

Vienna



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CHAPTER ONE

The Suitor's Task

"Have you decided?" her father, the king of all the land, asked her. "I believe I've been very gracious."

"You have been, father," she answered while staring out the window. She was sending her dreams out, rushing them out, begging them to fling the window open and let her fly away on the wings of dreams. "Thank you."

"And?" he pressed, waiting for an answer. He was draped in ruby reds, as was his daughter. His clothes were embroidered with sleeping dragons and tulips, and hers with galloping horses and wild roses. "You asked to set a task for your admirers. However, I know it is more rather than less your plan to avoid marriage. But, as king, I could not refuse one last wish to my only daughter."

"For that, I do not love my king. I love my father," Vienna said, turning away from the window to look at the grand man, her father. His face always gave the impression that he hadn't shaved for three days.

"You had a deadline."

"I know."

"They are waiting for you."

"In the drawing room?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Vienna's lips turned into a painful frown, as if she had tasted something dreadful. "I take it, then, they are in the courtyard?"

"Take it, darling. They've filled the courtyard."

Vienna took one last lonely look out the window, wishing her dreamed wings had come true. She wished she could stay in this room, just this room, forever. The window seat she was sitting on was a night-light blue, matching the rest of the room's blues and whites. The colors of the room were not what she loved about it, though they seemed to calm her mind a bit. It was the books the room held, old books that filled the walls built-in bookshelves that attracted her so.

Wasn't that always the case? Where dreams held fast, hiding and surviving in little, hidden corners, books might follow after them?

There were many libraries in the palace. But this one was in the highest tower, away from everything else. But this one overlooked the fields of royal horses. This one had portraits of her mother and of fiery dragons and roaring stallions. This little library, whose books were a little more wilder, a little more forbidden, was a little more to her taste.

"All right then, Your Majesty." Vienna got to her feet, her little feet holding up her little frame, with little rose shoes. Her dainty hands swept before her, dainty gloved hands that all princesses seemed to have. "I'm ready."

She followed her father out of the room, moving through the remarkable palace. She disregarded the modern and ancient items that the room had, and the modern and ancient pictures hanging on the walls. They were all so elaborate, demonstrating the best of taste, and achieved the most splendid outcomes of thought and feeling. But the princess disregarded them, as she often did.

From her father's study, or, rather, from one of her father's studies, they traveled through the curtained door and walked onto the brilliantly crafted balcony. Looking toward the courtyard, they could see that it was stained, wall-to-wall, with men. No. Not men. *Admirers*.

Trumpets cried out. Yes. Cried out. They felt like tears, maybe the only sound that knew how much Vienna hated her current situation. She felt their tearful sound as if their tears were not merely sounds, but tearful lines, already traveling down her own delicately featured face.

"King Gladness!" The announcement was made. Vienna wanted to flinch away as they announced her name. She watched as her many admirers bowed and rejoiced with her presence.

"Your princess shall speak," King Gladness addressed his subjects, although today they were more or less *her* subjects. "Hear her and know that her words are absolute. A task will be set today, and whoever conquers the task shall win her hand in marriage and become king of the land. Silence! Your princess speaks!"

The king turned to Vienna, anticipating her words to her suitors.

Instead, she whispered, "Kill me," to her father.

"Not until you're married." He kissed her forehead and bid her forward.

"I shall marry the man . . ." Her strong words filled the air. Yes. She was a princess. Even if her heart was fluttering and her cheeks felt like they would burst open, they were so warm. She carried herself with perfect poise, every word carefully placed. "I shall marry the man who brings me the diamond that best suits me."

"Well, that, at least, will get rid of the riffraff," her father said under his breath.

"Only then will I marry. Only then will one of you be king." As she spoke the last word, she turned. Her perfectly frail female form leaving the gentlemen, the princes, and the riffraff in an uproar of questions and cheers and shouts and demands. Anyone could confess their love for her, and it was her duty to hear them out, and that included the poor, and the ugly, and the shrewd.

Her father caught her arm as she walked the great hall, trying to get away from him. "I do not understand you."

"What meaning do you have, father?"

"You hate diamonds. You shriek and shrivel to wear them, calling them heavy, gaudy things unworthy of your feeble female frame. And now you're going to be swarmed with them."

"Yes." Vienna smiled a sly, wicked smile she'd learned well from being too spoiled, and too brave, and too much the princess she had been raised to be. Yes, she was a girl who wanted what she wanted and got it all the same. Thus, our clever little princess rejoiced inwardly. "And now I shall never marry!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Diamond

Being swarmed with diamonds was a reality, and not an understatement. Each day, Vienna sat on her throne, and lines of men presented her with jewels. She turned everyone away. Her father would give a nod when the suitors looked up at him, begging for someone to reconsider them, before they left, teary-eyed.

Her dainty hand worked her blue-feathered fan. Sitting for so long with so many people in one room was not only tiring, it was also drastically hot. Her darling blue gown was heavy against her skin, sticking to her, her skin dying to be released. Once upon a time, she used to gallop her horse to a secluded river, deep within the countryside. She'd strip naked and swim for hours. Her skin remembered it, and remembered it all the more as she sat, sweaty and bored.

Butterflies flew around the window frames, landing and flying, stretching, and then resting their wings as Vienna eyed the diamond presented to her. Her boredom was making her impatient and irritable.

"The largest diamond in all the land." The man opened the very large box, where, indeed, an especially large diamond was lying inside. Vienna heard her father gasp as he stood beside her. He rubbed his chin because it *was* a remarkable piece, surely the grandest they'd seen. But still the princess was unconvinced.

"This is how you see me, sir?" He was the leader of one of the larger villages in the realm, a prince, of sorts, to the kingdom.

"It is. Worth every penny."

"You flatter me, almost as much as you flatter yourself." She flicked her white-laced hand, sending him away.

He threw the diamond to the wall, outraged. The guards rushed forward and carried him away, kicking and screaming.

The next man in line came forward, offering her a small ring with a little square diamond.

A woman's cry filled the room.

Vienna looked over and saw a maiden at the palace door, trying to get in. A handkerchief was at her mouth, calling out to the man whom she so obviously loved.

Getting to her feet, Vienna pointed to the door. "Is that your wife? Is this her ring?"

The man flinched.

Oh, you are so unworthy! "Need I say more?"

And the guards came and carried him away.

Vienna sat down with a strained sigh.

Her father took her hand and kissed it as two of his advisers bowed to him. One of them came up to whisper in his ear. The king nodded, and asked his daughter, "Will you be all right if I leave for a while?"

Vienna shrugged, her fan working furiously.

"Stay with her," he ordered his advisers, who bowed, and came to stand at the sides of her gold throne. The tiara resting on her head felt too grave and heavy for her to bear. But the burden remained because another man presented a diamond, followed by another, and another.

“What is that?” Vienna asked no man in particular, objecting to no diamond in particular. She’d had quite enough, and the passage of time was making her cruel.

“It’s a diamond.”

“Yes, I can see that. I’ve seen a great many of them today. But why do you think it’s suitable to be presented to me?”

“I . . .” He couldn’t answer.

“Do you have nothing to say for your diamond? Do you have nothing to say for the diamond you’ve chosen to represent me? Therefore, do you have nothing further to say to me?”

“I . . .” But again, he couldn’t answer.

“In that case, on your way, sir.”

“I . . .” He tried again, but the guards were already leading him out of the palace.

“Your Majesty . . .” One of her father’s advisers spoke into her ear. She couldn’t remember his name. Her father had so many advisers. He whispered, “I think it might be prudent for you to take a short break. That is, if you should wish it.”

“Please!” She found herself grateful and the adviser waved away the guards. Both advisers escorted the princess away, announcing that Her Majesty was fatigued and may not return for some time. Going into the dining hall, Vienna sat down. Water and wine and an assortment of fruits were already waiting for her.

She sighed long and low.

One of the advisers fidgeted. “Try to remain cheerful, Your Majesty. I’m sure things will get better.”

Vienna looked up. It wasn’t customary for her father’s advisers to speak to her, and she generally had nothing to say to them. “What’s your name, sir?”

He fidgeted again. “Hour.” He motioned to the other adviser, who was eyeing him for his impertinence. “That’s Augustus.”

“Well, Hour –” Vienna took a grape and let the taste overtake her before saying, “I don’t understand what you mean. Please explain it to me.”

“Um . . .” Hour cringed under the other’s stare. “I only mean to encourage Your Ladyship. It must seem like an ocean of endless turmoil. But I’m sure the storm will pass, and a man will show you a diamond that will end your agony.”

“No, sir. That would be my agony!” the princess cried.

“I . . . I don’t think I understand *you* now.”

Vienna set her water goblet down. She was hunched over with laughter. She gasped, choked, covered her mouth with one hand and held her stomach with the other. She was maddened by the force of her laughter.

Startled, Hour asked, “What is it that’s worthy of your amusement, Your Majesty?”

“Gentlemen!” She wiped tears out of her eyes. “This has only been the first day!”

CHAPTER THREE

The Midnight Ride

Half a year was swallowed up by the glitter and gleam of riches, all turned away, and all scorned at. The more they came, the happier Vienna was to send them away. The seasons changed, and Vienna continued to sneak out of the palace. She would bribe the stable boys with a handful of chocolates for them to saddle up her horses, and she would gallop them out, one by one, in the falling snow. Soon the whole year went by like this. At last, it came around to another winter's day, when the snow came down lightly, calling the princess to go galloping.

She held out a handful of chocolates like she always did, and the bronze-haired boy took them eagerly, stuffing them into his pocket for safe keeping.

"That's a good lad, Poem," she encouraged the boy, who was no boy. He was a few years older than her. About twenty-years-old, maybe to the day, maybe a day older . . .

The servant led her already saddled chestnut gelding to her, and they both gleamed in the cold air. The horse pawed restlessly. He was as restless as the princess, for she was also eager to run.

"There's a better lad, Poem." Vienna winked at the stable boy. He blushed despite himself, but she gave him his dignity and blamed it on the winter weather.

He held out his hand, ready to give her a leg-up. He was the only man she allowed to touch her, and that was only to help get her on the horse. In the daylight hours, she used a stool or got on from the ground. But at night, when her heart ran amok and she couldn't help but do forbidden things, she allowed one boy, the most loyal of her servants, to hold her leg and hoist her onto her horse.

"Your Majesty?" Someone entered the stable.

Poem quickly withdrew his hand.

"Hour." Vienna greeted him, unnerved because no one had interrupted her midnight riding before. Not ever.

"Alone, are you?" the king's adviser asked.

Poem's anger was clear to the princess, although Hour never once considered him. "Shall I run for help, my lady?"

He may not have considered Poem then, but he did now, while he waited for Vienna's answer.

"That's all right." She and Hour had not become friends, but they had become agreeable to each other. She wasn't sure if she trusted him, but she certainly didn't fear him. "He must have a reason for being here. Give us a moment, please, won't you?"

She sent Poem away and, as her most loyal subordinate, he obeyed without question. The stable was magnificent, with chandeliers hanging down from the ceilings. The stalls were skillfully designed with rose-sculpted bars and wood. Solid enough to keep even the most belligerent animal contained. At that hour, her most precious nickered for her and pawed eagerly for their turn, while her other loves, who admired her presence less, slept, uncaring.

Hour walked closer to her, his grey eyes and silver hair fitting well with the winter's night. He wasn't wearing a coat, although it was freezing, and his dark clothing indicated something ominous in him.

"Has my father sent for me? Has he noticed I'm missing from my chambers?" Vienna asked.

“No,” Hour answered.

“That means you are here of your own accord.”

His eyes gave him away.

“Don’t even think about it,” she told him.

“What?”

“What you’re thinking about. I’m not interested in the love of a man.”

“May I ask you something?”

“Only if it will please me.”

“Why don’t you want to be loved?”

Vienna thought about the subject, as she always did, looking like she always did when the subject weighed on her mind. “Because every woman wants that, and I don’t want to be every woman.”

“But maybe it will be epic.”

“I’m sure it might be.”

“It would be.” He took hold of her hand.

“Let go of my hand, Hour,” she ordered, remaining calm. She wished she hadn’t sent Poem away now.

“It would be epic.” He didn’t let go. Instead, he slowly drew her closer to him.

He was going to kiss her! Her! Who was untouchable!

“I demand you release me!”

“Hour.” A voice came from the doorway. “If you don’t want me to get involved, you’ll remove yourself from my princess.”

Hour pulled away from her. “Augustus!” he exclaimed.

“Quickly, Hour,” the man said calmly, not moving as he stared down the lesser man, “while I still find myself patient.”

“Of course.” Hour steadily walked away from the wide-eyed princess.

“Hour?”

“Yes?”

Augustus’s tone was severe, possibly the most severe thing Vienna had ever heard. “Aren’t you going to apologize to Her Majesty for being so regrettably out of sorts? Looks like you haven’t been getting enough sleep. That must be it. Why don’t you be off? It’s late.”

“Of course . . . So-sorry . . .” Hour rushed out of the stable, not meeting the other man’s eyes.

“Your Majesty?” Augustus said kindly, oh so kindly, like sunlight touching skin on a welcomed afternoon.

Vienna cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“The snow is calling you. You should never have been detained.” He ran his admirable gaze over her chestnut gelding. “You should be off on your midnight ride.”

Clearing her throat again, she hooked her feet in her stirrups. Her fur cape snuggled about her shoulders. Her woolly long underwear nestled in her hardy socks and long, padded riding boots. Her white nightgown rustled in an unladylike manner since she was riding like a man.

Bidding her horse forward, she listened to every ‘click’ of her horse’s hooves on the grey stone floor, before finally making her way out of the barn. She paused in front of Augustus.

“Look,” he ordered. Her horse was snorting at the cool air and the questionable man. “The snow wishes to please you.”

Was it snowing so perfectly before? No, not even a second ago, not until this man mentioned it, waving his hand in the air . . .

“Goodnight, good gentleman.” Vienna didn’t want to stay; didn’t want to discover any more about him. In fact, he was far too interesting to be caught by her interest. She spurred her horse and left him behind. Indeed, she left all thoughts of him behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Warlock

Vienna sat on her throne with her father beside her, and six kittens running around the bottom of her dress, entertaining her as they jumped and swatted its many layers and ruffles. Her little crown didn't seem so unfit anymore as the lines of men slimmed. She had paid heed to all the men in the country, listening as they had tried for her hand. She had sent them away disappointed, and yet she was satisfied with herself. Her father wondered about her openly, marveling at whether she really had done it, if she really was too clever to behold.

The kittens grew. Hour stood behind the king, far from the princess and she was far too above him to grant him any attention. Finally, there was no one, and the palace was quiet; almost neglected. Vienna sat in the empty throne room, her feet up over the side of her gold throne. Her dress was unfit for court. It showed far too much skin as it was before she let it rise up to dangle her bare legs freely in the summer heat. In her hands, capturing her full attention, was a book, and it was because she was so enraptured in the novel that she didn't hear her father calling to her.

She jumped up, smoothed out her dress, and then sat perfectly still now that her father had caught her in such an unprofessional state. He wasn't alone. As the king came up to take his throne, two guards escorted a man toward them. This could only mean one thing: a suitor.

"Your Majesties." The guards and the man bowed.

"I take it you remember the palace's magic-man." One of the guards gave a nod to the trying suitor. But it was clear that both guards secretly mocked him for trying.

"Augustus?" The king seemed bewildered, but very pleased, and the magic-man bowed again.

Augustus . . . She knew him. He was an adviser for her father, and the only warlock for miles, she had learned. His eyes were emerald-green with gold and chocolate brown swirls. Yes. His eyes were very peculiar. He was slim, slimmer than her other pursuers, and though he wasn't without muscle, it was clear that he'd never drawn a sword in his life. He had kind lips, but there was a dragon-like quality about him.

Well, of course there was . . .

He bowed to her, and she gave a slight tip of her head in recognition of his presence. "You've come with a diamond?"

At first he didn't speak. He carefully – as if not to frighten her – walked forward. He stopped so that both Vienna and her father could consider him carefully, and his hand stretched out to her.

In his palm was a necklace. The chain fell through his long, slender fingers. While Vienna's other admirers had brought her great, gaudy diamond rings, he'd brought her a necklace with a well-made wooden heart.

"A wooden heart?" Vienna didn't take it. She judged it from afar, until her father's glance reminded her that she was a princess, and all people were to be respected by her. But still . . . "Is this how you see me?"

"Open it."

She took the necklace, noting that he made a point to brush his fingers against her wrist as she drew the item away. She had to admit the action wasn't entirely unpleasant. He didn't scare

her, as some of the other suitors had. She could see in his face, odd as it was, considering he was a warlock, that he was exceptionally kind, and that perhaps he really did exceptionally love her.

Narrowing her blue eyes at that thought, she inspected the necklace. She didn't want to open it. She found herself pitying this man. No, in no way was she considering marrying him, but he was the first suitor that she didn't want to see damaged by her; curious because she had enjoyed damaging so many of them.

Taking the heart between her fingers, she opened it.

"You're not a diamond at all, princess."

Vienna stared in horror. There was no diamond inside.

"You're a pearl."

"Oh my god!"

"Isn't that right," the warlock whispered, knowing that he had won, "my love?"

"Oh my god!" Vienna sat, stunned, the heart lying open in her hand, the pearl taunting her.

"I see, at last." The king walked over, and inspected the pearl for himself, with a cheerful grin on his face. "Someone finally outsmarted you."

"I know it must come as a shock," the sensible warlock boy said, watching the princess. "I expected this. To imagine a princess rejoicing at the sight of a witch's son . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous, my boy." The king came up to shake his hand. "Royalty doesn't discriminate against our people. To us, all the men of Highest Guard are princes."

The warlock swallowed his nerves, eternally grateful to hear such wonderful words. "I thank you, Your Majesty."

"Please, call me dad!"

"Oh my god!" Vienna snapped closed the little, poisonous heart and its wicked pearl.

"I should warn you, son," the king said. "She's not easily pleased."

Augustus smiled warmly and lovingly. "Then I shall love her five times more than I do, ten times, a hundred times, until I can please her."

"Good man!"

Shaking, Vienna glared at her father. "How could you let this happen?"

"Me? What have I done? It was your task to set."

"You will find I am a really nice guy once you get to know me," Augustus assured her, although he was aware words from him would bring her little reassurance at this point.

"I can't accept this." Vienna's fists were clenched. Her shaking magnified. "I won't accept this."

"Careful child," her father whispered fast as he once again took his throne. "And know who his mother is."

Augustus raised his hands before him, signaling for peace. "It's all right. And I have long taken care of my own battles."

Relief filled the king. "Very good, I'm pleased to know that."

"She is a scary broad, though." Augustus gave an awkward laugh, watching his princess, hoping she'd look at him in a different way. "Isn't she?"

"That she is."

"I will not marry," Vienna spoke without realizing it. Her clever plan, her perfect scheme, had failed! This man, *this* sure enemy, had outsmarted her; had seen through her. This champion? No. This villain!

"Vienna!" her father warned.

But Vienna was already screaming, "I will not marry you!"

"Stop being childish!"

“I am perfectly serious.”

Augustus remained calm, unswervingly calm, and he said, “You’re going against your word? The word of the Princess of Highest Guard?”

“I will never marry you.”

The warlock grinned. “Oh, I very much doubt that. I expected this, and though I love you, I do not love you enough to let you go. I won you. You are my princess.”

“I am not yours.” Vienna slapped his words away and cursed him with her piercing eyes. His emeralds held her firm, but she was beyond them. “I do not belong to anyone!”

“I never wanted to cage you. I only wanted to give you wings, and only if you should wish them.”

“Then leave me in peace!” She threw the necklace and its wicked pearl, listening as it hit the wall, not looking to see where it had fallen. The king and the warlock looked, as if she had thrown it into its little grave.

“I cannot,” Augustus said more firmly, more aggressively. “As I am playing by the rules that *you* yourself set. You have no right to turn me away, not without at least getting to know me.”

“Let’s all just calm down,” the king tried.

The warlock wasn’t listening. It was as if the only people in the room were the warlock and his princess. “You don’t understand love or the pain of love, and until you do, you shall never love me, eternally, epically –”

“Shut up, whack-job!” Vienna screamed. She pointed to the door, forgetting her training and long life as royalty. “Get out!”

“So I hereby curse you!” The warlock raised his arms, and darkness crept over them.

“Wait just a minute–” the king tried.

“No one will believe you,” Augustus told Vienna, throwing at her the full fury of the dragon in his heart, “because no one but you will see them –”

And now, Vienna was terrified. “Father!”

“Stop this!” was the king’s demand.

But there was nothing to be done. The warlock set the curse. “Not just ghosts, but men, and the broken hearts of men. I curse you!”

The royal family jumped to their feet.

And the warlock disappeared.

Vienna stared, unmoving for some time, before turning toward her father.

“Don’t look at me,” the king said. “You’re the one who upset him.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stranger

The doctors were sent for at once. Even though Vienna had no ailment, she didn't mind them checking her over. The warlock had cursed her, and, unless he was a fake, he really could inflict damage on her. But, for the time being, she seemed to be in perfect health.

She changed into a silver gown that was fit for riding, and put on a large, bulky bonnet that would, if nothing else, keep the sun out of her eyes.

She walked into the dining hall, planning on waiting there a moment, before rushing off in search of an escape. The day had been a troubling one, and she needed a release.

But a man – a man she had never met – was sitting in her father's chair.

"That's the king's chair," Vienna informed him. The man jumped up and stared at her in a way that made her feel deeply troubled.

"Is it now?" he asked, looking at the seat. "I'm very sorry."

Vienna tried to look past him to see if there was anyone nearby. When she saw the guards, she breathed with ease. She had long stopped second-guessing herself on the appropriateness of being alone with a man, other than Poem. But, even if she wasn't the best judge of character, this man seemed to be harmless.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Who are you? That's what I'm wondering."

Vienna blinked several times. "I'm Princess Vienna, daughter of King Gladness, king of all Highest Guard."

"Are you really? A princess! My word!" The man said, excitedly. "What a pleasure it is to meet you, Princess Gladness of Highest . . . Whatever."

"Weren't you listening?" Vienna tried not to laugh, but failed miserably.

"I was trying to, but something about you took over my thoughts."

"Then let me release you from your troubles. I was just leaving."

The man bowed.

"Well, at least you remembered to do that." Vienna laughed again.

"My name is Vincent." The man rushed around the table and stood in front of her to give her a proper bow of respect. "Your humble servant."

"I'm Princess Vienna," she explained, noting that he hadn't been listening the first time. He was a well-built young man. A nicely built man, actually. He wasn't overly muscled, and his long, red hair was tied back with a blue ribbon. "I'm going riding."

"Well, I have nothing to do . . ." Vincent's willingness was evident in his eyes, and in the twist of his mouth.

"You want me to accept your company?" Vienna laughed again, shaking her head. "I don't know what to think of you, sir. You have me quite puzzled."

"Please . . ."

"I suppose . . ." the princess decided. She walked past him, deciding that, if he was going to come, he had better keep up. She'd had a very difficult day. Perhaps this new person might bring her some ease.

Poem was waiting for Vienna outside and gave her a proper bow when she appeared. Vienna could hear Vincent making a verbal note about it under his breath. She decided that it was

best not to glance at him, but to ignore him in front of Poem. She wouldn't be rude, not at all, but she wouldn't over esteem his character until she was sure his character was worthy of her esteem.

"Here she is, my lady." Poem led an already saddled, black-coated mare out of her stall.

"Very well." Vienna stroked the horse's shoulder. "But I'll be needing two horses today."

"Two, miss?"

"Yes, of course."

Poem's eyes showed curiosity.

"Oh, I don't ride, that's okay." Vincent waved his hands in front of him, looking up at the great beast. The horse snorted loudly, making them all jump. "Whoa, horsey!" Vincent said on reflex and the mare struck out. Poem shouted for Her Majesty to get out of the way, but the horse's hoof clipped her heel, drawing blood.

Vienna stumbled back, and the horse reared up.

"Are you all right?" Vincent ran past the horse, toward the fallen princess, and the horse shot backward, eyes wild, breathing heavily.

Vienna didn't pay attention to Vincent. "Poem," she whispered, watching as the boy calmed the trembling animal before putting her back into her stall.

"My lady!" Poem rushed to her. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened!"

"I've ridden her hundreds of times, Poem." Vienna assured her friend that he wasn't going to get into trouble for this. "It's not your fault. I don't quite know what happened either. Nothing's changed, except . . ." She looked over at Vincent.

"Oh, come on!" Vincent defended himself. Then he huffed. "Sure, it's got to be Vincent. Of course, it was all my fault."

"You're the only thing different . . ." Vienna said to him.

"What is, my lady?" Poem asked, choosing his words carefully.

"Him . . ." Vienna gestured toward the man shaking his head.

Poem looked at Vincent for some time before looking back at the princess. "My lady . . . Are you to say someone is there? That . . . You see someone there?"

"Of course." Vienna watched as Poem paled. He didn't explain. He just acted. He scooped her into his strong arms and ran. He ran as fast as he could with a dainty princess in his arms, rushing back into the palace and toward the remaining doctors.

Vienna didn't object.

As Poem rushed her out of the barn, Vincent stayed, waving sadly as he watched them go.

And then, finding transparency, he completely disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER SIX

The Ghosts of Men

She was ordered to stay in bed for a week, and when nothing else happened, she was allowed to leave, under the supervision of an escort. She performed what you might call a 'hissy-fit' and would only agree to be supervised by Poem.

Poem didn't mind.

Neither did Vienna.

Fresh air was part of her treatment, commissioned by her many doctors. Poem and the princess went on their first walk together through the royal gardens. She was about to suggest that they interest themselves in the swings hanging from the flowering trees, when Vincent walked up to her.

"Oh my god," she whispered. Poem stopped, attentively asking her questions she couldn't hear.

"We've got a problem," Vincent informed her. His hands were nervously concerned with a fine piece of cloth that looked to be a woman's handkerchief.

"I'd say we do," Vienna whispered. She whispered as if she were trying to keep Poem from hearing, even though he was right beside her. "You're not real, are you?"

"Well –" Vincent finally stuffed the cloth into his pocket, "neither is that guy." He pointed to one of the swings, occupied by a forty-year-old man who was crying into his hands.

"What?"

"Yeah." Vincent cleared his throat. "Try not to act like you can see him. If word gets around, you'll have dozens of dead dudes on your doorstep. I, for one, haven't told anyone you can see me."

"You're dead?" *I think I'm going to have a panic attack.*

"Yes, and keep your voice down." Vincent removed himself from her path, and said, "In fact, pretend you don't see me."

Panic attack . . . Coming . . . Now!

Her hands clasped her sides as she fought to breathe. Tears arrived in her eyes, and she began to choke. Poem was calling for help and trying to calm her down. She gripped his golden-brown tunic, desperately hanging onto him as if by doing so, she could hold on to her sanity.

"Hey, girl, are you okay?" the crying man came up to ask her.

"Oh shit," she heard Vincent say.

And then she screamed so much and so wildly that the doctors had her sedated.



Vienna awoke from a bad dream. She had dreamed that a warlock had put a curse on her and now she was seeing people who weren't really there. No. Not people. Men. She was seeing men who no longer existed.

She pulled her covers closer to her face and felt more comforted that way. Her mind was barely coherent with the world, until she heard chattering. At first, she told herself that the

whispering didn't exist. It wasn't there; it couldn't be. She wrapped herself tighter in her covers, trying to cover her ears, but the whispering didn't stop.

When she heard Vincent's voice, she opened her eyes, her long brown hair circling her head like a halo.

"What do you all think you're doing in my room?" Vienna screeched, watching the color leave Vincent's dead cheeks. "Get out!"

"She's awake!" they all rejoiced instead. Vincent threw himself into the many dead dudes' paths so that they wouldn't dog pile on the princess.

"Seamus!" Vincent shouted to a guy sprawled out in the princess's bedside chair, reading a book. He was reading one of *her* books. "Give me a hand!"

"You look like you've got it under control," Seamus, a rough-looking guy (even for a dead guy) said. His dark eyes matched the rest of him. "Hey! Watch it!" he scowled, shouting at the princess as she ripped the book out of his creepy, dead hands.

"She left me!" one of the dead guys shouted at Vienna, his dead eyes streaming with tears, and the princess was too stunned to look away. "She left me there! I was sick, dying, and she left me! I thought she loved me!"

"No one cares!" Seamus yelled at him, reaching over to take the book back, and then settled into the chair again, and flipped the pages to where he'd left off. "Does it look like she cares, idiot?"

"She killed me!" another man cried at her. "She hit me with her car and killed me! I thought we were going to be together forever!"

Seamus just laughed at that one.

Vincent couldn't hold them all back, and they broke past him. Vienna threw her covers over her head, shielding herself from them, but their dead hands tried to grab at her. Their cries for her to listen to their stories came fast, and she was stranded in a mess of confusion and tears and fifteen men, all talking at once.

Vienna screamed. She screamed for her father to help her. She screamed for Poem. She screamed for guards, but whether they came, she couldn't be sure. She only remembered the many voices and then nothing at all.



When Vienna awoke, it was to silence. She kept hold of her covers, hiding her face, until she was sure she was alone. When she opened her eyes, turning herself over to the day, she saw her father and three doctors watching her, discussing her situation.

"Daddy?" Vienna wiped her eyes sleepily.

"I'm here, my angel." Her father took her into his arms, stroking her hair, and she nestled herself against him as if she could make a nest atop his shoulders. "How are you feeling?"

She was about to tell him she was better – fine, perfectly fine now because the nightmare seemed to have past – when someone else spoke, making her head jerk up.

"Angel, huh?" Seamus flipped the pages of a new book. "You ever have kids, Vincent? Have I asked you that before?"

"No," Vincent told him, "and no."

Vienna swallowed hard.

"Vienna?" her father asked, nervously, seeing that *nothing* had caught her attention.

“He cursed me.” Vienna swallowed down her grief once more. “He said no one else would be able to see them. He was right. I’m being haunted by really sad, dead guys!”

“Did you hear that, Vincent?” Seamus smacked his lips together. “We’re really sad, dead guys.”

“I knew you were.” Vincent snickered.

“Are you sure . . . ?” The king hesitated and then sighed. “That was a stupid question. Where are they? Can you see them now?”

Vienna nodded and then pointed to Seamus and Vincent. “There are only two of them right now.”

“It’s rude to point.” Seamus inhaled aggressively, sounding vulgar and then spat on her floor.

“That’s enough, Seamus,” Vincent warned him. “Sorry, Princess Vienna. You can tell your father, the king . . . Oh my, I’m in the same room as the king!”

“Save it, loopy.” Seamus spat again. “And get to the point.”

Vincent collected himself. “You can tell your father that we seem to have sorted out things for now, but you’re going to have to stay here and talk to them one at a time.”

“What?” Vienna demanded.

Vincent flinched.

Seamus looked up from his book, impressed with the authority in her voice. “Very sexy,” he told her.

“What is it?” her father pressed.

“What do you mean I’ve got to talk to them one at a time?” Vienna asked Vincent.

“Vienna.” Her father’s voice got sterner.

“There’s a line-up, just outside your door. Got it?” Seamus offered no sympathy as if it were her own fault she was in this mess, and it certainly was not.

“Oh my god.” Vienna hid her face with her hands.

Gently – so very gently – her father removed them from her face. “My daughter, tell me what’s happening. I can’t see what you’re seeing. You’re going to have to explain it to me. Take your time. I’m not going anywhere. I won’t leave your side if you don’t want me to.”

“Wow,” Seamus observed. “He’s a pretty good dad.”

Vincent nodded.

Vienna closed her eyes, inhaling several times before answering. “Yesterday, when I woke up, my room was full of men. They were crying and unhappy, and they were trying to talk to me all at once.” She paused, and then pointed at Seamus and Vincent; although Seamus had told her that it was rude. She knew it was rude. She was raised as a princess. She knew what rude was, but she didn’t care, not at this point. “Those two guys over there . . . There are two guys over there, and their names are Vincent and Seamus, and it seems they’ve organized the dead guys. They’re lined up in the hall, waiting to have one-on-one conversations with me to talk about . . .” She had no idea what they wanted to talk about. “Vincent? What do they want?”

“Well, what every dead person wants,” Vincent explained. “To tell someone they’re still here, to let someone know why they died, to have someone care about them . . .”

“Cause god knows a dead dude don’t care about another dead dude’s problems,” Seamus agreed. He assessed Vincent’s reaction before saying, “No offence, man.”

“None taken, dead dude,” he agreed.

“But why you can’t see her, or her, or that dead guy –” Seamus pointed to nothing around the room, “I have no idea.”

“There are other dead people here, and I can’t see them?” Vienna asked. She was more relieved than anything else.

“They’re trying to see if you can see them, but nope. Looks like you can only see really sad, crying, pathetic dead guys,” Seamus muttered, flipping another page of one of her books. “Strange.”

“Does that make you a really sad, crying, pathetic dead guy?” Vienna baited.

Seamus got to his feet.

But so did Vienna. She wasn’t sure why. She’d never gotten into a fight with anyone before, least of all a dead guy.

“Vienna . . .” Her father put a hand on her shoulder. “Just because they’re dead, doesn’t mean you should be discourteous. It’s not ladylike.”

Vienna nodded and let him lead her back to the bed.

Seamus smirked, thinking he’d clearly won something.

“She was the bigger man.” Vincent put him straight.

“Don’t start with me!” Seamus scowled.

“Vienna . . .” Her father focused her back onto him, taking her face in his hands so that she would look at him. “What’s going on? What do you want me to do?”

“Vincent . . . ?” the princess asked for his advice.

“There’s only one thing you can do, I’m afraid,” he said, pained by her burden and confusion.

“Send them in!” Seamus said, throwing up his hands and knocking the book away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Curse

and

What It has Taken from Her

The doctors were sent out of the room, looking thrilled to have received such an order. Vincent opened the door and called in the first man while Seamus worked as a kind of bouncer. He punched anyone who tried to sneak in and tossed men out the window if they tried to stay longer than they were supposed to. This made Vienna anxious. She had never seen anyone punch another person before, let alone toss a person (even a dead one) out a window.

The days went on like this. All the while, her father stayed by her side. Afraid to leave her, he had provisions brought to her. She was afraid to leave her bed for fear that a strange, alarming dead man might follow her into the bathroom.

So far that hadn't happened. Still, the line grew every day.

Vincent let in another man. The dead guy, draped in purple cloth, knelt by her bedside. "I'm not like them, okay? I'm not going to cry all over you," he began.

"She'll believe that when she sees it." Seamus warned the guy by continually flexing his hands and then forming fists.

"My name is Henry," he continued. "And I fell in love. She was ridiculously hot. I mean, ridiculously."

Vienna shifted in her bed. "I am a princess, you know? That's not really appropriate."

Her father boiled over. "Is that dead man insulting you?"

"No, he just made me a little uncomfortable," Vienna assured him, instructing the man to keep a suitable tongue.

"You're dealing with men and their *feelings* now, princess," Seamus mocked her. "You're going to have to toughen those ears up if you want to survive now."

Vienna ignored him, bidding the man to continue.

"She married me. We were so happy, the happiest I'd been in my whole life!"

"And she died?" Vienna asked. "She hurt you?"

"What? No. She didn't hurt me. She died in childbirth, giving birth to my son, John, who still lives. I'm trying to find her in the scramble of things. Actually, I was hoping that talking to you about it all would make it possible for me to cross over or something. You know? To finally have the light shine on me, and have heaven open its doors. To see her waiting and we could finally be together again."

Seamus was pretending to hang himself, and Vincent slapped him.

"Maybe if I talk some more about her, you know? She had blond hair and these passionate blue eyes, like yours. I wish she was looking at me right now. I really do. It was true love, you know? Still is . . ." He started to tear up.

Now both Vincent and Seamus were pretending to hang themselves.

"God, I miss her!" he blubbered, although he had promised he wouldn't. The dead man grasped Vienna's hands and cried all over her.

"That's it!" Seamus grabbed him by the shoulders, slapped him twice in the face, and then chucked him out the window. "And don't come back, jerk!"

“What just happened?” the king asked her.

“Seamus sent another man out the window.”

“Seamus.” Her father spoke to his own hands since he couldn’t see Seamus. “That’s not how we deal with people in this kingdom, even if they’re dead.”

Seamus wasn’t convinced. “If you saw what he was doing to your daughter, you’d be telling a different story.”

“Did Seamus answer me?”

Vienna nodded. “He said he’s sorry, and he’ll try not to do it again.”

“I don’t remember saying that.” Seamus sat down, and all of them looked up as someone knocked on the door. So far, the dead hadn’t knocked.

“Enter,” the king ordered, and one of his advisers stepped into the room. Unknowingly, he let in a crying man, but since Vincent hadn’t sent for him, Seamus immediately sent him flying.

The adviser whispered something in the king’s ear, and the king nodded, sending him away. Once the adviser left, the king stood. “Are you perfectly safe with Vincent and Seamus?”

“You can count on us, Your Majesty!” Vincent said, even though the king could not hear him.

“More or less. Probably less,” was Seamus’s answer.

“I think so,” Vienna told her father.

“I have to go and be a king now,” he told her. “I’m not sure when I’ll be finished.”

“It’s all right. I’m sure we’re almost done.” She looked at Vincent, who tried to look encouraging, but failed in his mission. She watched her father exit, and then told her companions in the horrid, never-ending scene that they might as well send in the next dead person.

She chugged her goblet of coffee, set it down on her bedside table, and then gave a slight flick of her wrist, telling the man to begin.

But he just started crying.

“That’s it!” Seamus lost his patience. He grabbed the man by the shoulder, dragged him across the room, opened the door, and chucked him out. “Listen you wimpy, dried up corpses! That’s enough! Fuck off! If I see anyone of you bastards anywhere near this cracked palace again, I’ll kick the shit out of you!”

They scattered.

Seamus stood at the door, trying to calm himself down. Vincent headed to his friend, speaking low, and then both of them turned to the princess.

“Princess Vienna.” Vincent gave Seamus a quick, shameful glance. “I’m sorry if that frightened you.”

“Are you kidding? Why didn’t you do that sooner?” Vienna asked, irate. If she had been able to slap either of them, she just might have.



Finally, a day dawned when Vienna was able to carry on with normal palace life. She had breakfast, drinking a substantial amount of coffee, and eating whatever the chefs had prepared for her. Today it was crème brûlée and chocolate breads.

Vienna then dressed for riding and ran to the stable. She now had to bribe Poem to let her ride, even in the daylight hours. And the price was high: two handfuls of chocolates and a caramel.

Poem brought her father's grey stallion. It was clear he was wondering if Vienna would start to panic again.

The horse began to prance. His snorting was loud and terrifying.

Vienna glanced behind her. Vincent and Seamus had their arms crossed as they leaned against the barn wall.

"My lady . . ." Poem decided this probably wasn't the best idea, no matter how many sweets were involved.

"I know," Vienna said and then tried to calm the animal with a soothing voice. But, just then, a desperate dead man burst through the stable doors and charged at the princess. "Crap," was her reaction to that.

Poem raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

Seamus and Vincent moved to tackle the man.

The stallion bolted, fleeing to the back of the barn. Poem, still on his feet, was dragged away.

Vienna's hands were clamped to her ears, and her nails dug into them. That warlock had cursed her, making her see ghosts. As if that wasn't bad enough, now they wouldn't leave her alone, making it impossible for her to ride. She had to live with the fact that as things stood, it was dangerous for her to be in the stables. The horses were terrified of the ghosts. Soon they would learn to associate her with them and would begin to flee from her.

She would have to give up riding.

Infuriated, she marched over to the three brawling dead men.

She held her riding whip firmly in hand, and then pounded the crop on the intruder's head. She didn't wonder if he could feel it, although it seemed like he could. That made it all the more cathartic. She whipped him so much that, if he were a human, his head would have been surely severed from his body.

Straightening up, Vienna looked behind her to see Poem standing, mystified, wondering if she had completely lost her mind. She felt sure she had. She pushed her bonnet into place and straightened her tangle of brown hair before throwing her nose in the air and walking out of the barn.

But she wanted to run. She wanted to escape. If she couldn't ride, she decided, she would hide in her favorite blue-and-white-colored room and enrapture herself in a novel. In her purple summer dress, she took her place in her favorite window seat, and tried to read.

Tried to read because Vincent and Seamus wouldn't stop talking!

"Would you shut up?" Vienna threw them the most withering look she could master. "I'm trying to read!"

"We'll gladly leave," Seamus said, lazily. "Just say the word."

"Seamus," Vincent warned.

"Yes! Please!" Vienna snapped her book shut, her hands shaking with anger. "Go away, *Seamus.*"

Seamus smirked, silencing the other man when he tried to speak. "Come on, Vincent, and let us see how the 'Miss Learn to Appreciate Us Pageant' carries on without us."

As soon as they left, dead men swarmed in. They pulled at her hands and begged her to hear their stories. She couldn't take it any longer and screamed bloody murder for Vincent and Seamus to come back.

She knew now as she watched the scramble in the room, that the warlock hadn't just cursed her. He had taken everything she loved away from her. She couldn't read. She couldn't ride. She could barely sleep and had to drink massive amounts of coffee to remain standing because

she was so exhausted. Everyone thought she was crazy, and her present appearance didn't discourage that thought.

That warlock . . .

He's taken everything I love from me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Magic-Man

She tried to watch television, but when she tried to turn the volume up, it seemed that the dead people just talked louder. She tried blaring music, but that made them dance and continually ask the only living girl who could see them if she wanted to dance with them. She contemplated her many failed attempts to ignore the curse as she put her feet up on the dashboard of her father's blue Camaro. Horses were afraid of her now, so they couldn't journey on horseback, and her father endlessly complained about this. The gas prices were really too high for them to drive anywhere, let alone all around the countryside.

Seamus and Vincent were in the backseat.

They'd been to three different witch doctors and five different voodoo men so far, and all of them had told her that she was either faking it or simply crazy. She didn't take kindly to any of that.

"Make a right," Vincent told the king, even though he wasn't able to hear him.

"Idiot, he's supposed to go left," Seamus corrected.

"Did that goblin say we should turn up here . . . ?" her father whispered, trying not to get them lost. He had stopped for directions, and then he had done so again when those directions had brought them to a dead end.

"They're arguing about that." Vienna shrugged. She wasn't any help when it came to directions. "Vincent says to go left. I trust him more than Seamus."

"I think I'm going to go straight," the king declared, to the annoyance of the dead backseat drivers. They were certain that their knowledge on the subject was superior to the king's royal instincts. However, his instincts proved hardy because they passed a shop called 'Lifey's Magic Shop.'

"Shit, dad, there it is! We just went by it!" Vienna twisted around in her seat to get a better look. It was nicer than the other places they'd been to. White daisies filled the gardens that circled the shop. Although the building looked like it needed a new paint job, and a new roof.

"What does chipped paint and a leaky roof say about the quality of a magic-man's magic?" Seamus asked Vincent.

"The mechanic we employed had a car, and it always broke down. I often wondered what that said about him, but he was the best mechanic in the country at the time," was Vincent's answer.

"Vienna, don't say that word. It's not fit for royal lips. And put your seatbelt on," her father directed her.

"You've said 'shit' five times so far today," the princess mumbled under her breath as her father turned the car around and drove into the shop's parking lot.

All four of them exited the car and walked inside.

At once, Seamus saw something shiny and told Vincent, "Sweet! Come take a look at this!"

"Welcome!" A man stood behind the counter, his hands clasped behind his back. "I'm Lifey, and this –" He was suddenly in front of their faces. He held cards above his head and they turned into lively butterflies as he exhaled. Coming together, the butterflies turned into a single pink rose. "Is my magic shop," he said, winking at the princess as he handed her the rose.

He was an overly thin man with black eyes that had evident red specks. He bowed to his guests, playfully, almost mockingly. He had silver- streaked, short, red hair.

Vienna let the rose hang at her side, the bloom facing the floor. "Are you a fake?"

The magic-man blinked several times. "No."

"My name is Gladness." Her father gave a slight tip of his head. "And this is my daughter, Vienna."

"Gladness and Vienna? Royal family Gladness and Vienna?" The man looked from child to man.

"As in *king*?" Vienna sized Lify up. "Yeah, you're looking at him."

Lify performed a real bow this time. "To what do I owe?"

"We seek help," the king began, but Vienna interrupted. She couldn't help herself. She was rather unhappy about her situation, and she was more than willing to let it show.

"Some douchebag of a warlock named Augustus cursed me, and now I can see ghosts, and not just ghosts, really weepy ones!" The princess watched Lify's eyes widen.

"Augustus?" he asked calmly, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "You mean the Dragon Witch's son?"

"Yes," the king said, thinking back and longing for the good old days. "He was a wonderful adviser at the palace. His magic came in handy on more than one occasion. He was always polite and well-tempered. Always liked him –"

"Dad!" Vienna said, outraged.

"He cursed you?" Lify wasn't convinced. "Well, I can't see that. I know him. He's a great guy."

"You know him?" The king encouraged him to go on.

"We were childhood friends. I can't remember a time when he wasn't healing wounded animals or the sick or bringing food to the poor. Even when we were kids. He's the most upstanding guy I know. Don't get me wrong. He's only twenty-three. He's young. He's made one or two mistakes in his life. Like, swimming naked in the creek of death. That wasn't our brightest moment. But hey, we were twenty and high on mushroom dust, and we made it out alive, thanks to his quick thinking." He tilted his head back, admiring his past. "Good times."

For the first time on this bizarre road trip, Vienna felt hopeful. "Can you break the spell?"

"If Augustus cast it, no. I've got no chance. None of the magic-men around here do. I hate to admit it, but he's in an entirely different league." The magic-man paused, thinking as he watched Vienna. "Vienna? Princess Vienna? V?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're V, I take it?" He rocked back on his heels, letting loose a saddened, barking laugh. "That poor shmuck! If I had known all this time that he was in love with a princess, I never would have spent years convincing him to finally make a move. He gave you that heart necklace, didn't he? Damn. He's been carrying that thing around with him since he was sixteen." He stopped again, closing his eyes, as if he should have known all along. "Since he started working at the palace!"

"What is this guy talking about?" Seamus walked to Vienna's side. "If I punch him, do you think he will feel it?"

"Don't be mean," Vienna hissed at him.

Lify stared at her.

"Sorry." Vienna blushed. She had forgotten that no one else could see Seamus or Vincent, who was laughing while he looked at objects around the store. "You were talking about how you could break my curse."

“Weren’t you listening?” Lify then turned to the king, looking for an explanation. He didn’t find one. “I *can’t* lift the curse. I can’t even tell you anything about it or about what you might do to nullify it. Like I said, he’s on a completely different level than me.” He walked to the side of the store, standing for a moment beside Vincent, who gave him a respectful greeting. The greeting went unnoticed, of course. Lify came back with a handful of objects. “I can make clever things and cast B level spells. If you were bald, I could bring your hair back. Broken bones? No problem. I can even turn you into a mouse if I wanted to, or maybe a violin. But you said you can see dead people? That’s way beyond A level magic.”

“So you’d call that an A plus?” Seamus smirked.

Vincent walked over to them. “Nifty.”

“No, *Vincent*, it’s not *nifty*! It’s my life and I want it back!” Vienna screamed at him and stormed out of the store, tossing the pink rose into the trash.

CHAPTER NINE

The Witch of the Falling Stars

Lifey told them about a place that might be able to help.

Outside Highest Guard, was a small town framed with sunflower fields and blue skies. Farmers were outside, working their land. A horse farm was busy training horses, and a cattle farm was busy milking cattle. Goat-herders crossed roads, guiding their herds to new fields. And sheep followed their shepherds to new fields, doing the same thing in other parts of the town. There was a white chapel in the center of the town, as well as dozens of little bakeshops and butcher stores and a wonderful flower market. And there was also a magic shop called 'Bicker and Brooms.'

When Vienna walked up to the front door she read the sign, 'No Toads Allowed.'

"What do you think? It's wonderful here, isn't it?" the king took in big, gulping breaths, delighting in the country air.

Seamus had his eyes on something. "I'll be back."

"Me too," Vincent agreed, heading in a different direction. He admired the tempting bakeshops and looked at food he was no longer able to taste.

The Camaro was parked crookedly, and the pink rose that Vienna's father had picked out of the trash was lying on the dashboard. The king opened the entrance door, and she stepped inside.

The store was fresh with the smell of vanilla and cinnamon. A calico cat twitched its tail at them and then jumped onto a shelf of potion bottles. Vienna walked over to the feline and scratched the top of its head before reading some of the labels. 'True Love' potion, 'Get out of Work' potion, 'Skip Class – No Fail' potion, and 'Sexy Prom Night' potion were some of the most popular.

"Halloween, get off those shelves!" A woman whose hair matched the cat's black, white and orange fur, walked in carrying a large cardboard box. She set it on a table and then addressed her customers. "You look too rich to be from this town, and, since I know everyone here, I can say for sure that you're not." She picked bottles out of the box she'd hauled in and put them on the shelves. "What's your pleasure, kids? Can I interest you in some father-daughter outfits? They're sparkly!"

"No thanks." The king tried to keep his laughter at bay. It worked. He was the king, after all.

He had supreme control.

"Lifey said you might be able to help us?" Vienna redirected the conversation to her immediate need.

That caught the witch's attention. "So that's you, is it? Yes. Lifey's owl arrived with his letter this morning." She wiped her hands on her orange dress. "You're shorter than I imagined you to be."

Vienna huffed. How dare she talk to the princess like that! "Can you help me?"

"Help?" The witch cackled. "No. He's thinking I might be able to tell you where Augustus is. Well, I can't. I haven't heard from him in three years. Not since I proposed to him, and he turned me down. Me? Emily Tempest? Witch of the Falling Stars?" She occupied herself with

stocking shelves once again. The cat came over to rub itself against her legs and purred comfortably. “Go catch a mouse, Halloween!” she hissed at it, and the cat ran off.

“Can you at least try examining her? Look over the magic? Anything?” the king asked. He was unsure of how to word any of this properly. At this point, he felt like he was close to losing his sanity as well. “I don’t know.”

“Sure. Fine.” The witch wiped her hands on her dress again, walking toward Vienna. She circled her and then took her hands. The witch closed her eyes. When nothing happened, she spoke a few select words in Latin, keeping her eyes closed. “Huh . . .”

“What is it?” Vienna whispered. Had she seen something?

“If this wasn’t Augustus’s curse,” she said, throwing the princess’s hands back to her, “I’d say you were faking it.”

Not again! “Faking it?”

“Can you point to any ghosts in here? That’s what you claim you can see, right?”

“No, I can’t point any out!”

“Ha!”

“I mean, not here, in this store, because they’re off looking at baked goods!”

The king sighed. “Where are those dead fellows when you need them?”

“That’s it, we’re leaving!” Vienna fumed, marching to the front door. She grabbed the doorknob.

“About those father-daughter outfits . . .” the king said to the witch.

“I can give you twenty-five percent off for being the king of the land,” the witch said.

“Really?” the king was delighted at the idea.

Vienna shrieked and ran out of the store.

Maple trees lined the dirt road, as did lamp posts, making Vienna wish that she could wander about in the dark once again. There were yellow bows on every door, reminding her of happier times when she, too, lovingly embraced the fall. Pumpkins were everywhere, their carved faces not so mysterious during the daylight. They seemed to be mocking her as she made her way down the street, looking for Vincent. Sure enough, there he was, drooling over homemade peach pies and warm cinnamon buns.

“I could really have used your help in there,” Vienna informed him, unkindly. She straightened her gloves, trying not to delight too much in the homey smell of bread from the bakery. She had to maintain her indifferent appearance. She couldn’t let Vincent see that she was anything less than furious with him.

He pulled himself away from the Halloween cakes. “You’ve never required my help.”

True. She had never needed it until that Emily witch told her to point out a dead guy.

“Where’s Seamus? We’re leaving.”

“If he’s not with you . . .” He thought for a moment and then looked around. “There’s only one place he could be.” He wiggled his nose and bunched up his lips before letting a full-toothed smile take over his face. “You had better get him, then. I’ll head to the car. Don’t you think I’ll look dashing leaning against that blue Camaro?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “You’ll find him in the flower shop. If he’s not there, then look for the town’s garden. He’ll be there. Always by the roses.”

Vincent walked away from her, leaving her to reflect on Seamus and his words about him. She found herself walking, but she was also caught up in her memory of an old-looking man crying over the rose bushes in the palace garden. He’d been sitting on a swing, hadn’t he? She had been walking with Poem on that day . . . Had that been Seamus crying? Was Seamus even capable of crying?

She wandered back until she found the flower store they had passed on their way to ‘Bicker and Brooms,’ where no toads were allowed. Seamus was standing there, a white rose in his hands, his eyes closed as he lost himself in the smell of roses.

“Seamus . . . ?” Vienna approached him cautiously. She’d always been a little afraid of him. He was different from Vincent. She could yell at Vincent, knowing he wouldn’t take offense. But she couldn’t yell at Seamus without knowing whether he’d see through her. That was scarier.

He opened his eyes.

“You were that man, weren’t you?” she said, well aware that people were curious as to why she was talking to herself. She picked up a rose and then set it down again. “In the garden. Back at the palace.” He didn’t answer. He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back against the wall. “Did she hurt you, Seamus? Are you just like them?” she dared to ask.

Just like them . . . All those men dying inside because they had loved. . .

“All those guys have been dead for a very long time. Their tears are mostly the result of their relief that you can see them,” Seamus informed her. He did not look at her. “And, mostly, they’re just whiny bastards. You’re getting the wrong idea about love, kiddo. You think this curse is so that you can see how you hurt this warlock jerk or something. But that’s not it. I think he wanted you to see what love is. To have someone tell you that love is the only thing worth dying for.”

Then why were you in the garden? Why are you here now? “Then why were you crying?”

“Because I miss her that much.”

When she didn’t say anything, he took a few steps to leave. “Don’t go!” Vienna pleaded. In their time together, he had become something like a friend. If he needed to say something . . . If he needed her to listen . . . “Wait. Seamus . . . What was she like?”

He came back to her. His movements were slow and cautious as he held the flower safely in his hands. “She grew white roses,” he said. “Her hair, even when I knew her in her teens, was white and reached down to her hips. We’d make love under the trees in her family’s orchard.”

He wasn’t crying, not like the other guys who had told her their stories. All this time, she had thought that the ghosts regretted loving those girls. They were all dead now; how could they not? But Seamus was different. His words were different.

“Was she a nobleman’s daughter?” our princess asked him.

Seamus shook his head, letting the rose he held in his hand fall to the ground. “I was a nobleman’s son.”

He tried to walk away again, but this time she didn’t plead. She cut in front of him. Her hands out to stop him from pushing past her. “Do you know how old you looked in that garden? What are you, thirty-years-old? You looked twenty years older!” He listened, and she continued. She’d be lying to herself if she said he wasn’t a nuisance, but he wasn’t a bad nuisance. She’d be lying to herself if she said she hadn’t grown to care for him, and for Vincent. Although, becoming friends with two emotional ghosts seemed crazy. “How can you say love’s worth dying for, when you clearly wish you hadn’t? All you’re doing is going through existence trying to be strong. And it doesn’t matter because she’s not here, is she? You hold on to those roses like that’s all that matters. Well, it’s not. There’s so much more. You shouldn’t have to make yourself about that one thing and then never stop crying about it, you weepy bastard! Grow up!”

“Vienna?” he said coolly, effectively.

“What?”

“Where’s your mother?”

“I . . .” This time, he walked past her, and this time, she wasn’t about to stop him. He didn’t wait for an answer, but somehow she knew that he wasn’t done talking about this.

She followed him back to the car. Vincent was leaning on the car door, eyeing the people who walked by, projecting a ‘that’s right, this is my car, dig it man’ attitude.

“What a nice, nice lady,” Vienna’s father murmured as he walked out of the store.

A nice, nice lady? A nice, nice lady!

“We’ve been everywhere!” Vienna raged, getting into the passenger’s seat and slamming the car door. “They all tell us the same thing. *I don’t see anything. You must be crazy.* Bloody fakes!”

Seamus and Vincent piled into the backseat, and her father took the wheel. The pink rose still lay on the dash. The king pushed back his daughter’s hair as she tried to hide her red-stained eyes.

“I can’t stay like this forever!” she cried.

The king nodded, contemplating before turning the key and starting the engine. He listened to it hum before he nodded. “We’ve only one place left to go then.”

Vienna’s father pulled away as she asked, “Where?”

“To the Dragon Witch.”

CHAPTER TEN

The Dragon Witch

They drove through the night and throughout the next day and the next night. Finally, they reached ominous mountains and the entrance of a dark, portentous cave. A chill passed through Vienna as she stepped out of the car. She held her forearms, trying to warm herself, but the cool morning air was inescapable.

Her father came up behind her, wrapping a black, velvet cape around her, but she pushed it away. He put it on the car's hood.

"This is where she lives?" Vienna asked. "I didn't take it literally when you said she dwelled in the mountains' caves."

"It is a bit dodgy, isn't it?" Vincent agreed.

"Yeah."

The king eyed his daughter.

"Sorry." Vienna nodded toward the ghost at her side. "I was talking to him. The dead guy."

Exhausted, the king took the first steps forward, entering the cave. Both of them were engulfed by the damp, murky effect. There wasn't any light, so the king switched on the flashlight he was carrying.

There was nothing in the cave, but a long walk through the dark emptiness.

Then smoke traveled along the bottoms of the walls. Candles suddenly lit up, showing the way forward. The royal family followed all the way to a carpeted room with a jeweled ceiling and walls made of skulls. A dragon lay on a bed of gold. The massive, sickly grey-green dragon stared at them expressively, tilting her head one way and then another. Vienna set her shoulders and raised her head, trying to look unafraid.

"It's good to see you again, Dragon Witch," the king greeted the dragon. Her claws began to knead the gold. "We have come here seeking your help."

The dragon sat upright, and rings of smoke flew out of her mouth before she looked at them with a new level of seriousness. Her giant wings spread out and she took flight. When she landed, she was a woman, wearing an elegant gold dress.

"A king shouldn't need help from me," the dragon said.

"Oh, but I do, good witch."

Good witch? Was there such a thing?

The king continued, "My daughter . . ."

"Yes, I can already see. She is haunted. Someone cursed you," the Dragon Witch told Vienna. The princess hid behind her father like a small child.

"Not just anyone," the king explained. "Your son."

The Dragon Witch laughed. Vincent's ghostly elbow continually attempted to strike Vienna. He mouthed his criticism, telling her to face the witch.

The last time I faced a witch I was cursed . . .

"My son?" the dragon said in disbelief, the force of her laughter apparent on her face. "My son? I don't think so."

"And why is that?" the king asked.

"Well, please, you've met my son."

"I have."

“And what did you think of him?”

“I thought him a very splendid young man.”

“Exactly. Why would he go around cursing young girls, and a princess for that matter?”

The king gave a long, hard look at his daughter before sighing. He explained, “I take it you know of the task my daughter set for her suitors?” He watched the witch nod before he said, “Well, he was my daughter’s champion.”

The witch stood for a moment, amazed. “My son? King?”

“Well...”

“He’s really a great guy.”

“I thought so. I really liked him, but . . .”

He didn’t have to say another word. The witch cast a long stare at the princess. “You turned him away?”

“Now you can run,” Vincent told her.

But Vienna raised her head high. “Not every girl wants a prince. He shouldn’t have felt discriminated against. I don’t want anyone.”

The witch considered her, almost liking her. But she couldn’t, of course. It was *her* son whom she had cast away. “And yet you managed to find the one decent man on the planet and rip him to shreds? Badly done, Little Majesty. If he hadn’t already cursed you, I might have done so myself.”

“How can you say that?”

“He’s my son.”

“I mean that he’s a nice guy. He cursed me!”

“You denied him. He cursed you because you cursed him first.”

I did no such thing! And yet . . . She thought about how she had thrown the necklace with the wooden heart and the pearl – just thrown it to its grave. Had her eyes cursed him first?

Well, if she cursed him, she had every right to. She was the princess after all, for bloody sake.

“I did no such thing. I only wanted him, all of them, to leave me alone.” Vienna took that moment to compare herself to the Dragon Witch. She was wearing a gown of peach-colored lace, and the witch was clad in gold. Although Vienna was a princess, the witch’s presence overpowered her.

“Well, I was quite happy,” the king said, wistfully. “I thought he’d make me a very sweet son.”

“Oh, he would have,” the witch agreed. “He sings to the weeping willows when their weeping reaches its heights, and if the daisies are scared, he’ll kiss them goodnight –”

“Does he really?” the king inquired. “What a sweet boy!”

“Hello?” Vienna interrupted. “I’m still cursed here!”

The king cleared his throat. “Right . . .”

“Can you break the curse?” Vienna asked the witch.

The woman looked over the princess, eyeing her, and then circling her. She examined her son’s spell work and admired his craftsmanship before answering. “I know I am the Dragon Witch. I should be able to break anything my son casts, but, alas, I cannot. He is my son as well as his father’s son, and that makes him much more powerful than I am. That is as it should be. I am sorry, little princess. I admire your confidence and conviction. There’s not many a woman in this world who can stand before a man and tell him to his face that she doesn’t need him. Of course, I wish you hadn’t done it to my son, but no matter. I like you. However, this spell, I cannot break. Only he who cast it can uncast it.”

Vienna looked up at her father. “You still think he’s a nice guy?”

Her father shrugged. Obviously, yes.

“For cursing me? Strange way you brought him up to show his affection!” she yelled at the witch, who swelled with anger. “If he wanted me to get to know him, he didn’t leave much to be desired!”

She turned on her heels, storming out of the cave.

“What are you going to do, little princess?” the witch called after her, a great deal of mockery in her tone.

“It’s no use yelling at you, you’re not the one who cursed me!” Vienna marched to the car with Vincent hot on her heels. She sat, fuming. Her father joined her, started the car, and drove away.

Seamus didn’t ask how it went.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Witch's Broken, Scornful Heart

“What do we do now?” Vienna inquired, although she'd already decided. No one had said a word for two and a half days, not even the usually chatty ones in the back. The leather seats weren't all that comfortable. Vienna wrapped her blanket around herself.

“We're going back to the palace,” her father informed her. “I need to make sure my kingdom is still alive. From there, I'll commission search parties to find Augustus. I'll imprison him if I have to, if that's what it takes for him to lift the curse.”

She had to hand it to her father. He had formulated a better plan than she had. She was determined to find Augustus, yes, but she had planned on going alone. Maybe hopping a train . . . She looked out her window, as she rested her head on the fluffy pillow she had brought along.

Maybe it had belonged to her mother once . . .

“Vienna . . .” Her father didn't finish. They sat in silence, watching the nightscape of this nowhere land roll by. There weren't trees, houses, or hills – just plains, leveled land for miles and miles. Finally, after another mile, he spoke. “Vienna . . . You know I don't have any regrets, don't you? I mean about your mother. Even though it didn't work out –”

“Dad, look out!” Vienna screamed.

There was a person in the middle of the road!

The king swerved, and the car ran off the road and into the ditch.

King Gladness had Vienna in his arms. He had to make sure she was all right.

“I'm okay,” she assured him.

“Well, I'm not!” Seamus hissed, floating out of the car door.

Vienna and King Gladness held each other's gazes, then rushed out of the car.

“I didn't hit anyone, did I?” the king asked, but it seemed that everyone was fine.

Yes. Indeed. Everyone, but them.

A woman stood on the dirt road, her black dress flapping like wings in the wind she was summoning forth. The sky began to rumble with thunder and web with lightning. A calico cat sat at her feet, its tail twitching playfully.

“She a nice, nice lady now?” Vienna muttered.

Emily Tempest, Witch of the Falling Stars, pointed at Vienna. Halloween hunched her back and hissed at the princess as the witch spoke, hissing her words like the angry feline. “Vienna, Princess of Highest Guard, you are unworthy of your title!” The thunder roared so loudly that both the princess and the king covered their ears. Halloween's hissing sounded like laughter. “We will not have lying, loveless frauds in our realm!”

“That's enough, witch,” the king demanded. “As the king of the land –”

“Silence!” the witch's other hand shot up and the king fell to the ground, onto a bed of white feathers.

Vienna watched, bewildered.

“Vienna!” Vincent was rushing toward her. “Run!”

It was like watching a movie in slow motion. His words were drawn out and his actions played out bit by bit. Seamus was running for her too, both of them fighting to get to her.

Vienna wasn't sure if she was still breathing. She was trying to count her breaths, trying to draw back into herself, but it was hopeless. Fear had made her stupid. She was paralyzed as the witch's fingers moved upon the air, sending spiders and spider webs rushing toward her.

"You are banished for what you did to him!" The witch's words clawed at the princess's mind, and she told her, "For your cruelty, may you never know love. You are unworthy of it!"

Vincent and Seamus were fighting to get to her before it was too late.

The spider webs wrapped around her, black spiders biting her flesh, and Vienna screamed and fought and kicked and slapped the spiders away, wrestling out of the webs. She jumped up and around, grabbing spiders one after another and throwing them away from her.

"Vincent?" She didn't look up as she got the last insect out of her hair. "Seamus?" She listened to the calls of owls and the howling of wolves. "Father?" The trees were thick, and when she took a step, she sank deep into a mud pit. Struggling out, she threw her hands over her mouth to keep her shrieks in.

She had no idea where she was.

She was alone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Wild Wolf in the Wild Forest

There was nothing more to think about. She had only one choice. She had to keep moving in search of civilization. Of course, if she found anyone, there was no reason for them to help her. There was nothing to suggest that she was a princess. As it was, she had brought nothing with her. She was in pink bunny pajama pants and a white top. She removed the hair elastic from her wrist and put up her hair as she swatted mosquitoes away. That was all she had: pajamas and one hair elastic.

The stars were visible through the treetops, but the princess tried not to look at them. After all, it was the Witch of Fallen Stars who had forced her to end up here in the middle of, well, wherever she was. The moon gave very little light. It was enough to find her way in the endless darkness, in the endless clutter of forest life.

Twice, she tripped over the same log, falling to her knees and getting wet muck on her pajamas. Everything seemed hopeless, and yet she continued to make her way, traveling in any direction. As long as she kept moving there might be a hope of discovering something other than mud and darkness and more mud.

A tree branch slapped her in the face, and she cursed loudly and in a very unladylike manner.

“Is anyone there?” she screamed. A part of her knew that shouting in a forbidden forest was a very stupid thing to do. She’d read enough books to know that. But she couldn’t help it. She was, in fact, helpless, and she wanted – wanted beyond measurement – to scream. “Anyone!” And then she said something very stupid, something she couldn’t believe was coming out of her mouth. “Augustus!”

A man stood in her path.

“A-Augustus?” Vienna stuttered, straining her eyes to see the figure. No. It wasn’t the warlock that sent the princess through feelings of relief and bitter dread. If the warlock *had* shown himself, she might have been able to get rid of the curse *tonight*.

But, instead . . .

“You can see me?” the figure spoke, coming closer.

“Oh no, not another dead guy!” Vienna yelled, despite her inner-self’s proposal of a state of calm.

“I died here,” the man whispered, starting to cry like they all did. “There was an attack . . .”

“I don’t care if you cry, just don’t cry *at* me!” Vienna ran away from him, against his objections. He was shouting for her to come back, but she ran until his voice was nothing more than a memory, and then she ran until it wasn’t even that.

She held on to a tree to keep herself standing. She ran all night, and the morning sun was starting to rise, turning the forest into a foggy blue cloud. She slid to the ground, panting and gasping, sucking in air until she no longer felt sick. The spider bites covering her arms and stomach were wretched and horribly itchy things. She was desperate to scratch them, but begged for courage not to rip herself apart doing so.

A black snake slithered up her arm. Vienna jumped up and grabbed the creature by the head before it shot up to bite her face. She pitched it into the forest and then turned back around.

A grizzly bear was watching her from the trees. Walking forward, it assessed the girl accordingly.

And then the grizzly roared.

Vienna's inner-self was screaming. She could hear the screams and feel them in her throat although her mouth never opened to release them.

Were these her last moments? Was she going to die here – wherever *here* was?

“Oh please, please momma bear,” Vienna whispered, slowly walking backward, “tell me you don't have cubs nearby.”

The grizzly rose to her feet, towering over her, and roared again. Screaming, Vienna toppled to the ground. She crawled until her back hit one of the trees. She could taste her fear: a horrible sandy taste before it became sweet, like rotten raspberries, and panic sank in.

I can't die. My father needs me. I have a whole kingdom that needs me.

The grizzly landed with impressive force and lunged after her through the trees. Her mouth was open as if she could already taste the intruder's blood. Her eyes were fierce with her fear for her family. She had to protect them from the ambiguous threat posed by this being.

Vienna hid her face with her hands.

Noise. Suddenly there was so much noise that Vienna had to uncover her eyes. A wolf was fighting the bear, both of them raging with wild cries and curses, both of them wild-eyed and snarling. The grizzly's muzzle was bleeding as she swatted at the wolf, but the wolf was fast and agile and ran straight up the bear, latching onto her throat.

The creature roared, and Vienna screamed as she watched her grab hold of the sandy brown wolf and toss him against a tree. The wolf yelped as he landed. He lay motionless on the ground.

The grizzly turned back for Vienna.

Panicking, she grabbed the only thing there was to grab. She held a fallen tree branch in her hands as something inside her mocked her for thinking that a tree branch might hold up against a bear.

She had nothing else.

She had to try.

The creature bellowed, and the princess bellowed back. She lifted the branch above her head, trying to make herself seem more terrifying than she actually was.

The grizzly paused, studying her, and the wolf ran up the bear's back and hooked himself to her, biting her head. The grizzly cried, trying to grab the wolf, but he had already moved, hitting the ground and thundering for her neck.

With one last terrible surge, the bear fought. Then, with one last trembling cry, she ran back into the trees, away from the wolf and the pink-bunny-pajama-wearing girl.

Then the wolf turned on the princess. She guessed that saying, “I'm the Princess of Highest Guard,” wouldn't make a difference to the massive wolf who seemed to be leering at her with his large, expressive teeth.

He growled, and Vienna fell back. Pointing the stick at the creature, she braced her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. If she was going to die today, she would at least die a death worthy of her royal blood. She would put up some kind of fight.

But then the sandy brown wolf whimpered, his ears going down, and he crawled closer to her. Slowly, she extended her hand to him, and he licked it. She dropped the tree branch and flung her arms around the animal. At first, he was startled. He even tried to get away, but she wouldn't let him. She was so grateful!

“Thank you!” she said to the wolf, feeling his soft fur against her neck and cheeks. “Thank you!”

The wolf pulled back a little and started licking her.

She slapped him away. "Gross! Knock it off!" She got to her feet and wiped her face. The wolf watched her, tilting his head to one side and then to the other. He had very curious eyes for a wolf, and they kept changing color. One was blue and the other brown, and then one was green and the other gold. "Anyway, thanks."

The wolf turned and started walking away.

"Where are you going?" Vienna demanded, but the creature didn't stop. "If you think you're leaving me here, you had better think again!"

The wolf kept walking, although he seemed to realize she was following after him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Girl and Her Wolf

Days went by and the wolf stayed with her. She attempted to make fires, but they never worked. She cuddled close to the wolf and, like a blanket, his fur kept her warm through the cold autumn nights. She wasn't sure if it was a coincidence, but he would lead her by nuts and berries. Starving, she would gulp them down and collect as many as she could carry. She followed him, day and night, wherever he led her. She had nowhere else to go, nothing else to do, and no idea how to get anywhere. When he found water, she drank. When he found food, she ate, and she was grateful. She thanked him constantly, knowing perfectly well she would die without him, although she continually wondered why he was putting up with her.

Wherever he was going, surely she was slowing him down.

She walked by his side, sometimes keeping her hand on his back, sometimes stroking his noble head. She wondered where her father was right now, and if he had people looking for her. She wondered if they had captured the witch who had banished her. She hoped they had. She hoped she had been imprisoned, and maybe even been tortured. Those thoughts, at least, made it easier for her to look up at the stars again.

Now she walked with an apple in one hand, and she rested her other hand on the wolf's head. Seamus had said that he and the woman he loved would sleep together under the trees in her family's orchard. She wondered what kind of orchard it had been, if there was more to his story, and if she'd ever see him again.

She wanted to ask the wolf questions, but she knew how silly that was. As far as she knew, he couldn't talk back, and, if he could, he'd chosen not to. So she didn't speak much. She just wondered. She wondered about Vincent and Poem and if she'd ever get back. She wondered if anyone would find her.

The days went by and eventually, by following a stream, the wolf led Vienna out of the forest. The stream turned into a river, and in the middle of the river, a young man with sandy brown hair stood fishing.

"Maybe we should go this way, Hero," Vienna whispered to the wolf. She'd named him something appropriate. But the wolf continued on, his eyes changing colors and watching the young man with consideration.

Vienna prayed that they wouldn't be noticed. The pattern on her clothing was not visible now. They were covered in mud and stains. Moreover, her long hair was an awful mess, and her blue eyes weren't pretty things anymore. They were wild things, watching the predator's every move.

However, there was still enough 'princess' left in her to make her want to avoid the first person she stumbled upon. She could not be seen like this.

Of course he looked up, and of course he held her gaze. He was older than she was. Unlike her long lines of suitors, he wasn't perfectly muscled or sculpted from knighthood. He didn't have a pompous, prince-bred air about him, and it was clear he'd never lifted a sword in his life. He didn't seem to have the same eyes as the money hunters who had made their way to her either. He just looked like a boy fly fishing and not a dead boy fly fishing either.

“Can we run?” she urged Hero, but the wolf seemed unconcerned. She looked back at the young man. He was trying to speak to her. He moved forward, trying to catch up before the wolf led her away completely.

“Wait!” he cried, and his voice filled Vienna with emotion. To hear another human’s voice again was something magical in itself. His voice felt like sunlight and smelt of honey. “Please! Please, wait!”

Hero stood between them as the young man caught up. He was walking in the water, too close for Vienna’s comfort. She really wished her wolf had run with her, and yet a piece of her soul was thankful to him, as always. She couldn’t stop staring at the young man with his sandy brown hair. His green eyes seemed to breathe into her, and she inhaled those breaths as though she’d never inhaled before.

“Can you speak?” he asked and Vienna felt sunlight on her skin again. She smelt honey. It was as if she were holding a jar right in front of her nose, plunging her hand into it, and watching the honey drip off her fingers. “Can you speak?” he asked again.

She said nothing, deciding that she must really look like a creature, a forest child, if he was wondering if she knew how to speak.

Hero growled at him, warning him to keep his distance.

“Thank you, Hero,” she said on reflex.

“So you can speak,” said the boy. There was something peculiar about him. There was something drawing and alluring, attracting her to him all the more.

“Not to you,” she snapped, causing him to feel the alpha that Seamus had once noted in her voice. “Hero, let us run,” she begged him.

“No, please,” the young man begged as well. “Please don’t run. I..”

But stride for stride, the wolf and the wolf girl ran. Hero bounded, and Vienna bounded after him. They ran along the river’s edge, leaving the young man and his natural sunlight and honey behind.

“Thank you, Hero,” she repeated continually. “Thank you. Thank you!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Boy Bloom

Together, they entered the village with Hero showing her the way. He led her to a clothesline on which someone with a daughter had hung up simple peasant gowns to dry. At this point, anything would do. While Hero turned away, Vienna put on the tan-colored dress, thrilled to be wearing something *clean*. She basked in the remembrance of cleanliness, not caring that the gown was still a little damp.

She left her clothing there.

They were expensive pajamas. All they needed was a wash.

Her hair elastic was long broken. So she snatched a few strips of yellow ribbon from someone else's clothesline and tied up her hair. She was thrilled to finally be able to keep the wretched mess out of her face.

"What?" she asked as Hero's judging eyes questioned her. She tied the other ribbon around her waist, fastening a delicate bow at her right hip. "You started it. If I become a master thief, it's all your fault."

The wolf yawned, showing his indifference.

Around town, in shops and houses, there were pictures of her father, and she looked at his smiling face and his elaborate embroidered clothing with longing. So far, she couldn't tell whether anyone owned a television. She wanted to know if anyone was looking for her, spreading the word through mass media.

Fall decorations were still out. This community was as festive as that of the last town she had been in. She was eyeing the purple and black bows on the mailboxes, the leafless trees, the pumpkins, and the haunting decorations in the windows when a police officer walked up to her.

"There are leash laws in this town, missy. If you don't want that animal caged, you had better put him on a leash."

Vienna studied the officer. If she told him she was the princess of Highest Guard, would he believe her? To be honest, she wasn't sure they were in Highest Guard anymore, or if the people here knew where it was. "Oh, yes," she said, deciding to keep quiet. "Yes, sir."

For the present, the officer let them pass.

Vienna looked at Hero. He looked at her. They both understood that there was no way he was going to wear a collar.

The dirt road they wanted to cross was in need of a steady rainfall. The dust flew up as their feet hit its surface and dragged along it. Hero was leading her into a tavern.

"Hero, we can't go in there. You don't have a leash and I don't have any money."

He didn't care. He was going in.

People rode their horses by them or tied their beasts to posts so that they could enter the shops, houses, or tavern. All the while, they eyed Vienna and her wolf. That didn't trouble her much. Typically, she would be talking to herself, yelling at men whom no one else could see. But now that she thought about it, she hadn't come across a single ghost.

They walked into the dimly lit tavern. The drinking, laughing, and eating all came to a halt as the wolf pushed through the door.

“Hey,” the barkeep barked, his voice rough, “no animals! Keep your mutt outside, or out with the both of ye!”

But then he looked into Hero’s eyes and saw them change color, and he suddenly fell silent. He took a step back, as if to steady himself, and then said very kindly, “Welcome to Frank’s Tavern. That’s the name of the guy I shot to claim this bar. It was murder, yes, but no one knows. I’d appreciate it if you kept that quiet. Follow me to your table.”

“Hero, I don’t know if this is such a good idea,” Vienna whispered, but Hero followed the barkeep to a table.

The barkeep pulled Vienna’s chair out for her and came back with menus. “Do you need a moment to look over the menu?”

“Um . . .” Vienna noticed that everyone in the room was staring at her, and Hero sat down beside her feet. “Yes, please, thank you.”

“No, thank you!” the barkeep said happily, somehow a changed man. He hadn’t seemed like the cheerful type when they’d walked in.

Vienna opened the menu. “Hero, I’m thinking you’re a steak with a side of steak kind of guy.” He watched her closely, both of his eyes turning gold like they always did when she was on to something. “Steak with a side of steak it is.”

Giggling, she glanced up from the menu as someone walked into the tavern. It was the young man with the honey-flavored voice.

“Shit!” she whispered. Hero’s eyes changed again as Vienna hid behind the menu. She peeked over it.

“Afternoon, Sam,” the young man greeted the barkeep.

“Welcome!” Sam was joyful to have another customer. “Please be seated! Our special today is lamb pie!”

The young man stared in horror, and then decided on mockery. “You all right there, Sam? I was expecting a ‘You again, huh?’ or an ‘If you want to eat in my tavern you’d better pay first’ ordeal.”

Sam’s smile never faltered. He tilted his head as if he had no idea what the man was talking about.

“Okay, yeah, Sam. I’ll seat myself.” The fly fisher nodded. “Don’t come near me. You’ve obviously caught the Black Death and it’s messing with your mind.”

He chose a table in front of Vienna. Settling down, he removed the straw hat he was wearing and placed it on the table. Sam brought him a whiskey and a coffee, and the young man took the shot before taking the coffee goblet in his hands and glanced around the room.

He looked at Vienna, who was peeking over her menu. She quickly hid, but then realized that the wolf at her feet was clearly visible. The wolf had his eyes on the fly fisher as well. He watched him inquisitively.

“May I sit down?” the young man asked.

Vienna really didn’t want him to. But if anyone found out that she was a princess, and if her father found out that she’d refused to sit with a respectable civilian, she’d be hanged.

“I don’t want you to.”

He sat down. “You know,” he whispered intently, and she felt consumed with his eyes and his voice and that wonderful smell of honey. It had to be his cologne. “I thought I’d be telling stories about you for the rest of my life,” he continued. “Telling everyone how I saw this enchanting girl with a wolf walking through the trees. I thought I was going crazy.”

“Maybe you’re imagining things now.”

Bloom reached over and lightly touched her hand. He swallowed nervously, but so did she. “You’re real.”

Sam stood in front of them, his giant smile interrupting. “Ready to order? Bloom, how’s the coffee?”

The young man choked. “What did you say?”

“Five steaks please.” Vienna handed back the menus.

“Bloom?” Sam asked, taking the menus.

“I’ll . . . It would be really cool to say, ‘I’ll have what she’s having.’” He chuckled tensely. “But I’ll just have the coffee.”

Sam left, and Vienna decided that she might as well get something out of this awkward seating arrangement. “Are we in Highest Guard?”

Bloom choked on his coffee. He set the goblet down and wiped his shirt with a napkin. “No, Highest Guard is an entirely different country. Why?”

“Then where are we?”

“We’re in White Minstrel.”

“You’re telling me we’re in the country Highest Guard has warred with the most?” Now she was relieved she hadn’t confided in that officer. “That’s just great.”

“Is it? There are only four countries on this planet, and I’m not sure White Minstrel is everyone’s first choice.” Bloom paused, looking confused, but willing to aid her. “Are you needing to get to Highest Guard?”

Vienna tried to steady herself. That witch really was something else. Vienna would have taken Blood Port over White Minstrel, but at least, at the very least, she now knew where she was. She put her hand on Hero’s head. She didn’t know what would have happened if Hero hadn’t found her. That witch had really meant to kill her.

“Are you in trouble?” Bloom whispered. He leaned across the table, then reclaimed his seat when Sam came back with her order. Sam set five plates down on the table. Five tender steaks smothered in gravy. Each one was sided with mashed potatoes, a wide array of vegetables, and two biscuits.

Vienna kept one plate and put the other four down for Hero. It didn’t take long before the two of them were snarling over who was entitled to her last biscuit.

“What’s your name?” Bloom changed his question.

She wondered whether she should lie, but decided against it. “Vienna.”

“Are you in trouble, Vienna?”

“I don’t see what business that is of yours.”

He watched his hands, silenced by the authority in her tone. “I guess it’s not, but I guess it is. If you need help . . .” He braved it. He stole her gaze, keeping it for himself for a few undying seconds. “I could help you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Do you think gentlemen only live in Highest Guard? White Minstrel’s got them too.”

Vienna blushed.

So did Bloom.

“If you helped me . . .” Vienna began, noticing Hero’s gold eyes. “How would you help me?”

The bar had thinned. Lunch hour was over, but Bloom and Vienna remained. Hero sat on Vienna’s feet, leaning into her. Surprisingly, the wooden chairs weren’t as uncomfortable as they had first seemed. Bloom set his clasped hands on the table, which was stained by the dim light of the tavern. It seemed to Vienna that Bloom would be better suited to a golden field with the sun at its highest point in the sky, blazing down on him. She could imagine him opening his arms wide to welcome the radiance, and then, as that sweet smell maintained its hold on her, she imagined running into his open arms.

“I’d –”

Vienna jumped to her feet, but Hero was already ahead of her. She couldn’t stay here any longer. This boy was trouble. “I’ve got to go!”

“Wait –” He reached out and a part of her wanted to reach out to him. But the stronger part of her was already out the door, running to catch up with Hero.

The officer watched in shock.

“Don’t stop!” she ordered, although Hero wasn’t planning to. “Don’t stop running, Hero!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Way to Highest Guard

When they were back at the river, they stopped. She felt like an idiot for running away because she *needed* him. Bloom had agreed to help her, and she needed to get to Highest Guard. She needed to find Augustus, and she needed to get her life back. But she couldn't help but wonder – she couldn't help but notice – that she hadn't seen one ghost in that village, not one.

Hero watched her with two gold-colored eyes.

Bloom's green gems took over Vienna's mind and she cursed. "What was with that guy?"

Hero didn't say anything. He just sat there, staring at her like always.

Kicking the grass, Vienna swung herself around a few dozen trees, trying to understand how she had gotten to this point in her life. She couldn't tell anyone here that she was Princess Vienna of Highest Guard. Her life would surely be in danger. Just as it had been endangered in the forest. Hero had found her then. Bloom had found her now.

Vienna felt like she was missing something that was right in front of her face, and she needed glasses to see it. Feeling far too stressed to function, she clasped her head in her arms. Then she did the only thing she could do, the only thing that was left to do.

She threw herself into the river.

It wasn't deep where she jumped in, and she stretched her arms and legs out. Letting the water bear her weight, she watched the sky and felt as if she were flying up above the trees, like an angel.

Hero sat at the water's edge, watching her as his eyes changed color furiously.

Vienna smiled at him. Warmth filled her, and she soaked up his presence. Then she turned away, gazed into the trees, and thought of the first time she'd met Vincent.

There was a fishing pole against one of the trees, and two baskets had been left there with a blanket over them.

Oh god . . . Bloom only stopped for lunch . . . Bloom was coming back here!

Vienna tried to hurry. The water seemed to be dragging her down instead of giving her wings, and she found herself at the bottom of the river. She pushed herself up, trying to run, but she slipped and fell to the bottom again. Her mouth was full of water, and she was choking, taking more river water into her mouth.

Am I going to drown?

She pushed herself up, and her mind fought to find something solid. She counted to three, trying to sew her thoughts back together long enough for her to take charge of her actions. She hoisted herself up and found firm footing in the river.

Spitting out water, she raised her head, and there was Bloom. He was so close that, if she just leaned forward, she'd be pressed against him. He was drenched, and his green eyes were frightened, blinded by his fear. His sandy brown hair was hugging his head and the water was dripping down his face. He blinked it away as it fell into his eyes.

Bloom grabbed Vienna by the shoulders. "Are you out of your mind? I thought you were drowning!"

"Unhand me!" She was released and then slapped him as hard as she could. She turned and began running away, but it was dreadfully hard to run in water, and she wasn't going very fast.

He was right beside her. He was hardly finished talking yet. “Why would you go swimming if you can’t swim? What are you doing here anyway? Who are you? I want to know.” He took her arm, spinning her around to face him. “Why do you keep running from me?”

That honey smell was at its height, pouring out with his fear. Vienna wanted to cry. He was so concerned, but he didn’t even know her. It also kind of pissed her off. “You said you’d help me!”

Baffled, he let her go. “I want to help you!”

“I need to get to Highest Guard!” she yelled at him.

“Fine!” he yelled back. “I’ll take you. Don’t worry about it!”

“Thank you!”

“You’re welcome!”

They stopped yelling and stared at each other, both breathing heavily, both red in the face from their passionate encounter. Bloom slammed his fists into the water, his chest rising and falling, and then he started laughing. His laugh made Vienna laugh.

Hero had watched all of this without moving.

“Do you wear cologne?” Vienna asked after taking large, obvious breaths.

“No.” Bloom shied away. “I can’t afford it. Why?”

“So you smell like that naturally?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Smell like what?”

Vienna blushed. She couldn’t tell him. “Nothing.” She started to run again.

Bloom caught her by the hand, drawing her back. “No, no, no, no,” he sang, smiling too playfully, his voice too effective. “You’ve got to tell me. Do I smell like cheese?”

Vienna giggled. “No!”

“Do I smell like old cheese?”

“No!” Vienna twirled as he twirled her in the water, as if music had started to play and that was the beginning of the dance. She stripped her hand away, feeling his fingers brush against her wrist, and her entire body tingled in response. Stepping back, she couldn’t hold back the little sigh that escaped from her lips.

Bloom stopped, watching her, and when nothing happened, he asked seriously, “Do I smell like fish?”

Vienna filled her cupped hands with water and sprayed him. “No!”

“Do I smell good?”

Giggling, Vienna set her hands on Bloom’s chest and pushed him so that he fell backward.

She was already rushing away, her legs straining against the water’s force when he hit the water.

“No!” she sang, turning back once she reached Hero, watching as Bloom shook the water off.

All the while, Hero was watching.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Princess of Highest Guard

Five days went by before Bloom got passes for them to leave the country. He even got one for Hero. Vienna asked the wolf if he was sure he wanted to go with her, but he said nothing. His irises remained that clear gold color.

Bloom lived alone in a log cabin in the woods. She had wondered if she'd adapt well to the change, but she found the log cabin to be wonderfully cozy. It wasn't because she'd spent the recent days sleeping on the forest floor. It was because of the homemade quilts and the stew waiting in the evening and the bacon and baked eggs in the mornings. It was because the bath was large enough to accommodate three of her, much like the bath she had at home. It was because they would all sit together in the evenings, the fire going, while Bloom read books out loud. And it was because she was starting to recognize that honey smell, almost as if it were her own.

She was waiting in the little country kitchen for Bloom to come home, and she heard his footsteps on the woodland path before she saw him. She wanted to meet him with giggles and smiles. She wanted to jump up and down like a little schoolgirl with a crush, but, instead, she pretended not to notice him entering the room.

"I picked up the three travel-passes," he told her, putting his good hat on its hanger before handing the papers to her.

Bloom's description was very accurate. "It says Hero is a state official," Vienna said, continuing to read through the papers. But she found as much pleasure in Hero's new bow tie as Bloom did when he bought it. She flipped the page, reading on to find out who her own travel-pass claimed her to be. "I'm a boy?"

Bloom set a box in front of her, and Vienna freed the red ribbon and removed the lid. There was a bowler hat inside. There were also trousers, suspenders, and a button up shirt.

"Apparently, the only 'Vienna' in White Minstrel is a twelve-year-old boy . . ." Bloom explained. White Minstrel had lists of all the people living there. If you weren't on the list, you weren't getting a travel-pass. Bloom had to find the 'Heros' and 'Viennas' who were living in White Minstrel before he could have Hero and Vienna pose as them.

And the only 'Hero' is a state official . . . Vienna thought. *This could be potentially disastrous.*

She wasn't thrilled that she'd have to pretend to be a boy, but anything was better than nothing. "I guess I'll have to grin and bear it."

"Besides, I figured it might be safer." He went to take her hand and then thought better of it. "You still haven't told me why you need to go to Highest Guard or why you keep running. So, I thought that maybe someone out there was looking for a girl like you, someone you didn't want to find you."

"It's quite the opposite, actually," Vienna admitted.

Hero walked into the kitchen and rested his head on the princess's knee.

Clearing his throat, Bloom walked out of the room. When he came back, he was carrying two traveling packs. He handed one to Vienna, who had used the time to change into her new clothing in the washroom.

Vienna judged the heavy looking pack in his hand. "Am I supposed to carry that myself?"

Bloom shook his head at her, like he always did when he thought she was joking but she wasn't. "What are you? A princess?"

Vienna took the leather backpack and swung it on. "Of course not." Trying to remain confident, she took the bow tie off the table and put it around Hero's neck, who wasn't particularly thrilled.

Together, they walked out of the log cabin and began their journey to the station. At first they were quiet, Bloom kicking rocks out of his way, more irritated than usual.

"You don't have to come with me to Highest Guard," Vienna said, deciding Bloom's odd behavior was due to the thought of leaving his home behind. "You can leave me at the station and stay in White Minstrel if you'd like."

"You've got a lover at home, don't you? And you don't want me to know?"

"What's brought this on?"

"Why else would you tell me to stay in White Minstrel?"

Were they all the same? She tried not to think that her dear friend Bloom could be the kind of guy who would bring a diamond to a princess in the hope of winning her hand in marriage. "You misunderstand me completely, not my words, but my character. A lover? Perhaps, if that were permitted and I wasn't so proper."

"A husband then?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Why should I have a husband?"

"To be loved eternally . . ." Bloom was unwilling to look at her while his sentiments on this topic were written so clearly upon his face, exposing what she might consider to be weakness. He looked away.

"Is that all?"

"I think you're braver than me, wanting to walk this world alone."

Why did everyone always say things like this to her? "I'm not alone. I have my father, Vincent, and Seamus, Poem, my horses, and all my books. Hell, I have an entire realm to see to. It's impossible for me to walk alone."

Bloom slid to a stop. "What? What do you mean *realm*?" And then pieces started to string themselves together. "Vienna? *Princess* Vienna of Highest Guard?" He knew it was true. Her manners gave her away.

"Everyone thinks, unless you fall in love, you've failed and that's the end. But I've fallen in love with hundreds of different things, with hundreds of different heroes from a hundred different stories. I just don't want to get married. And that has nothing to do with being alone."

"Falling in love and getting married are two different things."

"*Really?* Well, I'm glad to hear you say that because I wasn't going to be given a choice."

Bloom took a moment to let all this sink in, and then he took another moment before continuing, "So what happened?"

"Some jerk told me I was a pearl and not a diamond." Now that she'd started talking about everything that had happened, she wasn't sure if she could stop.

"Don't you like pearls?"

"I love them. That's all I like to wear."

"So what's the problem?"

"Are you serious?" He lived in a cabin, but he wasn't out of touch with the rest of the world. Even in White Minstrel, they'd know the basics of her predicament. Although, hopefully, that would exclude the part about being cursed. Either way, a "What's the problem?" question deserved an "Are you serious?" response.

“No. I know. You didn’t know him. You probably never even talked to him before.”

Vienna wandered back through her mind. “I did. Once. Maybe twice.”

“If he had any sort of sense, he’d at least have had an entire conversation with you. I’m sure he’s sorry about that.”

“I hope he is!” Vienna’s fists dug into her sides. “I hope he’s as unhappy that he cursed me as I am about being cursed!”

“What?”

And yet she hadn’t seen one ghost in White Minstrel . . . “I refused him, and he cursed me.”

“Sore loser, huh? It’s not something disgusting, is it, the curse?”

“No, you’re perfectly safe.”

“This warlock, I take it . . .”

“Yes?”

“You really hate him, don’t you?”

As the three travelers went on, the last of the falling leaves rained down on them. A few colored leaves remained in her hair and Bloom reached over to pick them off. He had done that: treating her like a princess without knowing she was one. Now that he knew, he wasn’t acting differently.

The sky was greying and rain was sure to be coming. Or maybe snow. She wondered what White Minstrel was like in the winter. She could picture the trees, covered in a layer of snow. Everything would be hidden, like secrets that the snow promised to keep, keeping them until spring.

“I need to find him.” Vienna shifted her pack onto one shoulder.

“What if I were a prince? Would you love me if I gave you a pearl?” Bloom wanted to know.

“Certainly much less!” Vienna laughed.

“What if I were a warlock? Would you love me if I gave you a pearl?” Bloom wanted to know still.

“Certainly not at all!”

“What if I were me, would you love me if I gave you a pearl?”

He was serious, and Vienna found herself quite out of breath. She had taken this for a joke. But now that he’d put the question to her . . . She couldn’t answer, and yet she could not shy away from it either.

It was because she stayed still that he braved what came next. Carefully, he took her hand in his. And because it was his hand, because she had no words, she let him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Soldiers

The road was long and painted with autumn leaves. The odd one turned in the wind, capturing the most glorious of yellows and oranges and reds on this canvas of waking life.

They spent their nights just off the side of the road, surrounded by purple and red flowers that would glisten in the early morning. Bloom had packed blankets, and they used Hero as a pillow. Enjoying the full use of those entitlements now – with Bloom and Hero still in dreamland – Vienna welcomed the new day.

She watched Bloom sleep for a measured amount of time. Any other day she would have remained with Hero while Bloom collected nuts or berries, hunted rabbits, or fished for minnows.

But how wonderful it would be if *he* should wake up to a breakfast that *she* had provided for him!

Against the breath of morning, Vienna set out. Away from the safety of the road, she wondered about the watchfulness of the trees.

Deeper and deeper she ventured, chasing fairies and admiring shimmering seedlings, kissing unsure daisies good morning, and running with the deer of this White Minstrel wood.

At last, she stood below a hazelnut tree. Gathering hazelnuts worth her weight in gold, she thought about how silly she'd been to leave her pack behind. She ripped apart the sleeves of her buttoned shirt, stuffed and then tied them; turning them into handy pouches.

Of course, that's when she saw the 'Caution' signs and the 'Beware Ogre Territory' warnings. Arrows pinned portraits of ogres wanted for murder and suspicion of murder to the trees.

Vienna had made it this far unnoticed. She was certain she could return safely. She began her journey back to her heroes, picturing their sleeping forms as she went.

That was until a man stood in front of her.

"I know what I'm doing in ogre territory, but what are you doing in ogre territory?" Vienna addressed the stranger. He looked to be a bounty hunter of some kind. Perhaps he was here to slay a few prized ogres. She decided he might be able to help her safely back to her kin, but to her horror he stared, unbelieving.

"You can see *me*?" he asked like so many ghosts before him had asked her.

So there were ghosts in White Minstrel . . .

"No," she said without much thought about it. "No, I can't see you."

"But you're talking to me."

"You'll find you're mistaken. I'll find I'm talking to myself." She was already on her way before she said, "Excuse me," and was visited once more by her immense hatred for the warlock who had cursed her.

"Wait!" the man beseeched her, but Vienna would not wait. She only stopped when the great pounding of hooves thundered in her ears.

She fell to her hands and knees and crawled, her woolly scarf pulling at her neck while its excess dragged along the ground. She crawled until she came to a different road, one that she knew well. She had traveled it before with her father. Their carriage had been pulled by galloping horses, crossing through the highway-transport in Highest Guard and entering

White Minstrel without the guards, horses, or their carriage missing a stride. But that was the highway-transport, and one needed travel-passes to get onto it. Just like Bloom needed to get travel-passes to use the station to enter Highest Guard on foot. Vienna knew that you could turn on to the very road she could see now from White Minstrel's highway-transport. It was the quickest path to the palace, which meant that the lines of men and galloping grey stallions she was seeing now were a royal fleet.

No. She was not rescued. If anything, her life was in greater danger. White Minstrel and Highest Guard only tolerated each other, and if the steward of White Minstrel were presented with the opportunity, he would betray Highest Guard without hesitation.

Vienna tried to creep away, but her ambition failed. A hawk-eyed soldier swung his silver stallion around, sounding the slim trumpet that was slung around his neck. The fleet followed him, sliding their horses to a stop and drawing their swords.

The hawk-eyed soldier pointed his sword at Vienna while the others carefully surveyed their surroundings, ready for ogres or thieves and their fiery arrows.

"Come out, little thief, and you may win my tolerance."

Vienna straightened herself and walked out from her hiding place as she said, "I'm no thief, sir. I'm trying to make my way to the station."

"Then I'll have to ask to see your travel-pass."

Luckily, she had it in her back pocket, unspoiled by her new found life as a vagabond. She unfolded the paper and handed it to him.

The soldier dismounted, his loyal steed following him as he came to inspect her fake travel-pass.

He considered the paper and then considered her. "It says here you're a shoemaker, on your way to Highest Guard. Purpose?"

"Visiting family."

He folded the paper and handed it back to her. "You got enough money to be making it through Highest Guard, son?"

"In fact, I've no money at all."

The kind-hearted soldier let his pity sit for a while. He had sympathy for the lowly, twelve-year-old boy. "Can you sing or dance or read cards, boy?"

"I can sing."

"If you sing us a song, every man here will give you one silver coin. Are you willing?"

Vienna knew that Bloom had very little money. What he had, he was using to get her home.

There were over a hundred men here to sing for, and a hundred silver coins would pay Bloom back and more. Vienna made her decision. "If you find you like my song, then we have an accord."

The soldier chuckled as he mounted his horse. "Then be sure we do. A fortune's on the line."

Bloom was right. There were gentlemen in White Minstrel. The gentle soldier, his hard build and war-marked face, waited for Vienna to begin. Most of his body was hidden beneath steel and armored layers.

The hazelnuts still in hand, Vienna began to sing. She sang about knights slaying dragons and saving maidens. She sang a song about a man's paradise. It was a silly thing, but she'd heard the knights singing it back at the palace. As she sang, she thought of home, until someone interrupted her.

"Vienna!" A man was rushing through the trees. "Vienna!"

Not now, Bloom. She'd found herself thrown into a good thing, and someone else's presence would only bring about questions and suspicions.

But it wasn't Bloom.

"Vienna!" a ghost called her name.

"Vincent!" Her feet moved on their own. The spastic jerk of her abrupt movement sent her boy's hat tumbling off and she flung herself at him. "Vincent!" She embedded herself into his ghostly form, his sturdy chin resting on her head. "How did you find me? How are you here?"

"We figured if she didn't send you to a different planet, you'd be in White Minstrel. Seamus and I hopped the transport out of Highest Guard's station in search of you. We split up. We listened for news, but no one had seen you. Until today. Someone sent in a report that a girl had *seen* him."

"A report?"

"The dead don't live in an uncivilized manner either, you know? We have laws, law enforcers, and a communication office that we're all kind of connected to."

Nope. She wasn't even going to try to figure that one out.

"I came straight away, but Vienna —"

"Vincent, I'm so relieved!"

"Vienna?"

"What could possibly ruin this moment?"

"You're talking to a dead guy, and they can't see me."

She looked into over a hundred stunned faces. "Oh no . . ."

"Run," Vincent whispered.

"Seize her!" the gentleman soldier ordered, and horses took flight, sending ropes to contain her. But he was already there. His hawk-eyes were aflame as his hand hooked onto the back of her shirt and hoisted her up and over the saddle. He turned his horse. Freed from her boy's hat, Vienna's long hair was wild. Her cheeks were rosy from the force of the wind, as he led the fleet, storming into the palace.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Start of Dungeon Days

White Minstrel had gotten part of its name from its white needled evergreens and the white feathered wings of the fairies who nested in them. They would come out during the witching hour to play their flutes. Vienna could see the city as she looked out her dungeon window. The houses and shops gave the impression that they were made out of icing and gingerbread. Baby blue roses were scattered about the gardens that lined every shop. Dozens of skyscrapers circled the palace, as if to make a protective barrier. But, apart from a massive cathedral, the palace was the most artistically Gothic building in the city. ‘Wanted’ ogre posters hung in stores. They were a reminder of the nation’s most pressing threat. And ‘Highest Guard Sucks’ slogans were tolerated on vandalized school property, where they encouraged children to get away with what their elders could not.

From her little dungeon window, bars and all, Vienna could see swings and benches and statues of winged lions and commemoration stones. A statue of the Minstrel (the founder of White Minstrel) was in the town square, and she felt as if the bookshops were pointing and laughing at her because she wanted so much to enter them and was unable to do so. She was alone in the dungeon except for eleven dead men, all of whom wanted a piece of her. Especially Vincent.

“Are you listening to me?” he was saying.

“I prefer imprisonment to be a solitary activity.”

“Princess . . .” he objected as kindly as he could.

“Vincent, you want me to be a therapist for the dead.”

“That’s practically what you are now,” he said, his pen and notepad securely in hand.

This was all his idea, of course.

“But you want to make it official, and, judging by your extraordinarily long appointment list, you *have* made it official!”

“Don’t yell at me. I’m not the one who cursed you,” he reminded her, holding up the appointment book. “I’ve organized the dead. In order to speak to you, they have to make an appointment with me. And yes. We have a waiting list.”

Vienna knew that Vincent was onto something. If he didn’t have them make appointments, she’d be overrun with ghosts again. They’d all try to speak at once, each one convinced that his story was worth her time more than another’s story. Vincent had taken chaos and forced it to work. He had forced it into a system that would let her keep her sanity. She should have been grateful. She knew that.

“I don’t think so, Vincent. I don’t even want to talk to *these guys*,” she said in reference to the ten male ghosts who were listening to their conversation.

“What you mean to say is that you don’t have *time* to talk to them because you have a schedule to keep. We’re already behind. I started taking appointments days ago, hoping I’d found you by then. I’m calling the first gentleman in, and you *are* going to be polite.” He watched her cross her arms and turn up her nose. “Vienna . . . ?”

She knew she had a choice. It was either this way or the old way. Sighing, Vienna said, “Send him in.”

Vincent's lips flicked up encouragingly. However, both of them wondered what they would do without Seamus when someone needed a forceful exit. Regardless, Vincent read the first name on the list. "Carol Seymour."

A man appeared in front of Vienna. He was wearing a full sailor's uniform and comically took in his new surroundings. "What are we doing in White Minstrel?" he asked. "What are we doing in a dungeon?"

"Welcome." Vienna politely gestured to the stool in front of her, and the ghost took a seat. Vincent sat at her side. "You may begin your troubled story, and, no, I'm not ready to talk about mine, so no questions. A dungeon's a dungeon, and this one's as good as any."

"Vienna . . ." Vincent warned. She was a princess, his gaze was telling her, and she should act like one.

She shifted in her seat.

Carol studied his hands before letting them witness the extreme anguish of his trial of love. "This is a story about a boy who fell in love with a girl."

"They all are." Vienna hung her head. She wondered whether anyone would notice if she were to fall asleep.

"And I'm not sorry." Carol lit up. "I'll never be sorry. I didn't know how much one could have in this life until I knew her."

He wasn't crying. It was actually quite shocking.

"Did she hurt you?" Vienna asked.

"No." Carol shook his head. He looked like a man who had marched into battle and won a war. Triumphant and glowing, he said, "She married me. We met when I was eighteen. Two years after she ran away from home. I was a sea captain, and she didn't mind the sea." He basked in the remembrance of her. "She didn't mind at all."

"You're not crying . . ."

"Why would I cry?" Carol asked. "I'm just so happy to tell someone. I didn't waste my life, but I would have wasted it, if I hadn't lived it with her."

"But you're dead . . ."

"So?"

"But she's not with you . . ."

Carol looked out the barred window with longing. "No. But we will be. I know it. She'll fight to get to me, as hard as I'm fighting to get back to her. It's a wide world out there, child. Do you know how hard we had to fight to finally get to know each other when we were alive? I didn't expect death to be any different. It will take some time, but I'll hold her in my arms again." He looked down at himself. "Even if I am a ghost."

"He didn't cry once," she told Vincent although Carol was still in the room. "Seamus will never believe us."

Carol placed his hands on his legs, ready to venture off. "Thank you for listening. You have no idea how many times I've screamed at the living, telling them they're making mistakes, and they don't listen. You have no idea how many times I tell them not to wait, that that's all that matters, but they just walk away. All I wanted to do was tell someone that I'm one man who doesn't know regret."

"Well, thank you for not yelling that at me." Vienna smoothed her lips with her index finger, not quite knowing what to make of this guy. But if she didn't know now, she never would because he disappeared, satisfied.

"My wife had me imprisoned here," the man in the cell across from Vienna's huffed. "I can't *believe* I still love her."

“See.” Vienna pointed to the ratty looking prisoner. “Those are the kinds of stories I’m used to.”

“Ross Owen,” Vincent read from the list.

Just then, the dungeon door opened.

The gentleman soldier with the hawk-eyes walked up to Vienna’s cell door, and Ross Owen turned around, confused as to where he was. The soldier was no longer in his suit of armor. Rather, he carried his helmet under his arm and was dressed in a green tunic, breeches, and black, knee-high riding boots.

“I’ve been sent here to question you,” he began. His features were sharp and bird-like, and his hair was like feathers atop his head. “We need to get a few things squared up before we can start talking about your release.”

Ross Owen sized the soldier up, snorting while holding his beer-gut. “That’s some tactic, isn’t it? Don’t you tell them nothing, honey.”

“Please,” Vincent urged the man. “Have a seat.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” Ross sat on the stool. He was unsuited for the tiny object.

The soldier clicked his front teeth together before continuing. “Let’s start with an easy question. What’s your name?”

Vienna wondered about this knight. She wondered about the man underneath the mask, the man who had been willing to aid a poor boy, offering over a hundred silver coins for a silly song. “Is there such a thing as an easy question?”

“It’s impolite to answer a question with a question. I asked you about your name.”

“What’s yours?”

Ross howled in approval. “That a girl! You keep him on his toes!”

The soldier smiled lightly, placing his helmet on the floor. “I’ll tell you what, little lady. I’ll tell you my name, my title too, if you wish it. But you have to answer my question first.”

Vienna measured his words, knowing she couldn’t give him her real name. He already knew she was trying to get to Highest Guard. He’d soon make the connection that she was much, much more than she’d first made herself out to be.

“V. Just V,” Vienna told him. “A bargain’s a bargain.”

“So it is.” The soldier leaned on the cell bars. “Sir James Spear, Captain of the Royal Fleet and Second Platoon, Champion of White Minstrel.”

“Show off.” Ross puffed out his chest.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain.” Vienna tipped the imaginary hat on her head.

“Where did you get your fake travel-pass?” James asked. He continued to lean against the bars. His hands were moving above his head as they traveled along the iron, and his gaze became ominous, for he was a mass of a man, and she was a dainty beauty.

“I don’t know where,” Vienna replied strongly. She wasn’t intimidated by him. Although, perhaps she should have been. “It was given to me.”

“Who gave it to you?”

Bloom . . . She had to protect him. She couldn’t involve him in this. “I can’t tell you that.”

James’s face took on a strange expression, like a bird of prey anticipating the tasting of the mouse it was diving for. “Recently, a man transported into this country illegally. Are you in any way connected to that?”

“I hardly know. Depends upon the man, I suppose. Who is he?”

“There’s only one sort of man who can jump from place to place without being publicly transported. But to come into a country legally, he has to show his warlock permit.”

Augustus? No way. That was too much of a coincidence, she thought. But, if it was him, then that was *swell*. She'd somehow break out of here and give him a piece of her mind. "I can assure you I am in no way connected to that."

"I believe you," he said seriously.

"Careful, Captain," Vienna teased. "It's easier to believe lies than to believe the truth." She realized then that she was perhaps taking too much liberty, so she confirmed his thoughts, saying, "But I'm not lying."

"I believe you because you have the sort of look of someone running away." His arms came down, gripping the bars, keeping his hands level with his chest. "Why are you trying to get to Highest Guard?"

She had known that very soon he would start asking questions she could not answer. They came sooner than she had expected, and she was forced to say nothing.

"Who's Vincent?" he changed the course of his interrogation.

Vincent coughed in the background.

"You believe there was a man?" Vienna looked away from her interrogator.

"I believe you believed there was a man," James corrected her and Vienna said nothing. "I'm trying to help you, V. But you need to start trying to help yourself." He shoved himself away from the bars, knowing he wasn't going to get much further with her than that, and picked up his helmet. "Don't push my patience, little one. I'm still a soldier. I'll do what it takes to get results."

Vienna turned back to match his stare, folding her hands on her lap. "Are you suggesting you'll torture me for something I may or may not be able to tell you?"

"A little bird like you?" Sir James Spear walked out of the prison, leaving her with menacing last words. "There's no knowing what you might know."

For the first time since her arrival, there was silence in the dungeon. The ghosts who haunted it, some still secured to the walls by chains, didn't know what to say.

Vincent was going to say something encouraging, but Ross spoke first.

"I'm proud of you, honey." Ross set his hands as if he were about to lift a ridiculously large boulder. "You held your own. I didn't want to interfere. You were doing so well yourself."

"I appreciate that," Vienna said, adapting a calm, graceful mien and steadying her adrenalin. "Now that he's gone, I'm here to listen as you tell me about the girl you used to love."

Ross had to correct her. "The girl I love!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Hour

There was little life in the prison, but there was more than anyone knew. Ghosts came and went, and since they were called one at a time, there was no competition among them. Thus far, Seamus's assistance hadn't been required.

Vienna had spent the night sleeping on the worst, most vulgar surface yet. She would have preferred the forest floor and her long ago spider bites to this cold stone. The guards cared for her to the littlest possible extent, and, in the morning, when the city came to life outside her cage, she was brought a goblet of water and one green apple. The forgetful guard left the dungeon door open, and she was able to see the odd person passing by.

Not two hours after sunrise, Seamus appeared outside her prison cell.

"Where have you been?" Vincent demanded.

A harsh-looking Seamus passed through the cell bars. "Iron Hand."

"How did you end up in that country?"

"Don't ask!"

Vienna wanted to hug him and kiss his cheeks. The last time she had seen him they had been in a car accident. Vincent told her that, last he knew, her father had been back at the palace, searching for her, and Seamus had been searching as well. That, in itself, warranted a kiss on his cheek. But due to his apparent bitterness, she wasn't sure how to act, and he seemed to be pretending that they hadn't spent any time apart.

"Vincent filled you in on this sideshow of his?" Seamus decided to lounge at the back of the cell.

"Twenty souls last night." Vincent consulted his notebook. "Five so far this morning."

Seamus narrowed his eyes at them. "You're behind schedule."

Vienna looked out of the open door, which suggested a way out of the prison. Her jail mates had their priorities wrong. She needed to find a way out of here. She couldn't see much, but she tried to soak in all that she might learn from the hall, its red-carpeted walls, and the stories that its gold thread told. She'd been taken through the palace with a hood over her head, so she didn't have much to go on. But it looked like there were stairs at the end of the hall . . .

"Princess Vienna . . ." Vincent warmly attempted to redirect her back to her current situation. "Are you ready to talk to the next ghost?"

But Vienna wasn't paying attention. A group of people had come down the staircase. They were huddled together, speaking much too fast for her to catch pieces of the conversation. They were dressed in elaborate clothing and adorned with colored necklaces. However, there was one man she recognized. His hands were clasped behind his back. His silver hair stood out and his grey eyes were as sharp as his words.

He was an adviser to the King of Highest Guard.

"Just bring in the next bastard," Seamus told Vincent, cracking his knuckles. "I'll deal with him. I'm fired up. Got my ass handed to me for losing the princess. Like I could know a crazed loon was going to go postal, huh?"

Vincent's voice was light as he read the next name on the list.

But Vienna was beyond either of them. "Hour!" she screamed. Her arms thrashed against the bars, trying to make him notice her. She watched him stop and look around, as if someone

had breathed his name on the wind. Fear touched her heart, a light wisp in the heat of things, as James came down the hall behind the bickering advisers. Her arms reached out desperately for him. "Hour!" And this time, he looked right at her. "Hour!"

Startled when Hour set off at a run, the escorts forced themselves against the walls. He hit the solid door to the dungeon with his shoulder. His black traveler's cape followed behind him, and his riding boots thundered against the stone floor. When he saw the monstrous state that his beloved princess was in, his face grew paler and paler.

"Oh my god!" He reached her cell, taking her hands and pressing them to his chest so that she could feel the pounding of his heart.

"Do you know this girl?" James asked, standing behind him. He led a group of guards and the advisers of White Minstrel behind him. Hour, although frantic, was forced to drop Vienna's hands.

"She's –" But Hour knew, as well as Vienna did, how dangerous it would be for them to know that she was the daughter of King Gladness, ruler of all the land. White Minstrel was managed by a steward, but it was ruled by the king of The Four Countries. If they knew they had the king's daughter in their grasp, they'd try to force him to grant them independence. "She's my wife."

Vincent choked.

Seamus laughed.

And the ghost whom Vincent had called, took a seat and asked, "What the hell kind of lives are you *modern* people living? In my day, we didn't have parties in dungeons. That was considered bad taste."

"Your wife?" James seemed to be watching this all from above, soaring in the air over their heads. A slick expression held his lips and his attentive stare.

"Your wife?" Another soldier, in full uniform, asked. He chose to believe him simply so that he could mock him. "Well, we found your wife in the forest going on and on while no one was there."

"Yeah . . . She does that," Hour admitted awkwardly. "But it's hardly cause for imprisonment."

"No," James challenged. He looked as if he held their lives, shrewdly kept, in his hands. "But a fake travel-pass does."

"Oh . . ." Hour paused, observing James and James fervently observed him. "Yes, that would warrant it."

"Let's get out of the dungeon, gentlemen," one of the advisers pleaded. "We do have work that needs your attention, Hour."

Reluctant to leave her, Hour stood. He was unsure of what to do until the princess's mouth formed one word: 'Go.'

"Yes, of course," Hour replied to the advisers of White Minstrel. "Darling," he told Vienna, nervously. "You really get into far too much trouble. You're just that kind of girl, as your father always told me. He and I shall have to see what we can do with this."

"Tell him V loves him!" she cried, warning him not to use her real name.

"Yes, V, of course." Hour caught on. He lingered at the dungeon door, unwilling to leave her in such a place.

James gave her one last glance before closing the prison door. The lock sounded through the lonely prison.

Gripping the prison bars, Vienna slid to the floor.

"Whoa," the ghost, who had been lucky enough to be called to the prison, muttered. "I expect tea at events such as this, but I think this occasion calls for a much stronger substance."

“You’re dead, pal,” Seamus barked at him. “That’s all the substance you got.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Truth

“I’m dead,” Cole, the dead man, said.

“Um . . .” Vienna contemplated the ghost. “Assumedly for quite some time now.”

“You’re not listening to me!” the ghost shouted. “I died. And I went nowhere. I’m still stuck in my same crappy mind, except there’s no perks. I’m perkless!”

“Generally,” Vienna hesitated, “when people come to me, they talk about their love lives.”

“Who the hell wants to talk about that? That was the only good part. If you’re going to complain to the living, at least make it worth everyone’s time. I’m dead. I died! I don’t know how I feel about that. I’m not sure I should be expected to accept this.”

“You’re having a problem with death?”

“Doesn’t everyone? I had a problem with it when I was living,” the dead man went on, looking around the room. He began talking to ghosts Vienna couldn’t see. “Do you not have a problem with it?” he asked them. “And you?” His anger increased, and he promised Vienna: “I’ve got years of bottled rage; prepare yourself.”

“Sir, I’m going to stop you right there. You said you’re not sure how you should feel about death. Is it because you feel alone? Have you not found your, um, earthly partner in the, um, world of ghosts . . . ?”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I haven’t. But that’s really kind of understandable. I had to chase her all over the place when we were alive. It’s only right I should have to do the same thing when we’re dead – now that we’re dead.”

“And, um, how does that make you feel?” Vienna encouraged him to stay on topic. “Are you going to cry about it?”

“Are you mocking me?”

“It wasn’t my intention.” She supposed she should stop asking that question. It was just that they all seemed to start and finish with tears.

He seemed to have also bewildered Vincent and Seamus.

“I think your anger is rooted in the real problem. Why is your death so unsatisfying to you? Surely you couldn’t have had any expectations: like dying should automatically suggest that god grant you a cool car. Was your life really so unsatisfying that you have become so unhappy in death?”

“No.” He took a moment to decide. “I mean, sure, I wish we had settled down like she originally wanted. It was me who kept the band going, and that was the reason for the fights and the drugs. We couldn’t bring kids into that, and it wasn’t cool to want a white picket fence. *Now* I wonder *why* she stayed with me. I guess, yeah, I wonder if that’s the reason I can’t find her out here. Because she doesn’t want me to find her.”

“I think you need to come to terms with yourself before you can come to terms with your death.” Vienna carefully proceeded, hoping that everything she was saying was making sense. “I can see you because you loved so eternally. I don’t know if that means it was the same for her, but if it makes any difference, I haven’t yet come across one man that’s found his soul mate in death.”

“Really? I wonder what that’s all about . . .”

She leaned back, startled.

James was there, sitting on a stool in front of her prison cell. He was listening to her as she had a conversation with herself. Her legs were crossed, and she promptly set both feet on the floor, clamping them together. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. She folded her hands on her lap, fighting to regain composure.

“Don’t stop on my account.” James tilted his body to the right, his head moving up and down. “It’s absolutely fascinating.”

“Holy shit!” Cole exclaimed. “When the hell did he come in?”

“Vincent, why didn’t you say something?” Seamus was furious.

“I didn’t notice him,” Vincent defended himself. “I was too mesmerized. Vienna was really making an impression.”

“You really are a curious creature. Does your *husband* support your profession, being a counselor for the dead?” When Vienna said nothing, he tapped the side of his nose, signifying that he already knew she was lying. “It does interest me, seeing how loyal a king’s adviser can be. I ran your picture and your prints against White Minstrel’s travel database and came across nothing, which means we have a second illegal immigrant. How did you get into White Minstrel?” Vienna said nothing, which only encouraged him. “If I send your picture to Highest Guard’s database, what am I going to find?” He leaned forward, his hand rubbing his chin, excited for the challenge. “Who are you?”

This was very bad. If he found out who she was, he would tell the steward, and the steward would hold her for ransom. Yes, this soldier was an interrogator, and he was assuming that she was some kind of terrorist, but there was also more to him. She had seen it on that day when he had caught her eye on the roadside. He was a knight. His heart was noble and true, and perhaps if he knew she was royalty, the good knight would show her mercy.

She had to make a decision now. But if she was unable to convince him to keep her identity a secret, she would have to escape from this prison tonight, at all costs.

“You were kind to me,” she reminded him, hoping that he would consider kindness once again, “that day you found me in the woods.”

She watched as he replayed the memory in his mind. It was evident on his face, and she could almost hear the song she had sung for him. But as soon as the value of that moment played out, her betrayal, which he considered very grave, grew fangs at the end of his stare and sank into her. “You lied to me,” he said. “I’m not a fan of liars.”

“I didn’t lie about everything.” Gripping her hands tightly in her lap, she made her decision. She prayed for his mercy before she admitted, “My name is Vienna and I am trying to get home, back to my family.”

James leaned back, scratching the side of his face before crossing his arms. “By all means, continue.”

“I was driving with my father, and we almost hit a witch who was standing with her cat in the middle of the road. She banished me here. Since then, I’ve been attacked by a bear, have been imprisoned, and now I am being interrogated by you.”

“Why would a witch banish you to White Minstrel?”

“Because it’s the one place – regardless of where I go or who I meet – where my life is in danger.”

“And why is that?”

“You mean you haven’t connected the dots? It comes to as a relief, actually, that rumors of my failing sanity have yet to reach White Minstrel. I’m not crazy, by the way. Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist for someone else, especially if that someone else doesn’t particularly want it to exist for them.” She watched him for a moment as he

considered her. “Yes, there is a man named Vincent in here. And yes, I was talking to a ghost just now.”

“But not Vincent,” Vincent corrected.

“Right,” Vienna agreed. “But not Vincent.”

James raised his eyebrows, shifting in his seat.

“Think about it, James. Why would someone so close to the king care about me? It’s because it’s expected of him. If he didn’t, he’d surely be imprisoned for treason. Do you not hear the authority in my voice from my upbringing? My name is Vienna of Highest Guard.”

The soldier paled as the truth sank in.

“You’re a knight, sworn to protect royalty and you take your position most sincerely. My life is in danger, sir. You can’t let anyone know what I’ve told you. Will you help me?”

“Princess . . .” His voice took a different tone, that of a true knight.

“James . . . Please . . .”

“I will protect you.”

“You can’t tell the steward.”

“He can help.”

“No, and you know that. I know I’ve put you in a terrible situation. If you help me, you’ll feel as though you’re betraying White Minstrel, and if you fulfill your duty to White Minstrel, you’ll be betraying me. But you didn’t leave me with a choice.”

“You misjudge the steward. He’ll be loyal to the king.”

“Not everyone is as noble as you are! Please, James!”

He rose to his feet. “I’ll have to form a plan. I . . . I don’t know what I’m going to do yet. But please be at ease; whatever I choose, I’ll choose it because I believe it is best for you, to protect you and your royal title.” He left the prison.

Vienna’s heart fell. “He’s going to tell the steward.”

Cole got to his feet. “What do we do?”

Seamus pointed to him. “You aren’t going to do anything. Bye, Bye.”

“Wait –” He started to fade away. “I can help!”

“Vienna . . . ?” Vincent awaited orders.

But she hardly knew what to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Steward

A day past and no one came for her. No one threatened to drag her out of the dungeon by her hair or offered to send her back to her father in pieces if she didn't consent to the will of malcontents. It seemed that James was true to his word. He was taking time to think things over, giving the three jailbirds the opportunity to converse and bicker about their best course of action. However, not one of them formed an acceptable plan of escape.

And then, at ten minutes past midnight, while our princess dreamed of flying out the window and listened to the ghost of a sniper speak about a girl from the Bronx, the steward did come. The jolt of the lock and the forceful swing of the door sent all the ghosts to their feet. But Vienna continued to watch the city sleep, ashamed that she was still here, that she hadn't yet won her salvation.

Two guards stood beside the lanky man as he leered at our princess, trying to imagine her through the misery. He attempted to imagine her with flowing lace and styled hair. "Yes," he finally declared. "It is you, isn't it, Princess Vienna?" When she said nothing, he gestured to the door. "Leave us," he commanded the guards.

"Who's this punk?" the sniper asked, pausing his story, but Vienna didn't look up.

"I can't imagine why you'd keep yourself hidden and locked away when we are all the most *loyal* of subjects," the steward began, his long legs gliding him closer to her cage.

"You weren't kidding," Seamus agreed. "He is a punk."

"We'll treat you fairly, of course." He smoothed his fingers over his antenna-like eyebrows, peering at her with his bug-like eyes. It was as if he had many eyes to see her with. "There's no reason why you should remain in the dungeon. I'm going to have you moved to my private chambers, for your own safety of course."

Vincent walked to the bars and stood before the steward, ready to throw the first punch.

"You're dead, remember?" Seamus informed him.

"Just what is *he* implying?" Vincent asked, outraged.

"I think you'll be happy in White Minstrel," the steward told her, believing they were completely alone.

Vienna had to hand it to him. This wasn't what she had expected. It seemed his ambition was far greater than she had anticipated. "Forget about taking the throne through me." Vienna shifted her sights onto the menacing villain before her. "I will not marry you."

"But who will have you?" The steward ran his hand over the bars, flirtatiously. "Once you have been defiled by me? Who will have you if it should be that you conceive my child? Wouldn't your father be overjoyed if I should write him a letter saying you've found happiness in White Minstrel?"

"He'll never believe it," Vienna warned him.

"I wish I had my gun!" the sniper raged through clenched teeth.

"Even if I have a magic-man forge your handwriting?" He waited to see if Vienna would flinch. She didn't, and he pressed on. "You should rejoice, *princess*. I have every intention of being most gracious." He turned to the prison door. "Guards!"

Seamus and the sniper jumped to their feet, standing with Vincent, their fists at the ready. Vienna gripped the bars on her window desperately, and, in her desperation, something caught

her attention. In the darkness, a figure stood, looking up at the palace. His fearless green eyes had the intensity of knives. At first, Vienna thought he was somebody else. But when he took a step forward, and the night released his lovely form, her heart wanted to soar out of her chest.

It was Bloom.

The guards threw open her cell door. Her three friends fought bravely, attacking the intruders with everything they had, and if they had been human, they would have been the heroes of her heart.

But the guards moved forward, trying to get Vienna to walk on her own. When her shaky voice cried out a name, they swatted her hands, wrenching her from the window's bars.

"Bloom!" she screamed before a guard threw her over his shoulder and carried her out of the dungeon.

They locked the door behind them.

"Unhand me at once, swine. I'm perfectly capable of walking without the assistance of an invalid!" She let her voice rage with all her fury. The steward confirmed her order, telling the guard to set her on her feet. Vienna brushed herself off and glared at them all as her three ghost friends circled her, trying to create a shield.

"By all means, princess." The steward bid them forward, insisting that they proceed. "In fact, it would be fortunate for you to be willing on all accounts."

They led her through the palace, making their way to the top floor and to the steward's chambers. Suits of armor and dashing paintings and portraits lined the walls. There were tables with flowers and trinkets, placed along the black-carpeted floor. The walls were adorned with expensive carpeted designs: strings of gold and red thread depicting stories of dragons, kings, queens and destruction. It was all very Gothic and cold. There were statues of demon-faced creatures and winged monsters, followed by memorabilia of the Minstrel, dancing a wicked, black-spelled dance while playing his fiddle.

It occurred to her that she was very selfish. She couldn't expect Bloom to come rushing in here to save her. He was a lowly fisherman and would be against dozens and dozens of professional soldiers. It wouldn't do anyone any good if he died today because she'd been too much of a princess to save herself. She wasn't planning on waiting for anyone. She'd take the first opportunity that presented itself, even if that meant jumping out of a window.

The guards led her into the middle of a well-furnished and well-designed room. The Victorian style was something she was accustomed to. The steward walked to his bedside table, where he removed his leather gloves. "Leave us," he insisted, and then locked the door.

Vienna ran to the window, flung it open and then paused. It was a ludicrously long way down. The fall would surely kill her. Was this really a choice between life and death?

The steward chuckled and clapped his hands while Vienna stuck her head out the window, trying to see if she could climb down. He walked toward her, handing her a white dress with a clutter of blue roses embroidered down the side. "Why don't you go into the bath and then put this on?" he offered, and Vienna crawled back into the room away from the window. She pushed her hair behind her ears. She was wondering whether there was a window in the bathroom, or a trap door in here somewhere. All crooked men had trapdoors, didn't they?

She took the dress and shut the door to the bath, locking it from the inside. Vincent and Seamus had followed her, along with their sniper friend.

"What do we do?" Vincent whispered, although there was no risk of anyone overhearing him.

Vienna shook her head, trying to come up with something – anything.

"What are you still doing here?" Seamus asked the sniper.

“What do you mean?” He was outraged at the thought. “I want to help!”

“Everyone wants to *help*.” Seamus growled. “If Vincent and I are forced to be useless, then we’ll be useless without your help. Goodbye.” And, cursing, the sniper faded away at Seamus’s order. He turned to Vienna. “Anyone thought up anything yet?”

“You’ve got quite a lot of authority over the dead, don’t you?” Vienna whispered. She was impressed that whenever he told someone to get lost, they did.

“He should,” Vincent mumbled. “He’s an officer.”

“You were an officer?”

“No,” Seamus corrected her. “I was a nobleman. Now I’m an officer.”

“You became an officer after you died?”

“Yeah.”

She wasn’t even going to try to figure that one out. Besides, she had much more pressing concerns at present.

The bathroom was elegant and welcoming despite belonging to a villain. Someone had already drawn her a bath and it was still steaming. Sighing, she said, “I’m going to bathe, change into that dress, and –”

Seamus was shaking his head, his face reddening with fury. “You’re not going to –”

“No, I most certainly am not going to do anything of *that* sort.” Vienna looked down at her hands, wondering if Bloom was really here somewhere or if her desire to see him again had caused her to imagine him. “But my bathing will buy us some time, and one of you had better find the answer before I’m finished. Now go out there and keep an eye on him. I’m going to get undressed now and your eyes are unworthy to witness me in such a state.”

Vincent lingered, before asking gently, “What if the worst happens?”

Vienna suppressed her fear and looked into the mirror on the wall. There wasn’t a window, just a mirror. Her reflection was that of a girl she’d never seen before. “Then your eyes will be unfit to see me in such a state, and I’d appreciate it if you made yourself scarce.” She turned her back on them, waited five seconds, and then turned around.

They were gone.

Only then did she begin to cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Fight

The water was hot, and it made her frail body turn pink. Her long hair folded over her naked body as she sank to the bottom. She tried to decide what options she had left. Ultimately, she realized that she had to ready herself for the worst. She was not planning on losing without a fight, and she remembered seeing a letter opener on one of the tables near the bed. If she could get to it without being caught, she might be able to wound the steward and make an attempt to flee from the palace.

Maybe Bloom was outside, waiting for her . . .

And, unless Vincent and Seamus had come up with something better, that was all she had. Leaving a blackened pool behind her, she dried herself off and slid into the dress he had picked out for her. It fit perfectly. With her wet hair loose behind her back, she stood in front of the mirror, trying to encourage herself. She looked like a princess again.

She turned her nose up and placed one hand on the doorknob and one on the lock. Her heart was hammering against her chest, fluttering furiously. She promised herself that, no matter what happened tonight, she wouldn't cry.

Abruptly, she let herself back into the serpent's den.

The steward sat on a gold-colored chair with his legs crossed and watched her close the bathroom door behind her. His navy-blue hair was short and fell into his eyes as he stood. He began to stride toward her.

"Vienna," Vincent and Seamus said simultaneously.

The princess shook her head. There was nothing they could do. "Just leave," she commanded, and the two ghosts stared at each other, broken-hearted because they knew they were powerless.

"I'm afraid that's impossible while you stand, a vision, in that dress," the steward commented. He assumed that she was talking to him.

Vienna didn't turn her back on him as she slowly made her way to the bed and the table. Her hands searched for the letter opener and found it. She held it at the ready in front of her.

The steward smiled and held back his laughter. "There's no need for that." He came closer, so close that she could see his darkening soul. He was like a devil with his sinful expression, and Vienna fought the desire to hide herself with her hands.

It seemed like he watched her for an eternity before he launched himself forward. He was too close for her to stab him in the chest, but she raised her arm, preparing to send the knife into his back. He caught her hand, and then threw her onto the bed.

Vienna fought and kicked and struggled while he held her arms above her head. The knife fell to the floor. But he couldn't contain her, and she tried to crawl away. He dug his claws into her ankles and dragged her back to him. She kicked him in the face and he tumbled off the bed.

She threw herself at the knife.

The steward cursed and got to his feet.

And that's when something started growling.

Moving through the closed door, a massive, sandy brown wolf crept into the room, his eyes a horrifying gold. His teeth were set in a murderous response, and he snarled at the steward.

Vienna took a step back and watched as the creature bared its fangs at her, snarling, to force her behind him. He slinked toward the steward, ready to kill him.

“You . . .” the steward whispered, watching the wolf in absolute terror.

“Thank god,” Seamus whispered, watching the wolf in absolute relief. But the wolf unleashed a series of barks at Seamus and Vincent. He barked so wildly – like a rabid animal – that Vienna screamed and Seamus and Vincent were blasted away. And then the wolf leapt at the man. Blood already filled the wolf’s set stare.

“Stop!” Vienna screamed, and the wolf paused, pinning the man underneath him. His teeth were at the man’s eyes, promising death.

“He’ll be punished,” she told the wolf. “I promise you. I swear it. But I’ve met a hundred different souls, all filled with regret, and, if you kill him, surely you’ll never be able to let it go. Come here, Hero, let’s just run. Please,” she begged her wolf, “let us run.”

The wolf’s growls rippled through his throat in one final warning before he jumped away from the man and landed at Vienna’s side.

They turned their backs and started for the door.

The steward launched himself at them, but the wolf turned. His eyes were solid green emeralds as he stared at the coward of a man, and the steward fell to the floor with a gay smile on his face. After a moment, he got to his feet and declared: “You know, I think I’m going to give up politics and open a bakeshop.” His joyous smile never left his face. “I do so love cookies! Don’t you?” And he skipped out the door, humming to himself about his epic love for cookies. The steward turned down the hall while Hero cocked his head to the side, admiring his new found ambition.

Vienna looked down at Hero, but the wolf just yawned and walked through the hall. She rested her hand on his back, walking past shocked guards and whispering officials. In bewilderment, they asked each other whether pets were allowed within the palace walls.

Hero led her out of the palace and, stride for stride, they took off at a run. Vienna held her dress up at first, but then let it fall. Her thin legs wished for the freedom of her old trousers. The air was cold. It was cold enough for snow to start falling at any moment. Hero howled as he ran, and a hand grasped Vienna’s as she dashed after him. Running beside her, he matched her stride for stride.

Bloom led her forward, following Hero back into the wild and the falling snow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Beginning of What Would End

In the early morning, triumphant and free, Vienna tumbled to the forest floor. Hero leaped around her, barking joyfully. But Bloom was furious and took hold of her shoulders.

“Are you insane?” he shouted, his voice booming against the silent trees. “I woke up, and you were gone! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve been searching for you?”

“Unhand me this instant!” she demanded and slapped his hands away before slapping him in the face. Their breath was visible on the winter air. “I wanted to bring you breakfast!”

“Breakfast?”

“Yes!” she screamed back at him.

“I told you I would take care of all that!”

“I wanted to do something nice for *you!*” she bellowed.

“Whenever you get a thought like that, think again!”

“You came for me!”

“Of course I did!”

“Thank you!”

“You’re welcome!”

They sat, panting. Their faces were red from their passionate argument. His fear for her was evident in his features, and the heavy scent of honey that she’d come to expect whenever he spoke washed over her. As she gulped the air, she took in his shouted words. He was so close to her, and her heart was fluttering. She was relieved and excited to see him. He had come for her. Bloom and Hero had saved her life.

Snow danced in the air, and then fell all around them.

Bloom forced her against him, taking her into his arms before she could object. As he whispered her name in relief, she felt herself glowing. Even in the winter air, she felt his voice on her skin like full, radiant sunlight and it called her home in a way she had never been called before.



She found herself back in trousers and baggy boy clothing, for that was all Bloom had, taking her and Hero back to his log cabin. The fire roared against the chill of winter, and Vienna waited at the windowsill. A part of her wished that she was home and on a midnight ride, but her fragile heart was also glad she was here.

She hadn’t seen Vincent or Seamus since she had left the palace, twelve days ago, and she decided that it had been Hero who had repelled the ghosts all along. It made sense, thinking about it now. It was when she met Hero that she stopped seeing ghosts, and it was when she left his side that they promptly came back.

But she missed Vincent and Seamus. She would have liked to have them here with her while she waited for Bloom to return. Hero was sprawled out on the living room floor by the fire. The house was a medley of oil paintings, well-crafted furniture, and honest comforts.

Vienna saw Bloom coming up the woodland path and rushed to the door to greet him. He carried a basket of freshly caught fish, which fell out of his hands when she threw her arms around him.

“Oh, no.” He laughed, shrugging her off, and throwing the basket on the kitchen table. Luckily, the lid hadn’t come off when it had dropped from his hands. “You only do that when you want something.”

“I have to do something.” There was a bowl of nuts in the middle of the table, and she pulled them toward her. She picked up the nutcracker and began shoving hazelnuts into her mouth as she watched Bloom’s shoulders stiffen. She knew that he was happy. But she couldn’t stay in the paradise that he had created for her forever. She had a home to get back to, and a kingdom that was looking for her.

As he cleaned the fish, his voice became agitated. He knew what she was going to say. “You need to get to Highest Guard.”

“Yes.”

He wrapped the fish in paper and placed them, one at a time, in the freezer. “We can’t go through the station, not with only two travel-passes. How do you suppose we’ll get there?” He cleaned the mess and set three fish aside, ready to be cooked for dinner. Setting the knife on the cutting board, he seemed to understand. “You want to find the warlock?”

“I told you.” Vienna found herself pleading, although the thought of leaving here was a torturous one. The inside of the log cabin consisted of grey stone, hardwood, and accommodating fireplaces. This log cabin was of the greatest value to her. But so was home, her real home, Highest Guard. “The knight said a warlock transported into White Minstrel illegally. He’s got to be here still. If we find him, he can take us to Highest Guard.”

Bloom huffed and sighed. “Is that all?”

“I’m not saying it won’t be difficult,” Vienna whispered. By now, those in White Minstrel knew that the princess was wandering around. They knew that she had escaped from the prison and that she was somehow connected to the steward’s sudden decision to quit his job and start a bakeshop. Traveling would be much more difficult than it had been.

“You want to find a warlock?”

“Is that a ‘you’re going to help me’ or is that a ‘you’re going to be a jerk and not help me?’ Huh?”

“And say we find this warlock? He’s just supposed to help us, just like that?”

“Hello!” She motioned to herself. “I’m a princess!” Fiddling with the nutcracker, she added, “And if he happens to be the warlock who cursed me, we can have a good long argument about that too.”

Bloom didn’t say anything. He seemed unsure on how to proceed.

Vienna came up beside him, taking the three fish and tossing them into a pan to fry. “I know you wish we could stay like this forever . . .”

“You’re going to burn that,” Bloom told her as he lowered the heat to medium-low on the stove.

“What did I do now?” She laughed, watching him take the clutter of meat off the burner. He transferred it to a plate, and then let each one cook evenly at a time.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He chuckled when she started throwing odds and ends into the pan.

“Cooking,” she explained.

He picked out everything she had thrown in. Half of it wasn’t edible.

“Remember what I told you? When you get thoughts like that, think again?” He took the spatula out of her hands.

“Hey!” She made a grab for it. “Give that back!”

“Not if you insist on frying the nutcracker.” He lifted his arm as high as it could go, keeping the spatula away from her, and she jumped to retrieve it.

“That’s not fair.” She clutched onto his shirt, looking into his darling green eyes that seemed to belong to her now. Tears formed, but she tried to hide them. What would happen to them if they did get to Highest Guard together? He was from White Minstrel. Her father wouldn’t approve. And if he did? She wasn’t sure their time together warranted marriage. Either way, she didn’t want to lose him.

He dropped the spatula, folded his arms around her, and breathed her in. “Yes,” he whispered, closing his eyes, and trying to hide himself in her. “I do wish we could stay like this forever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Shattered Trust

Basket in one hand and a fishing pole in the other, Bloom tipped his hat to her before he headed out the door to go ice fishing. Vienna beamed from the chair she'd commandeered. She had a quilt around her and an open book in her lap. Hero slept on the couch, too heavy to move and too long to make room for another creature.

She counted to twenty before she headed to the window and watched Bloom disappear. Carefully, so not to wake Hero, she swung the red velvet cape Bloom had bought her around her shoulders. She fastened her wooly scarf and mittens, and then headed out the door. Looking through the window, she made sure Hero was still asleep.

He was.

Bloom had agreed to go looking for the warlock, and they were scheduled to depart in three days' time. She knew that once they found the warlock (if they could find him) and were able to get to Highest Guard, things would change. It was important to enjoy the time they had together. So she was taking it upon herself to set him in a trap. She would follow him to the river, and then jump out and startle him, telling him how silly it was that he hadn't noticed her until then.

It was an excellent winter's morning, silent and glittering, with snow falling from the trees. The sky was opening up, signifying a vast day ahead. She had only to follow his footsteps in the snow. She crept in them, quickly and quietly moving along. She was keen to play her little prank.

Her cheeks succumbed to a winter's blush, but her boots were good boots and kept her feet snug as she sank into the drifts. She watched a white owl calling from high in a tree. It swooped down past her and flew away. She kept moving, catching glimpses of Bloom's distant figure.

Vienna continued more carefully until Bloom stopped and scanned the woods. It was as if he could sense that she was following him. She hid behind some bushes, hoping her plan hadn't failed wretchedly.

"Come out," he demanded. "I can feel your presence."

Honestly . . . But she was far too impressed by him to be very angry.

To her great surprise, a figure appeared, leaning against one of the trees.

"It's a dangerous game you're playing," Seamus said to Bloom.

Vienna covered her mouth with her hands. How was this possible? Bloom could see Seamus? And what the hell was Seamus doing here?

"You shouldn't be here," Bloom told the ghost, eyeing his surroundings. "It's too risky for me to have you coming and going as you please."

"I'm here because I'm worried about her," Seamus said.

"I have things relatively under control."

"You have things wrapped in lies."

"I love her."

"I know. That's why this has to end."

"I love her, and the more I'm with her, the more I want to be. The more time goes on, the harder it is to tell the truth. You think she'll forgive me, Seamus? I can't take that chance."

"So what now? You're going to find a warlock?"

“I was thinking of summoning Lifey here; pretending he’s the one she’s looking for and having him transport us back.”

“Is Lifey capable of transporting anywhere?”

“No. I’ll have to bring him here and then transport us all to Highest Guard. She won’t know the difference.”

“And what about when you get to Highest Guard? You going to be Bloom the fisherman for the rest of your life? *You?*”

Bloom blushed. “Why not?”

“You’re spinning more lies.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Correction: it wasn’t my business until I faced thick and thin with that girl. And now it’s my only business, and I don’t like the game you’re playing.”

“I’m not playing a game, and if you don’t watch your tongue, I’ll send it to a different dimension. Don’t forget who commissioned you, who still holds you responsible for protecting her from the souls of men.” Bloom’s words were hard, but as he took Seamus’s loyalty for her in, his expression softened. “I didn’t have a choice. I rushed to White Minstrel as soon as the king told me what Emily had done. She would never have trusted me.”

“My *job* is to protect her from the souls of men. That includes your soul.”

“I didn’t mean for things to go this far . . .” Bloom shook his head, looking away. “It’s just so easy, wanting to be with her . . .” Speaking to the ground, Bloom said, “I can’t lose her, Seamus.”

“*Bloom* can say that. *You* can’t. *Bloom* has earned her trust. *You* haven’t.”

“That’s enough, Seamus. Hurry up and go before I make you.”

Seamus disappeared.

She let her footsteps mark the silence with strings of sounds as she came to stand behind him. He slowly turned around, his expression falling.

She stared at him like he was a monster, a creature, and the fraud that he was. Her voice was poison on the air, scornful, and ugly. Her heart shattered with his betrayal.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Betrayal

In the cold winter's morning, the wind bit into them. They hadn't noticed it until now, how cold everything was. But now that they stood, living this nightmare, it was freezing as their hearts began to crack and splinter, unable to tolerate the cold. "Please," Bloom whispered in a frenzied chant, begging because he couldn't believe things had come to this. "Please, Vienna."

"Don't come near me!" she shrieked although he hadn't moved.

"I won't. I promise I won't. Please, Vienna . . ." Bloom's gaze was reaching out to her, begging her, but she was too wrapped in confusion and his treachery to understand his reaching.

"Who are you? How can you see Seamus?" She started shaking. All she wanted to do was call out his name. She knew Bloom. He was honey and sunlight, and she knew his eyes so well now that it was like they belonged to her. She had thought to own those eyes forever.

She heard footsteps behind her, and her sandy brown wolf walked up to meet her and then headed for Bloom.

"No, Hero!" Vienna gripped into his fur. "We have to run! We have to go!"

"Vienna . . ." Bloom whispered.

"Stay where you are!" she ordered, and his hands reached forward, begging for an easy explanation for all of this. Hero tried to move forward, but Vienna threw her arms around him. "Hero, stay back! He's not who he says he is!"

Before her eyes and those of the wolf, Bloom began to change. His wounded expression remained on his face, showing on the outside the distress he was feeling on the inside.

Bloom's height changed first, and then his age followed. He'd only been a few inches taller than her before, and of the same age. But now his features were becoming more dominant, more mature, and more dragon-like. His hair and eyes darkened. His lips became fuller. His character became more interesting and handsome. He was less boyish, as if Bloom was introducing his remarkable cousin, instead of his true form.

"I'm still Bloom," he assured her as his appearance changed. "Everything he was is real. I'm still Bloom." He closed his eyes, haunted by her reaction. "Please, Vienna . . ."

"Augustus . . ." Vienna stepped back, horrified. "Run, Hero!" she screamed, ready to run and never stop running. "We have to run!"

But Hero stepped forward as the warlock reached his arms out to him. The warlock's fingers were moving in the open air. His fingernails were missing. Hero walked with quickened steps. Vienna was paralyzed with fear as Hero leapt forward. Within the air he grew more and more transparent, until his foggy form reached Augustus's hand, forming a long, clear rod that the warlock now held. Augustus took a step forward. The rod disappeared, weaving into him effortlessly. His fingernails grew back and the swirls of his eyes returned to their true state.

"Hero?" Vienna choked. All this time . . . Everything . . . The beings she'd come to care about . . . It had all been a lie. All of it. Bloom was Augustus. Hero was Augustus. "Oh my god."

"Your father sent my mother a message, telling her what Emily had done, and I came straight away. But I knew you'd never accept my help. Not if I looked like this," Augustus

explained. He walked toward her, and the princess took a step back for every step he took. “Please, Vienna.”

“You have no right to call me by my name,” Vienna hissed. Her back hit a tree, reminding her of the first time she met Hero, when he saved her from the bear attack. She wasn’t sure how she should act. A part of her wanted to run away, and never stop, not ever. A part of her wanted to cry, and another wanted to scream. But, instead, she acted like the princess she was, strong and forceful. “You may address me as the Princess of Highest Guard. And I demand that you take me back to my kingdom!”

“Vienna . . .”

“You are not Bloom,” she whispered, making sure to send her words at him like knives. “You have no right to speak to me.”

Augustus bowed his head, looking like he was either going to cry or be sick. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

“I demand that you take me back to Highest Guard.”

“That’s all I’ve wanted to do. I just wanted to protect you.”

“You want to protect me?” Vienna spat on the ground. “Then take back the curse!”

He shied away. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

He couldn’t meet her eyes. It seemed as though he would lose his balance and fall to the ground. “Because it’s the only thing still connecting me to you.”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through?”

“Yes,” he whispered. His being was clearly full of regret. “That’s why I sent Vincent and Seamus to aid you.”

Vienna held her breath and let it out sharply. “And Vincent?” Both of them were working for Augustus. “You can see them?”

“I can see even the ones you can’t,” the warlock admitted.

Her hands dug into her chest. Her heart was burning as if it were trying to claw its way out of her, as if her body was no longer a safe place and it needed to flee. “Why did you do this to me?”

“I wanted you to see me, to know me,” he said, his words summoned into one perceptive hope and what he honestly saw. “And you fell in love.”

“No.” She stood amazed – mesmerized – by her own suffering. “You’ve stolen everything from me,” she answered frankly. Torturing them both, she asked, “How could I ever love you?”

Within his storm of endless agony, breathing in this conscious pain, tasting his regrets as she tasted hers, he lifted his arm. His fingers moved as if he were pushing the numbers on a telephone, calling the correct number, opening the air, and waiting for the spell to respond. The woods began to fade, and Vienna felt like she was falling back. The last thing she saw were the tears in his eyes, before she found herself in her room, inside the Palace of Highest Guard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Return of the Princess

In the safety of her bedroom, Vienna fell to her knees. Her whole body – her entire being – had felt an eruption, the gargantuan eruption of emotion. Now, stripped from everything, she found herself quite empty.

For that single moment, her sworn emptiness came as a relief. It was a relief to have felt so much, and then not to feel anything at all.

Her chambers filled her mind with comfort and old, treasured memories, and they helped to lift her to her feet. She looked into her vanity mirror. She still wore the red cape and wooly scarf and mittens that Bloom had bought her. She removed them now, tucking them away in a bottom drawer. The winter's gown she let drop to the floor was something given by Bloom as well, and she quickly bunched it up, put it in a box, and stuffed it in the back of her wardrobe.

Changing into one of her own gowns, she sat on her vanity chair and began brushing her hair. Her room smelt like her, and there was so much enjoyment in being able to smell like herself again.

Standing up, her heavy yellow dress made ruffles around her feet. Vienna made her way through the palace, and toward the dining hall. She could hear voices, and she paused at the door to listen.

“His cardinal comes every morning.” Hour paced the hall. “What’s keeping it?”

“Patience, Hour,” King Gladness said with effort, and Vienna let the eruption of emotion once again rush over her. She hadn’t seen her father in so long. He looked weary, having suffered many sleepless nights. Two guards stood at the wall, and one adviser paced the floor. “His letter won’t differ much from yesterday’s letter. She’s safe.”

Hour halted. “How can you remain so calm, Majesty?”

“I can’t.” King Gladness swirled the untouched eggs on his breakfast plate. “This is just a front. In reality, my insides are wrestling, tearing themselves apart.”

Hour blushed, pushing back his silver hair. “Forgive me, Majesty.”

“You’re a son of Highest Guard. Your reaction is only to be expected.” He pushed away his plate, picked up his goblet of coffee, wrinkled his nose at it, and set it back down. “In the meantime, we need to prepare the elections for the new steward of White Minstrel.”

With one more peek out the window, Hour asked, “Did you get the cookies he sent you?” He took a seat at the table and began spreading out papers for the king to inspect.

“Yes, remarkable,” King Gladness commented.

“May I make a suggestion?” Vienna entered the room and both men rose to their feet, admiring her as if she were an apparition. “Appoint Sir James Spear as steward. It’s true. I made at least one worthy friend in White Minstrel.”

Hour was at a loss for words, but her father took his first easy breaths since she’d left his side. “Is he loyal?” the king asked.

“So loyal he should be living in Highest Guard,” Vienna declared. “He did everything in his power for me without going against the steward. He’s the kind of man we want sitting at the head table, managing our country while we manage it from afar. We’d be lucky if we had two more of him, one in Blood Port and one in Iron Hand. What a thought! Jobs would actually get done!”

The king took in his daughter. He found that his legs still knew how to walk, and took her up in his arms, lifting her, giving the impression that she had angel wings. She soared in the soft, feathered clouds of happiness.

“You’ve aged . . .” She examined her father’s face. He seemed to have more wrinkles, and bags hung under his eyes. His sleeplessness made him look as if he were wearing black eyeshadow.

But the king didn’t mind now.

“Signal the trumpets,” King Gladness ordered to his men. “Princess Vienna of Highest Guard has returned!”



A celebration ball was being prepared to signify her homecoming. The grand affair was to take place in three days’ time. She was looking forward to it as she walked to the stable, a groveling Vincent at her heels.

She paused at the stable’s entrance, giving Vincent a hard look. He held his pen and appointment book in his hands. Even now, he was convinced that she was the best ‘ghost therapist’ to ever walk the earth. “I’m still not speaking to you,” she told him. “Stay here. Your presence upsets the horses, almost as much as it upsets me these days.”

In truth, she’d long forgiven him for being connected to Augustus. But, in truth, she wasn’t above making him suffer for it.

He nodded, holding up the appointment book.

“Yes, yes,” she assured him. “I promise, after I ride. But the dead are dead, you know? The living still need a moment to live.”

Vienna stalked away from him, listening to the familiar sound of her boots on the stone floor of the stable. She delighted in the familiar smell and the jolt of her heart, begging, as the horses were begging, to go galloping.

It was a busy place today, and ladies in riding clothes walked by her. They giggled to themselves for flirting scandalously with one of the stable boys after their ride. They noticed Vienna and curtsied honorably, but they could not fool the princess. They were scandal-girls, and she was obliged to smile after them.

Poem was brushing a bay mare in her stall and didn’t notice her until she let herself in and began stroking the creature’s neck, cooing sweetly. Poem blushed and looked away. He turned back for another enchanted glance at his princess.

Swaying closer to him, her dress swinging back and forth like a bell chiming, she brought a caramel heart to her lips and then offered it to him. He took it gladly and knew what to do. He shifted the bridle he was carrying off his shoulder, and bridled the horse, tossing the reins over its head. He came around the side where Vienna was waiting, holding the reins. She offered him her leg, and he hoisted her up. He kept hold of her until he took the chance and kissed her knee. The folds of fabric kept his lips from her flesh. And then he opened the stall door.

“That’s a good lad, Poem,” Vienna whispered and pushed the horse forward with her legs. They walked out of the stable, listening to the ‘click’ of the mare’s shoes on the hard stone. The winter air called to them both and they breathed in. Vienna looked down at her gloved hands as she breathed out. The beast responded to the beast of Vienna’s burning soul, and they galloped, bareback, across the palace grounds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Ghost Therapist

They decided that it would be best to have their session in the dining hall. Vincent had his notebook and pen, and Vienna had hers. She scribbled away as she listened to a retired car salesman tell her about his first kiss, performed in the back of a pink limo.

“Man —” the car salesman thought back. “I was so into him. I always felt like I was the woman in the relationship, but you said you can only see ‘weepy’ (thanks for that) gentlemen, so I guess that makes me the pants instead of the skirt . . . Awesome. I was a little insecure back then.”

“Do you feel better now that you’ve talked about it?” Vienna asked, taking a moment away from her scribbling to observe their guest.

“Yeah.” He stretched his arms above his head. “I feel great!”

“Good.” Vienna went back to her scribbling. “Try not to spread the word. I’m swamped as it is.”

He saluted her and said, “You got it,” before he disappeared.

Vincent made a grab for her notebook, but she pulled it out of his dead hands. “Where’s Seamus? He must be avoiding me.” She hadn’t seen him since his argument with Bloom in the wood.

Vincent sat back, examining her. “You haven’t seen him? Oh my, princess, you’re smarter than that. If Seamus isn’t with us, where would he be?”

“Hmm . . .” She sighed, pressing her notebook against herself. “How many more troubled ghosts do you have planned for the day, Vincent?”

He looked down at the list and counted. “Just three more. Then, I’ve scheduled time for you to read or ride, whichever you feel up to.”

“Really?”

“A living girl still needs a moment to live. Isn’t that right, princess?”

“I’m glad you’ve realized that.” She strolled over to the window, stretching her legs. Her mind flashed back to her time in the dungeon, holding onto the window’s bars, and screaming Bloom’s name. What if he hadn’t come for her? She promptly sat back down and looked at Vincent expectantly. “Next.”

“What are you hiding from me?”

“Excuse me?”

“That book in your hands, or are you that bored with the dead?”

Vienna passed it to him, and he gazed over the drawing with admirable interest. “It’s just a rough.” Vienna wiped her hands on her dress, drying her palms. She was actually nervous to discover what Vincent thought of it.

“You’re going to make an office.” He traced the sketches with his fingertips. The page remained unmarked by his ghostly hands. “You’ve given yourself a title. Something important too.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because all important titles have the word ‘the’ before them.” He handed her back the notebook. “I think it’s superb.”

“I’d like to get started on it right away,” she admitted. Now that Vincent was fully in charge of her time, he’d somehow made time for everything. She remained active in her studies and realm affairs, had time for reading, and rode constantly. The brilliant thing was, she wasn’t tired and that was without a single drop of coffee. “We need a place to work, don’t you think?”

“Since you seem to be stuck with this, yes, I suppose.”

Vienna hadn’t meant it like that. For some time now she hadn’t considered her curse to be much of a curse. Not with Vincent, and not when she had Hero and Bloom . . . “How about you call the next ghost in?”

Since I am The Ghost Therapist.

Vincent nodded, looking down at the list, and reading: “Scott Summons.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon learning to square dance with an old-time cowboy after listening to him talk about his days working the plains with his wife, Jane. The next man told the princess how to properly dry herbs and prepare spices, having owned a shop with his girlfriend. And the last man cried at first, but then began to recite quotes from his favorite television shows. Then, at last, Vincent informed her that she had three free hours before dinner. She tried to read, but all the stories she loved, and all the heroes she’d opened herself up to, now reminded her of Bloom.

She put down the books and found Vincent. She informed him that, if he was up for it, they could call in the next tortured soul.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Story of Seamus

Vienna closed the book, rested her hand on the cover, and took in the moment when night becomes morning. In the candlelight, the vibrant colors of her room seemed washed-out and the detailed designs became faded, darkened aspects in the romantic Victorian style setting, attracting a mischievous feeling.

Her gown for the ball was hanging by her mirror. Her father bought it and presented it to her. It was an elegant piece, with lace, ruffles, and flowing sleeves. It had a corset top and it flared at the bottom. She would wear it with fake fairy wings, designed and fitted to complement her without overpowering the ensemble.

The creation was very different from the clothes she was wearing right now. She walked to the mirror in her white pajamas, which were imprinted with red apples. Her hair was loose and messy. Staring at herself now, her blue eyes were black in the darkness.

Vienna leaned over to the dresser beside her vanity and pulled open the bottom drawer. She took out the mittens and scarf she'd been hiding from herself. She slid the mittens on, bringing her hands to her face and breathing in.

But they didn't carry the scent of honey.

Wearing them didn't give the impression of sunlight.

She'd never be able to fall asleep like this – with her mind amok with distressing thoughts. She folded up the scarf and placed it back in the drawer. Leaving the mittens on, she fetched her fur-lined, long trained, blue winter coat and matching hat, and hurried through the palace and out the door.

The palace never slept, but that wasn't what it seemed to be doing this morning. The servants had finished up and wouldn't be ready for the new day for some hours. And the ladies and gentlemen, staff, and stable hands were nowhere to be found.

Princess Vienna wandered the snow-covered path, observing the quiet trees, the enduring gateways, and the birdbaths that appeared to be wishing for spring. Everything was bathed in the blue light of winter as the moon whispered down, still owning the sky. Vienna walked about the gardens, along the same road she had strolled along with Poem one fine day. She headed for the same swings that she had been heading for then.

Sure enough, a man had commandeered one. His head was turned down and his face was turned away. He sat where roses would bloom once they tasted spring.

"Seamus." Vienna sat down on the swing beside him, swaying slightly in the cool air. Vincent had told her once before that if she wasn't sure where Seamus was, she should look for him in a garden. He'd be the one by the roses. "This is where I first saw you," Vienna continued. "Did you know who I was then? Had the warlock already chosen you to aid me through the curse?"

"I didn't expect anyone to find me here that day. I was going to come barging into your life when those other blokes did, when you actually needed me." Seamus raised his head. He stared up into the maze of tree branches above him. "I've known Augustus for a long time. He's a good guy. Just stupid in love."

"I've met a lot of interesting people lately," Vienna said, changing the subject and snuggling into her winter coat, "while you've been hiding out in the garden." When he didn't respond, Vienna asked, "What was her name?"

"Eleanora."

Did he want to talk about this? Vienna wasn't sure, except that they seemed to need to. "What were you when you were alive?"

"A nobleman."

"I mean, what was your profession?"

"What every nobleman's profession is: being a nobleman."

"Was she a great lady?"

"She was a very poor one. Not suited for a gentleman like me."

It was difficult to imagine that Vincent and Seamus were similar (if not exactly the same) to the ghosts who booked her time. "And you haven't found her in death, have you?"

"She died a long time before I did. I don't expect to find her."

"You weren't married?"

"I never married."

"I don't understand. What happened to her?"

"A tyrant set a fire. I didn't make it in time to save her."

She was murdered . . . "You lived on. I'm proud of you," Vienna said, forgetting that he was a ghost and that she had no idea how he had died. "I can imagine your suffering. You're the strongest man I've ever met."

Seamus shook his head. "I died in an opium den."

Oh . . . She nodded, understanding. "You were destroyed."

"Not all of us are lucky enough to have a life like yours."

"You mean a cursed life?"

"You just listened to *my* story," Seamus said, scornfully. "Now tell me *your* life is cursed."

She turned away.

"The man you loved made it in time. There are women out there who never received that luxury."

"I'm sorry."

"Sometimes I look at you and wonder . . ." Seamus held her gaze. "My life would have been different if I had a father like yours."

His father was the tyrant? His father killed the woman he loved? "It's not fair what happened to you, Seamus. It's not fair that two good people had to suffer so, when they didn't do anything wrong. You're blaming yourself. I can imagine you are. But I hope – no, I know – that when you find her, and I know you will, she'll tell you the same thing I'm telling you now. That knowing you has been worth all the pain."

"Vienna?"

She was waiting for him to start crying. "What?"

"Where's your mother?"

No one else had asked. No one else had thought it mattered. Shocked, Vienna replied, "I'm not accustomed to speaking about myself to ghosts."

"But you always do, when you speak to me. It's hidden in the words you use to try to bring me comfort. She must have hurt you terribly. So why do you sit and read in the one room where her portraits still hang?"

"I can't say I know what you're talking about."

“When you were in White Minstrel, I stayed behind with your father for a while, waiting to see if anyone had gotten news of you. He wrote to the Dragon Witch, knowing she’d tell Augustus and he’d rush off to find you. In those days, do you know what I saw?”

“What?”

“Letters. Letters carried in by your mother’s blue jay, asking her ex-husband to send her more money. And do you know what your father did?”

“Yes. You don’t have to say it out loud.”

“I believe I do. He still loves her enough that he sent it to her.”

Vienna got to her feet, walking behind the tree so that she wouldn’t have to look at Seamus. “If my father were a ghost, I’d be able to see him, and he’d tell me tales about a woman he loved. A woman who married him for money, had a child, stole millions from the kingdom, and then ran off to Blood Port. Sending divorce papers so that she could marry the steward there, she bore my half-brother, and moved on to the next gentleman, leaving both her daughter and her son behind to be raised by the men who truly did love her.”

“Are you afraid you’ll be like your mother?”

“I’m not my mother. I couldn’t make her mistakes. I’m not my father either, so I can’t make his.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m surprised you’ve never heard this tale. The story is historic. She’s known as ‘Queen Lustless, the Green Queen.’ It’s a play on words, signifying her greed and selfishness.”

“But now you’re afraid to fall in love.”

“And you? Could you fall in love again?”

“I don’t consider loving her my mistake.”

“Neither does my father. And that’s his mistake.”

Seamus appeared in front of her, his hand slamming on the tree’s bark beside her. He leaned in so that she could feel the full force of his words. He was dead, but his actions still made her jump. He was dead, but his words still dug into her.

“You’re Princess Vienna of Highest Guard,” Seamus said, “and you’re a very frightened little girl, pretending to be strong, telling yourself to grow up because she’s not coming back. You’re telling me how the events of your life haven’t shaped you, that you’re not an inch like your mother, and that you’re not an inch like your father. But you can’t fight away the pieces of your life. Just like I couldn’t fight away the pieces I bear of my father. It’s how you overcome those pieces, Vienna. It’s how you rise above, not how you endure. You see your father’s pain, and you hide from it and from your own pain. It’s the same as dying in an opium den. One day you’re going to overdose.”

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying. But, if you’re arguing her case, may I remind you that she abandoned me.”

“I’m not arguing for her. I’m arguing for *you*. If someone had thrown it in my face – if someone had warned me that she was a ghost, watching me kill myself, finally leaving my side because she’d seen that I wasn’t the man she had thought I was because I wasn’t strong and she had seen enough – then perhaps I wouldn’t have betrayed her eyes. I wouldn’t have made her watch my suffering.”

He thinks he can’t find her in death because her ghost watched him die in an opium den? “You have an extensive imagination.”

“I’m a ghost. Watching you kill yourself. Watching you suffer. And if you don’t stop, you’re going to die. And, one day, someone will be able to see you as a ghost, and they’ll flinch as you cry all over them, trying to tell them about the life you should have lived, and the pain you should have let go.”

“You’re advocating for *him*, aren’t you? You’ve got a secret agenda!”

“I’m not sworn to protect him. I’m sworn to protect you from the souls of men, and from yourself, for you’re more *man* than many. That means you’re much more stubborn and hard-hearted, and more capable of letting things pass by, that should never have been passed by.”

“I knew it. You *are* advocating for him.”

“I want you to tell me, to my face, that you’re not your mother’s mistakes, or your father’s, and mean it this time.”

“I already told you that.”

“You’re Princess Vienna of Highest Guard. You’ve got a few issues, and you can see ghosts, and you’ve made your own mistakes. But you’re alive, and you’d rather not end up a weepy ghost. You’d be more suited being the kind of ghost that mocks my kind from afar, instead of crying, sitting on a swing, in the garden beside me.”

“What do you want me to do? Cry on your shoulder?”

“That’s what shoulders are for, and you’ve spent all this time shouldering the dead. Isn’t it about time it shouldered you?”

“I had no intention of letting anyone shoulder me. I have perfectly fine shoulders that are perfectly able to shoulder themselves.”

“Had?” Seamus said with care. “Do you know how old you look right now? Twenty to thirty years older. You keep holding on to something like that’s all there is in life, and you’ve never stopped crying about it. You shouldn’t make yourself about one thing, Vienna. There’s a whole world waiting for you out there. Instead of forcing yourself away, you should make the choice on your own terms, and decide who you want to share that world with. Because you’re a marvelous young woman, and knowing you has been worth the pain, even though there has been quite a lot of it.”

“You’re advocating for him, aren’t you?”

“No. I know you’d never listen. But if you would, I would advocate for him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Story of Her Mother and Poison

The day of the ball came, and three ladies hurried around Vienna, dressing her, doing her hair, and lathering her in jewels and make-up. A poet recited his verses to keep them entertained, coming in only when the princess was presentable enough to be seen.

Her gown fell in layers around her, her little frame crushed by the corset top. The gold fabric flared out and flowed with her every movement as she sat down. The ladies put her hair up, letting pieces fall down her neck and turning them into snug, little curls. As they fastened on her wings, a knock came at the door. Her father entered the room. He looked dashing in his fitted tuxedo. He wore a chain with a large, gold rose that rested on his slender stomach.

“What do you think?” her father gripped the bottom of his jacket. Nervous and awkward, he moved his feet in a circle so that she could see all of him. “Do I look stupid?”

Vienna got to her feet, much to the annoyance of the maids, annoyed that she’d refused, as always, to wear heavy diamonds. She considered her father’s dress. “I think you look rather splendid.”

“Really?” He lit up, looking down at himself with new eyes.

“And me?” Vienna twirled, her movements flowing like the fairy princess her wings made her out to be.

“You always look splendid.” Her father told her and kissed her forehead. “And today, particularly splendid.”

Vienna took her seat in front of the mirror so that the maids could finish their work and her father sent the poet out.

“There’s still time . . .” Her father took it upon himself to suggest. “I can send out last minute invitations, you know?”

The maids tried to hide their curiosity, but their eager ears turned pink with their keenness. Vienna pierced her lips. Had she been imagining what it might be like to have Bloom waiting for her on the dance floor? What it might be like to have Hero sitting at her feet, wearing a black bow tie? *Hardly*, she thought, setting her jaw. “Seamus told me you heard from mother. Where is she this week?”

Her father waved his hand, and the maids hurried out of the room. He picked up where the maids had left off, attaching glittery objects to her dress. “Seamus told you? He’s been keeping his eyes on me, has he?”

Vienna studied his reactions in the mirror. “He told me you sent her money. Again.”

“Well, she’s found herself in a bad way,” he admitted. “She’s in Iron Hand at the moment.”

Vienna looked away. *And she conveniently doesn’t send me her regards.* “You should let her flounder, father. She’ll never see to her errors if you’re always throwing money at them.”

The king twitched his nose. “We all have an assortment of human traits.” He kept an honest, even tone. “It wouldn’t be love if we didn’t love them all.”

“That love cripples you, father.”

He stepped away from fixing her dress and gave the subject the seriousness it required. “I suppose a part of me shall love her forever. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t room left in me to love again. We are all capable of moving on from the trials of our lives. That’s the blessing of time. But if you think I send her money because I’m crippled by her and will never get past

my love for her, you have wrongly underestimated my character. I'm not one of your weepy ghosts.

"What I love about your mother is that she gave me you, making me the happiest man in the world. I have no regrets. Not one. Even the highest of blessings can come out of some trouble. And oh yes," he tapped the side of her nose, "the trouble is always worth it."

"I thought you'd been caught up, a fish in a net."

"It's all right to be caught up once in a while."

"Don't know what you mean, father."

"You have been caught, love," he informed her, draping a necklace around her neck. "By royal law and your own." He kissed the top of her head as her fingers moved to touch the wooden heart. He studied her reaction in the mirror.

Keeping her fingers on the necklace, she said, "I thought I broke it."

"No. It's a hardy little heart."

She held it in her hand, opening the heart so that it was lying in her palm. A pearl shone up at her. *So the pearl had survived, too, had it?*

"There's still time."

Vienna snapped the heart shut. "No. I have no interest in speaking to him again."



Vienna avoided clocks and paid no heed to the hour as she rushed to her office. It had taken a day, ten servants, and a truckload of new stuff to make the therapist's office acceptable to her taste, but in the end, it had developed rather nicely.

She walked into the well-lit room and sat down at the extraordinarily large desk. It was big enough to allow her and Vincent to sit behind it like trained professionals. They also had a couch in the room for Seamus to sleep on. Although, he hadn't used it yet. If he wasn't in the garden, he was cracking his knuckles from the back corner or threatening to send dead people out the window.

Yes, the windows opened mainly so that he could toss ghosts out.

Today, however, he'd chosen the garden.

"Sorry I'm late, Vincent," Vienna said. Picking up her pen, she scribbled, 'Is he horrid?' on a card. She was referring to the man who was waiting to sob.

Vincent shrugged.

Vienna continued, addressing the man in a business suit, "I have to go to my own coming home party in thirty minutes, but I'd rather be fashionably late, so you have forty minutes to tell me all about how you lived and died."

The businessman adjusted his suit. "I was poisoned at my office. It was in my scotch. By my wife."

"And you still love her?" Vienna raised her eyebrows.

"No, I never married her. She was eighteen. My assistant."

"But . . ." Vienna contemplated, and the pieces started to fall into place. He was married to a woman but loved another. His wife found out and poisoned him. "Well —" She smiled at Vincent, her heart racing at the thought of the scandal. "My job's finally gotten interesting." Turning back to the businessman, she said, "Tell me all about it!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Celebration

The guests arrived, and Vienna came forth into the magnificent, breathtaking splendor. All eyes were on her. She glided in her fairy wings and gold dress. Her dainty feet moved her through the ballroom. The mystic effect of her was increasingly captured as she crossed the floor that was a pool of green-colored fog, created by dry-ice and green floor lamps. Elegant green fabrics were draped across the ceiling, and hammocks of flowers hung off the sides. The sparkling white walls held portrait after portrait of her. Bare trees stood beside each portrait. They were clothed in little gold lights, being the only other lighting besides candlelight.

Waiters roamed around, carrying appetizers of caviar, lobster puffs, and smoked salmon, while gentlemen talked business around the beverage tables. They sipped apple cider, eggnog, wine, and guzzled beer. There were rows and rows of dessert tables with mountains of French macaroons. And as the ladies sat at their tables, artists wandered around, constructing caricatures to the great and joyous amusement of the guests.

Dinner came after long hours of celebrating, each table centered with a fountain of orange juice. It was a party for Vienna, and her favorite foods were those of the brunch category. They started with lobster crepes. Then came the main course, Eggs Benedict, and then followed by sweet soufflés. Three courses fit her perfectly, finishing with a fruit plate and a collection of custards.

There was a great deal more talking and drinking, and then the king stood in front of them all to make a speech. Throughout the evening, Vienna had felt unsettled. She kept looking for things that she hadn't realize she'd been looking for. She had expected certain people to show up when she had known that it wasn't fair of her to expect.

She knew she was being ridiculous. She couldn't honestly be angry with him for not being here, when she knew she'd have been angry with him if he were here.

The king seemed to realize that he didn't have her full attention. However, he commenced. "Children of Highest Guard, I thank you. Your devotion to your princess has been beyond expectations. Your love for her evident by your reactions to the mere rumors of her disappearance and in your true brotherly conduct when you discovered those rumors to be true. I was made aware that rallies were held in back-alleys and in town squares, and even teenagers on school property declared a marching sweep of the world, to find her. When rumors spread that she had been spotted in White Minstrel, my sons demanded war. As father to you all, I had to cradle the nation, but it was your devotion that won the appreciation of your king.

"Now, I can't be going on like this, being too serious, addressing a bunch of drunks eating Eggs Benedict. Not that I blame you. I wouldn't want to be listening to an old, blubbery man like me either, not while there's hollandaise still on my plate. And, seeing as there is still hollandaise on my plate, I'd better make this quick.

"There have been many questions and rumors about the return of the princess. One story claims she wrestled a sea monster and won, the creature carrying her atop its head as they crossed the ocean. I'd prefer that theory, if it weren't for the truth.

"A son of Highest Guard returned Princess Vienna to us.

“I send out my appreciation to the men and women of Highest Guard and their strong hearts for coming together with equal valor in all the trials that our country has had to face. With our pearl’s return, our strong nation can continue, untainted.

“Since this is the princess’s welcome home ball, I may not have been the first to welcome her home. But, I trust I am the first to stand in front of a crowd to say: welcome home. I declare today, like every day, my whole-hearted, fatherly love for her. And I would like to express my love, by stealing her first dance here this evening.”

Vienna was sitting beside him at the long table in front of the crowd. The king took his daughter’s hand, led her onto the dance floor, and started the dance.

Green fog swirled around their ankles. The ball would begin and end with the waltz. As her father led her, Vienna tossed her head about. She was searching for something, but she couldn’t admit it to herself.

“He’s not here, you know?” the king whispered. “Right or wrong, I tend to yield to your every wish.”

Vienna snapped out of the world of daydreams, forced to focus on the dance and what her father was suggesting. “Who?”

“That man you love,” the king answered.

“I may have held someone in high esteem, father, but it wasn’t held for that warlock fellow.”

The king thought for a moment, humming as he did so. “How can you be so sure?”

Her father was a superb dancer and a partner whom any woman, including his daughter, would be lucky to have. But on this occasion, Vienna wanted the dance to end. “Simply because I hold ownership over my own thoughts and mind. It’s for me to know.”

“I wonder about that, child. Are we really the owners of our thoughts when even thoughts can lie? Humans often find themselves skillful liars. Imagine how skillful we can become when lying to ourselves.”

“What a scoundrel you are, calling your own daughter a liar.”

“It’s quite far from being gentlemanly, I admit, but not far from being fatherly.” The king fixed her with a stare beyond the authority he’d use on a subject because his daughter was rather harder to handle and was accustomed to having the last words in an argument. But he had to admit that it would be quite some time before she defeated him in a quarrel.

She said nothing more, and the dance ended. They bowed to each other, and the band started up again, and the guests took wing now to the floor.

She tried to sneak away, but it was difficult. Many young gentlemen had their eyes on her, but by dodging around chairs, hiding under tables, and wandering among the shadows, she was able to make a wild, successful dash for the exit.

She wandered through the empty halls, listening to the music from the ballroom. The music was so loud that it sounded like the party was in the halls. She found herself in one of the drawing-rooms, where they’d received company on lesser occasions than this. There was a piano, instead of a full orchestra, and more comfortable furniture than the many tables and chairs that had been set up for tonight’s guests. She expected to be alone in the darkened room, but Seamus stood at the window, hidden within the curtains.

“I was wondering about Vincent and yourself,” Vienna informed him, coming to stand beside him. There were two servants walking a pack of husky dogs in the palace grounds. “Are you not going to welcome me at my own welcome home party?”

Seamus wasn’t watching the royal dogs. He was admiring the stars. “We decided that one night without ghosts was probably the nicest gift you could receive tonight.”

Vienna flushed. Vincent and Seamus weren’t mere ghosts to her anymore. They were like family. “Why do the best of friends always seem to get things wrong?”

Seamus's eyes took her in, framed against the window's curtains. "Were we?"
"Nevertheless . . ." She glided to the middle of the room, curtsying low. "It seems I was kind enough to save you a dance."

Seamus thought that over. "You sure that's proper?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a young, impressionable princess." Seamus smirked. "And I'm a ghost."

"Have you forgotten how?" Vienna mocked, and he crossed the floor toward her. She hadn't risen from her curtsy, and he came over, taking her hand as if he really could grasp it. He lifted her to her feet.

"I wonder . . ." he said and began to dance.

Vienna's hand kept threatening to fall through his shoulder, but it was easy to follow him. If he were alive, he'd likely be the best dancer at the ball. He began to hum a tune that Vienna had never heard before. When the song came to an end, he took the princess's hand and kissed it, and for a moment she thought she actually felt his lips on her hand.

"See," Vienna told him, "that wasn't so improper."

He stepped away, walking back to the window. "I'm sorry that I'm not him."

Vienna blushed. "Who?"

The stars sketched themselves in his eyes. "He's still Bloom, you know? The same man: just a different face."

The princess growled. "Do I look like I'm pining? Why do the best of friends always get things wrong?" She threw the question with force. If it had been a solid thing, it would have shattered the window. She stormed out of the room, and Seamus didn't call after her. Instead, he looked up at the stars, soaking them in with a curious expression on his face. He was distressed to see her in pain because he knew he wasn't wrong.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Battle

She intended to go back to the party, but ended up in her bedroom. She was planning to go back, surely. It was *her* party, after all. And though everyone seemed to think she was a big, walking mess, haunted by a broken heart and the pieces of a broken heart, she would not give them the satisfaction of believing they were right. She'd dance and laugh and spin around in the eyes of men, thrashing their thoughts of her misery away.

But, in the meantime, she took a moment before tossing those thoughts away. She walked to her dresser and opened the bottom drawer. Standing before her mirror, she slipped them onto her dainty hands. They'd long-lost their smell of a life somewhere else. Now they smelt as though they lived in a bottom drawer, kept away: a lonely secret.

She admired herself in the vanity mirror, wearing the wooly mittens and the wooden heart that harbored a pearl.

She looked away, disgusted with herself.

"I didn't think we'd have our final meeting so soon." A woman walked out of the shadows, and Vienna watched her reflection emerge in the mirror. She was too stunned to turn around. "I'm glad you didn't keep me waiting long."

"Emily Tempest . . .?" Vienna blinked several times, wondering whether she was having a nightmare.

"That's 'Witch of the Falling Stars' to you." Emily hissed. Her calico cat jumped onto Vienna's bed, purring madly. Emily, whose hair was the same color as her cat's coat, was outlined in the moonlight.

"Are you serious with this?" Vienna asked, speaking to the mirror. She knew that yelling at the witch wasn't the wisest choice. But she couldn't help herself. "Are all witches this emotionally twisted? Isn't there some kind of law saying you can't spew magic every time you want to spew it? I'm asking because you might have an ounce of intelligence left in your head (but I already know the answer to that). There *are* laws. It doesn't matter what you do tonight. You're a wanted criminal because you banished me unfairly. You *will* lose your witch's permit." She slowly took off her mittens, tossing them onto the vanity, and turned around to face the witch. "If you come to your senses, you might not have to face life in the dungeon."

"Unfair banishment, you say?" Emily cackled, running her hand over the bed before letting it rest on the cat. "I gave you a life sentence and forbade love from ever knowing your heart. It's aggravating when my spells are overthrown by higher magic, especially *his*."

"Yes," Vienna fumed, not taking kindly to the thought of being banished again. "You love him. So why aren't you yelling at him? Honestly," she muttered before pointing out, "I told him to go away!"

"A friend of mine fell in love and earned his right as king." Emily threw the tale at the princess. "He was refused, even though he occupied himself with her rules. A witch banished her, and he became the paladin of her heart in a different form. And once again, he was cast away." She paused, removing her hand from her cat's back. "Yes, I love him. But he is also my friend, and you have deeply wounded him. You call yourself Princess of the Land, when you so easily throw hearts aside. What kind of queen will you make: daughter of the Green

Queen?” Her voice rose and the palace shook. The wind blasted the window open, letting in the great, screaming wind. “You are unfit to rule! You: who rejects love!”

Thunder rolled, and lightning struck the palace.

Vienna jumped.

“Tell me once and for all!” The witch was glowing. She had turned a fiery red. “Do you have a selfless heart?”

Vienna couldn’t breathe. She was scared, that if she stopped holding her breath, she would scream. Finally, as she watched the witch’s arm come up to cast a spell, Vienna looked into her heart and cast the lies out of her mind. She found her own weepy honesty. “Maybe I love him . . .”

The witch sneered. “Good.” Her arm came back as she worked the spell. “Then I can do this!”

Vienna ducked as Emily threw the spell. A ball of electricity flew through the air and smashed into the mirror. Glass fell around Vienna before she flung herself to the door. She could hear someone screaming for her.

“Vincent!” Vienna cried. She dodged another blue ball as it flew through the air toward her. She heard the witch’s crackling laughter in the background. Another ball came fast, blasting a hole in the wall. It sent off sparks until the wall succumbed to flames.

Smoke filled Vienna’s lungs as she called for the ghost, but she could no longer hear his voice. There was nothing but the insufferable heat, the smoke in her lungs, and the witch’s laughter in her ears. She crawled along the floor, trying to figure out how she would survive this.

And then it became clear to her. There was no time to wait for whoever Vincent was calling for help. Vienna was her own knight, and if she died today, she would die like one.

Under the cover of smoke, Vienna ripped the dragon imprinted shield and sword from her wall. She rushed to her bed, where Halloween was still purring, delighting in the chaos, deciding it was long over for the princess.

Vienna assured the feline that it certainly was not!

She grabbed hold of the cat, picking it up by the scruff of its neck, and pointed her sword at its stomach. “I have my sword ready to impale your cat!” Vienna cried. Her shield had replaced Halloween on the bed. “If you do not cease your madness, I will be forced to kill it!”

Emily stepped forward, her black dress hugging her body. She looked down at Halloween and then leered at Vienna. “Go ahead, *little princess*, try.”

Could she really kill a cat? Vienna’s mouth curled in determination and she readied her sword. But Halloween began to grow. The cat grew and grew until she could no longer be contained by the walls. Halloween kicked at the walls, making holes in the ceiling and indents on the floor with her claws. Then she swatted at Vienna, hissing wildly.

Our princess jumped for her shield, gripping her sword as Halloween and the laughing witch stood before her. She crouched low, knowing there wasn’t much hope, but she was determined to die a death worthy of her royal title.

If that was what it came down to.

Halloween prepared to spring forward, and Emily raised her arm. “Goodbye,” she whispered, “*little princess*.”

Halloween’s mouth widened. Her teeth were hypnotizing as she lunged forward.

Vienna was blasted backward, and she slammed against what was left of the wall. She shook her head to fight off her dizziness before she looked up.

A man was standing between her and her attackers. Halloween had disappeared. The man's arms lowered to his sides and the flames around them were washed away, sizzling as they vanished.

He and the witch began to circle each other.

"I would never have guessed that one day we'd have to face each other like this," Augustus said. His dragon-like features were crisp and clear against the night's cloak.

Emily lifted her arms above her head and the space between them glowed. "It has been long since you possessed the ability to guess my actions."

"You're a childhood friend . . ." Augustus didn't move his hands from his sides. He didn't prepare to cast a spell. Instead, his features seemed to darken. His voice hit Vienna like sunlight, deepening into the break of day, and filling the room with the smell of honey. "Don't overvalue our friendship," he said. "If killing you means saving Vienna's life, I will not hesitate."

"Fool!" She sent her blue force at the warlock. The palace trembled as it streamed through the air. "You've already killed me once!"

"No!" Vienna screamed, but the warlock fixed his stare on the blue force. It lessened and lessened as it neared him, and then it was nothing but a wisp of smoke.

Augustus walked forward, and Emily's eyes widened in fear as he raised his hand. She grabbed at her throat, gasping for air, crying because, like her spell, his was set to kill. "Emily Tempest, Witch of the Falling Stars, you are unworthy to practice magic," he whispered as she fell to her knees. Her face turned blue, and her lips formed words of pleading. "You should have vanished while I still kept my patience."

His fingers began to move, and Emily struggled with her last breaths.

"Stop!" Vienna screamed. "As Princess of Highest Guard, I order you to stop!"

Emily's gulping breaths were frightening noises as he released his hold on her. "You think you can save her?" the warlock asked the princess, doubtfully. His eyes remained on the witch, monitoring her every move. "I'm afraid I can't let her live now that the dragon inside me has awoken. I can smell her hatred. She'll never stop hunting you."

"Then I'll make it easy for you!" Emily promised and an arrow flew from her hands, aiming for Vienna's heart.

There was a noise so terrifying that Vienna found herself screaming. The world around her disappeared. For a moment, she was trapped in ebony as a dragon cried. The sound was coming from inside the warlock. The witch had been set aflame and turned to ash. The arrow raced for Vienna. Panicked, she threw her hands up to cover her face. When she looked through the gaps of her fingers, the warlock was in front of her, holding the arrow. Unmoved from its course in the air, the arrow spun in his hands and then vanished from sight.

"You . . ." Vienna sat in amazement. The witch was gone, completely burned away, killed by the man she loved.

Grief erupted inside Vienna as she looked over all that one man had done for her . . .

Augustus turned to her. Kneeling down, he stripped her hands from her face before he bellowed in fury. "What do you think you were doing? Trying to fight a witch? You could have been killed!"

"Unhand me this instant!" Vienna snatched back her hands, her face burning with fury. "She came at me! What was I supposed to do?"

"Take up a sword and shield, of course!"

The feeling of his voice . . . And his eyes were so familiar, as if they had belonged to someone else once and that person was looking at her once again. "You weren't at the ball!" She let her temper soar.

“You didn’t want me there!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Well then!”

“I think you saved my life!”

“Yes! I did!”

“I’m not thanking you!”

“No problem!”

“You’re yelling at me!”

“Of course I am!”

They sat, panting, staring at each other. Her blue eyes were struck by his emeralds and swirls. The boy she used to know was so faint in his features, and yet so dominant in his actions.

There were shouts and cries from below, and Vienna knew that very soon they would be swarmed with guards and questions and assumptions.

Her eyes traveled with his. They looked to the wooden heart around her neck. With saddened movements and saddened words, he whispered, “You wear my heart so well, my pearl.” His fingers came up to push back her long hair, and for a reason she couldn’t understand, she let him. He backed away, taking a few strides, and prepared to vanish.

“Wait!” Vienna demanded. Feeling too dizzy to get to her feet, she stayed seated on the floor.

With his back to her, he glanced back.

In the stillness, she found herself at a loss for words. What had she meant to say to him?

“If you’re going to tell me you love me . . .” He waited, expectantly.

“I wasn’t!”

He gave a nod and prepared to leave.

“Wait!”

“Quickly, love. I cannot stay here. I’ve used the dragon in my soul. I need to cool him before he strikes needlessly.”

“Will he strike me?”

Slowly, as the choir of shouts and curses of the guards and king grew nearer, he turned. “Of course not.”

In physical pain, Vienna hoisted herself to her feet and walked over to him. “Before you go, I need you to transport me to the royal gardens.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Your father will be worried.”

“You’re a warlock,” Vienna snapped. “Leave a note, won’t you?”

His green eyes glowed as he considered her request, the dragon in him breathing as he breathed. He wrapped his arms around her, sending them both into the air. They vanished through thought and space. An envelope with gold writing fell from nowhere and landed on the floor where they had been.

Slowly, the dragon dominating his every action, Augustus removed his arms from her. He took in deep breaths, and then turned away. His steps sounded, the snow crunching beneath his feet, as Vienna watched him leave.

It was quiet. The leafless trees were covered in snow. The swings swayed silently in the cool wind, all while Vienna assessed the weight of her weepy heart.

“Where are you going?” she asked him, watching as he turned with a look of confusion. “You’re not so bright, are you? Why else would I ask you to take us to a place where no one else would be?”

He stood, hopeful, but confused. It was his princess who was asking, after all. It wasn’t safe to hope.

She walked up to him, shaking her head at her future husband's stupidity. She decided it would one day be an action well-mastered. "Don't you think it's about time you had an actual conversation with me?"

She shivered in the cold, and he touched the wooden heart that she carried. He looked at her with eyes that had endured a thousand heartaches, knowing a world of longing and disappointment, having had his happily ever after stripped from him when she had stripped it from him, once upon a time.

He took her in now. His voice warmed her against the winter air, giving her the impression of sunlight.

"Yes." His entire body found ease. The fierce dragon, hidden within him, fell back asleep as he whispered, "Of course."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Vienna in Love

Spring had come at last. The buds on the trees were waking up, foals trotted to-and-fro in the grassy pastures, terrorizing Poem, and Seamus spent his days in the gardens, walking on the garden path, thinking about white roses.

Vienna held a book under her arm as she strolled through the orchard, admiring the peach trees returning to life. It would be some time before she tasted a peach pie, but it was something she joyfully looked forward to.

Yes, she was strolling, but she wasn't without an agenda. She had followed him here. He was leaning against a peach tree, looking up into the tangled branches. He noticed her now as she moved toward him.

She had met Vincent first, but she knew so little about him. Each day, he sat with her, called out names, and listened to story after story of long-lost love and days of wishing and longing.

But the one name he never called out, was his own.

Vienna crossed the grounds and approached him. She leaned beside him and together they looked up into the mess and maze of tree branches. They seemed to signify more than tree branches.

Kindly, Vienna whispered, "You were in love, too, weren't you, Vincent?"

"Yes," he answered like all the other weepy ghosts as they remembered bits of their lives that still haunted them in death.

"Was it epic?" It seemed like a forbidden question. She had discussed love with hundreds and hundreds of different men, but somehow it was different when she talked about it with Vincent. Somehow it was personal.

He nodded. "It was epic."

"Did she hurt you?" Vienna asked, shyly asking the question she had asked them all.

"Several times," Vincent said, after some thought. "But I hurt her several times too." He gave the princess a knowing look. "You'll find you will. Love is about forgiveness, beyond all else."

"What was she like?"

He hummed, closing his eyes, thinking of her. "She was a real lady, with blond hair and grey eyes, wearing bonnets and clever enough to get her way without ever raising her voice. She played the piano. She played until night hid her waking world away. She would then dress in drag and take the fiddle she hid under her bed to the bar where the servants went to every night. There she would play as a man. No one found out of course. She was far too clever."

Vienna smiled, picturing Vincent with a rebel of a woman. "How did you meet?"

"I was one of the fools who'd ask for her hand in dances and doted on her when she'd play piano. She hated all that. One night, after some business with her father, I saw her climbing out of her balcony window. I followed her to the bar." He laughed to himself. "Enter a long series of events."

"I thought you said no one found out."

"Well, no one cleverer than I."

"And you fell in love?"

"Not at first. She didn't love me. She didn't trust me."

“But you kept her secret?”

“I like the fiddle much more than the piano.”

“What was her name?”

“I should introduce her to you sometime.”

“When you find her?”

“Hmm . . .” Vincent leaned on his elbow, propping himself up so that he could see her better. “Who’s to say I haven’t?”

“Do you mean to say that you *have* found her?”

He leaned back against the tree. “She’s dying to meet you. But I told her it’s impossible. Your *sight* is horribly misogynistic.”

“I don’t understand. How could you have found your love when no one else has?”

He took a woman’s handkerchief out of his pocket. “I like to think it’s because, quite literally, we lived happily ever after.”

Vienna was at a loss for words, until another man’s presence interrupted them. Vienna told Vincent that she’d be right back, and then hurried to greet him.

“Did you know Vincent found his true love in death?”

Augustus looked Vienna over before looking at the ghost under the peach tree. “His wife, Keria?”

“Keria?” She tasted the name.

With one hand Augustus cupped her face and brushed his thumb over her lips. “We can always go back to White Minstrel, you know? Spend a few hours fishing by the river. I don’t think the new steward would mind a few illegal immigrants passing through. Plus, I hear there’s a splendid bakeshop there.”

“I’ve got an appointment at eleven o’clock.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to remove the curse?”

“What curse?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“And lose Vincent and Seamus?” Vienna shook her head. “Besides, I think I’ve found my calling.”

“Being a ghost therapist?”

“Every great ruler has something wonderfully peculiar about them.” Vienna justified her decision. “I just so happen to be able to see dead, broken-hearted, crying men.”

“What shmuck put you through that?”

“Hmm . . . I don’t know. But word around is that he’s a really nice guy.”

“That tends to happen, once you get to know someone.”

“Or once he finally strikes up a conversation with her,” she argued. “In fact, I think I started that conversation.”

“Yes, my pearl.” He stroked back her hair, lovingly. “Yes you did. And I truly believe we will live happily ever after.”

The End

Postscript

*Princess Vienna of the house of Morel and Augustus East, son of the Dragon Witch, did get married.
Five years later.*

About the Author



Isabel was E. L. Schoeman's debut novel. It received five-star reviews from Readers' Favorite Reviews and Readers' Favorite's Honorable Mention Award for Historical Fiction. You can find more about her and her work at elschoeman.ca