



THE
WAYWARD
WOMEN
SERIES

ELIZABETH
AND THE TOME OF
KNOWLEDGE
Angelique Anderson

ELIZABETH AND THE TOME OF KNOWLEDGE

THE WAYWARD WOMEN SERIES
BOOK ONE

ANGELIQUE S. ANDERSON



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FOREWORD

The Wayward Women Series is a set of stories where-in the heroine is led by a group of fairies against a never-ending war against Tovras, the Warlock ruler of the Realm of the Dead. Each Story is unique, but not connected in a way that you must read each one in order.

I hope you enjoy each woman's story and the magical elements that make each journey what it is.

As always, thank you, dear reader, for supporting me over the years. Please enjoy the newest one.

Sincerely,

Angelique S. Anderson

You can enjoy the rest of the books in this world here:

Selena and the Hourglass of Time

<https://books2read.com/Selenaandthehourglass>

Nessie and the Mask of Remembrance

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DEDICATION

*For Angel, Sophia, Natalie, Zoey and Ellie.
No matter where you are in life, or how old you get...
never lose your imagination or creativity. You are
all that is right in my world.*

To those of you struggling to keep your head up, this is your reminder that it does get better. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Until then, thank you for taking this adventure with me.

You are the reason I do what I do.

CHAPTER ONE



The exclusive ball was not for Captain Woolf to attend. He had business there, but it was the fairy's subconscious whispers that ultimately convinced him to be in attendance. He slid a wolf mask on, hiding his unkempt face.

The streetlight's glow barely gave passersby pause to take notice of the curious gentleman as he gazed at the oversized manor with its tall, ivory columns and grand wraparound porch. The captain, fitted in an elegant black and gray tailcoat, looked every bit a member of the upper class that lingered about the porch and yard, sipping their wine and chatting.

From tastefully manicured bushes, fairy sisters Nixine and Nishley tucked their tiny bodies behind deep green leaves.

"Yes," Nishley tapped her chin with her finger, "he'll do quite nicely." She watched the captain with impish delight as he made his way towards the dark oak doors of the manor house.

"Sister, are you sure this is wise?" Nixine fluttered by, her pale, blue face iridescent in the moonlight.

"No, of course, I'm not sure. But if Elizabeth is not tempted, how do we know her love is pure?" Nishley reasoned. "Besides, it just so happens to work in our favor that this particular gent has unfinished business with the lady of the house."

"Yes, still not sure how you pulled that off, but I suppose it is agreeable for

tonight's cause." Nixine nodded.

"Do we tempt fate? Or do we tempt love?" Oona chimed in, opalescent eyes wide as they watched the man from afar.

"It is an age-old question, and tonight it is both, no doubt," Nishley agreed. Their translucent wings fluttered quietly behind them, visible to only the eyes of the fairies.

In the silence of the eve, the only sound was the soft stringed music from the elegant ball floating into the crisp night air.

"The captain wishes to exact his revenge, and Elizabeth questions her feelings for the earl. This way, we find the truth." Nishley fluttered closer to the mansion to watch the captain and the Light Bearer. If her plan didn't work, everything they were fighting to save could end.



THE JINGLE of a well-played melody soared through the air like a kiss from heaven. The captain had been watching a particular young woman from the moment she entered the room. Her cascade of red curls shone in the light of chandelier as she glided elegantly across the cherrywood floor. Her fair skin was as pure as sunlight, and he felt immediately entranced. Seeing that she remained untethered to a dance partner, he politely grabbed her hand, swishing it across the polished wooden floor. The yet-to-be introduced beauty laughed as he twirled her about; the sound reaching his ears was almost as enchanting as the music that guided them.

As they glided about the room, Captain Woolf McNeil, pirate, and thief extraordinaire, found himself so enchanted he nearly forgot why he'd come to the ball in the first place. The woman had distracted him from the moment she sashayed into the room. Her footsteps were as delicate as the layers of lace and silk adorned her perfect frame.

His wolf mask, though fitting for his character, had not been intended for her. It had been intended for none other than Duchess Mary Lissett Geoghan, the lady of the house, who hosted this extravagant gala to show off her wealth.

He intended to rob the duchess blind, take all her precious jewels, then remove his mask as he introduced himself. He'd hoped that Duchess Geoghan would realize the thief was the son she cast away, making her regret her mistake for years to come. Then he would tell her that she had fulfilled her debt to him this evening.

The captain's plan was perfect until the pale-skinned goddess walked into the room and made him forget everything. As they waltzed expertly across the floor, he moved his hand from her waist to the small of her back and pulled her tightly against him. The warmth of their breath mingled. She smelled like cinnamon and Christmas, and he drank in her presence like a fine wine.

She laughed melodiously, smiling at him and batting her thick lashes. "You dance like a prince."

"Not a prince, just your humble servant," Captain Woolf responded, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing it. The whiskers above his mouth tickled her skin.

"Well, humble servant, to whom do I owe the pleasure of such a wonderful dance?" Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment, and, like a rose blooming under the sun, Captain Woolf found her radiant.

"Captain Woolf, ma'am." He took off his hat in true gentleman's fashion and bowed to her, his gaze never leaving hers.

"Well, Captain Woolf, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Lady Elizabeth of the house of Whitten."

A name lovely and befitting as the woman who bore it, he thought. "Lady Elizabeth, may I escort you to the gardens this evening?" He offered her the crook of his elbow, and though she hesitated briefly, she graciously accepted.

"That sounds delightful, but, pray tell, Captain Woolf, if I am to walk with you, do you suppose you could remove your mask? I promise I won't laugh."

That caused him to stop abruptly and turn to her as he gently pulled his arm away from hers. "What makes you think what lies beneath my mask is laughable?" He winked.

Elizabeth responded with bubbling laughter. "Well, there must be some reason you're hiding... Perhaps you're a scallawag come to steal my virtue?"

Now it was his turn to blush; the thought had crossed his mind more than once, but he'd done nothing but treat her like a lady and would continue to do so.

"I'm afraid you've found me out, Lady Elizabeth, and now I must take my leave, for I cannot face the humiliation of you gazing upon my face."

Elizabeth gasped, forehead crinkled with worry until she realized what he said was in jest. Her lips turned up in a smile. "You're teasing?"

"Of course, milady," he answered with a charming smile.

"Well then, are we going to stroll through the gardens or not?" Her voice was playful and sent his heartbeat reeling out of control. She gently linked her arm through his once more.

He had come here to take what was rightfully his, and now this lovely little package presented a complication. Captain Wolf's lips formed a charismatic smile, his firm, square chin and dimpled cheeks emphasized by the grin on his face.

"Are you sure? What if I'm a scallywag?" He used Elizabeth's words against her, doubting she would mind. They had already established a comfortable rapport.

"Now, now, mind your manners, Captain. Tell me more about how you came to be here this eve." And just like that, she was diving straight into his past without knowing. The thought punched into his mind with unwelcome clarity.

How I came to be here this eve? If I answer that, she'll run as fast as she can in the opposite direction. How do I tell her my history with the duchess? How do I tell her I am the unwanted child of a high society lady who prides herself on the respect she gets from others and the wealth she has acquired from hurting those around her? How do I tell Elizabeth, a woman I just met, that Duchess Mary Lissett Geoghan is the worst kind of abandoner.

How do I tell Elizabeth that I came here tonight not to dance, but to take the most priceless rubies Mary owns and show her my face, so she will know why I did it? That I came here to take back some of the wealth and riches that were mine due to me being the one and only son of the duchess.

"The duchess is my mother, though she'd probably have me killed for saying so." Captain Woolf waited for Elizabeth to respond, certain she wouldn't believe

a word he said. *Why did I say that out loud? What if she does believe me and reports me to the authorities for lying about the lady of the house even though it's true?* Paranoia crept into his consciousness like an unwelcome house guest, forcefully and with no invite. "Goodness, Captain... did you just claim to be a scion of the duchess?" Elizabeth's voice took on a particular tone. He wasn't sure, but he thought he detected disbelief.

Good, she doesn't believe you... Now get the hell out of here and get back to your ship.

"Indeed, I did. I know it's hard to believe that a scallywag such as I came from such class, such high society. I assure you it's true," Captain Woolf finished. *What is wrong with you? Stop talking!* Had he completely lost his head? He couldn't seem to keep anything from her.

"It's not hard to believe you came from high society." Elizabeth's tone was confident, and her shoulders relaxed. Not at all the reaction he expected. "You've done nothing but conduct yourself like a gentleman the entire time I've been in your company. I've no reason to believe anything less of you. Pray tell, Captain... Why are you wasting time with me when you should be in there, schmoozing with the guests and your mother? Why on earth would she have you killed for telling me that you're her son?" Elizabeth's eyebrows furrowed in concern, her large, almond-shaped eyes searching his.

"Well, I'd no sooner waste time with her or her guests than I would try to teach a fish to swim. If she knew who I was, she'd have me killed because she already paid to have me taken care of once before. I doubt much has changed since then."

Elizabeth's face drained of color. Her rich, brown eyes gazed so fiercely into his, that he was sure she would see right into his soul, glimpse his darkness, and run in the other direction.

"Captain, I'm generally pretty good at reading people. Especially when it comes to detecting falsehoods, but I feel like there is something... some large bit of information I am missing. You don't owe me anything, of course, but I find it hard to believe that your mother, the beloved Duchess Mary Geoghan, would not want you as part of her life. I mean, it's reprehensible."

“Well, I don’t know about you or your life, but I can assure you that the gown of roses and lace my mother wraps herself in is flimsy indeed. There are many things at work that you don’t know, and I can also assure you that I do not tell falsehoods. I find it quite tasteless. So, when I tell you she tried to be rid of me, I promise you it’s true.

“I was merely five years old at the time. She sold me to a cousin or uncle. To be honest, I doubt he was even related to our family. Uncle Charles, I called him. He took well enough care of me until I was about twelve and started doing things that little boys do. Climbing trees, pilfering items from the local market, that sort of thing.

“‘Uncle’ Charles told me to stop it, or he’d sell me and get his money back. Needless to say, thievery became something I couldn’t live without. First, it was for the thrill; then it was because I was told I couldn’t and shouldn’t do it.” *Woolf, shut your ever-loving mouth!*

“Oh, Captain...” Elizabeth said softly, pulling her arm from the crook of his elbow as they stopped walking. She stepped in front of him, so they were face to face, her soft hand caressing his coarsely bearded cheek. As she stroked his face gently, her free hand went to his chest. "You must have felt so alone, so... unwanted. I’m so sorry.” A tear rolled down her cheek, and Captain Woolf felt both touched by her empathy and uncomfortable.

“Yes, well. In spite of my mother’s actions, and my ‘uncle’ eventually selling me to work as a slave aboard a ship, I made my way. Turns out, working with that crew was the best thing that ever happened to me.” He shook his head, dismayed. *I’m just telling her everything as if she won’t be gone tomorrow.*

CHAPTER TWO



Elizabeth felt a cold shiver as the evening kissed the nape of her exposed neck. She brushed soft tendrils of curls away from her face.

“Elegant, like a lady should be,” her mother had said as she cinched Elizabeth’s corset too tight.

“What would mother say if she knew I walked the grounds with a self-proclaimed criminal?” The soft click of Elizabeth’s leather boots kissed the stone walkway they traversed together.

“Pardon, milady?” Captain Woolf’s voice cut through her thoughts.

“I said, what would my mother say if she knew the character of the man I walked the grounds with this night? She’d probably have me beheaded... or shipped to some upper-class, women’s-only education.” She purposefully ignored Woolf’s statements, unable to process everything he told her.

“I do not wish to be rude, milady, but did you hear at all? Did you hear what I said about my uncle shipping me off and what-not?”

“Indeed I did, Captain. I simply lack the proper response. Did you not hear me?”

“I did. You’re afraid your mother will behead you. I assumed it was typical feminine dramatics.”

Elizabeth cast him a cold glare. “I beg you not to say such things to me.” Her voice dripped ice.

“Beg your pardon, milady. I meant no offense.”

Or did he? Unwarranted tension mounted between them.

She shrugged, choosing not to dwell on his statement. “So, tell me more about the crew you grew so fond of,” Elizabeth redirected the conversation.

He deliberately ignored her with his following statement. “I have to wonder what kind of woman plays mother to you, given what you said,” the captain’s kind voice questioned.

“Well, it sounds like our mothers could be friends. Considering what you told me,” Elizabeth responded.

“You may not be wrong about that. You’re at the duchess’s party, are you not?”

“It’s a stature thing. Everyone who is anyone is here. I don’t think friendship has anything to do with it.”

He nodded. “I’d agree with you.”

She watched the Captain with keen interest.

“Surely they’re nothing like the friends of my own company that I keep. Friends that have become like family. My shipmates, my crew, who still to this day stand beside me. I suppose that’s what happens when your mother sells you for a bit of coin and your only semblance of a relative sells you off. I had to make my way, find my own family.” He stopped walking, dropped her arm from his, then paced in front of her. “You’ll have to forgive me, my lady; I’ve no idea why I dare to tell you all these things. I’ve never done such a thing before. You won’t give me away, will you?”

The wind picked up, blowing loose from Elizabeth’s braid soft tendrils of her hair, and her eyes gazed into his expectantly.

“Of course not. I could never,” Elizabeth said sincerely. She reached out her hand, then, having second thoughts, stopped.

“Why stop?” he asked, his eyes lingering on her fingers.

“I long to reach out to you, to offer you the comfort of a loving embrace from someone who empathizes with having no real family. If I do....” She hesitated. “Well, I suppose it’s not proper to say.”

“I’ve lived a life shrouded in lies. It does me no service for you to speak anything but the truth.” He studied her face to see her reactions.

“To be honest, Captain... I’m afraid my heart will be carried away with me.” Her voice lowered as she expressed what she’d been thinking. She turned away from him.

“An untruth?” he questioned, surprised at her admission.

“No.” She shook her head. “Oh, Captain, I’m afraid I have been too bold to come with you out here. Too brave.” Her body tensed.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Captain, I should have told you from the beginning.” She lowered her eyes as she sucked in a deep breath. “I’m betrothed. It was senseless to walk out here with you, but I couldn’t help myself. I was drawn to you....” Elizabeth closed her eyes, expecting him to grow angry that she’d led him on. The spark that occurred between them would now be snuffed by the cold reality of her confession.

Captain Woolf sighed, and she could feel his eyes boring holes into her face, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him. He surprised her with his quiet, gentle response. “You look like you wish you were anywhere else in the world right now.”

“I do. I know in my heart of hearts I can’t go back to face him.” She opened her eyes to meet Woolf's gaze.

“Him who?” he asked, and she saw his shoulders tense.

“Earl Julius Kingsland,” she said through clenched teeth.

“You don’t like your husband-to-be?” Captain Woolf blinked quickly, raising his eyebrows.

Elizabeth turned her back to Woolf, her elegant curls trailing down her back even as a quiet breeze caressed them.

“The thought of my impending marriage looms over me like an angry beast,” she said, voice heavy with disappointment. *Can the captain not tell that I have no feelings for my fiancé?*

The captain's embossed bronze buttons glinted under the moonlight. His shining black boots were the subject of her attention; she couldn’t bring herself to look him in the eyes.

“WHY DO you feel the need to tell me such a thing?” His voice was no longer playful.

The dynamic between them was shifting, and Elizabeth didn't like that he quietly tapped his foot or rubbed his face repeatedly. “I just thought....” Elizabeth felt her voice getting weak as her eyes met his. She was struggling to explain herself. She went silent, her white-satin gloved hands fiddling with the layers of lace on her dress.

“You just thought that if I were going to steal your virtue, I ought to know it belongs to someone else?” The captain's voice had taken on an edge. She had irritated him, though she couldn't figure out why. It wasn't as if they owed each other anything.

“I just felt that I should be honest with you, as you have been honest with me, milord.” Elizabeth's voice trembled, full of emotion.

“How dare either of us stir up feelings for the other...” the captain remarked, jutting out his chest and straightening his back.

“We are two strangers being swept away by the magic of a ballroom party, where lords and ladies are equals and find solace in each other's arms,” she said softly.

He scoffed. The wind circled them, causing his suit's coattails to flutter behind him as he stopped pacing.

The captain took a step toward her, removing his mask as he did so. “Indeed we are, milady. Except I am no lord.”

“And clearly, I am no lady.”

“And clearly, the one you are betrothed to does not hold your affections.”

Elizabeth gasped. He *had* read through her thoughts. *I've misjudged him.*

“That gasp was all I needed to do what I aim to do now,” Captain Woolf said, stepping toward her, grabbing her chin, and tilting it up slightly. His head bent forward; he pressed his warm lips against hers for just a moment. When they broke apart, he continued holding her chin, so their eyes never lost contact, “I came to steal jewels and silver, and instead had something much more valuable stolen.”

Elizabeth knew she should leave; after all, he was nearly a perfect stranger.

However, once he removed his mask, she couldn't tear herself away. The captain's eyes, no longer hindered by shadow, now sparkled like ocean depths, and when he kissed her, her heart skipped.

"Elizabeth Genevieve Littleton, what in the world are you doing?" The stark, shrill voice belonged to her mother and had probably been heard for miles.

She turned to face her fate.

Adella Littleton stood aghast, her hands on her hips, her cheeks red with anger.

"Mother, it was..." Elizabeth struggled to find words, but the only thing that came to mind was 'nothing,' and the kiss she shared with Captain Woolf was certainly not nothing. She waited for a kiss like that all her life. It was everything. She turned back to him, to beg him not to leave, but the mysterious captain had already disappeared.

"Elizabeth, you will come with me at once and tell your betrothed what you have done. Then you will beg for his forgiveness until he tells you to stop. Were you willing to throw it all away for a perfect stranger? How could you! I am so disappointed in you! You ungrateful child." Adella continued to scream and berate Elizabeth about her life choices, but the harsh scent of whiskey on the captain's breath and the sensation of his warm lips still lingered even though he'd gone.

Lady Elizabeth Genevieve Littleton had just experienced her first real kiss of freedom. She could not be wed to Earl Julius Kingsland. Not now, not in a million years.

Not for all the money in the world.

CHAPTER THREE



“Are you listening, Elizabeth?” Adella’s shrill voice sliced through the evening like a freshly sharpened blade.

“Hm...” was all Elizabeth answered, thinking longingly of the captain.

Smack!

Elizabeth’s cheek burned with fire at her mother’s unexpected blow.

“Damn you, child, focus your attention where it belongs. Now... you will go back in there and dance with the duchess’s guests. You will not make a spectacle of yourself, and you are not to be seen with that man again, do you understand?”

A tear stung Elizabeth’s eye. She sucked in a huge breath and let it out slowly, her pain fading as she did so.

“How am I to hide my newly acquired makeup, dearest Mother?” Elizabeth tenderly massaged her cheek, to take the edge off the pain.

Her mother ignored her and instead motioned to one of her well-trained servants. The servant, who had dressed for the occasion, nodded and disappeared for a moment, returning quickly with a lace and jewel-studded mask.

This was not the first time her mother had struck her in public, though typically, Elizabeth would excuse herself and make her way home or to her room, depending on the location of the outburst. Tonight’s festivities provided the perfect cover, as the duchess had several masquerade masks created for the occasion. Elizabeth had brought her own but, in the excitement of being swept away by the captain, she misplaced it.

“...and Elizabeth, if I catch you whoring around again, I will not only tell your betrothed, I will make sure you are so marked that if he doesn’t want you, no man will.” Her mother’s hazel eyes flashed with fires of hatred, and Elizabeth wondered what she did to gain her mother’s disapproval.

Sure, she kissed a stranger, but Elizabeth had always been the epitome of a lady. Manners, education, and respect had been her focus from the time she was a little girl.

“I was not whoring around, Mother; I’m not you,” she said insolently and stormed inside the lavishly furnished manor. Anger raged through her like volcanic fire. She heard her mother gasp dramatically and quickened her step so she could get lost in the crowd until late evening when she and her mother would depart. She could only imagine the punishment she would suffer then, but for now... for the first time in her life, she had the last word.

It’s not like it isn’t true. From the moment my father passed away, my mother had a slew of gentleman callers who stayed long past what propriety allowed. I may be sixteen, but I am not stupid. Now, caught in the crowd of people that surrounded her, Elizabeth surveyed the room earnestly. *If only for one more glance of him, to know he was real, so I have the courage to do what I must.*

The captain was nowhere to be seen. Had they not just met, she would have shed a tear for love lost. Their meeting was of chance, of beautifully blessed fate, the very thing that gave her the courage to stand up to her mother. Elizabeth would rather end up an old spinster, than marry someone who made her feel less than the captain made her feel in their short time together.



CAPTAIN WOOLF quickly retreated behind a lithe statuette adorned by roses and vines, his gaze remaining on Elizabeth for the entire incident between her and her mother. When the woman slapped her, he almost jumped from his hiding spot.

That’s an excellent way to get yourself thrown in a cell, and you didn’t get this far just to be locked up now, he reasoned with himself.

Then something surprising happened; Elizabeth shot back with a dagger of her own, insulting her mother before storming off.

Captain Woolf waited until the garden was clear and everyone had disappeared before he followed Lady Littleton himself. He had to be sneaky. *No problem, that's something I'm good at.*

Captain Woolf made his way through the large double doors and scooted along the walls, keeping a close eye on the older Lady Littleton, then scanning his surroundings for Elizabeth. No doubt, she made herself scarce. She wasn't stupid.

"Pssst..." He turned in the direction of the noise but couldn't identify its source.

"Pssstttt..." It was louder that time, and he saw a pale hand reach around a pillar, a lithe finger motioning for him to come closer. *I'm going to hell for sure.* He followed the motion, and, sure enough, it led to Elizabeth.

Captain Woolf checked where her mother was and, satisfied the woman had occupied herself a suitor near the food and exorbitant amounts of wine on the other side of the room; he grabbed Elizabeth around the waist. His head bent to her ear.

"You are too brave, my dear. Come on; I don't want to risk your mother catching you with me. Let's get out of here."

Elizabeth didn't even need to nod before he grabbed her hand and led her out of the ballroom, through the hallway to a kitchen near the back. Elizabeth giggled nervously, and he put a finger to his lips to shush her before leading her out the back door.

The evening sun was starting to set. If they kept to the shadows, they would be safe.

"Where are we going?" Elizabeth asked, as loud as she dared.

"Somewhere your mother won't slap you for running off with me."

"Oh, Captain, you weren't supposed to see that!"

"I imagine so." Taking the opportunity to grab her hand tighter, he pulled her closer as they snuck along the edge of the house. Then they ran the property length to the elegant Victorian stable that housed the horses.

Captain Woolf led her inside, knowing full well what it would look like to an outsider, and thankful the party guests were still entertained enough with the party that no one seemed to be milling about.

“Warning bells should be going off in your head, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Yet oddly, they aren’t.” Why didn't she seem afraid of him? Shouldn't she be?

“It’s true, every warning bell in my mind should be going off. A stranger is taking me to a barn just as it’s beginning to get dark. You are a self-proclaimed criminal who's already kissed me without permission.” Elizabeth paused for a moment. “Except I’m not afraid. And I’ve said too much.” Her face turned crimson.

“Feel free to speak as you wish, milady.” The look in her eyes held a hint of promise. Did he dare kiss her again? “As for asking permission, I’ll make sure to make it a priority next time. So, may I kiss you again?”

Elizabeth sucked in a deep breath as he faced her. She nodded.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” he said sincerely, his gaze drinking in her pale face in the moonlight.

Stepping closer, she placed her hand on his chest, mimicking her movements from when they stole a kiss in the garden. He leaned toward her, and her eyes closed.

Then, in an unexpected move, his arm encircled her back, and he lifted Elizabeth in his arms. She let out a yelp of surprise, and he shushed her.

“Quiet until I get you out of here. I’m sure in Hades not going to get caught kidnapping, which I’ve no doubt your mother would accuse me of. So, we’ll get out of here as quickly and quietly as possible.” With that, he ran toward the back of the barn, where a black horse neighed softly. He tossed her onto it and simply said, “Hold on.” Then, untying the horse's lead, he looped his foot through the stirrup and swung his leg over, so he was sitting behind Elizabeth.

His arms wrapped around her waist tightly; he clicked his tongue and led the horse out of the barn. Instead of taking the road that circled the fountain in the front, Captain Woolf veered to the left, and they headed towards the woods.

The captain’s heart beat strong and wild as Elizabeth inhaled excitedly.

“Have I made a terrible mistake?” she said.

“Don’t fear; I won’t let harm come to ya.”

She smiled and leaned against him while they rode. Her warmth was the most natural feeling in the world, as if they were always destined to be this way.

He exhaled softly against her neck. “I could never harm you, Elizabeth.”

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CHAPTER FOUR



The wind rushed through her hair, the cold air kissing her bare skin. Elizabeth closed her eyes and leaned her head against the captain. Captain Woolf had complete control of the reins, and, with his attention focused forward, the ride through the dark evening was bumpy but peaceful. Her imagination shifted from dangerous scenarios to overtly romantic ones, but even if the former were true, she had always been a good girl. She wouldn't give that up now.

Elizabeth didn't know if Captain Woolf was dangerous, but something told her he didn't get through life on his good looks.

As they got farther into the woods, and farther away from the manor, the air grew cleaner, its dance upon her face like angels caressing her. *They say God is beautiful, but his beauty is beyond fathomable on nights like tonight when heaven seems to have touched earth.* She sighed softly, and the smell of ocean hit her nostrils.

"Where are we going, Captain Woolf?" she yelled against the wind.

"To my ship, milady. It is my most prized possession, and I want to share it with you before I never see you again."

His answer sent her young, love-hungry heart careening out of control. Everything about tonight was off, her behavior... this man. *Perhaps I will wake up to find that I am dreaming, and the ball has not happened. Only, I hope that is not the case.*

"I do eventually have to go back home," Elizabeth said.

“I’ve no doubt but, until your reality can no longer wait for you, I want desperately for you to be part of mine.” Captain Woolf’s answer was honest, but his reality was very different than what he planned for the evening. In fact, nothing had gone according to plan. When Elizabeth was taken from him, he should have finished what he meant to do.

Captain Woolf should have stolen upstairs, found his mother’s room, taken as much precious jewelry as he could manage, and maybe pilfered an art piece or two before sneaking out the window and down the trellis. That was his original plan. He knew his mother would never suspect him; she didn’t even know he was still alive. *Not that she would have cared.*

Then he would have brought the treasures back to his ship and been on his merry way. *To where?* He wasn’t sure. The captain had discussed many destinations with his crew; England, France, Australia, China...the world was their oyster. Though they could have comfortably stayed on the sea as well. That was where he wanted to be. Woolf didn’t find it necessary to return to land unless they needed to pillage or stock up on supplies.

Somewhere deep inside him, he knew he couldn’t go on. One could only be a pirate for so long before the adventure wore thin and the fight left him.

Perhaps Elizabeth was a sign of his end fast approaching. He had never desired domestic bliss until he held her in his arms and kissed her virgin lips.

With the coastline fast approaching, the mast of his ship protruded from the evening mist like a soldier at attention. Pride swelled in Captain Woolf’s chest when he saw it. It was a formidable ship. *Would Elizabeth think so? Would she appreciate its beauty? The rugged grooves of the hand-carved wood and the hand-sewn sails with his pirate emblem upon them?*

Dad blammit! His pirate emblem! She’d fight him to get away as soon as she saw it! What was he thinking?

Elizabeth let out a startled gasp as they drew closer to the ship. There was no docking port where they rode, but a decent-sized rowboat had been tied to the shore.

“Is that...yours?” she said in wonderment, her eyes sparkling.

“Indeed, it is. Care to come aboard, at least for a while? I promise to return

you home safe and sound.”

Warning bells should have gone off in her brain, but if they did, she ignored them. The emblem on his flag was that of a black horse, with swords crossed over it. Catching her staring at it, he cleared his throat.

“Everything okay, milady?”

“Everything is lovely. Yes, I’d love to come with you to see your ship. What about the horse?”

“Oh, that belongs to my mother... I imagine you can ride it back when it’s time. You can even tell her I kidnapped you and threatened you with all sorts of things, but you made your escape on the horse... Or whatever it is you wish to tell her.” They stopped trotting, and he slid off the horse’s rump, his feet making a solid thump on the ground.

“Are you kidnapping me?” He noticed her voice grow quiet and shaky.

“Not even a little bit.” He spoke quickly to reassure her of his intentions. The captain grabbed her hands while she swung her leg, so both feet dangled from one side of the horse. Easing her onto the ground, he kept one of her hands in his, squeezing it tightly, protectively.

Like two people who had known each other always, they walked hand-in-hand to the row boat. Elizabeth seemed to know instinctively to sit on the far end so he could shove out from the bank and hop in the end closest to shore. Two dark mahogany paddles lay on the floor of the boat. The thought of rowing must have excited her so much, that she didn’t even wait until he was in. She propped the paddles against the side and began rowing like her life depended on it.

Well, she tried to, at least. Watching her awkward movements as she struggled with the oar, he could tell she’d never rowed a boat a day in her life. It was endearing, how she struggled against the waves, fighting to do it on her own, not asking for help. He thought about offering her help, but he’d already picked up that she was a ‘figure it out on her own type of woman. Something he respected but could make her life slightly more complicated.

“Eager little bee, aren’t you?” He chuckled to himself, teasing her.

She nodded, a smile stretching across her face like the wings of an eagle spread across the sky.

“It’s just.... All my life, I’ve always had to do as I was told. Play helpless maiden, follow orders, never step out of line, do my studies, marry the man I’m told to marry. I just didn’t want tonight to be like that. I can row. I can do things on my own.”

“You’ll find no one here saying otherwise. I need to warn you, though... The lot you are about to meet on my ship, they are a totally different type of people than what you’re used to. I can handle them, but just don’t... incite them.” He had to pause to think of the correct term but failed.

“Incite them?” She laughed. “How would I do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know, Elizabeth. Something tells me you would figure out a way.” Woolf grinned a half-smile that crept into his left eye and, incidentally, highlighted his chiseled chin and dimpled face.

“I must be dreaming,” she said as they made their way out to the open sea, drawing closer and closer to the beast of a ship anchored offshore.

“I think I’ve said that to myself over a hundred times tonight. You are the dream, milady.” All nuance of sarcasm was filtered from his voice. From the moment they met, everything that was true, right, and acceptable seemed to be thrown out the window.

“Why so grim, milady?” he said, noticing her frowning.

“Not grim, just... contemplative. Hellfire will rain down on me when I return home this eve; I do not doubt that.” Her head tilted down slightly, her eyes watching the gentle tossing of the waves. Carefully he scooted across the boat and moved closer to her.

“Then don’t go back; just stay with me.” Was that pleading in his voice?

“Are you serious? We don’t even know each other!” she cried.

He could see it in her face; she believed she had to go home and face the waiting consequences. Attempting to comfort her, he spoke again. “It’s true, but you don’t know your fiancé, yet you must marry him. I’m not even asking for that. Just.... I don’t know... Join my crew. I’ll teach you to captain, and we can just go from there?”

“Oh, Captain...” A tear escaped one of her eyes, and she turned to survey the soft rocking of the ocean waves against their boat. “One does not just abandon a

life of slavery and embrace their freedom. There are many chains that still hold me.”

Darn it all if she wasn't just the most beautiful, heartbreaking woman he'd ever met!

“I understand. Then take your shackles off for me... just for tonight. I promise to have you home by morning.

Elizabeth nodded while turning to catch his gaze. He leaned forward and kissed her again. She welcomed it as the boat rocked softly from side to side. The sound of peaceful silence wrapped them in a comforting embrace, and, as the moon finally settled in the sky, several stars twinkled their delight at the young lovers adrift amidst the lulling waves.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Oh, ho ho.... Captain’s got himself a fancy little trollop!” a boisterous voice called over the stern of the ship, startling Elizabeth and Captain Woolf from their kiss. The captain jumped up and away from her so quickly, that his boot lost its footing, and he fell backward into the rowboat. Which set the rowboat rocking so hard that Elizabeth screamed and gripped the sides, dropping the oars in the process.

Recognizing her mistake and seeing the oars gently floating away, she quickly leaned over to retrieve one. She found out too late what a bad idea that was when the small vessel, already off-balance, promptly flipped over, emptying her into the ocean. As the frigid water engulfed her, she realized how difficult it was to swim upward with the layers of her gown, steel-boned corset, and boots all saturated with seawater.

Fighting panic, she thrashed her arms, struggling to pull herself to the surface before her body ran low on oxygen. As her clothing grew heavier and the pitch-black water pushed her down, she had a brief flash of the captain’s handsome face. At least she was dying free, not at the hands of her tyrannical mother.

With the cold making her bones ache, she gave one final push towards the surface and felt something hard and unforgiving knock her in the back of the head. Then everything went black.



EVERYTHING HAPPENED SO QUICKLY, Captain Woolf barely had time to recover from falling before he broke the surface of the water. He sucked in a deep gasp of air and, in the light of the moon, saw the base of the boat as it rose out of the water and flipped over.

What just happened?

“Elizabeth? Where are you?” The commotion made the once calm water, turbulent, and he ducked under the waves to see if he could find her. The darkness of the depths was no help, and he rose to the top again, looking around wildly. “Elizabeth?”

Frantic thrashing coming from the overturned rowboat drew his attention and he swam underneath to get to the sound. With one hand out of the water, he felt his way through, worried he would hit his head or run into her. But the way was clear.

Panic built in the captain’s chest as seconds seemed to turn into hours. He dove down, arms flailing in front of him, trying to find Elizabeth’s body. Just when his lungs felt like they would collapse, he felt feather tresses of hair slipping through his fingers. *Elizabeth!* He grabbed hold. She was sinking fast, and he didn’t care if he hurt her. Time was running out.

As he pulled her up, the top of her head became visible. He reached farther down to grab her shoulder, pulling her closer to him. Now, with a firm grip and feeling faint from lack of air, he managed one final push to the surface, gasping with all his might.

“Er...Captain, are ye all right?” Duncan’s voice called, though Woolf could barely see his form.

“Yes, Duncan, drop the ropes!”

“We already did, Captain!” Rock’s booming voice called, loud enough to cause its own waves.

“I can’t see them very well, and my arms are tired,” the captain yelled. Then something plunked in the water near him.

“Ther’, Captain, unless you can’t see the broadside of a barn?” Rock was teasing, but the captain had no strength to humor him with a laugh.

The rope looked like a snake that rose to the heavens. Woolf grabbed it,

quickly tying it around him and Elizabeth, his strength running out. With the knot secured, he wrapped his arms around her and relaxed.

“All right, you lot, bring us up! And quickly! She’s not breathing!”

“Aye, Captain,” came the combined response.

Minutes began to feel like an eternity and, as they rose higher, the captain wondered how long Elizabeth could survive without breathing. *How long has it already been?*

His impatience grew like a fire tearing through trees, and he clutched her tighter.

“Elizabeth, just stay with me, okay? Just stay with me.” Then they were level with the deck and being hoisted over the edge. The captain undid the knot holding them together in one smooth motion, then laid Elizabeth on her back. He pumped her chest, attempting to push any liquid from her lungs.

Her body remained lifeless, and the captain fell on his rear, staring at her pale skin, wondering how a night that had started so wonderful had gone so wrong. *What have I done? What have I done? An innocent woman dead by my hands!* He scooted farther and farther from her, unwilling to accept that fate had given them but a moment before its cruel hand took her away.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Duncan said softly.

Captain Woolf stood up, anger on his face. He paced a few moments as anger swelled in him. Time was ticking by, and he was frustrated that, in the matter of one night, this woman had chipped away the ice built around his heart.

“Noooooooooooo!” the captain screamed, dropping to the ground. He slammed his fist on Elizabeth's chest. “No! You will not die! You will not!”

She remained lifeless, her pale skin as soft as the petals of a newly bloomed rose.

Gathering her in his arms, he brought her to his chest and squeezed her. “Elizabeth!”

Her head lolled to the side, resting on his shoulder, so he lowered her to look at her face. Still lifeless. Again, he squeezed her against him.

“I say, the captain has gon’ mad!”

“That he has!” a teenager who had been scrubbing the deck yelled.

Rock grabbed hold of Elizabeth's lifeless arms. "Captain, yer not right... Let me do away with her, and let's get away from this cursed place." Rock began to drag Elizabeth from the captain's arms, but Captain Woolf lunged after her, yanking Elizabeth hard against his chest.

"No! You bloody oaf, don't you touch her! I won't let her die! Ya hear that, you bloody woman? I won't let you die!" He balled his right hand into a fist, and while holding her limp form with his left hand, he beat against her back, letting her head rest on his shoulder as he did so.

For a moment, it seemed he was beating a dead horse. The crew looked away; sadness etched on their dirty faces.

Then, as if fate had been playing a joke on them all, Elizabeth vomited sea water—and food—down the captain's back.

"Elizabeth!" Captain Woolf exclaimed joyously and held her in front of him. Her pallor was positively awful, but she was breathing. "Hurry up, you lot, open up my quarters. Get some hot water boiling, and bring me some bread."

An off-key chorus of "Aye-Ayes," answered his demands, and the men scurried to do what they were told.

"Bring me some clothes for her from what we've pillaged," Captain Woolf barked more orders.

"Yes, sir." Another shipmate ran off to do what was demanded of him.

Captain Woolf scooped Elizabeth into his arms, cradling her like a child, unable to move his eyes from her face. Her breathing was ragged, but consistent, but her eyes remained closed. *I don't care... She's alive! I feel as if I could dance for days!*

Laying her in his bed, he pulled her heavy layers of lace and frills over her head. She moaned softly as her head fell back. Pulling the blanket over her, Woolf's hands brushed her naked arm. It was like icicles kissing his fingertips.

"She's freezing, you mangy lot! Get me that hot water and clean, dry clothes!" *How she's alive, I'll never know, but I thank God for it.*

The captain had never been a man of strong faith, but even he knew what had just occurred was nothing short of a miracle. He raised his eyes toward Heaven and mouthed a 'thank you.' It would take more than a miracle to change his

lying, stealing ways, but he wouldn't forget his gratitude to the bearded deity before the end of his days.

"Captain, this is all I could find. Is it all right? It doesn't seem fitting for a lady, but I found this necklace...."

Duncan brought the captain a simple satin gown of emerald green and, to adorn it, a delicate pearl necklace. As the captain recalled, it was taken from some debutante in the Americas.

"It's simple and elegant. It fits her perfectly. You've done well, Duncan. Now, fetch me the hot water. She'll catch her death if we don't get her warmed up."

"Captain, not meaning no disrespect, but it seems to me that death tried to catch 'er, and you chased it off."

The captain let out a laugh; he couldn't help himself.

"Duncan..."

"Yes?"

"Get the lady some hot water."

Duncan left the room. The door clicked quietly behind him, and the captain turned his attention towards Elizabeth. He would not rest until he was certain she would survive.

CHAPTER

SIX



Eight hours earlier

Earl Julius Kingsland sat at the piano, his fingers flying blithely over the keys as if they were the body of his love, and he was gently touching every lovely curve. His previous life would never have seen him with a woman like Elizabeth, but now, even in her absence, he missed the smell of her hair and the sound of her laughter.

“You’ve gone soft, Julius,” he told himself, his eyebrows furrowing as he recalled the days when he hadn’t been so spineless. In his heyday, he had been the most powerful mortal to grace the planet, a warlock no less. A warlock who had not spared a second glance to those beneath him. Even now, the image of who he was remained clear as a photograph. Tall, beard to his mid-chest, and power that emanated from his very fingertips. No one would have dared cross him then.

In his vision, he was Warlock Tovras, the most powerful and feared man throughout the land. He wore a thick, black cape that would indicate royalty, if not for the blood stains and ragged edges that dragged on the ground.

Underneath the cape, a deep V-neck revealed part of the simple shirt he wore beneath, along with a small rope belt held together by a big belt buckle. His pants were simple, incredibly wide, and reached his soft leather shoes. The

buckle contained the symbol of a dragon clutching the moon. His marker. A symbol of fear to all who knew it.

The ragged clothes were a far cry from the elegant threads he wore now, but his skin remembered the scratchy fabric and the heavy weight of the cape that was his symbol of power. In the back of his mind, a voice he thought was silenced begged for release. “*Free me,*” his subconscious begged, but he shook it off.

It was his salvation that the heavy wooden knocker on the door sounded just then. If it hadn’t, he felt he would have gone out of his mind. The image of his former self in warlock garments disappeared from his memory. He jumped from the thick oak bench he had carved himself and rushed to the door.

“Ah, my bride-to-be. You look radiant.”

She’s a worthless mortal; his conscious reminded him.

Even so, there was a lovely blush of red to her pale cheeks, and her dark brown eyes with their thick lashes made his heart palpitate.

Elizabeth dropped her eyes to the floor, “Thank you, Earl Kingsland.”

It bothered him that his intended still had a hard time looking him in the face. He wondered briefly if she knew something about his past. Then he shook his head; the fairy, Nishley, promised anonymity. He would never be confused with who he used to be as long as he fulfilled his end of the bargain.

As I live and breathe, my bride had better be able to look me in the eyes on our wedding day, or this will all be for naught.

“Earl Kingsland, we wondered if you might join us at Lady Geoghan’s ball later this eve. I know you said last that you were still contemplating it.” Lady Littleton’s voice cut over Elizabeth’s timid tone and sliced through his brain like a knife. It seemed no matter what the woman said, and in whatever tone... it still grated his nerves. He’d have to deal with her after the wedding.

No, you won’t. You’re a changed man now, his subconscious argued.

No, I haven’t changed. I’m just not dead anymore, wandering a spiritual plane as no one. A ghost of days gone by.

“Why, Earl, are you all right?” Lady Littleton’s high-pitched voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard. He wondered how Elizabeth stood to live with the

woman her whole life. Having a mother like that had no doubt taken its toll.

“Yes, milady. Never mind me... I just have much to do, and I can’t seem to get my focus. Thank you for the invite, Lady Littleton, and the ever-lovely Elizabeth. But I must decline for this eve. There will be another ball, no doubt. We all know that Lady Geoghan flaunts her wealth whenever she has the opportunity.” He took Elizabeth’s hand and bent his head to kiss the top. “I shall call you tomorrow afternoon, would that suit you?”

Lady Elizabeth nodded, then hurried back to the carriage. He couldn’t tell if she was hurt or relieved that he had turned them down. *Doesn’t matter. Though it will matter soon if I don’t finish that song. The fairy will surely send me back to the realm of the dead before night falls on my wedding day.*

Lady Littleton seemed taken aback, but she smiled and bowed, then headed back to the carriage where he knew she and Elizabeth would head home to prepare for the night’s festivities.

Two-hundred-fifty-six years in the realm of the dead made Tovras, now Earl Julius Kingsland, two things; first and foremost, grateful to be alive. And second, willing to do anything it took to never go back.

He returned to the piano and, once again, his fingers danced across the keys as he thought of his wedding night, and begged the moon and stars to grant him the song he desired to play.

The song of life.

“The song of life, what does that even mean? As in to raise the dead? I was a powerful warlock for four-hundred-twenty-two years, and, in all that time, I only ever raised the dead once. And that was to exact vengeance on an enemy. How am I to play a song that will bring someone back to life?”

The piano answered with silence.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Indigo Isle, Realm of the Fairies

NISHLEY DRIFTED under the lavender blossoms of gingergale, the lovely weeping tree that stood at the center of Indigo Isle. Like an angel of mercy, its soft branches brushed her tiny form. It was an embrace of acknowledgment, as if the tree were giving her its blessing.

“What if I made a terrible mistake?” Nishley screamed, silver rivers of glitter falling from her opalescent eyes as she looked upward. “I have given a warlock—Nay, not just any warlock, the vilest warlock in all of eternity, mortality. If he were to choose his wicked ways once more, he would kill us all.”

“Hush, Sister.” Oona appeared beside her; her pale face lifted upwards as well. Her expression was one of utter serenity. “Nish, lovely Nish, calm yourself. If King Bayard dies, we will be unprotected. The walls of Indigo Isle will be made visible, and every supernatural being ever created will come to take what they can. You acted out of desperation. What if Tovras does as you made him promise?”

“Earl Kingsland,” Nishley urged. “Please don’t speak his name. I’m afraid to scare the others.”

Oona nodded in understanding as Nixine joined them, her pearl blue hair radiating sunlight that shone brilliantly above them.

“Yes, Nish, what if he does as you made him promise? He will keep his mortality, not his powers, and marry a mortal woman and live a mortal life. The song of life will be ours to keep, and we can rescue our father.”

“Bayard,” all three fairy girls said in unison and reverence.

“Oh, Father...” Nishley teared up again, thinking about the consequences if Tovras decided to use the little bit of magic he had been granted for evil. “He promised, he promised,” she reassured herself. That would have to be enough for the moment.

“Come, Nish, let us visit Father. He’s looking well today, and he’s asking for you.” Nishley nodded and took Oona’s hand. Together, they drifted to king Bayard’s palace in silence.



PRESENT, Captain Woolf’s ship, Elizabeth’s quarters

CAPTAIN WOOLF TRIED NOT to worry, but it was a new day. He could only imagine what Lady Elizabeth’s mother was thinking. He had no doubt Lady Littleton would suspect he had kidnapped Elizabeth, and there would be a manhunt for his head. He could feel it in his gut. Not to mention, he had unfinished business with his mother, Lady Geoghan.

He laid his head on his desk. Papers and maps spread around him, and, in anger, he yowled and pushed them on the floor.

“I never meant for her to get hurt!” Captain Woolf yelled.

At that moment, the door to his quarters burst open.

“Cap’n, she’s awake!”

“She’s awake? By golly, Rock, I’m not going to be beheaded!” He ran to the man and pulled him down, kissing his dirty forehead affectionately. Then he hurried from his cabin, tapping on Elizabeth’s door quietly before he pushed it open.

Upon seeing Elizabeth, he gasped. The emerald green of the dress they’d

scrounged up for her matched her skin tone brilliantly, and, around her neck, the pearls made her look like a princess. She had tied her hair in a bun, and tendrils fell around the sides of her face. He wondered how she could look more enrapturing than she had the night before when they danced.

“Done looking, Captain? I’m quite hungry.” She was sitting upright and staring at him with the most mischievous grin he’d ever seen on a lady.

“Yes, of course. I’ll have my chef bring you breakfast right away. How are you feeling?”

“Parched and starved. You’re not a very good host.” Her voice was indignant.

His face fell until he saw the play of a smile on her pale, pink lips.

“No, I’m afraid I’m not. Not to mention, I just about got you killed,” he said sadly.

“Perhaps, but you’ve given me life.” She stood up and crossed the small cabin. Placing a soft hand on his arm, she squeezed gently. “You’ve awakened something in me I didn’t know existed. I can’t go back there; I can’t marry... that man.”

“Oh, but Elizabeth, you must! They’ll have my head. A life at sea is no life for a lady, trust me. If you joined my band of brigands, what virtue I haven’t stolen from looking at you will quickly be tossed into the ocean.”

“You’ve not stolen anything from me,” she replied harshly. Then, standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him fully and passionately. “There, I’ve given it to you.”

“Damn you, woman.” He grabbed her tiny frame, lifted her, and pushed her away from him before he did something he knew she would regret. “I’m a pirate, don’t you get it? And I’m good at what I do. I was only at that party to take what was mine; then, I would be on my way. I can’t have complications in my life.”

“Complications?” Her face paled, and she scrunched her eyebrows in pain. “That isn’t what you said last night. Why even come back to me? Why bring me here? I thought you wanted me to come with you?”

“Trust me, that is all I want. But I know the adventure will wear off in a few years, and you’re not going to want this life anymore. I care too much to make

you choose something I know you were not born for.”

“I don’t care that you’re a pirate; I care that you’re stupid!” she screamed.

“I’m stupid?” The terminology felt like a dagger to the gut.

“Yes, stupid... in that, you are about to lose the best thing that has ever happened to you.” Her face reddened in anger, then he saw tears falling.

“Elizabeth, I know I’m a stupid man. Trust me. But I am smart enough to know that this is no life for someone of your stature. You deserve all the most wonderful things, and you won’t have them with me. We steal, we kill, and we pillage. That’s what we do. You’ll never have to know those things with your fiancé.”

“I don’t love him!”

“And you love me?”

“Not yet, but I know that I could. In my heart—I feel things. Things I didn’t even know were possible. You have to let me take my chance here. Please—it’s my life. And this is my choice.”

The tears pouring down her face reminded him of the water he wiped away the night before, when she almost drowned.

“Elizabeth, I can’t risk losing you. Again. I need to know that you’re safe and happy, and trust me... If it doesn’t work out with your fiancé, I will be back because I will wait for you until I am the only option left. But—I will not condemn you to a life of crime and treason until it’s the only way to keep you alive.”

“Arrrggghhhhh!” she screamed, punching downward with her fists. “Get me off this ship, and get me home, now! I have nothing more to say to you!” Her crimson face and the hands-on-hips only made him want her all the more. He ignored his desire, knowing he had to do what was best for her.

Captain Woolf nodded and left the cabin. Standing outside her door, he said, “I’ll have someone I trust to bring you back to land within the hour. You’ll get home safely, I promise.” With all the care he could muster, he added, “I just want you to be happy. Truly happy and safe.”

“I don’t care about safety; I care about you,” Elizabeth replied before she flung herself back onto the cot and continued sobbing.

It would be wrong to reassure her that he did care; it would just make her want to stay longer. That wasn't safe for either of them, so he closed her door and returned to his cabin. He ordered Duncan to return her to her home without harming a hair on her head, or he'd gut him himself. Then Captain Woolf locked himself in his cabin for the rest of the afternoon.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Duncan shook his head. *Just like the captain to run from what is truly good for him.*

“Come on, lass, let’s get you back home. We’ll have to hit the water as soon as you’re out of sight. Who knows who’ll be coming for us,” Duncan said loudly through her door.

“Fine, I’m ready. Let’s go.” Elizabeth’s voice was irritated as she opened the door. “The faster I can be away from you lot, *the better.*”

Duncan refrained from speaking; he could hear the hurt in her voice and knew she was entitled to it. She may have been suitable for the captain, but women were trouble. Women were always trouble; he knew that if he knew anything.

Duncan tugged nervously at his coarse beard and replied with a, “Follow me this way, ma’am. Hey, you lot, get to the main deck and help lower the lady and me onto the rowboat. Captain wants me to take ‘er back to shore.”

A chorus of ‘arghs’ answered back, and he motioned for Elizabeth to follow him from the quarter deck to the main.

“You have another rowboat?”

“No, ma’am, a couple of the men went out last night and brought her back.” He motioned toward the rowboat that, aside from some chipped wood and marks

on the side that may have always been there, was no worse for the wear.

“Humph.” She crossed her arms.

“Don’t worry, ma’am, as long as neither of us stands up, we’ll be just fine,” he said, hoping to alleviate any lingering fears she may have. Elizabeth didn’t say anything in response, and he figured that was for the best. Duncan took a flask from his belt band and, uncapping it, took a hearty swig. The familiar burn down the back of his throat, followed by the fire in his belly, assured him he could handle anything this dame threw at him.

They managed to get into the boat and lower onto the water without incident. Duncan rowed them back to shore and untied the horse the captain had left from the night before. He handed her the reins and offered an apologetic smile.

“Think you can manage on your own from here, darling?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, thank you. Safe travels,” she said curtly.

Duncan knew she was hurt over the captain, but it wasn’t in him to meddle in the affairs of others. He tipped his head, and, as she and the horse disappeared out of view, he took another hearty swig of his grog. If he never saw her again, it would be too soon. The crew was still up in arms after having a lady aboard the ship.

The night before, he and Rock had to stand guard outside her door near the infirmary because the captain didn’t trust the lot of brigands to not try something with the poor girl while she recovered.

The captain had been right; most of the men hadn’t seen land or a woman for a few months, and they were getting rowdy.

“She isn’t a hooker,” Duncan had told one of the lower deck crew.

“She’s with the cap’n, ain’t she?” Tamson had asked.

“Slug,” he addressed the man, “even if she’s a hooker, she’s with the cap’n, which makes her off-limits to you. Now git before I call him down ‘ere, and he takes care of ya himself.”

Tamson grunted angrily, then sulked away. His bad leg caused him to limp. It made him the slowest of the whole crew, which was why everyone called him Slug.

“She didn’t look nothing like no hooker I ever saw,” Rock said after Slug

descended to the main deck.

“Nor to me, Rock,” Duncan agreed.

For the most part, the rest of the night had gone without a hitch. Now that the girl had taken the captain's horse and left the ship, things could return to normal.

Duncan rowed back to the ship and yelled for them to pull him up. *Better check that the cap'n is all right.*

“The captain gets to go to shore, but we gotta stay here and wait?” Slug poked at them.

“Look, you already knew he had business to attend. Now hold tight. I reckon we're gonna be hitting the water anytime now.” Duncan pushed his way through the crew and headed to the captain's quarters. *If the captain doesn't let this trouble-making crew make some disorder soon, it's gonna get ugly.*

“Ay!” Duncan yelled as he turned to find one eye blinking angrily at him. The other eye was blind and white, scarred from a blade that had cut from the top of the forehead to the middle of the cheek.

“Grimsley, you gotta problem?” Duncan said, teeth gritted tightly, face scrunched in anger.

“Ya, I gotta problem. The cap'n told us last night he'd be gone a few hours tops. He was just settlin' an old score. I gots no problem with that, I get it. Then he comes back with a dame and no goods. That I got a problem with, it's another day, and we're still here? I got needs that need to be filled, and if we ain't gonna do it here, then let's get the 'ell out of here.”

“Grimsley, your lack of patience is gonna...”

Before Duncan had a chance to finish, Grimsley reached for his throat.

Then the sound of a firearm rang out.

Grimsley's one good eye went wide, and, for a moment, his grip tightened. Then he released Duncan's neck and fell to the ground, blood seeping from a gunshot wound in his chest.

Duncan's breath stopped tight in his throat, as Grimsley hit the deck hard. Duncan's eyes followed the direction of the gunshot and caught sight of the man standing not far off, shotgun still aimed in their direction. The captain's face radiated anger, and, for a moment, Duncan worried this wasn't over. He froze,

afraid to cross the captain or anger him further.

“NOW LISTEN HERE, you band of idiots. When I say I have unfinished business here, I mean I have unfinished business here. Dame or no dame. I’m going back tonight to finish what I started. In the meantime, we’re going to move the ship. That piece of trouble that walked into my life is most likely going to send people for my head, and I can’t risk getting caught. So, pull in the anchor, man the deck, and let’s get this beast moving.”

“What about Grimsley?” Rock piped up, always so intelligent.

“Drop him overboard. Let that be a message to anyone who may come for me. I have no limits regarding my life or that of my crew. Duncan’s been with me longer than any of you lot. Anyone else who thinks of crossing him can join Grimsley at the bottom of the sea. Now get this mess cleaned up.”

A series of "Yes, Cap’ns," and "Ayes," rang out. Captain Woolf slid his gun back into its holster. The look on his face was unrecognizable as he walked away.

We don’t need to worry about him being hung up on some dame after all. He wouldn’t have done that if he’d planned on sticking around for longer than taking care of his unfinished business.

The thought may have been cold, but, to Duncan, it was a relief. Pirate life had afforded them all independence from commitment, repercussions from the law, wealth, and freedom. None of which Duncan planned on giving up any time soon, even for the captain.

CHAPTER NINE



Elizabeth had never met a man that made her feel hot and cold simultaneously. A man who made her heart beat faster and slower, and her breath stopped in her throat with a simple glance. *If only I hadn't fallen overboard and almost drowned. Who would want a woman so clumsy?* Perhaps her mother had been right all along. She was worthless. Elizabeth felt the cold hand of rejection clawing her heart as she rode back home, its claws digging deeper into her soul than she'd ever felt.

Her mind drifted to an even colder thought: what will I *do about Earl Kingsland? Surely my mother has told him of my indiscretion, and he will no longer want to marry me. I've ruined my chances at a decent marriage now, I'm sure of it.*

Was a decent marriage what she truly wanted? No, she wanted to marry the captain. Why had he turned her away when, just the night before, he asked her to stay, even knowing her status and all the things he had told her? Why the change of heart? It didn't make any sense.

She almost died. Or maybe she had died. Maybe she was in Hell? That would explain the heartbreak that haunted her now. That would explain the utter devastation she felt in her soul.

She passed the woods, and a line of houses became apparent in the distance. Elizabeth's heart thumped loudly in her ears as adrenaline rushed through her bloodstream. She had to wonder if going back home was the right choice. In the

dress she wore, her mother would know that something had happened. And if Adella Littleton had anything to say about it, she should expect the worst.

What has she told Earl Kingsland? That is the most horrible part. My mother probably made up some terrible story, and I won't even get to defend myself.

You don't love him anyway, and you certainly don't want to marry him.

Her subconscious could be a cruel friend sometimes. But it was true; she didn't love him. She knew that after meeting the captain, but it didn't change that she was still engaged to the earl.

As Elizabeth got closer to home, her stomach flopped like a fish out of water. All she could do was go home and accept her fate. As appealing as it sounded to run away and never be heard from again, it would only work if she were to run away with the captain. *Something I know now will never happen. Why didn't I just say 'yes' the night before? Then again, why do I even care? I barely know him!*

She slowed her horse to a trot and guided him up the small roadway leading to her home. The horse would go in the stable with the other horses until he could be returned to the captain, or whoever he belonged to.

"I don't even know your name," she told him as she slid off his back and led him into an empty stall. "I think I'll call you Storm for now. That seems fitting." She pulled the gate closed, checked it was secure, and hurried to get grain and hay for him to eat while he waited to return to his master. Rosebud nickered, and she rushed to the mare's side. Running her hands up Rosebud's coarse chin, she kissed the cream-colored mare.

"I'm so sorry; I was away for the night; don't worry, you're not being replaced."

Rosebud nickered again.

"Lady Elizabeth! You're back? Where did you go? Your mother is furious that you disappeared!" The stable hand stood staring at her, mouth agape as she stroked Rosebud's face.

"Indeed, I am. Do me a favor and care for that stallion over there. I meant to get him food, but Rosebud was feeling left out. I've no doubt my mother is angry. I'm debating even going inside," she confessed.

“You must! She summoned your fiancé and the police. Everyone is here. Well... mostly everyone. There are many who are out looking for you. Where did you go last night?” The stable hand watched her, growing concern evident in the furrow of his eyebrows.

“Thomas, that is of no business of yours. I’ll go deal with my mother.” Her voice came out more demeaning than she’d planned.

“Where did you get the horse?” Thomas seemed irritated that she had answered in such a way, but she paid it no mind.

“He belongs to a friend, so please take good care of him.”

Thomas nodded, and, despite how she’d treated him, she knew he’d take great care with the horse. Elizabeth nodded her approval, bowing graciously as she left the room and accepting that it was time to deal with her mother whether she wanted to.

This is not going to be pretty.

Reluctantly, Elizabeth pulled the door open and stepped inside. The bright floral furnishings and pristine setting starkly contrasted with the ship she had recently occupied. It felt like stepping into another world, where she no longer belonged.

“Elizabeth! I... I don’t believe it.” Earl Kingsland stood up from a settee and carefully walked toward her. One of his hands was partially outstretched, as if he was feeling around for something. “Are you real?”

“I am definitely real, Earl,” Elizabeth assured him. Unable to meet his gaze, her eyes drifted to the floral pattern carpet.

“Elizabeth Marie Littleton! Where in the blazes have you been? I’ve been worried out of my mind!” Her mother paused to look her up and down. “And just what in the harlot’s lingerie are you wearing?”

“I’m sorry?” Elizabeth said.

“You look like a woman of the streets!”

“I happen to think she looks quite lovely.” The earl came to Elizabeth’s aid. She met his gaze and was surprised to find not an ounce of insincerity.

“Thank you, Mother. You are too kind, as usual,” Elizabeth said snidely, only to be met by a familiar stinging pain in her left cheek.

“You will not talk to me so disrespectfully! I am your mother!”

A fact I regret every day of my life, Elizabeth’s thoughts countered.

“Yes, Mother. I’m sorry to worry you. I was out.”

“Sorry to worry me? You were out? Out being a harlot? Who were you with? You certainly didn’t up and disappear on your own. A servant said he saw you leave with a man. Where did you go? What did you do? Was it that scoundrel I saw you with last night?” Questions tumbled out of Lady Littleton’s mouth quicker than Elizabeth could process them.

She sucked in a deep breath, preparing to answer, when Earl Kingsland interrupted the conversation.

“Lady Littleton, it has been a long night and morning. Surely all of these questions aren’t necessary, right at the moment? Perhaps after everyone has some rest, we can talk about what happened, and with whom it happened?” The earl cast Elizabeth a knowing look. She half suspected he knew just what she had done last night, though that would have been impossible, unless he had followed her the entire time.

“Huh?” Lady Littleton gasped in shock, and, for a moment, Elizabeth’s fondness for her fiancé grew. The woman put her hand on her hips and stared her daughter down as if trying to bore holes through her head. Lady Littleton’s face, red from anger, seemed out of place among the luxurious surroundings.

Elizabeth’s eyes looked everywhere but her mother. The cream carpet with floral print below their feet. The delicate glass lighting fixture over their heads. The cherrywood furniture with plush purple seating. They may as well have been royalty.

She straightened her shoulders and looked from the Earl to her mother. “I’ve no problem answering all of your questions the moment all prying eyes and ears are out of sight. If it’s all the same to you. There is already speculation about what happened, rather than feed that speculation; I would like to tell you the truth. Then you can do with it what you may and tell who you wish.”

Adella Littleton looked to the Earl for answers, and he nodded.

“I understand, my lady. Though surely this will fuel the speculation rather than starve it,” he said with a gentle nod, his dark top hat in hand. He shifted

uncomfortably on the settee, his eyes watching her face intensely.

Elizabeth, seeing the clouds gathering in his features, could offer no explanation. "I suppose it will, Earl."

"All right then, away with you lot. Go back to your posts. Alert the police, when they return, that Elizabeth has been found and she is safe. That is all anyone needs to know for the time being." Lady Littleton stamped her toe against the carpet, barely making a sound, but her point was loud and clear.

The servants left the room at her behest, though their faces gave away their disappointment.

"So, my lady, tell me what happened last night." Earl Kingsland stood up and walked over to her, his voice gentle as he took Elizabeth's hand and led her to the settee.

"Yes, tell us!" her mother chimed in angrily.

"No. Pardon me, Lady Littleton, but please let me speak to my bride-to-be one-on-one. If you want to listen, please don't say a word." The earl's tone was polite and courteous, but Elizabeth couldn't help the swell of satisfaction that crept into her mind at seeing her mother put in her place even in such a gentleman-like fashion.

"Earl Kingsland, first of all...." Elizabeth began, voice shaking as she thought about the ramifications of what she was about to say.

His calming voice interrupted her. "Elizabeth, please... We are to be wed. Call me Julius. I insist upon it."

Sighing deeply, Elizabeth nodded. *You won't want to marry me after I tell you what I have to say.*

"Julius, I do admit I left the ball with a man last night. A stranger I just met, no less."

Lady Littleton gasped, her expression of complete horror, but she did not speak a word.

"And who was that?" Julius asked, maintaining a steady tone.

"He was a captain, though I won't give his name for fear of retribution falling on him. What I did was of my own free will."

"And are you back of your own free will?" Julius asked.

Elizabeth wanted to lie, but she couldn't.

"No, I'm sorry to say. After spending the night aboard his ship, I wanted to join him at sea, but he told me I wasn't cut out for that life and sent me away."

"You spent the night with him? You..." her mother spat but was cut off by the Earl.

"Adella! Control yourself. Continue, Elizabeth. What happened when you spent the night with him?" Julius's face had taken on a sickly pale color, and Elizabeth knew he expected the worst.

"Julius, while we were at the party, he kissed me. And I kissed him. Then, after my mother humiliated me in front of the party guests, he snuck in and invited me back to his transport. I was only too willing to leave after such an atrocity, so I followed him. We took a rowboat toward his ship. He asked me to join him and his crew, and I foolishly turned him down. Then, in an instant, I don't understand, he stood up. I stood up. We lost our balance and fell into the water. So heavy were my garments, I couldn't swim. Then everything went black.

"I don't remember much about what happened after that. I remember being sick, throwing up water, and then being so tired. I fell asleep and, this morning, when I woke, I was tucked neatly in a bed in a cabin with naught but my knickers and this lovely dress and pearls laying on my bed. I put them on, and one of the crew brought me breakfast."

"And what of the captain, Elizabeth?" Julius said, searching her eyes.

"To be honest, Julius, when I woke this morning, I felt more alive than ever. Perhaps I evaded death last night, I don't know. I knew I couldn't come home. I didn't want to come home. I wanted to be free. All my life, I have lived under impossible expectations, following the strictest orders and doing everything I was told, including being betrothed to you, and I don't want that anymore. I don't want to be controlled."

"Or married to me?" There was the hint of a question in his voice.

Elizabeth didn't blame him, but she also found herself shifting uncomfortably on the plush cushion. She couldn't lie to him anymore, it wasn't fair to either of them. "Julius, I... I don't even love you. What kind of a marriage

would that amount to?”

The earl went silent for a long moment. Lady Littleton was rendered speechless by her daughter's admissions

“May I ask one thing?” The earl shifted slightly.

His black, freshly shined boots caught Elizabeth's attention as she looked for something to stare at besides his face. “Certainly, Julius,” she said.

“Do you love him?” The look in his eyes was of genuine concern.

Perhaps he truly cared about her, and this wasn't just an arranged marriage between two well-off individuals for the sake of Elizabeth Littleton's family to remain wealthy.

She sighed, “You know that loving someone right after meeting them is not tangible. But yes, I suppose I do have a strong affection for him. He showed me a whole new world. A world I wanted to be a part of. Then, when I asked him if I could stay on this morning, he turned me away.”

“So, you feel for him, but you don't love him. What of me? Deep down, do you feel something for me? Is there even a part of you that feels anything?” The earl's voice remained steady, but Elizabeth could see uncertainty in his eyes.

Elizabeth's eyes drifted from his shined boots to an expensive gold-framed painting of an English countryside.

Finally, she sighed and answered, “If I'm speaking honestly, there is something there. You've been nothing but kind to me and a proper gentleman anytime we've met. Your generosity to others has fallen on my ears for some time. Though, strongly? No, I don't feel strongly for you,” Elizabeth finished, disgusted and pleased with herself.

“Well, I won't lie and say that doesn't hurt.” Julius's eyes were overcast, and it saddened her that she had done something to pain him. He'd been nothing but gracious in all his dealings with her.

“I am so sorry, Julius. I never meant to....”

Julius put a gentle finger on her lips to silence her.

“Lady Elizabeth, my betrothed, you've done nothing to apologize for. Your heart is not committed to me, and I understand that. I suppose I should do a better job of trying to win your affections rather than just expecting you to marry

me because of a contract between your mother and me. I do suppose that isn't fair to you. I know you, and I have never spent time alone together because it is deemed improper... But if you'll still have me, I'll use what remaining time I have before our wedding to woo you the correct way."

He sat up straight, adjusting his collar and unnecessarily flattening his perfectly ironed pants.

"What do you mean, Julius? What are you talking about?" Her cheeks flushed as she thought about her intended trying to woo her after all this time. Not after the kiss, she shared with Captain Woolf. Even though Captain Woolf had rejected her in the end, Elizabeth knew she would never stop thinking about him.

Julius grabbed her hands and looked her directly in the eyes. "Elizabeth Marie Littleton, may I have the tremendous honor of courting you?"

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat, and, despite how she felt, her heart fluttered. "You still want to marry me after I told you I kissed another man and felt things for him?" She couldn't help feeling shocked and a little delighted.

"He also saved your life and, as far as I can tell, wanted you to live well. I can give you a good life, but you don't know that if I don't show you."

"I don't want a 'good' life. I've had a good life, with everything I could need at my fingertips. I want to marry for love, true love. Not because of a paper." Elizabeth caught his gaze, her eyes never moving from his. *He has to understand how serious I am so I don't end up hurting him.*

"And all I'm asking is a chance to win your heart. That is all. May I at least try?"

She'd never noticed the hazel tones of his eyes or the warm flush in his cheeks, but they were evident while he spoke. He brought her fingers to his lips and gently kissed them.

Elizabeth's heart fluttered again. Julius still wanted her, even after she confessed her transgression and where she'd been. He genuinely wanted to be with her, and she owed him the opportunity for all the terrible things she'd done.

"I'm damaged goods now, and you still seem to want me. If that is the case, then yes, you deserve every chance. My only fear now is that I am not good

enough for you, and I am afraid you will toss me away when you see that for yourself.” She lowered her voice, knowing this little truth could be her undoing.

“Elizabeth, I’m never going to stop wanting you. I’ll show you tomorrow in the morning. May I call on you for breakfast?” His finger drifted up to tuck a stray tendril of hair behind her ear.

She nodded, and he leaned forward, softly kissing her cheek.

“Lovely. It’ll be just us then. I’ve so many things to show you.” Julius smiled as he walked away. “And Adella, go easy on your daughter. You got what you wanted. She is home and safe, and we are still engaged for as long as she wants to be with me. I can assure you, woman, the day she says she doesn’t want to be with me, I won’t force it, and neither will you.”

“Yes, Earl Kingsland,” Lady Littleton said, tightlipped.

Elizabeth could see that her mother was holding back a tirade of comments, but, for whatever reason, the earl had gotten to the woman, and she refrained from the usual bout of demeaning, anger-filled comments towards Elizabeth.

“And another thing, if you ever lay another hand on her, I will report you to the proper authorities. She is of age now and is still doing everything you ask of her. Give her some leeway now and again. She almost died last night.” And with that, the Earl took his leave, disappearing out of sight.

“Well, I...” Adella gasped as she watched him vanish, her mouth agape.

Elizabeth was delighted by Earl Kingsland’s ability to stand up to her mother. No one ever had, and any time Elizabeth said anything, she’d always been punished. Her feelings of affection for the earl were gaining traction.

CHAPTER TEN



Nishley spoke a spell of transparency so she could listen to the conversation that took place between Elizabeth and the Earl.

So, the girl is willing to give him a chance. It's a good thing too. She is the only one that can stop him if he decides to use this spell for the worst.

Satisfied, she used the opal stone around her neck to teleport back to Indigo Isle and spread the word to her sisters. After their father, Fairy King Bayard, took a turn for the worse the day before, it would give her sisters hope to know that Early Kingsland, the reformed Warlock Tovras, stood a chance to be loved by the only woman who had the power to make sure he never hurt another soul.

“Any news, my sister?” Oona sat on the satin edge of the petal bed that held their father. With his eyes closed and his breathing light but steady, he appeared to be in a deep sleep. The truth was, he’d been sick for so long, that the girls had begun to wonder if there was any hope for him.

Nishley gave him a solemn glance, searching for any sign of change. “Indeed, it appears that our Elizabeth is too wholesome to lie to our earl.”

“She confessed?” Nixine’s brilliant opalescent eyes took on emerald tones when she was sad, and, at that moment, they were dark as evergreen trees.

“She did, and our reformed warlock offered her another chance, if she’d do the same. If she’d allow them the opportunity to properly fall for each other.”

“Do you mean to tell me that our plan actually worked?” Oona chimed in.

“It would appear so,” Nishley responded with a grin, her eyes on her father’s

gently breathing form. “Any more seizures?”

Both Oona and Nixine shook their heads.

“It appears for the time being that he’s all right. I sedated him with herbs from the gingergale tree. It helps his body stay calm so he can sleep.”

Nishley nodded, flitting to the right side of the bed so she could kiss his pale, wrinkled forehead. He’d aged so much in the past few days, that it was impossible not to see the centuries of worry in his gray brow. The pain of seeing him so weak hurt her heart.

She had to get out of that room.

Reappearing once more near the gingergale, Nishley instead focused on what had happened between Elizabeth and the warlock. She closed her eyes and looked heavenward. Surely it was a sign of favor that the chosen one was willing to give love to Tovras. After all, King Bayard said it was not possible. Yet, for the song of life to have full power, the chosen one had to love, and that love had to be genuine.

“Let us hope that Elizabeth is the Light Wielder, the holder of knowledge, as we have hoped.”

“Yes, for if she is not, this will end badly.” Oona fluttered next to Nishley, grabbing her hand firmly. “Don’t worry, Sister. All will work out in our favor.”

Nishley only hoped her sister was right.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Lady Littleton’s house

Elizabeth stood in front of her vanity mirror, staring at the reflection that blinked uncertainly at her. Her mother had tightly braided her hair before she slept so that, upon the dawning of the morning when the braids were released, her red hair would cascade like waves over her shoulders.

The housemaid, Delia, had taken it upon herself to create a braided crown around the top of Elizabeth’s head, accentuating it with miniature white daisies. She was shocked that the brown eyes blinking at her still held such innocence.

I nearly died, had my heart torn out and handed back, and agreed to try

having feelings for my fiancé even though I know I do not love him. Everything is different and, yet, the same.

Except now, she could feel the fire that grew inside her. A spark that had been fanned into flame the moment she'd met the captain and ventured beyond the bubble that was her world. No matter how she tried to shake it, the suggestion that something greater existed would not leave her mind. It was there to stay, tied to the wildfire now evident in her eyes. For the first time in her life, she was more than just the debutante daughter of a well-off heiress.

Elizabeth smoothed the layers of her dress. The corset beneath was just a bit tight for her liking. Her black, lace-up boots had been freshly cleaned and barely peaked beneath the length of fabric that hung around her petite form. Her dress was pale blue, like the color of the sky kissed by the fresh arrival of morning. In the mirror, she could see the reflection of a white bonnet with lace around the forefront set at the foot of her bed.

My mother is still trying to tell me that I am her porcelain doll, and I will continue to dress to her liking, Elizabeth thought as she struggled with the idea of putting the wretched bonnet on and tying it tightly beneath her chin.

"No, Mother. I will not wear that tiresome thing. I am a grown woman. I will leave my hair down, and be proud of who I am," she said indignantly, straightening her shoulders as she gathered her confidence. Her reflection stared back at her, strong resolve growing in the face of the girl she was quickly learning to be proud of.

"What did you say, dear?" Lady Littleton called from the down the hallway. "Your gentleman caller is here, and, I must say, he looks quite handsome."

"Fine, you can marry him," Elizabeth answered loudly, tired of being a puppet in her mother's games.

"You will not speak to me that way." Adella entered the room, her face red with anger.

"Mother, I meant no disrespect. I simply meant that, if you are drawn to him, I would be okay with that." Elizabeth softened her tone slightly, knowing it would best not to anger the beast if she hoped to get away with not wearing the cursed bonnet.

“Child, do not fuel the flames of my wrath. I know perfectly well what you meant. Now, put on your head covering. You cannot go out with your head uncovered like that, it's not proper. It's bad enough that the two of you will be alone together, though I suppose it's better than you running off with some vagabond captain.”

The words sparked Elizabeth's anger. She tightly clenched her teeth, *I am not a child. I will not wear that bonnet, and you can go to hell.*

“Yes, Mother. I understand, Mother. Have a lovely day, Mother.” The anger in her voice was not lost, but, before she lost her temper completely, she ducked around the formidable woman and ran down the stairs to where Earl Kingsland waited. Elizabeth noticed that her mother had not been wrong; he looked quite dapper. She hurried to his side, appreciating the seamlessly tailored black suit jacket he wore, perfectly complemented by a teal ascot and top hat. His facial hair was trimmed impeccably; it appeared as if it, too, were just a decoration for the handsome man underneath.

The earl's eyes danced at the sight of her, and, if Elizabeth were being honest with herself, it was delightful that he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. When she stood next to him, the earl took her hand and kissed the fingertips, his velvet lips lingering on their edges. The feeling sent shivers down her spine.

“Lady Elizabeth, you look simply exquisite.” He released her hand and offered her the crook of his elbow. “Now then, are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“To fall in love with me,” the earl answered, a smug smile on his lips.

“Hmmm... One does protest too much. Nevertheless, let's see you do your worst.” Their banter was playful and light, something Elizabeth had never had the opportunity to experience with him. After all, she had done to him, he must genuinely feel something for her. He had forgiven her indiscretions and was even giving her the opportunity to explore her feelings before she married him. *Even if I do not love him, he certainly deserves to marry me if that is his wish.*

“Elizabeth, you had better....” Lady Littleton came barreling down the stairs, red-faced and irritated.

The Earl deterred her rash response quickly.

“Lady Littleton, you look quite lovely today. If you don’t mind, your daughter and I are off for the day. I promise to bring her back in one piece but, otherwise, I bid you not to worry, milady. She is in good hands.”

Adella stood stuttering, perhaps unable to think of anything witty or worthwhile.

With that, the earl whisked Elizabeth to the waiting carriage and footmen. As the gentleman lifted her the carriage step and into the cart, she glanced out of the velvet-curtained window of her transportation and, in stark realization, thought how wonderful it would be to be rid of her mother once and for all.

“Are you all right, my love?” The earl slid next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

Elizabeth’s first reaction was to pull away, but her heart told her he deserved a chance, a million chances if he asked for them. She turned her head, meeting his gaze, their lips mere inches from each other.

The faint cologne he wore danced under her nose like a flower’s kiss, and she wanted to lean close and drink in the scent.

“I’m quite well, Julius. Thank you for rescuing me from my mother yet again. I’m afraid if I don’t leave soon, and for good, she is going to break me. She demands too much from me and allows room for no mistakes. I can’t—I can’t take it.” Her voice broke a little, and a tear slid free. Julius used one finger to wipe it away. Then he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“My precious Elizabeth, if I had it my way, you would never go back there. Today will be just a taste of what awaits you if you fall in love with me, become my wife, and spend the rest of your days by my side.” He smiled wide, and for all her life, she couldn’t help adoring the boyish impishness that played on his lips.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“That, my dear, is a surprise.”

She grinned and took a deep breath, the image of her handsome Captain Woolf growing fainter in her conscious. She rested her head on Earl Kingsland’s shoulder and sighed peacefully. The gentle rumbling of the carriage wheels lulled her to sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Captain Woolf's Ship

Captain Woolf sighed heavily as he looked out at the sea. His ship was still anchored away from shore, going nowhere as he and his men decided what to do.

If Grimsley's body washed up on shore and some unsuspecting victim happened across it, there was no doubt the authorities would come for him.

For that very reason, he had his men prepare to hoist anchor and ready their cannons in case they needed to fight. *I must protect my ship. I must protect my crew.*

Those two thoughts ran through his mind, even as Elizabeth's face haunted him every moment.

"I invited her to come with me, only to turn her away when she finally agreed. What in the blazes is wrong with me? Have I lost my mind?" He hadn't slept well since her departure, and, though he knew he had unfinished business to attend to, Captain Woolf felt he would be unable to leave the shore again without her.

As a pirate captain, he'd vowed never to get attached to a woman, no matter how beautiful. But Elizabeth wasn't just any woman. She was *the* woman. The feisty, fiery souled woman he'd been looking for all his life.

Could he turn away from the shore after committing the crime he'd come for and leave her behind?

“Captain, everything all right?” Duncan’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Aye, just thinking.” Captain Woolf turned to face him and saw the crinkle of worry in the man’s forehead. “I’ll be all right. I just need to get out there.”

“Are you still going to rob the duchess?”

Captain Woolf nodded. “Indeed, that hasn’t changed.”

“Go finish your business Captain, then get back so we can get out of here.”

The captain nodded, grabbing Duncan’s shoulder reassuringly. “You’re a good man Duncan, keep an eye on the crew while I go take care of this.”

Duncan nodded, and the captain headed towards the rowboat. “Lower me down, you lot, and be ready to leave by nightfall.”

Rock grunted, “Aye,” as he and another crewmate worked to turn the wenches, lowering the ship into the water.

Captain Woolf waved his farewell from below and gathered the oars, rowing with haste to make the shoreline before nightfall. He was without a horse but hoped he’d be able to find where Lady Elizabeth lived without drawing too much attention to himself. Perhaps she still had his mother’s horse, and he could steal it back.

I’ll take it and be done with her. The sooner I can get back on the open seas, the better.

Captain Woolf resolved to let the woman go even if he knew he’d never meet another woman like her for the rest of his life.



INDIGO ISLE, Realm of the Fairies

Sleeping Chambers of Bayard, King of the fairies

“NISH, come to me, child. Tell me what news you have of the knowledge wielder and the warlock. Has he written the song of life yet?” Her father’s voice was weak, as if he fought for every word.

Flitting to her father’s side, Nishley could barely maintain eye contact. King

Bayard's sallow face had once been plump and full of color.

"Well, Father..." Nishley steadied her voice, despite the lump in her throat and the glittering silver tears that threatened to fall. Forcing herself to be cheerful, she fought back her fear for her father's life. "Tovras, erm, Earl Kingsland is doing everything in his power to learn the song. But we think, because he agreed not to allow his dark side to rule his life, it seems he has lost some of his power. It is taking longer than expected."

"You gave him fairy light with which to craft the song, correct?" King Bayard spoke, demanding her attention even in his weakened state. Nishley had to wonder if the warlock would master the song in time for the wedding and if the wedding would happen before her father died.

"Do not fret, Sister, all will be well." Oona was by her side, reading her thoughts as always.

"Of course, all will be well. How much longer until the wedding?" King Bayard asked, causing Oona to gasp.

He asked us twice this morning, and three times yesterday, Oona thought, and Nishley heard it loud and clear.

I know, Sister, but we must not let on that anything is wrong, Nishley thought back.

How can we not? He has already lost his ability to fairy commune. He should be able to hear every thought we have, yet... he knows nothing, Oona responded.

Just let me handle this, Sister. Find Nixine, tell her we must hurry. I will speak to Tovras about moving the wedding up. We are running out of time.

Oona nodded, then kissed her father on the forehead.

"Loads to do before the wedding, Father. Nixine and I still have many preparations. Get your rest, and I will be back soon." With that, she disappeared from the room, leaving Nishley alone with her father.

"Father, the wedding is still a few months away," Nishley told him each time he asked, but his memory was getting weaker, another sign he didn't have much time left. "Would you like us to move up the date?"

The pained look on her father's face was all the answer she needed. But

would Tovras be able to win the affections of Elizabeth and finish the song?

“Consider it taken care of, my king. Now, is there any way I can help Tovras write the song? It is embedded in our blood.” Nishley gently brushed his aging hand with her fingertips. His skin was cool to the touch; she could almost feel the life leaving him.

“No, my daughter. Finding the melody of the song of life must come naturally. You cannot force it. It has to be discovered—note by note—step by step and acted upon, much like love.” The lavender in the king's eyes had faded nearly to gray, and Nishley had to fight back a river of tears.

“What do you mean, Father?”

“I am tired now, Daughter. Let me rest. And please, tell Tovras to hurry... I haven't much time.” He took a deep breath and, as he released it, his eyes closed, and he drifted to sleep once more.

Nishley nodded her understanding and kissed his forehead, causing a single glittery silver tear to fall upon his face. The shimmer added a light to him that had long since faded. She watched the rising and falling of his chest and waited until his restlessness calmed before she left the room to join her sisters.

“Nish, time is running out. Whatever you are going to do, please hurry,” Oona urged her.

“I can't even bear to be with him, it hurts me so,” Nixine mumbled, her eyes downcast. Her opalescent orbs were starting to tinge lavender as Nixine aged. Her face shimmered from a trail of sparkling tears, and Nishley hurried to her side, wrapping her arms around her.

“Nixine, as Oona has said, all will be well in due time. As we speak, Tovras is courting his bride-to-be, wooing her. He genuinely cares for her. This will work.” Nishley said adamantly, her pale hands on her hips as her wings fluttered quietly behind her.

“Shhhhhhhh.... Do not say that name here, Nish. Do you want to cause panic amongst the rest of our cove?”

“I'm sorry, Oona, I forget sometimes. Anyway, let me leave this place... I must speak with him as soon as possible. The wedding must be moved up.” Nishley curled her fingers around the opal that hung from her neck; then, her

entire body began to disappear.

“Please, be careful, Nish,” Oona urged, watching her sister disappear.

“Yes, we still don’t know if he can be trusted,” Nixine chimed in.

Nishley nodded, then she was gone.



EARTH

“Breakfast was simply divine,” Elizabeth said, patting her mouth with her napkin.

The dainty little restaurant Earl Kingsland brought her to was charming in its cottage-like appeal. An elegant fireplace adorned one wall, though it remained unlit. Lovely paintings of countrysides and sunsets hung at various locations, and the lady who waited on them was as kind as anyone Elizabeth had ever met. The soft inflections of her words indicated that she did not come from this area of London, but Elizabeth couldn’t tell from where she hailed.

“Yes, I’ve loved this place since I was a little boy before I became...” The earl stopped and cleared his throat. “I mean, my father used to bring me here before I became an adult.” His eyes shifted as he said the last part.

“That isn’t what you were going to say,” Elizabeth teased. “What were you going to tell me?”

The Earl’s sudden shifting, and the crossing and uncrossing of his legs, told her he was uncomfortable. Why was he uncomfortable telling her what he was about to say? she wondered.

“What? What is it?” Elizabeth urged.

“That is a conversation for another day. Come, let us go to the next surprise that awaits you.” Julius stood, offering her the crook of his elbow.

“Shall I put it on your tab, Earl?” the woman who had helped them asked, her eyes appraising the Earl’s form appreciatively.

“Yes, indeed, and add another pound on there for yourself. I will be back to settle my account tomorrow, Emma.”

”Thank you, Julius.” Emma nodded shyly, utterly oblivious to Elizabeth

watching the whole fiasco.

Elizabeth was surprised to feel her muscles instinctively tighten and her teeth clench. Was she jealous? She hated the sudden burning feeling in her chest that made her feel like she couldn't breathe.

Earl Kingsland nodded back, then led Elizabeth to the waiting carriage.

"What was that all about?" Her voice dripped distrust even as she fought to remain upbeat and curious.

"My bride, do not trouble yourself with the likes of her. I have known Emma a long time, and she will always want what she cannot have." Earl Kingsland spoke with annoyance as if he didn't want to bother with the woman in the slightest.

"Well, she knows you well enough to call you by your first name." Elizabeth crossed her arms, turning to face him.

"My dear, as I explained, I've known her for years. I would love to hear you call me by my first name as well, I've encouraged it, and you've yet to do so."

Earl Kingsland's explanation didn't make Elizabeth feel any better about the situation, and the jealousy that sprung up uninvited grew a little worse. She climbed into the carriage and sat down in a huff. Wasn't this whole outing supposed to be a day for just the two of them? His way of getting her to fall in love with him? She didn't want to feel like she was in competition with someone else.

Not in her marriage, not ever again. It was something her mother did with everyone around her, and Elizabeth would not tolerate it herself.

After sitting for a moment, thinking angry thoughts, her jealousy finally subsided. It was a dreadful feeling, and Elizabeth wondered if marrying the earl meant that she would feel this way quite often. She shook her head. *If I marry him, I will do so because I am in love with him, and I am confident beyond a shadow of a doubt that he loves me. I will not spend my life in misery.*

When her thoughts quieted, Elizabeth realized he still had not joined her in the carriage. She pushed aside the small velvet curtain to see what had detained him. The earl was on the opposite side of the street, speaking to a woman so pale and elegant; Elizabeth first thought she was an illusion. The woman was so

lovely; she made Elizabeth and Emma look like common housemaids.

She had long white hair twisted into a beautiful mess of curls atop her head. Her gown was something befitting of a princess with its layers of blue satin. Her eyes, like sharp daggers, were also blue, but the color was almost unnatural.

One thing was sure, Elizabeth had never seen a more beautiful being in her entire life.

As the pale woman spoke with the earl quietly, she played with an opal that hung around her neck. Elizabeth was intrigued and annoyed that yet another woman was demanding Julius's attention. She sat back in the carriage, unwilling to watch the two converse anymore.

After a few minutes, she looked back. The woman had vanished, and Julius was walking toward her, a smile on his face.

"What's the matter? Worried, my love?" Julius called out, his confident voice almost mesmerizing.

Elizabeth looked for the other woman, but she had completely disappeared. She half-expected to see the surreal woman walking away or climbing into a royal carriage, but there was no sign of her. It was as if the woman had never existed.

"Who was that woman you were talking to? Where did she go?" Elizabeth demanded, refusing to hide the irritation in her voice.

Julius spun, his eyes searching every street and doorway.

"I don't rightly know," he answered, but his tone was playful, nearly teasing.

"Are you playing me for a fool? What was that all about?" Elizabeth's frustration rose.

"Now, now, my love. Do not fret. Nishley is the— Well, she's helping me with the wedding arrangements. I want everything perfect, and there was a little problem, so she sought me to discuss the options."

"And what is the problem, Julius?" Her voice rose.

His eyebrows raised slightly at her use of his first name, but he made no mention of it, only smiled before he spoke. "Well, she asked if we could move the wedding up. Apparently, there is some royal function she must attend on our wedding day, and she won't be available."

Julius slid into the carriage and sat beside Elizabeth, taking her hand.

“She wants to move the wedding date up? But I’m not ready. We’ve only just... I don’t know. I don’t think....” She couldn’t get a grasp on a full sentence, and her heart rate quickened. Elizabeth could feel her breathing grow shallow and her hands begin to shake.

“Hey, it’s okay, relax.” Julius squeezed her hand tighter. “Listen to me, I had so many things planned for today. I had so many things planned for our future. Maybe that doesn’t mean much, but there is one thing that was never planned from the beginning, and it happened anyway.” His voice remained gentle as he spoke to her, and his eyes never left her gaze.

“And what’s that?” Elizabeth questioned.

“I hadn’t planned on being so captivated by you. I hadn’t planned on this being anything more than a marriage of convenience. I sought to own more of Edmonton Parish, and your mother has a rather large chunk of that. You were just a chip in my quest for more power. Yet here we are, and Elizabeth—if I am being honest—I am quite smitten with you. I know that you may not feel the same, but if you agree to marry me, I will give you a hundred reasons why I am the one for you a day.”

Elizabeth didn’t know what to say; she was both humbled and struck speechless by his promise.

“Every day? That’s a lot, isn’t it?” she teased, wanting to decrease the tension. She didn’t have an appropriate response for what he asked of her.

“Not when you love someone. I know that moment with the captain has made you question everything, but I promise I never will. I’ll never make you question me. You will never wonder where you stand in my life.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught in her throat, and she broke their gaze. What she saw there made her heart stop. It was both fire and ice, a promise of eternity. It made her both afraid and excited, and she knew at that moment she could fall for this man.

She could fall very deeply.

“All right, Julius. Let’s get married. Let’s move the date up if you wish. I’m just warning you when you get to know me, it’s going to be a complete and total

letdown.”

He leaned in, closed his eyes, and grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“I don’t think that is even possible, my love.” Then Julius kissed her, the warmth of his lips silencing all her worries.

He loves me. I don’t know why.

Surely, I will grow to love him back. Her heart skipped a beat.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Captain Woolf had been around town and did his best to ask about Lady Elizabeth Littleton without drawing attention to himself. Taverns were the best place to get unsolicited information, and, after a few of the right questions, he found she lived at the farthest edge of the Edmonton Parish.

Not far from his mother, which worked out in his favor. He would retrieve the horse, then immediately return to Duchess Mary Geoghan's manor. He'd already plotted his pathway to his mother's room, where she kept her most precious jewels. Once in, he would bag them up, making as much noise as possible, and wait for her to find him there.

Then he'd reveal who he was.

Night had fallen cold and pitch dark, and Captain Woolf was in a hurry to get in and out. To put the woman he'd fallen in love with in the matter of a night behind him. To put his past behind him once and for all.

Captain Woolf stole through the streets, head down, not making eye contact with anyone who passed. Woolf was not one to fear any man, and normally he would have blown through town guns blazing. He would have destroyed anyone who got in his way and taken what he wanted.

Only now, there was someone who could be hurt.

Pirate he may be, but he wanted no harm to befall Elizabeth. He would make sure of it.

Woolf noticed that under the guise of night, most who came within a few feet

of him crossed to the opposite side of the street. Even when he wasn't trying, he was intimidating.

It's not a bad trait to have right now, Woolf thought gratefully. *I don't need any unnecessary brawls.*

Captain Woolf made his way through Edmonton Parish, taking in the elegance of the homes located there. Each house stood with aristocratic elegance, boasting large porches with tall columns, neatly tended yards, and shrubbery. Elegant carriages stood guard, awaiting use.

He shrugged off the bitterness that had crawled into his subconscious. This should have been his life. He never should have known the turbulence of the sea or the feeling of being without.

I'm a better man for it, though, he thought.

He made it to Elizabeth's home, casting a wary eye around the street for anyone who may be watching. The streets were silent and black under the guise of night. He took a deep breath and, crouching low, made a quick run for the stable. Taking a look around, his watchful eyes focused on the house, searching for any sign his presence had been detected. For the moment, all was well.

Woolf's eyes assessed each window, wondering which would lead to Elizabeth's room. For the moment, he entertained the idea of sneaking in, snatching her from her bed, and stealing her away from this life. *If she would even have me after I sent her away.* The answer to that was certain. She would probably laugh in his face, though he couldn't help but wonder. *Stop wasting time, get the horse and get out of here,* he reprimanded himself.

The large house looked back at him, unsuspecting, lights off and no sign of movement anywhere. Woolf took that as a good sign that his presence hadn't been detected, and he stole into the barn, pushing the heavy door open just enough for him and the horse to escape.

Soft neighs greeted him as he made his way down the middle of the barn, eyes searching the darkness for the familiar form of the dusky stallion he'd stolen from his mother. The sound of hooves kicking dirt grew louder as the horses became more distressed by his presence.

"There you are!" Woolf's eyes had adjusted to the dark, and the impatient

beast stamped his feet to get the captain's attention as if they were old friends. "Recognize me, huh?"

The beast neighed again, and Woolf unlatched his stable door. The movements from man and beast had spurred the other horses awake. A slowly growing chorus of stamping and neighing began to resonate around him. He needed to get going and fast. Grabbing the coarse black hair of the horse's mane, he hoisted himself onto its bareback.

"Let's get out of here." He gave a gentle nudge to the stallion's side with his heels, and the steed made a beeline for the opening in the barn door, nearly taking off Woolf's leg in the process. "Easy there, boy," he yelled.

The barn erupted in loud, neighing as if the horses were signaling the intruder's escape. *Well, if I was going after her, I certainly can't now.* Woolf shrugged off the thought of trying to get to Elizabeth. *No time and too much risk of being caught.* He would be at his mother's in minutes to finish what he'd started; then, he'd put the town behind him once and for all.

Woolf didn't dare glance back, even as a shadow of light on the ground indicated someone was up and about. He gave another, slightly stronger kick to the horse's side, and they were barreling across Elizabeth's property, then through the streets of Edmonton Parrish.

Things went swifter by horse, and, as they veered towards lady Geoghan's manor, the gentle clapping on the streets of Edmonton Parish was peaceful in contrast to Woolf's turbulent thoughts.

Once on his mother's property, Woolf tied the horse to the gate and dashed to the back of the house. As he turned the knob quietly and without resistance, relief washed over him.

That only made his job easier as he stole quietly into the large, luxurious kitchen. The smell of fresh oranges permeated the air. He was tempted to steal a few but needed the pocket space for things that held more value.

Here there was no moonlight to cast a dim glow across his path. He pressed his back against the wall, moving carefully from the kitchen into the hallway. He held his breath and listened for the sound of anyone moving around, but the only response was the gentle creaking of the manor settling on its foundation.

Woolf finally made his way to the elegant banister of the staircase that twirled toward the upper floor. He grabbed the polished wood, his calloused hands trailing it as he tiptoed up the steps. Each movement caused the wood to creak under his weight. His heart was racing, and he found himself holding his breath in anticipation of someone catching him.

Reaching the landing, Woolf pressed his back against the wall again, following it and trying each door until he came to *hers*. He knew it was Lady Geoghan's room by the cluster of sparkling jewelry on the oversized dresser, evident in the moon's reflection through the large window on the far side of the room.

On the bed, a blanket-covered form snoozed softly. He tiptoed past her, reaching the dresser where he began shoveling the gold and jewels into his pockets as quickly as possible. He half-expected the noise to wake Lady Geoghan, but she continued to snooze soundly. He moved more boisterously, pushing the items on the dresser about and clinking them into the mirror until his actions were interrupted by a loud shriek.

"Who are you! Get out of here!" the woman yelled, clutching her blanket to her chest tightly, even while she shivered in fear.

"Who am I?" he said. "Really? You don't recognize your own son, Mother?"

The woman's mouth dropped open, and, even in the dimly lit room, he could see the shine of her eyes growing wide as she watched him.

"No, it can't be!" she cried.

"Oh, but it is, Mother." His eyebrows furrowed, and his cheeks flushed brilliant red.

"That's impossible!" Her fear gave way to shock, and Lady Geoghan stood, taking a step forward. "I paid to have you taken care of, you shouldn't even be here," she said, her voice as slithery as a snake as she narrowed her eyes.

"There you have it, Mary. You are the worst kind of abandoner, and Heaven should never have given you a child, to begin with. But since I *am* your child and here, I demand what should be mine. Though I suspect you'll never give me that, I've come to take it."

"Come to take what?" she said, hissing once more.

“What’s mine. Hence the jewels and rubies that adorn my pockets. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh, no, you won’t!” Lady Geoghan shouted, lunging for him.

Captain Woolf jumped out of the way and held back the desire to tell her his name, who he was, and what he’d become.

Whatever he was, it was better than this villain of a woman who pretended to be respectable and high class. She would never be more than a parasite in his eyes. Now that Woolf had done what he came to do, he would leave, never to be seen again.

“Guards,” she screamed, “Guards! Come, help! I’m being robbed!”

“It’s hard to believe that a scallywag such as I came from such class, such high society. My friends will be impressed,” he said with a sneer. Then, hurrying to the window, he quickly unlatched it and clambered down the trellis, running as fast as he could towards the black stallion he left tied to the fence.

Jumping on its back, they were off into the night and headed towards the shoreline before any of Lady Geoghan’s men even knew what had occurred in the Geoghan manor that fateful night.

Captain Woolf rode hard until he reached his destination, and, as he hopped off the large horse, he smacked its rear end sending it to freedom as it galloped through the trees. His small boat still awaited his arrival as it rocked gently back and forth with the waves. He untied it from the shore and rowed out to his ship. The oars made gently plopping noises in the water as he sailed away once and for all. Elizabeth’s face, as delicate as porcelain, remained ingrained forever in his mind.

No matter where he went, he would never forget her. Her rich brown eyes were burned into his heart.

“Another time, another place, maybe,” he said aloud. Then his silhouette disappeared into the shadow of his ship.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



A *Fortnight Later*

Elizabeth awoke to birds chirping outside her window. She stretched her arms, yawning, annoyed that she had been awakened before she was ready. A clamor from downstairs jolted her upright.

“What was that?” she said, thrusting her blankets aside as the realization that she was getting married settled in.

Today is the day! Elizabeth felt both excitement and panic that it had happened so fast.

Julius, handsome, sweet Julius, had been by her side every day from the moment she agreed to marry him. Together, they picked out the flowers, the music, and the dress, and sent out invitations. His agreeable demeanor and natural charm had drawn her to him like a moth to a flame, and despite the circumstances, she found herself falling for him in a way she didn’t think possible.

Together they had hand-delivered most of the invitations since the wedding had been moved up. Every other detail of the wedding had whirled by in such a rush, that Elizabeth barely had time to think. But being on Julius’s elbow had helped, and, little by little, her heart yielded against her will.

While the days were busy, the afternoons were lovely. Julius ordered lunch in the gardens every day, and it was during the times when they were alone, and all was quiet, that they spoke of things that made her heart dance. Literature, music,

plays.

“Be still my heart, how did I get so lucky?” Elizabeth said, smiling as she thought of saying their vows to one another. Realizing she didn’t have much time, she began the tedious tasks of donning her undergarments and corset. The dress was to be delivered this morning, though she was unsure of the timing as no one bothered to wake her. *Hmm, I wonder if it was left downstairs, and my mother never bothered to bring it up... There is a lot to do today.*

One more thing she had been grateful for was Julius’s ability to limit her mother’s hand. Elizabeth had barely seen the women for two weeks, unless in passing or while she was tending to something Julius needed done for the wedding.

Elizabeth grabbed her robe and wrapped it tightly over her undergarments, then hurried from her room and down the stairs. In the parlor, she saw a great deal of people she did not recognize, moving about the house.

“Mother? Mother?” she called.

But the woman was nowhere to be found. Instead, a police chief greeted her.

“Morning, ma’am. Your mother is in the other room answering some questions.” Seeing that Elizabeth wore a robe, he averted his gaze. “There’s been a robbery not far from here, and we want to ensure no one else was affected. We’re gathering information.”

“A robbery?” The blood drained from Elizabeth's face. *Who was robbed? And why? That is just unheard of in Edmonton Parrish.*

“Well, I’m afraid it was a very close friend of your mother's, Lady Geoghan. Do you know anything about that?” The chief's face was stern, and, although he wouldn't look her in the face, she could feel his judgment weighing her.

“No, of course not. Why would I know something about her getting robbed?” The words were out of her mouth before she had time to think, but then her memories came flooding back, and she gasped loudly, taking a few steps back, before sitting on the stairs.

“So, you do know something about it then? Were you involved?”

“No, of course, I wasn’t involved! I’ve been so caught up in wedding plans I’ve barely had time to think. Why would you think I was involved?” *Yes, I know*

precisely who robbed her, but I can't tell you. I can't betray him. She said, "No, I don't know who would do such a thing."

"It happened almost a fortnight ago, and we came around then but had no luck. No one seems to have seen or heard anything. We hoped that by trying again, some new information would come up. Young lady, if you know something and you don't tell us, we can still lock you away," he threatened.

Elizabeth put her head in her hands, taking care to keep herself covered by the robe. *Do I tell them of the captain and his plans? Do I tell them what he told me?*

"Elizabeth, what are you wearing? Are you all right? What is going on?" Julius marched into the room, his voice agitated.

Great, just what I need. My fiancé to see me in my bathrobe while the police chief interrogates me about a man I thought I didn't have feelings for. Not like we don't have enough bad luck surrounding us as it is.

"I was just asking this young lady if she knew anything about the robbery at Lady Geoghan's place just a few miles away," the chief answered honestly.

"Look, Chief ...?" Julius awaited a name.

"Chief Anderton."

"Great. Look, Chief Anderton, Lady Littleton here needs to get ready. She's marrying me today, and you are standing in the way of that. If she told you she doesn't know anything, I am sure that is true. You've already been through here, and I already told you what I know. If you still have doubts, you can do the honorable thing and allow her to prepare for her wedding day."

"Look, sir, I don't know who you are, but this is official police business, and if she doesn't answer my questions, there will be no wedding because I will take her into custody," Chief Anderton said angrily.

"Look, Chief Anderton, I'll tell you what I know, but then you must leave. As I quite eagerly want to marry this man." Elizabeth smiled at Julius, hoping to diffuse the situation.

"Fine, fine," Julius nodded to her, then hurried to her side, bending to kiss her cheek. "If he makes you uncomfortable, or bothers you, just call me."

Elizabeth nodded her assent as Julius left the room.

“Chief Anderton, a little before the robbery, I was at a ball at Lady Geoghan’s home. I met a man in a wolf mask who told me he was a captain. Through private discussion, he revealed to me that he was Lady Geoghan’s son and had come to take what was his. He said that he would rob her blind, then show her his face so she would know why she had been robbed. That’s it. That’s all I know.”

“He told this to you because...?” The chief looked suspicious.

“Because he had reason to believe that I cared about him.”

“Really? Seems suspicious if you ask me.”

“Look, we danced, then we walked in the garden. We had a connection. He kissed me, and we talked. It was all very unusual,” Elizabeth admitted.

“I’d say so, considering that you are getting married today. Does your intended know of your indiscretions?” Chief Anderton furrowed his brow, and she hated how his disapproving look made her feel unworthy of Julius’s affections. As if she didn’t belong there with him, even though the Chief knew nothing about her.

“Yes, he knows everything except the part about the robbery. I didn’t tell him that. I didn’t think it was necessary. I didn’t think the captain would follow through with it.” She looked to the side, unable to meet the chief’s gaze now that he knew what kind of person she was.

“Do you have the name of this captain?”

Captain Woolf, whose kiss she still thought of. “No, I’m sorry... I don’t recall.”

“Really?” Chief Anderton pressed her.

“Really,” Elizabeth assured him, “Now, if you don’t mind, my husband-to-be is waiting for me. If you have further questions, you can ask me later.”

Chief Anderton tipped his hat in mock thank you, the smile on his face sinister.

“Well, alrighty.” He left, disappearing into some other room where Elizabeth assumed some of his officers must be waiting. Though she was unsure why, tears stung her eyes. She stood and ran up the stairs, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

“Elizabeth, are you all right?” Julius was right behind her, grabbing her arm mid-stairwell. Julius’s free hand grabbed her cheek, turning her towards him, even as she fought to pull away.

She met his gaze, eyes full of concern, and shook her head. Releasing her cheek, he held out his arms, motioning her to come to him. Elizabeth stared at his open arms for a moment before she allowed herself to fall into his embrace.

“He made me feel so... I don’t know. Like a harlot. Like my mother does every time she sees us embrace or kiss.”

She felt Julius’s lips on top of her head.

“My love, once we are wed, we will hide ourselves away in my home. You will want for nothing. We’ll never go anywhere, and I will have everything you want brought to us.” His gentle voice calmed everything raging in her, and Elizabeth felt a tear fall.

“Julius, you can’t be overprotective. You promised.” Elizabeth laughed. “But if you want to lock my mother out permanently, I would not be opposed.”

He held her tightly for a few more moments before releasing her.

“Love, if that is your desire, so be it.” Then he winked, the left crease of his mouth turning upward in a smile.

“Don’t tempt me.” She grinned wide and kissed his cheek. “All right, I need to go get ready. And you need to disappear... You’re not supposed to see me in my dress.”

“Yes, the dress... There was a little problem, that is why I’m here.” He released her, leaving her to wait for him on the stairwell while he disappeared momentarily. When he reappeared, he had a white gown draped across his arms.

“What is the problem?”

“You deserve better. I know we picked the other one, but I had this one made especially for you.” He laid the fabric over her arms, and she practically squealed in delight. Instead of all white with a lace bodice, this one was satin with a train that seemed to go on forever.

Delicately embroidered flowers flowed diagonally across the bodice. Tiny teal petals accentuated them, and pearls were sewn into the middle of each flower. The chest was heart-shaped with fabric emphasizing where her breasts

would rest in the upper bodice. The rest of the gown, though satin, had scalloped layers. She could see traces of the teal flowers dancing at the base of the final layer, and the delicate touch of teal was just enough to delight her.

“Oh, Julius... It’s the most exquisite dress I’ve ever seen in my life!”

“And you are the most exquisite woman I’ve ever met. Now, get ready. I’ll see you at the altar.” He bent to kiss her cheek; then, he was off.

Elizabeth watched in appreciation as he turned and walked down the stairs and out of the door, closing it behind him. Julius had been so generous, and she couldn’t help feeling safe when he was around. She had to admit that she’d fallen for him; there was no use hiding it. *Lady Elizabeth Kingsland*. She grinned like a child at Christmas. The fates had dealt her a lucky hand indeed. She lifted her eyes heavenward and mouthed a ‘thank you.’

“I promise I’ll do right by him,” Elizabeth said to whoever may have been listening. But the heavens were silent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Twirling the opal around her neck, Nishley's tiny fairy body flittered nearby, transparent to anyone but other fairies. She listened intently to the couple's conversation, which brought a smile to her face. Their affections, as far as the fairy could tell, were genuine. Julius's plan to court his bride-to-be and win her affections seemed to have worked.

"I hope you mean that when you say you'll do right by him, Elizabeth. He's going to need you," Nishley said, but the fairy tongue was so quiet, that no one could hear unless fairy magic or fairy will permitted it.

Afterward, Elizabeth hurried up the stairs to get ready, and Nishley flew after Julius. Julius needed to play the song of life. She only hoped he would keep his end of the bargain.

Julius commanded the footman to take care of the horses and put away the carriage. He had ordered a specialty transport to take him to St. Bartholomew church, where he and Elizabeth were to be wed. He wouldn't admit aloud how delighted he was that she loved the dress, but he was. *She'll look absolutely radiant in it, as she does with anything she wears*, he thought with a smile.

For the first time in a while, the stress looming over him vanished. The song was complete; he was to play it this eve as a dedication to his love.

What if your magic? Have you not wished for its return? His conscience suddenly interrupted. It had been poking at him for days. Once he played the song and the fairies bottled its life-giving essence, he would no longer have

magic of any kind. Could he live with that?

If Julius was honest with himself, wizardry in any form was a welcome retreat from the magicless existence he endured in the realm of the dead. Having a mortal life with limited powers had given him a taste of what he used to have, and that was a heady feeling indeed. He remembered his time as a reigning warlock and how all had feared him.

Much time had passed, and the world was a different place. Julius had no enemies anymore, an idea that both pleased and bothered him. As he stood outside the elegantly carved door to his house, he turned to survey the land that surrounded his abode.

“It is noble and terrible that I enjoy all a mortal life affords me.” He enjoyed being a mortal of high status, being able to pay for things he wanted. It was almost like being a warlock. Everything he could ask for was at his fingertips, and anyone he deemed necessary was at his beck and call. He let out a deep sigh, knowing no amount of money would take away his desire for power. No level of status would allow him to cause others to quake in their shoes at his mere presence.

I’ve gone soft, he thought with despair. He turned back and entered his home. Whatever happened, now was not the time to second guess his decision to help the fairies. He never wanted to return to the realm of the dead, and they at least promised that if he could compose the song of life - which he had - he could live the rest of his days as an immortal. Tonight, he would play the song, and he and Elizabeth would be wed. He would just have to tell her later that he would be immortal for all eternity.

No big deal. He grinned. *It’s too late for her to back out of our marriage anyway*. As he stepped into the foyer, he smelled Nishley, though he couldn’t see her.

“I wish you would try to mask some of your scent if you are to barge into my home without my permission,” he said, not attempting to hide his agitation.

“You wish for me to mask the scent of laughter and sunshine? The very essence of joy itself? You know I can’t do that, besides... You don’t smell so great yourself. Kind of like a wet dog with an attitude,” Nishley shot back.

“Yes, you’ve told me that before. I guess it’s good that my bride-to-be can’t smell me then, huh?” he countered.

“Yes, I suppose it is. She’d never want to marry you. However, I am not here to nitpick. I am here to have you play the song.”

“What? Why? It won’t work unless the woman I love is in the room.”

“Well, it won’t work for its intended purpose, but it will still create magic. Have you not played it completely yet?” Nishley seemed confused.

“Of course I have. Look.” Julius walked to his piano and snatched the parchment off it, handing it to her so she could see that he had written all the notes. “Why must I play it anyway?” he questioned.

“Because the song needs an equal amount of light and dark magic to create it, otherwise, it would not have worked. No one would have been able to write it with just fairy magic. It had to be you.” Nishley looked him dead in the eyes.

“Oh, is that so? Odd, I haven’t had my magic since I died,” Julius argued.

“Tsk... tsk. Tovras, you were the most powerful and evil warlock ever to live. That kind of magic never goes away, but it did die with you. You did a lot of wrong in your day; today, you will have the opportunity to right a lifetime of it.”

“Oh, goodie,” he said sarcastically.

“If you’re not happy about our arrangement, I can always send you back to the realm of the dead. I imagine they will be quite happy to see you. Many have wandered that place for centuries looking for a way out, and you were given a free ticket, then sent back. They’ll want your blood.” She folded her arms across her chest, her eyes narrowed angrily.

“Is that a threat, Nish?”

“Not at all. It is your reality. I simply wish to complete this as quickly as possible. It has been an arduous journey. Now, can you please play this song for me?” Nishley fluttered steadily overhead, but he could feel the unease radiating off her.

“Fine. But once it is complete, you will leave until tonight when you return for its essence. Then you will never bother Elizabeth and I again.” All he truly wanted was to be left alone, to live out his life with the woman he wooed and inevitably fell for.

“Yes, Julius. We made the deal, and fairies never break a deal. Your immortality will be complete when I have the essence contained,” she confirmed.

“Fine,” he said in irritation, then sat down at the piano. “Do you mind? I need the music back.”

Nishley nodded and placed the parchment in front of him.

As the sound of the melody filled the air, the light rays that streamed in the window from the sun came alive with sparkles. Everything seemed to fill with life and light—even the air they breathed.

Julius had never experienced anything like this in his entire life. It made his fingertips tingle, and his heart beat a little faster. It made him want to laugh and cry at the same time. Even as he felt that, he couldn’t stop to playing. His fingers danced faster and faster across the elegant ivory keys.

“Oh, Julius, it’s marvelous. You’ve done it!” Nishley’s opalescent eyes shimmered, and she began to cry. Great rivers of glitter poured from her eyes over her cheeks and onto the floor. She clutched the large opal she wore around her neck tightly and squeezed her eyes shut, saying some incantation he’d never heard.

"Bejoinum nehero quickeesium."

Suddenly, two more pale-skinned, opal-eyed women joined them. One had light sapphire-colored hair.

“What is the meaning of this Nishley?” The one with the colored hair spoke first, clearly agitated.

“Yes, what is the meaning of this?” The taller one looked around in confusion, her opal eyes furrowed fiercely.

“My sisters, take a deep breath. Breathe like you never have before, do you not feel it?” Nishley urged them.

They stopped clamoring and drew a deep breath. Julius could see their looks of utter delight as they realized what Nishley had been trying to show them.

“He’s done it? I mean, he’s really done it?” The blue-haired one spoke again.

“Yes, Oona.... That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“I don’t believe it,” Oona said, breathless.

“Why, because it’s me?” Julius said. As if an evil warlock wouldn’t be capable of such a thing. “Thank you for your confidence, it’s amazing.”

“No need to be snide, Tovras. You’ll have to forgive us for not believing you would want to help us,” the taller fairy said.

“Nixine, I can handle this,” Nishley told her, then turned to Julius. “Look, Julius, please do not take this personally. We took a great risk sharing our fairy magic with you. We didn’t think you would follow through on the bargain.”

“If you had lived in the realm of the dead for two hundred fifty-six years, you would understand why I took the deal. If you knew Elizabeth, you would understand why that deal seems better and better every day. My only regret is that she will not live forever. I will love her, and she will eventually grow old and die.”

That response shocked all three, and they each gasped in turn.

“You love her?” Nishley questioned.

“More and more every day. I would do anything for her.”

“How is that possible, Sister?” Oona spoke.

“I am not a monster!” Julius yelled.

“Do you not remember the lives you took when you were alive? Well, we do. In our book, you are a monster,” Nixine yelled at him, anger radiating from her eyes.

“Leave me now! I want nothing more to do with you. My deal is with Nishley. You come into my home uninvited, then dare to yell at me and question my intentions?” Rage boiled inside him, more and more by the second. It felt like giving birth to a beast. He knew if he did not calm himself, things would take a turn for the worse. Some things were irreversible, and he wasn’t sure he would be able to turn back.

“You listen here, we granted you fairy magic, and we can take it away. You are here because my sister thought to give you a chance, but we CAN do this without you.” Oona stepped forward, her voice steady and sure. “If you become a danger, we will strip you of your magic and send you back.”

“Oh, that’s convenient. I already wrote the song, and now you are threatening to send me back?” It was the last straw.

Julius's anger tipped, and he felt something inside him break. The world he had built in his mortal mind, all the genuine good things he felt, were overcome at that moment. Like an inkwell tipped over, every part of his psyche was covered in black. A power surge erupted in his soul, and even as his humanity tried desperately to fight it off, Tovras returned.

Julius turned. Tovras flicked his palm in front of him, and an orb of light grew in it. He wound it back like a ball and threw it at the one called Nixine. The orb struck her square in the chest and caused her to fly back against the wall.

Pictures came crashing down, along with a painting, and all of them shattered into pieces. Nixine let out a cry for help.

"Stop it, Julius! Stop it this instant!" Nishley yelled.

"Oh no, there is nothing left of the man you call Julius. You destroyed the good part of him with your accusations. Tovras is back!" Tovras threw an orb at her, which Nishley anticipated. She grabbed her opal necklace and disappeared.

"Coward!" he yelled. Then he focused his attention on Oona. He used both palms to gather light orbs and threw them at her while muttering, "*Guardius enchainmentum.*"

An iron cage encircled the fairy, leaving Oona trapped. She grabbed the bars and said her own incantation, but it knocked her flat on her back.

"Aaggghhh..." she cried. Sparkling tears trailed down her face.

"Noooooooooooo...." Nishley was back. She flew at him at full speed, but he simply waved his hand carelessly, and she was locked securely in the cage with her sister.

"Oops, one more." He waved his hands at the collapsed Nixine, and she joined the other two. "That ought to hold you until I return. Now, if you don't mind, I am going to my wedding. Then I am going to play the song for my bride and leave for the realm of the dead. I have some unfinished business there. Make no mistake, things are about to get very dark." He flashed the fairies his most debonair smile.

Tovras started towards the front door, then stopped to glare at them.

"Oops, I almost forgot. I can't get married in this," he said, looking down at his white button-up shirt and neatly ironed pants. "*Lineum Marvolosum.*" A

second later, he wore his thick black cape, which had been completely restored. It no longer bore the blood stains and ragged edges that used to drift upon the ground.

Underneath the cape, he wore his familiar and comfortable dark brown vest, which revealed a simple V-neck shirt worn below. Around his middle was his traditional rope belt, held together by a big belt buckle. His fingers ran over the grooves in the metal, and he smiled when the familiar dragon symbol came clear. It felt good to wear his clothes again, and he hoped that one day his symbol would again strike fear into all who knew it. His pants were simple and too wide for what he'd grown accustomed to, so he switched these with his wedding pants and black boots.

“There, a combination of the old me and the new. What do you think, ladies?”

Nishley, Nixine, and Oona didn't respond, and their glares only spurred his decision. “That's fine. I know I look quite fetching, and that is all that matters.” Swooshing his cape around him, he muttered, “*Dispiritum grantim.*”

Then he was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



St. Bartholomew Church
Later that evening.

Tovras stood at the front of the church, surveying the sea of faces that had trickled in over the past hour to take their seats. The place was near full, and, as he saw his plan unfolding, he couldn't help but smile. No one could have predicted what was about to happen. He would have Elizabeth and the world in the palm of his hand.

She would have loved you, genuinely loved you. Why did you do this? His conscience now counteracted everything he chose to do.

Who needs love when I can have my magic and be powerful again? he argued against himself.

Never mind that the kind of magic he hoped to attain had been expressly forbidden. *Control of the dead realm and the mortal one?* The thought made him smile. Never in all his hundreds of years on Earth and in the realm of the dead had he thought this day would come. It seemed he had Elizabeth to thank for it.

Many of the guests had introduced themselves, taking note of his odd apparel by giving him wayward glances up and down. Tovras had been asked to play the organ during planned pre-wedding festivities, but he had politely excused himself and blamed it on nerves. Everyone seemed to understand and had not questioned his decision to not play. Therefore, he took his place at the altar, waiting long before it was time.

No one seemed to mind his presence, at least as far as he could tell, but he could hear whispers about his odd choice of clothing.

If only they knew what my wardrobe pieces truly meant, he thought with a sneer.

Time went by quickly, and, before he knew it, everyone had taken their places, and it was time. The real organist showed up and took his position to play the wedding march. Lady Littleton buzzed about, placing flowers here and there, making herself look important and busy as she always tended to do. Her desire for perfection was so maddening, that Tovras wished he could do away with her.

Not yet, must wait until the right time, he thought.

The woman gave him a look of distaste when she saw Tovras's attire. Her disregard for anyone below her station made him wish he had done something like this sooner.

The ceremony was quick, and Elizabeth looked exquisite in her wedding gown. *Too bad she's going to hate me and want to destroy me once she figures out who I am, and what I'm up to.*

"I do," Elizabeth said, and she didn't even give a second glance to what he wore.

Could it be she accepts me for who I am? He laughed at the idea, knowing full well she was a human and the daughter of one of the vilest women he'd ever met.

"I do," he said as well, once the vows had been stated.

As the whole affair ended, and they walked down the aisle arm-in-arm to the waiting carriage outside, Elizabeth leaned in to tell him, "You know that my mother is going to be furious at you for wearing, well—whatever it is your wearing but, I love it."

Tovras laughed, knowing Elizabeth wouldn't love it once she found out why he wore it. *It's too bad she's so naive. I think in another life, I would have absolutely adored her.*

The time was getting closer. He just needed to stave off her suspicions for one more hour.

"Are you hungry, my love? Shall we get something to eat while everyone

goes to the reception hall? I've hired a lovely orchestra to play for us, but first I have a song I want to play you. It's kind of a surprise I've been working on." He grinned impishly, fighting back the darkness that swirled in his inner being.

"Hungry, Julius? Goodness, no. I'm too excited to be hungry." She looked out the window, perhaps thinking for a moment about all that had happened before she spoke again. "Do you mind if we go to my house and change, though? I'll keep the pearls on."

Tovras nodded his approval; everything had to go as normal as possible.

"Thank you," she said sweetly before adding, "Honestly, darling, this dress must have cost you a fortune."

"And you are worth every cent," he replied, fighting to keep his voice gentle and steady.

Elizabeth gently grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. "Then we can go back to your place so you can play me this song. You're just full of surprises lately."

In truth, the dress hadn't cost a fortune. He and Nishley had come up with the design, and, using fairy magic, they crafted it together.

"Let's just say it was a gift from a very close friend. Someone very excited about our union," Tovras answered honestly.

"A gift? That is incredible! You must introduce me to this friend, so I can personally thank him," she said, and he could hear the hint of nervousness she fought back. *Ah, yes*—jealousy was a powerful emotion, and he sensed it in her now.

"Well, her." Tovras deliberately corrected her, so that her jealousy would be confirmed.

Elizabeth didn't hide the disappointment in her eyes as her head dropped.

"Don't worry, you'll meet her soon enough. Before the night is over, I'm sure," Tovras said, glancing out the windows as he thought about the fairies locked in the iron jail in his parlor. The magic holding them would only stay strong for so long. Once they recovered from his physical attack, they could work together with their magic and break through the bars.

Which was why Tovras knew it had to happen tonight. Once he played the

song, he would capture its essence and send himself back to the realm of the dead. He would use the magic to awaken all those who had been wandering aimlessly for centuries. Witches, warlocks, dragons, harpies, griffins, and gargoyles. Any creature who would agree to help him overtake the Earth, he would allow to live again. His battalion of beasts would be so wicked and strong that no one would dare challenge his wrath.

Tovras was about to start the war of the millennium. He laughed in delight.

“Why are you laughing?” Elizabeth questioned, a puzzled expression on her face as she gripped his hand tighter.

“Oh, no reason, my dear. I’m just so happy to be married to you.” He didn't look her in the eyes for fear she would see he had been lying. Scooting closer to her to quell her fears, he wrapped his arm around her, allowing her petite form to rest against the thick cape that adorned his shoulders.

Elizabeth sighed in contentment and closed her eyes the rest of the way to her home.

It wasn't long before they arrived, and the footman was opening the door, attempting to assist her.

“No need, good sir, I can assist my wife.” Tovras got out, playing the gentleman, and took Elizabeth's hand in his, helping her to the ground. Giving her fingers a reassuring squeeze, they walked to the front door, where she rushed inside. She was up the stairs before Tovras had a chance to tell her to hurry.

No one else was around. Even the house servants had been invited to the wedding. Though the majority would be helping during the reception. Tovras sighed heavily. He was just a short time away from implementing his plan.



UPSTAIRS, Elizabeth felt her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. A thick cloud of fear descended on her when she said her 'I do' at the altar.

“What is wrong with me? Julius is a kind and generous man. I'm lucky to be married to him,” Elizabeth told herself as she stared at her reflection in her vanity.

“And why is that?” A deep, strong voice swept up behind her, and a hand slid over her mouth. “Please don’t scream, I’m only here to give my congratulations.”

Elizabeth recognized the face that surprised her in the mirror. *Captain Woolf*.

His hand released her mouth, and he stepped away from her. Turning to face him, she struggled not to scream unladylike things until she realized that would be pointless. She didn’t want her new husband coming up the stairs to find a man in her room. Somehow, she figured that was something he would not be able to forgive.

“Captain Woolf, what are you doing here?” Elizabeth said, keeping her voice down. “And please, whisper, my husband will have your head.”

“I’ve no doubt. I just came to say my farewell. I should have left when I robbed Lady Geoghan’s house, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t go until I knew you were happy.” Captain Woolf looked to the ground, unwilling to meet her gaze.

Elizabeth followed his gaze, his large weathered boots out of place against the pristine crème carpet he stood upon. Nothing about the scruffy-faced man fit with the surroundings; yet, her heart said it did.

“Oh...” she said, speechless. The familiar connection they had was just as strong now as it was the moment they met. She took a step back, clutching her arms tightly to her chest.

“Are you happy, my dear Elizabeth? You look more beautiful than any woman I have ever seen. Marriage suits you.”

She thought she had forgotten him, moved on from their brief moment, but the second Captain Woolf looked into her eyes, her heart was aflame. Every wave of his dark hair cried out for her fingers to brush through it. The strong jawline of his stubble-faced chin begged for her kiss.

“I am. I am happy....” Elizabeth’s voice shook.

“Then why do you sound so uncertain?” Woolf pressed her.

“Why did you let me go? Why invite me into your life then tell me to leave?” Her eyes began to water. It was like they were back on the main deck of his ship, staring into each other’s eyes, both imagining what a life together would have felt like and both knowing it wasn’t right.

“My dearest Elizabeth, you have to understand. I wanted you in my life. I wanted to keep you for the rest of our lives, but I thought life on land, full of riches and lovely gowns, was best for you.” Woolf’s eyes traced longingly over her form, and she wished that she could throw herself into his arms.

“Why didn’t you let me decide what was best for me? You didn’t even give me a chance. I could have come back after a year or whatever amount of time. It should have been my choice.” Her tone started to rise, but she stopped herself.

“Elizabeth, I am a selfish man. If you had come with me, stayed with me a year or so, and decided my life was not for you, I couldn’t have done it. It would have destroyed me, much like it destroys me right now, seeing you in that gown, knowing that I will never have you. I had my chance, and it’s gone. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Woolf stepped closer to her, and her breathing became shallow. *It’s not right, I know it’s not right, but ...*

Then the captain was kissing her, his lips moving with hers. His arms wrapped around her waist tightly, and, even though she was a married woman, her arms instinctively went around his neck. If it were her only chance to show him, love, she would give him every ounce she had.

When Captain Woolf finally stopped, they were both breathless, lost in a moment that transcended space and time.

“Goodbye, Elizabeth. Until I see you again,” he said, stepping away from her, cheeks reddening.

She clutched her arms around her chest as if to keep the essence of him close to her, fighting the urge to chase after him or beg him to stay.

“Goodbye, Captain.” Her eyes welled with tears, and she watched in dismay as he climbed out her window.

Elizabeth collapsed onto her bed, sobbing over the life she had given up. Her heart was wracked with grief. *How can I go on after this moment, being married to someone I now know I can never love completely? Not when my heart belongs to someone else. I’ve married the wrong man, she thought with certainty, and there’s nothing I can do about it.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Tovras smelled the intruder but, not sensing danger, allowed the exchange to take place. Both the intruder's voice and Elizabeth's sounded clear as a bell to his magically enhanced hearing. When he realized the man meant to kiss Elizabeth, he experienced a strong urge to kill him. Instead, he allowed the encounter to play out to see how his new bride would react.

"Interesting," he said as she came down the stairs breathlessly. Her cheeks were blotchy and red. Obviously, she had been crying; did she feel guilty?

"Why, my love... what has you so rattled?" Tovras spoke with feigned surprise.

"Oh, Julius!" Elizabeth, still not knowing the truth about her new husband, ran into Tovras's arms and threw herself against his chest. "I'm so sorry, my husband, I am so sorry..." She began sobbing against him, and, for a moment, he felt a slight tinge of compassion. But it was quickly swept away by images of her betrayal playing through his mind while she touched him.

"My dear, whatever has happened?" Tovras asked, playing the unknowing victim.

"Julius—my beloved Julius. I am your wife, and I love you, but I—Oh, it's too horrible to say!"

"You don't love me?" he said, feigning concern. Knowing what she was trying to say but wanting her to say it.

"I do! I love you—But even as I wear your wedding ring, my heart belongs

to another. Another who came here tonight to say his final farewell. He kissed me, and I....” She sobbed louder. “I kissed him back.” She was shaking against him.

Grabbing her by the shoulders, he pushed her away in mock disbelief.

“No! Say you didn’t! On our wedding day?” He pretended to be heartbroken.

“I did—Oh, I’ll never forgive myself! Never! I love you, Julius, and I know we will have a beautiful life together. I know we will.”

Her naiveté was too much. He pushed her back harshly, his face and tone changing. *Time for her to see the real Tovras.*

“I’ll never forgive you either,” he hissed, eyes squinting, mouth forming a scowl. “You’ve betrayed me. And since we are already connected, you and I, you will spend the rest of your life working off your betrayal. Consider the happy life you imagine a nightmare. You belong to me.”

Tovras’s eyes had grown dark as storm clouds. He smelled Elizabeth’s fear even before she looked him directly in the eyes to see if he was teasing.

“Julius, I didn’t mean to... What is happening?” All color had left her cheeks, leaving her more ashen than normal. Fear had replaced the usual sparkle in her large brown eyes.

“What is happening, my dear, is that my name is Tovras. I am a great and powerful warlock who died many, many years ago. I was brought back to life to compose a song that would give life. In exchange, a bunch of naive fairies offered me immortality as a human. Only now, I am tired of being everyone’s puppet. Today, I get my revenge. And seeing how you have wronged me, I supposed I will also take revenge on you.” Tovras puffed his chest out, cape billowing around him like he was some evil king taking residence in her home.

Her hands reached for him, eyes pleading. “Julius... I’m so sorry! I do love-”

“Shut up, wench! Shut your damn mouth and don’t speak again until spoken to, or I will send you to the realm of the dead. As a matter of fact, I need to make a stop at home, then we’re off to our honeymoon.” He enunciated the last three words with great clarity, his voice assuming a bright, happy tone as if they were going to the most incredible location on Earth.

“Please, Julius... Tovras... Whatever your name is, I’ll do whatever you

want....”

“Yes, you will! Starting with being silent! *Silencium stratum*.” Tovras shouted at her, eyes glaring as his callous hand lay palm out and trails of gold charged from his hand to her throat.

“No!” Elizabeth cried, putting her hands up to stop it, but the lines of gold dove underneath, hitting her square in her voice box. She felt a slight burning sensation. Elizabeth tried to cry out in fear. Instead of the high-pitched shriek, she hoped for, all that came out was silence. Not even her breath made a noise. She started crying again, but her sobs were rendered mute.

“That’s better. Now, if you don’t mind, we have things to do and places to be. The realm of the dead to unleash.” He cackled mercilessly.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, unwilling to see what he was going to do next.

Grabbing her hand, Tovras pulled her next to him and whipped his cape around them while he chanted the words: “*Lineum Marvolosum*.” The last thing she saw was the elegant surroundings of her home, clouded in the black of his cape, then everything went dark. When the cloak fell away, they were in Tovras’s living room.

Elizabeth stared around in wild-eyed wonder.

What just happened? Where are we? As the familiarity of their surroundings sunk in, she wondered why Tovras-Julius had brought them to Julius’s home. To one side, there appeared to be an iron cage containing some of the most pale-skinned but beautiful beings she had ever seen. Tears streamed down their faces, and, when they saw her, one of them cried out, “Tovras, she’s done nothing wrong. Please let her go!”

“Nishley, she has done everything wrong! She betrayed me!” Tovras yelled angrily, his voice booming like a thunderstorm through the elegantly decorated room.

“Betrayed you how?” the pale being called Nishley shot back.

“Tonight, only minutes after our wedding, she kissed another, then proceeded to tell me that her heart belonged to him.” Tovras placed a hand on his hip, shoving Elizabeth aside.

She tripped, falling to the floor, her elegant gown making a tearing sound as

she hit the wood. Elizabeth wanted desperately to call out, to beg him for forgiveness, but, as he stormed about, she could see in the cool rigidity of his shoulders that he was not the man she had fallen in love with.

“Tovras, whatever you plan to do, you know that the song's magic will only work if you truly love her and she loves you back. You can't win this way. Just give up your darkness and come back,” Nishley pleaded, her desperate tone heartbreaking for Elizabeth.

What have I done? Did I make him this way? Elizabeth wondered, picking herself off the floor and hurrying to his side. She had to right her wrong.

“Don't fret, fairy scum. There was a part of me—Well, the human part of me genuinely loved her. It is better, then, that I am Tovras once more, or I would have been heartbroken at the betrayal. Humans are detestable. Absolutely detestable.” He scowled, aiming his anger at Elizabeth as she joined him again.

She didn't turn away from the anger in his eyes or the tight fists balled at his side. Instead, she stepped closer to him, directly between him and the fairy cage. Elizabeth tried speaking, but nothing came out, and the anger of not being able to express herself made her want to hit him.

“What's the matter, *beloved?*” he said snidely. “Cat got your tongue?” Tovras waved his hand carelessly in the air.

She frowned in response and mouthed something, the look in her eyes desperate.

A flash of something in Tovras' eyes told her there was still hope. *I know that look. He cares about me still.*

“*Silencium reversum,*” Tovras said, tearing his eyes away from her gaze.

“Can I speak?” The sound of Elizabeth's voice practically made her giddy. Maybe there was hope after all. “Whoever you are, there is a man inside you that I genuinely love, and I never meant to betray him, not in a million years. If you let him return to me, I will spend the rest of my life trying to prove myself. Please, I do genuinely love, Julius, I do.” She could hear the pathetic begging in her voice but couldn't bring herself to stop. Tears rolled down her face and, to emphasize her point, she grabbed Julius's face with her hands and kissed him full on the mouth.

If the coldness of Tovras's heart could be transferred through his lips, she felt it. Whoever this person was, he did not love her.

He was not Julius.

She let him go, the guilt of her actions spreading. She had kissed two men tonight, and neither were her husband.

"Where is Julius?" she demanded, clutching the pearls that hung around her neck, tightly. Wishing there was something, anything, she could do to bring back the kind, sensitive man who had worked hard to earn her affections over the past few weeks.

"Oh, I am here," Tovras answered snidely, looking down his nose at her.

"No, you're not. Julius loved me. I may have been selfish and distant, but he still loved me and worked every day to show me he cared. You are not him."

"Oh, I am him, all right. I guess you could say I've bottled up my humanity for now. I have more important things to do. Like, take over the realm of the dead. So, if you'll give me a few minutes, I am going to play you a little song. Then we'll get this show on the road, as they say." Tovras smiled wickedly, his eyes nearly black and empty of all emotion. Elizabeth could feel every essence of hope she had crushed under his heartless gaze.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“It won’t work, Tovras,” Nishley yelled again.

“Shut up; you are so agitating! *Silencium stratum!*” he yelled and, before Elizabeth's eyes, Nishley mouthed words, but no sound came out.

No, no, no... He must be stopped! she thought. Elizabeth cast a meaningful glance at the one he had called Nishley. The beings' pale, blue-tinged skin was lovely and surreal. As were their eyes, opalescent, violet, colors changing by the moment. Nishley smiled in return.

That simple act made Elizabeth feel as if everything would be all right.

“Pay attention, traitor. I am going to play this song for you, and for just a moment, I will be more man than a warlock. It doesn’t mean anything, and if you try something while I am more man than beast, so to speak, I will make you pay. Do you understand?” Tovras looked her dead in the face. With his soulless eyes, she felt him dragging to the surface all of her fears.

“Yes, I understand. I won’t try anything,” Elizabeth said, her voice shaking. She wrung her hands as she tried to formulate a plan.

“Good.” Tovras went to the piano and closed his eyes for a long, hard minute. When he opened them and looked at her, it nearly broke her heart.

“Please tell me you didn’t kiss another right after we were married?” Julius-her Julius- was back, his voice soft and sad. At that moment, Elizabeth didn’t care if any other man existed. Curse her stupid human heart; hearing his authentic voice nearly broke her.

“Julius, I am so sorry! I swear to you, I’ve said my goodbyes. I don’t care about him; I want you to come back. Stay here, live this human life with me. I know I could make you happy. I’ll try to make you happy every day, even if it kills me.” Her voice cracked, and she rushed to sit next to him at the piano. “Please... I’m so sorry. I never meant to... I’m stupid. I’m a stupid girl.” She stared deep into his eyes, and the beautiful hazel of Julius’s eyes stared back.

He leaned in and kissed her, his mouth warm and inviting. It touched her to her soul.

This was genuine love, not fleeting romance, not the heart-crushing affection of a stranger, but a man who genuinely loved her and did everything to make her happy so that she would want to marry him, even though she was in love with another.

“My heart isn’t whole, but, if you want it, it’s yours. I love you, Julius. You are a kind and good man. I’ll do anything for you.” She meant every word, even as she scooted closer to him, resting her hand on his face.

“Elizabeth, I...” Julius struggled to speak, his face reddening as if he were fighting some unforeseen force.

“What is it?”

His lips pursed, and, again, he tried to say something, but it was as if something held him back. Finally, he managed to speak, his voice strained as if he fought for every word. “I love you, Elizabeth. I have from the moment this human heart laid eyes on you. Try to remember *that*, remember this moment, no matter what happens.” Then he turned to the piano and began to play. Eloquent celestial notes rose in a cacophony of sound.

It was the purest, most beautiful sound Elizabeth had ever heard. It touched every pore of her being, making her feel like she existed on another plane. Somewhere so lovely and surreal it couldn’t be believed. Elizabeth had never experienced anything like this before. She stood from the piano bench and, like a little girl among flowers, danced and twirled around the room, eyes shut, head back as if she were five years old again.

Growing dizzy, she opened her eyes in time to see blazing gold light shoot up all around them, circling the room like shooting stars come to Earth. The light

broke through the bars of the cage holding the fairies, and they immediately took a stance near Julius.

Tovras stood up and wagged his fingers like an orchestral conductor.

The gold light that danced around Elizabeth was nearly as beautiful as the music that continued to play even though no one was touching the piano, and she could do nothing but stare, transfixed. Tovras seemed to beckon the light to him, containing it in a jar floating midair in front of his face.

The fairies started chanting something, but Tovras turned to face them, and, as he drew his hand back, they disappeared.

Elizabeth's flicker of hope dissipated as the music grew quieter. He took it away, silencing the magic as if it were his alone.

It made her stomach turn. That kind of music deserved to be heard and felt by every soul capable of feeling such a thing.

“Stop it! You can’t, Julius!” Elizabeth rushed to him, and, just as her hand was about to touch the jar that hovered in front of him, everything went blindingly bright.

“I’m not Julius! Hey! Where’d you go?” he cried out angrily.

Elizabeth reached her arms out to grab something, but she was completely blind. *Where did the bright light come from? Why can't I see?*

Tears welled in her eyes as desperation hit. Tovras had used a stupid spell to silence her, and now he had blinded her.

“You blinded me! Give my sight back!” she demanded.

Only Tovras didn’t answer. There was nothing but pure silence. Silence and light.

“What is going on?” she yelled, but there was no sound that emitted from her lips. At least for the moment. Then she heard music. It wasn't as pure and elegant as the music from before, but it was lovely. Whimsical and happy, it worked like a lullaby, and she felt herself falling asleep though there was nowhere to lay.

Elizabeth was adrift somewhere; perhaps she had died and didn’t know?

That was the last conscious thought she had.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“S hhhhh... She’s coming to. Give her space. She needs to be able to breathe.” A stern, feminine voice barked orders as Elizabeth slowly became aware of her surroundings. The fairy’s pale faces, kissed with hues of blue, were bent over her. She could see the concern in their opalescent eyes, the colors changing moment by moment.

“Nishley, we know she’s human. You act as if we’ve never seen a human before.”

Elizabeth continued blinking until their beautiful faces became clearer. Beneath her body, a cushion of softness curved to her back.

“Elizabeth, are you... Are you quite all right?” the one called Nishley asked. Elizabeth swore she recognized her from somewhere but couldn’t place where.

“Yes, I’m fine. What happened?” Elizabeth sat up and looked at the surreal setting, all iridescent and glimmering as if she were inside a bubble and everything around them was made of shimmer. *Made of shimmer? Can things be made of shimmer? I must be dreaming. Oh, but what a beautiful dream it is!*

She reached out as if trying to part the glittering particles that invaded the atmosphere. *Did I die? Is this heaven?*

A porcelain-skinned angel appeared before her suddenly, more lovely than anyone she had ever seen. *Or maybe she was always there? My perception is off.* Except the more she thought about it, the more it felt like she had seen the woman with pearly blue hair that radiated every imaginable color with the

refraction of the light.

“Elizabeth, take it easy. Everything is okay. YOU are okay. I know everything is a little disorienting right now.” The lovely woman patted her cheek softly as she sat next to Elizabeth on the bed.

“What happened? Did I die?” Elizabeth furrowed her brow as mounting panic gathered in her stomach. *I feel like I already know the answer to this question.*

“No, of course not!” The woman laughed, sounding like a rainbow reaching across the sky to kiss the ground. She was immediately joined by the tinkling laughter of two other women. “Goodness me, why would you think you are dead?”

“I thought I had died, and this was heaven,” Elizabeth answered honestly, feeling frightened that she had no real answers and no idea where she was.

“My dear, you are in Indigo Isle. That is, the Realm of the Fairies. We put a spell on you, a fail-safe in case the Warlock Tovras decided to break his promise to us.”

“Tovras?” Elizabeth’s memory was foggy, and though the name brought the image of a handsome stranger to mind, she had no idea why.

“I’m Nishely. These are my sisters, Nixine and Oona. You may not know me, but we’ve met, and when your mind has a chance to catch up to your surroundings, you will remember who you are and why you’re here.”

“Not why she is here, sister; you’ve yet to tell her that,” the one called Oona spoke up, smiling sweetly at Elizabeth as she sat staring at them all, dumbfounded.

Nishley laughed. “Forgive me, Sister; I forgot she was not a fairy and does not have our innate knowledge.” Nishley turned back to Elizabeth. “When your consciousness has awakened and you remember what happened before we came here, I will tell you everything you need to know.”

“Forgive me... Nishley? Am I saying that right? When you said the name Tovras, the image of a man appeared in my mind, and I feel as if I know him. Except I have never seen him before in my life. Can you please explain why I feel this way?”

“Give it time, you haven’t adjusted to our plain yet. Sometimes, the human mind can get quite muddled.”

“Ugh!” Elizabeth said in exasperation, wondering why the women... the *fairy women* were staring at her so intensely, yet none of them would tell her what was going on. It made her so angry! Just like Tovras taking over Earl Kingsland’s body. *Oh, Julius, I do love you. I’m sorry I kissed that dreadful pirate. My rebel heart doesn’t know what’s good for it.*

“Sounds like your memories have returned,” Nishley said knowingly.

“Sounds like?” Elizabeth said in exasperation. “Does that mean you can read my thoughts?”

“Why, of course, dear, you are in our realm. I can hear everything you think, it’s a safety mechanism. Anyway, enough chit-chat... We must discuss why you are here and what happened.”

“Oh, Nishley, as hard as it is for me to say... I love both Julius and Captain Woolf. I can’t help it! My heart desires both. And I should have just run away with Woolf before this nonsense happened. Then I would never know Warlock Tovras, and I wouldn’t be here wondering if I had lost my sanity.”

“Calm yourself, Elizabeth; I promise you that who you love matters greatly in the scope of things. However, you need to know so much right now, and I am afraid that time is not on our side. You see, before any of this started, the great Warlock Tovras died hundreds of years ago. We’ve not had a worry or thought of him from the time he passed,” Nishley continued, wisdom emanating from her otherworldly eyes.

“I’m sorry?” Elizabeth’s eyebrows scrunched as she struggled to process what she’d just heard.

“Let me finish. Tovras went to the realm of the dead, just as all creatures do.”

“Anyone not human is what she is trying to say,” Nixine chimed in.

“Yes, anyone not human. As for you humans, you have your own celestial plain where you go-”

“Or not,” Nixine said with a horrified look.

“What do you mean by that?” Elizabeth asked.

“She’s talking about the place filled with fire and brimstone, but that place is

going to look like a picnic near the sea if Tovras does what he is planning to do. This is where you come in,” Nishley continued.

“I still don’t understand how Tovras is back from the dead. Is he a demon? Did he take over Julius’s body? Explain to me, please!”

“I’m trying. Warlock Tovras is back from the dead, but something you don’t know about him is that he is a masterful composer. Hence the beautiful song you heard tonight. When our father became gravely ill, we knew there was no kind of magic we could create that would keep him here. So we sought the great Tovras and asked him to compose the song of life. See—music is pure. There can be no evil in it; it’s not possible. We knew that no matter what happened, if we could get him to create the right melody... We knew he could summon the purest magic there is, the magic of life. Only it’s never been attempted.”

Nixine continued where Nishley left off. “It’s never been attempted because the purest magic, the kind that can create life, indeed the very song of life, is a marriage of evil and good. A marriage so powerful that, when the evil is expelled, it becomes pure just by the very light it brings.”

“So, evil becomes good, and good does what? That makes no sense.” Elizabeth felt as if her brain were shrinking, unable to contain the knowledge given to it.

“Of course, it doesn’t. You live in the mortal world and do not operate on supernatural time structures or rules.”

“So continue explaining this to me so I can keep not understanding it.”

Oona laughed and stepped forward, kissing Elizabeth on the forehead. “You precious girl, you are so innocent you do not understand the part you play. As my sister explained, we needed the darkest being ever created, Tovras, to create the purest magic ever seen, the song of life. The only way to get him to create something pure was to fall in love, unabashedly, unashamedly, and unregretfully. Love is the purest form of magic. When the darkest magic and the purest magic combine—”

“That is where you come into play,” Nishley interrupted.

“So, I’m a pawn? A love interest?”

“So much more than that, my dear. His love for someone had to be not only

pure and true, but the person he loved had to be pure and true. And in all eternity, there has never been one so pure as you, Elizabeth, *Tome of Knowledge Reader and Light Bearer*.”

As Nishley spoke the words, *Tome of Knowledge Reader and Light-Bearer* over Elizabeth, *something* came alive in Elizabeth’s soul. It seemed to fill every hole in her body, like an empty flask filled with water to the brim.

“What did you just do to me?” It was like warm energy soared through every vein of her body; it made her feel alive and tingly all at the same time.

Nishley smiled brilliantly, her eyes radiating pleasure. “I just called into existence something that has been harbored in your soul for a long time. Oona, get the book.”

Oona laughed giddily and disappeared for a moment before appearing with a gorgeous leather-bound book worn with age. She handed it to Elizabeth, and, as Elizabeth took it in her hands, she felt the covert presence of power inside her. A force spread throughout her body and soul, touching the tips of her toes and fingertips.

“What is happening to me?” The shimmer in the air and surroundings seemed alive at that moment, as if it was reaching out to her. It was a part of the warmth that now flowed freely inside her being.

“Open the book, Elizabeth; tell us what you see.”

Elizabeth opened the stunning book, the smell of weathered old pages touching her nostrils with a kiss of delight. *How I’ve always loved the smell of old books!*

Words written in a magnificent gold ink seemed to hover above the pages. As she turned each page and began to read, nothing made sense, but everything made sense. There was old writing from the beginning of the Earth describing the creation of man and words she’d never seen describing the first sunset. The first birth of a baby deer, the look and feel of the first flower ever to bloom.

“I’m reading the history of the Earth from the very moment it came into creation, but I’m reading it so fast, it’s as if my mind is communicating directly with the book. There are so many things I’ve never seen or felt... and I can feel them... I can see them. It’s like the way a dog feels love for its master. It’s unlike

anything I've ever experienced."

Elizabeth's eyes teemed with tears, and they fell unabashedly, coursing rivers down her cheeks.

"Everything is so beautiful and so heartbreaking. The joy a baby feels when it sees its mother for the first time and their bond forms. I can see it...." Elizabeth slid off the bed and onto her knees, overcome by emotion. "There are things I can't describe. The sensation of a leaf unfolding, a baby rabbit being born... It's so much. It's almost too much."

"Close the Tome, Elizabeth. You have eternity to learn everything, to feel everything. That book has a bigger purpose at this moment, and the thing is my dear, you and you alone can read it. You are the only one who can see words on the pages when you open it. Those pages are blank to everyone else in the world, human and supernatural. It's just a pretty book that smells weird."

Elizabeth took a deep breath, digesting that information. On any other day, she wouldn't have believed it. But on this day, she had seen her betrothed turn eviler than she could have imagined. She had seen the realm of the fairies and felt the sting of pure hatred and pure love all at once.

"What does this book have to do with me, and what you called me before—Light Wielder? Tome Reader?"

"You and that book will save us from literal hell on Earth when Tovras releases all the beasts in the realm of the dead."

"Um, what?" Elizabeth blinked in confusion. Had she heard that right?

What exactly is going on?

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Elizabeth was having a hard time processing what she was told. She was going to be the one to save Earth from Tovras? She felt like her mind was hitting a brick wall. She was in no state to comprehend any of this, yet holding the magic pages in her hand made her feel whole and complete. As if she had gone her whole life missing something, and now she'd found it. Things had occurred over the past few hours she would never be able to explain in a million years because there simply were no words to explain them.

"Tome Reader, we need you. Will you help us?" Nishley's begging was nearly too much for Elizabeth, as was the feeling of desperation radiating from her.

"I want to help, I just don't know how," Elizabeth confessed.

"Indeed. Not like you have a choice anyway," Oona chimed in.

"Not like I have a choice? How do I not have a choice if I don't know what I am supposed to be doing? I don't understand." She let out a sigh of exasperation. As beautiful and right as the book felt in her hands, the fairies were frustrating her more than anyone ever had.

"Never mind her, Elizabeth. We must go now... We're running out of time. Once Tovras releases the beasts, there won't be much we can do."

"I still don't know what you mean about him releasing hell on Earth. How can he have that kind of power?" Elizabeth had a million questions, and they kept adding to each other. So many questions, she was sure her mind would

crush under their weight.

“Do you think you can quiet your thoughts for just a moment and trust me? Trust that I can help you figure out what you need to do and that everything I am saying is true? I mean, it’s not that big of a leap for you, is it?” Nishley moved closer to Elizabeth, taking her hand. “Do you feel that?”

Indeed, Elizabeth felt a warm rush of energy between them, as if they were somehow connected.

“What was that?” She withdrew her hand.

“It is the magic you carry. It is pure. And because it is pure, it recognizes the magic in me. All beings possess this ability on some level. Since yours is newly awakened, it is more sensitive to sensing the magic in others. It makes us like sisters, in a sense.”

“Fine, whatever you say. Let’s just do what needs to be done. If we make it out of this alive, don’t think that makes us friends. I can’t deal with... any of this.” Elizabeth waved her hand, motioning to the fairies and their translucent surroundings.

“Why would you say such a thing? We didn’t choose this for you, it was just...”

“Destiny?” Elizabeth finished.

“Something like that, yes. The moment darkness had the opportunity to destroy the Earth, the light had to also be given the opportunity to save it,” Oona explained, but her voice was beyond the calm, concerned tone she used earlier. Elizabeth could tell she was losing her patience.

“Look, I’m not trying to make this difficult, I just find it hard to believe. Let’s not waste any more time. I can tell you’re getting impatient, and, frankly, so am I.” Elizabeth closed her eyes, not wishing to look at the fairies anymore.

“Very well, let us make our way. I suppose the longer we delay, the more damage he is capable of doing.”

Elizabeth didn’t respond to Nishley’s remark. She was resigned to her fate, and, in that moment, she had to question how much she believed in Heaven, Hell, and the beasts in between.

“I’ll take her, Oona. Stay with Father. I suppose we’ll know very soon if this

all works out for the best. But right now, the most important thing you can do is wait with Father. I don't want to lose him. If we do, though, I don't want him to die alone." Nishley's voice was sad but matter-of-fact.

"Nishley, don't say that," Oona replied.

"We have to expect the worse. I don't know how fast Tovras will work, but we already know he has the song of life." The sisters exchanged a glance that Elizabeth found unreadable. Next, Nishley grabbed Elizabeth's hands again and, almost as if waking from a dream, she found they were back in Tovras's house.



ELIZABETH BLINKED RAPIDLY, trying to orient to her surroundings. "Why are we back here?"

"Tome Reader, you need to confront Tovras and make him stop what he is about to do. If you don't, all of the lives of humanity are at stake."

"I really don't understand what I can do or what part I have to play in this. I don't understand how this book and I can do anything to stop Tovras, especially if he is planning on killing all of humanity by releasing the beasts from the hell gates," Elizabeth said sarcastically.

"Now you're starting to get it," Nishley nodded appreciatively.

"No," Elizabeth fought back, her fiery curls flying about her face as she shook her head aggressively. "I don't understand anything!"

Nishley put a caring hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, an act which sent a rush of calm through her soul. The fair-faced woman smiled at Nishley. "Thank you, I know... I'm losing it. I just don't know what to do. It's a lot to comprehend."

"Can you just please trust that when the moment is precisely right, you will know what to do? You will know what you and the book are capable of. You must trust the Light Wielder inside of you and embrace the Tome of Knowledge Reader you were meant to be. Above all, you must trust the book. It contains all the answers, more answers than you could ever possibly need."

"What exactly does that mean? Where do I go from here?" Elizabeth felt like everything the fairy told her was hitting that brick wall in her mind.

"Oh, my dear, I'm afraid if I answer that, you will be unhappy."

"Where do I go from here?" Elizabeth repeated, the sudden weight of the silk layers of her dress uncomfortably heavy.

Nishley closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. When she opened her lovely opalescent orbs, Elizabeth's deep amber gaze was on her.

Elizabeth stared unblinking, forcing Nishley to speak. "Elizabeth, where you must go next is a place no human has ever gone. It will test every corner of your mind and every recess of your heart. Please do not give in to it, do not give in to the doubt and fear that may enter your soul. Only listen to the book."

"No, you can't be serious. Please tell me you're not sending me..." Her voice dropped off. Elizabeth couldn't even bring herself to say the words.

"Yes, I am sending you there," Nishley responded; the heaviness of what Elizabeth had to do was evident in the fairy's voice.

"You're really sending me to Hell? Just how do you expect me to go to Hell? What exactly do you want me to do there?" The weight of what lay ahead crashed down on her like an avalanche.

"Well, as we discussed, it's not really Hell you're visiting." Nishley shifted uncomfortably. The pale-haired beauty looked so far out of her element that Elizabeth almost pitied the fairy for having to break the news. She wasn't sure she would have wanted the position if she were a fairy.

"No, it's worse. It's the supernatural realm where all the demons, monsters, and nether beasts dwell. Beasts I never would have believed in before this moment," Elizabeth chimed in, repeating the information they told her earlier.

"I know it is hard for you, Elizabeth. I cannot pretend I don't know how hard it is, but you must trust this is for the best. I promise you, when this is all over, it will all be worth it." The lovely fairy flitted away, flowing back and forth in the air like one would pace the floor.

"Really? Can you truly say that? What if I fail and all humanity dies? Then will it still be worth it?" Elizabeth wrung her hands nervously as she talked.

"Elizabeth, as long as you try, even if you fail, you will not have failed. Tuck those words in your heart and believe them. Now, I need you to hold the book tight and, whatever you do... don't forget who you are."

Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears as she clutched the lovely leather book to her chest. Her heart pounded so furiously that she was sure it would burst through her rib cage. She felt an overwhelming wave of nausea.

What is going to happen to me?

There was no one who could answer that question, and as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, she felt the world slowly begin to fall away. Inside, she felt movement but, for all the force of her will, she could not open her eyes to see where she was going. Her body was moving between worlds, as it had done when the fairies brought her to Indigo Isle, though where she traveled now would lack all form of pleasantness.

Trust me, you don't want to see, Nishley warned her.

Nishley, are you here?

No, but in a sense, I am. I will remain with you as a voice you can hear. It is the only way I know to help you. No one wants you to lose all sense of who you are.

Elizabeth smiled, grateful for the lingering feeling of loneliness not so heavy as she traveled through the world.

For a long moment, it felt as if her body was floating in a vast void. *Perhaps I have died, and this is death, this ethereal feeling of being alone.*

There was neither warmth nor cold, no physical sensation to the emptiness that filled the atmosphere around her. The emptiness was the most discouraging. It tugged at the corners of her very being, filling bits of her with darkness. Penetrating darkness that felt like it would take up permanent residence if she stopped to think for even a moment.

I can't think about where I am or what I'm doing. I must simply be patient and focus on what lies ahead. How will I defeat Tovras? How will I ensure he doesn't free the vilest beasts the world has ever seen to kill and maim as they please?

You will soon be able to answer that question, Elizabeth. You are here. Prepare yourself. Do not give into the darkness that surrounds you or tries to infiltrate your pure heart. Nishley pushed her way through Elizabeth's thoughts, her voice like salve on an open wound.

May I open my eyes now?

Nishley said 'yes' into Elizabeth's mind.

At that moment, she felt the firmness of the ground beneath her feet. She was no longer floating.

Elizabeth's thick, hooded lashes slowly opened, and her amber eyes took in the expanse of darkness around her.

Elizabeth had reached the realm of the supernatural, the kingdom of dark and evil beasts that would destroy humanity if given a chance.

She inhaled deeply and took a step forward.

"I have no clue what I am doing, but here I go."

CHAPTER TWENTY



At first glance, occupying the supernatural realm was like being in a cave. Large stalactites hung from the ceiling. Great rock protrusions rose from the ground, jutting like horns, ready to impale Elizabeth if she took a wrong step. She could hear something bubbling to her right, but the fear that entered her inner being stopped her from looking to see what it was.

It was almost as if she were back home, on Earth, exploring a forgotten cave.

"I suppose it's not that bad," she muttered. "Honestly, it's kind of peaceful." She needed to talk, to hear her own voice because the silence in her mind and the abandoned place was deafening. It was so loudly silent, she imagined that if she were trapped down here, it could make her go mad.

Below her feet, the ground started to shift, and the sound of rumbling grew louder by the moment.

"Earthquake?" she asked, hoping the fairy voice would pipe up and tell her what was happening.

Nishley was silent.

The rocks below Elizabeth's feet began to move. The protruding stones grew larger, then smaller, appearing to rise out of the soil, then descending back into the ground. A violent hissing started, and Elizabeth's skin crawled.

"No snakes, please, no snakes!" Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but not to the shadows that occupied the deeper areas. She could no longer make out any forms around her, and the jutting rocks rising and falling into the ground

looked like dark beasts getting ready to attack.

"Nishley, I need light!"

Open your book but hold tightly to it no matter what you see.

Elizabeth nodded, thrusting the book out in front of her, and opened it up. A brilliant ray of light emerged from its center like the arch of a rainbow. For a moment, the light was everywhere, illuminating every surface, pebble, and beast around her.

"Monsters!" Elizabeth yelled, fumbling backward. She tripped and landed on her hind end. The book flew from her hands. She watched it fly through the air and land on the ground where it closed, and the light disappeared.

Elizabeth couldn't wipe the beasts' beady black eyes from her mind, nor the curled horns and snarling mouths.

Get the book, Elizabeth, before one of those monsters steals it and all hope is lost.

"I will, I just..." The ground was crawling with snakes or beasts that looked like snakes. They wriggled in and out of each other. Elizabeth had been walking across them the entire time. The rugged ground that had appeared to be rock was actually creatures of various sorts. The large stones that jutted out of the cave floor were also beasts. Their blinking black eyes were only noticeable when the light landed on them.

She was terrified to move, frozen to her spot, wondering how she would take the steps needed to reach the book. The silence was now laden with the sounds of creatures breathing, and her awareness seemed to awaken the rest of her senses. The odor was abysmally pungent, invading her nose and sticking to her skin like a humid fog. Elizabeth feared that, if she walked toward the book, something would grab her and eat her before she could reach it.

Nothing will eat you, but they will eat that book. You must hurry!

Elizabeth tried to will her feet forward, but her body had grown cold and clammy. Her entire being was shaking. She felt rooted to the spot like a statue.

It would help if you did not let fear get the better of you, keep walking forward. If you stop, you lose. If you lose, everyone dies. Do not go out without a fight. Do not go out without trying. Nishley's voice in her mind was growing

stronger and more urgent.

"I don't even have a weapon!" Elizabeth cried.

A weapon would do you no good here anyway, just take a step forward. And keep stepping forward. There are rules that govern this world, and, while those creatures may scare you, they are not allowed to kill you. If you were a supernatural being on Earth who had died and come here, they could fight, torture, and taunt you. Whatever they wish. But you are human and very much alive. All they can do is make you fearful. Fear is their biggest weapon here, and they will use it well, as they are doing now. GET THE BOOK.

Having been reassured the creatures would not kill her, the tension in Elizabeth's body eased, and she began walking forward decisively. The only difference between this moment and earlier was the rumbling of the ground beneath her feet as if she walked across crawling creatures. She could smell the acrid smell of animalistic bodies. It was encompassed by the smells of death and hatred, if hatred had a scent.

The sensations caused her to lose her balance, and she fell forward, landing on her hands and knees. The slimy body of a beast shifted under her fingers. She cried out fearfully. Unable to bring herself to stand again, she crawled along the moving floor slightly faster than a snail's pace toward where she had seen the book fall. Reaching the spot, she felt around fervently, her heart dropping as she realized the Tome of Knowledge was already gone.

"What do I do now, the book is gone, Nishley?"

Silence, child. Quiet your murmurings and listen for it. Is it truly gone? You and the book are connected. If you calm yourself, you can hear it. Feel its essence in your very soul.

"What does it sound like?"

It's not about a sound, it's about how it speaks to you. Quiet yourself, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had no idea what to say or think. She stood up. She took a deep breath and fought to calm the racing thoughts in her mind.

"All right, Elizabeth, you've got this. Calm down and listen for it." It was easier said than done. She had no idea what she was listening for, and the

creeping solitude that surrounded her gave her the sensation of a loneliness so deep that it reached into her soul and crushed her heart little by little. It seeped into every good memory she had, grinding them up like fine herbs until she couldn't remember the good things about her life.

Slowly, a feeling of despair overcame her, and she felt her body grow heavy with it. Elizabeth was giving up on herself, giving in to the darkness as she lost sight of the light in her mind. The realization that nothing but unnamed beasts made up the ground and walls of where she now stood terrified Elizabeth to her core.

The softest buzzing began in the back of her brain. A buzzing that emerged from the darkness and despair. Elizabeth had never experienced such a thing, and, since it piqued her curiosity, she gave into it. Focusing on the buzzing, she followed it and realized it wasn't in her brain at all. It was coming from something.

Was this the book calling to her?

Yes, that's it! Follow it, Elizabeth!!

Focusing her attention on the gentle buzz allowed her to connect the noise to a direction. The despair that started to drown her was pushed to the side. Elizabeth turned slightly right and began walking forward. So intense was her focus, that she forgot about the crawling creatures below her feet and quickened her pace in the direction of the buzzing that now increased.

The pitch-black no longer deterred her, nor did the looming shadows of the beasts she could feel walking around her. No matter how close she felt them come, or how the hair on her arms stood up, they never touched her. She knew Nishely had been telling the truth, and the buzzing grew louder.

It was like electricity coursing through the air, pulsating through her blood. She really did have a connection with the book; there was no denying that.

"All right, book, where are you?"

The buzzing increased, only now it wasn't so much a buzzing as it was a certainty. It was as if she could sense the book now, like a line of electricity connected her to it, and she quickened her pace to reach it. As she got closer, her heart rate increased.

The electric feeling took her past a beast she could only see the shadow of, and, as she passed it, it growled vehemently. She screamed and took off running. Following where the book led her, she entered a larger cave. *Not a cave. I don't know what this is.*

Stalactites still protruded from the ceiling and the walls, but the floor no longer moved with the shifting of creatures. Instead, unnamed beasts circled in the darkness, their talons scratching the hard surface of the ground. Feelings of fear and hatred hung heavy in the room like dark décor.

In the middle of the room, a man sat upon a huge, throne-like chair. Large, fiery torches adorned the tall rock walls. The room was well lit, and the man was familiar.

"Look at you sitting on a throne of lies," Elizabeth called. "It suits you, though."

Incidentally, the chair was made out of horned creatures.

"Elizabeth, I was so delighted to hear that you had arrived, until I discovered that you had the Tome of Knowledge with you. Now I'm not happy to see you. Just what are you doing here?"

"Where's my book, Tovras?"

"No, I asked first. What are you doing here?"

"I think you know what I'm doing here," she said knowingly.

"I do. I just hoped I was wrong. It hurts me that you want to try to destroy me. It hurts that my beloved wife wants nothing to do with my plans to take over the world. We should be celebrating our wedding night and, instead, we are sitting here bickering like little children. It saddens me."

"Give me my book, and maybe I'll change my mind."

"Tut-tut, you know I can't do that."

"Well, this is one heck of a honeymoon we're taking." She batted her lashes at him.

"I wanted to give you more, but... You know how it is, leading beasts into battle and taking over the world. I just don't have the time. I guess you could say that you married a man who loves to work."

"So what, I get to be the little wife, barefoot in the kitchen cooking for you,

feeling unloved and unwanted just because you want to be some kind of overlord of the supernatural?"

"I knew you'd see things my way." Tovras winked.

"So, may I have my book? If I have to spend the rest of my life with you, I think I deserve at least that."

Tovras frowned, his thumb and forefinger reaching up to grab his chin. He rubbed it contemplatively.

"What is there to think about?" Elizabeth continued, stepping forward as a creature skittered behind her.

"I'm just trying to figure out what kind of damage you can cause with the Tome of Light at your fingertips. Though I suppose for it to work, you'd have to be the Light Bearer, the Tome of Knowledge Reader, and there can be only one. Somehow, I don't think it's you. You're the most timid woman I've ever met."

"I take offense to that. Please, just give back my book. I'll do whatever you want, I just want my book." Elizabeth tried to retain her confidence, pretending what he said didn't bother her. Not seeing Julius was hard, and she clung to her anger, knowing she needed it to spur her to action.

The electric buzzing of the book started again and drew her attention to the left of the throne.

"Book, please come to me. I don't know what else to do," she called out.

Tovras laughed at her furtive plea. "Only the Tome Reader is capable of doing that."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and focused her thoughts on locating the book. Fighting against her pitiful resolve to beat Tovras at whatever game he was playing, she knew she had to focus on something else.

Open the book. If she could open the book, she could go to it, instead of it coming to her. If it was open, she could see where Tovras had put it. Then she would fight to the death to get it back, if necessary.

The leather-bound beauty became clear in her mind. Elizabeth visualized herself next to it, spreading it open. Sure enough, a brilliant light emanated throughout the cave. It penetrated to the core of her being. The book lay to the right of the makeshift throne on a stone table. Tovras must have hidden it with a

spell, which was why she couldn't see it at first.

She hurried toward it, and Tovras roared, "Stop!"

Elizabeth ignored him and, within seconds, was near the table. A lion-headed beast guarding the book roared at her. She wasn't afraid and roared back, snatching up the book and clutching it tightly.

"You know, for wanting to be the ruler of the spiritual world, you sure don't seem very prepared. I'm just a girl. This book has the power to overthrow you, and the best you could do was place it on a table with some kind of lion beast guarding it?"

"You're awful haughty for a human. I could say the word, and any of the million beasts that reside here would tear you limb from limb."

"Oh, is that so? I don't believe it. I don't think there is much of anything you could do down here while I am alive." Elizabeth clutched the book tighter; *no way I'm allowing it out of my sight ever again.*

"I could make you not alive," Tovras threatened, leaning forward on his throne, his ice-cold eyes demanding her attention.

"Then you would have to take me to the surface to do so," she countered, body slightly shaking as the fear of what he meant to do settled in.

"You act like that is beyond my capabilities. Do you think it would bother me to kill my wife on the night of our wedding? It is certainly not the best thing we could do, but, if that is what you wish, I have no qualms about making it so." He stood up at that moment, advancing towards her, and the darkness he contained rolled off his body like steam.

Elizabeth found herself stumbling backward, seeking a way to escape from him. "You would kill me?" Her eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yes, as I have done with many humans before. You would not be the first, and most definitely not the last. Don't look so surprised."

Elizabeth had no doubt he would be willing to kill her; she just didn't think it would be so easy.

"You never loved me at all, did you?" she said, her heart sinking. Her feelings for the captain didn't matter. He had left her not once but twice now. Julius, the human version of Tovras, had convinced her of his love, and she had

fallen.

"Oh, my human form did. However, the warlock could not allow it to be so. I hope you understand." His tone was condescending, angry.

She didn't care, but she was desperately trying to make conversation so she could figure out what she would do next. Nishley had not given her any direction regarding what she should do, and Elizabeth knew her time was running out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



"Your time is running out, Elizabeth," Tovras told her, reading her mind as he rose from the throne of beasts.

"Yes, I know. Can you read my thoughts?"

"No, but I can read your face. One benefit to having loved you as a human; I learned to read you very well. Don't ever forget that. Not to mention, you're here, but I don't know how you're going to get out of here, because I'm not letting you leave. Surely you didn't think that would be true, did you?"

Elizabeth was speechless. She had no idea how she was going to get back home, or how she was going to stop Tovras. He was a warlock after all. Why didn't he just use magic to stop her?

She turned her back to him, the feeling of death and darkness reaching into her soul. An overwhelming sense of hopelessness soaked into every part of her being. She knew if she didn't leave as soon as possible, she wouldn't be able to.

She walked purposefully away from Tovras, back the way she had come, not knowing how she would get back to Earth. To her family, her friends... and Captain Woolf, the true love of her life, since it was clear Julius was gone for good.

"Where do you think you're going, little one? Do you honestly think you stand a chance against me?"

She didn't answer, only kept walking away with no direction and no idea what to do.

"Your time is running out, Elizabeth," Tovras repeated, sending a cold chill through her being. His words had a freezing effect, and she felt it getting more difficult to walk away from him, her hopelessness and fear growing like a wildfire within her. *Where is Nishley? Has she left?*

Elizabeth fought hard not to give in. She refused to respond and had no desire to do so. He angered everything inside her that was right and good.

"Do you think that I will let you escape? Think again, woman, child. That book is mine!"

He chanted something from his throne, and she felt an unseen force tug at her book. But she only clutched it tighter.

"If you think that some weak magic will tear this from me, you're wrong." Elizabeth said, voice shaking.

"You act like you have a choice." Tovras took another step, advancing toward her.

Knowing he meant to harm her now, she took off running as fast as possible. The exit to the cave seemed miles away rather than just a few steps.

Tovras cackled menacingly, catapulting fear throughout her entire being.

Don't be afraid, just breathe deeply and keep running towards the exit.

How am I supposed to get home? Elizabeth asked, praying with all her being that Nishley had not abandoned her and could hear her pleas still.

There was nothing but silence in her mind. Tovras's menacing laughter followed her like an evil shadow.

"Take another step, and I will..."

"You'll do nothing!" Elizabeth opened the book. Turning to face Tovras, she aimed it toward him.

A bright light burst forth. It hit Tovras square in the chest so quickly he didn't have a chance to respond. It sent him flying backward, but the creatures of the cave came to his rescue and caught him.

Tovras roared, his eyes flashing angrily. He muttered something with such vehemence, that Elizabeth felt it radiate in her soul.

Something heavy and unseen blanketed her entire being. It was as if the claws of death gripped her in their cold embrace.

"What is that?" Elizabeth cried.

"A little spell to keep you from moving until I can figure out what I am going to do with you. Until then, I think a little journey to the surface is in order." Then Tovras was chanting again.

The next moment, they were inside Tovras' house. Elizabeth found herself clutching the book and unable to move.

Her journey to the underworld had been for naught, and now there was nothing she could freeze in unseen chains.

What do I do now? How do I stop him, I can't move!? She thought angrily.

Nishley stayed quiet for a moment, then she repeated what she told Elizabeth before.

Listen to the book, and do what it tells you. Listen to it, connect to it. The book will give you the answers. You are the Tome Reader. You're the only one who can do what is needed.

"Ugh! You keep saying that! What does that even mean? Either tell me what to do or leave me alone!"

"Who are you talking to?" Tovras roared, stepping up to glare at her eye to eye.

"No one!"

"We'll see about that!" Tovras muttered something, then Nishley appeared at her side.

"Oh no!" Elizabeth exclaimed, terrified of what he might do to Nishley's petite frame. She glared at Tovras, then Nishley disappeared.

Elizabeth's heart broke. She was alone now. There would be no one to help her.

Elizabeth... Elizabeth... Elizabeth... A surreal voice called to her over and over.

Paralyzed, she stood helplessly, waiting for the source of the voice to make itself known.

"You stay right there. I'll be right back. Though something tells me you won't be going anywhere." Tovras laughed, then vanished out the front door.

"Aaaghhhhh!" Elizabeth screamed, her heart pounding wildly. Tears began

falling down her face. She questioned everything she knew to be true.

The soft voice whispered her name again. *Elizabeth, Elizabeth...*

"What? Who is it?" she called.

The voice did not answer. The book pulsed against her body, and she struggled to free herself from the invisible chain.

The book illuminated her mind with a picture of the book outside the chains that encased her, though she couldn't see them. She thought about it, and, as she thought it, the book left her hands and floated midair. With her mind, she imagined the book opening wide and flipping to a page that would tell her what to do.

"Where do I go? What am I looking for?"

There was no answer to her question. The book continued to float, the pages flipping as if an invisible wind whipped them open and closed.

"You'd think since I was the chosen one or whatever, someone would have taught me what I am supposed to be doing."

No one validated her words with a response.

She closed her amber eyes, her lashes caressing her cheeks as she tried to tune into the voice or the book. She hoped one or the other would tell her what to do next. As she silenced her mind, a vision of chains breaking away made itself clear in her thoughts. This must have been what Nishley spoke of when she said the book would communicate with her.

"Make it so!"

The book flipped open to a blank page, and words appeared across it. She read the words aloud. They said, "Elizabeth was trapped in chains magically placed on her by Tovras, the evil warlock. When she imagined them away, the invisible chains fell off her body. She was able to leave the house and go meet Tovras."

As she said the words, the invisible chains fell off her, and she could finally move around. Though it was only minutes, it felt as if she had been chained forever.

She snatched the book out of midair. Lifting her skirts, she took off running to see where Tovras had gone.

In the city streets, people were running and screaming. A giant beast came barreling at her. A beast, unlike anything she had ever seen before. It had large talons that scraped through the pebbled streets as if they were dust. Huge eyes shimmered emerald as they focused on her, and scales covered its body from head to toe. It roared so loud the sound caused the earth to rumble, and smoke billowed out when it flared its nostrils.

Elizabeth screamed, running away as its large, powerful wings flapped wildly behind it.

A dragon? Are you kidding me? I have to be seeing things! She turned on her heel and ran until she heard a voice speaking to her.

Don't run away. Use me to stop it.

Another soft voice echoed in her conscience. It didn't sound like Nishley. In fact, she still couldn't place the voice, but she was starting to suspect it was the voice of the book.

I must be absolutely crazy, she thought, until the dragon's feet pounded loudly behind her, and she realized she was about to become his snack.

Right, amidst everything else, a talking book is what is bothering me? At least it doesn't have teeth, or any kind of fangs, and at least it's not roaring at me.

I can if you want, the voice informed her.

"No, thank you," she responded. "SO, you are the book that is talking to me. Why?"

Well, you need a guide... and I don't see you figuring any of this out on your own.

"So why wait? Why didn't you just talk to me all along?"

The book let out something that sounded much like a sigh. Elizabeth would have laughed at the irony of the situation if the beast wasn't gaining on her.

She stopped running, gripped the book in both hands, and opened it towards the beast. Immediately, the familiar beam of light shot from its pages and hit the dragon in the chest. It roared and fell backward.

The dark-haired beauty took a few steps back, keeping her eyes on the dragon as it kicked its feet wildly. She readjusted her position, aimed the book

once more, and hit the beast's scaly side like a dagger slicing through flesh.

The dragon's mouth opened wide, and drool dripped from its sharp, pointed fangs. Elizabeth folded the book, holding it tightly to her chest.

She knew she had injured the dragon significantly, and though she would never have wished for a creature's death, she hoped it would go quickly so she could stop Tovras. Flipping a few pages into the Tome of Knowledge, she waited for more words to appear.

"The beast fell back stunned, and Elizabeth shook her head in dismay. Picturing a large wrought iron cage, Elizabeth aimed the book towards the beast and waited for it to work its magic." *Ah-ha! Cage it!* She finished reading and pointed the book toward the creature. As she did so, the light erupted into the sky, and a giant cage fell upon the beast, trapping it underneath.

The dragon roared in anguish, howling in hot-blooded fury.

With the sizeable fanged creature contained, Elizabeth directed her attention to the screaming people running in all directions. In moments, everything had turned into a chaotic fit of hysteria.

"Keep going, Elizabeth. Lock up as many of those beasts as you can as quickly as possible. I'll aid you. Just as I have been."

A lion-headed creature stampeded past, and Elizabeth repeated the actions she had taken before, opening the book and waiting for words to appear so she could read them out loud, knowing this was what the book wanted her to do. *Though it would be easier to call a sword into existence and kill as many of the netherworld monsters as possible*, she thought.

The most ferocious beast she called a cage over was the Cerberus. It's three heads were each as large as the dragon's, and they growled and snapped so viciously, it stopped her heart in her chest. Surely the size of their teeth could snap the metal of the cage! But as much as they bit and chomped at the bars, the cage remained unmarked. She continued doing this to each beast she encountered until she was dead exhausted and night had fallen.

"Now, go find Tovras," the book instructed. And though she felt she couldn't take another step, and her body shook with fear, she did as the book requested.

A quick scan of her surroundings revealed people still running from the

monsters she had caged all over the city. Tovras was not here. He was either in hiding, or he had returned to the underworld to release more monstrosities.

When Elizabeth couldn't find him, she started a slow jog toward home. Maybe he was back at his piano, she found herself wishing, clamoring out the notes to the song of life he had come up with when he was human and loved her.

A pang of nostalgia hit her heart, even though she didn't love him the way he wanted. She still felt her heart beating at having lost the human side of Tovras, the side that was good and kind.

When his house came into view, she slowed her pace. Elizabeth thought long and hard about what she should do when she saw him. If he wasn't inside, there was no way she would be able to stop him, even with the book at her side. If he was there, he might kill her on sight to make her pay in the afterlife for what she had done to him.

"Elizabeth, you escaped!" Tovras called from behind her. He rode up on a large beast with a lion head and a body like that of a dragon. It had oversized eagle wings, and a snake-like tail that flicked out behind it. It breathed fire and flared its nostrils at the sight of her.

"Tovras!" Elizabeth surveyed the streets around them, overwhelmed by the bodies that littered them. He had done so much damage in a short amount of time. "Stop this! I don't know what you're trying to do, but you must stop. You're killing innocent people. What is the reason? Is this really worth it?"

"I don't care who dies. I got what I wanted, a spell to bring the dead beasts of the underworld back to life so I could rule over both realms. Is that really so hard for you to understand?" Tovras cackled, throwing his head back with a laugh so evil it chilled Elizabeth to her core.

"No, it's not hard to understand. It just doesn't seem very you. That's all." She struggled to keep her composure despite running out of options. Even though she carried the book in her hand, she hoped once more to appeal to his human side. *It's the only hope I have of him stopping everything. I don't think this book is enough to cage his warlock side. It's too evil, too powerful. I need to get to Julius—somehow.*

Tovras had already shown her what he was capable of in the short amount of

time he had practiced sorcery in front of her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Captain Woolf's Ship, at sea.

Captain Woolf found the sea to be a lonely mistress and, in his mind, Elizabeth's fair face and dark curls taunted him like a siren. After robbing his birth mother, kissing the only woman he had ever loved goodbye, and setting sail, he imagined nothing worse could happen. He may as well die.

Not even a day and a half on the water and something in the atmosphere had changed. It was palpable; even the crew noticed it. The sea's anger caused the boat to toss from side to side, the waves getting rougher by the moment.

They were all on edge, waiting for something they couldn't explain. It was midday when Captain Woolf steered the ship out to open water, the foaming sea lapping against the wood, and he heard Duncan calling from the deck below.

"Eh, Captain, something strange off the port!"

"Rock, hold the helm!"

Rock clambered to the stern and grabbed the helm from the captain, nodding as he did so. The captain hurried across the ship to the port side, scanning the rocky waves where Duncan was pointing. It was hard to tell under the storm clouds that had gathered quite suddenly, but there was definitely something stirring in the water.

"Grab the harpoon, and ready the cannons. It may just be a whale or a school

of sharks.” The captain really had no idea what would cause shadows that large under the surface of the water. He hoped it was his eyes playing tricks on him or the storm clouds overhead.

The crew prepared to kill whatever it may be, their hope probably that it would be something they could kill for meat. Rations were always low between pillaging, and their food supply was running short.

“Duncan, ready that cannon!”

“Aye, Captain!”

As Duncan poured the gunpowder in and packed it down, the beast suddenly rose out of the ocean depths, great waves of water rising with it, and every crew member on the boat screamed in fear.

“A bloody hydra?” the captain yelled, not believing his eyes as the large, dragon-like heads swung back and forth, swaying in the wind. It roared loudly, teeth dripping saliva, eyes piercing and focusing on Woolf’s boat.

“Fire Cannon One!” Woolf yelled, not even thinking about the repercussions.

Duncan’s aim was true, and the shot caught the middle head of the sea monster, sending it soaring backward through the air until it landed with a large splash in its watery grave.

The rest of the body, along with the remaining two heads, came after Captain Woolf’s ship with renewed vigor. In response, the captain yelled, “Fire Cannon Two and ready Cannon One again!”

“Already on it, Captain,” Duncan yelled back. The waves crashed harder against the boat, causing the cannons to rock back and forth. It took several men to hold them steady while Duncan attempted to load the cannon again, so he could fire at one of the two remaining heads.

Then the rain started. Thunder crashed, water splashed from the ship’s sides, and the rain-soaked the men completely through.

Duncan fired again, hitting the hydra but only piercing the skin. The hydra roared, then dropped into the water, causing all the men to tremble in fear. It was preparing for its next attack, and to predict where it would come up was nearly impossible. The storm clouds made the water nearly black, and the shadow under their boat was barely visible.

Captain Woolf ran across the ship, grabbing a harpoon from one of the crew and holding it firmly in his hand. The next time the sea-beast emerged from the water, he would stab it straight through its heart.

The boat crashed against a wave, sending him sprawling onto the deck. As he tried to regain his footing, he heard someone yell. He watched in horror from the opposite end of the ship as the hydra rose, one head quickly striking forward and snapping up Rock, who had been at the helm trying desperately to keep the ship from going all over the place.

“No! Rock!” Woolf yelled, truly devastated at the loss. He leaped across the wood planks, catching himself against slipping in the large puddles that had gathered by navigating the ship using the railing. A huge wave lifted the left side of the boat so high, that the men started to fall. One plummeted into the ocean. The hydra immediately went for him, swallowing the body whole.

That only fueled the captain’s anger more. Half holding the railing, half crawling along it until the boat dropped back down, he quickly made his way to the stern, where he could see the beast rising again and getting ready to strike. The creature’s chest was wide open, and, as he pulled his arm back to hurl the harpoon, another head emerged from the sea beast's body where they had shot the first one.

Captain Woolf didn’t wait to see what would happen or allow the third head to emerge and cause more damage. He dove close, releasing the harpoon. It struck the monster square in the heart, just as he saw several more heads emerging from the stump of the one that had been chopped off.

The harpoon to the heart caused the hydra to roar and leap upward before it fell back, its arms and heads flailing. The sea around them crashed and roared from the weight of the animal falling. The hydra’s tail whipped around, hitting the stern of the boat as the captain ran to escape being pierced.

The heavy tail ripped out a massive chunk of wood before being dragged down with the rest of the beast, which disappeared into the angry sea. Blood stained the water, and the ship's deck.

“Captain!” Duncan yelled as things finally started to calm down, though the rain had gotten stronger.

“Duncan! Good firing, mate!”

“Yes, but we lost Rock,” he said, hanging his head.

“Yes, but t’wasn’t anyone’s fault.” The loss stabbed Woolf’s heart. Rock had been one of his original crew, and no matter how many people quit or joined, he had stayed on like a loyal dog, always ready to serve the captain. His loyalty was unparalleled. Woolf curled his hand into a fist and held it to his chest. “Never was there a more loyal crewmate. We must do him proud.”

“Aye, he respected you greatly, Captain.”

Woolf nodded, knowing what Duncan said was true. “Hey, wait. Where’s Slug?”

“Slug went over in that last bit as the ship came back down. He couldn’t hold on,” Duncan said, shaking his head.

“Thank you, Duncan. I mean it. Now, let’s get that stern repaired as quick as possible and get this boat chartered back to land.”

“Surely you don’t mean...?” Duncan asked, letting the rest of the question hang in the air.

“I do mean. I need to get back to Elizabeth. There’s something not right about this weather and that Hydra. I need to make sure she’s okay.”

“Yes, Cap’n. But if ya’ do that, they’re gonna capture you!” Duncan’s voice was gravelly, and his anger was clear in his reddening cheeks, but no doubt he was concerned.

“I’ll be all right. We’ll tie down farther out, in a different place than last time. I’ll keep to the woods and try to keep my identity hidden,” Woolf reasoned.

“Yes, but you don’t think that if you come within a thousand feet of her home, they will be looking for you?”

“Look, Duncan, I’ll take my chances. She’s the one true love of my life. I have to make sure she’s okay.”

Duncan shook his head, but said, “As you wish,” as the other crew members got to work lugging spare wood and tar to fix the broken part of the stern. The rain had slowed and, though it was dark, the calming waters made it easy to turn the boat and make their way back to shore.



UNAWARE OF THE battle at sea, Elizabeth held her stance as she mentally prepared for Tovras' next attack.

The Warlock threw his head back. His long fingers gripped the mane of the beast he rode. His cackle was nearly as loud as thunder, and Elizabeth felt her heart adopt an irregular beat as her fear rose again.

"Doesn't seem very me? Come now, Elizabeth. You can do better than that, surely?"

The eyes of the chimera flashed red and it breathed a small burst of fire, which caused Elizabeth to jump back.

Her eyes were drawn to the bodies yet again, and, as Tovras sat upon the beast, hopelessness seized her.

Tome Reader? Light Bearer? She'd barely made it through caging the beasts he allowed to escape the underworld. Now that she stood face to face with him, she couldn't bring herself to do what she knew needed to be done. The very thing the Light Bringer should be completely against.

There was a reason the book had her cage every beast; they were dead. There was no use killing them again. That knowledge flooded over her and became clearer than the full moon in the night sky. However, for Tovras, though his warlock body had died, his human body was still alive.

The evil man said that part of him no longer existed, but she knew it did. She had seen it when he played the song for her. The song of life that had the very ability to bring one back from the dead. Elizabeth knew the man she loved still existed. However, killing Tovras meant killing that part of him.

"Forget it, Elizabeth, you can't kill me. I am immortal!" Tovras yelled, charging at her.

Elizabeth took off running. Terror gripped her. Her feet pounded against the cobblestones as she contemplated where she should go. *Nishley, what do I do? Oona? Nixine?* She called to the fairies in her mind while clutching the book as tight as possible.

They remained silent. Overhead, the sound of thunder soared across the sky.

Just great, she thought. That's all I need. She hoped against hope it wouldn't begin to rain, but, as she thought it, large pelting drops hit her square in the face. The only advantages she had on her side were the book in her arms and the fact that it was night.

Elizabeth darted between two buildings, taking the narrow passage that led behind them, her feet flying as fast as they could go. She hurried to their home, where the piano stood waiting for the fingers of one gifted enough to play it again.

She had an idea, but she wasn't sure if it was going to work. Only time would tell if she was capable of doing what she hoped. The beast that carried the warlock cried out, and Elizabeth let out a triumphant laugh. He was not able to fit in the passageway she had taken, which meant he couldn't follow her.

That should give her enough time to get to their house and enact her plan, even if it meant she was about to have her heart ripped out of her chest. Elizabeth had to wonder what Tovras had done to the fairies. *Please let them be okay!* As she ran, she flipped open the Tome of Light.

Show me the fairies! She willed the book, and words appeared on a page.

As Elizabeth ran, she thought of her friends, Nishley, Nixine, and Oona, who had been cursed to stay back in Indigo Isle. As long as the dark magic that empowered Tovras the warlock to rule the Netherworld existed above the surface, the fairies would never be free.

Elizabeth was relieved that her friends were okay, but time was running out. King Bayard, the ruler of the fairies, was running out of time. As the clock ticked, he grew closer and closer to taking his last breath. It was up to the Tome Reader to rescue him and put an end to Tovras the warlock once and for all.

Elizabeth closed the book, knowing exactly what she needed to do. It would require more sacrifice than she'd ever had to give, and she wasn't sure if she could do it.

The chimera had taken to the air and now blew flames towards her. She found herself hurrying to escape once more. Steeling her resolve, she kept her attention on reaching the house she and Julius had planned to share. She darted back into the street, leaping over bodies and trying to avoid the puddles of blood

that pooled around them.

Elizabeth's heart was broken for the lives lost, but they made her even more resolved to put a stop to the death toll. *Come on, Tovras, where are you?*

The evil cawing of the beast he rode had followed her from the air, but when she darted back between the buildings and out into the street again, the sound disappeared.

A man shrieking in frustration filled the skies. The rain continued to pour, and now little pools of water were collecting. Elizabeth had to leap every now and then to avoid being soaked by the puddles. A hot blast of heat burst over her, and, to her dismay, Elizabeth realized the chimera had caught up to her. She darted out of the way, ducking behind houses and shops. Just as their house came into view, a little glimmer of hope flickered inside her, grasping talons gripped her back and lifted her into the air.

Elizabeth screamed, begging for help, but there was no one around to hear her shouts. Her legs and arms flailed wildly as the nails dug into her shoulders. "No!" she yelled, "let me go, you beast!" Suddenly being lifted had caught her off guard and, to her surprise, she had dropped the book. With her hands free, she clawed and yanked at the claws that gripped her, trying to free herself, but they had a death grip.

Tovras was laughing again, the sound of his jubilation filling the air as the rain-soaked them both. Flying over buildings and trees, Elizabeth had to wonder where they were going. Her subconscious told her their journey upward was just so the beast could release her. She would fall to her death.

"So be it," she said, closing her eyes and relaxing, knowing what came next was inevitable. It was always his wish to kill her; she should have known from the moment she found out who he truly was. Her entire body went limp as she submitted to her fate. The chimera flew higher, screeching at the sound of its master's laughter until they were high in the pitch-black sky. The stars formed a glittering backdrop to the murder that was about to take place.

"Release her," Tovras said, and the creature's talons opened.

Elizabeth's body plummeted toward the earth, wind whipping past her on both sides. She embraced that this was the moment she would die, and closed her

eyes, waiting for the impact that would shatter her into a million pieces. Adrenaline began racing through her veins, her heart beating so fast it felt frozen. Her breath came in short quick gasps.

This was death. This was the moment all humans feared their entire life.

The impact enveloped her like silk sheets wrapping around her early in the morning when the gentle warming of the sun caressed her pillows. The memory kissed her, reminding her what it felt like to gently flutter her eyes open and be greeted by the sun just peeking through the curtains.

The afterlife was more pleasant than she hoped.

What comes next? She felt her body shifting, and her feet hit solid ground. The uneven feel of gravel was uncomfortable.

“What is happening?” she asked, her voice sounding foreign to her own ears. She expected death to feel different, but there had been no pain, no shroud of darkness encompassing her soul. The silk feeling that hugged her entire body now melted away, and she realized what had happened. The book had caught her, wrapping her in its pages to shield her from the ground. *How was that possible?*

You dropped me, and I opened, which was precisely what needed to happen so I could help you, the book said. *Now hurry, you don't have much time!*

Remembering her plan, Elizabeth sprinted towards their house, which was in sight. She shoved open the oversized door and thrust it closed behind her. The piano sat untouched as if calling to her, though she had no idea how to play it.

Now she had to see if Tovras would play it. The chimera wouldn't fit inside the house; she was sure of that. Would the warlock have the beast break through to tear her apart?

Something told her no. Though she had no reason to believe he would have an affinity for the home they were supposed to share. After all, he was a powerful magician with endless dark magic at his fingertips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“I need Nishley, book. Can I free them?” Elizabeth said out loud.
Not until Tovras is defeated, it promptly answered.

“I need them to defeat him!” she yelled, though the book's voice was in her head.

You have everything you need to defeat him. Just trust yourself.

“That’s easier said than done,” she said sarcastically. She held the book tightly as she waited to see what Tovras would do. The next move was his entirely. She didn’t have to wait long.

The front door flew wide open, ripping off its hinges, and Tovras jumped off his chimera, muttering something in a foreign language that she didn’t understand. Or maybe it was a spell? The beast knelt, making a whimpering sound as it bowed to the warlock.

Elizabeth's heart was pounding against her rib cage. She knew he could hear it, and it took everything in her not to cower in fear. The coldness of this man penetrated through the very core of her being. *He wants me dead.*

“Tovras, you’ve decided to fight me one-on-one?”

“Oh no,” he said, “I’m going to do what I should have done.” His hand shot out in front of him, and he extended his fingertips toward her. Each digit was highlighted with a soft red glow, and Elizabeth knew he meant to shoot her with a spell. She would be no match for his dark magic. All she could do was hold the book and try to make the blast hit the Tome instead of her.

“Can I beseech you one last time to think about what you’re doing? You’ve already taken so many innocent lives. What does mine matter? Why not just return to the underworld and rule the beasts that live there? Why come here and kill? It does nothing for you.”

“Oh, but it does, Elizabeth. See, whoever I kill has a fifty-fifty chance of joining me in the netherworld. The more people I slay, the larger the army I have down there.” The left side of his face formed a mischievous grin like a little boy just caught stealing from the cookie jar.

“Army? Why do you need an army? Are you not powerful enough to fight your own battles? No one here is strong enough to fight you; you’ve proven that. Don’t pretend you’re affected by swords, arrows, or other weaponry,” Elizabeth shot back.

“I don’t need to explain my reasons to you. But I’ll explain since you can’t seem to shut up long enough to allow me to concentrate so I can kill you. Even the forgotten beasts of the underworld are not nearly enough to fight the beasts of the celestial realms. Killing as many as possible will give me more forces to fight in my army.”

She looked at him in confusion.

To which he responded, “I plan on taking the celestial palace.”

Tovras' admission stopped Elizabeth in her tracks. Her eyes widened. She had gotten glimpses of celestial persons and had to wonder what he was thinking, taking on the entire realm of surreal beings.

“Tovras, they’ll kill you!” Elizabeth yelled, scolding him like a child.

“That is why I need the army,” he quipped.

“Why? Help me understand why when you have all the netherworld at your fingertips?” She knew she was coming across as needy and that her pleading may irritate him more. But she had his attention now, which brought her one step closer to what she was trying to achieve.

“I don’t know why I’m wasting my time with you,” he said, suddenly snapping back to reality. His fingers focused on Elizabeth, directing his magic towards her. Almost too late, she saw the red and orange of the electrical charge he flung toward her.

Elizabeth dropped to the ground, afraid the blast would destroy the book, but the magic followed her as she rolled out of the way. Elizabeth held the book above her head, slipping and falling on her bum, giving her enough leverage to avoid the hit. Tovras's magic shot past her, hitting the wall and causing a hole to blow open in the wood panels.

Tovras yelled loudly, his face reddening, and he shot another flash of magic at her. This time, he focused on the ground at her location.

Elizabeth hurried away from the magic flare and, just as it was about to hit her square in the chest, she lifted the book quickly, its center opened outward, hoping it would protect her.

White light shot from the book's center, meeting Tovras' magic halfway and knocking him backward.

"What the...?" he questioned, stopping mid-sentence.

Elizabeth was confused as to what had happened. *Is the tome's magic stronger than a warlock's?*

Tovras' face darkened as he regained his footing. "Try that again and see what happens!" he screamed through gritted teeth.

"Tovras, stop! Please! I don't want to fight you. I'll gladly do whatever you wish, if you hear me out on one thing. That's all I ask."

He lowered his hand, staring at her, eyes black as night.

"You want me to hear you out on one thing, and then you'll do as I wish?" He seemed unconvinced.

"Yes, just hear me out, and if you agree to what I say, I will do whatever you wish, even if it means offering myself as a sacrifice."

That seemed to get his attention, and Tovras froze. "Very well, say what you must."

Elizabeth's heart nearly stopped when he agreed. She chose her words very carefully. "Tovras," her voice softened, "my request, and then you can do what you please with me, is that you play the song of life for me one more time before I die."

"No!" Tovras roared, "Absolutely not!"

"Why? What will it do? You already have your dark magic, so it will not

affect you. Just play it for me once, and I swear—anything you ask of me, I will do.” She searched his face for any sign of emotion.

He didn’t say anything for a long minute, and Elizabeth wondered if she had ruined her chances. If he didn’t agree to this, her plan wouldn’t work. *He has to agree. He has to!*

“All right, here’s the agreement. We sign it in blood. I will play the song for you one more time, and, once the song is complete, you and your soul are mine to do with as I please.”

Elizabeth nodded, agreeing to the terms.

“*And,*” he said, “you must put the book out of arm's reach while I play.”

Dad blammit! she thought, wondering if her plan would work without it. Elizabeth couldn’t do anything at the moment, because he would see the book’s magic at work, so in a desperate attempt to defeat him the only way she knew how, she nodded her agreement to his demands.

“Fine.” Tovras conjured a stiff parchment paper with the words written out and, using magic, sliced the palm of his hand and used the blood to sign it. When he was finished, he gripped her wrist tightly and cut it open with a small dagger he carried in his apothecary belt.

“Ow!” Elizabeth yelped, withdrawing her hand. She used her finger to draw her signature on the contract, knowing in a few moments, everything could blow up in her face.

“Very well, now that we’re done...” Tovras motioned to the contract, and it disappeared. He sat down at the piano and began to play, but the notes came out off-key and hoarse, as if the piano was broken. “What the...” he said again.

Elizabeth sat down to play a simple melody she had learned as a child. The notes came out perfectly.

“You spelled it, you witch!” he yelled.

“If I spelled it, then you can unspell it,” she reminded him.

Irritated, he muttered something quietly, then sat down to play again. The notes came out the same. Elizabeth knew exactly why, which convinced her that her plan would work if she timed everything perfectly.

“Tovras, the song of life, can only be played with the purest of magic. Right

now, as a warlock, you cannot play the melody. You must become Julius, the man who loves me, to play it right.”

Angry, he growled and gave her a dirty look.

“I’m sorry, Tovras. I didn’t do it on purpose. I want to hear it once more before you take me to the underworld.” Elizabeth looked at the ground, scuffing her feet against the softwood flooring.

“Come sit,” he barked, and she cautiously wandered over, afraid he may hurt her. “Sit here, and don’t say a word. Don’t try anything or, so help me, I’ll slice your throat.”

She shook her head. “I won’t, I swear.”

The bench wasn’t wide enough for them to sit apart, and, as her side pressed against his, his chill soaked through her. She folded her hands tightly in her lap, waiting for his next order, calculating her every move.

After a long, silent moment, Tovras’s fingers graced the piano once more. The melody that flowed from it was like one only heard in the heavens. It glided over her like the sound of angel wings, and, for a moment, Elizabeth closed her eyes and reveled in it. Julius was back. He had to be, because only the one who truly loved her could play the song of life.

“Julius?” she whispered gently.

He stopped playing and turned to look at her. “Elizabeth,” he whispered, their eyes meeting.

Their gazes locked, and everything Elizabeth planned for this moment flew out the window. She had hoped to reach into his cloak, yank the dagger from his belt, and stab him in his human heart. Only now, she couldn’t. The relief of seeing him, the real him, was too overwhelming.

“You look more beautiful than I remembered.” Julius turned on the bench to face her, his hands grabbing her face and pulling her in for a kiss. His lips traced over hers like a sailor returning from the seas.

Elizabeth tried to fight her feelings, but they were too much. After being so afraid and staring her dead in the face, having Julius back, and knowing he still loved her, even through all the darkness of his warlock side, she couldn’t help herself. She melted into his hands, fingers reaching for his cloak, gripping the

velvet fiercely. She didn't want him to leave. Not again; that would make her a slave for Tovras.

"Gods, I'm so sorry, Elizabeth. I wish I could stop what's happening, but I can't. It's like I'm a bystander watching everything happening, but I am powerless to stop it. I can't tell if we are two people, or if I am him doing all these horrific things."

"Shhhh..." she said, placing her finger on his lips to silence him. "Julius, I would give anything to have you back. Please don't leave me again. If you leave, I know I can't bring you back. Only Tovras has that power."

"I don't have control over that," Julius said softly, his dark brown eyes furrowing in concern. One hand dropped from her face to her hand and traced her fingers softly, causing a tingle to reach up her spine.

Gods help me, I can't do what I need to do. She could see the dagger poking out, and she had the perfect vantage to grab it and stab it through his chest. She had to do it when he was mortal, or Tovras would return, and she would never have the chance again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



“Elizabeth,” Julius sucked in a deep breath, “I know I don’t have much time. I want you to know, that I don’t care that you loved the pirate captain. Yes, it broke my heart, but you could break my heart a million times, and it wouldn’t matter as long as I could have another day with you.”

A tear gathered in her eye, and she felt her heart rending from her chest. “No, Julius... I could never do that to you again. I should never have let it happen,” Elizabeth said, the guilt overwhelming her. “I was a child, and if I had it to do all over, I would. I swear to you, I would.”

Julius leaned in and kissed her cheek, brushing a wild hair out of her face. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I never really did anything to earn your love until this last short time together, and that was only because I knew I was losing you. I was young too, and now it’s too late.”

Elizabeth’s tears started flowing, and she couldn’t stop them. Her chance to do what she needed was fading.

“I know that there’s a reason you were able to get me to come back. Do what you need to do. You have my blessing. And no matter what, remember that I love you. I truly do.” Julius stared at her meaningfully.

“Oh,” Elizabeth moaned as he turned away and began playing. Somehow, he knew. She didn’t know how, but he knew, and it killed her.

As the notes began to caress the air once more, she sucked in a deep breath, yanked back his cloak, and quickly grabbed Tovras’s dagger. She whipped her

arm around and drove the blade straight into his back. He let out a loud yell but continued to play the melody.

That broke Elizabeth's heart even more. She knew he was struggling to stay human so that the body of Tovras would die, and he would never be able to come back and finish what he planned. With tears cascading down her cheeks and the heartbreak of her actions rending her in half, she pulled the dagger out and plunged it again, her left hand holding tight to the handle, her right hand on Julius's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Julius. I love you," Elizabeth said softly, devastated by what she was doing.

He played slower, blood dripping from his back onto the floor. "I love you, Elizabeth," he choked, fighting with each breath to say the words, until his fingers couldn't play anymore. At the last possible moment, as he stopped, his eyes blackened, and Elizabeth sensed the change in his demeanor. Tovras was back and angrier than ever, only his human body was moments from death.

"What... have..." he sucked in a breath, "you...done...?" He fought for each word.

Elizabeth jumped back, watching as Tovras slumped to the floor, falling on his backside. As his face paled and his dark eyes began to glaze over, she almost felt pity for the warlock.

Tovras's breathing turned raspy, and she fell to her knees, hands folded over her mouth as she cried over the loss of Julius. Elizabeth couldn't tear her eyes from his body; everything in her wanted to crawl to his side, to comfort him in his last moments, but she knew it wasn't Julius. After a time, the rising of his chest stopped, and his body stilled. She crawled to him, putting her hand over his eyes to shut his eyelids.

"Oh, Julius! I'm so sorry!" It felt like pieces of her heart were splintering off inside her, the pain so excruciating it took everything in her to catch her breath and not collapse into a screaming, bawling pile of a broken woman. Elizabeth laid her head on him, her hand on his chest. Ignoring the warlock he had become, she remembered only the kindness of the man who had made her fall in love with him.

She would hang onto that memory for the rest of her life.

“Oh, my darling,” the soft, familiar voice of Nishley echoed quietly from behind her.

Lifting her head and looking over her shoulder, Elizabeth wiped her eyes, feeling overwhelming gratitude that the fairy had arrived. “Does that mean Tovras’s magic is broken? Is it over?”

Nishley nodded, kneeling next to her, putting her pale hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “Yes, all the netherworld creatures have been banished back to the darkness. Where they belong.”

“What about the innocent lives lost?” Elizabeth questioned, devastated that so many had been killed in such a short time.

“Darling, if they were taken, it was their time. They went out fighting for this city, and they will be rewarded as such. Though their families will suffer because of the loss, you can at least be reassured that the celestial beings have prepared a place for them.”

Elizabeth didn’t feel comforted, and grief overtook her in great wracking sobs, shots of pain echoing from her heart to the rest of her body.

“You have done a great thing today, *Tome Reader and Light Wielder*. You have saved all humanity, and they will forever be indebted to you. Not only that, Julius truly loved you, and you truly loved him back. That kind of magic cannot be forged. Because you opened your heart, my father will be saved. He will continue to rule Indigo Isle for many centuries to come. Fairy magic is responsible for many miracles here; without it, Indigo Isle would die, and miracles slowly cease to exist.”

“I’m glad of all that, but what of Earl Julius? He gave his life for that song, for the magic that song is capable of. I’ll never see him again. Also, now that Tovras is back in the realm of the dead, how do we know he won’t just come back? How do we know he won’t take another body?”

“No, my dear Elizabeth, you have nothing to worry about. The deal we made with his human form was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. It can never happen again. Also, because he has committed a grave sin against humanity, he has been locked in the darkest depths of the realm of the dead and will never be allowed

to leave. The celestial ones will see to that.”

It should have brought Elizabeth peace to know that Tovras was dealt with once and for all, and she had been the key to his undoing. The Tome had helped her fight the mythical beasts she had never believed to be real, and her strength of heart had helped her do the impossible. Now she just wished she could bring Julius back.

“Now, if you’ll please stand back,” Nishley urged her.

Elizabeth nodded and stood up, backing away from the body. Particles of purple and blue swirled and danced in the air like tiny droplets of fairies dancing. They poured over Julius’s body, lifting him from the ground, covering him entirely.

Elizabeth motioned for Nishley to stop, “What are you doing? You can’t take him! Why not just use the life magic to bring him back? He is the very life that was sacrificed to make it, why can’t you use it on him?”

“Dear one, he is Tovras’s mortal self. If I use this magic to bring him back, Tovras has a conduit to do the very thing he did before.”

Elizabeth fought the fairy, not believing her ears. “Yes, but you said yourself that the celestial ones locked him away, and he will never be able to escape, so why can’t Julius come back?”

Nishley pondered for a moment, then nodded. She held her finger up. “One moment, I must consult with the celestial ones,” she said. Then she disappeared, leaving Julius to float mid-air while Nishley pleaded Elizabeth’s case to the heavenly ones.

Walking to the floating body, Elizabeth grabbed his hand, holding it in her own. Her heart broke as she mourned her loss.

It felt like an eternity before Nishley returned, and her face was grim.

“They can’t help me?”

Nishley shook her head. “They can, but I’m afraid you will not like your choice. It will be a heartbreaking one.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Go on.”

“The celestial ones have said that if you want to bring him back, you have a solid case, and the magic will work. However! This is huge; if he comes back, he

returns as your husband, the man who loved you and that you married.”

“So, what is the problem? He’s not Tovras,” Elizabeth responded.

“That is exactly the problem. If he comes back, you stay married. You cannot go chasing whoever you please. We know that your heart belongs to another as well. If this other man were to come back in the picture, you could never be with him. You have to understand that. It’s important.”

Elizabeth took a step back. She didn't understand. She knew Julius was her husband; what was Nishley getting at?

“I’m sorry, I guess I don’t understand.”

“Elizabeth! We know you love another, but, if we bring back Julius, you are going to have to forget about him. You can never see him again, do you understand?”

Her eyebrows rose in response, “Why?” Her heart was torn. Even though Julius had the potential to come back to life, she still felt pulled toward the captain. She didn’t think there was anything she could do to stop that.

“If Julius were ever to have his heart broken, it may ignite the dark power again. And though it may not be powerful enough to break his chains in the realm of the dead, it could be enough to spark the darkness inside him. Julius and Tovras are still one and the same, but not. Does that make sense?”

It took Elizabeth a moment to process what the fairy was saying.

“So, if Julius returns, I must love him and only him. Because if I break his heart, he could potentially become Tovras again?”

Nishley nodded, “Potentially.”

Leave Julius dead and know that Tovras will never return? Or bring him back, love only him, and run the risk of having a broken heart for the rest of my life since I can never be with Captain Woolf?

The choice should have been obvious, but a man’s life hung in the balance. It made Elizabeth think about how much she truly loved him. She would be with him for all the right reasons, but her heart was also with Captain Woolf.

Elizabeth felt her heart breaking all over again. She hated that this was even a choice in her mind. This was Julius' life. Could she love him for the rest of forever? Could she keep him happy that long?

“You should not feel guilty if you choose not to bring him back to life. He is already dead, dearest.” Nishley hovered above the floor, smiling empathetically.

Elizabeth couldn’t answer or argue a response because, the truth was, she didn’t know if she felt strongly enough to promise Julius forever when he returned from the dead. The captain's face and kiss still stood out in her mind.

“I don’t deserve him, but I can’t let him die. It’s not right. No matter what....”

“Can you love him for the rest of your life together?” Nishley pushed.

She honestly didn’t know. “I will. I have to. I owe him everything,” she responded.

“Very well then.” Nishley moved her hands, and the magic continued, waving and dancing over the body, which rose higher into the air. The magic became melodic, and Elizabeth heard the song of life playing vibrantly through the air. The color returned to Julius' cheeks, and his fingers and toes began to move. Seeing his body come back to life warmed Elizabeth's soul. She fought the urge to rush forward and hug him with her whole being.

“Wait!” Nishley put her finger up, stopping Elizabeth where she stood.

The melody continued to play, and the glittering magic caressed the air around them, soaring over Julius' form and kissing the tiny hairs on Elizabeth's arms. She could feel its power pulsing, like the little buzz she experienced when she first connected with the Tome.

The Tome! It still sat on the table. Elizabeth rushed over and picked it up, cradling it in her arms. She was its reader and the Light Wielder. Now it was up to her to love Julius for the rest of her life.

Finally, everything went still. Julius, now alive, stood on his own two feet across the room. Looking at Nishley, Elizabeth’s eyes widened with the knowledge of what was to come.

The pale fairy winked, a smile playing on her lips as she disappeared.

“Elizabeth...” Julius’s voice came out ragged, as if he’d just woken up.

She stepped forward, still far from him, her heart pulsing quickly as she doubted her ability to love him for eternity, though humanity’s fate rested in her hands. She could never risk bringing back Tovras; it would mean absolute

devastation.

“You... you sacrificed yourself, your life, to bring me back?” Julius asked, his eyes searching hers, all traces of the evil Tovras gone.

Elizabeth nodded, then looked to the ground, a small tear escaping her eye. Julius walked over to her. Then his fingers cradled her chin, and he looked into her eyes.

“You are the most incredible woman I’ve ever met. How can you love me so much?”

Elizabeth couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. Captain Woolf’s face was etched in her brain, smiling at her. Asking her to come with him, even though she knew that ship had sailed.

She shook her head. She couldn’t even bring herself to meet Julius’ eyes, knowing she wasn’t worthy of his devotion. His life had been spared because she cared for all humanity.

“Nishley told me, in her way, what you gave up when she brought me back. I know you may hate yourself for loving another or think you only brought me back so you could save the world. But only true love could have brought me back from the dead. That’s the thing with magic; it only works when the receivers and givers are genuine. So, no matter how you feel about Captain Woolf, you love me. And gods help me, Elizabeth, I love you too.”

“How did you know his name?” Elizabeth felt a rush of red heat her cheeks, she was overcome by embarrassment and shame. She’d caused so much damage, and Julius still thought she was incredible.

“There are a great many memories I have that were Tovras’s. The guilt I carry for his actions will stay with me for the rest of my life. I promise that I will never forget the lives taken, nor will I forget that you gave up a life of adventure so you could save me.”

“It’s not like that, Julius. You were worth saving. You were worth giving up the uncertainty and the unknown to be happy,” Elizabeth said, and she meant it. “I know we’ll be happy, and I will do everything I can to prove that I’m worthy of you for the rest of my life.” She smiled, and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her body against him in a warm embrace. His face nuzzled her hair until

she tilted her head back, and their lips met again.

“You never have to prove yourself to me, I love you,” he whispered against her mouth.

Elizabeth responded, “And I you, husband.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Indigo Isle

Nishley's heart broke at the thought of what Elizabeth had given up, but she also knew that only the true Tome Reader could have sacrificed her happiness to save humanity and keep Julius mortal. *What will my sisters say?* Not that it mattered; all that mattered was getting back to her father. Without him, the fairy realm would be susceptible to attack from the other realms.

Elizabeth's innocence had the power to unlock magic such as the world had never known.

"Nishley, where've you been! Father is getting worse by the moment; please hurry!" Oona urged, her skin shimmering under the pale light of their realm.

The Gingergale was blowing in a sudden wind. That was not a good sign. Nishley flew quickly to her father's chambers, alarmed by the pallor of his skin and the lack of movement in his body.

"Father, we did it. I'm here!" Nishley fluttered in, holding the jar containing the essence of the song of life.

He didn't answer, only breathed in a raspy reply.

"Quickly!" Nixine pleaded.

"Join me, sisters!" Nishley urged them as she opened the jar. In unison, her sisters began to wave their fingers through the air, calling forth the magic from the song of life. A gentle swirl began around them. Both light and warmth danced through the room, descending on the silken blankets that covered their

father.

The music arose as if it were a hurricane, and they were in the center. Fractals of all colors one could imagine reflected in the room. They swirled in the king's hair and over his nearly lifeless face. So powerful was the magic with the three of them using it together; they felt transported to another realm. Nixine's illustrious blue hair floated in the air like bubbles in water. She let out a tiny giggle.

In anticipation, they watched their father's aging face as he lay resting.

"Please work, please be okay, Father," Nishley begged.

The fairy girls moved closer to the bed, bending slightly as they studied their father's face. The magical melody continued to play around them.

Slowly, the tiniest fluttering of lashes started, and the lovely lavender of the king's eyes finally showed.

"Father!" all three of them yelled together.

He cleared his throat, finally coming awake. After a moment, his face took on the palest of blue colors. He sat upright, smiling broadly.

"My girls, you have brought about the song of life! Until now, I only thought it to be a fantastic myth." His smile grew wider, lighting his eyes. "I couldn't be prouder," he confessed.

"Oh, Father!" Nishley leaned forward, hugging him tightly. They had come so close to losing him and losing the magic that protected the fairy realm from attack.

"We're just so happy you're back," Oona gushed. "Our kingdom is safe once more."

"And the Tome Reader has been found," Nixine added, the grin she wore emphasized by the twinkle in her crystal blue eyes.

"Yes! The Tome Reader has been found," King Bayard agreed as he got out of bed. "Now, to my throne. There is much to do!"

"First, we must tell the kingdom and have a party in your honor, Father."

"Well, naturally," he laughed and linked arms with his daughters. They left his chambers and hurried to the throne room of the crystal palace that was King Bayard's home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



A few days later

Elizabeth stood at her dresser, her eyes roving over the pale gown that fit her curves like a glove.

“Are you sure about your decision?” Julius asked as he looked Elizabeth over, smiling into the mirror as she fixed herself up.

“Yes, absolutely. Let’s sell the manor and go to America. I may have agreed to marry you to please my mother, but I don’t have to stay here to please her. Let’s start over. It will be good for both of us.” Elizabeth grinned like a child, then turned to face him. Throwing her arms around his neck, her lips brushed his cheek. “Besides, can you imagine how lovely it will be there? I’ve heard such tails!” She lifted her dress slightly, swishing it back and forth as she studied her reflection.

This is what I’ll be wearing when I tell my mother that I no longer wish to have anything to do with her, and that Earl Julius Kingsland and I are going to America.

She could hardly contain her delight.

“Do you have your things packed?” Julius smiled, his strong chin and rosy complexion comforting her tired heart. So much had happened that seeing him well and in good spirits was all she needed to face whatever was to come.

“Lady Kingsland?” A servant peeked her head into their room.

“Yes, Margarite?” she answered.

“I’m afraid you have company.” The servant's face was heavy with worry, and Elizabeth had to wonder what could cause such a thing.

“Company?” Elizabeth furrowed her brow. “I wasn’t expecting anyone, were you darling?” she asked the Earl.

Julius shook his head, so she cautiously made her way out of her room to the staircase. Captain Woolf removed his hat and bowed as she made her way down the elegantly carpeted steps.

Her heart immediately stopped beating, and her breath caught in her throat. The gentle flow of his whiskers and the worry etched in every line of his face were too much for her. She nearly broke down and ran to him, even knowing Julius would be destroyed if she did so.

Maintain your composure, Elizabeth; you are not a child. You are happy, and you are in love.

“Captain Woolf, what a pleasant surprise,” she said as coolly as she dared.

“Elizabeth, you look more radiant than ever.” The emotion in his voice pulled at her heart, but she could not allow herself to be swept away.

“Thank you.” She bowed her head gently as she reached the landing, where she stood a mere few feet from him. The soft smell of the sea and dirt that was his trademark called to her senses. “May I ask what you are doing here?” she questioned.

He cleared his throat, trying to fight back emotion, but she couldn’t read what kind. “I, um, ahem, was worried that something had happened to you. I was out at sea....” He began to mumble, not making sense. “Sea creatures, uh... wild waves... death. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come,” he replied.

Earl Julius joined Elizabeth at that moment, giving the Captain a stern look. She could feel the chill that radiated from her husband. A chill she knew could lead to Julius’s downfall if she were to break his heart. Elizabeth linked her arm through his, staring the captain coolly in the face.

“Captain, it was wonderful to see you, and I hope you are well, but there are many affairs that my husband and I must now attend to.”

His eyes widened at her response, and she felt her heart wrench. Curse her mortal heart!

“Um, yes, well, I see that you are well, so I will bid you farewell.” He bowed slightly and started to walk out the door.

She nodded to her husband, releasing his arm. “Julius, give me one moment. I can’t say goodbye like this.”

The Earl’s face wrinkled in pain, then softened. It was a long moment before he spoke. “Okay, Elizabeth, do whatever you must. I trust you.”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I’ll be right back,” she said, then ran out the door.

“Captain! Captain!” He had disappeared, but the moment she called him, she heard his heavy footsteps running toward her. Then he appeared from the side of her house.

“Please tell me you’ve come to say that you love me and you’re leaving with me? Please tell me I’m not too late.”

Elizabeth looked to the ground. She knew that no one made her heart skip like the Captain did, and no one brought her passions to the surface as quickly as he could. There was nothing she could do about that.

She also knew that what she felt for him may have been fleeting, exciting, and fiery because they never got a chance to explore it. She also knew her love for the earl was deep and genuine. They had come through hell and back.

There was no denying the love in her heart for both men. The promise of adventure and the unknown was something women waited their whole lives for, but to pursue it was childish. No matter how strong, an infatuation didn’t promise a happily ever after.

Elizabeth had to let him go, once and for all. This was how she felt, but she couldn’t say any of it.

Her commitment was to Julius, and she planned on sticking to it.

“So, that’s it; you have nothing to say? Then why did you chase me down?”

Elizabeth grabbed his hand and caught his eyes. “I know things didn’t work out for us, but I want to thank you. Because without you, I wouldn’t have had the courage to do any of the things I’ve done in the past few weeks. I can’t explain, but I need you to know how important you are. And no matter what, no matter where you go, I will always love you. Just know that. It’s all I can give you.”

She kissed his cheek, fighting the urge to grab his face in her hands and kiss him with the fire of a thousand suns.

She turned and, with deliberate intention, put one foot in front of the other until she was inside her house. She slammed the door shut and locked it, Earl Julius looking on with irritation.

"It's done. He's leaving. You and I can start our new life," she said with a smile, still fighting her feelings.

"If you even want to," he said, his voice low and grim.

If she was honest with herself, she felt a sort of relief. It was okay that she loved both men, and, even though she was doing what was right for Julius, she knew their love was genuine, not fueled by lustful glances and a few passionate kisses.

"Julius, don't be ridiculous. Our love has brought people back from the dead. How many people can say that?" Elizabeth rushed to him, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. His body relaxed under her embrace. "Now, let's tell my mother she can't control me anymore, and we're moving to America."

"Way to ruin her opinion of me." Julius pushed her a little and winked.

"Well, I can't have her thinking you're perfect," she laughed.

"Because?"

"Because then she would be right, and she wins," Elizabeth laughed. The Tome's magic hummed through her as if to confirm that it was pleased.



CAPTAIN WOOLF HEARD her gentle laughter from outside and stopped himself from breaking the door open and stealing her away. She couldn't possibly be staying of her own will! Could she?

He realized then, that he would never know. The best he could do was to walk away and let her live her life the best way she could. Perhaps in another lifetime, they would be given a second chance if the fates allowed. Until then, he would return to the sea, comforted that she was happy and that no matter where

he went, she loved him. That would have to be enough. He'd had his chance with her and lost it.

At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten back at his mother after all these years. Lady Geoghan would have to live with the knowledge that her very own blood had robbed her. He hoped that sent a message and, hopefully, she'd think twice about the choices she'd made. If not, it didn't matter anymore. He'd done what he came to do.



WITH THE FAIRY realm safe at last, and Tovras locked away for the rest of eternity, the supernatural realms were finally at ease.

Finally, all was as it should be for now.

The End.

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