up faster.

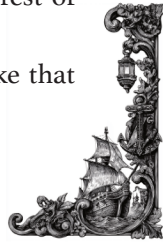


“I know how you feel.”

Jimmy jumped at the voice, eyes snapping open and looking around wildly. A boy who looked slightly younger than himself was floating beside his window, a sympathetic expression on his face and surrounded by a shimmering, golden glitter.

“Who are you?” Not even a boy able to fly could cheer Jimmy up. He was destined to be miserable for the rest of his life. That certainly was how it felt.

“The name’s Peter Pan. I used to listen to stuff like that



all the time.” Peter jerked his thumb toward the continued shouting. “I couldn’t stand hearing it, so I got out as soon as I could.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” Jimmy lamented. “I don’t have a family other than my parents.” He winced as some of his father’s spiteful words echoed up to him.

“What, you think that you can provide a better life for Jimmy than I can? You’d end up on the streets, begging me to take you back! You’d have nothing without me!”

A few sobs were heard. Jimmy pressed his hands over his ears again in the futile attempt to protect himself. How long until his father got tired of yelling at his mother and came to vent his anger on Jimmy instead?

“I can help you,” Peter Pan said. “I can take you where you’ll never have to listen to that again.”

“I can’t leave my mum.”

“If she wasn’t worried about you, do you think she’d leave on her own?” Peter asked seriously.

Jimmy thought about it. He had lost track of the number of times he’d found his mother crying. She always claimed that it wasn’t his fault and assured him that he wasn’t to blame, and yet... if he was older or able to care for himself, Jimmy was certain that she would have left already. He had even spotted her packing and unpacking the same bag, over and over again, preparing to leave but never quite getting as far as walking out the door.

“Yeah, probably,” Jimmy whispered, tears welling in his eyes. To distract himself, he stared at the boy hovering in mid-air. “How are you doing that?”

“Pixie dust. Want to try?”

Jimmy shook his head. The only thing he could think about was his mother. She needed to get away. She needed an escape.

“Don’t you think your mother would want you to have the best life possible?” Peter asked.

“Yes.”

“And if you leave, then your mother will finally be able to leave.”

“Probably.”

Peter held out his hand. “Then come with me to Neverland. You’ll never grow old there, and you’ll never be unhappy. It’s always good times there—no sadness, no anger, nothing but fun.”

“Sounds a lot better than here.” Downstairs, he could hear his mother crying again, but at least his father had stopped shouting.

“Leave a note. Tell her you’re off on an adventure. It’ll be better for everyone. You can get out and she’ll be safe. Everyone wins.”

“No,” Jimmy said, still listening to his mother crying. “I can’t just leave.”

“Just try it and if you don’t like it, I’ll bring you right back. I know how awful it is to feel alone.”

There were heavy footsteps on the stairs and Jimmy’s insides convulsed. Was his father coming?

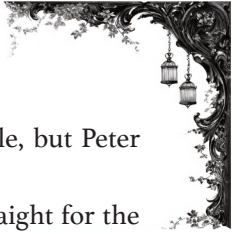
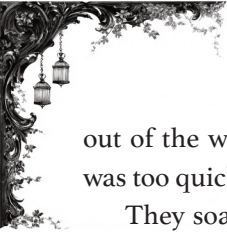
Peter kept his hand outstretched. “I can free you.”

The floorboards groaned just outside Jimmy’s door, and Jimmy looked back at Peter’s hand. This was a dream. It had to be; it was all too good to be true. If it was a dream, Jimmy wanted it to be a good dream. He stood and took Peter’s hand.

Peter grinned and pulled out a tiny creature that he shook over Jimmy. “Here we go,” he said quietly. “Off to Neverland.”

He sprang into the air, pulling Jimmy along with him. There was a shout behind him as his drunken father leaned





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out of the window, trying to catch Jimmy's ankle, but Peter was too quick.

They soared higher and higher, heading straight for the second star to the right of the moon, and Jimmy didn't look back.





CHAPTER 2



Jimmy and Peter burst out of the clouds and descended upon a beautiful island that didn't look anything like London.



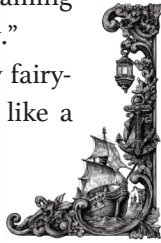
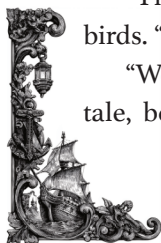
A tall, lonely mountain peak rose at the center of the island, and near its base, green jungle foliage spilled down across the island to pale beaches where the water turned glassy and blue. The air here smelled alive with salt and blossoms and something sharp and sweet that made Jimmy's chest feel full and let the memories of his parents' argument slip away.

Peter darted ahead, laughing, bare feet skimming the tops of the tree canopy. "Come on," he called, flipping over to fly backwards, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "I'll show you everything."

Tiny specks of green and gold light flickered between the trees leaves

"They're pixies," Peter said, as casually as if naming birds. "Just like dragonflies, but their dust makes us fly."

"Wow," Jimmy breathed. This was better than any fairy-tale, better than any bedtime story. This really was like a



dream come true. He turned in slow circles, afraid to blink and lose a single second.

Down below them, a winding bayou twisted its way through the vines and palm fronds waved in the breeze. In the circular lagoon that was shielded from the rest of the ocean by a ring of stones, shapes moved beneath the surface, quick and graceful.

“Mermaids,” Peter called out, pointing at the shapes. “Don’t get too close though—they aren’t very nice.”

One mermaid leapt above the surface and Jimmy nearly fell out of the sky. It wasn’t a beautiful woman with a fish tail like his books described. This was a creature with green-tinged skin, webbed hands, and wide, lidless eyes.

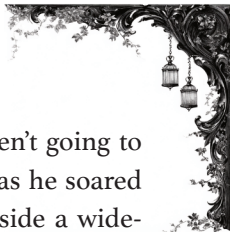
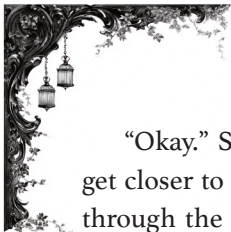
Peter laughed at Jimmy’s shocked expression. “I told you—don’t get too close! They’d love to drown you. But at least they can’t leave their lagoon. They shrivel up in salt water and will die on land, so they are confined to that bit of fresh water. But look at this.” Peter gestured at a large rock protruding from the island, jutting out onto the ocean. The domed top was smooth and circular and as they flew around to see the front, Jimmy felt his mouth fall open.

The massive rock had two holes hollowed out, dark against the sun, and waves crashed into what appeared to be jagged teeth, leaving behind seaweed caught between the rocks as water flowed in and out with a dull roar.

It should have been frightening, but Jimmy felt a thrill spark in his belly. If he was going to claim a place as his own, he wanted it to be there.

“It looks like a skull,” he said in awe.

“Yeah, it does. It creeps me out almost as much as looking at the mermaids,” Peter told him with a laugh. “I never go over there. Want me to show you where I live? It’s pretty cool.”



“Okay.” Slightly disappointed that they weren’t going to get closer to Skull Rock, Jimmy followed Peter as he soared through the trees and finally came to land outside a wide-mouthed cave.

The ground felt spongy and rather damp beneath Jimmy’s shoes, and the very air vibrated with some thrilling mystery. Here, everything called to him, willing him to explore. This was the greatest adventure a boy could ever dream of. Thick vines and broad-leafed plants hung outside the entrance, masking the opening just enough that the cave was somewhat hidden.

“You’re my first ever guest,” Peter told Jimmy, enthusiastically waving him inside. The cave opened to a wide, dry room, lit by shafts of sunlight and the soft glow of a few pixies in cages hanging suspended from the ceiling. “Look, here’s where I sleep.” He pointed to a makeshift hammock, then to another beside it. “And that one’s for you. It took me a week to make it.”



“Thanks,” Jimmy said, lifting himself into the hammock, which was surprisingly comfortable.

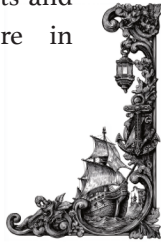
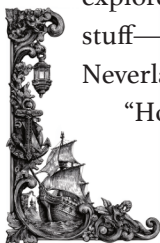
Peter gave him a push so that the hammock rocked back and forth. Jimmy closed his eyes. “This is great.”

“Yeah it is. It never gets too dark in here either, even at night. See these pixies?” Peter tapped one of the cages so that the pixie inside fluttered. A tiny jingling filled the air and a swirl of pixie dust fluttered down through the air. “They’re sort of like fireflies. It looks really cool at night.”

“What do you do during the day?” Jimmy asked.

“Anything I want,” Peter answered with a grin. “I explore, I go fishing, I can experiment with the plants and stuff—there are so many amazing things here in Neverland.”

“How did you get here?”



Peter's expression became closed off and he quickly changed the subject. "So what do you want to do first?"

"Fishing," Jimmy said. "My grandad used to take me fishing before he died. We used to catch cod all the time—it's my favorite."

"Fishing it is, then!" Peter said, delighted with Jimmy's enthusiasm. "I even made two fishing poles." He leapt off his hammock and snatched up the two rods, handing one to Jimmy.

Jimmy took it. It wasn't well-constructed, but it would be fun. Peter's face brimmed with eager excitement. "Do you like it?" He asked.

"Yeah, I love it," Jimmy said.

Peter's freckled face nearly split in two from his smile. "We're going to be best friends," he said. "I promise, this will be so much fun."

"Sounds good to me," Jimmy said. Already, the world he'd left behind was loosening its hold on him. This was so much better than London. Neverland was a dream come true.



CHAPTER 3



Peter took Jimmy to his favorite fishing spot and they sat companionably side by side, lures bobbing in the water. When Peter's weak fishing pole snapped in two, they laughed and passed Jimmy's back and forth, each taking a turn while the other worked on shaving down a new branch to replace the other fishing rod.



They only caught a few small perch, which Peter dumped into his satchel and said they could be used to bait bigger fish later on."

"There used to be a crocodile here before," Peter said as he whittled away at the new fishing rod. "At least we won't have to worry about catching one of those!"

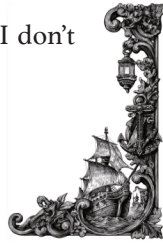
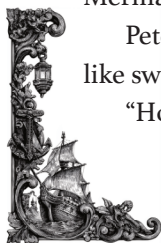
"What happened to it?"

"The mermaids killed it. It got into their lagoon and they went after it."

Jimmy shuddered. "I vote we don't go swimming in Mermaid's Lagoon then."

Peter laughed. "You'll get no argument from me. I don't like swimming anyway."

"How come?"



Peter shrugged and blew some of the shavings off the new fishing pole. "Just bad memories. How does this one look?"

"Looks good to me. So you just live here? You don't have a family?"

"You're my family now. We can be like brothers. Do you want to keep fishing or do you want to do something else? We can do whatever you want." Peter's eyes shone with sincerity.

"Let's explore," Jimmy decided. "I always wanted to be an explorer."

"Yeah!" Peter left the poles by the river and stood.

Jimmy looked up and down the twisting bayou. "We can go along this river and see what we find. We can pretend we're in a war and the pixies are the enemies."

"Perfect," Peter said with a laugh. "We should hunt them down and take them prisoner. We need more to be our lights anyway."

And so began the great pixie hunt. Jimmy gave Peter a green-ish paint that they used for camouflage. The boys painted their hands, faces, and clothes then crept through the foliage, leaping out to snatch any pixies they found and stuff them into Peter's satchel. The jingling noise pixies made delighted Jimmy each time he heard it, almost like it was the bells signaling another victorious battle had been won.

Once Peter's bag was crammed so full that pixies escaped when it was opened, Jimmy and Peter began the trek back to their hideout, talking excitedly about each capture and taking turns pretending to be the general commanding the army.

"Now, General Peter, what shall we do with our

hostages?" Jimmy asked, pitching his voice a little lower than normal so he sounded more adult-like.

"We imprison them, of course!" Peter said, trying to look stern but failing. "And once we—" He broke off, looking down at his feet. There was a shallow pit with a few whiteish objects resting in the bottom. "What's that?"

Jimmy crouched down to examine it. "It looks like eggs. But no bird would have eggs this big unless it was an ostrich or something."

Both boys stepped closer. Most of the eggs were torn open and the underdeveloped creatures inside had perished, but it didn't look like any bird Jimmy knew of.

He stretched out a hand and ran a finger along the only egg still intact. It had a leathery feel to it, not at all like a hard bird eggshell, and there was some slight movement inside as whatever creature inside was stirring.

"Mermaids and pixies don't lay eggs, do they?" Jimmy asked, picking up the last egg. It was still warm.

"Pixies don't, and I'm not sure about mermaids," Peter said, leaning in to examine the egg.

Jimmy looked at the other eggs that had been torn apart. "I think...I think it's a crocodile egg," he said quietly, then his brow knotted in concern as he looked at Peter. "Didn't you say the mermaids killed a crocodile? What if this is the last one?"

Peter took the egg from Jimmy and cradled it close to his chest so he could share his body heat. "It probably is. We could raise it."

Excitement exploded in the pit of Jimmy's stomach. "Raise a crocodile?"

"Sure, why not?" Peter's face became elated. "We don't have any parents telling us we can't. We can do whatever we want here."

"I don't know what baby crocodiles eat," Jimmy said nervously. "I don't want to make it sick."

"We can figure it out," Peter reassured him. "Come on, let's take it back home."

Back at the hideout, Peter threw his satchel down and he and Jimmy clustered around the egg, keeping it in the warmest spot of the cave and taking turns covering it with their hands and holding it so the egg was kept warm.

"What should we call it?" Jimmy asked. The crocodile inside was moving; the flexible eggshell bulged out in places then returned to normal.

"Tikka," Peter decided. "I think it will be a girl." He considered. "I don't know how to tell the difference between boy and girl crocodiles anyway."

"Tikka sounds good to me, and I can't tell the difference either."

The egg twitched again, more insistently this time and both boys were riveted on this sight. A crocodile hatching—this had to be the most thrilling thing any boy could ever watch.

Jimmy sucked in a breath and scooted closer, bracing his palms on the floor as he watched. The leathery shell dimpled inward, then bulged out as the crocodile inside fought to emerge. A faint *tap* followed, then another.

"She's trying to get out," Jimmy whispered, afraid that speaking too loudly might scare it back into stillness.

Peter's grin stretched wide. "Of course she is. She wants to meet us."

Another tap came and the shell puckered so a tiny crack split the surface, no bigger than a fingernail. Something pale pressed against it from within.

Jimmy's heart began to pound. He reached out without thinking, then froze. "Should we help her?"

Peter shook his head. "No. She has to do it herself."

The crack widened with a wet sound. A small, ridged snout pushed through, followed by the blink of a dark, glossy eye. The creature paused, trembling, then, with a determined wriggle, the shell split open and collapsed inward.

Tikka spilled into Peter's hands, small enough to fit across his palms, all slick scales and oversized jaws. She let out a sound somewhere between a chirp and a hiss, sharp and indignant, and snapped her tiny jaws at the air.

"She's perfect," Peter said reverently, gently touching her snout.

Tikka squirmed, her little claws scraping against Peter's skin as she stared up at him. Her tail flicked back and forth, tapping against his wrist.

Jimmy stroked her tail. "She's strong. That's good, right?"

"Very good," Peter said. "She'll be fast."

"What if she grows too big?"

Peter shrugged, utterly unconcerned. "Then we'll move her to the bayou."

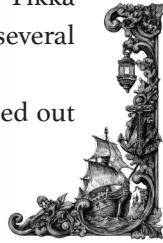
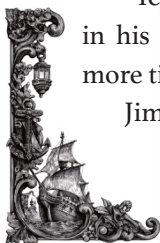
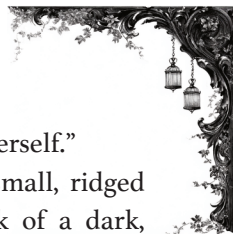
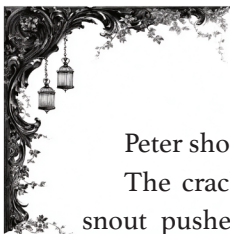
Jimmy reached out at last and brushed one careful finger along Tikka's back. Her scales were warm and firm beneath his touch. She turned and snapped at his finger. It wasn't hard, but quick enough to make him jerk back with a startled laugh.

"She likes you," Peter declared. "Or maybe she just thinks your finger is food."

Jimmy grinned. "Let's find her something to eat that isn't my hand. We could try some of the fish we caught."

"Yeah, get that," Peter said, still carefully holding Tikka in his hands. She squirmed and snapped her jaws several more times. "I think she's very hungry."

Jimmy leapt to where Peter's satchel was and pulled out



one of the small perch he had caught. As he did so, several pixies pushed their way out and flew back out of the cave, but Jimmy ignored them and ran back with the tiny fish.

"Here," he said, offering it to Tikka. She tried to snap her jaws around the fish, but it was much too big for her. "I can cut it smaller." He looked around. "Do you have a knife?"

"In my pocket," Peter said, shifting his weight so his pocket was exposed. "I don't want to let her go to get it out for you."

"That's okay, I've got it." Jimmy pulled out the knife, flipped it open, and carved chunks off the fish.

"I feel like a parent," Peter said with a laugh, picking up the fish and offering it to Tikka. She greedily snapped it up and looked around for more, which Jimmy offered. "This is way better than any old dog or cat though."

"Yeah." Jimmy continued to give Peter bits of fish to feed Tikka until her stomach bulged and she closed her eyes. "I bet we could train her to be like a watch dog though. A watch crocodile."

Peter nodded vigorously. "She can protect us from the mermaids."

"Oh, are they our enemies too?" Jimmy said with a laugh.

Peter handed him a cup with a drink that faintly sparkled. "Yep. It's us against the world. Jimmy and Peter, best friends forever."

Jimmy beamed and drained the cup. "Cheers."

Living in Neverland was so much better than everything he'd left behind.



CHAPTER 4



Taking care of a baby crocodile turned out to be a lot more work than Jimmy expected, but found that he enjoyed it immensely all the same. Tikka devoured all the fish they gave her and seemed to grow quickly. All of Jimmy's and Peter's time was suddenly taken up with feeding Tikka, which was made much more difficult by the fact that neither fishing rod was good quality, and fishing took up more time than Tikka wanted to wait to eat.

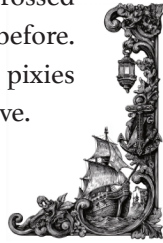
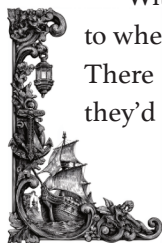


When they tried to feed her the berries and other plants they scavenged, she refused to eat.

"There has to be something else we can give her," Jimmy fretted. "I can't catch fish fast enough for her, and if we let her try to hunt on her own, she'll get hurt."

"No, she isn't big enough to hunt on her own yet," Peter said, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. "Are you sure you got all the fish out of my bag?"

Without waiting for an answer, Peter got up and crossed to where he'd dumped the satchel in the corner days before. There weren't any fish in there, but several of the pixies they'd caught were still there, either dead or barely alive.



Peter lit up. "We could see if Tikka likes bugs! That is sort of like fish, right?"

Tikka didn't just like the pixies. She *loved* them even more than the fish, particularly the ones that still had the glittery remains of pixie dust sparkling on their wings. The pixies, still coated in the green paint from Jimmy's and Peter's hunting game, emitted their frantic jingling as Peter lowered them to Tikka's eager mouth.

Peter sighed in relief. "Oh good. Pixies are easier to catch than fish and Tikka needs to eat a lot."

Jimmy looked up at the pixies overhead. They were all staring down, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at the baby crocodile still swallowing the last pixie. "At least we have a bunch in cages, and we can take turns to catch more."

"Yeah. I wish we had a way to collect the pixie dust more easily," Peter said, watching the dust flurry off the pixies and float away on the breeze. "That dust is very valuable. I hate to see it wasted."

"Why don't you put out some collecting pans? If you keep the cages in rows on a shelf, then their dust will just settle into the pans and you can funnel it into a bag to keep."

Peter's mouth fell open. "Of course! You're brilliant, Jimmy Boy!"

Jimmy's chest swelled with pride. This was what he wanted—to be admired and praised by others. This never would've happened back in London, where everything always felt depressing and isolating. London...what was it that had been so sad there? He thought while Peter got him a drink, but after draining his cup, Jimmy decided that whatever had been so depressing likely wasn't worth thinking about anyway.

"You use the dust to fly, right?" Jimmy asked Peter.

"And as a sweetener for drinks. It does look pretty when

it's mixed in, doesn't it? It's sort of like Neverland's best spice. Just think, once we get enough, we could fly any time we want."

Jimmy's imagination ran wild. "If we capture enough pixies, we could have an unlimited supply of dust."

Peter's mouth quirked into a mischievous grin. "You mean if we capture enough of our *enemies*, right? We're still at war and now we have our battle crocodile!" He pointed at where Tikka was sleeping on a warm rock.

Jimmy laughed in delight. "Ah yes, our ferocious protector! We mustn't forget her! I've never had a pet so terrifying."

He paused. *Did* he have a pet? How much time had passed since he left London? In some ways, it seemed like he'd been here for an age, but in other ways, he felt like he'd only just arrived.

"Peter, how long have I been here?" he asked, blinking as he tried to remember.

Peter glanced up. "Not long. Here, have another drink. How long do you think Tikka will sleep before she wakes up?"

Jimmy drank and thought. How long would a crocodile sleep before needing to eat again? "At least a few hours. She's been eating more than sleeping longer lately. Are you tired?"

"Nah, there's too much to do to be tired. Did you think about the new cage design? If you start building them, I can get some more paint. We can paint them green like Tikka."

"Perfect!" Jimmy drained the rest of the cup and looked at it. He had meant to say or ask something earlier...what was it? He shook his head. Probably not that important, or else he would've remembered. "Where will we get everything for it?"

"Stuff washes up all the time on the eastern side of the



island. We can use whatever we want. One of us should stay with Tikka in case she wakes up.”

“I’ll stay,” Jimmy volunteered. “You got to feed her last time so it’s my turn. Just bring me back stuff I can work with for the cages.”

“You got it, Jimmy Boy,” Peter said with a quick smile. He sprinkled some dust over himself and flew away.

Jimmy sighed, so perfectly content and happy that it was impossible to think of any way his life could be better. While Peter was away, Jimmy began twisting sapling sprouts, bending them and lashing the wood together to make small cages for the pixies. It was work that required a great deal of focus and attention to detail, but it was also relaxing, much more relaxing than his home life or school had ever been.

Here in Neverland, the wind had the habit of finding Jimmy no matter where he was, but it was like a friendly wave from a friend. The air here smelled like damp earth and salt, like warm rain that had already passed and would come again soon. He bent saplings while they were still green and pliable, tying them off with twine stripped from creeping vines. The cages took shape quickly, each just large enough to hold a pixie without snapping its wings.

Each cage had to have a door or opening so the boys would be able to insert a new pixie, and a latch that wasn’t able to be undone from the inside. Jimmy wasn’t sure how resourceful pixies would be, and wasn’t going to let his new pet miss a meal because of his own neglect.

Every so often, Jimmy glanced over at Tikka. She hadn’t moved, her small body sprawled on the warm rock but she looked like she was growing, day by day. Satisfied, Jimmy returned to his work.

By the time Peter came back, Jimmy had finished several

cages and the light shifted as the sun began to set. Peter landed with a clatter, his arms full. Metal pans clanged together as he dropped them at Jimmy's feet, followed by a small treasure chest that looked as though it had once belonged to a pirate ship's captain. Its hinges creaked when Peter opened it, revealing a dark, empty belly.

"For the pixie dust," Peter said proudly. "Isn't it cool?"

Jimmy grinned. "Yeah, it is."

Peter set the chest aside and produced several thick glass jars, each filled with a viscous green liquid that clung to the sides when he tilted them. Jimmy frowned slightly.

"Is that paint?"

"Yep," Peter said airily. "Best there is. Ready to make the cages look nice?"

They worked together, painting the cages inside and out before setting them into neat rows and anchoring them down. Jimmy and Peter slid the collecting pans below the cages.

"They're ready," Jimmy said, pride blossoming in his chest once more.

Peter pulled a few of the pixies out of the old cages and shoved them into the new ones. When they fluttered their wings, the glittering, golden dust drifted down in soft spirals. Jimmy watched it collect in the pan beneath.

Peter returned from outside again, this time with a smaller bag. He loosened the drawstring and tipped it slightly. Several pixies tumbled out, dimmer than the others, all of whom had wings that were frayed or torn.

"These ones are old," Peter said. "Or broken. They won't make much dust, but we should still keep them"

Jimmy hesitated. "What will we do with them?"

Peter didn't miss a beat. "We'll keep them well-fed and comfortable until Tikka needs to eat. But it's better for them

to serve a purpose than just dying out there without being used. We can't let Tikka go hungry."

Jimmy considered this. It made sense. Nothing here went to waste.

"That's fair," he said finally.

They set the older pixies in a separate cage, lined with leaves and moss. Jimmy even added a small dish of fruit. The pixies chimed softly, and Jimmy smiled. They were probably thanking him in their own bell-like way.

Peter clapped him on the back. "See? You're good at this. You think of everything."

Jimmy smiled and returned to adjusting the pans, ensuring they were perfectly aligned beneath each cage. Soon, they would be able to fill up the entire chest.

As they sat back on the stone floor to admire their work, Tikka stirred, blinking awake, and let out a soft rasp of a noise.

"Oh!" Jimmy scrambled to his feet. "She's up."

Peter scooped the crocodile up easily and set her down closer to the shelves. Tikka's nose twitched. She snapped gently at the air, then fixed her gaze on the pixies.

"Hungry girl," Peter murmured fondly, then he flung an arm around Jimmy's shoulders, his entire face lit up with joy. "This is the best. I'm glad you're here, Jimmy."

"Me too," Jimmy agreed, beaming from ear to ear.

Jimmy and Peter.

Peter and Jimmy.

The best friends Neverland had ever known.

Nothing would ever tear them apart.



HUNTING KRAKENS



BAYNE'S POV

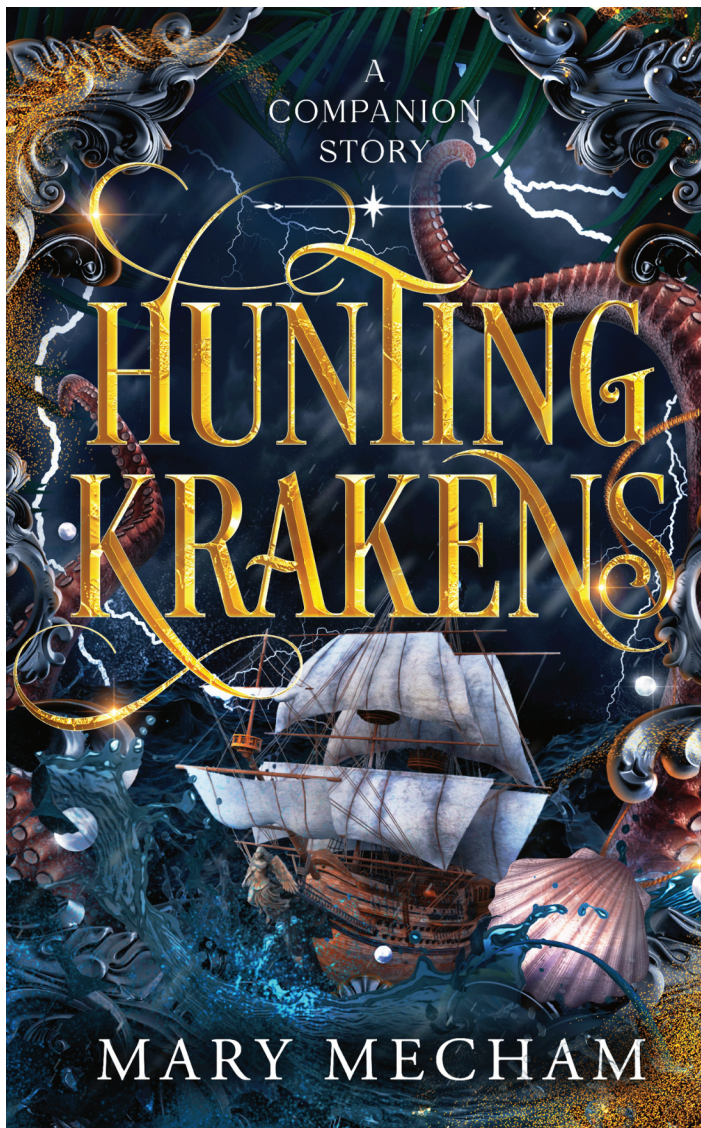




A
COMPANION
STORY

HUNTING KRAKENS

MARY MECHAM





WARNING



This bonus story contains major spoilers
for Hunting Sirens!

DO NOT READ until you have
finished Hunting Sirens!

Note: Hunting Krakens is told from
Bayne's POV







CHAPTER 1



Horror filled me as I stared at the dead siren that my scout had returned to the city. Puncture wounds and lacerations covered Fiona's body and her eyes were half-closed. The blank stare, devoid of her bubbling, lively spirit, felt like I was the one who had been attacked.



"We discovered her like this," the scout told me. The musical quality of his voice trembled. "We don't know what happened."

This was no shark or kraken, I signed, carefully inspecting the gashes all over Fiona's body. No fish alive would have teeth shaped to do this sort of damage.

"Maybe the humans?" the scout asked nervously.

I shook my head. *Humans aren't capable of fighting back when we sing, and Fiona was one of the best. They would've had no chance against her. Unless they found a way to block her music...* I stopped signing. What if the humans *had* somehow discovered something that protected themselves from the voices of the siren singers?

Had the quality of our singing diminished over time?



Had we grown lazy and overconfident? Humans had always been so easy to control; there was the possibility that we had become less effective.

But Fiona?

I stared sadly at her dark hair and high cheekbones. She had been one of my sister Ness's closest friends. I couldn't imagine that she would ever have sung anything but her best. Humans couldn't compete against a voice like hers. No, it had to be something else. A new marine animal, perhaps?

Take care of the body and tell King Jor, I told the scout. I'll report to the Coral Caller.

With every beat of my tail as I swam to the grotto where she lived, possibilities chased themselves around in my mind. The kraken swallowed its prey whole; it wouldn't have been that. Sharks ripped chunks of flesh and didn't leave puncture wounds. No jellyfish or stingray had the capability of such a vicious attack.

The scout's suggestion of a human floated back in my mind's surface. Humans built ships; could they have constructed a mechanism that had such devastating capabilities. Likely so, but that still left the question—how could any human have resisted a siren's call?

In what felt like no time at all, I arrived at the Coral Caller's cave-like dwelling in the center of our colony. She was arranging the colorful seashells that were patterned around the entry and looked around as I swam up.

"Prince Bayne, this is a surprise," she said, starting to smile, but then her ancient face faltered. "What's wrong?"

I signed the entire story to her. The Coral Caller was one of the oldest females, with a voice so enchantingly hypnotic and powerful that she had once single-handedly overcome an entire fleet of humans on their many ships. It was she who trained all the new singers and had personally tutored



Fiona as a prized pupil. If anyone was going to have answers, she would.

"I can't believe it," the Coral Caller moaned. "No human could resist Fiona. She was one of the best."

I know, I signed back glumly. Is there any way humans could have adapted or evolved to become more resistant to our voices?

The Coral Caller thought. "I can't think of a way. Could it have been a shark or—"

No. Something punctured her body clean through. Many somethings.

The Coral Caller shuddered and her silver tail flicked from side to side. Her face hardened into a mask of fury. "We must discover and punish whoever did this."

I inclined my head. *I agree.*



MANY WEEKS PASSED WITHOUT ANOTHER INCIDENT LIKE Fiona's, until everyone began to wonder if her death had been an unexplained freak accident. No humans ventured onto the water. Scouts continually reported that the humans were alive and well on land but stayed far away from the beaches, just as they had for years, far enough away that our apprentice siren singers couldn't reach them.

Just as I began to think that Fiona's death might be a mystery that would never be solved, another report came in as I was in council.

"There's a human ship," a female scout said, a panicked look on her face and a gash on her arm that still had blood oozing out to mingle with the seawater and float away on the current. "They attacked me."



“Didn’t you sing?” my sister Ness asked, her strong jaw locked. “They can’t attack you if you sing.”

The scout frowned. “Of course I tried. It didn’t work but I’m a scout and my voice isn’t trained nearly as well as a singer’s. It’s a small ship; they must have a small crew. We can still get them if we hurry.”

Send the singers now, I signed, swimming forward. *There haven’t been ships for weeks. We can’t let this one get away.*

Several singers swam to the surface, led by the scout. Unease prickled at my insides and Fiona’s face kept appearing in my mind’s eye.

Send a second team, I instructed Ness. *Something isn’t right.*

Not long after the second team went to the surface, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. I couldn’t isolate what it was, but there was something. The ocean waves felt colder than they should have for such a warm season, and the current pulled at me.

I’m going to see, I told Ness.

She cocked an eyebrow. “It’s one small ship, brother. They don’t need you.”

“I need to see,” I told her, and swam upward.

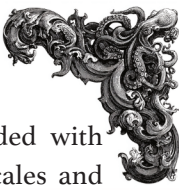
The water’s weight didn’t press on me nearly as heavily as I approached the surface, then one of the singers shot towards me me, terror on his face. I threw out my arm to stop him.

What’s wrong? I asked.

“The humans...the humans are fighting back!”

The entire ship looks alive and monstrous, almost as terrifying as the kraken was. How were we supposed to fight this? We had brought some of our finest singers, and yet there were no humans casting themselves overboard. What was wrong?

The sirens swarmed the ship, trying to call, but all who



attempted were slaughtered. Heavy nets embedded with sharp bits of metal and glass slashed through scales and dragged sirens down. While they struggled with the nets, there was a loud *BANG* and bolts ripped through the air, immediately killing every siren in its path. Those bolts were shooting out faster than any of the Sharkan could ever throw. So this was what had killed Fiona. How were we supposed to fight back?

The Sharkan's normally-organized ranks broke as panic spread. The singers' voices rose, trying desperately to get the humans to stop and enter the trace-like state we always saw. The night was dark and it was difficult to see the humans aboard.

Why wasn't it working?

We were vulnerable. The realization that hit me with more force than a tidal wave. The thin shark-hide that some of the Sharkan wore for armor was no match for the devastating force of the weapons cutting through everything in their path. How could humans deal out so much death after a decade of being easy to control?

A blazing light exploded into life, rippling across the water with a vicious heat, flickering as it consumed the black tar-like pitch that had burst out of the sacks the human had heaved into the water.

Any sirens still able to dove back down in a panic, safe in the watery depths far below the surface. I also retreated to a safe distance before carefully putting my head up above water to observe the damage.

It had been a complete massacre.

Dead siren bodies littered the water. We had no way to fight back against the humans aboard. I squinted at the figures moving around on the deck. A garish orange and red glow illuminated the floating bodies of the dead

sirens, struck by the projectiles the humans had launched at us.

No, I corrected myself, it was a single figure, not many. My heart sank. All that damage, caused by a single human?

The human's hair whipped around its head and as I stared, I could make out faint curves beneath the heavy leather armor. Realization froze me in place so my tail forgot to beat and I dropped several inches in the water. The human responsible for so many deaths was a female.

Perhaps all humans hadn't evolved to be resistant to sirens but somehow, this female had discovered a way to block our voices and respond with deadly force. Who knew any female could be so powerful and terrifying? What had she plugged her ears with? She was too far away to tell and some of her hair hung over her ears so I couldn't have figured it out without getting close up, and she would've killed me on sight, just like the others.

The longer I watched, the worse it seemed. Again and again, a large bolt shot off the ship, burst into a dozen tiny bolts, and stabbed anything in its path. There was nothing we could do to defend ourselves against the human, much less fight back.

This was not a battle we would win.

After one last, horrified look at my fallen comrades—so many of the siren singers and Sharkan, I flipped over and dove back down.

We had lost.

But it wasn't over yet.



CHAPTER 2



The war council that followed that battle was the most dejected one I'd ever sat through. Try as they might, the Sharkan's seniormost members had no idea how to defend against a human that was immune to our calls. Our harmless prey had suddenly become a terrifying predator overnight, and there was nothing we could do about it. The weight of the water pressing on us felt heavier than ever.



"We have to plan a counterattack," Da said after a long time of silently letting the currents wash over us. "This sort of attack on our people cannot go unpunished."

"When the next ship comes—" one Sharkan officer began, but Da cut him off.

"No. We take the fight to them."

On land? I asked. How? They stay far from shore. Our singers can't call from such a distance.

"Perhaps most singers cannot, but some still can," Da pointed out. "If the kraken doesn't feed soon, it will come for our people and we cannot allow it."

Da's gaze shifted to the Coral Caller, who had remained



silent through the entire council. Her ancient eyes, once bright as sunlit shallows, had dimmed since Fiona's death.

"I can still reach them," she said at last, her voice melodious and resonant even without song. "If any humans are even remotely close to the shore, I can reach them."

A ripple of agreement passed through the council.

"They will come," she continued. "They always do."

"Then go now," Da said. "The ship returned to the human settlement near the eastern coral reef. Target that town. Let the humans know that sirens are still in control."



THE CORAL CALLER SWAM AHEAD OF US AS WE APPROACHED the shallows, her silver scales muted by dark sand so she wouldn't gleam too brightly beneath the moon. I stayed farther back with the Sharkan guard, watching the dark stretch of beach where the land met the water in a thin, treacherous line. If the human had plugged her ears somehow when she was aboard the ship, she would've felt safe to unplug her ears when she got home.

Anger licked at my insides. The human was probably resting in her cozy bed, pleased that she had destroyed so many of us. Just because we avoided the shore most of the time didn't mean we would always stay away. Let her rest, unaware and unprepared, just as we had been.

The moment the Coral Caller's song began, the sea itself seemed to listen.

It was softer and higher than the battle songs that were used against ships. Battle songs needed to be powerful and rich to overpower the sound from the waves, but this melody was slow and coaxing, interwoven with deepest



longing. It slid through the water and crept over the sand, a sound meant not to command, but to invite.

After several minutes, shapes appeared along the shoreline.

A few young human males, older than children but too small to be full adults, emerged from behind rocks and old, gnarled trees. They carried no weapons. Their movements were slack, eyes unfocused, mouths parted as if they could already taste the salt on their tongues.

My chest tightened. Despite the necessity of it, I'd always hated this part. In many ways, I was grateful to have no voice. It felt cleaner to meet an enemy in battle, face-to-face. Stripping humans of their minds felt like demoting them to a creature as unintelligent as any common fish.

The boys waded into the surf, one by one, clothes dragging at their legs, the song wrapping tighter around them with every step. The Coral Caller's voice lifted, then the Sharkan guard rushed forward.



The current shifted, sharp and sudden, and the water darkened as the human bodies stilled beneath the surface. The Coral Caller cut off her song the instant their life force faded.

It was done, clean and efficient as it had always been.

Take care of them, I signed.

It had to be done. At least now, the kraken wouldn't come for us, and it served as a warning. The humans needed an appropriate reminder that the sea did not belong to them. It belonged to *us*.

We retreated, satisfied that whatever had changed for the one human, our voices still held power over the rest.



CHAPTER 3



Any hope I had that the humans would be frightened back into submission by the fresh attack was crushed the next day. The same ship that had slaughtered so many sirens came back and with it brought a vengeance. The female aboard killed sirens without mercy, and all who went to the surface found themselves in immediate peril. The human female had many weapons and we had none. Our only real tool, our singers' voices, proved useless against her.

During one battle, I sent the Sharkan warriors to retrieve the bolts that were shot into the water and we attempted to hurl them back at the human, but it was impossible to match the speed and force with which they shot at us, and the human simply collected the bolts, smiled cheekily at us, and re-used them.

Rather than give her weapons back to her, I ordered my warriors to try and use the sharp metal tips of the bolts to break through the hull of the ship from beneath, where the human couldn't see us hacking away at her ship. If we could



sink it, the human would be easy prey after that. No human could swim as well as a siren.

But whatever she had done to the wood made the planks nearly impossible to break through and when we did finally manage to splinter apart one board, there were many more beneath that and the bolts we used to pry at the planking would break long before any useful holes could be formed. She must've reinforced the bottom of the ship. It would've taken us days of uninterrupted work to chop a hole large enough to do any damage, and the siren hunter kept returning to port each morning and doing repairs faster than we could cause true damage.

When I dismally gave my bleak report to Da, he was undeterred. "If we have that many casualties, we must change our methods. Instead of meeting the human on the sea, have the Coral Caller sing to the humans on the shore. Draw them in that way and avoid the ship."

I nodded. The humans couldn't stop us forever.



THE NEXT TIME WE RETURNED TO THE SHORE, EVERYTHING felt wrong.

I swam closer to the Coral Caller as she approached the shoreline. Something large and skeletal loomed on the sand ahead, its shape angular and unnatural. It was wood, bound together in a way I had never seen, crouched behind a ridge of stone. Boulders were heaped beside it and nearby, many humans were gathered. It should be easy to call to them from this distance, but unease tugged at me.

What is that? I signed, hoping the old Coral Caller knew.



“I don’t know,” she murmured. “It’s not alive, whatever it is.”

The humans were unusually loud. They applauded and cheered as a familiar silhouette stood before them. I squinted. Was it the same female that had been aboard the ship?

Sing quickly, I told the Coral Caller. The sooner we got this over with, the better.

She opened her mouth and drew breath, but before a single note emerged, a thunderous *CRACK* split the air, so loud it sent shockwaves through the water. The skeletal structure on land jolted and I barely had time to see something dark tear free from shore before it hurtled toward us, directly at the singer, and she had closed her eyes, preparing to sing.

With a powerful beat of my tail, I surged through the water and shoved the Coral Caller out of the way.

The object smashed into the water where she had been moments before, throwing up a violent plume of foam and water. It had been a massive boulder, almost larger than I was, and the force of it pulled us back, as if the stone wanted to draw us down to the depths and kill us as we had killed so many humans.

The Coral Caller screamed.

I caught her, wrapping my arms around her as the water churned around us. Another deafening *CRACK* followed, and something else tore free of the land, missing us by a tail-length before disappearing into the depths.

“They’re trying to kill us,” the Coral Caller gasped, then wriggled free and dove back down to where it was safe.

I threw a horrified glance at the land. All the humans were cheering, laughing, and celebrating. Did they think they’d succeeded in killing us? Could they see us from so far



HUNTING KRAKENS



away, or was it coincidence that they were practicing using a new weapon just as we arrived? And how could their projectiles be launched across such a great distance?

A sinking despair swept over me, and I followed the Coral Caller. We fled into deeper water, hearts pounding, the echoes of those unnatural thunder-cracks chasing us long after the shore vanished from sight. The humans were learning quickly, and much too quickly. Next time, they wouldn't miss.





CHAPTER 4



Weeks passed. No matter what we tried, the human seemed to have anticipated our plans and countered it before we had even made the attempt. The weapons grew more ferocious and more sirens died with each new attack. Our best singers had no effect and soon, the singers were too frightened of the human to rise to the surface and were too frightened of the kraken to leave our colony. The Coral Caller refused to call again. She was certain that if she did, another projectile would land on her head and she would be the next victim, and with the heavy casualties we were taking, we had no way to dissuade her.

We tried everything, but no tactic we came up with was sufficient. Every day, I met with my father and sister as well as many other leaders of our colony, trying to come up with ways to defend ourselves from not just the aggressive humans, but also the kraken that was coming closer and closer each day. Reports were trickling in of how the kraken had begun preying on the sirens living on the algae farms near the outskirts of our borders. Not even the Sharkan could keep a kraken at bay.



“Bayne, you have no voice,” my sister Ness said in the middle of yet another highly unproductive meeting. “What do you suggest to fight back against humans who are resistant to our voices? We have to do something before the kraken eats us all. I’ve never wanted to feed a human to the kraken as much as I want to feed that human to it.”

“But we can’t drown her to take her to the kraken,” one of the Sharkan protested. “She’s as impossible to kill as the kraken is.”

If we can’t kill her and take her to the kraken, I signed slowly. Then I say we lure the kraken to her next time her ship comes. No one can win against a kraken.

“She would just sail away,” Ness pointed out.

Then we slow her down. We don’t need to kill her; the kraken will do that. Humans are susceptible to stingrays, jellyfish, and any other number of creatures. We can throw them aboard her ship.



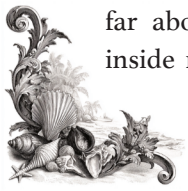
“We’re susceptible to stingrays and jellyfish too,” Ness grumbled.

But it’s worth it to stop her. If she can’t escape the kraken quickly enough, it will consume her. I would be willing to trade a jellyfish sting for getting rid of the siren hunter any day.

Da nodded. “I agree with Bayne. A few injuries are nothing compared to ridding our seas of this menace. The kraken must be kept at bay, and sacrificing humans is the best way.”



THE MOMENT THE SHIP’S SHADOW SLID ACROSS THE SURFACE far above me, dread and determination locked together inside my chest. The kraken did not hunt like other crea-




tures; it waited, sometimes for days or weeks at a time. It slept coiled within a lightless gorge outside our colony, stirring only when hunger clawed sharply enough to drag it upward. But this time, it would not be aroused by instinct alone.

I swam toward the abyss with the male singer who shook in fear next to me. I kept my face calm and impassive, even though the scar at my throat throbbed painfully. I couldn't let him know I feared the kraken just as much as he did, or else more so. I could still feel its slimy tentacle crushing my throat from all those years before.

The water grew colder with every beat of my tail. At the mouth of the gorge, I locked my jaw and signaled to the singer, who released a low, pulse-like note. It wasn't quite a song, but a resonating vibration that echoed off the stone walls the way the Coral Caller taught us *never* to do. The sound shuddered through the depths, deliberate and dangerous.

After a minute, the singer stopped to draw water through his gills then released that eerie, pulsing vibration that the kraken loathed so much.

This time, the water answered with movement. A vast shape uncoiled in the darkness, many tentacles snaking out as the kraken pulled itself up from the depths, its attention turning upward toward the faint promise of prey.

The singer who'd come with me shot off back toward the colony, his part done.

Come higher, I silently urged the kraken, angling my body toward the ship's distant silhouette. Feed. The kraken surged after the trail I left. I didn't look back. Whatever came next, whatever price was demanded, would be worth it if the creature reached the human vessel. The humans had



learned to fight us but nothing on land or sea could withstand the hunger of the deep.

I barely reached the surface before the water exploded. Sky water poured from the clouds above, and the rolling thunder was barely audible above the kraken's furious bellowing. The kraken rose in a fury, its enormous form surging up from the depths with a force that hurled me aside like debris. I twisted instinctively, letting the current carry me out of its path as a tentacle slammed down where I had been moments before. The human ship's hull groaned under the impact of the tentacles, boards cracking and bending like brittle shells.

Relief flooded through me so sharply I almost laughed.

It was working.

After weeks of fear and helplessness, after watching my people butchered by weapons we couldn't comprehend, the balance had finally shifted. The merciless, hated kraken had answered my summons. My greatest enemy had risen to devour my new enemy, and for the first time since Fiona's death, the sea felt like it belonged to the sirens again.

Good, I thought savagely, circling just beyond the reach of thrashing tentacles. Let the human see what true terror looks like.

The kraken roared again with a sound that was more vibration than noise and wrapped two massive limbs around the ship's midsection. Wood groaned and splintered as the vessel lifted, tilted, and began to tear apart. The sea foamed black as tar and debris spilled into the water.

Then a sharp, unmistakable *BANG* split the air.

I instinctively flinched at the sound, waiting for projectiles to slam into me, but nothing happened.

I stared.

The human had not cowered in fear. She had loaded her



weapon and fired it. A bolt streaked away from the ship and slammed into the kraken's hide. It struck just below one of its massive eyes and immediately, the monster recoiled, releasing the ship with a furious bellow that shook my bones.

No, I thought, heart stuttering. That couldn't have—
BANG.

More bolts struck, embedding themselves deep into the kraken's flesh. Dark fluid spilled into the water, clouding the sea around it. The kraken thrashed, pain rippling through its massive body, tentacles flailing wildly.

The human had hurt it.

The smug satisfaction at luring the kraken over drained out of me, replaced by a creeping, icy dread.

The human stood at the center of the chaos, braced against the wreckage of her ship. Her hair whipped wildly around her face as she moved about. She turned the monstrous bolt-throwing weapon upward again and fired again.

BANG.

The kraken surged forward, enraged, but the human didn't retreat from the tentacles creeping over the sides.

Instead, she leapt forward, stabbing a trident down to pin a tentacle to the ship's deck. With a brutal, practiced motion, she snatched up another weapon and hacked at the pinned tentacle. The kraken shrieked in agony, its body convulsing as the tentacle tore free, completely severed. It fell into the sea with a thunderous splash and sank out of sight.

My breath caught painfully in my chest.

This was impossible.

Krakens this size were legendary forces of nature. We

told our young they could not be slain. They were meant to be avoided, appeased, and feared...but never fought.

The human didn't stop. She rolled across the deck as another tentacle lashed toward her, slicing the kraken's slimy limb as she passed. The kraken recoiled again, injured and furious, its movements growing increasingly erratic.

The human was killing it. She was killing the kraken.

My thoughts scattered as terror and awe tangled together. If this human could wound a kraken... if she could bring one down...

We wouldn't need to appease it any longer. We wouldn't need fear for our lives or call to humans to sacrifice them. As much as I hated the human, the kraken had killed many more sirens than she ever had.

Tentative hope swelled in my chest that was almost instantly doused.

The ship finally gave way beneath the kraken's assault, snapping apart in a cacophony of splintering wood and grating metal. The vessel collapsed, kraken tentacles wrapping around it and dragging it down into the sea.

The kraken thrashed one last time, then recoiled, wounded badly enough that instinct finally overrode rage. With a sound like the earth itself tearing open, it plunged back into the depths, disappearing into the dark gorge from which I had summoned it.

Silence followed, broken only by the hiss of sinking wreckage.

I should have felt victorious. But instead, my gaze locked on the water's surface.

Where was the human?

I scanned the debris-strewn sea until I spotted her motionless body slipping into the ocean.

She was unconscious, defenseless, and vulnerable.

This was my chance, a voice in the back of my head whispered. Finish it. Let the sea claim her the way she claimed so many of us.

But another thought came, sharper and more insistent.

She fought the kraken and had nearly killed it. If the kraken could bleed, then it wasn't invincible. It could be killed, but we needed her, the human siren hunter, to teach us how.

My jaw clenched as I made my choice and dove.

The water rushed past me as I cut through it, debris scraping my scales as I reached her. She sank fast, weighed down by her leather armor and heavy boots. I hooked my arms around her and beat my tail, dragging her upward before the sea could steal her breath away.



As I broke the surface, I tilted my head to look at her. Still unconscious, she let out a shaking gasp of air. She was still alive.

I held her and stared at her face. Somehow, against all instinct, hatred, and reason, I had chosen to save the very human who I should have killed.

The war was about to change.



CHAPTER 5



The tiny island I brought the human to was little more than a circle of sand and scrubby foliage rising from the sea, barely large enough to shelter a few wind-twisted trees. I heaved her through the shallows and onto land so that only the smallest of waves lapped at our feet. Her wet hair was plastered all over her face, but at least her chest was slowly rising and falling.



Water dripped from my arms and ran down my face as I tried to pull her through the sand. Having a tail was not at all conducive to carrying a human on the land. Without the water to buoy me up, my body felt heavy and slow, especially as I dragged the woman and stretched her out on the sand, close enough to the tide that the rolling waves lapped at my tail before ebbing away.

She didn't stir. I watched her skeptically, half-expecting her to wake up and strike or reach for a weapon that was no longer there. My muscles stayed taut, ready to dive or fight, though I didn't know which I would choose if she opened her eyes. Even unconscious, she felt dangerous.

If I had returned her to her people, she would vanish



into their world of wood and smoke and iron, and it wouldn't be long before she came for us again. If I'd let her drown, sirens would be safe from her, but we would still be unable to defeat the kraken. If I managed to convince her to help us somehow... then there might be a chance.

I cautiously studied her face. Without the fury of battle upon her, she looked vulnerable in a way that felt deceptive. I clenched my jaw, anger stirring as memories rose: nets biting into sirens, bolts ripping through scales, and the water clouded with the blood of my people.

She had done that.

This single human had slaughtered my people without hesitation. I could have left her in the water and let the sea decide her fate. I likely should have.

And yet...

My gaze drifted to her hands, scarred and calloused, to the faint tremor in her breathing that told me she still lived. Awe twisted uncomfortably in my chest. She had faced the kraken and survived. More than that, she had wounded it. She had severed a tentacle and driven it back to its gorge.

No one else had ever done that.

If she could do it once, she could do it again.

If the kraken died, then everything would change. The sirens would no longer need to lure humans to their deaths to keep the beast fed and away from our colonies. We had peacefully co-existed with humans for thousands of years until the last decade. We could go back to the way things were, and this human might be the key to ending it all.

The problem, I realized grimly, was that I had no idea how to speak to her. I had no voice and even if I had one, she'd found a way to block our songs.

I leaned closer and skated my fingers across her face, tucking damp strands of hair out of the way so I could



examine her ears. I searched for wax, for plugs, resin or any foreign substance that might explain her immunity to our voices.

There was nothing. Her ears were entirely bare. Had the wax fallen out during the battle?

Somehow, I didn't think so. A chill slid down my spine and I pulled back.

It made no sense.

No human could resist a siren's call unaided. Even the strongest wills bent beneath it eventually. We had tested it for generations. It was fact, as immutable as the tides. And yet she had stood at the center of that ship, untouched by our songs.

Unease prickled at me, sharpening my earlier fear into something colder. If she hadn't blocked our voices... then what had she done?

Or what was she? Was she one of the pixies from Neverland, who were immune from siren songs? I rolled the human onto her side so I could feel her back but found no wings. Had she perhaps cut them off? I withdrew my hand and straightened, forcing myself to breathe. I was letting superstition take hold.

She stirred, feebly moving in a way that sent my heart leaping in panic. However harmless she looked now, I'd seen her slaughter innumerable sirens. I pulled back quickly, putting space between us as her face flickered with movement. A soft sound escaped her throat, more like a gargled cough than voice, but then she relaxed again, drifting back to sleep.

Wake up, I thought, still uncertain whether I actually wanted her to or not.

If she refused to help me, I reasoned grimly, then nothing had truly changed. She would have drowned

without my interference, and I could simply leave her here and she would die slightly later than she would have originally. It would simply be a delay. There was no harm to trying.

But if she listened... If I could make her understand that the kraken was the true enemy and that her war against the sirens only fed a cycle neither of us could escape...

My gaze drifted back to the ocean, where the kraken lurked far below, wounded but alive.

If we killed it together, she would have no reason to hunt my people any longer. We would have peace, brought about by an alliance no one would ever believe.

I looked back at her, at the human who terrified me, enraged me, and fascinated me in equal measure. My attention caught on the swelling along her leg, the angry mark already darkening beneath the skin. A stingray's work, I realized, and I was the one who'd told the Sharkan to use stingrays to slow her down while I led the kraken to her. Left untreated, it might hinder her ability to fight the kraken again in the future. I returned to the water and tore a length of kelp from the shallows and crushed its bulb between my fingers until the soothing oils bled free. I pressed it carefully over her wound, binding it tight with more kelp. She stirred again and shifted in the sand. If I showed mercy now, if I proved I was not her enemy, perhaps she would choose to help me in return.

Or maybe she would kill me.



CHAPTER 6



My chest constricted as I watched her slowly regain consciousness. No matter what, I had to convince her that I could be a friend. Trying to use brute force to overpower her hadn't worked. I would have to charm and persuade her to join me.



I went to pull the rest of her hair out of her face and her eyes flew open. Her shock looked even greater than mine and she attempted to shove me away but flopped back down with a grimace. I reached out for her but she twisted away with a slight cry of pain and rolled over.

She was going to hurt herself straining this much after that battle. After reminding myself that she didn't have any weapons to hurt me, I carefully hooked an arm under her shoulder and propped her up so she could breathe properly instead of having her face half in the sand. She panted for breath and I could feel her muscles tensing as I held her. It didn't take long before she worked up the energy to push herself out of my arms and inch away from me, scooting backward to put distance between us.

I followed the best I could, but then—



Stop! She signed ferociously.

I froze, my eyes widening in realization. She knew sign language? Understanding slapped me in the face. Why hadn't I thought of it before? No wonder she wouldn't have needed ear plugs to block our voices.

We stared at each other then I slowly lifted my hands, careful not to spook her, and signed, *Are you Deaf?*

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened to the size of sand dollars. She looked so comical that I couldn't help smiling.

She blinked several times before slowly answering, *You know sign language? Are you Deaf too?*

Well, this development easily solved my worries about communicating. I tried to smile winningly and signed back, *I'm hearing, but I don't have a voice.*

She still looked jumpy, but her eyes brightened with an instant connection. This really would be simple. Relief relaxed my shoulders. As far as humans went, at least this one was interesting. She had none of the delicate frailness I associated with human women. Her arms were well-defined and she had leather armor strapped across her tall, muscular body. If she had a tail, higher cheekbones, and a slightly darker complexion, she could have passed for a female siren.

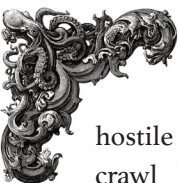
Why are you here? she asked.

I hesitated then threw caution to the wind.

I want you to help me, I told her.

She frowned. *Why would I help you?*

I fought the temptation to scowl. I'd just saved her life; she owed me much more than a favor. But in an effort to remain friendly and approachable, I explained about wanting her to help me kill the kraken. But the longer I explained and tried to persuade her, the more closed off and



hostile she became. Despite being injured, she continued to crawl backward, trying to distance herself while still watching me with deeply mistrustful eyes.

Where are you going? I asked her.

Home.

I almost smiled again. She thought she was on the beach near her home and hadn't realized I hadn't taken her there at all. Did she really think I would be that foolish? Slowly, I gestured at the sparse shrubbery behind her.

She looked, then her face contorted in anger. *You trapped me!*

I saved you, I corrected her. *I didn't let the kraken eat you.*

She pushed herself upright and fled along the sandbar, favoring one leg as she limped along. She was still much faster than I ever would be able to go on land, but slower than I was swimming.

I dove back into the water and swam lazily alongside her as she limped up the sandbar and onto the small island. The land ahead of her rose in uneven ridges of sand and scrub bushes and she went immediately to the highest point with the most cover, where she knew I wouldn't be able to follow.

Annoyance prickled at me as I watched her put distance between us. After everything I'd done for her—after pulling her from the water and treating the sting in her leg, after rescuing her when I could've let her drown—she vanished without so much as a *thank you*.

But as she reached the island's narrow interior, that irritation faltered and was replaced with a shrewd satisfaction.

Even if she retreated a little ways, there was nowhere for her to go and none of her fellow humans would risk entering the water to come search for her. She was stuck with only me for company.

The island's heart was little more than a knuckle of land



barely large enough to hold a cluster of wind-bent trees. Their roots clawed at the sand, long, thin palm fronts whispering softly in the breeze. She limped toward them anyway, knowing that the thin screen was still sufficient to block her from my view.

I remained where I was, the tide brushing against my tail, watching as she disappeared among the sparse trees. Branches shifted as she moved, then stilled. She had found a place where the land curved just enough to hide her from view.

This was the human who had wounded an ancient terror. She had slaughtered my people without hesitation. I had expected bargaining, rage, or some desperate attempt to fight me.

Instead, she gave me nothing.

The sea shifted behind me, restless, and I resisted the urge to retreat back into its depths. I watched the trees, memorizing the space she occupied, aware that she must be doing the same in her own way: mapping my limits, my patience, and testing my intentions.

I had trapped her here, hoping that necessity would force her cooperation with me. But necessity, I realized, did not guarantee trust.

Trust, I suspected grimly, was going to be far harder to earn than I had planned.



CHAPTER 7



She's Deaf, I reported immediately upon returning. *That's why she wouldn't heed our calls.*

Da's eyes narrowed. "Ah, I hadn't considered that. Is she dead now?"

No, I admitted. *She was unconscious and I put her on an island.*

His face contorted with fury. "Why didn't you kill her?"

I think she can help us kill the kraken.

"No one can do that."

I saw it, I insisted. In the battle, she seriously injured it. If I can get her to cooperate with us, we can kill the kraken. We wouldn't even need to call to humans anymore.

Da raised his eyebrows. "You think you could get her to cooperate with us when she's the one responsible for killing hundreds of sirens?"

It's worth a try, I argued back. If she refuses to cooperate, then she'll end up dying anyway. If nothing else, we can study her so we understand humans better.

"We don't need to understand them," Da raged,



thrashing his tail from side to side. "They're barbarians who kill us for sport. She deserves to die."

But we can use her, I pressed. After all the trouble she caused us, she ought to pay it back somehow. She would have access to weapons. If we had the right leverage, we would be able to convince her to at least give us the weapons that she used on the kraken. We might be able to kill it that way.

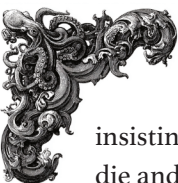
Da's nostrils flared. "And just how do you plan to convince her to help us? Surely you aren't planning to seduce a human."

I'll do whatever it takes to protect our people. I wouldn't need to seduce her; I could simply pretend to be friendly and gain her confidence.

Da chewed on his cheek for a moment then finally said, "Fine. You have my permission to try. But if it takes too long, just kill her and be done with it."

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, I DISCOVERED THAT HUMANS were incredibly stubborn, or at least this particular human was. I'd never observed a human so closely before to compare her to. After our initial conversation, she refused to communicate with me for a long time. She dug holes and broke down tree branches, her skin grew redder as the day progressed, and she kept limping when she thought I wasn't watching. She built a shelter, made fire, and even collected coconuts to eat.

She was resourceful, I'd grant her that. But other than a few interactions during which I learned her name was Treva and that she was a weapons designer, we had virtually no contact. With each passing day, Da grew more impatient,



insisting that the best course of action would be to let her die and go back to the way things were before.

It took a great deal of effort to convince him to give me more time.

“She won’t ever trust you,” Ness told me flatly. “So long as she knows you’re a siren, she’ll hate you.”

I can convince her that the other sirens hate me. Humans seem to be social creatures as well; she must need a friend.

Ness laughed. “You’re going to convince her that the general of the Sharkan is hated? Humans are stupid, but not *that* stupid.”

I haven’t told her who I am, I protested. All she knows is that I want her to help me.

“Okay, little brother,” she said, still laughing. “Go ahead and try.”

Something about her mocking and the phrase *little brother* made me even more determined to succeed. I was the leader of the siren’s military. I wasn’t some child trying to construct a shell necklace and I wouldn’t be taunted, even if it was by the future queen.

Spurned into action by my sister’s laughter, I stewed until I developed a plan. I enlisted the help of three of the Sharkan and told them to pretend to attack me in front of Treva so she would feel like it was her and I against the sirens. The best way to form an alliance with anyone was to have a common enemy.

The plan mostly worked. At the very least, I managed to get Treva to open up to me a little more. We began playing a few games, having deeper discussions, and I started bringing her food every day—she had begun to look a little malnourished from all the time on the island. Occasionally, I would think that she finally considered us friends, but



then she would turn cold and retreat back to her shelter, where I couldn't follow.

I had to keep trying. All the sirens were depending on me. When word of another kraken attack came, I knew that I had to try something even more extreme. If Treva wouldn't trust me as a siren, I needed to become human.





CHAPTER 8



“This will hurt,” the lifegiver warned me as he handed the vial. “Immensely.”

I’ve endured injuries in battles before, I reminded him. Don’t you remember the shark attack a few years ago?

“This will be different,” he told me gravely. “It will be worse than anything you’ve ever experienced before.”

I floated just beneath the water’s surface, eyeing the vial apprehensively. It glowed faintly with a greasy, oily shimmer that made me think of eels. Beams of sunlight from the sky above split while entering the water so that rays pierced through the water. Krill darted past, swimming along without a care in the world.

“Once it’s consumed,” he told me, “Your tail will split. Your bones will reshape and your muscles will tear and reform.”

I winced slightly. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“But that’s not all,” he continued placidly. “Your gills will close and lungs will grow to replace them. You *must not* breathe water after that. If you forget—”



I won't, I assured him quickly. I know humans need air.

"It's difficult to remember your way out of more than two and a half decades of instinct," the lifegiver said. "I'll accompany you until we reach the Stinging Coral but I won't get any closer than that. I don't trust that human."

She isn't all that bad. Treva's face rose unbidden in my mind, with the sharp intelligence in her eyes, and the way her hands never stilled. She wasn't untrustworthy; she was just scared, that was all. Those who were scared, humans and sirens alike, always acted in unpredictable ways.

"So you claim. I told King Jor that this was a bad idea but he's determined to let you try. Once you drink the potion, there is no stopping the transformation."

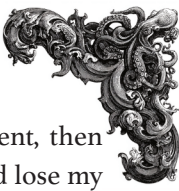
My grip tightened around the tiny vial. Treva told me that she would trust me if I were a human. Without her trusting me, I'd never be able to persuade her to aid me in killing the kraken. I had to succeed or both our races would be killed off or die out.

That was my desperate plan, anyway. But no plan, no matter how well-thought out, could alleviate the tightness to my chest or the way I couldn't stop my thoughts circulating around her. If I had legs instead of a tail, maybe Treva would look at me with adoration instead of hatred. I eyed the vial. Was it worth it?

"There's no shame in backing out," the lifegiver told me. "Everyone says she isn't worth it."

That was enough to make me rise to the surface and uncork the bottle. She was worth it to me to at least try. Even if it caused me pain, I could endure it for her... right?

The potion inside smelled all wrong, somehow just as sharp and metallic as the bolts Treva had fired at sirens during battles, or like blood struck by lightning. Instinctively, I clutched at my necklace where my pearl was



concealed. I closed my eyes, hesitated for a moment, then swallowed the potion in a single gulp before I could lose my nerve.

The pain was immediate.

It exploded through me with a violent tearing sensation that made me convulse and drop the empty vial as my muscles seized. My spine arched as a horrific burning seared down to my tail, burrowing into bone and sinew.

Just as the lifegiver had told me it would, it felt like my body was being torn apart from the inside.

Then my tail split. If I'd had a voice, I wouldn't have been able to stop screaming. The pressure continued to build as bones cracked and realigned, the agony indescribable. I thrashed helplessly, clawing at my long hair as the unendurable pain consumed all thought.

My tail was undergoing a slow, brutal division, changing to become legs. It brought a feeling of terrible wrongness with it. In some far-distance space, I felt hands holding me steady and heard the lifegiver's voice trying to reach me.

As the pain in my tail—no, the pain in my *legs*—diminished, I nearly understood what he was saying, but then my gills spasmed.

I gasped reflexively and promptly choked.

Water flooded an empty, hollow-feeling compartment in my chest and a violent coughing seized me. Something inside me had collapsed and reshaped and suddenly, I didn't even know how to exist anymore. The easy rhythm of water passing through my gills was gone, replaced by a burning pressure that demanded something else.

Air.

The lifegiver hauled me up above water, continuing to hold me up as my transformation became complete. I broke



the surface with a desperate heave, sucking in my first breath.

It burned, cold and sharp, in the hollow inside my chest.

I continued to cough and gag, dragging breath after breath into my body that barely understood how to use it. Each inhale felt like swallowing nothingness to try and appease the gaping emptiness inside me, and yet as I continued to do so, my thoughts became clearer and the pain slowly ebbed away, leaving behind a trembling exhaustion and a body that no longer felt like mine.

I floated above water, held up by the lifegiver, panting for breath and afraid to look at my new self.

When I finally did, my vision blurred.

Where my beautiful tail had once been, there were now...legs.

They look all wrong. They were separate and fragile, leaving me more vulnerable and weak in the water, but they did move when I willed them to. I flexed the unfamiliar feet, watching them stir the water clumsily.

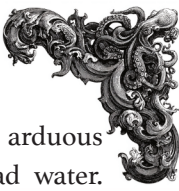
I looked human.

I knew that would be the case, and yet it felt heavy as the realization settled over me.

The lifegiver presses a bundle into my hands. "Clothing," he said shortly.

I nodded numbly. Humans, I knew, were particular about such things. Did they think such things would protect them? After feeling how fragile my legs felt, I thought maybe I understood them better. I felt the need to add protection as well.

I struggled into the wet pants, my movements awkward as I tried to stay afloat and don the clothing as well. If the lifegiver hadn't been with me, I knew I would have drowned



during the transformation or else during the arduous process of putting on pants while trying to tread water. When I finally deemed myself decent enough to present myself to humans, I turned to the lifegiver.

Thank you, I signed. Each of my movements was clumsy and weak.

Worry lines were etched deep into his face. "How are you feeling?"

I managed a weak smile. *Better than dead, I suppose, but not by much.*

He turned his tormented face to look at my pathetically weak human legs. "I shouldn't have given you the potion."

It was a necessary sacrifice on my part. Now, siren folk can have the possibility of a better future. Can you accompany me as far as the stinging coral? I'll be fine after that. It isn't far from the human's shore.

He nodded and went to loop my arm around his shoulders. I allowed it, too weak to protest. He propelled us through the surf with strong beats of his tail, and the water rushing past felt much colder and more hostile than before.

Water no longer was a sanctuary and refuge; it was dangerous. Treva's island came into focus, and I could just barely make out her form on the shore, waiting for me. Would she know another siren was helping me? She might deduce I'd deceived her.

Let go, I instructed the lifegiver. *She mustn't see you. I'll go on my own from here.*

"You're certain?" he asked anxiously. "If you breathe wrong even once..."

I'll remember to keep my head above water, I told him with a smile. *It has to be only me from here on though. I need to gain the human's trust.*



“Be careful, then,” the lifegiver told me. “May the tides be with you.” He dipped out of sight.

I fixed my sights on the shore up ahead, carefully stroking through the water and keeping my head up. I felt utterly foolish doing so. My sister would never let me live it down if she saw me swimming awkwardly, but I deserved it. I would do the same to her if I saw her like this.

The thought that Treva might see me swimming like a dog out at sea was too humiliating to bear. I knew I had to hold my breath when I had lungs. Humans did it all the time; I could too. When I was almost to the beach, I stopped my absurd paddling, took a deep breath of air, and reverted back to my usual stroking.

This was easy. Why had the lifegiver worried? I cut through the water toward the shore, inwardly laughing at my previous anxiety. Swimming was no problem at all.

My chest began to feel constricted and I couldn’t figure out why. I was holding my breath. But even so, my movements became slower and something inside me threatened to burst.

Realization dawned. I needed new air.

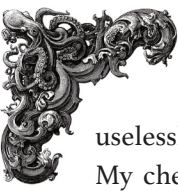
I tilted my head to the side and opened my mouth, trying to gulp down some oxygen, but saltwater flooded into my mouth, throat, and lungs along with the air.

Panic detonated inside me.

Instant fear made me splash uselessly in the water, thrashing as my body rebelled, desperate for air it couldn’t find beneath the surface. Every instinct I had was wrong for a human and every reflex betrayed me.

Shoals, I was drowning.

Black spots crowded my vision as I clawed my way upward, desperate and uncoordinated. My legs flailed



uselessly, movements slowed by terror and unfamiliarity. My chest burned, pressure building until I knew it would tear me apart.

I break the surface with a ragged gasp, coughing violently as air finally fills my lungs, but it wasn't enough. There was still water somewhere in my lungs and throat, foreign-feeling and impossibly unnatural. I continued to cough and gag until I vomited, still fighting all the while to stay afloat.

There was no room for humiliation or embarrassment. I was going to die.

So this is what humans endured when they drowned.

How could they ever venture out on the oceans when the water felt like constant proximity to death? One mistake, one forgotten breath, and the sea would claim them. It was about to claim me.

My legs, so pathetically weak compared to my legs, failed to keep me all the way out of the water and I dipped below the surface again.

Panic whined in my head. I wouldn't make it to land. Treva would never know why I never returned.

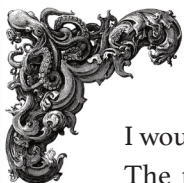
She would eventually die too, unable to get back to her people.

That thought alone forced me to kick harder so I burst out of the water again, closer to the shore but still too far away. I tried to gesture to Treva, but she only waved back, not knowing I was about to die.

How could she know?

She would never enter the water if this was the constant threat she would face. Drowning was unendurable. I slipped beneath the surface again. I had given up the sea for her trust and ripped myself apart for a chance at peace.





MARY MECHAM

I would die before I ever reached her.

The traitorous water covered my body and my energy was too spent to try to regain the surface. I sank, a few last bubbles of air escaping my mouth as my eyes closed.

I would die as a human.





BETRAYING DAHLIA



CURDY'S POV





A
COMPANION
STORY

BETRAYING DAPHILIA

MARY MECHAM



WARNING



These bonus stories (yes there are two)
contain major spoilers for Betraying Korth!

DO NOT READ until you have
finished Betraying Korth!



Note: Betraying Dahlia is told from
Curdy's POV and Breaking Vows is
told from **Korth's POV**







CHAPTER 1



I watched through narrowed eyes as Dahlia pulled Korth away from the crowd during the Night of Masks festival. Jealousy burned, molten hot and destructive, within my chest at the sight of her hand in his. I followed at a distance, wending my way through the other smiling, laughing couples, all wearing masks and unconcerned that the woman I had feelings for was throwing herself at the dullest, most uninteresting man in the world.



But I wasn't the only one following them.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted another figure dodging around booths and skulking in the shadows, trailing them as well. Had he seen me? I didn't think so; he was too fixated on Dahlia's and Korth's retreating backs. I gripped the hilt of my dagger, almost hoping I would get a chance to use it.

Dahlia and Korth stopped near the outskirts of the festival, where the scents from the food were still floating on the air, but it was much quieter and all the music was muted. I stayed crouched behind the bushes and threw an ugly look at Korth, who was tenderly tucking Dahlia's hair behind her



ear, oblivious to everything other than the woman right in front of him. They were speaking to each other, but not loudly enough for anyone else to hear what they were saying. From the way they were looking at each other, I guessed that I probably didn't want to know.

Who cares if he believes her? I told myself. *Everything she's ever told him were lies. It shouldn't matter.*

But it mattered to me. I wanted to cut off Korth's hand for touching her, or stab it at the very least. I fingered the knife at my side. If only I could do something that wouldn't risk our mission. But I couldn't risk revealing Dahlia's true identity.

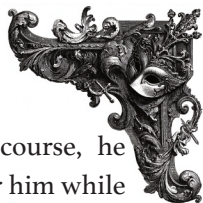
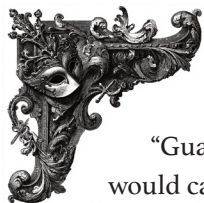
My lip curled as Dahlia pressed herself close to Korth, arms looping around his shoulders, and he was leaning in. I couldn't watch. I had to stop them from getting even closer to each other, but what could I do that wouldn't make Dahlia hate me?

For once in my life, fortune smiled on me.

The other person I'd also seen following them took advantage of their distraction and lunged forward, blade drawn. For a wild moment, I had a vicious stab of pleasure at imagining Korth being killed in the struggle, and I would be blameless.

But Dahlia hadn't been distracted enough. She yanked on Korth's shirt so he was pulled out of harm's way, but the knife whistled through the air close to Dahlia...too close. The attacker was winding up for another blow, and if he was clumsy, he could hurt Dahlia.

With a shout, I lunged toward the hooded man and blocked his blade with my own. He fell back, surprised at my sudden appearance. I grappled with him, trying to angle his knife away from me and Dahlia while also getting in blows of my own.



“Guards!” Korth bellowed behind me. Of course, he would call for someone else to fight his battles for him while he kept the girl.

I gave a few more vicious swipes with my dagger, and the other man turned and fled. I chased him for a few steps, but more than hunting down some common thief, I wanted to make sure that Dahlia knew it was *me* who had defended her.

I turned back to see Korth shielding Dahlia from view, arms thrown wide as if that would be any kind of defense against a steel blade.

The fool.

But I found the eyes I was searching for. Peeking over Korth’s shoulder was Dahlia. Shoals, she was so beautiful. Her lips were slightly parted and I saw recognition stir in those large, blue eyes. She wasn’t looking at Korth; she was looking at *me*. Hope blossomed in my chest.



Slowly, I raised my fingers to my lips then to my earlobe, but before I could touch my forehead, there was a clatter of guards approaching and I turned and ran. Dahlia would thank me later.

I had no need to be jealous. It was all just an act she was putting on with Korth. I was the one who had just saved her life. She and I were co-conspirators. I had joined the rebellion and crossed an ocean for her, and she knew that. She might lie to Korth, but she had always been honest with me. Even if Korth thought Dahlia was in love with him, I knew better.

Dahlia was *mine*.



IT TOOK SOME TIME TO SHAKE OFF THE GUARDS. THEY followed me for a time, but I managed to lose them by ducking into the gardens where couples sat snuggled on benches or were strolling along the paths, holding hands and whispering to each other.

I couldn't help but feel self-satisfied. Dahlia would know that I risked my life to save hers while Korth did nothing but squeal for help like some useless piglet. He wasn't half the man I was, even with his stupid crown and title. Just because he'd been pampered his whole life didn't mean he was valuable. He'd just been conveniently born.

Not to mention that he had the personality of a rock. It really was just proof that Dahlia was such a good actress that she'd managed to make him think she was interested. No woman in her right mind would ever love someone like Korth.

Once Dahlia and I were alone together, she would be sure to express her appreciation thoroughly. I'd been patient enough; I had earned my reward many times over. She owed me for protecting her when Korth hadn't. Dahlia owed me for putting up with the real princess so she could fool Korth. Once we got back to Ebora, she and I would be hailed as heroes. And the sooner, the better. It would happen any day. There was already talk of ships being prepared to take the army to Ebora. Dahlia wouldn't need to pretend to be in love with Korth for much longer.

Ugh, Korth. I sneered at the very thought of the crown prince. He was boring and much too obsessed with bridges—a subject no one would ever care about, and he—

Two familiar figures were standing in the gazebo perched at the top of a bridge spanning the pond. The full moon rose behind them so I could only make out their silhouettes, but those profiles were unmistakable.



Korth and Dahlia.

It's just an act, I repeated to myself, trying to avoid noticing how close they were standing to each other. Dahlia was touching Korth's chest and leaning in to untie his mask. Great. Now they were going to gaze into each other's eyes in the moonlight.

But it didn't stop there. As much as I wanted to look away, I couldn't. Korth leaned toward her, touching the woman that should be mine guiding her face toward his. Their lips met. Hatred burned within my chest. It was bad enough that I had to watch her be courted by some entitled royal; now I had to watch them kiss?

Any hope I had that Dahlia would accept a single peck and end things there vanished. She leaned back in with far too much enthusiasm and aggression, returning his affection with kisses that should have been saved for me. It didn't look like just an act. Did she actually think she had feelings for him? He was a prince—a royal! He was the type of person we were supposed to be overthrowing, and she was throwing herself at him.



The jealousy that I'd tried to suppress came roaring back to thunder in my ears. Dahlia was falling in love with Korth. He could give her anything she wanted, everything she'd never had, and she was lapping it up.

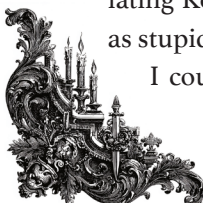
Clearly, she must never have wanted me.

She probably never even cared about the rebellion.

She only wanted power.

My vision turned red. She'd strung me along, teasing me and dangling hope just so she could manipulate me into doing what she wanted just as easily as she was manipulating Korth. I hated myself for falling for it. I had been just as stupid as Korth was.

I couldn't watch any more. I tore myself away and ran.



hunched over to avoid being seen. It was impossible to pay attention to where I was going. My feet carried me back to the foul-smelling cabin I shared with Garrik and Odette.

They were already asleep by the time I got back. I glowered at Odette's form on her musty bed in the corner. Why was I even keeping her here? If whichever woman showed up and announced herself as Korth's betrothed was given to him, I never should have supported the mutiny. If the mutiny had never happened, Odette would be with Korth and Dahlia would have still been free to be with me and we would have bonded over our hatred of royals, just as we'd always done.

But now...

I kicked the wall so a shower of tiny pebbles were dislodged in a puff of dust. The rage boiling my blood was all-encompassing.

Dahlia's claims of being on the rebellion's side had been fake. All Korth had to do was offer her hot meals and a comfortable bed, and she'd become melted wax in his hands. If I had wealth, I would have been able to win her over just as easily. Dahlia had been quick to criticize the royals until it was her turn to sleep on cushions and be waited on hand and foot. The moment she was treated like a princess, she seemed to forget everything about her entire upbringing.

Waves of heat rolled off me. I flung myself into bed and crossed my arms, livid.

All night long, I tried to fall asleep, but it eluded me. I tossed and turned and finally got up and paced, but nothing did any good. The memory of Dahlia wrapped around Korth was burned into my mind's eye and I couldn't get rid of it. Watching her lean in, watching her forget herself completely...that hadn't been an act.



That was real.

And it made me sick.

My heart pounded wildly within my chest. It wasn't fair. I was the one who kept Dahlia's secret. I was the one who babysat Odette every single day so Dahlia could keep playing her little game of make-believe princess. She got to wear fancy clothing and eat puddings and be pampered, leaving all the work for me. She wasn't the one herding geese while watching Odette and holding meetings with the other rebels at midnight when I was already exhausted. No, she was probably sleeping and comfortable, and hadn't spared me a single thought.

And for all my trouble, all the thanks I got was watching Dahlia throw herself into the arms of a man who doesn't even know her.

Korth loved a lie, not Dahlia. That's the part that ate at me the most. He had fallen in love with a disguise...a girl who doesn't truly exist. Any time he looked at Dahlia, he thought he saw *Odette*. He thought he was in love with a princess. But I was the one who had seen Dahlia without a crown. I was the one who wanted her before she wore fancy gowns and had servants.

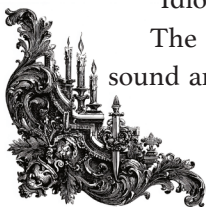


I had seen the worst of her and wanted her, and Korth only loved the mask that hid Dahlia's true nature from him.

My face screwed up in anguish and my breath came in short, ragged bursts. I clutched the back of a chair, listening to Garrik and Odette inhaling and exhaling quietly from their bedrolls. I had crossed an ocean for Dahlia. I had joined her rebellion and done everything she'd ever asked of me...but then she had to go and fall in love with *him*.

"Idiot," I muttered.

The geese honked from their pen, a low, mournful sound and Odette shifted on her cot, wrapped in my spare



cloak since she'd deemed the blankets too itchy. Even asleep, her expression annoyed me. Everything about her annoyed me. I volunteered for this mission to be close to Dahlia, and we were farther apart than ever.

I returned to my cot again, hoping for some sleep. The night air leaked through the cracks in the shutters, cold and damp. It smelled like geese and rot and betrayal. I stared at the dark ceiling, grinding my teeth together. What if, somewhere out there, she was sleeping beside *him*? Or maybe they were still awake, whispering secrets to each other and cuddling close.

My hands curled into fists.

He doesn't even know who she is. He doesn't know what she's done.

But I did.

I could destroy her with a few simple words.

If I revealed her true identity, the rebellion would dissolve. The king would call for her head. Korth would look at her the way I wanted to: with disgust, disbelief, and that sharp, burning hate that felt almost like heartbreak.

I could do it. I could.

And yet...

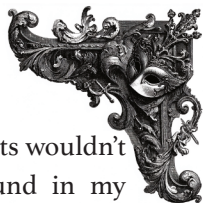
I pressed my palms against my face, breathing hard. I didn't *want* to destroy her. I just wanted her to see me. Was it too much to ask that she notice me?

I wanted her to come to me, tears in her eyes, and say I was right. I wanted to hear her say that she had never loved him, and that it was all confusion, that it was me she wanted, me she trusted, me she *chose*.

That's all I had ever wanted.

Isn't that what I deserved?

After everything I'd done for her, after everything I sacrificed for her... Didn't I deserve at least that?



I dragged my hand down my face. My thoughts wouldn't stop spinning. Images chased themselves around in my head, of her smile, her voice, and the way she used to tease me before he came along. There was a time when she noticed me.

Now she barely looked at me at all.

Maybe that's what hurt the most—not the kiss itself, but the realization that I had become completely invisible to her. She didn't think about me at all when I could think of nothing else besides her.

I hated her for it.

And I hated myself for still wanting her despite everything she'd done. I whispered her name to the dark night, and it tasted like longing and poison all at once.

I pictured her face again, eyes too blue and innocent for someone who could lie so easily and so well. She had been lying to me just as fluidly as she had lied to Korth. Hatred surged again.



She ought to suffer for what she had done to me. She should know how poorly she had treated her only friends. She abandoned us the moment she met Korth, and she hadn't given us a single thought since.

Didn't it bother her? It should.

I wanted to see her cry. I want to see her break the way I was breaking.

And then, after she was broken and sobbing...only then would I forgive her. I would take her in my arms and remind her who stood by her when everyone else turned away. She would see how wrong she had been to even dream of actually having a prince love her. She would thank me for saving her from herself when the temptation of a life of ease presented itself. That was all she wanted from Korth





anyway. Surely, she didn't want *him*; she just wanted what he could provide for her.

If the rebellion succeeded, I could give her those things too, and she would treat me the same way she had been treating Korth tonight.

I turned over again.

I would talk to her next time I saw her and demand an explanation. She owed me that...and so much more.





CHAPTER 2



*“Y*ou look terrible.” Odette was finally awake and had come to help with the chores. She stared at me from across the goose pen.



I ignored her and continued to fling handfuls of grain at the geese, who all honked and pecked at the feed.

“You were gone last night,” Odette continued. She was combing through her hair with her fingers, trying to tame the blonde curls into a braid.

I threw a dirty glare her way. She and Dahlia looked somewhat alike, but Odette’s upper lip always seemed to be curled in disdain. For a fraction of a second, I managed to delude myself into thinking it was Dahlia that stood there, but that didn’t feel right either.

“Leave me alone,” I snapped.

“You were following her, weren’t you? Was she with the prince again?”

I hated how smug Odette sounded.

“It’s none of your business.” I flung another handful of feed out so forcefully that one of the flock’s ganders spread his wings and flapped in warning.



“You would’ve been a much better match for her, you know,” Odette said. Her voice changed. It was softer and more compassionate. “She used to talk about you all the time.”

I couldn’t help it. I looked at Odette, hating how pathetically desperate I felt. “Really?”

She nodded. “Really. She would always say that she hoped it was you coming to deliver messages and things. But your little mutiny changed everything.”

I let out a snort and turned away from her.

“She used to like you,” Odette went on, “But now it seems like she’s just using you. She’s using you and Garrik to keep me here so she can swoop in and take everything for herself. It’s a shame that she’s taking advantage of everyone and isn’t sharing her newfound wealth. Isn’t that what you’re always saying that you wanted? For everything to be equal? Looks like she doesn’t believe that anymore.”

“That isn’t true,” I said defensively, but the words lacked any real power.

“I’m so sorry that she would throw you aside the moment you weren’t useful to her any longer.” Odette’s voice had become softer and more wheedling. Even though I *knew* she was trying to manipulate me, I couldn’t prevent myself from agreeing with her. She was right. Dahlia had discarded me the second she stepped off that ship and began masquerading at Odette. She had shunted me to the side so she could shine.

I emptied the entire bucket of feed for the geese and turned on my heel so I could march back to the cottage. Odette followed me. “You know it’s true.”

“You aren’t supposed to be talking,” Garrik griped at her as we came around the corner. “You work silently and if you



put one toe out of line, I'll gladly tie you to the chair like I did the last time you tried an escape."

Odette clamped her jaws shut.

It used to give me pleasure to watch Odette suffer through the hard manual labor we were required to do. But now... now I wished it were Dahlia. Who cared if Odette was here working as a goose girl or tied to a chair or back in Eboria on her pampered throne? All that mattered was that Dahlia was drifting further and further from me, and I was powerless to stop it. The lake between here and the castle may as well have been an ocean, and I had no way to cross it.



IT TOOK SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE I MANAGED TO CONFRONT Dahlia. Garrik, annoyed with my constant sulking and moodiness, finally told me to go for a walk to clear my head, and I didn't need told twice.



I nearly ran up to the castle, brainstorming a dozen different excuses I could use to see her, but I didn't need any of them. Just as I was reaching the gardens, I saw Korth walking out with a servant, waving to someone he'd just left behind. Was it really that easy?

Dahlia was around the next corner, near some rose bushes, and had buried her nose into a large, freshly cut blossom.

"Hey," I called.

She looked up. If I wasn't so angry with her, I would have found her beautiful. Her eyes scanned our surroundings, then she asked, "Is Garrik with your *sister*?"

So we were still playing pretend, were we? After all the



time we had been apart, she first asked about my responsibilities. It was like she didn't care about me at all.

"Yes," I snapped. "He's doing *his* job." I couldn't stop the harsh, bitter tone from seeping into my voice, and I didn't care. I wanted her to know how much she'd hurt me. Didn't she feel bad about it, even in the slightest?

Her eyebrows contracted slightly. What, was she surprised that I would feel resentful after all I'd sacrificed while she was turning into a spoiled, selfish brat?

"And I'm glad to hear it. How is, you know, *she* doing? Behaving herself?"

I cracked my knuckles and ground my teeth together. We hadn't spoken for more than a week, she didn't want to ask a single thing about me? She didn't ask about how I was holding up or say that she missed me. No, it was all about Odette and making sure the rebellion's plan was coming along so she could continue her little masquerade with Korth. It didn't matter if it was me or anyone else supervising Odette. Dahlia just wanted her orders followed without question.

A tiny flicker of hope still held out. Maybe she was just waiting for me to bring it up. Fine, if she needed me to address it first, I would.

"It's fine. No trouble. How's it going with the prince?" I couldn't bring myself to say his name.

"Perfectly," she answered. "Thank you for being there at the masquerade. You didn't get hurt, did you?"

So she knew. She knew it had been me who protected her, me who had stopped the attacker, and she was only just now thanking me like some sort of afterthought unworthy of her time? She could have sent a note or called for me or come down to see me to thank me personally, but no. She



waited until I hunted her down and practically begged her to acknowledge my presence.

"You said before that *he* would protect you. Guess you were wrong about that."

"We were caught unaware."

"Because he's an entitled royal," I spat. "Then when I protected you, that still wasn't good enough."

She frowned. "I said thank you, and I *do* appreciate what you did. It's not like I can shower you with gifts of thanks when I have a cover to maintain."

Of course. Her cover was a most convenient excuse for throwing away our friendship the second that some rich royal came waltzing into her life.

"I should've let him get robbed," I snarled. "He deserves it."

More than anything, I wanted to hear her agree with me. I waited for her to say what she'd always said about royalty, and that they didn't deserve their snobby life of entitlement while the rest of us slaved away. Then we would go back to the way things were.



She paled. "No, he doesn't! What's wrong with you? Korth is—"

I sneered. "Oh, sure. Tell me more about Prince Perfect." I relished the shocked look on her face and pressed my advantage. "You want to think that you're actually a princess he loves, but he would hate you if he knew the truth about you, and you know it."

Her expression became pained. "Stop it."

"It's true though," I said, taking a step forward. "All this time, when I've known the truth about you and was there for you, you wouldn't give me the time of day, and now you're throwing yourself at some rich snob. I guess you only ever cared about money."



"Where is all this coming from?" she burst out.

As if she didn't know. I ground my teeth together again until the truth exploded out of me.

"You were kissing him during the Night of Masks festival," I snarled.

"I was," she answered without the slightest drop of remorse. "The whole point of me coming here was to get him to fall in love with me, remember? For just about any man, that will involve a certain amount of kissing. I'm just not sure why you felt compelled to watch."

I reddened. Of course she would immediately flip it back onto me to deflect the blame off herself. "You didn't have to do it so enthusiastically," I growled.

"Curdy, why are you so jealous? There has never been anything between us."

Her words fell like physical blows. "Jealous? I'm not jealous!" I snapped back, anger building by the second. How dare she pretend that she'd never flirted with me and teased me? She had been provoking me all this time and giving me hope, only to snatch it away now? I cleared my throat. "Why would I be jealous? I just don't like you cozying up to him, that's all. He's the *enemy*, remember?"

"No, he's not. Korth is—"

"Ooh, so it's still just Korth, is it? You haven't given each other revolting nicknames yet?"

She shook her head. "You're being ridiculous."

"At least I'm not being a hypocrite," I shot back. "More than you can say."

Her face was getting flushed and red as well. Good. It felt powerful and gratifying to know that I was getting under her skin the same way she'd gotten under mine. I wanted her to suffer the way she'd made me suffer.

"What are you talking about?" She snapped, still



clutching her rose. I glared at it. Just another gift from some rich prince that won her over with no effort from him. I had sacrificed so much for Dahlia, and Korth had sacrificed nothing.

“Here the rest of us are, carrying out all the dirty work while you lounge about, sitting on cushions and being the exact kind of royal scum you swore to overthrow. You haven’t done anything but play kissy face with that prince from the moment you got here.”

Dahlia looked around, as if to check that we were alone then stepped forward and lowered her voice to the same, conspiratorial hiss we had shared so many times before. She smelled different now, like lilacs and roses and not at all like the sweat and dirt I was used to from our underground rebellion meetings. She probably thought herself too good to be around people like me now.



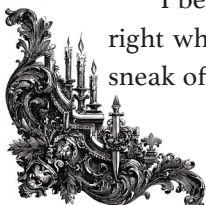
“That was the entire point of me being in this position. I’m the one who knows enough about Odette’s duties and habits that I can impersonate her without arousing suspicion. I’m the one—”

I stepped closer so we were almost nose to nose, hating how she smelled so pristine and clean now. “You’re the one whose father is leading the rebellion, and he wanted to give you an easy job. Nepotism at its finest.”

Dahlia’s look of shock morphed into sheer anger. “That had nothing to do with it. I was the best person for the job, and I’m doing it well.”

She was doing it well...she was cozying up to Korth much *too* well. I crowded her backward so she was backed up against a stone statue.

“I bet you are. I’m sure your oh-so-noble prince has you right where he wants you. What else do you do when you sneak off in the dead of night? I’m sure he gets lots of extra



privileges from you when you're closeted together, doesn't he?"

She looked affronted. "Korth has been a perfect gentleman this whole time, and that's more than you can say."

That was the breaking point. She was saying that Korth was better than me. She was choosing him. She had become the type of person she previously claimed to despise.

"No wonder he can't tell you apart from the real princess," I snarled. "You're exactly like Odette."

Before I could even blink, Dahlia slapped me full across the face.

Just as quickly, I grabbed her wrist and slammed it above her head, against the stone statue. Her expression was a mixture of horror and fear, and I got a sick twisted pleasure from the realization that she knew she was at my mercy. No guards were around. Her beloved prince had left. It was just her and me, the way it was supposed to be.

"Let go," she cried, trying to break free, but I held fast and leaned in. I could almost smell her fear.

"No. I'm done taking orders from you."

"Stop!"

I clapped my hand over her mouth. No guards would be coming for her.

"You can't tell me what to do anymore."

Her eyes were so intensely blue and frightened. I had done that. I was in control, not her, even if she wanted to pretend otherwise.

Something tiny hit my head. For a moment, I thought a squirrel had thrown an acorn before I realized there were no large trees around. I turned my head and saw Korth's younger sister, who was maybe only twelve years old,



standing with feet splayed out and small fists on her hips, glaring for all she was worth at me.

"Hey, you big bully! You leave her alone!"

My lip curled. Here was another entitled royal who thought she could have her way simply because she'd been born into privilege. She thought she could dictate my decisions simply because she commanded it. I slowly lowered my hand from Dahlia's mouth.

"Tess, it's fine, I can handle this," Dahlia said. "My friend and I are having a little disagreement is all."

A self-satisfied smile spread across my face. I knew Dahlia well enough to hear the tiny quiver in her casual tone.

"If he's being mean to you, he isn't a friend at all," the girl said stoutly. "You leave Odette alone!"

My smile turned venomous. Even though I knew it would drive Dahlia away, I no longer cared. Dahlia had made it perfectly clear that she would never willingly choose me, and if she didn't want me, then I didn't want her either. "I think I shall," I said softly, looking at Dahlia. "I won't lay a finger on *Odette*."



Fear spasmed across Dahlia's face again, and I went on, "You have my word. Now run along, little girl. I want to talk to my *friend*."

Her pattering footsteps retreated, leaving me entirely alone with Dahlia again. For a moment, I considered forcing a kiss from her. She had denied me long enough. But even that idea had lost its appeal. Dahlia no longer interested me. I threw down her wrist and she backed up several paces until she was against the garden's stone wall. I didn't even want to touch her. She disgusted me.

All she would have had to do was give me the attention I deserved. She was the one who had caused this. She had



been asking for it. I took an aggressive step toward her and she held out a hand, trying to defend herself.

How amusing. She'd never been physically strong, but I was. Now, she would be able to see just how strong I was.

Red spots speckled my vision. I couldn't stop myself from becoming more unhinged by the moment. This was a woman I had crossed oceans for, lied for, committed crimes for, only to have her run off with the first man who opened a door for her. Dahlia's only job was to convince her stupid prince to deploy aid to the rebellion, and already she'd taken longer than she'd promised. Of course she would want to drag this out as long as possible. *She* slept in comfort each night. *She* wasn't the one carrying out the grunt work. And now, she would pay the price. I took another step toward her.

"Curdy, don't." Her voice was shaking in earnest now. "We're on the same team here. You don't understand. I've been doing my part."

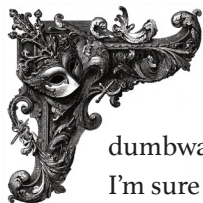
"Oh, I understand better than you think I do. All this time, I've wondered if you've intentionally been slow about getting him to send the ships. This was never about maintaining our cover or waiting for the right moment, was it? You're in love with him, aren't you? You don't want to go through with the plan anymore."

"Curdy, I—"

She was going to make more excuses. I didn't want to hear it.

"You aren't even denying it! Here I was, thinking that the daughter of the rebellion's leader could be trusted, but no. You're just like the rest of them, aren't you?"

Shoals, I hated her so much in that moment. "I wonder what would happen if I told Odette how to access that



dumbwaiter you love so much and let her give me the slip. I'm sure she'd love to pay you a visit."

"Get back," she said, trying to sound brave.

"There you go, giving orders again. You really do love power, don't you? You preach about how power corrupts, and yet here you are demanding people cater to your every desire. You are just as shallow and self-absorbed as—"

Someone yanked on my shoulder so I was pulled away from Dahlia, and felt a fist connect with my jaw.

There was a flash of white followed immediately by an explosion of pain. The earth tilted violently beneath me as I hit the ground, breath knocked clean from my lungs. For a moment, all I could do was lie there, blinking up at the blur of leaves and sky while my ears rang and I gasped for breath. I had *never* been punched like that, not even in any of the street fights I'd been in during my adolescent years.

Sound returned and my vision sharpened.

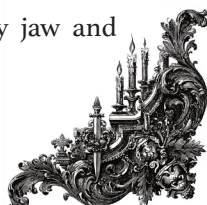
Above me, Korth was shaking out his hand, where a bruise was already forming on his knuckles where he'd struck me. He wasn't advancing on me, but stood planted like a shield between me and Dahlia, all protective bravado and righteous anger, as if *I* were the villain.

As if she weren't the liar.

He didn't even know who he was about to marry.

I lifted my hand to rub my jaw. How it wasn't shattered, I didn't know. I pushed up on one elbow, wincing as pain radiated from my jaw down my neck. My mouth tasted like a combination of copper and dirt. I spat, and a smear of red stained the grass. Would I even be able to open my jaw correctly? I tried it, carefully trying to work my jaw open, and pain stabbed at me again.

I gingerly got to my feet, still massaging my jaw and





watching Korth warily. Parts of my face felt swollen. Everything hurt. I wouldn't be able to eat normally for a week.

Though I was certain I would easily beat Dahlia in a fight, my confidence drained when I looked at Korth. A prince would have been trained in combat, and he had enough muscle that I held myself in check.

Korth glared at me, eyes blazing, and for one wild second I thought he was about to hit me again. The thought made my pulse quicken, but what infuriated me most wasn't the punch... it was the way she looked at him.

She looked grateful, even adoring. She reached for his hand and he allowed it, brushing his thumb against her knuckles as though he owned her. My stomach twisted and my logical thoughts caught up to what I'd done. She would never want me now.



"Tess, get the guards," Korth called. Behind him, I saw his younger sister, who must have run to get him. Of course she would.

"No!" Dahlia said quickly. I watched her, barely daring to hope.

"Please let him go," Dahlia pleaded with Korth.

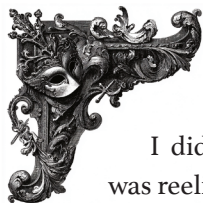
Korth glared as I slowly got to my feet. "He shouldn't have put his hands on you," he stated, and I was unnerved at how calm he sounded. I took a step backward.

"No, he shouldn't have," Dahlia agreed. I swallowed.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't have him thrown into prison," Korth growled. His fists were clenched. He was going to punch me again, I knew it.

Dahlia placed a hand lightly on his chest. "Because I asked," she said, and sank against Korth's side with a sigh of relief, looking much too comfortable next to him. She didn't even glance back at me. She was wrapped up in Korth's arms.





I didn't hear anything else she said. The entire world was reeling. She had chosen him.

Her betrayal hit harder than Korth's fist had.

It took several moments for me to realize that Korth was talking to me. By the time I focused on what he was saying, I only caught, "Leave, *now*."

That was it. I was dismissed.

I glared at Dahlia. "I see how it is," I said stiffly, turned on my heel and marched away.

Did she think she was being benevolent to let me off? Did she think that because she helped me avoid a jail cell, I would be grateful to her?

She didn't care about me. She was just trying to manipulate me into not telling so that she could marry her prince and live in comfort for the rest of her life.

I wasn't going to stand for it. Before their wedding day, the truth would come out, and when it did, Korth would look at her with the same horror I had seen in her eyes when she looked at me.

In that moment, she would finally understand that I never *lost* her. She threw me away, and by doing so, she threw away her future.

If I couldn't have Dahlia, no one could.





CHAPTER 3



“Where’ve you been?” Garrik asked when I got back.

I grunted a non-answer.

“It’s your turn to watch the girl. I’ve had her all morning.”

“Fine.”

“What’s eating you, boy?” Garrik looked closely at me. “What happened to your face?”

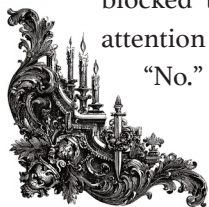
I caught sight of my reflection in the cottage window. Even through the grime, I could tell I looked dreadful. My cheek where Dahlia struck me was still red and swollen, and there was brilliantly blue and purple bruising blossoming up and down my jaw.

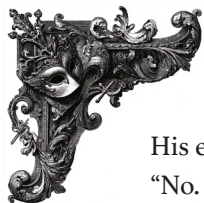
“I slipped,” I said, glaring at Garrik, waiting for him to challenge my story.

“Did you slip into a fist?”

I shrugged and tried to go into the cottage, but Garrick blocked the door. “We can’t afford for you to be calling attention to yourself. What was it, a tavern brawl?”

“No.”





His eyes narrowed. "Was it about Dahlia?"

"No. Move; I have work to do."

Garrik didn't move. "I've seen the way you watch Dahlia. Don't let it consume you."

"It won't." I tried to push past him, but Garrik didn't budge.

His hand clamped down on my shoulder. It wasn't particularly hard, but there was enough command in the gesture to root me in place. His eyes, hard and assessing, bore into mine.

"What did she do this time?" he asked quietly.

I scoffed. "You always think it's her."

"That's because it usually is," Garrik replied, voice even. "You've talked of nothing else since our arrival." He paused, head tipping as he studied me again. "But she wouldn't be able to do that much damage. Those bruises aren't her doing."



The memory flashed across my vision and I ground my teeth so hard my injured jaw screamed in protest.

"She didn't lift a finger," I admitted, bitter heat rising in my throat. "She just stood there and watched."

Garrik's facial expression didn't change. "Then who did it?"

"Korth." The name tasted foul on my tongue.

Garrik huffed, stepping back so I could finally enter the cottage. "He's protective of his fiancée."

"She isn't actually his fiancée," I sneered. "But she's certainly acting like it."

Odette was inside, knitting a long scarf, and looked up with interest as we came in. Both Garrik and I ignored her.

"She should be acting that way. That means she's doing her job."

I advanced a step. Would Garrik believe me? "I think her



allegiances have turned. She isn't loyal to us anymore and she isn't loyal to the rebellion either. She's a danger."

Garrik laughed, actually *laughed*, as though I were a small child whining that someone snatched away my toy. "Boy, she gave up her entire *life* for our cause."

"She gave up nothing!" I snapped. A plate on the table rattled with the force of my voice and my jaw ached again. "She gained *everything*. A title, a crown, control. She never earned any of it."

Garrik's eyes turned cold. "She earned my trust."

"Well, she's lost mine," I shot back.

"And why is that?" he pressed. "Because she didn't choose you?"

I froze.

The words sliced clean through me, humiliating in their accuracy. "That's not—"

Garrik held up a hand. "Curdy. I was young once. I know what it is to want someone who doesn't want you back. But this isn't a fairy tale. Dahlia has a mission, and so do we. Don't let your feelings confuse you."

I shook my head. "You think she cares about this rebellion? About you? About any of us?" My voice dropped to a sharp whisper. "She only cares about herself and she's going to betray us."

He crossed his arms. "Based on what? That she's grown close to Korth? That she isn't swooning at your feet?"

"They kissed, and it wasn't just for show," I growled. "She meant it. She's falling for him."

"So?" Garrik said with a shrug. "We told her to kiss him. She's following orders, just like you should be doing."

My nails dug into my palms until they hurt. "He's in love with a lie."

Silence stretched. Garrik studied me like he was trying



to decide whether I was dangerous or just pathetic. Finally, he spoke.

"You're jealous," he said simply.

Jealous didn't begin to describe it. Jealousy was much too soft and small a word. What I felt was a wildfire that was burning, all-consuming, and that choked out everything else, leaving no additional room for any other emotion.

"You don't understand," I said, voice low. "She's forgetting why she's here. She doesn't fear being discovered anymore. She doesn't fear *anything* because she thinks Korth will protect her."

"She has fear aplenty," Garrik countered. "She's just learned to hide it well. And if Korth gives her courage, I'm grateful for it."

"Then you're blind," I hissed.

"And you're becoming a liability," he shot back.

The words slammed into me, leaving me winded. When I told Garrik that Dahlia was becoming untrustworthy, he immediately had *me* labeled as the liability.

Garrik lowered his voice. "Listen to me. Dahlia is the rebellion's only hope. Whether she loves Korth or not is irrelevant. She knows her duty and she will make the right choice when it matters."

My mouth twisted down. "What if she doesn't?"

"She will," Garrik said firmly. "And you will not get in her way."

He moved past me, brushing my shoulder as he headed toward the door. "It's your turn with Odette. And Curdy?" He paused, glancing back. "If you care for Dahlia even a fraction as much as you claimed in the past, you won't sabotage her."

The door shut behind him.

He thought I was jealous. Maybe I was. But I was also





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the only one willing to see the truth: Dahlia was becoming too comfortable inside her lie. She was far too enamored with the power she'd stolen.

So be it.

If no one else would stop her...I would.





CHAPTER 4



Later that day, I dropped onto the grass opposite Odette, the geese clustering around us and nosing around for any oats they may have missed. My jaw throbbed. The bruise had darkened to black and blue. It was ugly but I didn't bother hiding it.



"I'm sorry about Dahlia," Odette said sympathetically while we tended the flock. "It must be hard to see her with another man."

"You aren't supposed to be talking," I told her flatly, nudging one of the geese over with the toe of my boot. She waddled off, trailed by some of her goslings that were too old to be cute but too young to be considered adults.

"Dahlia may not notice you, but I do," Odette said with a small smile.

I shot her a calculating look but didn't silence her again.

Encouraged, she continued, "You're so loyal to your cause, but Garrik and Dahlia have treated you so poorly. They don't know how good they have it with you."

"Garrik too?"



Her mouth fell open. "I'm sure you see it. He never agrees with you. It's always Dahlia, Dahlia, Dahlia. He thinks of her as some infallible angel who can never do wrong when she's really just a snake."

I let out a snort of laughter. "She is, isn't she?"

Odette's smile widened. "I'm glad you were smart enough to figure it out. Garrik isn't nearly as intelligent and she still has him fooled."

I knew she was trying to manipulate me. I should just do what Garrik always did and demand silence from our prisoner.

And yet...

She was saying everything I longed to hear. I didn't just want someone else to agree with me; I *needed* it.

Odette's hand found a goose feather and twirled it between her fingers, slow and deliberate. "Garrik is always taking Dahlia's side, even when she isn't around. It's ironic that he is letting her take so much power when he says he doesn't like dictators. I can't believe he's let her continue the façade for so long."

"I thought about turning Dahlia in," I muttered.

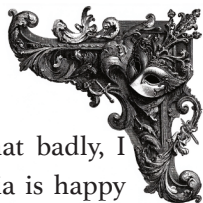
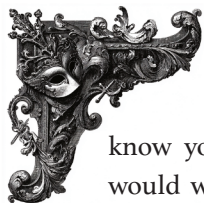
"I figured you would've thought about it. But since you work together, I'm sure you don't want to ruin everything she worked for. If you turned Dahlia in, the prince would hate her forever. I'm sure of it. You're much more loyal than she deserves."

I ran my tongue between my lips to moisten them. She was wrong about me. I did want to ruin anything and everything.

"If it was me in your position," Odette went on, "I would turn Dahlia in."

"Of course you would," I snarled. "You hate her."

"That's no secret. But no, I'm talking about if I was you. I



know you like her, but if someone hurt me that badly, I would want to take away their happiness. Dahlia is happy when she's in power, and whether she is here marrying Korth or whether she is back home with the rebellion, she is in power. I'd find a way to take away her power."

I ran my tongue along the backs of my teeth. It would serve Dahlia right to have no power. But the only way to do that would be to jeopardize the entire mission.

"If I turn her in, I'd be imprisoned," I told Odette flatly.

"Not if you and I teamed up. Once she is in prison and powerless, I would be reinstated as the true princess. I'd be able to give you everything she always refused to. I don't ignore you the way she does."

"I don't need your attention," I reminded her, but was tempted nonetheless.

"Dahlia left you for a prince and to gain power," she pointed out. "It would be a perfect way to show her how it feels if you leave her for a princess and gain your own power. Then, you'd have everything you ever wanted back in Eboria. Instead of sitting around in a reeking goose pen, you'd have servants attending you, all the food you could ever want, luxury, comfort... I'd make sure Papa rewarded you for liberating me and doing the right thing."



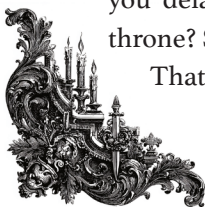
The temptation grew.

"You wouldn't be giving up anything," Odette pressed. "You only came on this mission for a woman who rejected you. You would gain so much more by joining me."

I still hesitated.

"If you do nothing," she pointed out, "Dahlia will marry Korth. Right now, there is still a chance to stop her. But if you delay... what if she ends up carrying the heir to the throne? She'll be unstoppable then."

That did it.





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“Fine,” I told her. “Let’s do it.”
My cap blew off my head and landed in the lake, but I
didn’t bother trying to retrieve it.
The winds of fate were changing.



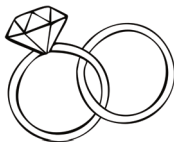


BREAKING VOWS



BREAKING VOWS

PRINCE KORTH'S POV

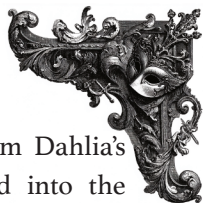
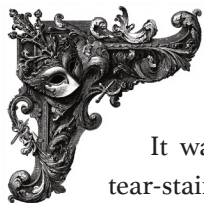


Dahlia's eyes swam with tears as she stared at me through her cell bars. Locking her away should have felt like justice after all she'd done, but all I felt was the cold ache of losing the one person who made me feel truly alive. I wanted to believe her when she said she loved me, but...she had lied so many times. What would stop her from doing so again? How could I ever trust her again?

"Dahlia, do you think what you did was right?" I asked desperately. If only she would renounce allegiance to her rebellion, I could help her. How could she defend what she did? When honesty was supposed to be the foundation of every relationship, how could she claim that she ever loved me?

Tears welled in her eyes as she set her jaw. "Yes and no. But I was fighting for what I believe in, and I will never regret that. If I die, at least I'll die knowing that I did everything I could to help others, and that's enough for me. I don't want to be a coward who's too afraid to take a stand against injustice."





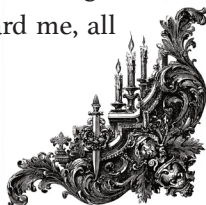
It was impossible to tear my gaze away from Dahlia's tear-stained but determined face as she faded into the shadows at the back of her prison cell. She was making me question everything, but the most terrifying thought of all was that she might be right. Was I a coward? I had always considered myself to be the one courageous enough to tell the truth even when it was unpopular, but by turning a blind eye to injustices, perhaps I was a coward after all, and now I was paying for it. Dahlia was the one imprisoned, yet it was my own heart that felt chained. If Dahlia's accusations were true, how could I marry Odette, a woman who had actively oppressed her people or stood idly by as they suffered?

"Prince Korth," one of the guards said, bowing low. "Everyone is waiting. We can't delay any longer. Princess Odette insists."

"Goodbye," Dahlia whispered, shoulders drooping. I'd seen her cry before, but her helplessness and vulnerability was far worse than that. The memory of her scarred back was seared into my mind's eye. Dahlia had suffered because no one would take a stand against injustice on her behalf, and yet here she was, still fighting for the kingdom that had oppressed her for her whole life. *I know you don't want to fight against me, but will you fight for me?* Her words echoed in my mind, reverberating until I thought I may go mad from them.

I couldn't bring myself to say goodbye to her as I mutely followed the guard. There were still so many questions I had that had gone unanswered.

The bright sunshine outside the prison stabbed at my eyes, and I lifted my hand to block the sun's rays. Chairs were set up in the gardens facing an arched stone bridge. The faces of the curious guests were turned toward me, all



whispering to each other in such a frenzy that it sounded like a swarm of buzzing bees.

Odette, who was nowhere in sight, had changed the venue for our wedding to the field adjacent to the prison. She had claimed that she loved the rose bushes, but I had a lurking suspicion she wanted Dahlia to be able to witness the wedding. Several attendees rose, including my parents, Godfrey, and Tess, but before they got to me, someone slipped a gnarled hand into mine and squeezed gently.

"Are you all right, dearie? You look just like my son, Orion." Nona had been set up in the shade, close enough to see but still with enough room to be cared for when she needed additional assistance.

I blinked rapidly to clear my vision. "It's me, Nona. It's your grandson, Korth."

Nona's eyes cleared, and a shadow of her former self shone through. "I remember you. Where is your lovely bride? Did you get married yet?"

"Not yet," I said. My voice came out slightly strangled, throwing an eye over to gauge how close my family was. At least there was a benefit to royalty never rushing. Mother and Father were still walking as calmly as if they were strolling on the beach, completely unhurried even though the wedding should have nearly been over by now. While they were still out of earshot, I added, "and Odette wasn't who I thought she was."

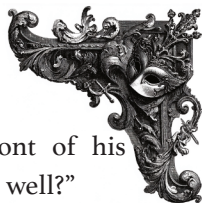
Nona squeezed my hand again. "Do you love her?"

"I love Dahlia," I admitted with a sigh. "The one I introduced you to before."

"You should marry the woman you love."

"I wish it was that simple. I have responsibilities."

"Responsibility is overrated." Nona's eyes suddenly lit up. "Orion? Is that you?"



"It's me, Ma," Father said, kneeling in front of his mother. "I apologize for the delay. Are you feeling well?"

"How could a grandmother not feel well on her grandson's wedding day? Korth and Dahlia will be very happy together."

"Dahlia?" Mother shot me a look.

"Princess Odette is ready," Godfrey informed me, nodding to where Odette was patiently standing under a canopy, a broad smile on her face. "She said waiting in the sun made her feel faint." He fixed me with his baleful gaze. "And I believe she expects an apology for your going to see another woman right before your wedding."

The weight of my responsibilities had never felt as heavy of a burden as it did in that moment. When I'd seen Dahlia in her wedding dress before I learned of her deception, I'd felt like the luckiest man in the world. How could something so wrong have felt so right? Now that I had given my word to uphold my commitment, the only emotion inside me was dread.



"I'll talk to her."

It didn't matter how many times we'd been over the details of Dahlia's betrayal or how many advisors gave reasons as to why it would be beneficial to form a union with Eboria. Even when I voiced my concerns to them about their current leadership, they had urged me to initiate change by honoring the betrothal, marrying Odette, then forming new laws.

We don't need a treaty, we need an army. We need to be liberated, Dalia had said.

"Sorry for the delay," I muttered when I reached Odette.

"Is it time?" Odette's fluttery, girlish voice only irritated me. Ever since being released from prison, she'd taken every





opportunity to slander Dahlia for her actions. I hated that what she said about Dahlia was likely true.

"It's time." Everything inside me was telling me to run. It didn't matter how many advisors encouraged the union. It didn't matter that the political relations with Eboria were already strained because their princess had been forced into servitude in my kingdom and I needed to mend those wrongs. Nothing mattered other than the knowledge that I wouldn't get to marry the woman I loved.



Music from the orchestra swelled as I walked down the aisle toward the priest, noticing that beads of sweat glistened on his bald head. The crowd rose to watch Odette prance down the aisle after me, a bouquet of roses clutched in her hands. Had they come from the very same rose bush where I'd taken blossoms to give to Dahlia? The cracks in my conviction expanded. Even if Dahlia was locked away for the rest of her life, her absence would haunt every moment of mine.

Odette held her fawning smile in place all the way up to the altar, but my heart had turned to stone. I didn't even want to look at this woman, let alone marry her. It was impossible to listen to what the priest was saying. My gaze dragged away from my fiancée and settled on Nona, who frowned and slowly shook her head from side to side. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the very topmost bits of the prison cell windows. Dahlia would be able to hear me pledge to love and honor another woman, and the very thought made my stomach churn. How could I claim that I was a moral, upstanding man if I vowed to love a woman I knew I would never love even a fraction as much as I loved Dahlia? It wouldn't be fair to anyone involved, and most importantly, it would be wrong. Perhaps Dahlia was right,





and sometimes it was justified to do the wrong thing for the right reason.

I don't want to be a coward who's too afraid to take a stand. Stalwart determination swelled in my chest. All growing up, I'd known I was supposed to marry the woman standing in front of me. I'd been willing to, but once I got a taste of what it was like to feel loved...I couldn't give that up now. Dahlia had been willing to fight for the future she dreamed was possible. She wouldn't mutely accept whatever fate was handed to her, and neither would I.

"Your Majesty?" the priest prompted.

"Wh-what?"

"I said, do you take this woman to be your wife, to love, cherish, and protect, as long as you both shall live?"

"I...I don't." The words came quietly.

Odette and the priest both gasped. "W...what did you say?" The priest stammered.



I shoved away every thought of obligation and duty. "I'm sorry, Odette. I can't do this. I won't stand before you and make vows I know I cannot keep. I won't lie."

Instantly, the crowd broke into a buzz of whispers. Mother's face had frozen in an expression of polite disbelief and Father appeared completely flabbergasted, but Tess shot me a tiny smile and Nona nodded approvingly at me. Odette stared for a moment, then threw the bouquet to the ground, gathered her skirts up, and stomped away without a word.

"My Lady! Your Majesty!" a few of her attendants cried, hurrying after her. "Wait!"

At the very least, I owed her an explanation. "Odette!" I called, taking the short flight of stairs down to the ground two at a time. "Stop. Let me explain."

Odette didn't stop. She stormed back toward the palace,



ripping the veil from her head and cast it into a rose bush to the side of the path. The buzz from the crowd grew louder as I ran after Odette.

“Odette!” I called again.

She whirled about, her face bright red. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve told you before, but—”

“But you were perfectly happy to marry me before you went to talk to *her*.”

“I have some concerns.”

“Concerns *she* put into your head, right? I can’t believe you’re still listening to all her lies! I told you everything that she did. I trusted you to do the right thing. So much for all that talk about your being an honorable man.”

“They were concerns I already had. But yes, she did raise some valid points,” I argued back.

“Like what?” Odette snarled, an expression so venomous on her face that she looked rather like an irate mongoose.

I pressed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, trying to find words that were diplomatic enough for the situation.

“Like *what*?” Odette repeated, crossing her arms and glaring at me.

“Like that you mistreat your people,” I said, fighting to keep my tone level.

“I treat them well enough.”

“Is that why Dahlia has scars on her back from being whipped?” The words burst from me.

“Whippings only happen when it’s warranted,” Odette said, dismissively waving her hand. “You know the need to maintain order. We both can agree that people must follow the laws. What does it matter if one handmaiden needed to be kept in line? She doesn’t matter anymore.” She leaned forward and fluttered her eyelashes. I suppose she intended it to be flirtatious, but it only hardened my heart.



"She matters to me." Venom edged my voice. I'd rarely felt such rage in my life.

Odette huffed. "We're about to get married and you're telling me that another woman matters to you? And everyone told me that you were so honorable. You've ordered punishments and executions in the past, haven't you?"

My mouth went very dry. "That's different."

"I see no difference. The person being punished will always disagree with their sentence and feel it isn't fair. You know Dahlia did nothing but lie to you before. She'll do it again, too, and yet I'm the one being punished?"

"Why do you want to get married?"

"We've been betrothed almost since I was born." When Odette saw that I was unmoved, she hastily added, "Besides, I love you."

"We both know that isn't true."

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth!" I burst out. "Why can't anyone just tell me the *truth*?"

"What makes you think I'm not telling the truth? I'm not the one who has lied to you for months."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, breathing deeply. The image of Dahlia's scarred back burned in my vision until the world around me swam in red. All rational thought evaporated as pure, undiluted rage flared up from the very depths of my soul, burning away any moral compass that might have guided my actions before.

Odette placed a hand lightly on my arm. I shrugged her off, but she persisted. "You were perfectly agreeable to getting married before *she* came along. Don't you see? She's driving a wedge between us. Once we get married, we can



unite our kingdoms. We'll be more powerful than any other nation."

"I don't care about power. You've been rushing this wedding and you had it set up right outside Dahlia's cell. It feels like you want to marry me to punish her and for no other reason."

"That isn't true," she protested. "I love you! Unconditionally."

Chills ran down my body at her final word. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you unconditionally." She tried to inject passion into her voice, but it came out sounding wooden.

"I'm not sure I believe in unconditional love anymore." I'd told Dahlia that I loved her unconditionally, then called off our wedding and had her thrown into prison. Had I been lying to her or to myself?

"You don't need to love me. Marriages like ours are for political gains. We could help each other. Look, I even wrote my vows myself." She fumbled to pull out a piece of paper and handed it to me.

"I'm sorry," I apologized again, not even looking at what she'd written. "But I can't marry you, not when I have so many questions."

"Then we can postpone it for a few more days so you have more time."

"I won't marry you, now or ever. I'm in love with someone else."

"It's her, isn't it?" Odette's face contorted into something truly evil. "You care about her more than you care about your duties."

I didn't answer. For several long moments, we stared at each other. "So now what?" Odette asked. "You're going to



send me packing after forcing me to tend geese for months? When my father hears about this..."

"I shall escort you back home to Ebora," I told her, forcing my voice to remain level so my anger wouldn't boil over. "We can leave within the week and sort out all the details on the way."



ONCE I WAS FINALLY BACK IN MY OWN ROOM, I COLLAPSED INTO my desk chair. This was the second wedding I'd called off within two weeks. After a moment of staring at the wall, I glanced down at Odette's vows that were still in my hand. As my eyes skated back and forth across the paper, I sat up a little straighter and frowned. Still staring at her vows, which sounded just as fake as her confession of love had, I scrambled to pick up some of the letters I'd received from Odette over the years.



The handwriting wasn't the same.

Slowly, I rose and crossed to where I'd flung one of Dahlia's notes after learning of her betrayal. After smoothing it out, I compared it to Odette's vows and to the letters. I could barely catch my breath. Dahlia had been the one writing to me all those years.

The small portrait of me and Dahlia was propped up on my desk. There she was, smiling out of the frame forevermore. I slowly picked it up and ran my thumb gently over her face before tucking it into the inner pocket of my suit, directly over my heart.

If I couldn't marry Dahlia, I wouldn't marry anyone at all.



