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This one's for you, dear reader.

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time and ever since, a key turned in a rusted lock, and a woman stepped into a small and dismal cell.

Her gown, the color of ashes, hung off her shoulders like a shroud. Her hair, styled high on her head, was as black as ebony. Her dark eyes glittered; their gaze pulled at whomever it fell upon, sucking them in like a whirlpool.

Across the room, a high window, shaped like a half-moon, was filled with midnight, yet the room was not without light. A wan glow suffused it, like that of a single candle.

It came from a child.

She was gazing up at the window, her hands clasped behind her back. "Lady Espidra, always a pleasure," she said at length, turning to face the woman.

Her pink dress, once pretty, was dirty and torn. Her hair, so blond it was almost white, was wild. Her face was open and frank. Anyone glimpsing it would guess she was nine or ten years of age, except for her eyes, which were as ancient as the stars.

Lady Espidra set her lantern down on a table. She opened the small wooden box she was carrying. "Shall we play? To pass a bit of time?" she asked, taking out a deck of cards. "How long has it been since we last chatted, you and I? A year? Two?"

"Twenty-five."

Lady Espidra laughed. It was an ugly, jangling sound, like shattered glass raining down. “Ah, it’s true what mortals say—the days are long and the years are short.”

She placed the deck faceup on the table, then fanned it expertly. The cards were yellowed at their edges but beautifully illustrated. The kings, queens, and jacks were framed by a thin line of black. Rich pigments colored their robes. Their golden crowns sparkled; their silver swords gleamed.

The queen of hearts blinked and stretched. Then she glimpsed the queen of spades, who was next to her, and waved excitedly. The queen of spades gasped, then laughed. She reached a hand to the frame surrounding her and pushed at it. Gently at first. Then harder. Until she was beating her fists against it.

The king of diamonds placed a hand over his heart and gazed with anguished longing at his queen. The queen of clubs, stuck between two numbered cards, stared listlessly ahead of herself.

Espidra seemed not to notice their distress. She briskly gathered the cards, shuffled them, and dealt two hands.

But the child noticed.

“Poor things,” she said, picking up her cards. “Imprisoned in their boxes, just like the mortals who drew them.”

“A box is the best place for mortals,” Espidra retorted. “It keeps them out of trouble.”

Espidra looked at her cards and smiled; she’d dealt herself an excellent hand. As she arranged them in order of rank, the queen of clubs blew a fervent kiss to the handsome jack of hearts. The king of clubs saw her do it. His smile crumpled. He gripped his sword in both hands and, with an anguished cry, plunged it into his heart. The queen turned at the sound, then screamed when she saw what he’d done. Blood flowed from the king’s wound. It pattered onto the bottom of the frame, spilled

out of a crack in the corner, and dripped onto Espidra's withered fingers. She slapped the cards down on the table, scowling, and wiped the blood off on her skirt.

"Such a lovely way you have about you," the child said. "Why have you come? Surely it wasn't to play cards."

"Of course it was," Espidra said. "I like a challenge when I play, and no one bluffs like you do."

"Liar."

Espidra shot the girl a baleful look. "All right, then. I wish to offer you a deal."

"Ah, now we have the truth. What kind of a deal?" the child asked.

"Leave this place. Do not come back."

"What do you offer me in return?"

"Your life."

A slow smile spread across the child's face. "Why, Lady Espidra, you are afraid."

Espidra flapped a hand at her. "*Me*, afraid? Of *you*? Don't be absurd."

"You would not offer me this deal otherwise."

"Yes, I would. Because I wish to be rid of you, and you would be wise to accept my offer. The girl is beaten. She has given up. She merely bides her time now, waiting for the end."

Pain sliced across the child's features at the mention of the girl. Espidra saw it. She leaned forward. "You cannot win. The clock winds down. The story is over."

The child lifted her chin. "Almost, but not quite."

Her words were like a torch to straw. Espidra smacked the cards off the table. She shot up out of her chair; the legs screeched over the stone floor.

"You are nothing but a trickster," she hissed, jabbing a bony finger at the child. "You come and go, as careless as the wind, leaving a trail

of broken mortals in your wake. But I stay. I am here for them after you abandon them, with my arms wide open, my embrace as deep—"

"As a freshly dug grave."

Lady Espidra looked as if she would like to wrap her hands around the child's thin neck and snap it. "You will be sorry you did not take my offer," she said.

"This cell will not hold me forever."

"Big words from a small girl. I hope you enjoy the darkness."

The door clanged shut. The key turned in the lock.

Espidra's footsteps receded, and silence descended once more, suffocating and cruel.

The child sat, motionless and alone, her head bent, her fists clenched.

Trying to remember the light.

– ONE –

"I'm freezing my balls off," grumbled Rodrigo. "Hungry as hell, too. What about you, boy?"

Beau didn't reply. He couldn't; his teeth were chattering too hard. Icy rain needled his face. It plastered his hair to his skull and dripped from his earlobes.

The storm had swept down upon the thieves as they'd ridden out of the merchant's lands. It howled ferociously now, scouring the rocky hills around them, tangling itself in the branches of the bare black trees.

It seemed to Beau as if the thrashing limbs were warning them, waving them back. But back to what? They were lost. Riding with their heads bent against the driving rain, they'd missed the trail to the mountains. To the border. To safety.

Raphael was certain that if they just kept heading south, they'd find their way. *A few more miles . . . a little bit farther . . .* he kept saying. They'd passed ruined cottages, a deserted village. They'd ridden through dense woods and crossed a river, but still could not find the path.

Beau hunched down in his wet coat now, seeking comfort and warmth, but found neither.

"What's the matter, Romeo? Missing Her Ladyship's pretty smile?" Rodrigo asked. He was riding on Beau's left.

"Look at him, melting in the rain like he was made of sugar!" taunted Miguel from Beau's right. He leaned in close and grinned, revealing a mouthful of rotten teeth. "That pretty face is your fortune, but what happens if I carve it up, eh?" He pulled out his dagger.

"What happens is that Raphael carves *you* up, you fool, since my face is also his fortune," Beau replied.

"Poodle," Miguel grumbled, sheathing his blade. "All you do is beg rich women for treats and kisses while we do the hard work."

"Begging for treats and kisses *is* hard work," Beau said.

He pictured his mistress now. *Former* mistress. She was older than he was, but not by much. Married to a man who only loved his money. She hadn't given Beau this information; he was a thief—he'd stolen it. He'd taken the sorrow in her smile, the hunger in her eyes, the ache in her voice, and he'd used them. Just as she'd used him.

"Oh, you beautiful thing," she'd whispered to him last night, tracing the line of his jaw with her finger.

He'd been standing in her bedchamber, looking at the books on her night table. His eyes had lit up when he'd seen *Candide*.

"I've read everything Voltaire's written," he said, turning to her excitedly, thinking he'd found a kindred spirit, someone—the only one—in his life he could talk to about a book. "Could I borrow this? Just for a day or two? I'm a fast reader."

But his mistress had only laughed at him. "You're just a *servant*, boy. I don't pay you to read. Or talk," she'd said, pulling the book from his hands. Then she'd tugged at the ribbon that bound his dark hair and caught her breath as it tumbled around his shoulders. A moment later, her lips were on his, and the things he'd wanted to say, the thoughts he'd wanted to share about books and ideas, turned to ashes on his tongue.

Beau pictured her face as she'd learned that her servant was gone, and her fine emerald ring with him, and remorse pinched him like a pair of borrowed boots. He fought it, telling himself that her husband was wealthy; he'd buy her another ring. He almost believed it.

The ring was nestled safely inside a slit he'd made behind a button on his jacket—a place where its contours couldn't be felt. Raphael often patted them down after a job, all of them, and Beau had seen him beat a man bloody for keeping back a single coin. The ring would buy him the thing he wanted most: a way out. For himself, for Matteo.

The boy had been unwell the last time Beau had seen him, listless and pale, with a rackety cough. *A fever. It will pass*, Sister Maria-Theresa had said. Beau had written to her two weeks ago, to ask if his little brother was better, and just that afternoon he'd received a reply, but he'd tucked the letter inside his jacket unopened. There had been no time to read it. Not with the robbery planned for that very night.

"It's not fair. *I* could be the inside man. Why not?" said Miguel, breaking into Beau's thoughts, jutting his chin at him. "What does *he* have that I don't have?"

"Teeth," said Rodrigo.

"Hair," said Antonio.

"A bar of soap," said Beau.

Miguel threw him a venomous look. "I'll get you, boy. When you least expect it. Then we'll see who's laughing. Then we'll—"

"Shut up. *Now.*"

Raphael's words fell across the men like the crack of a whip. He was several strides ahead of them, but Beau could still see him through the lashing rain—with his felted black hat, water dripping from its brim, and his sodden gray ponytail trailing down his back. His shoulders were tensed; his head was cocked.

An instant later, Beau heard it—the baying of hounds. Amar, his horse, danced nervously under him. The pack likely numbered a dozen or so, but the hills amplified their cries, making it sound as if there were a thousand.

"The sheriff's men," Rodrigo said tersely.

Raphael gave a grim nod and galloped off. Beau and the others followed. The wet ground made for treacherous footing and they had to work to keep their seats. The rain had let up, but a heavy mist was moving through the trees now. One minute, Beau could see the thief lord up ahead of him; the next minute he vanished.

Faster and faster the men rode, but the hounds still pursued them, their cries savage and bloodthirsty. Beau's heart slammed against his ribs. *Not now*, he thought desperately. *Not here.* This was supposed to be his last job. Just a few more miles, and he'd be beyond the reach of sheriffs and jails and gallows. Beyond Raphael's reach. Him and Matti both.

The baying grew louder. Amar's nostrils flared. He surged ahead, trying to catch up to Raphael's horse. Every second, Beau expected him to stumble over a fallen limb or break his leg in a ditch. He could see lather on the animal's neck; he could hear him panting. They would have to surrender. The horses couldn't keep going.

And then came a shriek that severed the night like a saber.

"Hold up!" Raphael shouted. "Nobody move!" It was his horse that had made the awful sound. He was rearing, his hooves slashing at the air. Beau, right behind him, only had a split second to halt Amar.

"Whoa! *Whoa*, boy!" he shouted, yanking on the reins. The bit caught; the horse stopped short, snapping Beau forward like a rag doll. He jammed his weight into his stirrups to keep from falling.

The others halted behind him, jostling, swearing, their hands on their weapons. Eyes searched for movement, but the mist blinded them. Ears strained for sounds, but the baying had stopped. All they could hear was the panting of their played out animals. They waited, hearts thumping, blood surging, bodies tensed for an attack, but none came.

Instead, the mist receded like a treacherous sea falling back from jagged rocks, and the men saw a cliff, high and sheer, sweeping down into nothingness. Raphael, perched at the very edge of it, had come within inches of an ugly death. Yet fear, if he'd felt any, had not lingered on his hard, scarred face. Instead, his features were fixed in a look of astonishment—a look that only deepened as the ebbing mist revealed what lay on the far side of the abyss.

Beau squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, but they were not playing tricks. He clearly saw the things around him—the mist, the men, their stamping horses. These things had all been there a moment ago.

But the castle had not.

– TWO –

It was a gray Gothic fever dream.

Soaring spires pierced the night sky. Towers brooded darkly. Pointed arches framed shadowed windows. A high granite wall, blackened by time and weather, encircled the castle. Along its crenellated edge, an army of gargoyles gibbered and leered.

The mist had disappeared. Moonlight shone down now, illuminating a long wooden bridge that spanned a deep moat and led to the castle's gatehouse. Beau could see that the massive iron portcullis was raised. Spikes ran along its bottom edge.

"Who leaves a gatehouse open at this hour?" he asked quietly. "Where are the guards?"

Raphael nudged his horse forward. His men followed. Their shrewd thieves' eyes darted up walls, over archways, to the tops of turrets. They noticed things they'd missed in the first flush of surprise—a crumbling parapet, empty watchtowers, a tattered flag.

"There are no guards. The place is deserted," said Antonio.

Beau's gaze settled on the bridge. As it did, a shudder ran through him that had nothing to do with the cold. The bridge seemed to him like a long ogre's tongue and the shadowed arch of the gatehouse like the ogre's mouth, and he felt, deep down in his bones, that if he entered it, it would eat him alive.

The others felt it, too. "Something's not right. We should ride on," said Rodrigo.