



MONSTERS'
BRIDE MARKET

BOUGHT BY THE
MASKED CANTOR

CARA WYLDE

**BOUGHT BY THE MASKED CANTOR
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[Alia Terra](#)

No one remembers the world before the Shift. It was thousands of years ago, all lost, all forgotten. Scientists and historians say that before, the world was better, brighter, and our planet belonged to us, humans. There were proud countries and bustling cities, and technology was at its peak.

We can hardly imagine all that. There is no proof, no written texts, no pictures of Alia Terra before the Shift. All we know is the face of Alia Terra now. The land haphazardly divided into territories, the walled cities, the poor living on the fringes, barely surviving.

The monsters.

The temples where young maidens can take a DNA test and be matched to one of them. Being owned by a monster is often the only way a woman can save herself or give her family a chance to not starve.

But for women who are not maidens, or whose blood never found a match, there is another path. The bride market offers a desperate chance. Here, women pay a small sum to enter a public auction. Monsters bid, but in the end, it is the bride's choice. Will she go with the highest bidder, or will she choose the less monstrous?

This is Alia Terra. Their world, more than ours.

Chapter One

Aveline

I feel the sound of the opera rehearsal through the pavement, in the soles of my boots, but I can't hear any of it. I feel it in the bones of my feet, it climbs up my shins, and when the drums start, I feel them in my back teeth. I stand in the shadow near the performers' entrance with my shoulders against the brick, so I can feel the music through the wall in my spine. I know from the way it builds and drops that they're close to the end of something big. Inside the building, people are breathing together, counting together, and waiting on the conductor's hand. I used to stand in the middle of it. Now I'm on the outside, with the music going through me like I was never a part of it. It hurts more than I thought it could.

I open my hand and stare at the six copper pieces and one silver coin, which is what I earned at the market today, singing with my palm pressed to my chest so I could feel the notes. People stopped, and some of them stayed until the end of the song. One woman put the silver in my cup without looking at my face, and I thanked her. It's enough for a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese. I count the coins again, not because I've forgotten the number, but because I need something to do with my hands while I wait for the door to open. Because I'd rather look at the meager coins than at the door.

The performers' entrance is a plain door of dark wood set into the side wall, with an iron lamp above it and a stone step worn hollow in the middle. Around the corner, the façade has columns, gilded letters, and tall posters for the current performances.

I've come here for two months now. I've asked the doorman, the wardrobe mistress, the men who carry the scenery, and anyone else who's opened this door while I was standing out in the cold. I've offered to sew, and I've offered to scrub the dressing rooms, the corridors, and the privies. I've offered to carry, to sweep, to run messages, mend, and do whatever else they'll hand me. I stopped asking to sing after the first few refusals. Some of them have told me *no* with pity, and some with disgust. The ones who refuse me with pity are always harder, because I can see them wanting to say *yes* and deciding against it while I watch their lips move.

I pull my hood a little farther over the right side of my face and settle in to wait.

I don't need to walk around the corner to know what's on the posters. Six months ago, they had my face on them. I was twenty years old and the youngest prima donna in the history of the Rosemere Lyric House, with my name printed larger than the title of the opera. People came from every part of the city to hear me sing. The critics called my voice clear and luminous. Strangers said my name in the street.

Home was Bellflower Row, where the houses stand so close together that there's no gap at all between one and the next. My family's bakery was on the ground floor, and our rooms were above it. My father worked the ovens, and my mother worked beside him with her sleeves rolled up and her hair tied back. She ran the shop, the books, and the four of us. My brother was sixteen and apprenticed to my father. He was learning to shape the loaves. I used to help in the shop when I was little, but then I was at the Lyric House every morning, every evening, and most of the time in between, so my family took over the work I couldn't do anymore and never once said a word about it. My mother said my career belonged to all of us. She said it exactly that way – that it was *ours*.

The drums start again through the brick, and I press my palm to the wall behind me. I make myself keep going, because I've learned that if I stop halfway through remembering, I only have to start again later. Remembering what happened that night hurts, but it also keeps me grounded. Keeps me grateful that I am here, alive.

And if I'm alive... Then life can still...

It can get better.

That night, six months ago, I'd come home from a performance and gone straight up to my room and fallen asleep. My parents and my brother were downstairs starting the morning bread. I remember unbearable heat. There was a sound, and it's the last sound I ever heard.

I've never been able to say what it was exactly, only that I felt it in my bones as much as I heard it. My skin went soft on one side, which is the only way I've ever found to put it, and then there was the pain, then nothing. I don't know who pulled me out or how. I woke up in the hospital and couldn't hear the nurses, couldn't turn my head. The Peacekeepers came later and told me the rest.

They were kind about it or tried to be. They wrote it out for me because I couldn't follow the movement of their lips yet. Their investigation had discovered that the flour chute jammed while my father was working. When

it came free, it filled the workroom with dust, and a worn bearing in the old sifting mechanism made a spark. The dust caught, and that was the first explosion. It shook loose every bit of flour that had settled over the years in the rafters, on the shelves, and in the corners no one swept. All of that went up in a second blast that tore through the building, lit the ovens, the stored wood, and the timber floors.

The houses on Bellflower Row stand too close together for a fire to burn in only one of them. It spread into the neighbors' homes and the neighbors' shops. The noise woke everyone, and everyone got out. People were hurt, and dozens of families lost their homes or their livings. My father, my mother, and my brother were the only ones who died.

The blast threw me through part of the front wall as it came down, the Peacekeepers wrote, and someone pulled me out of the burning wreckage before the rest of the house collapsed on top of it.

I lost my hearing to the concussion. Burns now cover the right side of my face, from my temple down across my cheek, jaw, and along my neck. They go on down my shoulder, my arm, my ribs, my back, and my thigh. The smoke went into my throat and my lungs, and for months I couldn't speak and couldn't sing at all.

I spent every coin I had on the hospital. When I could talk again, and later sing again, the Lyric House had already found a new prima donna. My voice came back different. I can feel that much. I feel it lower in my chest than I used to, it's warmer and rougher in my throat. I can't hear it, so I don't know if it's still a voice anyone would pay to listen to. I only know how it feels, and that's not the same as knowing.

I touch my throat, then I take my hand away.

The house and the bakery are gone. What was left of our things was taken or sold to pay for some of the damage. The survivors of Bellflower Row decided that my father's old machinery and his flour storage had done this to them. I don't think they're wrong. No one could prove he'd been careless, but the sifter was old and the flour had been in those rafters for as long as I'd been alive. The people needed someone to hold it against, and I'm the only one of us left.

My neighbors drove me off when I went back. The shopkeepers I'd known since I was a child wouldn't serve me. When they rebuilt the street, they made it clear I wasn't to come back to it.

They call me the Bellflower Fire Girl. I've seen the words on people's lips when they didn't yet know I could read them.

I don't hate them for it. They lost their homes and I'm still alive, and that gives them more right to Bellflower Row than I have.

I understand the Lyric House too. They don't want a singer who can't hear the orchestra. They don't want patrons who've paid for an evening of beauty to look up and see this. I don't look in mirrors anymore unless I have to, and when I do, I understand exactly why people turn away. It would be strange to expect them not to.

The door finally opens. I feel it before I see it, a change in the vibration through the wall as it swings. I pull my hood down on the right and step out of the shadow into the last of the daylight. I put myself where the light will fall on the other person's face and not on mine.

It's the stage manager, the new one. She came to the house not long before the fire, and I worked under her for a handful of performances but never learned much about her. She's holding the door open with one hip and looking down the street, not at me. I move into the edge of her sight and wait until she notices me.

"Excuse me," I say.

She flinches, and I know I've said it too loud, though I can't always tell. I bring my voice down and try again.

"I'm sorry. Is there any work? I'll take anything at all. I can sew. I can clean, carry things, or work backstage, wherever you need someone. I know the building. I'll stay out of everyone's way."

Her mouth moves quickly, too fast for me to read her words. I catch her frown and the shape of one word.

"I can't hear you," she says. "You'll have to speak up."

So, I've gone too far the other way. I try for something between too low and too loud, with my hand pressed to my chest so I can feel the vibration of my voice. I repeat myself – the sewing, the cleaning, the carrying, and staying out of the way.

She watches me while I talk, and I see the moment she looks under my hood and sees the right side of my face. I turn slightly from her.

"You're her," she says, and that much I get whole. Then her mouth goes fast again, and I hold onto what I can. "I remember you. I remember your voice. Half a year ago, you lifted the whole of Rosemere with it. I was in the wings, I heard all your performances."

She turns her head toward the street, and I lose the rest of what she's saying. I smile so she'll think I've followed. When she looks back, she's slowed down a little, the way people do when they remember that I'm deaf.

"I'm terribly sorry about your family. What happened to you was deeply unfair."

"Thank you," I say.

"There's no job for you here."

She doesn't say why, and she doesn't have to. I don't ask for an explanation, because I already know the reasons better than she does. I don't ask her to think again. I've said everything I came to say and she's answered it.

"Thank you for telling me," I say as I step away.

People come along the pavement, half a dozen of them. I know their walks before I can make out their faces. I've stood in the wings with these people. I press myself against the brick to give them space. Not one of them turns their head. They go past me and in, one after the other. I think they must pity me and not know what to say. That's fair, because I don't know what I'd say to me either. The stage manager goes in last, and the door swings shut.

I walk as far as the corner before I turn around and look at the Lyric House the way I told myself I wouldn't.

The façade is lit, the posters are taller than I am, and Callia's face is on every one of them, her dark hair worn loose, her green eyes painted a shade brighter than they are. She's a little older than me, and we used to be friends. She hasn't spoken to me since the fire.

I remember standing at the center of the stage with the house lights down and the applause coming from every part of the building, from the stalls, the boxes, and the gallery. I remember the faces in the front rows with their mouths open. People looked at me while I sang with love in their eyes and their whole attention, hundreds of them at a time, and I never got used to it. After, I went home up the stairs, past the warmth of the ovens, I lay down in my bed and slept without any trouble at all, because my mother and father were proud of me and I knew exactly where I belonged.

I cry there on the corner. I can't hear myself doing it, and nobody stops to ask if I'm all right. When I'm done, I wipe my face with the good side of my sleeve and turn my back on the Lyric House. I go to the bridge.

The city of Rosemere looks best in the evening. The carriages are out, the restaurants have their lamps lit, the flower sellers are packing up what's left of their stock, and the marquees along the avenue are glowing. It's a prosperous city, a crowded one, a beautiful one, and none of that is for me anymore. I keep to the edge of the pavement, keep my hood down, and no one looks twice at me.

The covered bridge is close to the Lyric House. I've slept under it since I left the hospital. I have a nest there of blankets I've collected, three of them, one good and two thin, wedged into the angle where the stone of the bridge meets the bank. I climb down, get into it, and pull the good blanket up to my chin.

Then I do what I do every evening, which is to take stock.

I don't blame the neighbors, and I don't blame the Lyric House, or the stage manager, or the people who walked past me tonight without turning their heads. I understand all of them, because I'm a scarred, deaf former singer with no family and no money, and there isn't a use for me anywhere in this city. I've looked.

I'm alone, and winter is coming. Three blankets under a bridge won't keep me alive through the cold. No one in Rosemere has told me to leave, not in so many words, but everyone who's opened a door to me has said the same thing without saying it, and I'm not too slow to understand it.

I need a roof over my head. I have no family to give me one, no savings to buy one, no home to go back to, and no work that would earn me one.

I turn the coins over in my pocket, six copper and one silver, and I think about the bride market.

It's held outside the city in a field, in a few days, because the people who run Rosemere don't want it inside the walls and act as if it isn't there. Monsters come to buy wives, and women who've run out of other choices stand on a stage and wait to see if anyone bids.

I'm not fool enough to think any monster will want me for a bride, but I'm going to go. I'll tell them the truth, which is that I can sew, clean, cook, carry heavy things, and keep a house. That I'll work harder than anyone they've ever bought, and that they can have me for whatever they think a pair of hands is worth. I expect that to be very little, and I don't mind. A small price still means a household, and a household means walls, a fire, a corner to sleep in, and that's more than I'll have under this bridge when the snow comes.

I let myself hope, a little, that a monster might look at my face and not turn away. They're monsters, and they know what it is to be judged by human eyes and found wanting. Maybe one of them won't care about the burns, as long as I can scrub a floor.

I don't let myself hope for more than that. I don't imagine one of them wanting me the way a man wants a woman, because that girl on the posters is gone, and I'm what's left of her. And what's left of her is ugly but useful, and that will have to be enough. I only hope that someone out there needs a pair of hardworking hands badly enough to pay for them, and that they'll let me keep them busy until spring.

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Chapter Two

Aveline

I leave everything under the bridge, but there isn't much to leave. The three blankets stay wedged where the stone meets the bank, and if this works, I'll never need them again.

The road out of the city is nearly empty, and I'm glad of it. I hold my cloak closed at the throat with both hands, but the wool is thin and full of holes, and the cold comes through it anyway. My shoes are worse than the cloak. The soles have split along the sides, and I feel every rock on the road through them.

When the sky goes gray with feeble morning light, I stop and look back. Rosemere is behind me with its rooftops crowded together and its towers above them. Even from the outside it looks like a city its people are proud of. It's a beautiful city, full of theaters, music, and people who dress well and know exactly who belongs on its streets. They keep monsters out whenever they can, and they keep this market out as well. Bride markets are legal everywhere on Alia Terra, so the officials of Rosemere can't ban this one. They can only push it past the city boundary and act as though it doesn't exist.

I'm one of the women its people don't look at now. If a buyer takes me, I won't come back here. I turn away from the rooftops and keep walking.

I know what I look like. I haven't looked in a mirror since I woke up in the hospital, because I don't want to see, but I know. My hair used to be so pale it looked white on stage, and silver in certain light. Now it hangs dark and heavy with grime. My dress is filthy, and so is my cloak. There's dirt under my nails and in the creases of my hands. The people who run the bride market will take one look at me and decide I'm not worth putting on the stage. I keep that fear the whole way down the road, and focusing on one step at a time doesn't get rid of it.

Beyond a line of bare trees, the field comes into view. The market has already begun.

There's a stage in the middle of the grass, built from rough boards and raised on posts. It looks as though it was put together quickly and could come apart just as fast. A large tent is off to one side with its canvas sagging from the damp. Around the stage, a loose crowd of bidders waits in the cold. There are no chairs for anyone.

A woman is on the stage right now. I can see her from the road, and I can see a man beside her with his mouth moving. I don't stop to watch. I go straight to the tent and push through the flap.

Inside, about twenty women wait on the trampled grass. Some stand, and some sit on the ground with their arms wrapped around their knees. None of them look at me. I keep my hood up and cross to the table at the far end, where a young man is bent over a ledger.

He looks up and speaks. He speaks quickly, and I catch nothing. I watch his lips and wait for him to slow down, but he doesn't. He says something else and lifts his eyebrows, waiting for an answer I can't give.

"I'm sorry," I say, and I keep my voice very low, because I can't hear it and I'm afraid of how loud it might be. "I didn't understand."

He frowns and says it again, faster, and points at the ledger. I look down at the ledger instead of at him. I should've told him before he opened his mouth, but saying it is asking for something. And I have no right to ask for anything.

"I can't hear you," I say, and I touch my ear, so he'll understand. "I'm deaf."

He stops. He looks at me for a moment with his mouth slightly open, then pulls a scrap of paper toward him, dips his pen, and writes. He turns the paper around so I can read it.

"Your name?"

"Aveline," I say.

He writes again. "Your age?"

"Twenty."

He writes one more line and taps it with the end of the pen. "Are you certain you want to enter the bride market?"

"Yes," I say. "I'm certain."

He nods and reaches for the ledger. Before he can write my name into it, I lean closer to the table and speak.

"I know what I look like," I whisper. "I know I'm dirty, and I know I'm ugly. I know no one here will want me as a bride. I'm not asking for that. But someone might want a servant, and I'm a good worker. I'll do any work in a house, whatever they need, and I won't complain. Will you tell the auctioneer that? Will you make sure he says it?"

He's watching my mouth now instead of my eyes. He nods once.

“And please tell him I know sign language,” I say. “And I can read lips, if the person faces me. I’ll stay out of the way. I won’t be any trouble to whoever buys me. I promise that.”

While I speak, his eyebrows come down and his mouth softens. I know the look because I’m used to it. I’d rather have pity than be sent away.

He writes on the scrap of paper again and turns it toward me.

“I’ll tell him. Wait with the others.”

“Thank you,” I say.

He writes my name in the ledger and points me toward the waiting women. I go and find a place to sit against the canvas wall where I can see the whole tent.

I can’t hear the auctions outside, and I can’t tell how long each one takes or how many are ahead of me. All I can do is watch the flap. A woman goes out, and later another woman goes out. I count them, then I lose count when I realize I don’t know whether the ones who left were sold or sent back home.

The cold has turned my hands white, and my stomach hurts. I fold my arms and keep my eyes on the flap.

When the clerk comes for me, he steps into my line of sight before he waves. I’m grateful for the small mercy. He points at the tent flap, then lifts his hand to show a set of steps going up, and I understand. I stand and follow him out into the open.

The bidders are standing right in front of the stage. I see them as I climb the steps. There aren’t many. Two dozen, perhaps, and they stand in a loose half-circle with nothing in their hands but wooden paddles.

One of them towers over the rest, with blue skin and a bald head that shines in the gray light. Another is massive through the chest and shoulders, with a beard so long it reaches his belt. There’s one covered in coarse brown fur from his head to his hands, and beyond him stand others I can’t make sense of, with too many joints or too few, with faces I can only look at briefly before I have to look away.

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The auctioneer stands at the front of the stage. He's a slender man in his fifties, human, with a wide, fixed smile that never changes. He turns to the crowd and begins to speak. I can see his mouth moving, but I'm too far behind him, the angle is wrong, and I can't read a word. I know what he's saying, or I hope I know. He's giving them my name, my age, and telling them I can clean, sew, and cook, that I can read lips, and I'll stay out of the way.

I shiver as I stand in the middle of an open field, and all I have is what's in front of my eyes. I can see everything and understand none of it. The bidders shift their weight, turn their heads, and speak to one another. I don't know why. One of them laughs, and I don't know at what. The auctioneer lifts his hand and lets it fall. A vibration comes up through the boards into the soles of my split shoes, and I don't know what caused it. I can't sense anything behind me or to either side, only the stretch of field I'm looking at, and I have nowhere to hide from any of it.

The auctioneer turns and walks toward me, still smiling. He reaches up and pushes the hood back off my head. I bow my head and turn my face, so the scars are away from the crowd. It's the only thing I know how to do. He puts one finger under my chin, and his touch isn't rough, but it isn't gentle either. He handles me the way he'd turn a vase to show the buyers the other side. He lifts my face toward the audience and holds it there.

The biting cold reaches my right cheek, my right eye, and the tight, ridged skin along my jaw and down my neck. Everyone can see it now. Tears fill my eyes, but I clamp my teeth together and refuse to let a single one fall. I will not cry in front of so many souls.

I look for paddles rising. I make myself keep looking, but there are none.

The monster with the beard has turned to speak to the one beside him. The one with the blue skin looks over the top of my head at the trees. Two of the ones I can't name have their backs half-turned and are talking with their hands moving. The furred one stares at the ground, and another shifts from foot to foot, and waits for me to be taken off the stage so the next woman can be brought on. Even the ones I can barely look at have looked at me and decided I'm not worth a bid. I'm not worth the price of cleaning their floors.

So, this is how it ends. I'll walk back to Rosemere and the bridge, wrap myself in my three blankets, and when winter comes, I'll find out whether three blankets are enough.

From the corner of my eye, I see...

One paddle is up, near the back of the crowd.

I look at it, then I look at the man holding it. He's looking straight at me. He says something to the auctioneer without looking away from me, but he's too far off for me to read it. I don't need to read it, because I understand him anyway. He's buying me.

I can't be sure he's human. Some monsters look more like men than others, but he looks like a man. He's tall and straight, about thirty, with dark hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and eyes so blue I can see the color from the stage. He wears clean, elegant clothes under a black cloak. The cloak is fastened at his shoulder with a gold pin in the shape of a harp. Gold rings shine on his fingers, and gold earrings hang from his earlobes. He looks rich, important, as though he came here from somewhere with a ceremony waiting for him. There's a tiredness around his eyes that doesn't match the rest of him, but everything else about him is composed.

I don't care what he is. He raised his paddle for me.

The rest passes in pieces. The auctioneer takes my arm and guides me down the steps. The man with the harp pin is waiting at the bottom, and he motions for me to walk ahead of him toward the tent. I go. I can't see his face, and I can't tell if he's speaking to me.

Inside, the clerk stands up from his table. The man reaches into his cloak and sets money in front of him. The clerk counts it, writes in his ledger, then counts out a smaller pile, which he pours into a leather pouch and holds out to me. It's my share, and I take it with both hands.

The clerk lays a sheet of paper on the table, dips the pen and offers it to the buyer. The man bends to sign, and I watch his hand, because I always watch hands. His hand trembles just a little as the pen touches the paper. The first stroke of his name comes out uneven before he steadies it. He's nervous, I think. Even a man like this can be nervous, buying a woman in an open field. I read the name as the letters form.

His name is Callum.

The clerk turns the paper and holds out the pen to me. I sign under his name.

Callum steps around the table and faces me squarely, standing in the light from the tent flap where I can see his mouth. He speaks slowly.

"I'll take you to your new home," he says. "The city is called Nivallia."

I watch his lips through every word to be sure I have it right. Nivallia. I've never heard of it.

"Thank you," I say.

"The auctioneer said you can read lips," he says. "So, I will make sure to speak slowly."

I feel my face grow hot. No one has said that to me. No one has made the effort before I asked for it, and I stopped asking for it.

"Thank you," I say again.

"I don't know sign language," he says. "But maybe you can teach me."

I smile at him. I feel it happen, the pull of the scar at the corner of my mouth, and I don't try to hide it.

He leads me out of the tent and around the side, away from the stage and the crowd, to where a carriage with two horses waits at the edge of the field. There's no one on the driver's bench. He opens the carriage door and offers me his hand. I take it, and he helps me up the step and inside. He smiles at me through the open door. Then he closes it, and I feel the carriage rock as he climbs onto the bench outside. A moment later, it rocks again and begins to move.

I'm alone. Through the window, I watch the field go by, the bare trees, and the road I walked this morning, with the carriage taking me the other way along it.

A man has bought me. A human man, as far as I can tell, with gold on his hands and a harp at his shoulder. Human men don't come to monster bride markets. Human men don't buy the Bellflower Fire Girl. But he raised his paddle when no one else did, he paid, he signed his name, and now I'm in his carriage on my way to a place called Nivallia.

I don't know what I am to him. I don't know if he means to make me his wife or his servant, and I realize, watching the trees go by, that I should've asked before I signed. I had the pen in my hand, and the question right there, but I signed instead, because the paddle had gone up and I was afraid that if I asked anything at all, he might change his mind.

I hold the pouch in my lap and watch the road. I decide I'll ask him when we reach Nivallia.

Chapter Three

Mordred

Air moves through the ruins far above me, pushing down through broken passages and open shafts until it reaches the water.

I stand in the boat and row. The lake spreads out from the hull into a darkness that has no far shore. The surface holds so still that each stroke of the oar carries across it and comes back to me, echoing off stone I cannot see.

I'm in no hurry. Water parts around the hull. The oar dips and lifts. Somewhere above, wind passes through a gap in the old walls, and the sound carries down through the caves and stops. Then there's nothing again, except me.

The platform is already down. It hangs at the end of its rails over the middle of the lake, an iron square lowered from the orchestra pit of the old performance hall, down through the broken remains of the lower vault, to where the rails stop just above the water. There is no landing under it and no shore near it. The people above lower it, but they never come down with it. They've never seen me.

I bring the boat alongside and tie it off to one of the rails. Today they've sent glazed donuts, a meat pie, and baked potatoes wrapped in cloth. I take the donuts. I have a sweet tooth, and I've never pretended otherwise. I leave the pie and the potatoes where they are. I don't feel like eating much.

Most days I do, but I don't need their food. My body works perfectly well without it. But something a person made with their hands, kneaded, baked, and wrapped for me, puts me a little closer to them while I eat it. I'm one of the most dreadful monsters to have walked Alia Terra, and I know it, and a donut doesn't change it. It only lets me forget for the length of a meal. Lately, even that has stopped working. Part of me looks at what they keep sending down and thinks I have no right to it.

There's a book. I turn it over in my hands. I haven't read this one before. The cover shows a man with a pack on his back and a road ahead of him. The words on the back say he's a wanderer, a hero of sorts, and that the one thing he wants more than anything is to see the ocean. I put it in the boat.

There's a knitted blanket, blue and white. I leave it because I have more blankets than I need.

Then I finally reach for the cards. The children of Nivallia have sent a bundle of them, folded, thick paper, tied together with string. I gather them and put them on the seat beside me where they won't get wet.

I take hold of the hauling line that hangs down next to the platform and pull. The old pulleys take the weight, the counterweight drops somewhere in the dark, and the platform rises with the pie, the potatoes, and the blanket still on it. It climbs past the vault and out of my sight. I know how they'll read it up there. Every gift that comes back is a message, and I have no way to tell them it means nothing more than a full stomach and enough blankets.

I untie the boat and row for home.

A century ago, I found this place. The performance hall had been magnificent once. Anyone could see that in what was left of it, in the height of the auditorium, the carving on the boxes, and the scale of the machinery under the stage. The Shift had brought most of it down, and almost no one living understands what it was built for. I understood enough. Its ruined hall, its backstage passages, the caves beneath, and this lake gave me what I'd been looking for. No one lived near it, and no one came for a long time.

I'd already spent centuries moving from place to place.

I'm a Cantor. We are rare and we live alone, because our songs act on bodies and minds. Mine can heal, but they can also do many other things. They can draw grief out of a person or pull a confession out of them. My songs can make people devoted to me. They can bind a vow so it holds, and even call the dead. They can soothe, punish, or give a body more pleasure than it can stand. Turned on myself, the healing songs keep me alive and young, as long as I keep choosing to sing them.

Every one of these songs is safe when it's brief and dangerous when it isn't. The longer I sing, the farther the song reaches, and the less it stays what I mean it to be. Healing makes people need the healer. Comfort turns into surrender. Devotion turns into obsession. When humans find a Cantor, they are curious at first, then they want him, then they need him, and finally they worship him whether he asked for it or not.

I can't go to my own kind for company either. Two Cantors singing together make a song neither of them can control. I learned all this the way my kind learns everything – by getting it wrong and living with what it cost.

So, I chose these ruins when I found them. And I meant to stay hidden here for good.

I can make out the island in the dark ahead of me, and I pull toward it.

People built near the ruins anyway. A few houses first, then a village, then the village became the city of Nivallia. I thought about leaving. I was tired of running, and by then, I'd watched their lives long enough that I didn't want to. I told myself I could stay as long as no one found me.

When the old hall was empty, I'd come up from the caves and stand in the shadows of the stalls, or in a private box with the front broken away and watch them. They never saw my face. I saw children learn to walk. I saw those children marry, have children of their own, and bury their parents. I know every name up there, whose grandmother is whose, which family argues at supper, and which doesn't. I liked them then, and I like them still.

They found out about me anyway. I don't know a place I've settled before where it went differently. They made a religion out of me without asking me. They turned the ruined auditorium into a place of worship, and they started lowering gifts through the pit. I take some. Some are useful. The children's drawings I would take if they were the only thing sent. And if I refused all of it, that would only be one more way of wounding people who already believe I've abandoned them.

For six months, I haven't sung for Nivallia.

They're in pain. I know that. They want my voice, they ask for it, and the longer I stay quiet, the harder they ask. I won't do it, because it will pass, and they'll be well again. I'm certain of it, and I say it to myself with each stroke of the oar, the way I've been saying it since I stopped.

I don't go up much anymore. I can't stand in the dark and watch people I've known since they were born hurt while I hold back the one thing they beg me for. So, I stay down here and row to the platform when the platform comes down.

The hull bumps against the dock, and I tie off at the bottom of the steps.

The island is a shelf of rock rising out of the lake. From where the lift comes down, no one can see it at all. I built the dock and cut the steps into the rock myself. I built the retaining walls over the years, one course at a time, and filled the beds behind them with the pale plants that grow down here without sun – white leaves and thin stems that bend toward the lamps. The house stands on the broad slab at the top. I keep it well. After the cold of the caves, I'm surprised by the warmth inside the door every single time.

The fire is low. In the main room, there's a hearth, an open kitchen against one wall, a dining table, my writing desk, and furniture I carried out of the ruined hall one piece at a time and mended. Two velvet chairs stand

before the fire, their color faded to a soft rust. The table is set for two, as it always is.

I put the book, the donuts, and the cards on the table, then I go to lay another log on the fire.

“The lake was quiet today,” I say. “Nothing moving on it but me.”

I turn toward Prima’s chair, the one nearest the fire, and wait.

“No. Nothing came down that I couldn’t carry.” I go to the kitchen for plates. “The children sent pictures. A whole bundle. Would you like to see them?”

I stop with the plates in my hands.

“I thought you might.” I continue and set the plates on the table. “And there are glazed donuts for dinner. Don’t look at me like that. I know you love them. That’s why I took them.”

I glance at the back of the chair.

“The pie went back up, and also the potatoes.” I listen for a few seconds. “Because I wasn’t hungry, that’s why. Are you comfortable? Are you warm enough? I can move you closer.”

I set the donuts out on the table while I wait for her answer, then I nod.

“There’s a book too. A new one.” I pick it up and turn it so she can see. “A wanderer. He wants to see the ocean more than anything, it says here. Do you want it first, or do you mind if I take it?”

I hold the book out to her and listen to the fire.

“You want to know how it ends before either of us has opened it. That is exactly like you.” I chuckle and set it down. “We’ll see. I’ll start it after dinner, and you can have it when I’m done.”

I walk back past the hearth. My hand grazes over the back of her chair as I pass, the way it always does. I gather the cards from the table, bring my own chair in, close to hers, and sit. I untie the string that holds them together. The first one is a cat, or something with ears, in brown. I hold it up so she can see it.

“A cat,” I say. “Look at the tail. Whoever drew this put more work into the tail than the rest of it.”

I wait, then I laugh, low, and move to the next, which is a house under a blue sky. The sky is a thick band across the top of the paper, pressed hard, and the sun is in the corner. I turn it toward her.

“Every one of them draws the sky the same way. Right across the top.” I tilt it so Prima can see the door of the house, which has been drawn with a

handle. "I know which house this is. I know the girl who drew it, and I knew her mother when she was her age."

One card has writing on it in big letters, and it asks whether I am well.

"They want to know if I'm well," I say. "I know, but it's not like I can tell them."

The next card asks me to sing. I look at it, set it under the others, and pick up the one after.

I go through a horse, a dog or possibly a bear, two figures holding hands under a round sun, and another house with its band of blue sky above. Then there is another one asking me to sing, in letters that slope down toward the corner of the page. I put that one under the pile too and move on.

"They think of me," I say. "That's the thing. They sit down with their colors and they think of me." I hold up a picture of a bird. "Look at that. I'd keep this one on the desk if I didn't keep all of them."

I hold the last drawing up to her, then I gather the whole bundle together and lay it on the low table in front of our two chairs. I will put them away later.

A log breaks in the fire and sends up sparks. For several minutes, I stay beside her with my hands on my knees and watch the flames. I don't say anything, and neither does she.

Then I stand and turn to her chair.

"Do you want a glazed donut?"

I stand there and wait.

"Yes, of course. I'll help you up."

I bend over her chair and gather the dress out of it, the skirt over one arm and the bodice against my chest. I carry it to the table and settle it in the chair across from mine. I arrange the skirt so it falls to the floor. I bring the sleeves forward and lay them on the table, one on either side of her plate. Then I go back to the hearth for her shoes, which stand together on the floor in front of her chair. I set them under the table, beneath the hem of her skirt.

In the lamplight, the dress is deep wine velvet, cut in a fashion no one has worn in centuries. Gold thread runs along the cuffs in a pattern of leaves, and small pearls are sewn one after another along the neckline. I've washed it, mended it, and kept it from the damp with more care than I've given anything else in the house. It's Prima's favorite dress, after all.

I put a glazed donut on her plate. I put one on mine.

I reach up, unfasten the clasps at the back of my head, and take off my mask. It's white bone-porcelain with a mouth of silver ribs. I lay it on the table next to my food. I feel the air hit my face.

I take a bite of my donut. The sugar is heavenly. I smile at Prima across the table, and I let the seamlines along my jaw open so the smile can go as wide as my mouth will go, all the way, all rows of my teeth showing.

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Chapter Four

Aveline

The city wall is taller than any building in Rosemere. The gate stands open just after dawn as Callum drives us through.

I've been awake since before the light came. We've traveled a day and a night to get here, with one passage through a portal that I don't want to think about again. Callum stopped along the road so we could eat and rest. At those stops, he faced me, spoke slowly, and told me about the city a little at a time.

"No one begs in Nivallia," he said. "No one goes without what they need."

At another stop, he told me he's the city's spiritual leader and the mayor's right hand, and that he sees to the well-being of everyone.

"It's a city of humans," he said before we set out again, when we could already see the wall on the hills. "You'll be welcome there."

I believed him then, and I believe him more now that I can see it with my own eyes.

Just inside the gate stands a large inn with clean windows and a swept step. Beyond it, the main avenue opens wide and straight. If I thought Rosemere was beautiful and wealthy, then Nivallia is something else. The streets are swept clean, and the houses stand straight and freshly painted, with flower boxes under every window. The shops are already open, and their tables carry more bread, cheese, and fruit than I ever saw on the whole of Bellflower Row. There are public gardens with trimmed hedges and raked paths.

The people wear good wool and good boots, and not one of them holds out a hand for coins. The people of Rosemere ate well and let me sleep under a bridge. I can't picture anyone in these streets allowing such a thing.

I press close to the window so I can see their faces, the way I always do. That's when I notice the first thing that bothers me.

The people move slowly. A woman with a basket stops in the middle of the street and stands still with her eyes closed before she takes the next step. A man in a fine coat grips a shop railing and pulls his mouth tight before he lets go and walks on. A girl carrying flowers holds her shoulder with her free hand.

I look for the cause and find none, because no one is bleeding and no one is old. They are simply in pain, and there are so many of them.

Some of them turn toward the carriage as it passes. A few press a hand over their hearts when they see me at the window. I can't tell what the gesture means, so I sit back and fold my hands in my lap.

The carriage stops before a house with a wide stone front and tall windows, larger and finer than anything I've ever entered. Callum opens the door, gives me his hand, and I step down onto the street. He walks me up the steps and inside, where a maid in a gray dress curtsies to us in the hall.

Callum turns to face me before he speaks to her, so I can watch both of them.

"Sabrina will take you to your room," he says.

The maid nods and smiles at me. I should go with her. Instead, I stay where I am, and I make myself ask the question I've wanted to ask since the bride market.

"Please, sir. What will I be in your household?" My voice comes out too quiet, and I try again. "Am I to be your servant? Did you buy me for a new maid?"

Callum laughs, and it's a bright laugh that shows his perfectly straight teeth. He touches my shoulder, gently, where I can see his hand coming. Then he faces me squarely and shapes each word with care.

"Your role is much more important than that."

"More important?"

"You'll understand soon. For now, don't worry about anything. You need to rest."

He isn't going to say more, and I've learned not to ask twice.

"Thank you," I tell him, and I follow Sabrina up the stairs.

She leads me to a sitting room with a fire already laid, and through it, to a bedroom with a canopy bed hung in pale blue. Through that, to a bathroom with a claw-foot tub big enough to lie down in. Everything is clean, soft, polished; none of it has a single mark on it. I've slept under a bridge for months, and I stand in the doorway of the bedroom and look for the cot in the corner that must be mine. Because these rooms can't be for me.

Sabrina turns the taps on the tub and pours something from a bottle. Steam rises with the smell of flowers. Then she comes to me and starts on the ties of my cloak.

I step back and pull the ties out of her reach.

“I can do it myself,” I say.

She stops and waits until I’m looking at her before she answers. She speaks slowly, keeping her face turned fully toward mine.

“It’s my duty to help you, and it’s my pleasure. I have to get you ready for Master Callum.”

“I’m not used to it.”

“You’ll get used to it. He’s a good man. He’s wise, kind, and he’s devoted.”

She takes the cloak from my shoulders while she talks, and I have to watch her mouth so hard to follow her that I forget to hold onto my sleeves.

“You’ll see,” she adds.

She undoes my dress, slides it down, then removes the shift under it. I’m standing naked in the warm room with all my scars on display. They start near my temple and run down my right cheek and jaw, and along my neck. They cover my right shoulder, my upper arm, my ribs, part of my back, and a wide patch on my right thigh. Some of the skin is pale and glossy. Some of it is ridged and uneven. I turn that side away from her, but she simply takes my hand and helps me into the water without looking.

The water is just the right amount of hot. This is the first time I’ve been warm all the way through since the hospital. I sink to my chin and close my eyes. I can feel the grime of the road and the bridge lifting off me. I let out a sigh and dip my head back to soak my hair.

Sabrina kneels behind me and washes my back. Her hands go over the ridged skin as carefully as over the smooth parts of me. She doesn’t slow down or speed up when she reaches the scars. She wets my hair and works soap through it, and when I open my eyes, she’s moved around to where I can see her.

“Your hair is beautiful. Is the color natural?”

“Yes. It’s from my mother.”

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I stop there, because my mother's hair was the same pale blonde, nearly white by the oven light. Sabrina watches my face and waits, and when I don't go on, she rinses the soap out of my hair and says nothing more about it.

In the bedroom, another maid has set a tray on the table by the window. Sabrina dries me and helps me into a sleep dress so soft I keep touching it. She points to the tray.

"Eat, then sleep. You need to be rested for the ceremony tonight."

"What ceremony?"

She brushes the wet hair back from my face and smiles.

"Don't worry. Master Callum will take care of everything, and it'll be perfect. I'll come back in a few hours to help you dress."

She leaves me alone with the food, and I eat all of it. There's roast chicken, buttered potatoes, soft white rolls, and stewed pears. I eat with my hands and don't stop until the plates are clean. I set my pouch of coins on the table beside the empty tray, unsure of where else to put it, and I think about what Sabrina said.

She said a ceremony. Callum wouldn't have bought me, brought me to his home, given me these rooms, and had me bathed and dressed for a ceremony if he meant to make me a servant. Servants don't get canopy beds. Servants don't get told their role is more important than that. He means to marry me.

I want to think it through, but I'm too tired. I climb into bed and pull the covers over me. The mattress gives under my weight where the stone under the bridge never did. It's the first bed I've laid in for months, and I'm asleep almost before I finish the thought.

When I wake, the window is dark and Sabrina is already in the room, shaking out a white dress across the foot of the bed. I've slept the whole day away. I sit up, and she smiles wide at me and holds the dress up by the shoulders.

It's a wedding dress. She gets it over my head with immense care, as if the material is so delicate it might tear. The sleeves are long and made of lace, and the neck is high and closes at the throat with a row of tiny buttons. There's lace over the bodice and at the hem, and the skirt falls straight and full. There's no veil to go with it, though. Maybe brides in Nivallia don't wear veils. Sabrina pulls at the waist, pins something at the back, and then it fits me perfectly.

While she's fastening the last buttons, the floor shakes. I feel it come up through my bare feet and into the bones of my legs – one long vibration, then another, deep and slow. I grab the bedpost and hold on.

"What is that?"

Sabrina finishes the button before she looks at me.

"It's the grand bell. It announces the curfew and the closing of the city gate. It rings at sundown."

"The gate closes?"

"Every sundown. Now let me do your hair."

She brushes it dry and pins it up loosely. She leaves the right side of my face uncovered. I don't ask her to change it. Then she takes my hand and leads me down the stairs.

Callum waits at the bottom. He isn't wearing the black cloak from the road anymore. He's in long ceremonial robes of white and gold, and the gold harp is pinned at his collar among heavy chains, jeweled ornaments, and pieces I don't recognize – medallions and pendants that look holy rather than rich. He wears a ring on nearly every finger. He's dressed the way a priest dresses for a great feast day.

He offers me his arm, and I take it.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks, his face turned to me so I can read his lips.

"I did. Thank you."

He leads me outside. The streets are full of people and full of light. Lamps burn in every window, torches burn on posts along the avenue, and the smell of burning oil and wood reaches me on the steps. I stiffen at it on the top step, but I make myself walk on, hoping Callum didn't notice. People stand along both sides of the street, and there are more of them at every corner as Callum walks me toward the center of the city.

We come into a great square, and beyond the square there's a building.

It's enormous. Its front rises higher than the houses around it. I can also tell it's in ruin. Weathered statues stand in rows along the upper ledges, holding instruments in their stone hands – a lyre with no strings, a horn broken off at the bell, a violin with its neck snapped. Newer stone has been fitted into the lower walls, paler than the old, patching the doorway and the pillars. Above the second story, the walls stop in jagged edges, and the night sky shows through where the roof should be. Even broken, it's grand. I

know what it used to be, because I sang in a house built for the same purpose.

The people in the square are singing. I realize that's what they're doing when I notice they're opening and closing their mouths in unison, their chests rising and falling in the same rhythm. I try to read the words, but I can't make sense of them. The shapes repeat, but I still can't catch a single one. Maybe they're not singing in a language I know, or it's simply that the light from the lamps and torches is too diffuse for my eyes to focus.

Then the strangest thing happens. The people nearest us go down on their knees, and the ones behind them follow, row after row as we walk, until every person I can see is kneeling. I look up at Callum, but he looks straight ahead with his face calm.

We climb the steps and pass through the doorway into the hall.

It was an auditorium once. The private boxes still line the walls in curved tiers, but their railings have been hung with cloth and set with candles and small figures. They look like chapels raised into the air. The seats are gone from the floor. The old stage stands at the far end under a great many lamps, and I can see it's been built up into an altar, draped, stepped, and crowded with offerings.

I pull on Callum's arm until he turns to me.

"What is this place?" I ask. I can't tell if my voice is shaking, but it probably is.

"This is the House of Voices, and it is your new home."

I don't understand him. Because *his* house is my home. Isn't it? He told me he'd take me to my new home in Nivallia, and he did. I slept there.

I keep my hand on his arm because I don't know what else to do. I let him walk me down the length of the hall toward the stage, where several men and women in robes stand waiting.

We're almost there when I see the pit.

The orchestra pit has fallen in. Where the musicians should sit, there's an opening in the floor, and a gilded grille surrounds it, taller than my head. Its door stands open, and inside the grille there's a platform of iron, held on rails. Past the edge of the platform there's nothing, only a drop that the lamps don't reach the bottom of.

There is a cage on the platform.

I let go of Callum's arm and step back. He catches my arm above the elbow, and his fingers close hard enough to hurt.

He pushes me toward the cage.

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Chapter Five

Mordred

Far above the lake, the counterweight drops and the pulleys begin to turn. I lift my head to listen.

The city should be asleep by now. There was a ceremony in the ruins earlier. I heard it from all the way here, as I hear all of them – the sounds of many feet and voices coming down through the passages and shafts to the water. I thought nothing of it. The people of Nivallia hold their ceremonies often, and in the past six months, they've held them more often still. The platform never comes down this late.

I hear everything that moves up there – a door in the backstage corridors, a step on the stairs to the boxes, a loose stone rolling in the caves under the stage. Each sound comes to me through the passages and across the water, and I know where it started and how far whoever made it would have to come before they reached me. That is how I've stayed out of sight for as long as I've been here. No one has ever come close without my knowing long before they did. The people of Nivallia began calling the ruins the House of Voices about fifty years ago. They know I'm under it. They have never seen me clearly.

I turn to Prima's chair by the fire. We've been sitting in companionable silence for a few hours.

"This is unusual," I say. "I will go see what's going on, but you're tired, aren't you? I will help you to bed first."

I lift the dress from the chair and fold it over my arm. I pick up her shoes as well and carry it all to her room.

Her bed stands against the far wall. The boudoir next to it is crowded with the things she loves: combs, jeweled hair ornaments, perfume bottles, and gloves. I imagine she'd never part with any of it. I hang the dress in the wardrobe among the other gowns and smooth the skirt so it won't crease. I take out a nightdress of soft silk and lay it across the bed.

"Goodnight," I say from the door. "I won't be long."

I go down the steps to the dock, get into the boat, and light the lamp at the front. Then I push off and row.

In the lamp light, I can see a few strokes of black water ahead and nothing else. I hear the platform stop at the end of its rails. Then I hear something else on it, and I stop rowing to be sure. Someone is breathing out

there in short, hard pulls. Between the breaths, there's a sound that is small, high, and repeated. I take up the oar again and pull harder.

The light falls on the platform. This is no ordinary offering. A cage stands on the iron, and there is a person inside it. I make out a white dress first, and then hair so pale it looks silver, warm and gold where the lamp light falls on it. The sounds I heard earlier are whimpers, and they come from a young woman.

I bring the boat alongside until the hull touches the platform. She looks up and startles. The cage shakes with the force of it. She pushes herself into the far corner, wraps her arms around her knees, and shivers so hard that her teeth knock together. Tears run down her face.

The cage is too low for her to stand in, so she crouches there with her knees tucked in. She's small and slender, with long, nearly white hair and large blue-gray eyes. Her face is fine-boned, with a gentle mouth. Burn scars cover the right side of it. They begin near her temple and her hairline, cross her cheek and her jaw, and run down her neck under the high collar of the dress. Some of the scarred skin is pale and glossy. Other parts are raised and uneven. The scars pull at one corner of her mouth and cut through her eyebrow.

I see all of it and think she's the most beautiful creature I've laid eyes on. She's alive, a breathing, warm body only a few feet from me. I haven't been this close to a living person in a century or more.

She's whispering, so softly that a human would've lost it in the sound of the water, but I hear every word.

"Please, please, please."

I reach a hand toward the bars, but I stop with my black claws in the light. I can't accept that she's here. I've talked to Prima for a century, making up her replies in my head, imagining her laugh and her snide comments. Maybe I've created her so well that she's come to me now. Maybe this is what happens to a mind left alone this long.

Then I see the envelope lying at the woman's feet.

I reach for the lock. I have no key, but I don't need one. I close my hand around the iron and crush it. The lock breaks cleanly, and I pull the door open.

The woman makes herself smaller in the corner.

"Please don't hurt me," she says. "I beg you. Please."

A song rises in my throat, the one that soothes. I force it down. I press my lips together behind the mask and hold them shut. My hand goes up to the clasps at the back of my head, then to the grille over my mouth, the way it does when I need to know they're holding. If she's real, I need to keep silent. I decide that I will not speak.

I reach past her feet and take the envelope. She watches my hand go in and come out again. She doesn't make a move. I open it. There's a single sheet inside, and on it a fragment:

“...what is given in silence
the Voice cannot take...”

I know these words, because they come from an ancient song of my kind, one piece of the little that survives. I've never understood what they mean. I know the hand that wrote them too. This is Callum's writing.

Anger bubbles up inside me fast. Callum, who leads every ceremony up there and lowers every gift, who has put himself deeper into this than anyone should. He's sent me a woman in a cage, with a line of a song he probably understands even less than I do. I hold the anger for a few seconds, then let it go. Because it doesn't tell me what he wants.

How did he get these words? Has he found more of the song than I have, or has he taken this one piece and made it mean whatever he needed? And what does any of it have to do with a frightened woman delivered to me in the dark?

I fold the note and put it in my pocket.

I look back at her. She's still afraid. But she's looking straight at me, into the black eyes behind my mask, and she doesn't turn away.

She presses her lips together and takes a breath.

“I don't want to die,” she says, “but maybe... Maybe I'm dead already. Maybe I've been dead since the fire, and I just refused to accept it. It's okay. Please... But it's okay.”

I don't know what fire she means. I know what she's doing. She's telling me it's all right to kill her, and she says it gently, so I won't feel bad about it. I can't keep silent through that.

I make my voice as small as it will go, smaller than I've ever made it, and I hope it's small enough to be safe for her ears.

“I won't harm you.”

Her eyes widen. Her gaze drops to the grille over my mouth, where she can't see my lips. She shakes her head.

“You are safe with me,” I say again, just as softly. “I will not harm you, I swear it.”

She narrows her eyes and shakes her head a second time. She lifts a hand and points to her ear.

“I can’t hear you,” she says. “I’m deaf.”

I stay where I am, frozen.

She can’t hear my voice. She just said so, but I need a moment to be sure I’ve understood it. I can’t remember the last time I spoke aloud to a human. I’ve avoided it like their lives depended on it, because every person I ever spoke to came back for more, unable to leave. This woman is close enough to touch, and she can’t hear a word I say. My song could still work on her body, but it can’t make her want me for it.

I feel so much joy that I think I might cry. I haven’t cried in centuries. In fact, I don’t know that I ever have. She’s real, and she might be able to stay herself with me.

I lift my hands and reach toward her again. She pulls back into the corner.

“I can read lips,” she says. “If you remove your mask, I will read your lips.”

I draw my hand back and graze my fingertips over the grille that covers my mouth. I can’t do it. She’s frightened enough, and what’s under the mask would frighten her worse. The one thing she’s asked for is the one thing I can’t give her.

I have nothing to write with. I look at my hands, at the boat, at her.

I gesture toward the boat. Then I bow to her, low. I lay my hand over my heart. She follows my hand with her eyes, and when it settles on my chest, she goes stiff. I hold still and keep it there. Slowly, some of the shaking in her bones eases. She lets her arms loosen around her knees and leans forward.

“I…” she says. “I don’t understand.”

I pull the cage door all the way open. Then I move to the far end of the boat, away from the lamp, kneel and bow my head.

The lamp lights her while I’m mostly shrouded in darkness. Before I lower my eyes, the last thing I see is her hair, gold now instead of silver, inside the edge of the light. I keep my head down.

I listen to her breathing, I listen to the water lapping at the hull, and I leave her the space to decide what to do.

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Chapter Six

Aveline

The monster kneels at the far end of the boat with his head bowed. The door of my cage is open. I don't move.

I don't understand why Callum sent me down here. I don't understand why this creature broke the lock, then went away from me instead of coming closer. Tonight, nothing makes sense, and I wonder again whether I might be dead and this is what comes after. Then I feel how cold the bars are under my palms and how much my legs ache from crouching. I let the thought go, because the dead wouldn't feel any of that.

The lamp at the front of the boat provides enough light for me to see and assess the situation. The monster has made himself small, or as small as something his size can be. He keeps his hands where I can see them, resting on his knees. The shaking in my shoulders eases, and my fingers come loose from the bars one at a time. He doesn't want to hurt me, I think, or he doesn't want to yet.

I look at him, because I need to know what he is.

He's so tall that even folded onto his knees he doesn't look right, with a build that's powerful and lean at the same time. The length of his arms is a little wrong. They're almost right, and that's what bothers me. Long, black hair falls over dark, formal clothes, high in the collar and embroidered with gold gone dull. The skin at his wrists and throat is pale with a gray cast under it, and his hands are large, with long, fine fingers that end in black claws. Over his face there's a full mask of white bone-porcelain with no expression at all, a death mask with narrow ribs set over the mouth in a grille, so close together that I can't see his lips. Above the grille, his eyes are black from edge to edge, with no white, no color, and no pupil I can find.

That's all there is to see. When people speak and I can't hear them, I read their faces, the tightening at the corner of a mouth and the way a brow drops before a person says *no*. He has no mouth I can see and no brow that moves, and there's nothing in his eyes to change and warn me about what he thinks. He holds so still that I can't read his hands either. With him, I'm left with nothing.

I'm cold. The boat floats a little closer to the platform. I'm dizzy.

Before the bride market, I'd never seen a monster. Rosemere keeps them out, and it keeps the market outside the city, so no one has to look at them. The ones in the field were giants and furred things, but none of them looked like this. I don't know what he is, and I don't know what he can do.

I tip my head back and look up the way I came. The rails go up through the broken floor above me and into darkness. That's all there is. There are no torches, no people at the edge of the pit, no altar, and no auditorium. I can't tell how far I've come down, only that the light up there is gone, and I'm deep underground.

I put it together, then, because there's nothing left to stop me. I remember the torches in the streets, the crowd singing words I couldn't read and kneeling as I passed, the stage dressed as an altar with gifts heaped on it. I remember Sabrina telling me to rest for the ceremony, Callum in his white and gold, and his hand closing on my arm hard enough to bruise when I stepped back from the cage. He never meant to marry me. He never meant to keep me in his house and let me scrub his floors. They brought me here for whatever lives under these ruins, and if the people of Nivallia kneel to it, then what they did up there was a sacrifice. I was...

I am the sacrifice.

I don't blame Callum. Who would want me, marked the way I am, and deaf on top of it? I let myself think a man might, because he faced me when he spoke and gave me a bath, a big bed, and more dinner than I could eat. That was all it took: a warm room and a full plate. I look down at my hands, because I'm ashamed of how easy I was.

Then I look back at the monster. Whatever he wants from me, I can't stay crouched in a cage, on a platform in the middle of a lake until he decides to tell me.

I crawl through the open door with the wedding dress catching under me, get my feet onto the edge of the platform, and lower myself into the boat. It rocks, and I grab the bench. When he sees I'm in, he lifts both hands and holds them open toward me, palms out, so I can see he isn't going to touch me. He gets up slowly. He unties the rope from the rail, takes the one oar, and turns the boat away from the platform.

I press myself into the corner at the front, beside the lamp, and I keep one hand on the side of the boat. I watch him.

The stroke of the oar comes up through the wood into my palm, a pull and then a rest, over and over, and I hold onto that because it's the only

thing I can measure. The lamp lights a little of the water, black and without a ripple. Past that, there's nothing. There's rock above us, and it goes up past the light before I can find the top. There's no far shore. I can't hear the oar dip, or the water on the hull, so I don't know if this lake is the size of a pond or the size of a city. Behind us, the cage gets smaller until I can't see it anymore. I watch his hands on the oar because they're the only thing moving.

Lights appear ahead.

I see a broad slab of stone in the dark, with lamps burning along it, steps cut into the rock, and a low wall. Behind the wall, there's a garden of pale plants I don't know the names of, and above the garden, there's a house. I can't believe my eyes. It has a door, windows, and light in the windows. A house on a rock, in the middle of an underground lake.

There are so many lamps that my hand goes tight on the side of the boat. I make myself loosen it. I can't be afraid of fire for the rest of my life. Fire keeps a house warm, bakes bread, and gives light, and I'll need all three if I live through tonight. I never imagined a place like this could exist anywhere, let alone down here, and I'm too busy looking to stay frightened.

The boat bumps a dock at the foot of the steps. The monster climbs out, stands aside, and doesn't offer me his hand. I take a few deep breaths and force myself to move. He seems to be patient, giving me time to decide to get out of the boat. It's not like I have another option.

I follow him up the steps and along the path through the pale garden. I keep enough distance between us that I can see all of him. At the top, he opens the front door and steps back from it, so I can go in first.

I stop on the threshold. Once I'm inside, I may never come out again. I still don't know what he wants. Maybe Callum meant to give him a wife. Maybe he needs someone to keep his house. I open my mouth to ask, and I can't.

I think of the fire, and of everything that came after it. Since I lost my family and my home, I've lived on what other people were willing to give, and I think I know why. I'm scarred, I'm deaf, and I'm not useful the way I used to be. People who aren't useful don't get to choose. They get what they're given, good or bad, and they say thank you for it.

I take a breath, and I step over.

The first thing I feel is warmth on my face. Then there's the smell of woodsmoke. I hold my breath and my back goes rigid. Slowly, I let the air

out through my parted lips, because it's only a hearth, with a fire burning low in it. There's a sparse kitchen along one wall, a dining table, a writing desk, and furniture that's old and has been looked after by someone who cares. Two faded velvet chairs are set before the hearth. The room smells of old things, of cloth, wood, and paper. It isn't unpleasant. After the cage and the lake, it's so comfortable that I don't trust it.

I feel the door close through the floor, and I turn. The monster is standing against it, positioned between me and the only exit. Not that I'm going to bolt now that I'm here. He lifts a hand and moves it toward the room, asking me to go farther in. I do.

I put the table between us and stop where I can see both him and the door. He goes to the writing desk, takes up a pen, and writes on a piece of paper. I watch his unnatural claws hold the pen the way anyone would hold a pen. It's unnerving. He brings the paper to me and holds it out at arm's length. I take it. My hand is shaking so badly that I have to hold the paper tightly between my fingers.

I am Mordred. I will not harm you.

His name. And a promise.

I nod. I press my hand to my chest and say:

"My name is Aveline. I... I believe you."

I keep my voice quiet, the way I've learned to, and I can't tell whether it's carried across the table to him.

He stops, with his hand halfway back to his side. Then he nods, and I know he heard me. He reaches for the paper, and I give it back. He writes again under the first line and returns it.

Are you hungry?

I shake my head. I ate more than I needed at Callum's house, and fear has left me sick and dizzy. He takes the paper back and writes again.

Are you tired?

I look around the room before I answer. There are three doors leading out of it, all closed, and I think about whether he expects me to sleep in his bed. I'm not brave enough to ask. I nod, gently.

He leads me to one of the doors without touching me and without walking too close. He opens it, and I look past him into a bedroom.

It's rich, spotless, and so full that I don't even know where to look. There's a canopy bed, old, with the wood polished and the hangings marked by time. There's a boudoir table with a mirror over it. I keep my face turned

from it. There's a closet and a soft rug, and everything looks as if someone already lives here. On the bed, a silk nightgown is laid out, smoothed, with the sleeves arranged. On the floor beside the bed, a pair of soft slippers has been set.

I turn to him.

"This is all for me?"

He turns his head away the way a person does when they're embarrassed. He writes on the paper again and passes it to me.

Through the back door, you will find the bathing chamber. It's yours. I don't need it.

I look at the door in the back wall. If he doesn't need a bathing chamber, why does he have one? Did he build it? Was it here before he was? I'm still holding the paper, trying to make sense of the room and the answer, when he steps back out and closes the door, leaving me alone.

I wait and count my own breaths. When I get to twenty, I go to the door and lay my palm against it. I feel nothing through the wood. I try the handle, and it turns, the door opening a crack. He hasn't locked me in. I let my breath out and close it again.

I look at the room properly, because I have to know where I am.

The boudoir table has drawers, and in the drawers, there are pots of color, brushes, and powder, the kind we used at the Lyric House, along with combs set with stones, necklaces laid out on cloth, and wigs on stands in shades that don't match my hair.

The closet is full of dresses in silks and velvets, nightgowns folded on the shelves, and slippers and shoes in rows along the bottom. None of them is cut in a fashion I've seen anyone wear. Every piece has been brushed, mended, and kept. These aren't things gathered in a hurry for a woman who arrived tonight. This room was made for a woman before I ever came here and made with care.

I stand in the middle of the rug with a nightgown in my hands that isn't mine, and I ask myself the one question that matters.

Am I the first woman Mordred has kept in this house? Someone wore these dresses, sat at that table, and looked in the mirror I have no intention to use. Maybe Callum sent me down here to take her place. If he did, where did she go? What did Mordred do with her? What is he going to do with me?

I can't stop the thoughts once they've started. My chest pulls tight until it hurts to breathe, my breath comes fast and shallow, and I can't slow it. I'm dizzy again. I try to look at one thing and hold it – the bedpost, the closet door, the slippers. I can't keep my eyes on any of them. I put the nightgown down on the bed. I can't feel my hands properly.

In the end, it's tiredness that stops it and nothing else. I sit on the edge of the bed because my legs won't hold me. Then I become too tired even for that. I pull back the covers and crawl under them in the wedding dress, with the lace rough against my neck. I fall into a sleep that keeps breaking and starting again.

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Chapter Seven

Mordred

I close her door and keep my hand on it until I'm sure she isn't coming back through it. Then I turn around, look at the living room, and see what she saw. I start picking up Prima's things.

They're everywhere. Because I put them everywhere. A woman who lives in a house leaves traces of herself in it, so I learned to scatter them. I did it so well that I have to search now.

I find a pair of her shoes under the low table by the hearth, the heels set together. I find a hairpin on the arm of her chair, and two more on the rug. There's a velvet bow on the writing desk, and another one under the edge of the dining table. I crouch, gather them into my palm, and carry them to a cupboard without a sound. She can't hear me at all, and I know that, but I stay quiet anyway.

Aveline asked whether all of it was for her. I turned my head away because I had no answer that would've made sense. Now I keep seeing her face when she stood in the bedroom doorway and looked at the nightgown on the bed, the combs, and the perfume bottles in front of the mirror.

I can guess what a woman thinks when a monster keeps a bedroom full of a woman's belongings. She thinks he invented someone to sit across from him because no one real would. She thinks he's pathetic. Or she thinks he's mad and talks to a woman who isn't there and believes she answers.

I've never believed that, not once. Prima has no face I've ever seen, and no voice I've heard. I speak to her out loud because at some point, the silence down here became more than I could bear. I fill her pauses myself, I answer for her, but I've always known that I'm the only one in the room. That was the arrangement. It was never a mistake I was making. It was a way to feel less alone.

I go back for a comb I missed on the mantel. I turn it over in my fingers before I put it away with the rest.

I found her name on a door. Soon after I came to these ruins, when there was no town above me and no one for miles in any direction, I was salvaging the dressing rooms behind the old stage, and I found a brass plaque on one of the doors that read PRIMA DONNA. I stood in front of it and imagined the woman who'd used that room. Then I went inside and took what I thought she would've wanted kept, which was her mirror, her

costumes, her paints and powders, and the jewelry left in the drawers. I chose every piece by asking myself whether she'd treasure it, and when I built this house, I built her a bedroom in it. Then I started talking to her. I set a second place at my table and put a second chair by the fire. I've lived with her for nearly a century, and I've never once lost sight of what she was – imaginary.

Now there's a living woman in Prima's bed, and because of the room I made, she has one more reason to be afraid of me. She already has every reason she needs. I'm a monster, and she's been handed to me in a cage. If she also thinks I'm unpredictable, if she thinks I might forget what's real, then nothing I do can make her feel safe under my roof.

I close the cupboard and make myself a promise. I'll do better. I'll make her feel safe and welcome for as long as she's here. Which will be for a day or two, no more. It's long enough to learn why Callum sent her down and what the people above me believe they've done, and to be sure she's unharmed, fed, and rested. In that time, I'll find a safe way to put her back on the surface, somewhere she can look after herself.

I don't let myself think about what it will be like to watch her go. I think about the note in my pocket instead, about Callum's handwriting, and about a line of a song I've never been able to interpret.

I don't go to my room. Instead, I sit in my chair, with the fire in front of me, and keep my eyes on her door. I don't sleep. Every so often, I hear her turn over and the bed creak. I stay where I am. I'm afraid that if I close my eyes and open them again at dawn, no one will come out of that room. I'm afraid I'll go in and find the bed empty and the nightdress laid out where I left it. So, I keep the fire alive, and I watch. I wait for her.

I hear her moving before the door handle turns – her feet padding over the floor, her hand on the wood. The door opens, and I'm on my feet.

She's still in the wedding dress. The lace is creased from sleeping in it, and her hair is slightly disheveled. That tells me she hasn't touched the nightdress or used the bathing chamber.

I built the bathing chamber for Prima, because I always thought of her as human, and a human would need somewhere to wash. I use the spring sometimes, when I want the pleasure of the warm water, never because I

need it. My body doesn't sweat, doesn't take on the smells a human body does. I keep it clean and whole the same way I keep it young – with song.

Aveline walks across the room and stops in front of me. She pulls at her long sleeves and looks at my chest instead of my face. That's when I see her wrists. There are bruises on both of them, dark and going all the way around. The marks of fingers.

I reach for her hands. She flinches, and I stop. Then she reconsiders and lets me touch her. I turn her wrists toward the firelight and look more closely.

"What happened?" I ask.

I hear my own voice and I remember. She's staring at my mask.

I let go of her and cross to the table where the paper is. I write and bring it back to her.

What happened? Who hurt you?

She looks down.

"It was Callum, when he put me in the cage," she says. "He took hold of me, and I didn't go easily. It isn't anything. It doesn't even hurt."

I write under the first line.

I can heal you. Will you let me?

She reads it twice. She looks up at me, and there's doubt in her face. I'd rather see that than anything else. She nods.

I point to the second chair by the hearth, and she sits down in it and folds her hands in her lap. I put a log on the fire. I stand where I can see her face and start singing.

I keep it low and inside the mask, as much as I can. The grille keeps my jaw closed, and the sound comes through it weaker. Which is what I want. A healing song for a few bruises needs very little, after all. I feel her body through the connection the song creates between my power and her as my patient. I find the bruises first, the blood pooled under the skin of her delicate wrists. I move it back where it belongs and mend what was torn. There are scrapes on her hands and knees from the cage, and I close them easily. There's stiffness in her back and neck from a night spent on a strange mattress, wrapped in a lace dress, and exhaustion that one night's bad sleep didn't cause. I ease those too. I watch the strain go out of her neck. Her hands loosen in her lap.

I feel the rest of her through the song. There are burns under her dress, on her shoulder, right arm, ribs, and her thigh. There are also the scars on

her face and neck, which I saw last night and didn't linger on. And inside her head, on both sides, there's the damage that took her hearing. I can feel exactly where it is and I know exactly what it would take to fix it.

I stop singing as soon as her wrists are smooth again.

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She lifts her hands and turns them over. The skin is pale and unmarked all the way around.

"I don't believe it," she says. "I don't believe you did that." She looks up at me. "You can heal people. Do you know what that is? That's the most incredible thing I've ever seen."

She's looking at me, and for the first time, she isn't looking at a monster.

It hurts, because I've just made a choice she knows nothing about. I could give her back her perfect, unmarred skin. I could give her back her hearing. I'd only have to keep singing a little longer, a little more, and she'd stand up from the chair whole.

I'm choosing not to, and I tell myself it's because the scars take nothing from her. That much is true, because I thought she was beautiful last night, and I think so now. However, it isn't the only reason. If I give her back everything she lost, she'll have no reason at all to stay, not even for the day or two I've allowed in my head.

The last reason is the worst. If she can hear, she can hear me. She'd hear my voice, and she might become what everyone becomes around me and my songs. I want Aveline to stay exactly who she is. I want her to be herself, I want her here, and I know what both of those wants make me.

"How did you do it?" she asks. "You didn't even touch me."

I take the paper and write. It takes longer this time.

With my song. I am a Cantor. That is the name of my species. When a Cantor sings, things happen. It depends on the song. I sang a healing song for you.

She reads it slowly, and she touches her own throat while she does it.

"I'm sad I can't hear it," she says.

It's better that you can't. Trust me.

She looks from the note to my mask and back.

"I used to sing, too," she says.

I sit down in my chair so that she doesn't have to look up at me. Taking my gesture as an invitation, she goes on. Her voice is low, warm, and a little rough. She doesn't know that, but I do. I could listen to it for as long as she'd let me.

"I'm from Rosemere," she says. "I sang at the Lyric House there. I was the youngest prima donna they'd ever had. People came to listen to me. They loved my voice, and I loved singing for them. That was my life, and I thought it would be like that forever."

She pulls her sleeves down over her hands.

"My family had a bakery. My mother, my father, and my brother. He was younger than me. There was a fire, in the night, while they were working and I was asleep upstairs. They didn't get out. I did."

She touches the right side of her face, then drops her hand.

"I lost them, and I lost my hearing. I was beautiful before, you know? That was half of what people came for, and I knew it. Now I'm a husk. No one wants what's left. I'll never sing the way I did, because I can't hear an orchestra, and I can't hear myself. I still do it sometimes, when there's no one to hear, but I must sound terrible. I have no way of knowing."

I hear the words *prima donna*, and I don't hear much after them.

I write one word and hold it out to her.

Prima.

"Yes," she says. "I used to be a prima donna."

I nod, because there's no way to tell her what that word means to me. I think that some almighty power heard me, that a century of talking to a woman who wasn't there was heard somewhere and answered, and that she was sent down on the lift in a white dress because of it. I push the thought away. No one sent her to me. She's a woman with a name of her own who was put in a cage, and I'm going to let her go.

I don't know what else to write, so I write the only thing that's true and simple.

I will bring food.

I go to the kitchen, and she watches me from the chair. I don't keep much a human can eat, because I've never needed to. When the offerings come

down, I take what I want from the platform and send the rest back up. That has always been enough. I open the cupboards one after another. There's a jar of honey, there's butter on a covered dish, a tin of biscuits, and a bottle of wine. I carry all of it to the table.

Aveline gets up, comes to the table, and sits down in Prima's chair. Her chair now, for as long as she'll be in my house. I set a plate in front of her, then a knife and a spoon. I move the honey, the butter, and the biscuits close enough that she can reach them without asking.

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Chapter Eight

Aveline

I eat everything he puts in front of me. It's a simple breakfast, but it's delicious. He pours wine into a glass, and I take a few sips before I convince myself it's too early to drink. He doesn't join me, and I think that maybe he ate before I came out of my room.

Mordred takes the paper from beside my glass and writes on it, then turns it so I can read it.

Would you like me to show you the rest of the house?

"Yes," I say. "Please. If it's no trouble."

He stands, and I stand with him. I keep the table between us so I can watch his hands. I can't read anything from his face. The mask keeps his mouth from view, and his eyes never change, so his hands are the only part of him that tells me anything. They're large, his claws are black, and he holds the pen lightly with the claw tips clear of the paper.

There are three doors off this room. The first is the one I came out of, and I know it already. He points to the second and writes on the paper, *My room*. He doesn't open it. He doesn't move toward it, and I understand without being told that I'm not to go in there. I wonder what's on the other side. A bed, I suppose. I wonder if it's as fine as mine, or if he keeps all the fine things for the room he gave me.

The third door opens onto a corridor, narrow and dim, with lamps set along the wall. He looks at it, then turns back toward my bedroom instead, and writes, *The bathing chamber first*.

We cross my room, past the canopy bed and the nightgown I never touched, and he opens the back door. The air inside is warm and damp. The chamber is tiled in old patterns, cracked in places and scrubbed clean, with folding screens set along the walls and mirrors fixed between them. Copper pipes run down to a deep stone bath sunk into the floor, where water moves and steam rises from the surface.

I catch my reflection in the nearest mirror. Pale hair, white lace, and the shine of the right side of my face. I turn my head away and look at the water instead.

"It's warm," I say. "Do you heat it?"

He writes, *A spring. The water comes warm from the rock*.

"You said you don't need it."

No. It's yours.

The copper is polished and the tiles are clean, as if someone has looked after this room with great care. He's just told me he doesn't use it. I think of the gowns in the wardrobe and the combs in the drawers. I don't ask him who bathed here. I don't think he'd write the answer, and I'm not sure I want to read it.

We go back through the main room, and he leads me into the corridor. It's narrow enough that I have to walk behind him, so I keep close, close enough to see his hands whenever he stops. Circles of lamplight lie on the floor with dark between them. He stops at the first door and writes one word before he opens it.

Library.

The room is bigger than the main room. Shelves rise to the ceiling, with cabinets with glass fronts, and desks with lamps burning on them. I can tell that all of it had been carried down from the offices above. There are hundreds of books, bound journals stacked on the desks, boxes of loose pages, and sheets of music laid out under glass. It's beautiful, and it's also wrong, with so much writing, so many lamps, and no window anywhere.

"Did you read all of these?" I ask.

Most.

I point to the journals on the nearest desk. The handwriting on the open page I see is his. I know it now.

"Did you write those?"

Yes.

I don't touch them. I read the spines on the shelves and the labels on the boxes, and I keep my hands folded at my waist.

He writes, *Music room* at the next door he leads me through, and I stop in the doorway.

There's a piano against the far wall, and a harp next to it with all its strings. There are violins in open cases along a shelf, a cello in its stand, horns, flutes, a drum, and music stands set in rows. Some of the instruments are polished and whole. Others are half built – a violin body without a neck, a horn with a new brass section fitted into old green metal, pieces laid out on cloth beside them. Cabinets line one wall, and every shelf holds scores.

I know all of it. I know where each one belongs below a stage, and what it does when the conductor lifts his hand. I used to feel the cellos through the boards.

“You fixed these?” I ask.

Some. Others I’m still building.

“I sang with an orchestra. I could tell when one instrument was out of tune before the conductor could.”

I stop before my voice gives me away. I refuse to cry.

“They’re beautiful.”

He writes nothing to that. I don’t touch any of the instruments. It wouldn’t be polite, and I don’t know what I’d do with my hand on a string I can’t hear.

The last door is the workshop. Benches run the length of it, and there are tools hung on the walls in careful order – saws, chisels, clamps, cabinets of hardware, coils of rope, and painted boards leaning in the corner with clouds and columns on them. On one bench, there’s a chair with three legs, and on another, a lamp with its glass off. The whole room smells of oil and sawdust.

He writes, *I repair furniture and instruments here. I also keep the lift working.*

“The lift that brought me down?”

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Yes.

I look at the clamps and the chisels, and then at his hands. Everything in this house was carried, built, or mended here, and it was done with those claws. I don’t say anything about the lift.

We go back to the main room, and I sit in the velvet chair by the hearth. He remains standing. I add up what I’ve given him and what he’s given me. I’ve told him about Rosemere, the Lyric House, the bakery, and the fire. He’s only given me his name, one word for what he is, and a handful of lines on paper.

“You know a great deal about me,” I say. “I know that you’re called Mordred, that you’re a Cantor, and that you can heal. That’s all.”

He waits with the pen and paper in his hand.

"I could teach you sign language," I say. "Then you wouldn't have to write everything down. It would be faster for both of us. I could ask you things without making you stop to find paper."

He looks at my hands, then writes, *Teach me.*

So, I do. I motion for him to sit down, and when he does, I turn to him and give him an encouraging smile. I say "table" and make the sign. He copies it, his fingers long and the claws catching on each other. I say it again and shape my hand slowly so he can see. I move on to "chair", "hearth", and "house". He watches my hands with everything he has, and by the third word, he's not making any mistakes.

"Good," I say. "That's good."

I fold my hands in my lap and look at his face, at the white porcelain and the grille over his mouth.

"Why won't you take off the mask?"

He lifts a hand to it. He touches the edges and the clasp at the back of his head. Then he brings his hand down and writes.

My mouth. I'm embarrassed by it.

I think of my own face and how I always try to hide the side that's marred. I have no right to judge him or insist that he shows me his face.

"All right," I say. "You didn't eat this morning. Why not?"

He writes again.

I don't need human food.

I look at the kitchen with its pots and its shelves, and at the table with two plates on it, one used and one clean. I don't ask anything else.

He leaves me for a moment, walks to the door, then comes back with his cloak on. He writes on the piece of paper and hands it over to me.

Come out on the boat with me.

I follow him out without asking where we're going or what we're doing.

We cross the eerie garden at a measured pace, and when we reach the dock, he offers me his hand to help me down the slippery steps. He holds the boat steady while I step in, then he takes the oar and starts rowing standing, moving the oar from one side of the boat to the other, so it glides in a straight line. The lit lamp at the front barely breaches the darkness.

I sit facing him. I'm not shaking this time, I just look at the water. It's black on every side, and the island lamps fall behind us until they're mere

points in the distance. I count his strokes. I try to keep the direction in my head, but there's nothing to fix it to.

The platform comes into the light, hanging at the end of the rails that run up into the broken ceiling far above us. There's no cage on it now. There's a tray with a lid on it, and from the boat, I can smell meat, bread, and something sweet.

Mordred ties the boat to a rail. He lifts the tray with both hands and sets in the boat, at my feet. Then he takes the rest – cards folded and tied with a string, a book, and loose paper. He gathers them but doesn't show them to me. He opens a wooden box under the bench and lays them in it, one at a time, then closes the lid. I watch him and don't ask. When he's done, I look up instead.

The rails go up through the hole in the vault, and next to the platform, a line hangs. I follow it with my eyes. Mordred pulls the line to send the platform back up. It's a pulley, and it works from either end. A person could stand on the platform and pull herself up into the House of Voices. And by *a person*, I mean... me.

I'd need the boat first. I'd have to take it while he slept, find this place in the dark, tie it to the rail, and haul. I look at the line and at my own arms in their lace sleeves. I wouldn't be able to move the iron platform. And if I could, I'd rise into that hall, and I wouldn't know who waited at the top of it. I doubt the people of Nivallia don't watch over the altar they built on the stage.

It's too much risk for what I'd gain, so I'll wait, watch, and see what Mordred wants from me.

He unties the boat and turns us around. I keep the tray between my feet, so it doesn't slide. As we slowly approach the island, all I can do is think. I've seen the house now, or the parts of it that he wanted to show me. A room of his I can't enter, a bath kept for someone, a library, a room full of music instruments, a workshop where he builds things. I've seen the lake and the only way up, and it goes to the people who put me in a cage.

There's no door in this place I could leave through by myself. Mordred never locked one, and I understand why. He doesn't need to.

The island lamps come up ahead of us, small and then larger. I watch them and not the dark behind me. The tray is warm against my ankle. I keep my hands folded in my lap and my heart steady in my chest.

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Chapter Nine

Mordred

Aveline waits until her plate is half empty before she asks me what she is to me.

I set two places at the table earlier, lifted the lid, and motioned for her to take as much as she wanted while I sat across from her, my own plate empty and my hands folded in front of it. She ate the way she'd eaten this morning, with nothing wasted, only pausing to frown at me, making me avert my gaze, realizing that I was staring.

Now she's staring back, asking me something I hadn't thought of.

"I've been thinking about it since the bride market," she says. "I signed the contract without asking Callum. Not that he would've answered honestly. Am I here to be your wife, or your servant?"

I take the paper from beside the lamp and write: *Neither.*

She reads it and waits, so I write more.

I didn't ask for you. I don't know why they sent you down to me. I won't assign a role for you.

She shrugs at that.

"Then what should I do here?"

Eat, rest, and ask me for anything you want.

"Thank you," she says.

Her voice is so quiet. She looks down and picks up the bread.

It's the truth, and I'm glad to give it to her. The note Callum sent her with is still crumpled in my pocket. The two verses from the ancient Cantor song tell me nothing about his intentions when he put her in a cage and sent her down.

Aveline isn't here as my bride, because no one asked me. Or her, for that matter. And she isn't a servant because I won't make her one. That leaves a woman eating at my table, sleeping in the bedroom next to mine, going for strolls in the garden when she feels the need to move her body, when she's spent too many hours reading by the fire.

Days pass like this. Silent days, animated days with Aveline teaching me sign language, pleasant days in the music room, where I play the piano or the cello, and she sits close enough to feel the vibrations of the instruments.

The people of Nivallia lower the platform every day, and I take her across the lake each time. There's always more than she can eat. There's

bread, roasted meat, cheese and, more often than not, pastries, folded, glazed, and dusted with sugar. Everything else goes into the box under the bench. Sometimes there's a book, cards and drawings from the children, or folded notes with no name written on them.

I read the notes when she can't see me, when she's in bed for the night and I know for certain she will not walk out of her room. They ask for a Mercy. That's the name they've given to my Healing song. Some ask plainly, in one line, others describe pain in the chest, the joints, or the head, and ask for the song so the pain will go away. Some ask me to sing for a child who can't sleep. I read every one, fold it along its creases, and lay it in the box I keep in my room, tucked in the closet with my robes.

Every morning, Aveline comes out in a new dress. The wedding dress doesn't appear again, and I'm glad she feels comfortable enough to use the things in her room. Because it is her room, not Prima's, and they are her things.

The lessons go on every day, because there's little else on the island to fill the time with. She teaches in the evenings as we sit by the hearth. She says the words, makes the signs, and I copy her movements.

"Hungry," she says, and makes the sign. I copy it. "Yes, that's it. Now ask me."

I make the sign at her and tilt my head. She answers with her hands and her voice together.

"No. I just ate."

I smile behind the mask, though I know she can't see it. I'm becoming quite proficient, if I say so myself.

"Tired," she teaches next. "Cold." I copy that too. "Now put them together and ask me."

I ask her with my hands whether she's cold, and she shakes her head and answers with the sign for *no*. Then she shows me more words – *yes*, *where*, and *what* – and checks each one by asking me a question and waiting for me to answer. She gives me the questions she'd want to ask and the answers she'd want from me, and I've never been more focused in my life. After she shows me the sign for *tomorrow*, I can ask her with my hands whether she wants to go out on the boat. She smiles and signs *yes*.

One evening, she pulls her chair over until its arm touches mine, so she can reach my hands. She shows me a sign that needs both hands, and she

makes it slowly. She repeats the phrase, touches me on the wrist, and my fingers twitch with the need to touch her back. I resist the temptation.

I watch her hands, and then I don't. I watch her mouth shaping the word and listen to her voice, warm and a little rough. She leans in, and I can smell her clean, beautiful hair. When she sees that I've understood the new sign, her face changes. I've begun to watch for that delightful change more than I watch her hands.

I try the sign and turn my wrist the wrong way.

Aveline laughs. It's a low sound, and it's over too quickly. She reaches across the arm of the chair, takes my wrist in her fingers, and turns it the way it should go. Her hand is warm against my skin.

I don't know what she's teaching me anymore. I can't remember anyone taking hold of me like this, without asking, without fear, over a mistake this small. I can't remember anyone laughing with me over anything at all. I'm certain, while her hand is on mine, that I've lost my mind after all. That I'm alone, and in the chair next to me, there's an empty dress and nothing more.

Aveline lets go. She makes the sign again and urges me to try. I do, she nods and goes on to the next, and I follow her hands and take in none of it.

I can't stop thinking about this one thing. This one obsession. Will I be able to let her go?

I know what my house is to her. There's no lock on any door because none is needed. There's the lake, the dark, the only boat, and the platform that rises into a hall where someone is always tending to the altar. She has no way out of here. Not without my complicity.

I tell myself I'll find a safe way to send her up. I told myself she'd only be here for one or two days.

It's been a week.

On a later crossing, there's a note that looks different. I know the handwriting as soon as I unfold it. I put it in the box with the rest and set the tray of food on her lap.

I read it after her door has closed for the night. Callum calls Aveline a gift from Nivallia. He asks for a sign that the gift was accepted. He asks me to sing again, if the gift pleases me.

So, I know now what he hoped to buy. He wants me to sing, and she's supposed to be payment. I understand that much, but I can't understand the rest, how a man takes a frightened woman, fastens her in a cage, lowers her into the dark, and writes the word *gift*. I told her I didn't know why they

sent her. It was true when I said it. I fold the note and put it away with the others.

Aveline asks more questions now that she doesn't have to wait for me to write the answers. When we row to the platform, she points at the stack of cards and asks what they are.

I sign: "Letters. For me."

She nods and looks away.

I'm hiding things from her. The cards and the notes, how my song could heal everything broken in her body, what the people want from me. She doesn't press when an answer stops short, and I've begun to depend on that.

During the day, Aveline keeps her door open. From my chair, I can see the mirror on her wall. She never stands in front of it. The drawers of jewels, combs, and cosmetics stay shut, and she wears her hair brushed and loose with nothing in it. The wardrobe is full, but she chooses the gray, brown, and dark blue gowns, with sleeves to the wrist, collars to the chin, and skirts that cover her shoes. Whenever she sits next to me, she turns her right side away from me. I thought, at the start, that it was out of fear.

One evening, after our lesson, I don't have the signs for what I want to ask, so I reach for pen and paper.

Why do you wear only those? Everything in your room is yours. Any dress or ornament you like. Choose what you want.

She reads it.

"These are comfortable," she says. "I don't want to spoil the fine ones."

I put the pen down and wait.

She looks at the fire and sighs.

"I'm ashamed of the burns." She touches the collar of the gown where it closes over the side of her neck. "They're ugly. I know you've seen them. I'm sorry you have to look at them."

On instinct, my hand goes to the back of my head to check the clasps of my mask. It's tight over my face, no chance of it slipping. I force my hands down. It's become a nervous tic by now, to always check, especially in her presence.

Her burns have never been ugly to me. I didn't know until now that they bother her. The fact that she's apologizing for them takes me aback. I don't understand it. Why would someone as beautiful and kind as Aveline apologize for the way she looks, for her existence in my space?

I must be doing something wrong. This is my fault.

When I sang to heal her wrists, I felt the marred skin through the song. I could've mended it then. I left it, partly because it needed no mending in my eyes, and partly because if I mended damage that deep, she'd wonder what else I could restore. And I didn't want her to wonder. I've told myself since that leaving her as she is does her no harm. I can't tell myself that anymore.

I pick up the pen and write.

I can heal your burns.

I turn the paper toward her and hold it in the lamplight where she can read it.

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Chapter Ten

Aveline

I read what he wrote twice, because the first time, my eyes go over the words without taking them in. Mordred holds the paper steady in front of me. I've had the scars for six months, and in that time, they've stopped being something on my face and become my face.

"You can heal them," I whisper.

"Yes," he signs.

"All of them? The ones on my body too?"

He hasn't seen those, so he's surely not aware of the extent of the damage.

"All of them," he signs.

I look at his hands, then at the mask, but there's nothing for me to read, the same as always. I want to ask him whether he's certain. I want to ask him whether he's looked at all of me without my knowledge, because I've kept the gowns buttoned to my throat and the sleeves to my wrists since I've come here, and there's no way he could know how far the scars go.

"Why didn't you do it before?" I ask. "When you healed my wrists?"

He takes his time, looking for the right signs that would convey what he wants to say.

"Old burns are harder," he signs. "Fresh bruises are easy. I wasn't sure I could do this, so I didn't try."

I nod. It's a reasonable answer, and I believe it. I also consider it beside the closed door of his room, and the papers he stashes away in a box before I can get a look at them. He has given me a true answer with a gap in it. I've learned to notice those.

"All right," I say. "What do I do?"

"Stay still."

I fold my hands in my lap and sit back in the chair. He doesn't come closer and doesn't reach for me. He only goes still, with his shoulders set and his head tilted a little. Behind the grille of his mask, I can barely tell that his lips are moving. I've never heard him sing, but I know when he begins, because the feeling from when he mended my wrists comes back, only slower and deeper. It doesn't stop at my hands.

It reaches into my jaw and along my neck, down my right side, into my ribs, my back, and my thigh. It doesn't hurt. The tightness that has lived

inside my skin for so long that I'd stopped feeling it eases, one inch at a time.

I push my sleeve up past the elbow and watch. The ridged skin along my forearm goes smooth before my very eyes. The glossy patches lose their shine and take on the color of the skin around them. I turn my arm over and back, and wherever I look, the skin is changing.

It takes longer than my wrists took. I can't tell how much longer, because I have nothing to measure it by except the subtle movement of his lips behind the mask and the feeling in my body. I don't dare speak in case I break whatever he's doing. I keep my eyes on him. He breathes rhythmically, his chest rising and falling as he sings.

When the tingling feeling in my body settles, I know it's over. I don't wait. I get up, cross the living room, go through my door, and stop at the mirror I've walked past with my eyes down since my first night in this house.

In the glass, I see the girl from the posters in Rosemere. Her right temple is smooth to the hairline, her cheek is whole, her jaw and neck are perfect, and the corner of her mouth isn't mangled. I touch my fingers to my cheek to make sure what I'm seeing is real. The skin under my fingertips is soft, even, and mine.

I pull the gown down, off my shoulders, and look at my neck and my right shoulder. They're clean. I gather the skirt in both hands and pull it up past my knee, past my thigh. The place where the scar covered half my leg is smooth. I undo even more laces and buttons, until the dress barely hangs to my frame. I twist to see my ribs and as much of my back as I can. I don't think about anything but looking. I don't think about the door I've left open.

Then I see Mordred in the mirror. He's standing behind me, in the doorway, and our eyes meet. He came after me, found me half undressed, and I have the feeling he couldn't look away. He does now. His head bows slightly, then he turns his face away, his hands clutched in front of him.

My face goes hot. I let the skirt fall and pull the gown back up over my shoulders. It's still undone and I look disheveled, but I can't stop looking at myself in the mirror, can't stop running my hands over skin that looks as if it was never ruined.

My legs go out from under me. I don't decide it. I'm on the floor, with my hands over my perfect face, and I'm crying the way I haven't cried in front of anyone since the hospital, with my whole body, with no sound I can

hear. Mordred finally steps into the room. He bends and offers me his hands to bring me up.

I don't take them. I reach past them, put my arms around his knees, and hold on.

"Please," I say into the fabric of his trousers. "If you can do this, you can do anything. Please give me back my hearing. Please. You can, I know you can, please do it now."

He goes rigid. He holds his hands away from me, wide in the air, touching me nowhere. I've gone too far. I know it, but I can't let go. I feel him tremble in my desperate embrace.

"Please," I say again.

He lowers himself to his knees so that we're level, takes my wrists gently, and moves my arms from around him so that I can see his hands.

"No," he signs.

"You can. You just did this."

"I tried," he signs, slow and clear. "When I healed your wrists, I tried. I tried again now. What took your hearing is beyond me. I'm sorry."

I furrow my brows as I stare at his hands, but they've stopped moving. I sit back on my heels. I was told in the hospital that the force of the explosion took my hearing, not the fire. Whatever that force did, it did something a song can't mend. I believe him. It would be selfish not to.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have asked. I'm grateful. I'm so grateful for what you've done. I didn't expect this. I didn't expect anything."

He waits. I wipe my face with both hands and breathe until my voice steadies.

"What can I give you in return?" I ask. "I have nothing, but there must be something I can do."

His hands start moving.

"Sing for me," he says.

"Sing?"

"Sing for me."

I push myself up. I set my feet apart, place my hand on my throat, and draw a breath. He lifts one hand with the palm toward me, and I stop with the breath still in me.

"Not here?" I ask.

"Come," he says.

He leads me out through the main room, past the hearth, through the third door, and into the dim corridor. I know the way now. He passes the library and opens the music room, lights a lamp, and walks between the piano and the harp to the far wall, where a tapestry hangs from a rod near the ceiling. I saw it on the first day and took it for decoration. It shows a stage with its curtains drawn back and a row of masked figures bowing, woven in colors that have gone brown and gold with age.

He lifts the edge of the tapestry. Behind it, I see a plain door with an iron latch. He works the latch and pushes the door inward. I notice that this door is thick, thicker than any other in the house, and padded on the inside.

"I didn't know this was here," I say.

"I know," he signs.

He goes in first and lights the lamps on the walls. I follow him.

Heavy stage curtains cover every wall, the dark red kind. Where the curtains part, I can see layers of costume felt tacked under them, and under the felt, panels of cork. Pieces of old, painted scenery, wrapped in more felt and stuffed until they're soft, stand against the corners and are fixed to the ceiling. The floor is covered too. A single chair stands in the middle of the room. There's nothing else. Every piece has been cut, fitted, and layered against the next, and where the layers meet, I can see the seams, the patches, and the places where the work was done over.

"What is this room?" I ask.

"Sing here," he signs, and points to the chair.

He closes the door. I move to where he showed me, but I don't sit down. He stays by the door with his hands at his sides.

I choose my favorite. It's the piece I sang most often when I was the prima donna at the Lyric House. I know it by feel, so I don't have to think about where it starts. I put my hand on my chest, take the first breath low, and begin.

I realize that I'm afraid. I can't hear my pitch, can't hear whether I'm loud or soft, can't hear what the smoke did to my voice. Mordred does. He hears all of it, and I feel like I'm left in the dark.

I told him I must sound terrible, and now he's finding out. I hold on to what's still mine. The breath comes from the belly, the sound moves high into my face, my throat stays open and my jaw loose. The notes hum under my palm, steady in my bones.

Then there's a warmth under my skin that wasn't there before. It's in my chest, and it spreads outward, into my shoulders and down my arms. It isn't from the singing. I know what my singing feels like. This isn't coming from me.

I look at Mordred. Behind the white mask, his dark lips seem to be moving. His chest rises and falls, but not with my rhythm, with one that fits under it. He's breathing where a singer breathes. He's leaning in toward me, his head tilted, his whole body turned to me. I understand that he's singing with me.

I smile, and I keep going. I'm still afraid of what he hears. But he hasn't stopped me, hasn't looked away, and he's leaning toward me, so I stop holding anything back. I let the breath go all the way down and the sound come all the way out.

He takes a step toward me. I take a step toward him. We don't touch. I look up into the darkness of his eyes, and he looks down into mine. I sing to him, and I feel his voice in the floor, through the soles of my shoes, in the warmth in my chest, and in the rhythm of his breath.

I've missed this so much. I didn't know how much until now, with someone here to sing to. To sing with. I let myself have it.

I sing my favorite piece at full voice to the only one who's ever asked me to sing since the fire.

Chapter Eleven

Mordred

I have never sung with anyone before.

I'm doing it now, with my jaw held tightly inside the porcelain ribs and my voice kept so low that it barely passes the grille.

I brought Aveline into this room because I knew this would happen. I heard the first line of her song in her room and understood that I wouldn't stay quiet through the rest of it. So, I led her here, where the stage curtains, the costume felt, and the cork panels keep every sound from leaving. Nothing I sing in this room reaches Nivallia. Even so, I'm careful, and I don't let the notes rise or my mouth open past what the mask allows. I know she can't hear me, and my caution is mostly for my peace of mind than her safety.

Her voice fills the room. I keep mine quieter than hers.

Her training is obvious. She breathes from low in her body, places each note forward, and she shapes every phrase with the discipline that made her the youngest prima donna at the Lyric House in her home city. I can tell the smoke from the fire that killed her family changed her original voice. There's a rough edge at the top of her range that a prima donna isn't supposed to have. She has it anyway, and I wouldn't trade it for the clear voice she must've had before.

Aveline can't hear any of it. She keeps one hand against her throat, her fingers pressing into the skin when she reaches for a note. Twice she lands beside the pitch she wants, and twice she finds it on the next breath through nothing but muscle memory. I don't wait for her to come to me, because she wouldn't know how. I move my note to meet hers, so the interval stays true, and she never knows she drifted. I follow her breath and fit mine under it. Where she slows, I slow. Where she opens her voice, I let mine open a little to stay level with hers, then I bring it down again. She's leading, and I'm the one adjusting. I've never once in my long life done this for another voice.

She doesn't hold back. She sings at full strength, loud enough to reach the back row of a full house. Her eyes stay on the grille of my mask, on my mouth moving under the thin ribs. She can't see much of it, and that thought allows me to be myself around her.

I hear both of us. I hear the two parts separate and return to the same note, I hear how her rough edge sounds next to the smoothness of mine. She makes my song sound better than it does alone.

I've never allowed myself a duet like this. Two Cantors who sing together lose control of what their voices do. Their songs don't blend so much as multiply, and there's no telling what they'll become and what damage they'll cause. So, I've sung alone in every place I've ever lived. I built this room so I could go on singing alone without affecting anyone. I never imagined a voice I could sing beside safely. I certainly never imagined that it would belong to a woman who can't hear me, a woman who stands a step away from me with her face turned up and every part of her being still belonging to her.

That's what moves me most. She isn't enthralled. There's no glaze over her eyes and no slackness in her mouth. Her pleasure in the song is plain and belongs to her alone. I've never seen anyone this happy within the range of my voice without my voice being the cause of it. She's happy because she's singing. I'm standing close enough to see it, and I want it not to end so badly that the wanting frightens me.

Her voice fades on a held note, and she lets it go. I stop right after her.

Neither of us moves. I can hear the silence. The padding absorbs every echo, and the only sounds left in the room are her breathing and mine. She lowers her hand from her throat and looks at me. She doesn't ask anything. I don't offer anything. I know what I would say if I could, and I don't.

I know something else, standing here, getting lost in her bright eyes. Whatever plan I've been making about the way up and the road beyond Nivallia, it has just become harder to carry out now that she's sung for me. With me.

I lift my hand and gesture for her to follow me.

I push the padded door open and hold the tapestry aside for her. In the music room, the lamps glow eerily. She walks past the piano and the half-built violins without looking at them. I lead her along the corridor to the library.

The music scores are kept under glass in the case near my desk. I lift the lid and take out the scores from the bottom shelf, half a dozen of them, and carry them to the table under the lamp. They're fair copies. I wrote them out in my own hand with no crossings, no smudges, and no wasted ink, because

I had nothing but patience and no one to hurry me. Each has a title across the top. I set them down in front of her and take a step back.

She looks at the top page, then at me.

I sign to her.

"I wrote these."

"You compose," she says, and it's not a question.

"Yes. These are for two voices. One is mine. The other is a woman's." I make the signs slowly, though she doesn't need me to, but I don't trust myself to speed up without making mistakes. "I wrote them hoping I could sing them with someone one day."

Prima, I think. Thought she isn't real.

Aveline reads the title on the first score aloud.

"Litany Beneath Black Water." She turns to the next one. "Nocturne for the Unlit Stage." She looks up at me. "Are these all yours?"

"All of them. Those two are my favorites. Would you like to learn them? And sing them with me?"

She doesn't answer right away. She pulls the first score toward her, bends over it, and reads along the upper line. Her lips move over a phrase without sound. Then she hums, a low steady note, and puts her hand against her throat to feel the pitch. She checks it against the page and hums the next. I can hear that she's a little under the pitch on the second one. She can't, but her fingers press harder into her neck, and she adjusts anyway.

"The line is high here," she says, and touches the page. "You wrote it for a soprano."

"Yes."

"Your part is under it the whole way." She traces the lower line with one finger. "You never let it cross above hers."

"No."

She keeps reading. Eventually, she straightens and looks at me.

"Yes. I'd like to try. It's going to be hard for me. I'll have to learn it through my hands and my breath, and I won't know if I have it right unless you tell me. But I'll try." She taps the upper line with two fingers. "You'll have to stop me when I'm off the note. Don't let me go on because you don't want to hurt my feelings."

"I won't be kind about it," I say with a smile.

"Good. I'd rather know." She glances down at the score again, and she speaks more quietly. "I'm sad that I can't hear you sing."

I keep my hands still and let her go on.

“I think you have a beautiful voice,” she says. “I know I’ve never heard it, but I felt it in there. I felt it through the floor and in my chest. And I can see it here.” She touches the paper. “No one who doesn’t have a voice worth writing for writes like this.”

She’s just told me the thing I most want to be true about myself. I don’t know how to receive such a compliment, so I bow my head. Then I remember what my voice is. The voice of a monster. A voice that heals but also manipulates and drives people mad.

“It’s better that you can’t hear it,” I sign.

I’ve told her this before. Now her reaction is different. She tilts her head and watches my hands finish signing.

“Why?” she asks.

I could tell her. What she’s seen of it so far is the kind part: the bruises closing, the burns gone. There’s another part. People who hear enough of it begin to want it, then they begin to need it. I’ve witnessed what that need does. I could tell her that.

I look at her face, at the eyes that have never once gone soft and empty for me, and I imagine how her expression would change if I did.

That isn’t even the worst of what I’m keeping from her. She asked me on her knees to give her back her hearing, and I told her it was beyond me. If I explain now what my voice does to the people who can hear it, she’ll ask the next question, and then the one after that, and I’ll have to lie to her again or tell her everything.

I’m still thinking of an answer to her question when, far above us, the lift begins to move. I can hear the counterweight take the load and the platform start down the guide rails.

I point at the door.

“The platform is coming down. Would you like to come with me and see what the people have sent?”

She cocks an eyebrow and regards me with mild suspicion. Finally, she nods.

Chapter Twelve

Aveline

Nearly two weeks have passed. When we talk, he doesn't need to write anything down anymore. I speak freely and make the signs with my hands at the same time, so he keeps learning. He knows the names of every room and most of what stands in them. When he needs a word I haven't shown him yet, then he writes it down so I can read it. He asks me for the sign and remembers it on the first try. His memory is impressive.

We spend much of each day in the padded room behind the tapestry. He told me he calls it the Silent Room. He lights the wall lamps, closes the thick door on its iron latch, and we sing together. I've learned the first two of his pieces, the Litany and the Nocturne. I can't hear him, but I feel the floor thrum under my feet when he joins me, and a warmth that spreads from my chest into my throat that doesn't come from my own breath. He stands close but never touches me. I watch his lips move behind the grille of his mask and fit my breathing to his as much as I can. I love it more than I know how to tell him. I loved the Lyric House, and I loved the applause, but no one in Rosemere ever sang with me like this.

What I don't understand is why it has to happen in this room. The house is quiet, the lake is quiet, and nobody lives on this island but the two of us. Once, I ask him what the room is for, and he only signs, "Sing here." When I ask why we can't sing by the hearth, he distracts my attention with something else.

Mordred says I may do anything I like in his home. He wrote it when he was still writing things down, and he's signed it since. I believe he means it, but I've started to see the limits he never puts into words.

He comes with me to the library every time. He doesn't follow me there, not quite; he happens to have work at his desk whenever I want a book. He reads his journals while I read one of his many fiction novels, and when I put my book back, he closes his and walks out with me. The last time we were in there, I reached for a book on the third shelf, a thick one bound in dark cloth, and his hand closed on it before mine did. He took it down and held it against his chest.

"You wouldn't like it," he signed with his free hand.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Trust me."

“You keep saying that.”

He simply nodded, set the book on a shelf out of my reach, chose another from the same row, and gave me that one instead. I took it. I wanted to tell him I’m not a child, but I said *thank you* instead. Because that’s what comes out of my mouth, always. I read the book he gave me by the hearth, and I didn’t take in a single page.

I know he keeps the letters from the people of Nivallia where I can’t see them. Every time we go to the platform and there’s a new stack of them, he places them in the box. I’ve noticed the box isn’t full yet, which means he moves them from there to some other box he keeps somewhere in the house. Maybe in his room, where I haven’t stepped foot yet.

I don’t want to overstep his kindness. On the rare occasion when he’s out in the garden, I keep to my room, or the living room, or the kitchen corner of it. I don’t go into the library, the workshop, or the music room without him. He’s never asked me to mind where I go alone, but I do it anyway. I’m a guest in his house.

The simple days with him have become the best part of my life since the fire, and that makes it harder to ask him anything that might spoil our easy companionship. It also means that every time I decide to let him distract me, I know it’s my choice. I fold my hands in my lap, so they don’t ask what my mouth won’t.

We’re by the hearth after we sing the Nocturne together, with his scores across his knee and the book he chose for me across mine, when he lifts his head and tilts it toward the door. I know what that particular tilt means. The lift is coming down over the lake.

He stands and signs, “Platform. Come with me?”

“I’m tired,” I say. “I think I’ll stay here this time, if that’s all right.”

He looks at me for a long moment. I’ve never refused his invitation before.

“You’re not unwell?” he signs.

“No. Only tired. Go on, I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Rest,” he signs. “I’ll come back soon.”

He takes his cloak from the hook and goes out. I stand in the doorway and watch the light from the lamp at the front of the boat move away from the dock and shrink over the water until I can’t see it anymore. Then I close the door, turn around, and stare at the door I’ve never walked through before. I have some time.

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I cross the living room and wrap my hand around the door handle. He's never opened mine without asking for permission first. He turned his face away from me in the mirror when I stood there with my skirt pulled up. He's allowed me into every room in this house but this one, and I've never asked for it. If I go in, there's no going back.

I open the door, not knowing what to expect. The room beyond it is dark and neat. A canopy bed stands against the wall, hung with black curtains tied back with cord, and the covers are pulled straight without a wrinkle. A tall desk faces a narrow window. Through the glass, I can see the pale plants in the garden under the lamps. On the desk, there's a pen, a stack of paper, a row of books, and a score with fresh ink on it. The wardrobe is black wood with carved doors. Everything is in its place. It looks like a room no one has ever been careless in.

I go to the desk first. The score is one of his, and the top line is a woman's part. Below it, he's written his own part on the lower staff. There are places where he's scraped the ink away and written the notes again. I put my finger under the first bar and hum it with my other hand against my throat. Then I remember I'm not here for this. The desk drawers hold pens, blotting sand, sealing wax, and folded papers covered in his writing. I leave everything as it is.

I walk to the bed, run a hand over the covers, and try to picture him in it, on his back with the mask still on, looking up at the black canopy. I can't picture it. I don't know if he sleeps at all. Mordred told me he doesn't need human food, so maybe he doesn't need sleep either. Maybe he lies here with his eyes open or sits at the desk and writes, and composes until I come out of my room, and the bed is only another thing he keeps because a house should have one. I know the shape of his hands and the way my chest feels when he sings with me, but I don't know what he is. A Cantor. But I have no reference for his species, really.

I open the wardrobe. His coats hang in a row, black and dark gray, with high collars and tarnished gold at the cuffs. Behind them, the cloaks hang

longer, and behind the cloaks, on the floor of the wardrobe, there's a wooden box with a plain lid. It isn't locked or even pushed to the back. When I lift the lid, I see that I've found what I was looking for.

I carry the box to the bed and read every card and letter in it, look at every drawing.

Some are in Callum's handwriting. I know it from the contract I watched him sign, from the way his letters lean. The rest are different, some written with care, others in such a shaking hand that I have to guess at the words. I understand what they're about before I'm halfway through the pile.

They call him a god, and they beg him to sing. They write about pain, about people who can't stand, sleep, or work, who are certain they're dying without knowing of what. They keep asking him for Mercies.

Callum asks more directly than others, and he asks more often. He writes about the children and about how faithful Nivallia has been. He writes that the gift they sent was given freely and is his to do with as he pleases, that he asks only for a sign the gift was accepted, and that he asks him to sing. I read that page twice before I understand that the gift is... me.

One note is different from the rest. It's a single line, written like a verse of a song, about something given in silence that the Voice can't take. I read it three times and don't understand it at all.

I sit on the edge of Mordred's untouched bed with the letters spread around me. It's all clear now. Like the light of day, which I haven't seen since I was lowered underground.

Callum bought a woman to give to his god. To the monster he believes is a god. He bathed me, fed me, and put a wedding dress on me so I'd walk to the cage on my own feet. He pushed me in when I didn't accept my fate. He did it because the people I saw in the streets, the ones who stopped and held their sides, and pressed their hands to their hearts, are in pain. The pain is Mordred's to take away, and he won't.

He won't, and he knows they're asking. How long has he known that these people are suffering?

The first week, I asked him whether I was his wife or his servant, and he wrote that he didn't know why they'd sent me.

I try to be angry at Callum and find that I'm not. Because all the anger I have is for Mordred. My hands grip the edge of the bed so tightly that the wood hurts my palms. I look at his neat covers, his now open wardrobe, and the box he didn't even try to hide better.

I gather the papers, carry them to the living room, and sit in my chair by the hearth. I spread the letters on the floor around my feet, on the low table, and across my knees, where the light from the fire falls on them. I face the door, because I can't hear the boat come in, and I keep one foot on the stone floor to feel his steps when they approach. Then I keep reading. The cards sent by the children of Nivallia are the ones that break my heart.

Half an hour later, Mordred comes in with a lamp in one hand and a covered tray in the other. He stops when he sees me.

I don't look away from his mask. I wait until I see his head turn down, until I see him look at the floor around my chair, at the letters on my knees. Then I speak, slowly and as clearly as I know how, so he can't pretend he missed a word.

"Why did they send me?"

He doesn't move.

"What does your singing do to them?"

He sets the tray and the lamp on the table without looking at either one. He reaches up behind his head to the clasps of the mask, and I watch his fingers check them one by one. It's a habit I've learned by now.

"Why did you hide their pleas from me?"

He lowers his hands and looks at the letters again, then at me. He knows what he told me when I asked what I was to him, and he knows Callum's notes prove it false. He lifts his hands to sign, and I know the shape his fingers are starting to make, because I taught it to him. It's the shape for *wait*.

I'm on my feet before he finishes it. The papers slide off my knees onto the floor.

"Tell me the truth!"

I haven't shouted like this in a long time. The vibration the sound makes in my throat is vindicating.

Chapter Thirteen

Mordred

Aveline just shouted at me, and it's clear she doesn't know how loud it was. I know. I hear it still, and under it, I hear her heart running faster than ever.

I've been selfish with her. I've told myself that I was being careful, that I was protecting her, that I would put it right soon. All the while, I took her choices away, one at a time. I gave her a room, a bath, and my scores, and I called it kindness. I gave her those things so she wouldn't ask what I was keeping from her. The letters on the floor are what I kept, and now she's found them.

I'm afraid to look at her face. I'm afraid that when I do, I'll see the thing I've seen on every human face that ever learned what I am, except that on hers it will be worse. Because she'll despise me without my voice having affected her judgement.

I know Callum's handwriting from where I stand. There's nothing left to hide about what Nivallia has asked of me these past six months.

I walk closer to the hearth so the light from the fire will fall over my hands. I've learned where she needs me to be. That's one of the few things I've learned for her and not for myself.

"They sent you as a gift," I sign. "The man who sent you wanted me to sing for the city again. I didn't ask for you, I promise. And I haven't answered their pleas."

She watches my hands until they stop. She's always filled my silences before, with a smile or a thank you, or a tilt of her head that let me off easy. She does none of that now. I hear her breathing, short and even, and I know this was the first of her three questions and the easiest. My answer changed nothing in her expression.

"That's one answer," she says. "I asked you three things."

"The second is long," I sign. "You can't read my lips. Let me write it."

"Then write."

I get the pen and paper from the desk, sit in the chair by the hearth, and write for a while. Aveline remains standing. After a minute, she starts pacing, her arms crossed over her chest. When I'm done, I hand the piece of paper to her.

A Cantor's song has different modes. Each one does a different thing. Every one of them helps if it's short, and harms if it goes on too long. That's the rule, and I've never found a way around it.

She reads it and lifts her eyes to my mask. I know she's waiting for the rest, so I take the paper back and write some more.

Healing closes wounds and cures sickness. If it goes on too long, the healed become dependent on it. Their bodies feel weaker without it. Old pain comes back sharper, small sicknesses become unbearable. They come to believe they're dying unless the Cantor sings again.

I hear the rhythm of her heart change while she reads the words. It hurts to know that it isn't enough, and I have to tell her everything.

Lament brings grief to the surface. It lets a person mourn what they've buried. If it goes on too long, they're trapped in the grief and live every loss again, and again, and can't come out of it.

"Go on," she says.

Confession forces a secret out. It can expose a lie or a crime that must be exposed. If it goes on too long, everyone within reach begins confessing, and every private shame comes out whether it matters or not.

Devotion calms people and binds them together. It can steady a frightened crowd or give a divided one courage. If it goes on too long, the attachment turns to obsession. They become possessive. They can't choose for themselves anymore.

Those are four of them, and there are others. I'm telling you these so you understand that a Cantor doesn't sing one song. My song isn't harmless because I mean kindness by it. I've never sung a note in my life that couldn't become a harm if I held it long enough.

She holds the last page longer than the previous ones. Her hand is steady on it, but her breath isn't.

"The people think they're dying because you used Healing on them," she says.

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“Yes,” I sign.

“Your singing hurts them.”

“It didn’t begin that way.”

“Then tell me how it began.”

I write again, this time slower, filling a whole page.

Twenty years ago, a plague reached the village that became Nivallia. I’d promised myself I’d stay hidden and never interfere with the people above me. I watched them fall sick. I watched them carry their children into the old hall and beg any god who was listening. I couldn’t let them die. I went into the acoustic chamber under the auditorium and sang Healing through the old passages until every sick person in the village had recovered. Not one of them died.

I don’t regret saving them.

I look at her while she reads it. She does so with her whole attention and no hardness anywhere in her, which is how she told me her own story the day we met. I know that when she reads the next page, that look will be gone, but I write it anyway. Because the only thing left that I can give her is the whole of it.

I sang for too long. They were healthy and strong for a while, then they felt weak, frightened, and in pain. I sang again to relieve them. Each time I did, I made the dependence stronger. They learned I was here. They began to worship me. They built the city around my voice, and I kept singing to them for years because I couldn’t stand their suffering. I understood what I was doing to them the whole time. I did it anyway.

She stops reading before the end. I see her eyes stop on the page and stay there for a few beats before continuing.

Six months ago, I stopped. I believe that if I refuse long enough, the dependence will break. They’re miserable. I watch them from the ruins, and I’ve seen no sign that the withdrawal is killing them. It’s why the letters beg for Mercies. It’s why Callum believed a gift might bring me back to singing. I understand his desperation, because I’m the cause of it. That doesn’t excuse what he did to you.

Aveline is done reading, but I know it isn’t over. Because I haven’t yet confessed to the reason why I’ve been keeping these things from her.

She steps back and moves away from me toward her bedroom door. She stops with her back against the wall beside it.

“He bought me for you, as a sacrifice, so you’d sing,” she says. “I understand that.” Her voice is louder than she means it to be. This time, she doesn’t correct it. “You told me to trust you. But you’re keeping me here, aren’t you? You’ve accepted the sacrifice.”

I don’t move my hands, and she goes on without waiting for me to decide what to sign.

“You could’ve told me from the beginning. I would’ve understood. I know... I know that I’m broken, and I can’t expect anything from anyone. Callum knew it too when he saw me at the bride market. He was the only one who raised his paddle. He bought the woman that no one wanted.”

Her eyes go past me toward the door that leads to the library, the music room, and the padded room where we sing together. Then she looks at her own hands.

“You healed my burns,” she says. “Every one of them. Face and body.” She lifts her gaze and looks straight at my mask, at the grille that covers my mouth. “Tell me the truth now. Does this mean you can also heal my deafness?”

I can hear the fire burning in the hearth, the water lapping at the dock outside, and her irregular breathing as she waits for my answer.

“You told me you tried,” she says. “You told me you tried twice and it was beyond you. Was that a lie?”

I could sign it in one motion. *Yes* is one motion, and *no* is one motion.

“Did you lie to me?” she asks again, her voice so low now that it sounds feeble.

I go down onto my knees in front of her. I curve my back so low that she has to look down to see my hands. I raise them into the firelight. They’re shaking.

“Forgive me,” I sign.

“Please tell me the truth, Mordred.”

“Let me explain, Aveline.”

Chapter Fourteen

Aveline

Mordred is on his knees before me, and it's not even the first time. I push away from the wall. He keeps his hands up in the firelight, shaking, held where I can read them. I step over his pages and the scattered letters, cross to my chair by the hearth and sit. The velvet is worn through at the arms.

"I'll listen," I say. "But I don't know if I can believe you anymore. You lied to me about the one thing that mattered most, so I don't know if I can trust anything you say now."

He turns toward me and looks up at me, though his head is still slightly bowed.

"Let's try again," I say. "Can you heal my deafness?"

"Yes," he signs.

My breath catches.

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because if I heal you, then you'll hear my voice. My song." He signs fluently now. "What happened to the people above will happen to you. When I sang for them during the sickness, they got well. They became addicted to my song, though. They came to the ruins, left food, knelt, and held ceremonies. They stopped being able to tell wanting me from needing me, and in the end, they stopped trying to tell the difference at all."

"And you think I'd become like them."

"I think anyone who hears me long enough becomes like them. It isn't about strength. Your body would start to need my voice. Then you'd want to stay, and you wouldn't know whether you were choosing it or whether leaving had become unbearable. You'd call it love. I'd never know if it was real."

I look at the letters at my feet and spot the one where Callum begs for a Mercy. I think of the padded room and the warmth that spread through my chest while Mordred sang with me. That was the effect of his voice on my body even if I couldn't hear him.

"Does that mean your plan is to let me go?" I ask.

"Yes."

"When?"

"At the start, I meant to keep you a few days. Long enough to heal you, feed you, and find a safe way to send you up." He signs more slowly. "Then

I kept putting it off. For the first time in my long existence, someone was living with me. Every night, I told myself tomorrow. Every morning, you came out of your room, and I couldn't send you away."

"My room," I say, nodding. "The gowns, the makeup, the jewelry... everything. Who was she?"

"There was no one before you," he signs.

"Don't lie to me again."

"There was no one, I swear it. When I first came down here, before there was a town above me, I was pulling what I could out of the dressing rooms. One of the doors had a plaque on it that said Prima Donna. I told myself the room had belonged to her, so I brought everything here, built a bedroom for her and a bathing chamber. I started saying her name out loud, so I'd have something to say. I started talking to her, pretending that she was here. A companion."

I remember my first day here. He wrote Prima on a scrap of paper, and I said yes, I used to be one. He wasn't asking about my past. He was asking me if I was... her. His imagination become reality.

"I've been alone down here for about a hundred years," he signs. "I furnished her room a piece at a time. At first, I took a chair from a box, a mirror from a dressing room, and a gown I thought she'd like. Then it became... what you see now. Every morning, I went in and said good morning to her. I chose a dress and laid it on the bed. I carried it out here and set it in the chair you're sitting in, and I put her shoes under the hem. I told her what I'd seen in town, I asked her what she thought. I imagined her answering me and laughing together."

He stops signing, and I wait for him to go on. I don't know what to say. I don't know why both my chest and my stomach are aching.

"At night, I took the gown back to her room, wished her good dreams, and closed the door. I always knew she wasn't real. I never once thought she was. I did it anyway, because the other choice was this house with no one in it. The night you came, I put her nightdress on the bed before I went out to the lake. That's what all of it is. I made her up, and then they lowered you down in a cage."

My hands unclench. My fingers twitch, and I find that I want to touch his cold, porcelain mask, his long, black hair. I want to place my hand on his head and pull him in until he's resting on my knee.

I think about what he's done since that night. He gave me the bed he'd kept made up for a woman who doesn't exist. He learned my language when no one in Rosemere had even tried. He showed me the scores he composed and let me sing them without knowing how I sounded. He never locked a door, not even the one to his bedroom. Since the fire, no one has made me feel wanted, and I've grown fonder of him than I've let myself admit. He lied to me, but can I blame him?

"My burns," I say. "You told me they were hard to heal because the damage was deep. You told me you weren't sure you could."

"That was another lie," he signs.

"Why?"

"At first, I didn't heal them because I thought you were beautiful as you were. They didn't take anything away."

"I hated them. It was obvious. I told you how ugly they made me feel. I said I was sorry you had to look at me."

"I heard you." He comes forward on his knees, slowly, until he's at my feet. He settles his hands on my ankles above the slippers. "I was selfish. I thought if you were healed, you'd have one less reason to stay. I thought a woman with your beautiful face would walk out of here and never look back, and I couldn't stand it, so I let you go on hating yourself."

I don't pull away. The cool of his hands seeps into my skin, and a buzzing warmth spreads up my calves, over the backs of my knees, and gathers between my thighs. An ache starts in my lower belly that I have no name for. I've never felt it for anyone. I want him, and I want his hands higher. I want to know what he'd do if I let him. Then I remember why he's on the floor and redirect my wandering mind.

I stand, and his hands slide off my ankles.

I walk to the table where the covered tray is still untouched, then to the closed door of his room, and back to the hearth. I'm pacing. I try to think of him as a man, and I can't.

He is a god who sang until every sick person above got well. He is a creature who set a table for two and tucked shoes under a hem for someone who never existed. He is a monster who left me scarred so I wouldn't leave.

His loneliness helps me understand every one of those choices. Understanding them doesn't excuse a single one. I can't imagine what a century alone does to anyone. I'm angry, all the same, that he let his suffering decide what happened to me and my freedom.

“You don’t add up to one person for me.” I know it’s a strange thing to say. “You are... all these things, good and bad. Contradictory, but somehow, they make sense.”

“The mask hides the part of my face I think would frighten you,” he signs. “The grille over my mouth does more than hide. It holds my voice back. It keeps my jaw from opening all the way.”

I stop where I am, halfway between the table and the hearth.

“There’s a tunnel,” he continues. “It comes out in a wooded ravine past the wall of Nivallia. No one in town knows of it. You can leave through it, and they’ll never see you go.”

My eyes widen, and I look at the front door. There’s a way out, and it doesn’t involve the platform and coming up in the center of the city.

“If you want your hearing back, I’ll give it to you,” he signs. “I need you to understand that I’m afraid of what will happen, though. I’m afraid that once you can hear me, you’ll stop wanting to leave, and neither of us will know if that’s you or the song. I’m not saying you should decide now.”

He lowers his hands. He’s told me everything, and I don’t know which fear to trust, his or mine.

“I need to think,” I say.

He nods.

“I need air.”

He nods again.

“I can’t look at you right now.”

I don’t wait to see his reaction to my harsh words. I cross the room, open the front door, and step out.

The lamps are lit along the retaining wall, and the pale flowers glow between the stones. I walk down the path, away from the house, toward the dock and the black water beyond. He doesn’t come after me. I keep walking until the path ends at the water, and I stand there with the house at my back and the dark in front of me.

Chapter Fifteen

Mordred

For two days after I tell her the truth, Aveline doesn't speak to me. She doesn't look at me either. That night, she came back from her stroll in the garden without a word, crossed the living room without turning her head, and shut herself in her room. She hasn't said a word to me since.

I hear the lift the next morning and go out to it alone. The platform brings down a warm loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese, a covered dish, drawings from the children, and two folded letters. I take all of it into the boat and pull the hauling line to send the empty platform up. I row home, set the dish and the bread on a tray, place the plate on the floor outside Aveline's door, then retreat to the workshop so I won't be there when she opens it. I don't want to impose my presence on her.

When I come back, the tray is empty and the door is shut again. That's how it goes the next day as well. The lift comes down, I row out, I bring her food, leave it at her door, make myself scarce, and later find the plate clean. She eats in her room. I don't eat at all.

I don't do anything, really. I'm a ghost.

I hear everything that happens in the house. It doesn't matter what room I'm in. I hear her feet on the floor when she gets up, the water splashing in the bathing chamber, and the wardrobe door when she chooses a dress. I hear her cross the living room and open the front door. Each time she does that, I go into my bedroom, stand at the window over my desk, and watch her walk down between the pale flowers to the water. She holds her arms folded against the chill, stands on the dock, and looks out into the endless dark. She turns and walks back up the path with her head down. She doesn't even look at the house. She comes inside, crosses the main room, and shuts her door again.

Aveline asked for time and space to think, so I give that to her. I don't knock on her door, don't leave her notes, and don't sit in my chair by the hearth anymore. Instead, I mostly go to the workshop and take apart things that are working just fine, clean each piece and put them back together. Then I take them apart again, because I need something to do with my hands. Sometimes, I sit in the library with a journal open and write nothing. Or I sit at the piano in the music room with my hands on the keys and force

myself to play something, anything. Wherever I am, I'm listening for her door, her movements, her light footsteps on the floor.

On the third day, I sit down at the piano and play. The house is too quiet. I need to fill it with sound. I play whatever comes to me, and I'm halfway through the piece when I hear Aveline's steps down the corridor. I keep playing, because if I stop, she'll know I heard her coming, and she might turn around.

She comes into the music room in a pale gown with thin sleeves that move when she walks, one of the airy ones she's never worn before. She's a vision, even if she looks tired, with dark shadows under her eyes. Her mouth is pressed tightly, into a hard line, her pale hair is brushed, and her back is straight. When she looks at me, she seems determined.

She crosses to the piano and lays her hand on the side of it, above the keys, where the notes come through the wood. She stands there with her palm on the case and her eyes on my hands as I play for her. Then she comes around the end of the bench and sits down beside me, close enough that her sleeve touches my robe. She leans over and rests her head against my shoulder.

I stop playing, my whole body going rigid. My hands hover over the keys. I don't know what to do with them.

Her hair brushes the edge of the mask at my jaw. She's leaning her weight on my arm. I've imagined this, spending long evenings in the chair by the hearth, with a dress draped over the other chair, no living, breathing person to fill it. I taught myself not to trust anything I imagined. I know better than to trust this. I sit still and let her lean on me, but I don't let myself hope.

Aveline lifts her head and looks at my profile.

"I've thought about what you told me," she says. "About my deafness. About what your voice does to the people who hear it."

"Yes," I sign.

"I understand why you are afraid to heal me. I don't want my hearing back if it means what you said. I don't want your song to take away my freedom to choose. I... I don't want to be like the people of Nivallia."

"All right," I sign.

"So, I've decided."

Her eyes are trained on my hands, so she doesn't miss my reaction to her next words.

“I’m going to leave. I want you to show me the tunnel that goes past the city wall.”

I promised her this on my knees. I told her there was a way out, and that I’d show it to her. She’s asking me to deliver on my promise now. And she has every right to.

“I’ll show you,” I sign.

“Thank you,” she says. “Not just for letting me go, but for taking care of me, for healing my burns, all of it. I know I can manage out there. I managed before, and I was deaf then too. Now people might not turn away when I ask for work. It’s impressive what a pretty face can do.”

I could tell that the world is awful and doesn’t deserve her. I could tell her what the road is like for a woman alone, and that people don’t stop being cruel because a few scars are gone and now her skin is smooth. I don’t. As much as I want to keep her here, safe and protected, I know this is a prison to her and nothing else.

Aveline watches me. She’s always watched my hands more than my mask.

“You’re grieving,” she says.

I don’t answer her, because there’s no sign for what’s in my heart that wouldn’t be a plea.

“You were kind to me when I had no one and nothing,” she says. “You fed me, gave me a room and a bed, and you learned sign language just to talk to me. I care about you, Mordred. I care about you more than I know how to say, and I need you to know that before I go.”

I know she means it. That makes it worse. Because I also know she’s still leaving.

She cares about me, and she’s leaving.

I could ask her to stay, but it wouldn’t change her mind. The most it would achieve would be to make her feel guilty, and I don’t want that.

Aveline stands, and I think that’s the end of it. Instead, she gathers her skirt in one hand, puts one knee on the bench beside my thigh, then the other knee on the other side. She’s careful, holding my shoulder for balance until she’s sitting in my lap facing me, with her weight across my legs and her face level with mine.

My eyes widen behind the mask. I don’t move, don’t breathe. I stare at her as if I’m dreaming.

I must be dreaming.

She lays her hands on the sides of my mask and looks into my eyes.

“I want to give you something,” she says, “In return.”

She leans in and presses her mouth to the grille over my lips.

My fingers grip the edge of the bench hard. I feel the warmth of her mouth through the gaps between the porcelain ribs. I don’t understand what’s happening, what she’s doing... Before long, she draws back a little and whispers, so low that a human would never hear it. I am no human, so I register every word. They will be forever imprinted on my brain.

“I want to give myself to you. Take me to your bedroom.”

I shake my head.

“No.”

I want her. I’ve wanted her since she sat in the chair that was empty for a hundred years. I want her now, with her hands on my masked face and her whole weight in my lap. But she said, “in return”, and I can’t take what she thinks she owes me. I also know what it will cost me after. If I have her once, I’ll have to let her walk away knowing exactly what I’m losing. I don’t know how I’ll stand it.

I lean away from her so I can use my hands to sign.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

Aveline takes my hands and places them on her waist. Then she’s kissing my mask again, slower, with more intention behind it. I feel a tremor go through me. My body has never reacted in such a way. She’s not even touching me, not really. There are layers of fabric between us, her fingers press into the porcelain, not into my skin, and her mouth is inches from mine as her lips move over the unyielding grille.

“This is what I want,” she says, pulling away slightly. “I’m not paying you with my body. Listen to me. I already told you *no*. I’m still leaving, and I’m not changing my mind. So, this isn’t because I can’t refuse you. I did refuse you. This is what I’m choosing on my own. I want us both to have something to remember after I’m gone. I want you to have it, and I want to have it too.”

I look into her pale eyes. My own eyes are starting to sting in an unfamiliar way. There’s pressure in my skull, and a sound like rushing air in my ears. There’s a beautiful woman in my lap who’s telling me she wants me, but she’s leaving anyway. She’s waiting for me to decide what to do.

Am I selfish enough to take her offer?

I am.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her against my chest.

Aveline makes a small sound against the mask and holds on to my shoulders as I gather her up and stand with her. Her legs come around my waist, and her long skirt falls over my arms. She's light and warm, and she smells like my damnation.

No woman has ever touched me like this. In all my life, in every place on Alia Terra where I've hidden, no woman has pressed her lips even remotely close to my monstrous mouth or put her arms around my neck and her whole body against mine.

My body does things I have no name for. Heat gathers in my belly and spreads down. Instincts that I never needed before flood my veins, urging me to grip her hips tighter and press mine up against her. I feel myself harden for her. She gasps, then giggles, as if she's not surprised at all. As if this is what she wants.

I carry her out of the music room, down the corridor, into the living room, and head straight for my bedroom. I'm moving fast, as if afraid this dream is going to end before I get to see and have more of her. If she wanted me to stop now... I would. But I would die in the seconds after.

Which reminds me that this is temporary. Aveline in my arms, in my house, keeping me company by the hearth, reading as I compose music for us. It will never happen again. These are my last moments with her. And once I've had this, I won't be able to be here anymore, live here, under this roof.

A plan forms in my mind.

Tomorrow, I'll show her the tunnel. I'll take her over the lake, to the shore, and set her free. When she's safely gone, I'll turn my song against myself. If I can heal, I can break. I'll sing sickness and degradation into my own body until I'm weak, a husk, until I give my last breath.

Yes, this feels right. It's decided.

I've lived long enough and caused enough harm. After Aveline, there's no reason to cling to this existence. Without me, Nivallia will finally heal, truly heal, and be free of my influence. They will forget me too, as if I never was.

I push the bedroom door open with my shoulder and carry her in. She kisses the grille again as I cross the threshold. My arms shake so hard that I'm afraid I'll drop her.

I'm a monster – strong, untouchable, immortal if I choose it.

Aveline makes me feel like I'm nothing.

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Chapter Sixteen

Aveline

Mordred lays me down on his bed slowly. The black curtains of the canopy hang open on either side of us, and the lamp on his desk gives enough light that we can see each other. Once I'm on my back, he pulls away, hovering over me on his hands and knees, looking at my face, searching for something I can't name. Maybe he thinks I'll change my mind.

But I won't. Not about this, and not about leaving tomorrow.

We aren't touching anywhere anymore; we're only breathing in each other's space. I've seen a man not know what to do with me before, though not often. I'm not a virgin. Before the fire, I was young, beautiful, and wanted, and the Lyric House was full of dark corners. I found my way into some of them with a few of the male performers and a couple of the stage boys. No one knew, or everyone knew and no one said anything. I never saw a reason to refuse myself what half of Rosemere wanted from me. Those men mostly knew what they were doing.

Mordred doesn't. He told me there was no one before me. Ever. I believed him then, and I believe him even more now.

"I know this is your first time," I say. I try to keep my voice low, though my own volume is a wild guess to me. "I'll make it good for you."

He lifts one hand from the bedding and signs yes. Then he places it back beside my shoulder and waits.

I smile. At the very least, I have his consent.

I slide out from under him and stand up. The gown ties at the back, so I reach behind me and pull the laces loose while he watches me with intense focus. The gown drops around my feet, and I pull the thin shift over my head and let that fall too. I step into the light and let him look at me.

I turn my right side toward him on purpose. The skin runs smooth from my temple all the way to my thigh. I hid this side from every stranger, but there's nothing left to hide. Thanks to him. He deserves to see what he's done for me. I feel like myself again, the woman on the posters, the one men waited for at the stage door. I'm going to have this night no matter what comes after it.

He sits back on his heels. His head tilts to the side, his hands rest open on his thighs, and he doesn't reach for me. I've watched him look at his scores

with less care than this.

“Will you let me undress you?” I ask, moving toward the bed.

He draws back. His hands come up between us, and I think he’s going to sign *no*, but instead, after a moment’s hesitation, he signs *leave the mask on*.

“I won’t touch your mask,” I say. “Only your clothes. I promise.”

He lowers his hands, and I climb back onto the bed and kneel in front of him.

The robe comes first. It’s black with tarnished gold thread worked along the high collar and down the front, and it closes with a row of clasps that I open one by one, top to bottom, taking my time with each. He holds still while I work. When I open the last clasp, I push the robe off his shoulders and down his arms. He lets me pull it free and lay it aside.

“You wear so many layers,” I say. “I’m not in a hurry.”

The waistcoat laces up the front. I untie the knot at the top and loosen each cross of the lace. Under it, his shirt is white, plain, and closed with more laces at the throat. I pull those open too. I gather the shirt in my hands and lift it, and he raises his arms so I can draw it over his head.

His skin is pale, almost translucent, the skin of a man who never sees the sun. I gasp at how wide his shoulders are, how strong and defined. His chest and arms are hard with muscle. He’s long in the arms and long in the torso. None of it matches a human man’s build, though I couldn’t say which part is wrong. I press my palm to his chest and feel how warm he is, almost hot. I expected cold, because everything about him is so still and pale, but the heat of him sends a current straight to my core.

I untie the laces at the front of his trousers and work them down his hips and legs. He shifts to let me take them off. His cock stands long and thick against his stomach. The tip is already wet with a bead of precum sliding down the underside. He looks like a marble sculpture. I can’t help myself; I lean back and just take him in, every inch of his exposed body, trying to memorize him.

I realize I’ve only slept with boys before. Mordred is not a boy.

“You’re beautiful,” I tell him.

He doesn’t reply to that.

I am wet between my legs. Impatient. I press myself against him, my breasts to his chest, my thighs against his, and I kiss the smooth, white cheek of his mask. I hate that it’s in the way, but I will respect his wish. His

body is majestic. I honestly don't think his face is any different. But if he's not ready to show it to me, then I won't cross that boundary.

I kiss the edge where the porcelain ends and his throat begins. The skin there is soft and warm. I trail down the side of his neck and along his collarbone. I put my hands on his shoulders and gently push him.

"Lie back."

He goes down onto the pillows, easily, with no resistance. I follow him, my mouth moving over his chest, down the center of his stomach, along the line of his hip. I kiss him, bite him, lick him, taste his skin like I've been starved. It's been a while since I've done this. I need it.

I can feel him holding still under me, his muscles tight, his hands closed at his sides. When I reach his cock and bend to suck him into my mouth, his hand closes over my shoulder.

I look up. He shakes his head and pulls me up. I don't fight him. If this is another boundary, I'll respect it. He draws me up his body until I'm kneeling astride his chest, then farther up, until my thighs are on either side of his head. His hands grip my hips, but he's careful not to let his claws dig into my flesh.

"Oh," I whisper.

He holds me there and lifts his head. I feel the porcelain ribs of the grille press against my soaked folds, cool and hard, then his tongue pushes between them and into me.

I throw my head back.

"I didn't think you could do that with the mask on."

The porcelain is cool against my pussy, the ribs push into my sensitive flesh every time he pulls me down onto him, but his tongue is hot and long, and it overwhelms everything. He licks into me, up over my clit and back down. I rock against the mask as he holds my hips, making sure I don't get away, not even when it's too much. I'm soaked. I can feel it running down, seeping through the grille and onto his tongue. The lower part of his mask gets so wet with my juices that I can smell myself when I curve my back over him to look at what he's doing to me. I see his tongue slipping between the ribs, right into my pussy. The sight draws me dangerously close to the edge.

"I'm dripping all over your mask," I gasp. "There. Yes. Like that. Don't stop."

He pushes his tongue deeper and swallows. I feel his throat work against the inside of my thighs. I brace my hands on the headboard and grind down on his face. I come with a cry, my thighs shaking, my spine turning to jelly. He keeps his tongue moving until I'm oversensitive and have to pull away. I collapse next to him, chest heaving.

I want him more than I've ever wanted anyone. My pussy aches with it, swollen, open, and empty. It's been too long, but that isn't the only reason. Until now, I've never been intimate with someone who was more than a convenient body to me, a quick tryst to get the tension out of my system. Mordred is so much more. He's kind, caring, gentle. He wanted me when I was covered in scars.

I push myself up and slide down his body until his cock is under me, wet and hot against me. I reach between us, take hold of him, and rub the head between my folds until he's slick with me. I start sinking down.

"Slowly," I say, more to myself than to him. "Let me."

He fills me and stretches me, thicker than anyone I've had. I take him all the way and stop there with my hands on his chest.

"Do you feel that?" I say. "Do you feel how wet I am for you? That's yours."

He settles his hands on my hips again. He barely moves under me, just tiny twitches and shivers he can't help. It's as if he's afraid to do anything. Behind the mask, I can see his black eyes study me, looking at me with reverence. His head is tilted on the pillow, and his chest lifts and falls under my hands. From this up close, I can see his lips move. But they're not human lips, they're thinner and stretch wider, and I can't read them as they are blocked by the porcelain ribs. Is he loud? Is he whispering? I will never know what he's saying to me as I start rolling my hips tentatively.

I take my time, as I promised, rising, sinking, and rolling forward again. He doesn't thrust up into me. He lets me move at my own pace. Maybe he doesn't know that he's allowed to touch me. I take his hands off my hips and bring them to my breasts.

"You can touch me," I say. "Here."

His palms cover my breasts. He holds them for a minute, then his thumbs rub over my nipples, slow and careful. I push into his hands.

"That's it. Just like that. Harder. You won't break me."

He closes his fingers and pinches my nipples. I groan and gush around him. I squeeze his cock, so he feels what he's doing to me. With him, less is

more. The fact that he's being so considerate and hesitant turns me on to the point of desperation.

I feel it first where we're joined – a hum where his cock is buried in me. I feel his breathing change under my hands, deepening. Behind the grille, his lips are moving again, different than before.

"You're singing," I say.

The hum spreads up through me, into my belly, my chest, my throat. My pussy pulses with it, as if taking on the rhythm of the song I can't hear. I was already wet, already close, and now I'm wild with it. I can't keep the slow pace. I lift and drop on him faster, my hands press hard into his chest to feel the vibration there. I can feel his song in my cunt.

"Don't stop singing," I say. "Whatever you're doing, don't stop."

I let out a long, almost pained moan. I fuck him with my whole body, my hips slamming down, my breasts bouncing in his hands, my clit grinding against him every time I bottom out. The vibration of his song is in my belly, my thighs, my heart, my head... until I can't tell it from my own pleasure.

"I'm going to come on your cock," I tell him. "I want you to feel it. I want you to come inside me."

None of the men at the Lyric House ever did this to me. They couldn't have. They weren't literal gods.

"Mordred," I say his name again and again.

I come so hard that my body locks around him and my vision goes white at the edges.

I feel his hips lift off the bed under me. He moves his hands from my breasts and grips my hips tight. He holds me down and pushes up into me. I feel him come inside me, pulse after pulse, pumping me full until his cum runs out of me and onto the sheets.

I collapse onto his chest. He wraps his arms around me, gathers me against him, and holds me there, with his cock still inside me. He spreads his hands across my back and brushes over my shoulder blades and my spine. I feel his chest rise and fall under my cheek. I can tell he stopped singing.

Tomorrow, I have to leave. But right now, this is where I want to be. I close my eyes and fall asleep like that, on top of him.

Chapter Seventeen

Aveline

I wake up in Mordred's bed with my arm stretched across the place he left empty. The sheets are cold. I lie still and let my eyes settle on the black curtains of the canopy. I remember what needs to happen today. Nothing about last night changed my decision. With a deep breath, I push the covers back.

I don't find him in the living room. I cross to my door and go through my bedroom to the bathing chamber at the back. I wash in the warm spring water without hurrying. When I pass the mirror on my way out, I look at myself without hesitation. My skin is flushed, my pale hair falls down my back in waves, and my eyes are bright with possibility. Soon, I'll be above ground. I will start a new life, and that's a thought that excites and scares me at the same time.

I pick a gown that Mordred would've never laid out for Prima. I go through the racks until I find something simple, a wool dress in a dark color, with sleeves I can move in and a neckline that doesn't reach my chin. Because I don't need to hide anymore. The wool is thick, which is good, because it's almost winter above ground. I find a sturdy pair of boots that fit if I lace them tight, then I pull out a cloak from the back of the wardrobe. It's old but sound, with a clasp at the throat. I put it on, and I take nothing else. Nothing in this room was ever mine to take.

When I come out of my room, Mordred still isn't in the house. I go out the front door and down the path to the dock. I see him there, bent over the boat, getting it ready. The lamp at the front is lit. He straightens and turns before I reach the bottom step.

He takes in my appearance, then he holds out his hand. I accept it, step into the boat, and sit where I always sit. He lets go of my fingers and signs:

"I will take you to the tunnel now."

"Thank you," I say.

He unties the rope and pushes off from the dock. He turns the boat away from the island in a direction I've never seen him take. The platform is behind us, somewhere in the dark. He rows with measured movements. I can tell he isn't rushing this. He doesn't want to let me go, but he does it anyway. It must be late morning by now, maybe close to noon. He said the tunnel will take me to a ravine. I don't know how long I'll have to walk

from there to the next city or village, but even if I'll have to walk all day and night, I'll make it. I'll put distance between me and Nivallia and find a way to build a new life.

The island lamps shrink behind us and drop out of sight as the passage narrows around us. The lamp on the bow lights only a little way over the black water. There's no current I can feel and no wind. Then there's stone on both sides, wet and streaked with rust where water has run down it. The roof is low enough that Mordred ducks his head. We pass under it and out into a larger cavern. The light falls on columns of pale mineral standing in the water, some of them joined to others that hang from the roof. Some I could close my hand around, others are wider than the boat. Beyond them are ledges, and beyond the ledges, there are openings the lamplight doesn't reach, holes in the rock that go down farther than I can see.

I hold the edge of the bench and look at all of it. Then I look at him, because I'll never see him rowing again. I watch the way his shoulders flex, and the way his body twists as he moves the single oar from one side of the boat to the other. I look at his mask, white and smooth in the lamplight. I can't believe that we spent nearly a month together, that we were intimate last night, and now I'm leaving and I won't even have seen the whole of him. Can I really say that I know Mordred if I haven't seen his face?

He keeps rowing. The water never changes, but the caverns do. They widen, narrow, and widen again. The stone is rougher here, and at last, the lamplight reaches a strip of gravel and a wall behind it with a black opening at the height of a man. Mordred turns the boat and runs it up on the gravel until it stops.

He climbs out first. He takes a torch from the boat, lights it, and holds it out to me. I take it. The flame is steady. He motions with his open hand toward the opening in the wall.

"Will you walk me out?" I ask.

He shakes his head. I wait for him to give me a reason. Instead, he lifts his hands and signs slowly, the way I taught him, one word after another.

"I'm sorry I kept you down here. I'm sorry I lied to you." He stops for a moment, then goes on. "Thank you. For everything. You brought a spark into my lonely life. I'll never forget you. I know you'll have a wonderful life out there."

He's saying goodbye. My chest aches.

"What about you?" I ask.

He looks away from me.
“I’ll be all right. Don’t worry about me.”

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It isn’t fair. That’s my first thought, plain and childish. He shouldn’t be down here, alone with two chairs, one always empty, a table set for two, and a room full of dresses for a woman he made up so he’d have someone to talk to.

He isn’t a monster. I’ve called him that in my head a few times, but now I know it’s not true. He opened the cage I was trapped in, knelt in the dark, and let me come out on my own. He gave me back my unblemished face. He can heal a whole city with his voice, and he can refuse to sing for six months while the city begs him, because he knows what it does to them. He’s the most extraordinary creature I’ll ever meet, and he deserves so much more than this. He deserves someone who stays.

And here I am, dressed for the road, with a torch in my hand. I’m the one who’s hurting him. He gave me everything he had, and I’m going to leave him down here. Alone. I’m awful. My hands start shaking.

But I can’t stay. If I stay now, I’ll never know if I stayed because I wanted to or because I couldn’t bear to hurt him. He’ll never know either. And this place is not for me. I can’t live here, underground, without feeling the sun on my face, without walking out into fresh air and bright colors. This isn’t the life I want. I can’t be isolated like he is. I’d endure it for a while, then I’d resent him for it, and then what? Then I’d leave anyway. Except it would be harder and even more painful.

I can give him one more thing before I go.

I step close and hold the torch away from us. I place my free hand on his cheek. The porcelain is cool under my fingers. I kiss the grille that covers his mouth.

“I wish you’d show me your face,” I say against it. “Just this once.”

He doesn't move, and I think he won't do it. But then he lifts his hands, and I see him hesitate with his fingers at the back of his head. I feel the slight pull of the clasps coming undone as I hold his mask for him. I know when it's free of its bindings and only my hand holds it against his face.

I lower it.

His hair falls black around a face that's too even. His cheekbones are high, his nose long and straight. His lips are dark, and along his jaw, on both sides, run fine lines like seams. He once told me that his mouth can open wider than is natural.

I'm not afraid of him. I thought I might be, but I'm not. He belongs in the dark. He's the thing the people above kneel to. He looks ancient, and he looks like a man. His features are noble even with the seams. Maybe his face would frighten others, but not me. Because I know him.

Now I know all of him.

His lips part. He keeps his jaw narrow, but I see a row of teeth, small and close together, and behind it, another row. There might be more, but he doesn't open his mouth wide enough for me to know for sure. He whispers something. I can't hear it, and I don't need to. For the first time, I can read his lips.

"I love you, Aveline."

That breaks me. Tears roll down my cheeks, and I can't stop them. I don't try. I press my mouth to his.

He's warm. I close my eyes, open my mouth against his, and push my tongue inside. He grips my waist and holds on. I run my tongue along the inside of his lower lip and find the seam on that side, a fine ridge that I follow as far as I can reach. I go deeper and find his teeth. The first row feels almost human, the second one feels strange, and behind it, there's another still, smaller, set back in the dark of his mouth. I trace every one of them with the tip of my tongue on purpose, slowly, so I'll remember. He lets me. His tongue meets mine, and it's long, longer than a human man's. It easily curls around mine. I kiss him the way I'd kiss him if I were staying. I know I'm not, so I kiss him harder for it.

When I pull back, I'm crying so hard I can barely see him. I keep my hand on his face for another moment, then let go.

"I'm sorry," I say.

I step back. He holds on before he lets me. His claws catch in the wool of my cloak and drag at it before they come free. His arms drop to his sides.

He stands there with the mask hanging from his hand.

I turn and walk into the tunnel. In the torchlight, I see rough walls and a floor that slopes up. I pick up the pace with my free hand bracing on the stone. Ten steps in, I look back. I don't mean to. He's standing on the gravel where I left him, in the light from the boat lamp, his black hair framing his bare face. He's watching me go.

I break into a run and I don't turn again.

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Chapter Eighteen

Mordred

I hear the water against the hull, the oar as it sinks, my own breath, and nothing else. I row toward the island with the mask forgotten on the bench where Aveline used to sit. At the dock, I tie the boat unhurriedly, grab the mask, climb the steps, and notice how the lamps along the path light the pale flowers on both sides. At the door, I stop and tilt my head. Inside, I expect to hear a heartbeat that isn't mine, or the scuff of slippers on the floor. It's quiet. With a sigh, I open the door and go in.

The two chairs stand before the hearth, where they've always stood. It's hard to look at them. I walk to the table and set the mask down. I've worn it day and night, even when I was alone, with the exception of the times when I ate. Even if I haven't eaten human food in a month, my stomach doesn't feel hunger. There is an emptiness inside it, but it couldn't be filled with food.

The pressure I've been feeling behind my eyes since yesterday finally breaks, and I feel tears flow down my cheeks and follow the seams along my jaw. They drop from my chin onto the front of my shirt. I don't wipe them away. I stand there and allow myself to cry. I feel more human than I've felt in all the centuries I've lived among them.

Aveline did this to me. As much as it hurts, I'm grateful. My soul may be broken, but I had her. I had her voice, her weight as she slept on my chest, her whole body as she gave herself to me. I've had the most I could ever have, and I can let myself fade now knowing that.

I step into her bedroom. The bed is made. I lay my hand on the pillow and press down until my claws catch in the linen. I open the wardrobe. The high-necked gowns she wore hang neatly, and when I lean in and let my nose graze over the fabric, I can tell that she washed them before putting them away. They still hold the scent of her skin, though. I find the airy gown she wore when she found me in the music room, the one that ended up in a pile on my bedroom floor. At the back, folded and put away, is the wedding dress. I take it out and hold it up. I can see her in it again, crammed into the far corner of the cage, shaking with her arms around her knees, whispering "please, please, please" to a monster. I put it back where she left it.

On the dresser lies the brush she used. Pale hairs are caught in the bristles. I pull one free and wind it around my finger.

I can smell her in this room. She's in the sheets, in all the gowns, the shoes and the slippers, and on the brush that slid through her long, silvery hair every morning and every night. When I step back into the living room, she's there too.

Aveline is in the air I breathe. My body gives off nothing – no sweat, no scent. When her smell disappears, which will happen eventually, the house will smell of nothing at all.

I stand in front of the fire. I could take a gown from the wardrobe and set it in the chair, shape the sleeves the way I used to. I could call it Prima and pretend that nothing has changed. I'd know I was a man talking to himself in an empty house. I always knew it, but now that I've spoken to someone who answered, pretending would be an insult to her.

Aveline is gone, and Prima is gone too. Never again will I be able to trick myself into believing that I'm not alone.

I can't stand another hour of this. I won't wait until tomorrow. I'll do it today.

The song that keeps my body young can go the opposite way with a change of pitch. Sung against myself, it will make my body decay. The Silent Room is where I've always healed myself, and I'll do this there too. I'll close the door and no one above will hear a thing. It's important that they're not in any danger while I go along with my plan.

Out of habit, I grab the mask, even if I don't need it anymore. It's just that wherever I went, it always went with me, and I don't see why this time should be different. Before I go to the Silent Room, I want to take one last stroll in the garden. I take the alleys Aveline liked, letting my gaze roam over the flowers I planted with my own hands, strange species that grow without sun. I look at the lamps I hung so there would always be light on the island.

The boat rocks at the dock. The lake is as dark as ever. Behind me, lamps burn in every window of the house. I built all of this with my own hands, and I've lived in it longer than I probably should have. There is no point to an eternal life like mine.

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I say goodbye to the lake now, to the boat, the garden, and the ruins above me. I won't sing for Nivallia again. I'll vanish, their god will be dead, and with nothing left to wait for, they'll heal.

Then I hear it across the water. The lift mechanism catches and turns, and the platform begins to come down through the vault.

I don't need more offerings. Let it hang over the lake with its cakes, its cards, and its letters asking for Mercies. I turn toward the house, but I stop with one foot on the first step.

One last time, I think. I don't ask myself why. I untie the boat and row out.

When I approach the platform, I see there's nothing on it. It has never come down bare before. I secure the boat and look closer. No, it's not empty. I have to haul myself onto it to reach what Callum has placed right in the middle of the slab of metal.

It's a lock of platinum blond hair. Long and cut clean, it's tied with a ribbon, and there's no mistaking whose it is. A folded note is knotted into the ribbon. My hands shake as I take it and read the note.

Sing, or she dies.

Callum has Aveline. I read the words again as I rub the soft hair between my fingers. I lift it to my nose and breathe her in.

She ran up the tunnel toward the ravine, and he was waiting there. Or his people were. Maybe Callum knew about the only exit that leads outside of the city wall. It's the only explanation that makes sense. Maybe he's had people guarding it for days, or since the night he offered her to me as a sacrifice.

He has her. He cut her hair and sent me a piece of her with a threat tied to it. He put her in a cage and called her a gift, and now he threatens to kill her to get his song. The paper creases under my claws. In all the years I've watched them, I've never lifted a hand against one of them. But I want to hurt him now.

All right. I'll sing. I'll do more than sing. He wants my voice to come up from under the floor, but this time, I'll come up with it. They've had a hundred years of a god they've never seen. It's time to show myself to them.

I fit the mask on my face. I reach behind my head to fasten the clasps, then run my fingers along the grille. The hauling line hangs beside the rail, and I wrap it around my hands and pull. The counterweight takes the load and the platform begins to rise.

The water is farther below me with every pull. I rise past the cracked tiles of the vault, then the rusted racks and the broken edge of the floor. Above me, the shaft brightens. Light comes down through the broken vault, and with it come sounds from above, faint at first and then stronger with every length of line that passes through my hands.

I fix my eyes on the light and keep hauling.

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Chapter Nineteen

Aveline

Rope holds my wrists together behind the pole, and a second loop crosses my middle and pulls my back hard against the wood. I can turn my head, at least. My fingers have gone icy cold. Every time I pull at the bindings, all I manage is to hurt myself.

Everyone is watching. The House of Voices is full. The seats, the aisles, and the boxes dressed as chapels hold people standing shoulder to shoulder. There are men, women, and children. The whole of Nivallia is here.

I see the children, small faces turned up toward the stage, and I see their mothers holding them close against their skirts. I can't make sense of it. Who brings a child to see a woman tied to a pole? Who brings a child to watch what Callum has promised to give them?

The faces I can read hold wonder. Some hold uncertainty, others plain confusion, but not one holds the intention to stop this, or even the thought that what is going on here is wrong. No one comes toward the stage. No one shouts at Callum to cut me loose. They look at me the same way they looked at me in the streets through the carriage window. I thought then that it was kindness.

I don't understand these people. I thought I did. I thought they were frightened, sick, and desperate, and they are, but I never thought they could be this lost to their suffering.

I've suffered before. I didn't take it out on anyone.

They made a god out of a voice in the dark, and they've come with their children to see what he'll do.

Mordred never asked for any of it. He sang because the plague was killing them, then he kept singing because they got weak when he stopped. This is what came of it. Every person in this room should be dead. Instead, they're here, gray in the face and leaning on each other, waiting for him.

They all look bad. Men have their backs bent as if under a terrible weight. Women sway where they stand. An old man in the second row holds the back of the seat in front of him with both hands as if he'd collapse if he let go. Even the children look like they haven't slept in days.

Callum stands a step ahead of me, to my left, turned so that the crowd and I can see his face. He's worse than a month ago. He's lost weight, his robes hang wrong on him, and the skin under his eyes is bruised. His hands

shake, and he isn't hiding it anymore; I don't think he can. The many rings clink on his fingers when the shaking gets bad. He lifts his hands toward the crowd anyway.

He speaks, and his mouth moves slowly, the way it always did for me, though I don't think he's doing it for me now. I think this is how he speaks when he prays.

"Your suffering will end soon," he tells them. "You've been patient. You've been faithful. Your beloved god will sing for you."

The faces in the front rows show a sliver of relief. Every one of them wants what he's just promised.

"He hears us," Callum says. "He's always heard us. He's waiting for us to give him what he asks. We have brought him his bride again, and this time we won't fail him."

He looks down at the collapsed orchestra pit when he says it, and his whole body bends toward it. I've watched people pray before. I've never watched a man pray with his hands shaking so hard the chains on his robe move.

I turn my head as far as the rope allows.

"I want to speak," I say. "I have something to say to them."

I've said it too loud. I realize this when the people nearest to the stage flinch. Callum turns to me and takes me in. He isn't afraid of anything I could say. He motions toward the crowd with one trembling hand, palm open, letting me speak. He thinks I'm going to help him.

I face them. I'm a singer, this is a stage, and I know how far a voice has to travel to reach the last row of a house this size. I set my feet on the boards and push the sound from my belly the way I was taught. I can't hear it, but I can feel it in my chest and in my throat. I know it's loud enough.

"You're wrong," I say. "The Cantor won't sing. He won't sing for you ever again."

They all go still.

"That's all right," I tell them. "You'll heal. You'll all heal soon, without his help."

The whole house moves at the same time. I don't hear it, but I see it. They shout over each other, rise out of their seats, arms come up as they gesture wildly. Women pull their children in tighter. The old man in the second row lets go of the seat and points at me. His lips are moving too fast for me to read them.

Callum lets it go on for a few minutes, then he raises his hands, and that calms them down. He turns to me so I can see his mouth.

“He healed you,” he says.

I purse my lips and don’t say anything.

“Look at her face,” he addresses the audience. “You saw her when she arrived. You saw the burns on her face. They’re gone. Our god sang for her. He healed her.” He looks back at me. “If he sang for you, he’ll sing for us. We’ve been devoted to him all our lives. You barely know him. He’ll sing for the people who love him.”

“He isn’t a god,” I say, loud, to all of them. “He’s an ancient monster. His power is in his song. That’s all it is.” I look at Callum. “And if he sings for you again, it’ll be worse than it is now.”

“You look fine,” Callum says.

“I’m fine because I’m deaf. I couldn’t hear his healing song, so it didn’t affect me.”

Callum considers this for a moment.

“Why didn’t he heal your deafness?” he asks.

“Because I didn’t want him to.”

He doesn’t answer that. He looks at me with his mouth slightly agape, then his eyes turn back to the crowd.

I could tell them the whole truth. That they’re not faithful; they’re dependent. That every song he sang for them made the next one harder to live without. I could tell them that nothing they’ve built here was a personal choice, that their ceremonies and their kneeling came out of a sickness he put in them by keeping them alive. That as long as they can hear him, they will never have a single free thought about him. I could tell the women holding their children that the children were born into it.

I don’t say any of it, because it isn’t mine to tell. They’ve built their whole lives around Mordred. If I tell them that everything they love was done to them, I’d be taking away the one belief they’ve built their lives on. Mordred can tell them, if he ever wants to. I won’t.

So, I let them hate me. I think about the ravine and how wrong it all went.

I came out of the tunnel where Mordred said I would. There were trees and a road in the distance. There were also two men waiting. They took the torch out of my hand, tied my wrists, and walked me back through the gate. They brought me to Callum. Callum cut a lock of my hair while they held

me bound in front of him. He didn't tell me why. Then they brought me here and sent word through the city. Within an hour, the House of Voices was full.

Callum told them what they were here to see. Either their god sang, or I'd pay with my blood for failing to be the sacrifice he'd meant me to be.

I don't know if Mordred will come. I know what this is. They did this to me to force something out of him. He's hidden under this building for a hundred years. He stayed hidden through a plague and sang without once being seen. He wouldn't take the mask off for me until the last moment, and even then, he whispered, didn't raise his voice. I don't believe he'll show himself to them because of me. I don't think anyone could be worth that to him.

The faces in the front rows turn away from me. They turn toward the orchestra pit, a few of them first and then all of them together. Callum's head turns with them. Then I feel it, up through my boots and into my back, a slow and steady shudder that I know too well. I felt it on the night they lowered me down there. It's the lift, this time coming up.

The iron platform rises out of the dark, up through the gilded grille that is wide open now.

I see his head first, the long black hair. Then the white mask. His black robes, the high collar, the tarnished gold, all of him, rising into the light of a full house that has never seen him before. He stands very straight, holding the hauling line in one hand.

The shouting stops. I know it because everyone snaps their mouth shut, and the boards under my feet stop vibrating. Then the people in the front row go down onto their knees. The row behind them follows, and the row behind that. It moves back and up into the boxes, until the whole city is kneeling. The women pull their children down with them. Beside me, Callum's knees hit the boards. He looks up at the platform with his mouth open and his shaking hands pressed together.

Mordred doesn't look at Callum. He doesn't look at the kneeling people. He finds me and our eyes lock.

He raises his hands to the back of his head. He unfastens the clasps.

The mask comes away, he lowers it to his side, and the people see him. I don't look at them. I look at the pale skin, the dark mouth, the fine seams along his jaw that I traced with my tongue before leaving him.

And I'm glad. I'm glad Callum caught me and brought me back.

His mouth opens. It opens past where a normal mouth should stop. The seams part, and his jaw splits wider and wider, until I see the first row of teeth and the rows behind it, more than I counted with my tongue. I see the darkness at the back of his throat, like a void from where godly music spills into the world.

He sings. I can't hear it. The first notes reach me through the boards and up the pole against my spine, a deep pressure that I feel in my ribs.

He keeps his eyes on me.

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Chapter Twenty

Aveline

I've felt music through walls, through the pavement, and through the body of a piano. I've felt his healing in my flesh and in my bones, but I've never felt anything this strong. It's in my teeth, in my marrow, in the very blood that rushes through my veins. The boards under my boots are shaking, and I don't think they'll stop until he does.

I keep my eyes on Mordred's. He stands on the platform below the lip of the stage with his jaw open wider than any human jaw can open, every row of his teeth showing to a city that has never seen his face, and he looks at no one but me.

I'm the only one who exists in his world.

I make myself look away from him, because I need to know what he's doing to them.

Their expressions are changing. From angry and confused, they've all gone calm. Their mouths are open, jaws slack. Spines that were bent against pain have straightened. Hands that were pressed to hearts, hips, and knees have loosened. Men, women, and children kneel with the same peace on their faces. They look like people hearing the most beautiful song there is. They never want it to end.

This is what he refused them, and he's giving it to them now because of me.

The vibration in the pole at my back changes, and I can't say how at first. It has a shape now, a rise and a fall that I could follow with my hand if my hands were free. Then the shape has a height to it, a place where it's high and a place where it's low. A pitch. Then there's a sound inside the pitch. It's a voice.

It's pouring into my head through my ears. I have to fight not to close my eyes against it. I smile wide, my lips stretching as I realize I can hear him.

Mordred's voice is deep, a baritone that goes down further than any voice I ever sang beside at the Lyric House. It fills the ruins from the stage to the open roof, and I'm sure it goes out through the walls, over the whole city, maybe past its wall. He lands every note clean, holds each one longer than a human chest could hold it, and the next one comes without a break for breath.

The words he sings are old. They don't sound like any language I know. The vowels are long, and the consonants come where I don't expect them. None of it means anything to me. It doesn't need to mean anything for me to hear how beautiful it is.

I'm crying, and I don't know when it started. Tears run down both sides of my face and hang by the tip of my chin and the curve of my jaw before they drip onto the floor.

Finally, he closes his mouth. He steps from the platform onto the stage and walks toward me with purpose.

No one moves. They watch him, their eyes wet and reverent, their hands pressed together under their chins. They're grateful. They adore him. Callum remains where he dropped to his knees. He follows Mordred with his gaze but doesn't look at me at all. My job here is done, it seems. His plan worked embarrassingly well.

Mordred reaches me and goes around behind the pole. I feel his fingers at the knots. The rope across my middle loosens and drops, then my wrists come free. I bring my hands forward and rub the marks the rope left in them. He comes around to stand in front of me.

He looks at my face. He lifts his hand and brushes the tears from my cheek with the side of his finger.

"I'm sorry," he says.

I can hear him. That only makes me cry harder and smile wider. It's the same deep voice, but quiet now, a man's speaking voice, low, even, and meant for one person. Me.

"I didn't know what else to do," he says. "They said that if I don't sing for them, they will..."

"Kill me," I say.

He bows his head slightly.

"You can hear me now."

"Yes." My voice comes out thick from crying. "I can hear you. Your voice is beautiful."

He takes a step back from me.

I reach for him, but he moves his shoulder so that my hand closes on nothing. He doesn't lift his head. I look at his hands, because he's always answered me with his hands. They hang limp at his sides.

The tears stop, and my voice comes out steady when I speak. I keep it low so only he can hear me.

“You’re rejecting me,” I say. “Why? You don’t want me anymore?”

He doesn’t answer.

I frown and cross my arms over my chest, my foot tapping lightly on the floor.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll leave.”

I look past him at the entranced audience. Everyone, including Callum, looks like they’ve ascended or something.

“I’ve filled my purpose anyway.”

I turn my back on him and walk toward the wings.

“Aveline!”

I keep walking toward the dark at the side of the stage.

“You... you can leave?” he asks, dumbfounded.

I stop and turn around. He’s standing where I left him, with his hands half raised and his lips parted in surprise.

“Well, yes,” I say. “I can if I want. And since you seem to not want me here anymore, that’s what I’ll do. Leave.”

I realize that I’m pouting. Of course I want him to stop me, but I’m not going to beg. I was never the kind of person to ask someone for something twice.

He laughs then. It starts low in his chest, and while he laughs, tears tumble down his marble-like face. I’ve never seen him laugh like this, and I’ve never seen him cry either. I raise an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to be done with this strange meltdown.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“You’re not enthralled.” He wipes his face with the back of his hand and laughs again, softer. “Look at them.”

He sweeps his arm at the House of Voices. The people look drunk on him.

“You’re not like them,” he says. “You heard my song, and it didn’t affect you.”

I open my mouth to argue with him but then close it. How didn’t I realize this?

I ask myself what I feel, and whether any of it comes from him and not from me. The anger is still there, and it belongs to me. I’m still furious at Callum for what he did, though I’m grateful too. I’m also annoyed that Mordred rejected me just a few minutes ago.

I still think he was wrong to sing, but I also think he had no other choice. I don't feel that I have to go to him. I don't feel a need to be near him at any cost, and if I walked into the wings right now, I could keep walking until I found my way out of the ruins. I try to want him to sing again, but the truth is that I don't. Right now, I'd rather he didn't.

My eyes go wide.

"How?" I say.

He shakes his head.

I walk back to him across the stage, and this time he doesn't step away. We stand close enough that I have to tip my head back to hold his gaze. I look at the seams along his jaw, at his black eyes, and the tears drying on his face.

I know what I want. I throw myself at him and wrap my arms around his neck.

"Take me home," I say into his shirt. "So we can figure this out."

His arms close around me. He lifts me off my feet, holds me against his chest, turns and carries me to the platform. He steps onto it with me and doesn't set me down. I feel him reach past me for the hauling line and pull. The platform drops a hand's width and stops, then he pulls again.

We go down through the dark chasm. The people watch us but don't make any move to stop us. They don't say a word. Callum looks at us with a smile on his face that has nothing behind it but bliss. We drop again and again, until I can't see him anymore, but that smile stays imprinted on my mind.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mordred

Aveline turns her head toward the oar on my third stroke away from the platform. I understand that she's hearing it for the first time.

She doesn't say so. She watches the blade go into the black water and come out again. She tips her face up toward the roof of the cavern where the lamplight doesn't reach and listens to the water drip from the stone. Her hair is shorter on one side where Callum cut it.

She tells me what happened after we parted. Two men stepped out of the trees, tied her wrists, and walked her back through the gate. I row and listen. Her story confirms my suspicions. I thought I was the only one who knew about the tunnel, but it appears the people of Nivallia had figured it out a long time ago. I don't tell her what I wanted to do to Callum when he threatened her life. She's had enough of Callum for one day, and whatever I feel about him and about the whole kneeling city is mine to sort through on my own.

"And then Callum let me speak to the crowd," she says. "Maybe he thought I'd beg. You didn't hear that part."

"I heard it."

"From down here?"

"I hear everything that moves above. I heard you tell them I'd never sing for them again."

"And then you did."

"Yes."

She leans forward and frowns at me.

"What did you think when the platform came down with nothing on it but my hair and a note?"

"That he had you."

"And when you saw me tied to that pole?"

"I don't remember."

She groans, rolls her eyes, and falls back against the bench.

"I want to hear you. That's all I've wanted since I met you. Now I can, and you're giving me one-word answers."

"I'm too stunned," I tell her. "I don't know what to say. That's why I'm quiet."

The island lamps come into view ahead of us before I'm ready for them. She stands up, closes the short distance between us, and presses herself to me, her arms around my waist and her face against my chest.

"Maybe it was a good thing," she says. "It brought us back together."

I turn my face away from her. She doesn't know what she's saying. She may not know until it's too late to matter, and that's my greatest fear. She says she's not influenced by my voice, that she can leave if she wants to. But it's hard to believe. Centuries of experience tell me it's, in fact, impossible.

At the dock, I tie the boat to the post and reach into my coat, where the mask has been since I took it off in front of the whole city. I fit it to my face and fasten the clasps at the back of my head.

"Don't," she says. "Please don't put that back on."

"I feel better with it on."

"I like your face." She climbs onto the dock before I have a chance to offer her my hand. "I like all of you, just the way you are."

It's what I wanted to hear all my life, but I can't help hearing it as a warning. I go up the stairs ahead of her and hear her follow. Inside the house, I don't stop in the living room. I go down the corridor to the library, and Aveline runs after me and catches the door before it swings shut. I grab the books she was never allowed to touch, empty the glass case and the high shelves, and bring down the records I took from her hands and told her she wouldn't like reading. I lay them open on the long table until there's no wood showing.

"What are you looking for?" She's out of breath. "Tell me. I'll help."

"Anything in the old songs that might explain why you're not affected by my voice."

"It's probably because I was deaf when I met you."

"That doesn't make sense to me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It doesn't."

She gives me a pointed look, then pulls out a chair and sits down. She grabs the nearest book before I can protest and opens it.

I settle in a chair myself and start reading through everything, even though I know most of these songs and records my heart. I read the records of every community that ever found one of my kind, my own journals, my notes on the plague, and the fragments that were left after the Shift, some of

them in languages no one uses anymore. None of them describes a person who heard the full voice of a Cantor and stayed of their own accord.

After a few hours of this, Aveline leaves and comes back with a plate for herself. She eats it beside me, looks at my mask, but doesn't ask if I want any food. When she's done, she spends another hour reading with me, then goes out again and returns with snacks we keep in the kitchen cupboard.

She turns her head toward a lamp when the oil pops, toward the shelves when a book shifts, and toward her own plate when the knife touches it. It's like she's finding out what random things sound like for the first time. She settles into the chair with her feet tucked under her and continues reading.

We keep at it late into the night. At some point, when I think she's tired and about to give up and go to bed, she smacks her finger on a page in the oldest bound record I own. It's a translation.

"These lines," she says triumphantly.

I lean over. I know them well.

"I've seen the first two," she says. "They were on the note Callum sent down with me."

"Yes," I say.

"I see there's more."

I read them out loud.

"What is given in silence, the Voice cannot take. The heart knows the singer before it knows the song. Where the beloved stands, Devotion finds no altar."

"What does it mean?" she asks.

"I never understood these verses. I've had them since before I came here, and I've never guessed the message behind them."

She reads them again.

"Well," she says. "I think they make sense."

"Tell me."

"I met you when I was deaf. I couldn't hear your song, so it couldn't manipulate me. What is given in silence." She points at the first line. "Then I lived with you. I got to know you, I got to care about you. Before I ever heard your voice. The heart knows the singer before it knows the song, right?" She touches the second line, then the third. "So, when I finally could hear you, there was nothing for the song to do. It would've made me worship you, but there was no room left for that, because I already had you

in the place where the worship was supposed to go. Where the beloved stands, Devotion finds no altar.”

I look at her hand on the page, then at her beautiful face.

“You care about me?” I ask.

“Yes.” She blushes. “I care about you so much. I...” She stops, starts again, and doesn’t look away when she says it. “I love you, Mordred.”

My world tilts on its axis. I get up, swaying, find my feet, and pull her out of her chair and into my arms. She comes up on her toes and kisses the grille over my mouth. Then she groans against it, annoyed.

“Take this thing off.”

I laugh.

She lifts her head.

“I’ve never heard you laugh like this. Like you’re not hiding anything from me.”

“I’m not.”

I reach behind my head and open the clasps. She doesn’t wait for me. She pulls the mask off my face, drops it on the open books, and lunges at me. I catch her, my arms closing around her back. She kisses me, eager at first, then slower. Her hand is on my bare jaw, squeezing lightly.

I let myself get lost in her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aveline

The kiss lasts until I hear him breathe out through his nose and realize we both need air.

I push him back into the chair and climb onto him before he can catch on to what's happening. My knees land on either side of his hips, my skirts bunch between us, and I take his face in both hands and kiss him the way I've wanted to since our first time in his bed. His lips are cool, dark, and soft. The ridge of the seam feels delicious on my tongue at the corner of his mouth. I follow it. I find the narrow front teeth and the smaller row behind them. I press my tongue against them on purpose until he makes a sound in his throat that travels right to my core.

That is new. I've felt him before. I've never heard him like this. Now I'm curious to know what others sounds he makes.

The chair creaks under us. His hands land on my hips and stay there, claws curled against the wool of my dress. I grind down on his lap and feel him thicken under the laces of his trousers. His breath comes short against my cheek.

"I love you," he says, low in his chest. "I love you."

"I love you," I say it back.

"I love you, Aveline."

"I love you, Mordred." I rock against him and say it again into his mouth. "I love you. Put your hands on me. Here. Yes, like that."

He cups my breasts through the dress and squeezes. I push into his palms and kiss him harder. His tongue is longer than a man's and he uses all of it. I suck on it until he groans. I'm already wet. I can feel it when I move on him, the slick ache between my legs and the want to have him inside me right now.

He stands with me still wrapped around him, one arm under my ass and the other across my back. He lays me down on the table across his open books. Paper slides under my shoulders. A heavy binding digs into my spine, and I don't care. He looks down at me with his black eyes and his mouth open, and I can see the seams and the teeth in the lamplight. I love him so much I laugh out loud.

His hands go to the front of my gown and pull. The wool holds against the first pull, then the seam gives with a long, tearing sound. His claws open

my bodice from the neck to the waist. My breasts come free of the ruined fabric, and my nipples tighten as he stares at them.

“Beautiful,” he says. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Don’t stop.” I’m laughing while I pull at his coat. “Get this off. All of it, get it off now.”

His coat clasps are stiff under my fingers, but I get them open anyway. He shrugs it off his shoulders and lets it drop. I go for the laces of his waistcoat while he goes for my skirts, and our hands tangle and get in each other’s way. I laugh again. I yank his shirt open and shove it down his arms. His skin is hot under my palms, pale and hard with muscle. I drag my nails down his chest just to hear what sound he makes.

He makes a good one.

He pushes my skirts up to my waist in one shove. My thighs are bare, my cunt is bare, and he puts his hand between my legs to feel how wet I am. His whole body goes still.

“Look at you,” he says. “Look how wet you are for me.”

“For you.”

I get his trousers open at last and reach inside. His cock fills my hand, long, thick, and already leaking at the tip. I stroke him once and he shudders.

“This is for me,” I say. “Put it in me. Please.”

He pulls me to the edge of the table by my hips. I wrap my legs around his waist and guide him with my hand. He pushes inside me in one hard stroke, and I cry out.

He’s big. I knew that. I’ve had him before, but the first time he barely moved and I set the pace. This time he gives me all of him without pausing, and my body has to stretch around him fast. It aches and it’s perfect. I grab his shoulders, dig my fingers in, and lock my heels at the small of his back.

“Incredible,” he says against my ear. “You take me so well. You’re incredible.”

“Move.”

“Aveline.”

“Move, please, fuck me, please.”

He moves like I ask him and fucks me hard against the table. The books shift under my back with every thrust while pages crumple under my shoulders. I hold on to him. His lips are parted above me, and I can see the dark inside of his mouth. I reach up, pull his face down, and lick the seam at

the corner of his mouth. He groans. It comes out low, rough, and inhuman. I kiss him filthily, tongue, teeth, and spit, and he fucks me harder.

“Your mouth,” I tell him. “I love your mouth. I love it, don’t hide it, let me see.”

“Nobody has ever wanted to,” he says.

“Look at me.”

He does. He holds my eyes, drives into me, and talks the whole time. His voice keeps breaking lower.

“So beautiful. So wet. You feel so good around me. The way you give yourself to me, nobody has ever given me anything like this, nobody, you’re perfect, you’re perfect.”

“Yes.” I can barely get words out. “Yes, yes, please.”

“Tell me it’s mine.”

“It’s yours. I’m yours. Harder.”

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He puts one hand behind my head and the other under my hip to angle me. At this angle, he drags across the exact place inside me that makes my vision blur. I moan, loud and shameless in the quiet library. No one can hear me but him.

“Will you stay?” he asks. “Will you live here with me?”

“Yes.” I pull him closer with my legs. “Yes, yes. I’ll stay. Forever. I’m yours, I’m yours.”

“Say it again.”

“I’m yours. I’ll stay forever. I’m not going anywhere. I love you.”

He kisses me then, open-mouthed and desperate, and keeps fucking me through it. I reach down between us and find my clit with my fingers. He covers my hand with his and presses down. His claws rest against my belly. I feel every one of them and I feel nothing but safe.

“Please,” I say into his mouth. “Please, please, I’m close, don’t stop.”

“Never.”

“Mordred.”

“Come for me. Let me feel you.”

I come with my legs locked around him, my nails digging into his shoulders, and his name on my lips. It starts where he’s buried inside me and spreads up into my chest. My cunt clenches around his cock over and over, and I hear the sound I make, loud and broken. He groans at the feel of me. He keeps thrusting through it, slower now, deeper, and I hold him with my whole body until the pulsing eases.

“Beautiful,” he says, hoarse. “That was beautiful.”

“Now you.” I lift my hips against him. “Inside me. I want it.”

He drops his forehead to mine and fucks me deep, three strokes, four, and on the fifth, his back arches, he pushes as far into me as he can go and comes. I feel his cock pulse. I feel him fill me, hot and thick. He groans against my neck with his mouth wide open, and I turn my head and kiss the seam on his cheek while he spends himself in me.

Then he collapses. His weight lands on me, his chest on my bare breasts, his hips still between my thighs, and his face in my hair. I wrap my arms around him and hold on. I can hear his breathing, fast and rough beside my ear, and under it, the faint tick of the lamp on the desk.

“Mordred.”

He hums.

“You’re crushing me.”

“Mm.”

“You’re too big, too heavy. I can’t breathe.” I push at his shoulder and laugh with what air I have left. “Get off me, you great monster, you’re going to squash me into your books.”

He lifts off me right away, up onto his elbows, and looks down at me with his hair falling around his face.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I take a proper breath. “Just don’t kill me. I only just promised to stay.”

“You did.” His eyes move over my face, slow, from my mouth to my hair and back. “You did promise.”

“I did.”

He slides out of me, and I feel his seed drip down my thighs. He tucks himself back into his trousers without lacing them. Before I can sit up, he gathers me off the table, ruined bodice and bunched skirts, one arm under

my knees and the other around my back. I put my arms around his neck. He carries me out of the library and down the corridor, and I listen to his steps on the stone and to my own breathing slow against his throat.

His bedroom is dark except for the lamp on his desk. He sets me on the edge of the bed and pulls back the covers. I kick off my boots and let the torn gown fall off my shoulders. He steps out of his trousers and climbs in after me. The sheets are cold, but he isn't. He pulls the blankets over both of us and draws me to his chest. I burrow into the heat of him and wish to stay there forever.

"Say it once more," he says into my hair.

"I love you."

"The other thing."

"I'll stay." I find his hand under the blanket and lace my fingers through his. "I live here now."

He breathes out. I hear it, long and slow, and I feel his whole body relax. His arm tightens around me.

I close my eyes and listen to him breathe. The sound of it is the last thing I know before I fall asleep in his arms.

Epilogue

Aveline

I step onto the platform while Mordred is still securing the boat to the rail. He's already made one knot, and he makes a second one over it, then tests both with a firm pull.

"It won't drift," I say. "You've never lost it before."

"I've never left it this long."

"It'll be fine." I hold out my hand. "Come up."

The platform dips under his weight, then settles. He takes the hauling line in both hands and pulls, the rope runs over the pulley somewhere above us with a dry sound, and water drips off the rails as we rise out of the lamplight. I hear every turn of the wheel.

Soon, the light above us goes from gray to white. The platform stops, and we're standing in the collapsed pit with the stage in front of us and the whole House of Voices around us. There's no one here.

It's afternoon, and the sun comes straight down through the open upper floors. Snow has come down with it. It lies on the broken rows of the boxes and across the floor of the church. I feel the cold through my cloak. I hear nothing but our breathing and the drip of water far below.

"This is a bad idea," Mordred says.

"It's a great idea."

I reach up and set his mask straight. It's slipped a little to the left. I rise on my toes and kiss the porcelain ribs over his mouth. They're cold, but his breath through them is warm.

"Open the grille," I say.

He squeezes his hand around the lock, and it breaks with little to no effort. He swings the gate open, and I take his hand and lead him up onto the stage, past the altar, down the steps, and through the long aisle of the auditorium. His boots and mine leave prints in the snow. We pass under the statues with their broken instruments and walk out into Nivallia.

This was my idea. I asked him, and I kept asking until he ran out of reasons to deny me.

"You should enjoy your city," I tell him. "You've watched it from the shadows long enough. Stop hiding. Let them love you."

"It isn't real love," he says.

“It’s love, nonetheless. And you aren’t hurting them anymore. You’re just walking down the street.”

He sighs.

The snow is soft under my boots, and the sun is so bright that I have to squint. The square in front of the House of Voices is empty, and the street beyond it is quiet. Mordred walks beside me with his hand in mine and his head turning toward the roofs, the shop signs, and the walls with snow along their tops. He slows at a shop window and stands there until I tug him on. I’ve never seen him look at anything like this. He knows every house on this street and every family in it, but he’s never once stood in front of any of them in daylight.

“You’ve never seen it from here,” I say.

“No.” His voice comes low through the grille.

A woman comes around the corner with a basket on her arm. She stops in her tracks. Her mouth opens comically. She looks at the mask, at me, at our joined hands, then her knees fold and she’s down in the snow. A man behind her does the same. Two children come out of a doorway and drop where they stand. Their mother follows, and after we take a few more steps, the whole street is on its knees and murmuring.

“Cantor.”

“Mordred.”

“It’s him. It’s Mordred.”

I giggle.

“Please, that’s not needed. Please, all of you, rise. Rise.”

They rise slowly, but instead of going back to what they were doing, they follow us. More people come from the side streets, and before we reach the market, there’s a crowd around us, standing close and saying his name to each other in low voices. Every one of them looks strong, well fed, and rested.

I see Callum among them, in his black cloak and his gold. His face is back to its fullness, and his hands are still. Near him stands a man in a formal coat with a chain of office across his chest, and I know without asking that this is the mayor. He kneels at first, then rises.

I stop, and Mordred stops with me. I turn to face as many of them as I can.

“This is Mordred,” I say. “He is a Cantor. That’s what he is, not a god. He’s been looking over Nivallia since the beginning. He knows all of you.”

I squeeze his hand and step back a little. I tip my head toward them. "Go on."

He doesn't move at first. Then he steps forward, and when he speaks, his lips barely move behind the mask. His voice is low, but it still carries to the far edge of the crowd.

"Thank you," he says. "For the offerings you've brought me over the years. For the food, the books, and the drawings your children made. I kept every one." He turns his head toward me. "And thank you for my beautiful bride."

No one speaks. They stand with their faces lifted toward him, and I watch them take in the word bride. I don't correct it, because it's true.

Callum drops to his knees in the snow. He doesn't reach for either of us. He keeps his hands at his sides.

"Forgive me," he says. He looks at me first, then up at the mask, then at me again. "Both of you. I never intended to harm Aveline. I swear that. I was desperate. The people were suffering, and I didn't know how else to bring you back to us. I would've done anything for their healing."

Mordred lets go of my hand and steps forward. He bends, takes Callum by the arm, and brings him up onto his feet.

"I understand," he says. "I'm upset with you. I won't pretend I'm not. But I know how much you care about this city. You'd do anything for these people, and you did."

Callum looks at me.

"I forgive you," I say.

Mordred pats Callum's arm, and Callum stares as if something utterly holy has just happened.

"I want to go to the market," I say. "That's what we came for."

Mordred returns to my side.

The crowd parts, and the mayor steps out of it.

"The Cantor and his bride may take whatever they want," he says. "Whatever they need. No payment is required. Nivallia is yours."

"That's very kind," Mordred says, "but we can't accept..."

I rise on my toes and whisper in his ear.

"Do you have any money?"

He's quiet.

"Any at all?"

"No."

I turn to the mayor and smile at him.

“Thank you. That is most generous.”

I take Mordred’s hand and pull him toward the market. Behind us, the people of Nivallia stand in the snow with their mouths agape, watching their god get led away by the arm before they’ve finished understanding what just occurred.

Mordred Ten Years Later

Aveline turned thirty today, and Nivallia held a feast for her. The whole city came into the square, and they ate and drank with her until dark. Since I still refuse to remove my mask in their presence, I let Aveline eat all the pastries and drink all the wine. Now I’m rowing her home across the black water.

We’ve had ten years together, and I can’t find one of them I’d change. I sing for Nivallia only when it’s needed, and I keep the songs short. For Aveline and for myself, I sing all the time. She joins me more often than not. I write the pieces, she learns them, and we sing them in the Silent Room with the door shut. Sometimes, she goes up alone, stands on the stage of the House of Voices, and sings for all of Nivallia while they fill every seat in the auditorium to hear her.

She’s happy tonight, and tired. She leans on my arm on the steps up from the dock and yawns against my sleeve.

“You’ve been sad about this birthday,” I say.

“I haven’t.”

“You joked about being old three times in the span of one hour.”

“They were only jokes.”

“They weren’t happy ones.”

I don’t understand it. She is thirty, and to me, she is exactly the woman she was the night I opened her cage, only more herself. But I’ve watched humans mourn getting older before, and I’ve tried to learn why. I know it isn’t for me to tell her the sadness is foolish. She’s perfect, and what I want is for her to look at herself and think so too. I’d rather she loved herself than loved me, if I had to choose. I’ve never said that aloud because she’d argue.

We reach the garden path, and I stop her between the pale flowers.

“I have a gift for you,” I say.

She looks up. "What is it?"

"Come and see."

"Mordred, what is it?"

I take her hand and lead her in through the front door, past the hearth and our beloved two chairs, down the corridor, and into the music room. I lift the tapestry and open the padded door. She laughs behind me.

"You wrote me something," she says. "You wrote me a new song, didn't you? For my birthday."

"Sit down."

She sits in the one chair in the middle of the room. I light the wall lamps and close the door. I kneel in front of her, reach behind my head to open the clasps, and set the mask on the floor beside my knee.

I open my jaw along the seams and sing. It's a Healing song, older than the one I've sung her before, and older than the one I sang for a dying city. I've never sung it for her, only for me. I keep my eyes on her face. She closes her eyes to listen, and her hands go still in her lap. Her breathing slows and evens, and her lips part a little.

I sing for a few minutes. Then I close my mouth, and my jaw draws back to its narrow width. The room is silent again.

She opens her eyes and looks at me.

"Thank you," she says. "That was beautiful. It made me feel..." She stops and puts a hand to her chest. "Incredible. Young. Strong. I don't know how to say it."

I reach under my robes and take out the hand mirror I've kept hidden there. I hold it out to her.

She looks at it, then at me.

"What's this for?"

"Look."

She takes it. She turns it toward her face, and she gasps. Her free hand comes up to her cheek. She touches the skin at the corner of her eye, where the fine lines were. She touches the corner of her mouth. There is nothing there now. Her skin is smooth from her temple to her jaw, and her face is the face I first saw ten years ago.

"What?" she says. "How? How did you do that?"

"I can keep you young," I say. "For as long as I can sing for you, you won't age, and you won't die. You can be eternal, if you want to be."

She stares at me over the mirror.

“You can do that?”

“Yes.”

“You never said you could make me immortal.”

“I’m saying it now. It’s yours if you want it.”

She lets the mirror fall to the floor, then she’s out of the chair and in my arms. I catch her against my chest and rock back on my heels. We’re both kneeling on the padded floor with her legs around me and her arms around my neck.

“I want to spend an eternity with you,” she says into my hair.

“I adore you.” I hold her tighter. “If that’s what you want, I’ll give it to you. Anything you ask me for, I’ll give you.”

She pulls back to look at me and laughs. Then she kisses me, right on my bare mouth, quick, warm, and happy.

“Yes,” she says. “Let’s spend an eternity loving each other and looking after the people of Nivallia. That’s what I want.”

THE END

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I am a thing of horror.

A failed experiment, stitched from mismatched parts. I carved out our place in the wastelands of Alia Terra, yet even my own kind, perfected by my work, avoids me. Hideous and utterly alone.

Years ago, consumed by this loneliness, I sent my blood to a Marriage Temple, and to my surprise, I was matched to a maiden. What happened when she saw me sent me into a spiral of despair and grim thoughts. I vanished behind my mansion's gates, forever.

But forever is a long time to be lonely. If this is my fate, then I'll reject my immortality and be done with it. Or I can try once more...

I visit the bride market with no hope in my soul. I bid on every woman, the highest offer, always refused. Until...

She points at me. "Sold." Our eyes meet. I don't know why this fierce, beautiful woman lets me buy her. I pull my cloak tighter, sure she is terrified. No matter. **If I can have her, I'll hide my form, never touch her.**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cara Wylde loves to write about strong, feisty women and their hot Alphas who will do anything to make them happy. Her books are filled with romance and just a dash of mystery, suspense, and that eerie atmosphere she fell in love with reading too many gothic novels. With a master's degree in Comparative Literature, she can't help but play with tropes and themes from various genres, trying to come up with fresh perspectives on the paranormal characters her readers love so much. Vampires, shapeshifters, demons, witches... Cara will always make sure they get their own twists.

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