

THE Runaway Princess

A Princess Vigilante Short

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Chapter One

The mist was thick, making it difficult to see more than a few feet in front of me. My legs were beginning to cramp from my crouched position atop the tree limb, but without knowing where the target was, I didn't want to chance moving.

A flash of light caught my attention and I smiled. A small caravan of Kulkan produce. There was a heavy rainstorm to the west of us, which had sent the more desperate merchants into the forest to bypass it on their way to the city of Forcadel. Unfortunately for them, we were waiting.

I pressed my lips together and whistled, darting my tongue to make a bird-like sound. Three short taps, one long tap, five short taps. A code to tell the others in the trees where to point their arrows.

Almost as soon as the last whistle echoed, arrows pierced the air and landed in the ground. A fire blossomed, illuminating the darkness and the group of travelers. More arrows behind and beside them created a veritable ring preventing their horse from escaping. The creature bucked and kicked, and the man jumped off the carriage to calm him before he damaged himself or what he was carrying.

Jax strode out of the darkness and into the ring of fire that trapped the family. The black tunic and pants made him more formidable than he really was, and the pencil-thin mustache and devilish sneer completed the image.

"Now, who told you that you could walk through our forest?" he asked, his voice soft. "Don't you know there's a toll in these parts?"

"We don't want no trouble," the man said, averting his gaze from Jax's. "Just trying to get our wares into Forcadel."

"But there's people who could use them here," Jax said, walking to the buggy and ripping the burlap covers off. Twin cries of fear echoed from the back as two small children huddled together. I closed my eyes, unease settling in the pit of my stomach. This wasn't some large, well-off caravan traveler. But it was too late now.

"Just don't take them," the man cried, yanking them from the buggy before Jax could touch them. "I've heard tell what that forest pirate does to children. You can take whatever you want, just don't take my kids."

Jax rifled through the buggy and said something I couldn't make out from this distance. He didn't look too pleased with the bounty he'd just secured, and my stomach came up into my mouth.

"Take the girl," he said.

The man screamed, grabbing his daughter tighter as two black shadows dropped from the trees. My heart thudded in my chest and I looked away. I'd witnessed this scene enough times; I didn't need to see it again.

"Send ten bushels of apples into the forest every week for the next two months," Jax said. "Then perhaps Celia will let your daughter go."

The reins whipped in the air and the horse took off past the fire and into the dark forest beyond. I remained in the tree, listening to the quiet sobs of a man who'd just lost everything, telling myself that at least his daughter would be well-taken care of.

But even I couldn't lie to myself. So I quietly climbed down and took off into the forest on foot.

The unsettled feeling in my stomach hadn't dissipated by time I arrived back at Celia's fortress. The tall, tree-trunk walls that formed the impenetrable barrier emerged out of the dark night, their pointed tops and smooth bark preventing anyone from getting in—or out—except through the front gates. They were open, as several of us had been out in the forest tonight. The Nestoris had predicted the weather would turn south, and they were never wrong.

As I walked through the gates, my eyes adjusted to the lantern light. The recently acquired buggy was to my left, empty of its cargo, the horse, and the child. Soon it would either be put into use for the camp or chopped up for firewood. I tried not to think about how long the farmer had probably spent saving up for it.

I continued into the camp, passing the dining house and rows of sleeping houses, all made from the same logs as the camp's walls. My sights were set on the small hut at the back of the camp, a thin stream of smoke spiraling out of the stone chimney. Already waiting outside were the others who'd gone with us on our mission—Locke, Radmilla, and a new boy whose name I hadn't learned yet.

Radmilla nodded to me as I came to stand with them. She was a Forcadelian, like me, her long brown hair streaked with blond. "Jax is still in there. Think he'll try to stiff us this time?"

"How much was in the carriage?" I asked.

"Ten bushels of apples, two of pears. Plus a few boxes of late summer strawberries." She grinned devilishly. "I hope we get some strawberries."

I simply nodded. I'd long since lost my taste for fine food, although an apple would be delicious, especially since we'd all missed our one meal waiting for a caravan to pass by.

"So why'd we take the girl?" I asked after a moment. "Sounds like that's plenty."

"Who knows? Maybe Jax had orders to take someone," Locke replied, running a hand through his blond hair. He was Niemenian, one of the few such northerners in our midst. His pale face was covered in freckles from the hot, Forcadelian sun. On his left forearm was a symbol, a flame in a triangle. Radmilla bore one as well, as did the new boy. Even Jax had one under his shirt, and the girl we'd just taken prisoner would have the brand by morning. The only person who didn't have one was me—not a fact I shared readily.

After a few more minutes of small talk and camp gossip, the door opened and Jax came strolling out, a shiny red apple half-eaten in his hands. He paid us no attention as he took a large bite of it and kept walking.

"Oi!" Radmilla cried. "Where's our cut?"

"You don't get none," Jax said, his mouth full.

A cry of anger shot up from the group, all of whom were probably just as hungry as I was. "That ain't fair, Jax," Locke barked. "I'mma go see Celia—"

Jax grinned. "Be my guest. She's inside. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

Locke hesitated, staring at the open door behind him and swallowing hard. He made no move to walk inside. Nor did anyone else.

"That's what I thought," Jax said. "Oh, since Larissa was the one to find the thing, she can have this." He threw the apple core at my feet then walked away.

"I hate him so much," Locke snarled, balling his fists at his side. "Thinks he can just do what he wants to

us, cause we ain't as favored as he is? Well, he got another thing coming."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, raising my brow. "Then go in there and talk to Celia about it."

"Well...why don't *you* do it?" he said. "You should have at least half the bounty. You're the one who saw 'em."

I glanced down at the core and shook my head. "Not worth it. You guys better get some rest. I think that storm's supposed to continue, so we'll be out again tomorrow night."

I left my fellow thieves standing in front of Celia's door and walked toward the sleeping houses. They were right; we'd all be within our rights to complain to Celia, and she might listen. Although she kidnapped children and pressed them into service, once they were here, she was a fair leader. Everyone got a bed, everyone got one square meal a day—as long as they remained useful. Still, most of the younger kids were terrified of her, and Jax used that to his advantage.

I wasn't necessarily scared, but I preferred not to speak with her if I could help it. And besides that, the spoils of our evening weren't really ours. They belonged to that poor farmer.

A sigh left my lips when I reached the doorway of the sleeping hut. I turned around, walking back out into the night and toward another hut with smoke coming out of the chimney. I paused at the door then softly pushed it open as soft sobbing reached my ears.

The girl we'd taken from her father sat with a mug of calming tea between her hands. Her eyes were red as they stared blankly at the floor. She couldn't have been older than eight or nine.

Callum, a Kulkan Nestori with light brown hair and broad shoulders, knelt in front of her, pressing a damp cloth to her knee. It was bleeding—whether from Jax or some previous injury I didn't know. Nicolasa, a Forcadelian Nestori with a kind face and long black hair that curled wildly down her back, was combing the girl's hair with a special solution intended to kill lice, mites, and whatever else she might have on her. The girl gave no indication she even knew where she was.

"Larissa," Nicolasa said with a warm smile. "Are you ill?"

"No." I shook my head. "Just wanted to check on her."

"You have a good heart," Callum said, standing and dipping the cloth into the healing solution once more. "She'll be fine tomorrow—perhaps two or three days."

"Papa won't forget about me, will he?" the girl whispered.

"Of course he won't," I said, kneeling beside her. "And you won't be here long. Just a few weeks then you'll be back home in your bed."

She screwed up her face. "Why did they take me? Why can't I go home?"

I had no good answers, so I took her small hands in mine. "This is your home, for now. My name is Larissa and I'll look out for you, I promise. But I need you to stay strong, for tonight."

She nodded, her red eyes drooping as the calming tea put her to sleep.

"Hold her arm out, will you?" Nicolasa said, holding a needle and a cup of black ink.

As much as I didn't want to, I gently took the girl's arm and held it out as Nicolasa drew the symbol, marking the girl forever as one of Celia's. I couldn't bear to watch, so instead I kept my gaze on the spot on my arm where my symbol should've been.

Chapter Two

True to my word, the next morning, I returned to the healing house to look for the girl, but she was already gone. Nicolasa told me she'd been assigned to the laundry house, which was good. If Celia planned to keep her longer, she would have put her in the training camp to learn how to use a sword.

Still, that she was there at all irked me. It was one thing to pluck off lords and kings, but stealing from those with barely anything to give was wrong. Celia didn't encourage it, but she didn't exactly stop Jax from taking what he wanted either.

There was no use in thinking more about it, so to distract myself, I headed into the training ring. There, kids as young as seven and eight fought with real weapons, learning the hard lesson that if you didn't defend yourself, nobody else would.

I picked up a sword from the trunk and tested the weight in my hands.

"Good morning," Locke said walking up to me. He flashed me a handsome smile which I shyly returned. I hadn't been romantic with anyone in the camp yet, but I had a feeling Locke had a crush on me. It was probably why he'd volunteered to go with us the night before.

"Morning," I replied, tossing the sword from one hand to the other. "Fancy a session?"

"I know better than to test you with real weapons," he said with a laugh. "Didn't you take someone's arm off last week?"

I rolled my eyes. "No. He just got a nasty cut, that's all."

"I'll take you hand-to-hand though," he said, grinning again. "That way it's just bruises and bumps."

I tossed the sword back into the trunk and shrugged. As we strolled toward an open sparring ring, which was nothing more than a wooden circle placed on the ground, I took stock of any weaknesses I saw. He was probably sixteen, a few months older than me, and still growing into his manly body. His arms swung at his side as if he had no idea how to use them, and his feet kicked up dust. But he was an apt scout, like me, and knew how to defend himself.

"Ready?" he asked. "Take it easy on me, will you?"

"You're the one who asked me to spar with you," I said. And without hesitation, I took off toward him.

He avoided my first blow, and I caught his fist in my free hand, twisting his arm behind him. But he wriggled free, kicking his man-sized foot toward my shin. Remembering how his balance had been off, I used my knee to push his standing leg and he fell to the ground with a loud *oomph*.

"Watch your balance," I remarked, brushing dust off my face.

He jumped to his feet, still grinning. "That's what Calvin says. Or I guess what he would say if he actually taught anything and didn't just let us figure it out"

"He's a mystery." One of Celia's trainers, the hardest of the bunch, gave more criticisms than praise. "Ready—"

I didn't get the rest of the words out as he barreled toward me, his shoulder aiming for my stomach. But he left the back of his neck open, so I balled my fists and brought them down on the base of his skull. This time, he landed in a heap and didn't get up.

I kicked him gently then checked for a pulse. Just knocked out.

"You shouldn't hit so hard," one of the other trainers said, walking by. "Take him to the Nestoris."

I rolled my eyes—a little headache was barely mentioning. But feeling bad, I looped his arm around my shoulder and dragged him to the healing hut. There, I put him down next to another kid, who was missing a finger and watching blood spurt out of the stub.

"Hey, Nicolasa," I called, walking to their table of supplies and finding some gauze. I returned to the boy and wrapped his hand only to stop the flow of blood.

"I know, I know," she said, breezing in with a tincture. "Had to run to the ends of the earth to find some spinach." She stuffed the green leaves into the boy's mouth. "For iron. And cow's liver, too."

"See? Lose a finger, but you're eating well," I said, patting the boy on the shoulder. I glanced to the seat where the little girl had been the night before. "How's the new kid?"

"Still in shock," Nicolasa said, spooning a bloody piece of animal carcass into the boy's mouth. "She screamed when she saw the brand."

I glanced at her arm, which bore the same mark, although it had faded with age. "All this for ten bushels of apples. I still don't believe it's worth it."

"Well, then, take it up with the big boss," Nicolasa said, looking over at Locke's unconscious form. "Now get out of here. I have to deal with another boy you beat up."

"He asked for it," was all I said as I breezed out the door.



I couldn't get the farmer's little girl out of my mind, and I was growing impatient with myself and my lack of action. It wasn't as if I was completely powerless. I *could* raise the issue with Celia. Only fear stopped me. But when I saw Jax eating another apple, taunting a young boy who looked like he could've used it more than Jax, I made up my mind.

Girding myself, I walked purposefully to the small hut at the back of the camp. Smoke rose from the chimney, as it always did. I hesitated for just a moment, unsure what I might find inside, then rapped on the door.

"Enter."

I turned the knob and pushed open the door, revealing a small room with a wooden desk in the center. There sat Celia, the forest pirate and leader of everyone confined within the fort walls. She was in her mid-fifties, but her brown skin was smooth and youthful. The only sign of her age was the smattering of gray hair around her temples and something about the way she gazed at me. As if she could see right through me.

"Yes?"

I licked my lips nervously. "I...um... I have a complaint."

She sat back in her chair, which creaked loudly, and put her hands behind her head. "Oh? Do tell."

"It's...well, it's Jax," I said, after a minute. Was this going to come back and bite me? If Jax found out I'd spoken to Celia about him, would he make my life a living hell?

"You're angry with him for not sharing the spoils of last night's raid?" she asked, quirked one black eyebrow.

"No, that's not it at all," I said, waving my hand. Then I steeled myself. "There was no reason he should've brought that girl into the camp last night. Her father was a poor farmer, and they barely had

anything in their cart to begin with. Ransoming her to get a few bushels of apples seems grossly unfair."

Celia was quiet for a moment then released her hands from behind her head. "Did you enjoy the stew last night?"

"I didn't eat dinner last night." And my stomach was starting to rumble.

"The night before, then. Or any meal you've eaten since you arrived?"

"Yes, of course, and I thank you for your generosity," I said, bowing a little out of habit.

"The vegetables in your stew, the beef in the broth. All of it comes from the people who owe us. The children are well-kept here, and in some cases, better off than back in their farmlands. We give them food, shelter, and a trade, and in return, their families—"

"Provide us food, I understand." I still didn't like it. "But why can't we just... I don't know, not steal from poor people?"

"We take equally from the rich and poor," Celia said, but there was a note of something unusual in her voice. "But perhaps Jax's judgment hasn't been the best lately. I don't need another girl in my laundry, after all, especially one who's never washed a shirt in her life."

"Can we let her go, then?" I asked.

"Of course not. Then everyone will want to be let go," Celia said, a smile curling onto her face. "I was actually thinking of something much different. Perhaps it's time I let *you* lead a mission."

"W-what?" I blinked. "Me? Why?"

"You're one of the most talented young ones in the camp," Celia said. "Crossbow, sword, knives—you can use them all with ease. But what I haven't seen yet from you is strategy."

"Ma'am?" I furrowed my brow. "What kind of strategy?"

"The kind a princess from the kingdom of Forcadel would possess."

Her eyes glinted, and my blood ran cold. *This* was why I hadn't wanted to speak with her. She was a woman who leveraged secrets and ransomed truths. And my truth was her most prized possession.

Two years ago, when I was just thirteen, my father informed me that I was to be married to a prince from the kingdom of Kulka. It would seal some treaty—I didn't remember the specifics. All I remembered was the sheer terror of knowing my own parent was willing to whore me off before I'd even had my monthly bleeding.

So, I ran. Straight into the arms of Celia, who'd shuffled me into the queue of child soldiers as if there was nothing special about me. I made sure to keep my nose clean, learning what I could about using a weapon, not in a fencing ring, but in a fight. Knowing that if I didn't win, I would die.

Up until this point, neither of us had spoken about my origins—mostly because I'd done my best to avoid speaking with Celia at all. I feared she might dangle me in front of the king for some exorbitant amount of gold, and I would be right back where I started. That's why she hadn't branded me yet.

"I don't have any strategy," I said, after a long pause.

"You have a sharp mind, Larissa," she said. "Better than most in the camp. That, my dear, is what I'm interested in right now." She rose from the desk and pulled a small letter from the pile. "I've gotten word that there will be a royal carriage making the trek from Kulka to Forcadel. My sources tell me the Forcadelian king's guards will be carrying some exquisite jewels that will be used to fashion a crown for the new princess."

"Princess?" Did I have a sister I didn't know about?

"Ah, I suppose you haven't heard." She grinned, and I hated that she knew what I was thinking. "The marriage between Prince August and Lady Katarine of Niemen is happening in a few weeks."

I nodded, feeling nothing for my brother.

"The king of Niemen wanted a specific jewel only found on the western side of his country, on the other side of the mountains. So it's faster for them to bring the jewels to the city of Neveri on the coast and then continue down the river to Forcadel." She pointed to the weathered map on her desk. "But since that storm continues to rage here, they'll have to take a detour into the forest if they want to make good time."

"And you want me to lead this mission?" I asked quietly. "Alone?"

"I will send Jax to oversee." It was all I could do not to groan. "With the explicit instructions that he's to monitor *only*. Unless, of course, you get yourself killed, or make a stupid decision, like leaving this camp in favor of Forcadel."

At that, I snorted. "Believe me, there's nothing for me there except a marriage I want no part of."

"It's not returning to your privileged life that concerns me," she said, straightening. "It's that little look in your eye every time we bring back a bounty. You don't like this work, and I'm not sure you ever will. I can't trust that you won't make a wrong decision for the right reasons."

I thought about that little girl then shook my head. "King Maurice has enough jewels. This is the kind of mission I can get behind."

"Very well." She reached into her drawer and pulled out a scrap of black fabric. "Since the royal guard will be there, I don't want you to be recognized. So you'll wear this."

I unwrapped the fabric, revealing a mask with two eyeholes. "A mask?"

"It might give you a little air of mystery," she said, sitting back down. "You can take three others with you. I will expect you back by midnight."

Chapter Three

Perhaps this was how it was with Celia. She'd tell me what she wanted done, and I was supposed to just...figure it out. I returned to the Nestori healing house, as it wasn't just medicines they kept there. Happily, Locke was awake, but his smile was twinged with a painful wince.

"Knew I shouldn't have gotten into it with you," he said, beaming up at me from the chair. "My head is killing me."

"Sorry," I said, my cheeks warming considerably. Then, as I had nothing further to say to him, I continued into the back of the house, where the Nestoris made their magic. The room was filled with a pungent odor of herbs and spices, making my eyes water and my throat scratch, but I soldiered on until I found Callum kneeling over a bowl and mixing yellow powder.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Celia's sending me out on a mission," I said. "I thought I could use some of that sleeping powder."

"Knockout powder," he corrected, straightening. "And Celia's letting you out alone, hm? Big day."

"It's a royal caravan, too," I said. "Hence why I want the knockout powder. There'll probably be more than a few soldiers, and the more I can take down before we hit the ground, the better."

He nodded and walked over to a shelf with several boxes. "Each pouch is good for one man. Two if you can aim it right. Someone my size will sleep for fifteen minutes, your size perhaps an hour." He deposited three bags in my hand. "That's all I can spare."

"Should be plenty." I thumbed the bags in my hand. "Any...advice?"

"The royal guard won't hesitate to kill you," he said. "So don't hesitate to kill them."



With my knockout powder in hand, I left Callum and ran smack into Locke once more. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out on a mission," I said.

He removed the cloth. "Can I go?"

"I..." Sure, I could decide who to take with me, but would Locke really be a good option? He was injured, but he was also loyal to me. Even if he didn't have a crush, I could count on him not to muck things up intentionally. "You can come scout for me. But only if Nicolasa—"

"He can go," she called from the back. "The Mother knows Celia sends out worse into battle."

"Scouting only," I said, hoping I sounded firmer than I felt. "Meet me at the gates in one hour."

With my scout identified, I headed to the weapons arsenal to find what I needed. A sword, definitely, but something to get this knockout powder to the guards before they even knew we were there. The less my people were on the ground, the better.

I plucked a crossbow from the rack and mounted an arrow. With a single move, I pointed it at the wall

and shot, smiling when the tip landed square in the wall. I gathered several more arrows and stuck them in a quiver, attaching the crossbow to my belt on the opposite side to the sword.

Next, I ventured to the training ring to look for the people I'd be taking with me. Locke counted as one, but I needed two others. Preferably big, tough others who wouldn't think twice about tussling with royal guards. I looked out on the rings, not at the kids fighting, but the trainers. They sometimes went on missions, and this might be a big enough mission to take them out.

"Are you done yet?" Jax asked, walking up to me. "I don't have all day to babysit you."

"Looking for my crew," I replied, then, knowing it might be wise to get on his good side tonight, I asked, "Any suggestions on who to take?"

He cast me a disgusted look, then sniffed loudly. "Braintree and Percel."

I'd been on a few missions with them, and didn't like their style. Too much like Jax's. "Anybody else?"

"You asked for my opinion, and I gave it to you," he said, spitting on the ground. "And if you don't quit dawdling, the royal caravan will pass us before we even get into position."

For tonight, I'd take his advice, because time was of the essence and I didn't have all night to be asking for help. But in the future, I'd make my own decisions. "Fine. Let's go."



Night had fallen some time ago, but there was a large moon overhead, illuminating the forest floor and the road that lay beneath the trees. In the distance, thunder rumbled, proving the Nestori weather predictions accurate. Our other scouts in the forest ahead indicated no one had passed through before us, so all we had to do was wait.

I glanced at the other tree, where Locke was watching. He caught my gaze and something in my heart fluttered. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to have companionship at the camp.

A whistle broke my attention and I turned in its direction. Jax pointed at his eyes then back at the ground, presumably telling me to get back to the mission at hand.

I rolled my eyes; it wasn't as if there was much to see. I could daydream a little.

But my daydreaming was cut short when another whistle echoed from our scouts to the south. My pulse quickened as I moved into place, tying the back of knockout powder to an arrow and pointing it at the road. Jax and the others rustled in the trees, reminding me that if I didn't take out the guards, they would.

In the distance, a light shone, and as it drew closer, I could make out the sight of a carriage. It bore the Lonsdale crest, the coat of arms of my family, which meant this carriage was sent by the king himself. For a brief moment, I wondered if August was inside, but then I shook my head. Celia was testing my loyalty tonight, and I didn't want anything to mess it up.

Locke whistled the code to signal there were ten guards, and my heart sank a little. I only had three bags; even if I was extra careful with them and took out two per bag, we'd still have to fight off four guards.

But this was the path I'd chosen, and there was no turning back now.

When the carriage bumped over a rock, I released the first arrow, landing it squarely between the two guards, male and female, sitting atop the bench holding the reins. They looked down at the bag spilling out between them then their eyes drooped and they slid off the top of the carriage.

"Hold!" cried a male guard to the side, who reached for the horses before they continued. "What's this?"

Two guards came running from behind the carriage to check on their compatriots, and I couldn't get a clear shot to hit them both, so I aimed for the one holding the horse's reins. Maybe the horses would get scared and run off then we'd just take our prize without bloodying anyone.

The third man went down, but the horses remained in place.

Jax whistled at me, clearly thinking it was time for him to make an appearance. But there were still seven guards left, and only four of us. Not good enough.

I aimed the last arrow at the carriage and searched for an opportunity, my pulse quickening as sweat broke out on my forehead. I was running out of time, and if we returned empty-handed...

Another furious whistle, and Jax and his men were getting into place to jump down. If I didn't take control, they would, so I stashed the extra bag of knockout powder in my back pocket and jumped from the tree with the crossbow in hand.

"*Thief!*" cried one of the guards, a woman with short-cropped hair. "Get the carriage out of here!"

After attaching the crossbow to my belt, I pulled my sword and sliced it through the leather ropes holding the horses to the carriage. The horses, already spooked, took off running into the dark night, and I was faced with the female guard, baring her teeth at me.

She pulled her sword, and we danced, clashing steel to steel. She was well-trained, but not in the art of survival. Jax and his two friends jumped from the tree to take the other guards, and Locke remained above, as instructed, to keep an eye out.

"You're nothing but *scum*," the woman seethed as our swords met again. "Can't even show your face."

I'd nearly forgotten about the mask, but I let it turn into a shield. "You're not lucky enough to see my face. You'll be lucky to make it out of this forest alive."

Metal against metal, we were evenly matched, but I needed to get rid of her quickly. So as with Locke earlier that day, I found her weakness. She was too aggressive, leaving her back defenseless, so with a swift blow to the back of the skull, she was out as he'd been.

"That looks painful," Locke said from above.

"She'll recover," I replied with a grin.

"Quit flirting and *help us!*" Jax snarled. He had two guards twice his size bearing down on him. I searched for the other two and my heart stopped. Braintree was on the ground, his eyes open and blood pooling at his neck. He was dead.

"*Larissa!*" Jax cried as another guard came for him.

I shook myself out of my reverie and sprang into action, attaching the bag of knockout powder, but fumbling with the arrow.

"*Mother damn it, just kill him!*"

No, I wouldn't do it. I cast the crossbow aside and ran toward them, sword ready. The two of us beat them back, and I looked away as Jax rammed his sword through a guard's shoulder. There were four of them left. Two had Percel occupied, Jax ran for another, and the fourth...

The fourth was aiming his bow and arrow at a defenseless Locke in the tree. In one move, I tumbled over the ground, picked up my crossbow, aimed, and fired directly into the man's chest.

The world slowed as the man stared at the bloody arrow then turned to look at me as he fell forward. He landed with a sickening thud that echoed between my heartbeats, and I waited for him to get up.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, there was yelling, but all I could see was the man who I'd killed. He was about twenty-five, with brown hair and lifeless brown eyes. Could've been quite handsome. Did he have a family? A mother who loved him? A mother who would now—

A disembodied hand yanked me to my feet, and I looked into the green eyes of Locke. He was mouthing something, but I had no idea what he was saying. But my legs began to move—to run into the darkness, guided by Locke's hand on my shirt.

After a few minutes, the world sped up, and I stopped short, bending over and retching onto the forest

floor.

"Oh, we don't have time for this shit," Jax said, his cheek bleeding. "Those guards will be after us any second now. And maybe even bring backup."

I wiped my mouth, unable to speak.

"We'll get you back to the camp," Locke said, helping me upright. "You did good! Celia will be proud."

"I...I..."

A hand whipped across my face. "*Snap out of it, you little shit!*"

I rubbed my cheek and nodded, but I didn't snap out of it. I would never snap out of what I'd done. There was no turning back for me, or the man I'd just murdered.

Chapter Four

Even though it was my mission, I let Jax deliver the jewels to Celia and take all the credit. Perhaps she'd never let me leave the camp again. It would be a blessing.

Locke tried to talk to me, but the sight of him made me ill. How could he be so cavalier about death? How could he smile at me with those bright white teeth when I had blood on my hands? I sat on a bench outside Celia's house, staring at my palms and desperately wanting to wash them.

The door opened, and Celia walked out with Jax. "Larissa, come inside."

I didn't want to, but I pushed myself to stand and join her inside the house. She offered me a chair on the other side of her desk then handed me a glass filled with amber liquid.

"Drink," she ordered.

"Is this a calming draught?" I asked, my voice rough.

"Sure. Some call it whiskey though." She sat on her desk and poured herself a glass. "It gets easier."

"I don't want it to," I whispered.

"Those men would've killed Locke had you not interfered," she said, looking at the liquid in her glass. "We already lost Braintree. I'm glad we didn't lose anyone else."

I shuddered and forced myself to drink what was in the glass. It burned as it went down and made my already uncomfortable stomach protest violently.

"You should sip that," Celia said. "It's strong."

I nodded and held the glass between my hands.

"Jax told me what happened tonight. Said you were a pathetic little wimp."

I shook my head. Apt description.

"But I've known Jax long enough to read between the lines," she said with a throaty chuckle. "You impressed him, and he's threatened by that. Tell me how it went down."

The words came out of my mouth, but I barely heard them. It was like my brain had shut down to protect itself. When I came to the part where I'd shot the man, my voice cracked and I drank more.

"You did good," Celia said. "I can't expect a kid to be perfect on her first try. But you have the makings of an incredible thief. Perhaps even, one day, taking my spot here at this desk." She paused and sat back.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You want me to take over for you? Why?"

"I like you, Larissa," Celia said. "I like how you work, I like how you think, and I get a good feeling about you. There's potential there. But we'll have to stamp out some of your more...*empathetic* qualities. I can't have my protégé throwing up every time she has to make a difficult decision."

Now I was her protégé? Since when? "Maybe you were right about me, maybe I'm not cut out for this work," I said slowly. "I don't know if I want to be your successor. I don't even know if I want to keep doing this. I killed a man today, Celia. I took someone's life."

"You're just in shock," she said, gently.

"I'm not in shock," I snapped, louder than I probably should have. "This, what I'm feeling right now, I should be feeling this. Normal human beings who don't kidnap children from their parents and force them into slavery should feel this way."

Celia sat back, observing me over the tips of her fingers. "Then you're free to go."

"W-what?"

"You have no brand, no markings that signify you as mine," she said, evenly. "If you're not willing to do the work, I don't want you in my camp. Perhaps you can run back to your father, and he'll marry you off to some old duke who'll bed you until he croaks. Does that sound like a better life?"

"There has to be something in-between," I said, heart thumping.

"You said yourself you don't want to do the work," she said, standing. "If you aren't going to pull your weight, you can leave and try your luck in the big, bad world out there."

I swallowed, my hands trembling around the glass of whiskey. I didn't want to leave, but I didn't want to stay, either.

She gently took the glass out of my hands. "Or you can trust that I know what's best for you. You're in shock. You just need a little rest and then you'll have a clearer mind."

I chanced a look at her, finding none of the hardness that had been there before. She almost looked *too* motherly. It made something uneasy in my stomach.

"We'll talk more in the morning," she said. "Go get some sleep."

✂

Later that night, I lay in bed with eyes wide open, caught between the disgust of what I'd done and the terror of knowing if I didn't do it again, I'd lose everything I had. My thoughts jumped back and forth, somewhere between sleep and waking as I pictured myself standing at Celia's side, ordering the execution of Locke and the farmer's daughter, and laughing about it with her over a glass of whiskey.

Waking with a start, I stared into the darkness, the dream reverberating through my body. I didn't want to be the kind of person to whom killing came easy, nor someone who condoned the kidnapping of children. If I stayed in this camp, I was in danger of succumbing to acceptance through exposure.

I sat up, the thought of leaving lodging in my brain. It usually floated in and out, and the stark reminder that I had nothing to my name kept me in place.

But, I remembered, I didn't have exactly *nothing*. Rolling out of bed, I pushed the mattress off the base, revealing the slats beneath. One of them held a large, dark knot in the wood, and it was there I retrieved a blue gem on a golden chain. It was the one thing I still kept from my former life, as it had belonged to my mother.

Numbly, I slid the necklace over my neck and stared at the orb that rested against my chest. It wouldn't set me up for long, but it would buy a few weeks's worth of food. And when it ran out, what would I do?

This was madness. No one left Celia's camp, and anyone who tried was dragged back and flogged within an inch of their life. The people in the surrounding villages were terrified of Celia, so any children caught with the brand were given up without a fight.

And yet...I stared at my arm, reflecting in the nearby torchlight. If I could get out of the camp, I could slip into obscurity.

"This is madness," I repeated, this time aloud. But it seemed more inconceivable to stay, to continue a path I wanted no part of. I wouldn't survive carrying this guilt around for much longer.

My breath caught in my throat as a rather elegant solution wafted through my mind. I didn't need to

survive very long—just long enough to find that guard's family. I would come clean, tell them what I'd done and then...then I would turn myself in. If I was lucky, they'd throw me in jail before anyone got a good look at my face.

A tear fell down my cheek as I made my decision. I took a step out of the sleeping house then another and then another. Treading lightly on the balls of my feet, silencing my movements and keeping to the shadows as I crept closer to the front gates. They were still open, but I counted five guards. Celia had said I was free to go, but I didn't want her to realize I left for awhile.

I knelt, resting my fingertips on the ground as I watched them patrol. They kept a pretty tight watch, except every so often, there would be a moment where the ground guards were facing the one side and the other guards were facing the other. But it was so haphazard, I couldn't time it. I would just have to make a break for it and hope for the best.

The guards turned, and I took off, barreling through the main gates as quickly and quietly as I could. I dove into the underbrush of the forest, rolling until I came to a complete stop. I crouched, watching the sentries and not believing my luck that I'd—

A whistle cut through the night. An alarm. The sentries in the trees; how could I be so dumb?

The sentries turned, pointing their arrows at the blackness. I dashed into the darkness just as one barely missed my feet. More whistles pinpointing my location joined the call of the guards to assemble and search. There was only thing left to do: hope I was faster than they were.

The forest was black, but the storm in the distance grew closer. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the forest floor for a moment before the darkness returned. A shadow fell from the tree as the lightning flashed across the sky, but it had been enough. I grabbed the disembodied hand, flipping the attacker over my back and kicking them in the side before continuing to run. Another shadow, another flash of lightning, this time followed by an arrow that sliced the skin of my arm, but luckily missed.

Rain fell from the sky, at first a drizzle then a deluge. The sound muffled the whistles, but I didn't trust that the sentries weren't following me. Once I got out of the forest and onto the open plain, I'd be safe. When another flash of light split the sky, freedom appeared maybe fifty feet beyond.

"Larissa!"

I stopped, turning at the sound of Locke's voice. A crack of lightning illuminated his wet face, and a boom of thunder followed. His blond hair stuck to his forehead, and in the darkness, his blue eyes almost glowed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I can't stay," I said, backing up a little.

"You had a shock tonight, I get it. But you can't leave. Celia will—"

"I don't care what Celia does to me," I said, taking another step backward. "I can't stay there anymore."

"And I can't let you leave." He actually looked pained to be saying it.

"You can walk back into the camp and tell everyone you never saw me," I said, as the rain began to soak my clothes.

"You know I can't do that," he said, pointing to the trees. "Come back, and maybe she'll be lenient. You'll only have to get lashed—"

I shook my head. "I can't live this life anymore. I can't kill people and shake it off. And...to be honest, I don't ever want to become the kind of person who can do that." I licked my lips, tasting the cool rain on my skin. "And I don't want to hurt you either. But I will if you don't let me go."

"Celia will hurt me more."

He barreled toward me, and his body connected with mine, sending us both to the muddy forest floor. He circled my wrists with his hands, pinning them into the wet ground as his knees pressed into my thighs. But this was merely to let him think he had the upper hand.

I slid my legs wide, causing his knees to slip, then wrapped my thighs around his hips and rolled him over. With him on the ground, looking up at me, I caught a glimpse of his wide-eyed, fearful expression just before I reared back and knocked him out.

A whistle echoed in the night, and I jumped to my feet, sliding in the muck as I struggled to get moving. The whistles grew louder, but the plain was coming closer. Just twenty feet, maybe, until freedom.

Ten. Was there an army of men behind me?

Five. Nearly there.

I burst out into the plain, the unfettered rain pelting my face and soaking all the way into my bones. I didn't care though. Out here, I was free from Celia's sentries and her guards. And as long as I kept running, they would never catch me.

Chapter Five

I ran for what felt like hours, until my legs cramped and I slowed to a walk. Any minute, I expected the horses, the arrows in my back. Every step was torture, wondering if it was going to be my last. But I kept moving, because what else was there to do?

In the distance, there was a small pinprick of light. For all I knew, it could've been the front gate lights from Celia's camp, and I'd just walked in a large circle. But no, there were two lights at the gate. And this was a single, orange light.

I put one foot in front of the other, my boots sometimes sinking into the muddy ground, but the orange light in the distance became my beacon. If I could just make it there, I would be all right.

My teeth chattered as my shirt stuck to my body, so I broke out into a run again to stay warm. As I drew closer, I could make out the shape of a house, the light coming from a small window at the top. Although I should've been more apprehensive, I wasn't as I hopped the fence and ran up to the door, banging on the wood with all my might.

Bang bang bang. "Anybody home?" I called.

A few moments passed before there was creaking on the floorboard. The door cracked open revealing one old, brown eye. "Who's there?"

"H-help," I cried, my brain racing to come up with anything but the truth. "I...my family was attacked by thieves. Please! They'll kill me if they find me."

The woman opened the door fully. "How old are you, girl?"

"F-fifteen," I stammered, more from cold than playacting. "P-please, I just need shelter until the morning."

"Show me your arm."

I forced myself to look confused. "What?"

"Your arm. Want to make sure you aren't one of her escapees. Had one of them once then they took all my chickens. Never again."

I hesitated for a moment. I didn't have a brand, but I was definitely one of hers. Would they hurt this woman because of me? Could I have that on my conscience?

"Well, girl?" the woman barked.

Freezing rain and fear forced me to roll up my sleeves, even as guilt raged at me. She was an old woman, and I was a valuable person. If Celia came for me, would this woman be caught in the crossfire?

My bare arm seemed to placate the woman, and she opened the door fully. "Come on in. Go to the fire so you don't drip on my floors."

I did my best to keep my soaking clothes and hair from messing the dark wooden floors, but it was difficult. I stood in front of the roaring fire, warming my pale, wrinkled hands. The desperation faded

slowly, especially after the woman offered me a bowl of stew from a cast iron pot on the stove.

She introduced herself as Orane, but didn't say more than that. Once I'd finished eating, she produced a white dressing gown and ordered me to place my wet clothes on the grate in front of the fire. But with a full belly and warm hands, guilt took over.

"What is it, girl?" she barked. "You're getting my floors wet."

"I can't..." I said, looking down at the gown. "I can't stay. I'm sorry. I lied. I'm one of Celia's."

The woman eyed me for a long time then shook her head. "I figured as much. Don't take much to whittle the truth out of 'em." She smirked. "You broke a lot faster than most of them do."

I shook my head, not understanding.

"I get kids in here a couple times a year," she said, settling into her chair by the fire. "Sometimes Celia's men come to take 'em back, sometimes they don't. With this storm, I doubt we'll see them tonight, in any case."

I swallowed. "Are you going to get in trouble with her?"

"Bah, she knows better than to mess with me. I have someone looking out for me." The woman pointed to the crest hanging above her fire. It was three ovals interconnected—the symbol of the Mother. Some of the kids in the camp had been religious, but I'd never believed any of it.

"The Mother won't protect you from Celia," I whispered.

"Oh, lost your faith in that camp, did you?" she asked with a wry smile. "You wouldn't be the first."

My lip began to tremble, and I stared at the nightgown. I couldn't stomach another person getting hurt because of me.

"If you're worried about repayment," she said, casting me a look. "I'm running low on firewood. I'm too old to chop the wood anymore and you look like a strapping young girl."

The stew threatened to come back up, and I swallowed hard, ready to tell this woman to open the door and let me out into the storm again. A crack of thunder made me jump, and the woman just shook her head.

"Whatever you've done," she whispered. "Whatever you think you're guilty of, the Mother will forgive you."

"I doubt that," I croaked with a dry laugh.

"How about this," Orane said, leaning onto her knees, "you go upstairs and sleep. If you wake up in the bed in the morning, and Celia ain't here to take you back, you'll listen to what I have to say, hm?"

I might've argued more, but exhaustion was creeping in at the edges of my vision. So I changed out of my sopping wet clothes and climbed up to the loft, falling asleep to my own heartbeat, the crackle of the fireplace, and the pounding rain outside.



I slept fitfully, dreaming of Celia arriving with an army of fire-breathing horses from the forest and forcing me to shoot arrows at everyone in the camp. When dawn broke outside the small porthole window of the house, I dressed in the spare clothes and crept out of the loft. The crest hanging above the fireplace burned into the back of my mind, reminding me of the large chapel in Forcadel where I'd had to attend services as a girl.

Needing to fulfill my end of the bargain, I went outside into the dewy morning, found the weathered axe, and got to work on the logs.

It was monotonous work, but it helped keep the foreboding thoughts at bay. Every few minutes, I'd cast a wary look at the forest in the distance. I'd traveled farther than I'd thought the night before, but not far

enough.

"Well, you're still here," Orane said, walking outside with a mug of steaming coffee. "Sounds like I was right."

"Just because Celia hasn't caught up to me yet doesn't mean she won't," I replied as the axe came down in the center of the wood and got stuck.

"So why'd you run?"

The axe nearly fell out of my hand, and I found my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "I did something horrible. And I want to make amends for it." I adjusted the axe in my hand. "I'm headed to Forcadel."

"That's a far ways from here," she said, leaning on the fence post. "How are you planning to get there?"

"I don't...quite know," I said, putting the axe down. "What direction is it?"

She leaned on the fence post. "A week on foot, I'd wager. With your skinny legs."

My heart sank into my chest. How was I going to make it a week on my own without food, water, or shelter? Would my necklace buy me passage? Perhaps Celia was right. If I turned back now I might...

The royal guard's face flashed in my mind. No, I wouldn't turn back. I'd figure it out, just like I had the night before.

"And how will you make amends for this horrible thing you've done?" Orane asked, sipping on her coffee with a knowing smile on her face.

I swallowed as I looked down at my hands, red from the axe. "I'll tell his family that it was me. Then I'll turn myself in and stand trial for...for murder."

"Murder, hm?" She took another sip. "Cold blood?"

I looked up at her, incredulous. I'd confessed I'd killed a man and she acted like I'd told her the sky was blue.

"You seem fairly set in your plan," Orane said.

"I am," I replied, a little hotly. "It's what I deserve."

"Mm." She leaned on the fence, which creaked under her weight. "You know, the Mother's keen on forgiveness, especially for those who truly want absolution. I can tell your heart is good, if a little naïve."

Perhaps she was senile, because there was no way my heart could be described as *good*.

"Tell you what," she said, reaching into her pocket. She tossed me something shiny—a gold coin. "If you walk due south for about three hours, you'll find the river city of Qririth. There you can use this coin to buy yourself passage to Forcadel."

I stared at the coin, amazed that she had it—and even more so that she was giving it to me. "I can't take your money."

"I'm not arguing with you," she said, giving me a stern look. "And before you go to Captain Mark to turn yourself in, I want you to visit Mother Fishen in the church."

My mouth fell open. Fishen had been the priest when I was a girl. I couldn't believe she was still there. "Why would I go see her? I've already confessed to you what I've done."

"Just promise me you'll see her first." She offered a kind smile. "They may not allow you to seek forgiveness before they send you to the gallows. So you might as well get your soul right before you lose it."

I opened my mouth to argue, but the thought of the gallows sent a tremor of fear down my spine. "I promise," I whispered.

"You know, there are many kinds of justice," she said. "There's always redemption in service to others. Remember that."

Chapter Six

I left Orane's house and walked in the direction she'd told me. The sun was hot, and without water or shade, I grew a little delirious. But my guilt kept me moving until, like a mirage in the distance, the city of Qirith appeared, along with the Vanhoja river that connected Forcadel to the country of Kulka.

My gold coin bought me passage easily enough, though, based on the chuckles from the river boat captain, I'd probably paid three times what it should've cost. But I didn't care. There was water on board, a place to lay my head, and the current was swift. And I still had my necklace to buy myself a few nights in Forcadel.

Three days on the river and we arrived at my hometown. It was strange to see something so familiar after so many years—every spire and flag of the castle remained unchanged since the day I'd run away from it. In Celia's camp, I used to wonder what I might feel returning to the city of my birth. Arriving now, there was nothing but numb acceptance of my fate.

It took several hours to get to an open slip in the very busy docks, but as soon as the deck ramp was lowered, I scurried off. The air was salty and moist. Even in the middle of fall, Forcadel was muggy. Men and women with weathered faces and hands moved the cargo on and off the docks, calling out to each other as they tried to avoid collisions. I sidestepped a few of them, not wanting to attract attention to myself, until I finally reached the end of the maze and my feet landed on cobblestone streets.

I craned my neck upward to take in the city rising on the hill. Flat-topped houses made of brick and stucco lined the edge of the city, and as I moved up the street, there were more shops and businesses than I'd ever thought possible. As a girl, I'd never been able to walk so freely in the city, and the sights, sounds, and smells were intoxicating.

But as I came into the main square, I was reminded of my purpose. Directly across from the castle gates was a large, white church, with a single bell tower reaching toward the sky. I hesitated as I stood in the middle of the square. Would Fishen recognize me and, if so, would she take me back to my father?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the black, fabric mask Celia had given to me. I would look ridiculous with it on, but perhaps it might buy me a little anonymity.

The church doors were open, so once I crossed into the dark, cavernous space, I wrapped the fabric around my head and kept to the shadows of the dying daylight. The church, as with everything else in this city, was exactly as I remembered it. One large dais in the front, where Fishen gave her weekly sermons, the ostentatious throne and golden bench where my brother and I had been forced to sit for hours on end. The confession box in the corner, where parishioners went to speak their truths. And, of course, the candles along the south wall for those who needed a prayer.

I tucked myself back into an alcove, chewing on my lip, and torn between doing what Orane had asked and just walking out the door. But if I went to the confession box, there would be no chance she'd see my

face. That surely counted as speaking with her, even if she didn't know who I was.

I crouched low, hiding myself amongst the pews, until I reached the end of the row then, as quickly as I could, I darted across the space, wrenched open the door and slipped inside. The space was dark, with nothing but a small grate between myself and Fishen's side of the confession box. I exhaled as I slumped into the space, looking down at my dirty, shaking hands.

My pulse jumped when the door opened on the other side of the grate. "Is someone in here?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Ah, well, let me get settled." The moments stretched out as cloth rustled on the other side, and my stomach sat perched at the top of my throat. "Now, my child. Tell me what's troubling you."

"I'm..." Could I really tell her what I'd done? My throat tightened as my body seemed to protest speaking such horrors in a holy space. Tears leaked down my face instead, and I cursed myself for being a coward. She would be under no obligation to report me, and yet...shame kept me quiet.

I expected Fishen to leave, or prod me to speak, as she used to when I'd been a petulant child, but she sat quietly as I choked on my words.

"I'm scared," I managed.

"Is someone hurting you?"

"No." Not yet, anyway. "It's...I've done something. And I'm scared of what the consequences will be."

"There's nothing in this life that cannot be atoned for, my child," Fishen said gently. "Those who want forgiveness can seek it from the Mother."

"It's not the Mother I need forgiveness from," I said. That would be easy.

"It's much harder to forgive ourselves, isn't it?" Fishen said with a smile in her voice. "But it's possible, with time and understanding. And most often, in the service of others."

"What does that mean?" I asked, wiping my cheek. Perhaps it was a saying in the priesthood. "I've heard that before, but I don't understand."

"To serve others is to be close to the Mother," she said. "And to be close to the Mother is to find forgiveness."

Now she was speaking in riddles. That was the Fishen I knew.

There was a rap on her door, and I heard a soft voice. "Mother Fishen, I hate to interrupt, but Lieutenant Llobrega is here. And he says it's urgent."

"Ah, well." She turned, eyeing the grate. "I apologize, my child. This will only take a moment."

Even though there was no window to the outside, I crouched lower on the wooden bench, curling into a ball so Llobrega wouldn't see me. He'd surely remember me, as he was my brother's best friend, and the kind of rule-following person who'd drag me back to the castle kicking and screaming.

"Mother Fishen," his voice wafted through the wooden door. "There's been an incident in the forest. Oleander...Lieutenant Oleander has been killed."

I loosed a shaky breath and pulled myself to the door, pushing it open ever-so-slightly. Felix stood facing the priest, his somber face downcast and serious. He wore a uniform of navy blue with white trim, and at his left breast was the Forcadelian crest, but even that seemed dull. He'd aged in the three years I'd been gone, looking less like a boy trying to be a man and more like an actual adult.

"How?"

"Thieves," he said, his disgusted look sending a dagger straight into my heart. "They were after the crown jewels to be used in Kat's crown. I told Captain Mark it was too dangerous, especially with the summer storms, but he insisted upon..." He breathed out slowly, his nostrils flaring. "I'm on my way to inform the

family. I thought you might want to go with me."

"Of course, of course," she said. "Let me finish up in here, and I'll join you."

I silently closed the door and exhaled. If I wanted to atone and apologize, this was the perfect opportunity. I could follow Llobrega, and then have him arrest me. Perhaps he'd even be so kind as to avoid telling my father, so they wouldn't try to marry me off again.

I pressed myself against the wall so Fishen wouldn't see me through the grate and quieted my breathing.

"My child?" Fishen called. "Are you still in there?"

I closed my eyes, wondering if she could hear the loud pounding of my heart.

"Ah, must've left. Poor girl."

The door to the confession box opened, and she made idle conversation with Llobrega as they walked away. I cracked open the door again, searching for other royal guards who might be nearby. But the church was empty, save Llobrega and the mother.

Crawling out, I kept low as I made my way to the front of the church, where Llobrega was helping Fishen into a modest carriage. There was only a footman atop the carriage to manage the horse, and no other guards. And with the sun having set, and a dense fog rolling into the city, if I didn't stay right with them, I might lose them.

So, as soon as the horses pulled the carriage forward, I bounded toward it and climbed onto the back.



The carriage wound through the city, out of the main area of the castle and church and into a much more modest section. Here the houses were a bit smaller, more cramped. The oil lamps a bit more tarnished from the salty air and lack of funds to keep them up.

The carriage slowed to a stop, and my chest constricted. Before I lost all sanity, I slid off the back of the carriage and took refuge in the dark space between two houses. From there, I watched Felix help Fishen out of the carriage. Together, they walked up to the house.

This was what I'd wanted to witness—to know and feel the pain I'd caused these poor people. I grit my teeth and forced myself to watch.

Felix stood on the stoop for a moment, staring at his feet. Fishen whispered words of encouragement to him, and he straightened, looking much younger than he had before. As my heart thudded against my ribcage, sending tendrils of liquid ice through my body, Felix rapped on the door.

I couldn't hear the words, but I didn't need to. A woman answered the door, and her face dropped when she saw Felix and the mother. Her reaction was swift and one I wouldn't soon forget—her cry of anguish echoed on the dark street, waking the neighbors. An older couple came to help her, and I saw she was with child.

Wetness gathered at the edges of my eyes. I sank to the ground, clutching my chest as I struggled to breathe. Silent sobs bubbled from my lips as I understood the pain I'd caused, the irreparable damage I'd done to this woman, to their small family. And what was there to say to her? Sorry was something said to a broken vase, not a broken life. How naïve could I have been to think I had the right to speak?

With nothing else to do, I curled into a ball in the alley and cried.

Chapter Seven

I didn't know how long I sat there. A light drizzle started, misting my hair and skin, but I didn't move. The black carriage remained in front of the house, and until Llobrega reemerged, I would wait in this alley, feeling sorry for myself.

The mask over my eyes was now soaking wet from tears and rain, but I didn't remove it. With it on, his men could easily pin me as the woman who'd killed Oleander. Perhaps they'd leave it on when they hanged me for murder.

Oleander's lifeless eyes flashed through my mind, and then morphed into my own, as a chill ran down my spine. My hands shook and I pushed myself to my feet to clear the vision from my head. I leaned against the brick as the rain pelted me.

A cry reached my ears, and I looked up for the source. It sounded close, but I couldn't tell from what direction.

"H-help! Somebody!"

My body moved automatically, first into the main street, then toward the sound of the screaming woman. Surely, someone else would've heard her, but I couldn't help my curiosity. I came into an alley where two men crouched over something—the woman screaming for help. One had a knife in his hand, and the other was unbuckling his pants.

"H-hey," I said, stepping forward. "Leave her alone."

The one dealing with his pants turned to look at me and cracked a grin. "Hey, look. Another one. You have that one."

My feet moved underneath me, bringing me closer to the man. I used the slick ground to slide under his incoming fist, bringing my knee to up slam into his lower back. The other man caught sight of my foot before it connected with his cheek, and he went sprawling backward.

"Why, you little—!"

Creep Number One was back up, the sharp end of his knife headed toward my body. I bent backward to miss it, slammed my hand against his wrist to loosen his grip then snatched the blade and pressed it against his throat before he could react.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave this woman alone and get on your way," I whispered.

"I ain't scared of you!" He spat.

"Fine." I lowered the knife to his groin. "How about if you just lose this?"

That got his attention, because he backed up two steps then turned to run into the dark alley beyond. The woman sat on the ground, gripping her torn dress and pressing two fingers to her swollen lips as she stared blankly at the other man, still unconscious.

"Hey," I said, reaching out my hand. "Are you okay?" She didn't even flinch, so I snapped my fingers in

front of her face. "Look at me."

She tore her gaze away from the man, and her mouth parted. "W-who are you?"

"Nobody," I said, grabbing her hands and helping her to her feet. "Do you need help getting home?"

"I can't believe you just...you just..."

There was a coin purse on the ground, which I snatched up and pressed into her hands. "Here. This is yours. Where do you live?"

"You saved my life," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "One of them had a knife, and you just...you just..."

"It was nothing," I said, waving her off. "You didn't answer my question. Where do you live? Is it far?"

"No," she said, finally seeming to come back to herself. "Two blocks."

"Then get home," I said firmly. "And don't walk into dark alleys alone, if you can help it. Or else carry a weapon with you."

"I don't have a choice. I work until now," she said, tucking the purse under her arm. The more we spoke, the more the dazed look left her eyes. "I don't live far. I'll hurry home." She stopped and turned. "What's your name?"

"L..." I swallowed. "I don't have a name. Just go."

"That's why you've got the mask, huh?" She quirked a smile. "Vigilante? Probably needed around these parts. The guards don't do anything to help us out here."

"Go home," I said, touching the black cloth on my face.

A new voice echoed in the alley. "That was something."

I froze and turned to see Mother Fishen standing in the alley, a curious look on her face.

"W-what are you doing here?" I said, taking a step back. "Where's Llobrega?"

"Still with the family," she said. "Poor dear's taking it as hard as Oleander's wife." She cocked her head at me. "You were the one who came to confession, weren't you? The one seeking atonement?"

Despite myself, I nodded. "I'm going to turn myself in."

"For what, my child?" she asked. "I daresay Lieutenant Llobrega might give you a medal for saving that young woman's life."

"I didn't do anything," I said, looking at the ground.

"That woman might beg to differ," Fishen said, turning to walk out of the alley. "It seems to me you have a bright future helping others. If that's what you choose to do."

"I told you," I said, louder. "I have to turn myself in for what I've done."

"I suppose you could do that. Or, perhaps consider using your skills to serve others." She shrugged. "The Mother might find more use for you in the streets of this city than in the dungeon of the castle. And perhaps, my child, that's why She sent you here, to this moment, to help that woman."

"She didn't," I said. "I followed—"

But Fishen was gone.



The rain stopped, but the black mask remained stuck to my face as I wandered through the city. I would've gladly faced the hangman's noose, but something itched in the back of my mind. Helping that woman had been as natural as breathing, as had fighting off those creeps. Celia had trained me to be a thief, and I'd used those skills to become a murderer, but perhaps there was a third life for them. I could stay on these streets, learn them as well as I'd learned the forest, and protect them as soundly as Celia's sentries protected her fort.

A whistle echoed through my ears, and I shook my head. My brain must've been playing tricks on me.

There was another, and I stopped midstride as the shadows moved. I turned to run, but smacked into someone's chest.

"Found you," Jax said with an unkind smirk.

The world went dark as a burlap bag darkened the world. I let him bind my hands with rope and didn't protest as they marched me through an unseen world. If this was to be my end, I was ready for it. I wished I'd done more than just save that one woman, but perhaps one life was all I was allowed.

I was pressed into a wooden chair and the bag removed. My eyes adjusted to the dim light, and I swallowed hard.

"Leave us," Celia ordered.

"But—" Jax began, but a look from Celia silenced him.

"If you think I can't take this little runaway, perhaps I can show you what I'm capable of," she replied, her voice low and smooth as silk.

The shadows in the room disappeared, but Celia's hawklike eyes didn't leave the door behind me until it closed. Then she softened and gazed down at me like a mother goose whose gosling had gotten lost.

"So," she began softly. "Have you come to your senses yet?"

"My...what?"

"You've had a shock," she said. "And gone on a little adventure. But now it's time to come home."

Come *home*? Celia should've been dragging me back to the forest, or lopping my head off, not lecturing me on what a naughty girl I'd been. Had I hit my head? Was this a dream?

"Surely by now, you've seen what a harsh place this world can be for a girl with no connections," she continued, crossing her arms over her chest. "And what would you get for using them anyway? A one-way ticket to Kulka and a marriage where you'd have no power?" She smiled. "Come home, Larissa. We need you."

I opened my mouth to ask why she was being so lenient, but the answer was clear. Celia considered me an asset, but I was also a liability. She didn't want me to be her successor, she wanted me happy enough at the camp so I wouldn't sell her out.

It was at that moment that I lost my fear of her.

"If you're afraid I'll go to my father, why don't you just kill me?" I asked softly.

She quirked a brow then smiled. "That's the kind of strategy I expect from the princess of Forcadel."

"I'm not a princess," I replied. "But I'm not going back with you, either. I don't...I don't have the stomach for this work, like you said. I can't just walk away from death like it meant nothing, and I can't sit by anymore and watch you take children from their parents—just because they happened to travel into the wrong end of the forest."

"Oh, come now, Larissa." Celia made a face. "What's here for you? If you're not going to the castle, why would you stay here?"

"Because I could help people," I said softly. "Celia, I...I saved someone tonight. I used these skills to do good, not to hurt someone. And it felt... it felt..."

"And how much were you paid?"

"Nothing," I snapped. "I didn't do it for the money."

"The first night you go hungry, I'm sure you'll feel differently," she said with a hearty eye-roll. "Fine, if you want to stay in this city and play hero, you are welcome to it. But just know that once I leave this room, your place in my fort leaves with me."

The threat of being completely cut off wasn't as scary a prospect as it had been before. "That's fine."

"And there's still the matter of your debt to me."

"I don't have a debt," I said slowly. "And if I did, you would've held me for ransom already. My father would've more than paid for it." I rolled up my sleeve to show her my unbranded arm to prove my point. "There's no proof that I was in your camp, other than your word against mine."

She chuckled. "Your debt may not be branded on your arm, but it's still there. The food you ate, the nights you slept in that warm bed. You know in your heart that you owe me for that."

"Fine," I snapped. "How shall I repay it?"

"One day, Princess Brynna-Larissa Rhodes Archer Lonsdale, you may find yourself in a position of power," she said, walking to the door. "And at that time, I'll come knocking."

I had no aspirations of power, of gold, or even a kingdom. What I wanted was to do something with my life, something positive. Even if it meant living as a beggar on the street.

Celia waited at the door, her hand resting on the knob. "This is...your final chance to change your mind. I meant what I said about liking you, by the way. I think you could've been a great successor."

I remained silent until the lock turned over and the door slammed shut.

✂

Celia's threat might someday become a problem, but as the sun rose over a glittering bay, I couldn't be anything but optimistic about the life I was embarking on. My only money was gone, I had no food, nowhere to lay my head. But I would find my way, forfeiting my life in service to others. Under this mask, I would be a veil of protection to this city.

Veil. I rather liked that name. Perhaps I'd start using it.

Thank You for Reading

Thank you for checking out this preview of the Princess Vigilante trilogy. I hope you enjoyed getting a sneak peek into Brynna's origins before the start of the first book. You can find the first book in the series, *The City of Veils*, in eBook, paperback, and hardcover on [my website](#).

And as a special thank you, I've included a couple of sneak peeks to some other books in my backlist, including my YA contemporary fantasy novel, *Spells and Sorcery*, and my fantasy romance, *The Island*.

Thanks for reading, and hope to chat with you soon!

Spells and Sorcery, Book 1 of the Lexie Carrigan Chronicles

(Preview)

Lexie Carrigan thought she was weird enough until her family drops a bomb on her—she's magical. Now the girl who's never made waves is blowing up her nightstand and no one seems to want to help her. That is, until a kind gentleman shows up with all the answers. But Lexie finds out being magical is the least weird thing about her.

Check out a special preview from Book 1, *Spells and Sorcery*

I ran out of the house as fast as my legs could carry me. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't...

Magic?

Was real?

Not only was it real, but I had it. So did that make me a witch or a wizard or...?

Or nothing. Magic didn't exist.

But it did, because I'd seen with my own two eyes.

I slowed and looked behind me to see if Jeanie or Nicole were coming after me. I wanted them to rush out and say it was a giant joke and Marie was in on it and "Ha-ha. Happy birthday, idiot."

But as the fall night darkened around me, I heard no voices behind me. Nothing except the random car door slamming or the rumble of a truck passing on the highway nearby.

Perhaps I'd just imagined the whole thing. Maybe I'd had a stroke.

There was a small park in the distance, and I marched toward it, waiting to wake up from this strange dream. The lamplights snapped on, and I jumped nearly out of my skin, my heart thudding wildly. I stared at the orange glow for a moment, taking a few moments to convince myself that the streetlights were on a timer, and not turning on of their own volition.

They couldn't have been turned on by magic, could they?

Could they?

"I'm losing it," I whispered, covering my face with my hands.

I crossed the grassy park, headed for the swing set. I plopped down on the swing and leaned against the chain. After a moment, I began to swing back and forth, allowing my mind to go blank for just a moment. I took a deep breath in and out and stared at the empty suburban streets.

"Yer a wizard, Lexie..." I whispered to myself.

"Rough day?"

My head bobbed up at the sound. An older man stood on the sidewalk. He wore casual khaki pants and a polo shirt, and his salt-and-pepper hair was neatly trimmed. He stood under one of the street lamps, which gave him an almost angelic sort of glow.

"W-what?" I said, realizing he was still talking to me.

"I asked if you were all right," he said, stepping out of the spotlight and closer to the swing set. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Have you ever questioned everything you thought was real?" I asked, for lack of anything better to say.

"Once or twice," he responded with a charming smile. "Mind if I join you?"

I shrugged, and he sat down on the other swing beside me. I might have thought it strange, a middle-aged man on a swing set, but I didn't have a clear definition of weird anymore.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

"I doubt you would believe me," I said. "I don't believe me."

"That's a tough spot to be in. Let me guess: did they tell you about magic?"

I nearly fell out of the swing. "W-wait, you know? Does *everybody* know?"

He laughed, his few wrinkles deepening with smile lines. "No, of course not. Just those of us who have magic."

"A-and how did you know I have it?"

"We can tell," he said. "You'll get there, I'm sure. But I only assumed—teenage girl, looking the way you did, magical..."

I slumped lower against the metal chains. "I wonder what else people are lying to me about..."

"You know about the Easter Bunny, right?"

I sat up, wide-eyed. A man-sized rabbit *existed*?

"He's not real," the man finished with an amused smile.

"Very funny," I said, clutching my still-pounding heart. "After tonight, I'm pretty sure I'd believe anything is real."

"Magic is real. The Easter Bunny is not. How about we start there?"

"I can't wrap my head around it," I said, looking up at the stars. I might've still been dreaming, but this guy seemed real enough. "I mean, is science really science or is it magic?"

"I'd go out on a limb and say your understanding of science is sound," he said thoughtfully. "Magic tends to stay within magical communities. Not too much gets out into the nonmagical lesson books."

"What about gravity?" I said, lifting my feet from the ground and letting the swing do the work. "Does magic make the earth go 'round?"

"No, the earth rotates due to leftover inertia from when the solar system was created," he said without missing a beat.

My feet thudded back onto the sand and I stared at him. I'd never been out-nerded before.

"Magic is more like another sense," he said, slowly swinging back and forth. "It's like an extra hand you wield with your mind."

"Oh." I frowned. "I don't know what that means."

"Here." He flicked his hand and, in a purple puff of smoke, a thick book appeared in his hand.

My eyes nearly fell out of my head for what felt like the hundredth time that night. "How did you do that? What is that?"

"This," he offered the book to me, "is a primer. It was used in the late seventeenth century for young magicals. Very basic, of course, but the best tutorial I've found to introduce magic."

The most purple book I'd ever seen, it was well-worn, the edges frayed and water damaged. The title, *Spells and Sorcery, Volume 1*, was embossed in a gold lettering that almost *glowed*.

It was one thing to see puffs of yellow smoke and sandwiches, but something about this book was alive, and calling to some ethereal feeling dancing in the pit of my stomach.

I shook my head. Probably indigestion. "This is..."

"Open it."

"I..." Even though I was still in shock, curiosity was starting to take hold. That strange calling grew more pronounced the longer I held the book in my lap. So, almost compelled, I opened the book to the front page and ran a finger along the pressed pages. "Where'd you get this?"

"I'm a collector of old books—specifically magical ones. I'm sort of a history buff." He paused and nodded to it. "Why don't you take that with you and give it a read?"

Something in the back of my mind reminded me of a book that housed an evil wizard. I glanced at the book and shook my head. "I can't possibly take this. It's...I mean, it's so old. Probably worth a lot of money."

"Books are meant to be read, not gathering dust on a shelf. What good is the knowledge in here if I can't share it?"

I stammered like an idiot and fired off a few reasons why I couldn't, but he placed his hand over mine.

"I insist. Think of it as an early birthday present."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "How did you know it was my birthday? I mean, it's not my birthday. Tomorrow's my birthday."

"Magic comes at the beginning of one's fifteenth year," he said, standing. "I only assumed they wanted to tell you before you woke up with it..."

"Would've been nice if they'd told me sooner," I said, running my fingertips down the front of the book again.

"I have a feeling that book will help," he said, nodding once before turning to leave.

"Oh, I'm Lexie, by the way," I called to him.

He paused and turned back around with a curious expression. "That's an interesting name."

I grimaced. Not the first time I'd heard that. "As in Alexis, but...blah."

"I prefer Alexis myself," he said with a smile. "I'm Gavon. Get home before it gets too dark, okay?"

I nodded and opened my mouth to agree but he was gone.

Just...disappeared in front of my eyes *gone*. In a puff of purple smoke.

Purple smoke.

What was it about people appearing and disappearing in smoke today?

I ran my hands over the cover of the book absent-mindedly. My head was starting to hurt from all the new information crammed into it. But I could never say no to a book, especially one which promised to give me the answers I so desperately needed.

When I opened the book, I could've sworn the air tingled around me. Or that could've just been my imagination. But I definitely wasn't imagining the way the pages glowed, giving me just enough light to read the first lines.

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The Island, Book 1 of the Madion War Trilogy (Preview)

He's a prince, she's a pilot, they're at war. But when they're marooned on a deserted island hundreds of miles from either nation, they must set aside their differences and work together if they want to survive.

Check out a special preview from Book 1, The Island

Theo

I woke slowly, the sound of unfamiliar animals coming to me first, followed by a cold breeze. As I tried to move, pain shot up from every corner of my body. I looked up at the blue sky, barely visible through a thick canopy of trees. I smelled leaking fuel, and wondered if my ship would explode or if I'd bleed to death first.

I relaxed into my seat and prepared for the inevitable. Even if the Raven government sent a search party for me (which they wouldn't), I doubted they'd come in time to save my life. Still, I took some solace in the fact that I killed another son of that God-damned mass murdering king.

A noise startled me and I turned my head slowly to find the source.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The stupid princeling was *alive* and standing in front of my ship.

Fear and anger gripped at me. How was it possible that I was badly injured and he appeared to be walking just fine? I hated that the last thing I was going to see in this world was Prince Galian standing in a clearing, his pale skin flushed and his eyes sparkling with...*amusement?*

I was dying and this son of a bitch was laughing at me.

"What's so funny?" I snarled through my helmet.

"Serves you right." He was smirking as if he had something to smirk about.

"For what?"

"Shooting me down. Looks like you're in worse shape than I am, too."

"Go to hell."

He laughed again and hoisted himself up onto the broken nose of my plane. I was in too much pain to fight back, and my gun was nowhere to be found.

"Yep," he observed, with a smirk on his face. Up close, he was every bit as handsome as I'd seen in pictures. "You definitely got what you deserved. Shouldn't have shot at me."

"You shouldn't have invaded my country."

His eyes widened for a moment and I thought I'd finally done something to wipe that smile off his face. To my supreme annoyance, he tilted his head back and let out a throaty laugh.

"Oh, you are witty," he said, nodding. "And technically right. But it wasn't my decision. I was, as they say, just following orders."

"And I was just following orders when I blew your ass out of the sky."

"Aren't we at an impasse then?" He seemed to be *enjoying* this conversation. He looked down at the side of my ship and read the inscription. "Theo, huh? Well, you must be a pretty high ranking pilot then. I hear the Ravens only allow you to put your name on your ship after you've survived plenty of battles."

I moved out of anger, but the pain in my legs came roaring up my body. "Please let me die in peace," I

asked, unable to look at him.

"Oh, you aren't going to die today. But it would probably be safer if I pulled you out. I don't like the look of that fuel leak."

He leaned into my small cabin. If I'd had half a mind, I could've snapped his neck, but it was hard enough just to breathe. He found my seat strap and unhooked it, then lifted me out by my arms. I couldn't help but scream.

"Yeow, buddy," he said, stopping. He put one hand over his ear and muttered. "You sure got a girly scream."

"My legs are caught. Just leave me here. I'm as good as dead anyway."

"Naw, then who am I going to talk to while I wait to get picked up?" He sounded like he was waiting for dinner. "C'mon, we can get you out of here. Just take a deep breath. One...two..."

I didn't hear him count to three as he yanked my legs out of the mess and I screamed again, the pain so bad I almost lost consciousness. But, blessedly, it subsided, and the next thing I knew, he was laying me on the ground.

"There, now, Theo of Raven, let's take a look at you," he said, taking my helmet off.

Galian

Theo was a girl.

A pretty girl.

I'd always thought Raven women were more interesting looking than Kylaen women—with their olive skin and black hair, they seemed to draw my attention. And this girl, something about her made my head spin.

Even with her mangled, bloody legs.

They were a sight: dark red staining her gray jumpsuit.

"Thank you, Dr. Maitland," I said, cracking open the bag he'd given me and sliding on the pair of latex gloves.

She murmured something. The amount of blood she'd lost was a real concern, and she was most likely concussed. I would worry about the head injury later; it wouldn't matter much if she died from blood loss.

"What are you doing?" she croaked.

"Pardon the invasion of privacy," I said, flashing her my trademark smile.

I unzipped her jumpsuit and pulled it down, exposing a white bra and underwear and nothing else. Immediately, her skin puckered with goosebumps as I tossed away the soaked dark gray suit.

"Are you still with me, Theo?"

She blinked, but didn't respond.

"Okay, I'm going to examine you now," I said, leaning over her bare legs. I pressed my hands to her hips, and she reacted, swiftly, sitting up so fast she nearly whacked her forehead to mine.

"*Get your filthy hands off of me,*" she hissed, her breath touching my face.

"I'm a doctor."

"Bullshit."

"Seriously," I insisted. "You're bleeding very badly, and I need to find the source of it."

Her deep brown eyes stared into mine, her lip twisted in a snarl, but she removed her hands from my

wrists. I explored the bloody patches on her bare legs. Most of them seemed to be small scrapes...until I brushed something on the underside of her leg, and she screamed in pain.

"Ah, there it is," I said, placing my hand on her hip to calm her down. The four-inch gash was deep, and probably nicked an artery in the leg, based on the amount of blood seeping out of it.

Gently, I rolled her onto her stomach and she didn't protest. I used nearly every antibacterial wipe in the bag to clean the wound, then fished out sutures and twine.

"This is going to hurt," I said, sliding the needle through the bottom of the wound. She sucked in a loud breath, and her knuckles went white. I worked quickly, using all the sutures in the bag to close up the wound. I wrapped it with gauze as tightly as possible, hoping that it would keep her alive until we were found and I could get her to Dr. Maitland.

I rolled her back onto her back. She'd gone pale and was mumbling to herself. I fished out the tube and rubber tourniquet that I'd seen in the bag and looked at her.

"Well, Theo," I smirked. "You're just lucky I'm everybody's type."

"What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"Transfusion." I wrapped the rubber band tight around my forearm. Tying the other band around her arm, I felt for a vein—she was so muscular, it took me no time, and I stuck in the needle connected to the tube. With care, I slid the other end into my own vein and released the tourniquet.

She watched, wordlessly, as the red blood flowed from my arm down into hers. I counted the rate of blood flow on my watch.

"Okay," I said, sitting back and shaking my foggy head after I disconnected our transfusion line. There was significant bruising starting on her other leg on the inner calf, and it was swollen enough to make me curious.

"I'm going to check your leg," I said, placing my hand between her legs.

She tensed, and her eyes flew open.

"Theo," I said, as professionally as I could. "I think your leg is broken. I'm just going to check it. I promise, I'm not going to hurt you."

She snarled at me, but I continued moving my hands down to her knees and lower to her calves. She sucked in air when I touched the bruised spot, and, based on the swelling, I knew that if her tibia wasn't broken, it was close to it. At the very least, she needed a brace. Hopefully, there was something to help me in the bag. So far, Dr. Maitland hadn't let me down. I dug around for a moment, pulling out more antiseptic wipes and gauze, until my hands fell on a small box with a glass vial inside.

"You are one lucky girl," I said, assembling the needle. "This is anesthesia. It'll numb the pain locally until I can set the bone."

"I don't want your Kylaen poison," she spat, to my utter shock.

"Really?" I gaped at her. "I just gave you a damn liter of my own blood, and you think I'm going to *poison* you?"

She said nothing but looked away. Still muttering to myself about Raven paranoia, I pulled the cap off the syringe and inserted it into the swollen nub on her leg. She hissed, but I held still as I finished administering the drug. After a moment, she relaxed.

"Pain won't go away fully, and that's all that I have," I said. I glanced at the syringe and tossed it into a nearby bush, as I didn't have a biohazard disposal box at the ready. Then again, from the looks of this island, Theo and I seemed to be the only ones on it.

I stood up and looked around for a pair of sticks that would be sturdy enough to keep her from doing

any more damage. I found a couple of straight ones that would do the trick and returned to her. She had regained a little color, and seemed to be enjoying the anesthesia because she seemed more relaxed when I crouched next to her.

She stared at the sky with a stoic resolve that I kind of admired. This girl was a warrior, having seen her share of scrapes and bruises, based on the state of her arms and legs. I was no longer surprised that she'd survived the crash of her ship.

What did surprise me was what she said when I finished bandaging her up.

—

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About the Author

S. Usher Evans was born and raised in Pensacola, Florida. After a decade of fighting bureaucratic battles as an IT consultant in Washington, D.C., she suffered a massive quarter-life-crisis. She decided fighting dragons was more fun than writing policy, so she moved back to Pensacola to write books full-time. She currently resides with her two dogs, Zoe and Mr. Biscuit, and frequently can be found plotting on the beach.

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