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1

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PROLOGUE

Midsummer 1559

Province of Angelique, Kingdom of Valenia

Magnalia House was the sort of establishment where only wealthy, talented girls mastered their passion. It wasn't designed for girls who were lacking, for girls who were illegitimate daughters, and certainly not for girls who defied kings. I, of course, happen to be all three of those things.

I was ten years old when my grandfather first took me to Magnalia. Not only was it the hottest day of summer, an afternoon for bloated clouds and short tempers, it was the day I decided to ask the question that had haunted me ever since I had been placed in the orphanage.

"Grandpapa, who is my father?"

My grandfather sat on the opposite bench, his eyes heavy from the heat until my inquiry startled him. He was a proper

man, a good yet very private man. Because of that, I believed he was ashamed of me—the illegitimate child of his beloved, dead daughter.

But on that sweltering day, he was trapped in the coach with me, and I had voiced a question he must answer. He blinked down at my expectant face, frowning as if I had asked him to pluck the moon from the sky. "Your father is not a respectable man, Brienna."

"Does he have a name?" I persisted. Hot weather made me bold, while it melted the older ones, like Grandpapa. I felt confident that he would at long last tell me who I had descended from.

"Don't all men?" He was getting crabby. We had been traveling for two days in this heat.

I watched him fumble for his handkerchief and mop the sweat from his crinkled brow, which was speckled like an egg. He had a ruddy face, an overpowering nose, and a crown of white hair. They said my mother had been comely—and that I was her reflection—yet I could not imagine someone as ugly as Grandpapa creating something beautiful.

"Ah, Brienna, child, why must you ask of him?" Grandpapa sighed, mellowing a bit. "Let us talk instead of what is to come, of Magnalia."

I swallowed my disappointment; it sat in my throat like a marble, and I decided I did not want to talk of Magnalia.

The coach took a turn before I could bolster my stubbornness, the wheels transitioning from ruts to a smooth stone drive. I glanced at the window, streaked from dust. My heart quickened

at the sight and I pressed closer, spread my fingers upon the glass.

I admired the trees first, their long branches arched over the drive like welcoming arms. Horses leisurely grazed in the pastures, their coats damp from the summer sun. Beyond the pastures were the distant blue mountains of Valenia, the backbone of our kingdom. It was a sight to salve my disappointment, a land to grow wonder and courage.

We rambled along, under the oak boughs and up a hill, finally stopping in a courtyard. Through the haze, I stared at the decadent gray stone, glistening windows, and climbing ivy that was Magnalia House.

"Now listen, Brienna," Grandpapa said, rushing to tuck away his handkerchief. "You must be on your absolute best behavior. As if you were about to meet King Phillipe. You must smile and curtsy, and not say anything out of line. Can you do that for your grandpapa?"

I nodded, suddenly losing my voice.

"Very good. Let us pray that the Dowager will accept you."

The coachman opened the door, and Grandpapa motioned for me to exit before him. I did, on trembling legs, feeling small as I craned my neck to soak in the grand estate.

"I will speak to the Dowager first, privately, and then you will meet her," my grandfather said, pulling me along up the stairs to the front doors. "Remember, you must be polite. This is a place for cultured girls."

He examined my appearance as he rang the doorbell. My navy dress was wrinkled from travel, my braids coming unwound,

the hair frizzy about my face. But the door swung open before my grandfather could comment on my unkemptness. We entered Magnalia side by side, stepping into the blue shadows of the foyer.

While my grandfather was admitted into the Dowager's study, I remained in the corridor. The butler offered me a place on a cushioned bench along the wall where I sat alone, waiting, my feet swinging nervously as I stared at the black-and-white checkered floors. It was a quiet house, as if it was missing its heart. And because it was so quiet, I could hear my grandfather and the Dowager speaking, their words melting through the study doors.

"Which passion does she gravitate toward?" the Dowager asked. Her voice was rich and smooth, like smoke drifting up on an autumn night.

"She likes to draw. . . . She does very well with drawing. She also has a vivid imagination—she would do excellent in theater. And music—my daughter was very accomplished with the lute, so surely Brienna inherited a bit of that. What else . . . oh yes, they say she enjoys reading at the orphanage. She has read all of their books two times over." Grandpapa was rambling. Did he even know what he was saying? Not once had he seen me draw. Not once had he listened to my imagination.

I slipped from the bench and softly padded closer. With my ear pressed to the door, I drank in their words.

"That is all very good, Monsieur Paquet, but surely you understand that 'to passion' means your granddaughter must master *one* of the five passions, not all of them."

In my mind, I thought of the five. *Art. Music. Dramatics. Wit. Knowledge.* Magnalia was a place for a girl to become an arden—an apprentice student. She could choose one of the five passions to diligently study beneath the careful instruction of a master or mistress. When she reached the height of her talent, the girl would gain the title of a mistress and receive her cloak—an individualized marker of her achievement and status. She would become a passion of art, a passion of wit, or whichever one she was devoted to.

My heart thundered in my chest, and sweat beaded along my palms as I imagined myself becoming a passion.

Which one should I choose, if the Dowager admitted me?

But I couldn't mull over this, because my grandfather said, "I promise you, Brienna is a bright girl. She can master any of the five."

"That is kind of you to think such, but I must tell you . . . my House is very competitive, very difficult. I already have my five ardens for this passion season. If I accept your granddaughter, one of my arials will have to instruct *two* ardens. This has never been done. . . ."

I was trying to figure out what "arial" meant—"instructor," perhaps?—when I heard a scuff and jumped back from the twin doors, expecting them to fly open and catch me in my crime. But it must have only been my grandfather, shifting anxiously in his chair.

"I can assure you, Madame, that Brienna will not cause any trouble. She is a very obedient girl."

"But you say she lives in an orphanage? And she does not bear your last name. Why is that?" the Dowager asked.

There was a pause. I had always wondered why my last name did not match my grandfather's. I stepped close to the doors again, laid my ear to the wood. . . .

"It is to protect Brienna from her father, Madame."

"Monsieur, I fear that I cannot accept her if she is in a dangerous situation—"

"Please hear me, Madame, just for a moment. Brienna holds dual citizenship. Her mother—my daughter—was Valenian. Her father is from Maevana. He knows she exists, and I was concerned . . . concerned that he might seek her out, find her by my last name."

"And why would that be so horrible?"

"Because her father is—"

Down the hall, a door opened and closed, followed by the click of boots entering the corridor. I rushed back to the bench and all but fell on it, provoking its squat legs to scrape along the floor as nails on a chalkboard.

I didn't dare look up, my cheeks flushed with guilt, as the owner of the boots walked closer, eventually coming to stand before me.

I thought it was the butler, until I conceded to glance up and see it was a young man, horribly handsome with hair the color of summer wheat fields. He was tall and trim, not a wrinkle on his breeches and tunic, but more than that . . . he wore a blue cloak. He was a passion, then, a master of knowledge, as blue was their

signifying color, and he had just discovered that I was eavesdropping on the Dowager.

Slowly, he crouched down, to be level with my cautious gaze. He held a book in his hands, and I noticed that his eyes were as blue as his passion cloak, the color of cornflowers.

"And who might you be?" he asked.

"Brienna."

"That is a pretty name. Are you to become an arden here at Magnalia?"

"I don't know, Monsieur."

"Do you want to become one?"

"Yes, very much, Monsieur."

"You do not need to call me 'monsieur,'" he gently corrected.

"Then what should I call you, Monsieur?"

He didn't answer; he merely looked at me, his head tilted to the side, that blond hair spilling over his shoulder as captive sunlight. I wanted him to go away, and yet I wanted him to keep talking to me.

It was at that moment that the study doors opened. The master of knowledge stood and turned toward the sound. But my gaze strayed to the back of his cloak, where silver threads gathered—a constellation of stars among the blue fabric. I marveled over it; I longed to ask him what they meant.

"Ah, Master Cartier," the Dowager said from where she stood on the threshold. "Do you mind escorting Brienna to the study?"

He extended his hand to me, palm up with invitation. Carefully, I let my fingers rest in his. I was warm, he was cold, and I

walked at his side across the corridor, where the Dowager waited for me. Master Cartier squeezed my fingers just before he let go and continued his way down the hall; he was encouraging me to be brave, to stand tall and proud, to find my place in this House.

I entered the study, the doors closing with a soft click. My grandfather sat in one chair; there was a second one beside his, meant for me. Quietly, I surrendered to it as the Dowager walked around her desk, settling behind it with a sigh of her dress.

She was a rather severe-looking woman; her forehead was high, bespeaking years of pulling her hair back beneath tight wigs of glory. Now, her white locks of experience were almost completely concealed beneath her gabled headdress of black velvet, which was elegant upon her head. Her dress was a deep shade of red with a low waist and a square neckline trimmed with pearls. And I knew in that moment as I soaked in her aged beauty that she could usher me into a life that I would not have been able to achieve otherwise. To become impassioned.

"It is nice to meet you, Brienna," she said to me with a smile.

"Madame," I returned, wiping my sweaty palms on my dress.

"Your grandfather says many wonderful things about you."

I nodded and awkwardly glanced at him. He was watching me, a fastidious gleam in his eyes, handkerchief gripped in his hand once more, like he needed something to hold on to.

"Which passion are you drawn to the most, Brienna?" she asked, attracting my attention back to her. "Or perhaps you have a natural inclination toward one of them?"

Saints above, I didn't know. Frantically, I let my mind trace

them again . . . *art* . . . *music* . . . *dramatics* . . . *wit* . . . *knowledge*. I honestly had no natural inclinations, no intrinsic talent for a passion. So I blurted the first one that came to mind. "Art, Madame."

And then, to my dismay, she opened a drawer before her and procured a fresh square of parchment and a pencil. She set it down on the corner of her desk, directly before me.

"Draw something for me." The Dowager beckoned.

I resisted looking at my grandfather, because I knew that our deceit would become a smoke signal. He knew I wasn't an artist, I knew I wasn't either, and yet I grasped that pencil as if I were.

I took a deep breath and thought of something that I loved: I thought of the tree that grew in the backyard of the orphanage, a wise, gangly old oak that we adored to climb. And so I said to myself . . . anyone can draw a tree.

I drew it while the Dowager conversed with my grandfather, both of them trying to grant me a measure of privacy. When I was finished, I set the pencil down and waited, staring at what my hand had born.

It was a pitiful rendition. Not at all like the image I held in my mind.

The Dowager stared intently at my drawing; I noticed a slight frown creased her forehead, but her eyes were well guarded.

"Are you certain you wish to study art, Brienna?" There was no judgment in her tone, but I tasted the subtle challenge in the marrow of her words.

I almost told her no, that I did not belong here. But when I

thought about returning to the orphanage, when I thought about becoming a scullery maid or a cook, as all the other girls at the orphanage eventually did, I realized this was my one chance to evolve.

"Yes, Madame."

"Then I shall make an exception for you. I already have five girls your age attending Magnalia. You will become the sixth arden, and will study the passion of art beneath Mistress Solene. You will spend the next seven years here, living with your arden-sisters, learning and growing and preparing for your seventeenth summer solstice, when you will become impassioned and gain a patron." She paused, and I felt drunk on all she had just poured over me. "Does this sound acceptable to you?"

I blinked, and then stammered, "Yes, yes indeed, Madame!"

"Very good. Monsieur Paquet, you should bring Brienna back on the autumn equinox, in addition to her tuition sum."

My grandfather rushed to stand and bow to her, his relief like overpowering cologne in the room. "Thank you, Madame. We are thrilled! Brienna will not disappoint you."

"No, I do not think that she will," the Dowager said.

I stood and dropped a crooked curtsy, trailing Grandpapa to the doors. But just before I returned to the corridor, I glanced behind to look at her.

The Dowager watched me with a sad gaze. I was only a girl, but I knew such a look. Whatever my grandfather had said to her had convinced her to accept me. My admittance was not of my own merit; it was not based on my potential. Was it the name of

my father that had swayed her? The name I did not know? Did his name truly even matter, though?

She believed that she had just accepted me out of charity, and I would never passion.

I chose that moment to prove her wrong.