

Born To Be Queen

The bells toll at the view of the rising sun. The village rises to start their day. I roll over in my bed avoiding the sun that invades my spacious room. The wood floor is shining with the glow of the morning sun. The maids must have come in and opened the curtains while I was still deep in sleep. My hair lay in a tangled mess all around me. I pull the thick bed sheets up over my head and grunt at the start of another day. *I wish I could just stay in bed all day.* I shove the bed sheets down and my stray hairs go afloat. I sit up and let the morning sun wake me up. I look over and find a glass of water sitting on my bed side table as usual. I take it and gulp half of the glass setting it back down and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

I sit looking around my room for a while. My large wardrobe is a dark mahogany with gold handles, and it shines in the sun light. Three tall mirrors sit side by side creating a wide mirror in the corner across from me. I can see my hair: a tangled mess cloud my face. The mirror is rimmed with gold and speckled with diamonds. I look up. My bed sits 3 feet off the ground and a canopy of silk goes all the way to the ceiling. My desk sits right in front of the large window. The dark mahogany matches the wardrobe. The drawers are filled with years and years of journal entries, poems, and drawings.

In the other corner across from me sits a mannequin body that has a dress on it. The one I will wear today. I shove the bed sheets back and set my feet on the feathered rug that lay right next to bed. My night gown is crumpled with the nights sleep. I stand up and stretch letting the material straighten itself out.

“Princess? Are you ready to be dressed?” The servant calls.

“Yes.” I reply.

She comes in trying to avoid eye contact. She is one of the new ones. She hasn't gotten used to my skin. The color loss that recently has been appearing on my arms and soon will probably travel to my legs and face. It first appeared on my stomach: a small circle about the size of my belly button. Then it spread. My parents worried. They called in multiple doctors and paid them a fortune to not say a single thing to anyone. If they did... I don't want to think about what could happen. They would see it to be an act by the gods. We have tried to hide it the best we can. But it's getting harder. I have to wear arm covers and gloves despite the increasing heat of summer. Anyone who works in the castle is paid well to keep the secret.

She immediately goes over to get the dress off the mannequin. We have finally traded out my heavier and thicker dresses for the light, flowy linen dresses due to the heat. I come over. My feet find the cool wood floor. It almost feels good.

She opens up the dress more so I can step in. Once I'm in I straighten out my nightgown that lay under the dress. I brace the handles that were constructed onto the wall so she could tighten the dress. I feel the tug and my body goes to the familiar and comfortable parts of the dress. Any lady who has worn a corset dress has learned you must breathe through your chest and stand up straight to breathe the easiest. So once she is done I stand straight waiting for my body to get settled. I walk over to the mirror and examine the dress. It is peach color that glows in the sun. A sturdy material is placed on the torso with linen that is placed over it. It has sleeves that go just past my shoulder. I run my hands over my torso. The material is soft. Almost like my nightgown. It has small embroidered flowers that scatter the top. It's so beautiful. My feet poke out of the bottom waiting to be put in shoes.

I take one last look at my arms. Blotches of lighter skin scatter my arms and parts of my hands. I look up and catch her staring. She quickly looks down.

“I'm sorry princess.” She says.

“It's ok. You can look.”

She slowly brings her head up and looks at my skin.

“Were you born with it miss?”

“I think so. It didn't appear until I was thirteen though.”

She gathers the sleeves and gloves and slips them onto my arms and hands. The material is also soft. Not silk but some other material. My first set of sleeves were so itchy they gave me rashes that cluttered my arms. The material was beautiful but not worth it. After that we had our seamstress hand make linen sleeves and gloves of all colors and patterns. They reach all the way to my armpits. Elastic bands were placed within the fabric at the top so it isn't visible. I slide my arms in. They're a little snug. I can't have the fabric too loose otherwise it will slide down my arms. She hands me the linen gloves and I slip them on. She picks the black boots up off the floor and we walk over to the plush stool in front of my desk. I sit down and she holds the boot up so I can put my foot in. She does the same with the other and begins lacing them up. They feel snug. I stand up and walk back over to the mirror. I take one final look at my outfit.

“It's perfect.” I say

She smiles in return and bows.

“I was told to inform you piano lessons will be in one hour.”

With that she walks out, closing the door gently. I turn back to the mirror finding a look of irritation play over my reflection. Piano lessons are so boring, not to mention Miss Adelaide is

scary. I fear that if I hit the wrong note she will strike me with the back of her hand and tell me to start from the beginning. I fear that because I have seen her teach other children around the village. It doesn't matter that I'm heir to the throne, she will do as she sees fit.

I sigh loudly and walk over to my desk and grab the hair brush and run it through my long wavy hair. I gather my hair and twist it into a knot at the top of my head and pin it in place. In the top right drawer I find my head wrap and start to over my hair. I lay the thin wrap at my hair line and pin it in place, going around and around until it is all covered. I pin the last of it to down.

I have had to do this nearly my whole life. When I was young I was blonde then it started turning a deep scarlet red. When we noticed the change my mother taught me how to hide it and make sure no one found out. I asked why I had to hide it, and she said that it was unnatural and that the village would be angry. I wanted to know more, but she wouldn't tell me; eventually I gave up on asking.

I cross the room to my wardrobe and open it. A wide array of colored dresses flash before me. At the bottom are shelves of my sleeves, gloves, boots, and hats, but behind those is a hidden drawer that hold my wigs. I reach in and pull out one that is styled in low bun with curls that hang around the face. My first wig was a little darker than my hair at the time. The shades got darker every few months, enough that no one would notice, until it matched my mothers hair. Then the perruquier made several styles of the same color so I could change it up a bit every once in a while.

I set the wig on the floor and shuffle around and come up with a light peach hat. It is stiff at the center and loose at the edges. I go over to the mirror and slide the wig on, grabbing some

pins and pinning it in place so it won't move. I position the hat at an angle and pin that also. I look myself up and down one last time to make sure nothing is out of place.

I head for the door, opening it and shutting it gently behind me. The stair case is down the hall to my right. I slide my hand along the railing as I head down. The thick wood of the stairs has a long carpet piece that barely reaches the edges and goes the whole length. My footsteps are muffled by the carpet until reach the bottom, and my boots make a soft clicking on the wood floor. There are so many corridors and rooms that it is confusing to learn where every room is until you walk them for a while.

I head to the dining room and find a plate of breakfast on the table. I seat myself and stare out the large window that gives a perfect view of the ocean. I nibble on the fresh eggs and toast. Mother always taught me to eat light when I am dressed in a corset. I sip at the freshly squeezed orange juice. I'm the only person in here: Father and Mother must be having a meeting or something with the council. I sit there until a servant comes in and tells me Miss Adelaide is here.

I sigh, scoot the chair back and stand making my way to the music room. Every instrument you can imagine is there. The servant opens the door and I find Miss Adelaide standing right by the grand piano. I make my way over and take a seat avoiding her hard stare.

“Andante and variations in G major.” She orders.

I hesitate at which piece of Mozart's music that is. I remember and I place my hands on the keys and start playing. I try not to think about all the notes otherwise I tend to make more mistakes. My hands float over the keys as I recall from memory all the notes. I reach the last note and take my hands from the keys. I look up and she doesn't say anything. I look back down

happily, knowing that when she says nothing she is pleased. You should only be worried when she starts talking or stops you in the middle of a piece.

All of a sudden she walks out without a single word. I sit there wondering if she just didn't want to teach today. I only played one piece. Why would she leave? I sit there for a moment longer and decide to go find mother.

I wander the halls in search of her.

“Mellah. There you are.”

“Mother, I was just looking for you.”

“Would you like to run into the village market and get some fruits, maybe go see some friends, ooh or you can go check out what's on the traders market? If not I can get one of the servant to go out.”

“Yea that would be nice, get some fresh air.”

She hands me a couple coins and walks away. I place them in the small pocket on the side of the dress and turn around and head for the kitchen grabbing a basket for the fruits. The main doors are guarded by three men. All of whom are tall and muscular. Their body armor gleams in the light passing through the large open windows. They immediately bow and open the doors. I nod and pass through.

My eyes close a little as they adjust to the bright morning sun. It's fairly warm, with a light breeze that moves the bottom of my dress. I breath in the fresh air and get a hint of freshly baking bread. I open my eyes and take in the scenery. I walk the dirt path way heading to city center. The grass pokes up wherever there is a free patch and flowers of all colors sprout in the

midst. Village houses are everywhere. I know just about every one here. It will be my job to know everyone someday when I take the throne.

Birds chirp and dogs bark as I walk by.

“Hello Mellah.” People call out.

I turn and wave; they smile and go about their day.

My Mother and Father are loved throughout the village. They always have been. They are fair rulers. I hope to rule like them someday.

I head left of city center to get to the market. This part of the city is always full. People bustle by each other. I can see the market in the distance and the traders market just behind it. A group of women make way for me as I enter the market. The fruits are to my right behind a big group of girls.

“Excuse me.” I say politely.

They hurriedly apologize and move away from the fruit. Some continue to stare and others avoid eye contact.

“Princess? I heard king Landon and Queen Evelin are closing the harbor, is that true?”

“Now where did you hear that?”

“Lady Viola.”

“I haven't heard anything of the harbor closing.”

I turn to place a variety of fruits in the basket and they walk off. Of course they heard it from lady Viola, she spreads rumors all the time. I'm surprised the devil hasn't asked her sign her soul away. I carry the basket on my arm and hand the lady my two coins and leave the market.

The sun is getting hotter by the day; I'm thankful for these linen dresses. I would be melting in my wool and cotton ones.

I don't feel like visiting much with anybody so I quicken my step and head back home. The tall, wide doors are coming into view. The castle doesn't look that huge from the outside, at least that is opinion, the inside makes it seem endless.

The guards open the doors and I step into the large sunlit foyer. They ease shut and some of the light disappears, but it is still bright. I head for the kitchen and drop the basket off. A servant girl is standing at the counter preparing brunch snacks.

“Thank you princess.”

“You're welcome.”

She must also be new. She is very shy, and I don't think I have seen her around. *I wonder why we are getting new servants.* I leave the kitchen and go to the music room. Maybe I can play some music to pass the time. Maybe the violin, or the harp. The halls are so quiet. The soft tapping of my boots echo in the wide hallway. Paintings of my great ancestors scatter the walls and antiques sit on pedestals of stone.

The doors open and I walk in. It's slightly darker in here. The curtains need to be opened, it's too creepy with them partly shut like that. I cross the room and fling them open. Sun light bathes the wood floor making the instruments cast long shadows. This has always been my favorite room. The ceiling is probably twenty feet high and shelves upon shelves line the walls. They hold endless music sheets to almost every piece you can imagine: composers like Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven.

I walk over to the shelves and pluck one down at random. I unroll it and place it on the stand, pinning it down so it won't curl up on itself. I pick up the violin and rest it on my shoulder, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath before I start. Music and I have always had a special connection. It just flows. I don't have to think about it. The piece starts out slow then speeds up until I feel like I can't stand still. I just want to dance with the music. Before I know it it's over. I stand there for a second then unpin the sheet and put it back picking another. I do this until it feels like it has been hours, but it has probably been only one.

I set the violin down. I didn't notice my arms were so tired until I stopped. Now they feel limp and exhausted. I head for the doors and pull on the handle. It opens easily. A guard hurriedly moves out of the way and apologizes.

“It's ok.” Do you know where my Mother and Father are?”

They shake their heads.

“Well thank you anyway.”

I turn and head for the main hall. They aren't there either. Where could they be? They don't usually go up to the sending floor so they have to be on the main level of the underground level. I run into the servant I saw in the kitchen.

“Do you know where my Mother and Father are?”

“No I'm sorry Princes.”

They shouldn't be in a meeting so what are they doing. I wander the halls waiting to here my Mother call out and ask where I have been. My hands are getting really warm in the gloves, but I feel I shouldn't take them off.

“Princess!! Come quick!” A servant calls.

This one I know: Miss Catlyn.

“What is it?!”

“It's the king and Queen.”

“What's happened?! What's wrong?!”

She can barely speak.

“Take me to them.”

She holds a torch in her hand and rushes off and I notice we are heading to the underground levels. My stomach churns. They will be fine. The steps to this area are stone; my boots clomp as we hurry down the stairs. She leads me through a maze of hallways. Until we get to a small room which if I am honest I don't think I have ever seen or let alone knew about, and trust me I explored a lot as a kid. How could I have never seen this room.

The room isn't huge but we walk across and I see dark figures on the ground. She brings the torch closer so I can see. My breath lodges in my throats. I still manage to scream. The scream comes from somewhere so deep down it hurt my lungs. My hands fly to my mouth in an attempt to stop myself from screaming more. My eyes go wide as I realize what has happened.

“Mother and Father are dead! Someone killed them!”

I can't even find the words to speak. I stand in horror as the lifeless bodies that once held the happy soulful lives of my parents are empty. A shell of what once was lays in their place.

“Oh Gods!!”

I can barely process everything. They are gone. They are really gone. What am I gonna do? I didn't get to say goodbye. When did I tell them I loved them? Was I good daughter? Did they think I would be a good queen someday? Tears stream down my face, I make no attempt to hide

it. She always taught me to hide it when around servants or villagers, but I can't do it. I can't be strong without her.

How is it that I was just talking and smiling with her a few hours ago. How did this happen? Who did this? My throat aches. I crumple to the ground and curl into a ball. My hat comes loose and falls off. My whole body shakes from the violent tears that escape my eyes that are squeezed shut.

I manage to crawl over to them and lay my head on Father chest. Aching sobs escape my mouth in violent fits. His soft suit glides against my hands. I haven't hugged him since I was a child. Why didn't I hug him. What's wrong with me? I look up and see moms face through blurry eyes. Hers eyes were closed; she looks so peaceful. Her dark purple dress matching his suit. They always did that: matched. I used to think it was dumb but lately I thought it was really cute.

My chest aches and my head is pounding. I look up and Miss Catlyn stands there with wide innocent eyes.

“Did you find them here?” I manage to say through choked sobs.

“No, Miss Darla did.

“Who is Miss Darla?”

“The new servant.”

“The one that was in the kitchen?”

“Yes.”

“But I asked her where they were and she said she didn't know.”

I look back down at my parents.

“Have their bodies brought upstairs, and wait till I find you and we can discuss funeral plans.”

I kiss their cheeks lightly and another tear slides down my cheek. I'm so sorry this happened to you. I look at them for a while longer then stand, brushing off my dress, and grabbing my hat. I walk out the door and back track my steps to get back to the stairs. I climb them with determined feet.

My fist tightens around my hat as I reach the top of the stairs. There is no more being graceful. I storm down the hallways searching for Miss Darla. Anger burns through my veins. I think I catch a glimpse of her blonde hair pass through the foyer doorway. I run through the doorway and stop in my tracks. There she stands dusting the antique decor. She turns to look at me. She looks at me with pure innocence. I stomp over to her and stare her down.

“You killed them!!”

I bring my hand up and strike her across the face. She brings her hand to her face and looks at me calmly.

“I don't know what you're talking about Princess.”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about.”

The look that's behind her calm serene one is anger starting to show through. The tips of her ears are turning red.

“They got what they had coming.” She says through clenched teeth.

“They didn't deserve it!”

“Like hell they didn't. They were going to close the port to Bellmare because apparently we don't need the goods they produce over there anymore. My family was going to sneak on the

next boat so we could be together; if they would have closed it I wouldn't be seeing my family in a couple days. Plus the rest of us have our own reasons for them to be gone.”

“The rest of you?!”

“Yes, there are and there have always been rebels living in hiding in this village.”

The thought swirls in my mind. I can't believe there have been people out there that wanted my parents dead. And now they got what they wanted. I search for something to say.

“Well I'm heir to the throne, so I will be queen now. And I can order what ever I please.”

“When you have the ceremony. Then you will be queen.”

“Yes, what is your point.”

A devious smile creeps onto her face.

“Who says you will be there for the ceremony.”

All of a sudden the guards that stood watch at the entrance lunged for me. The castles own guards are traitors. I can't trust anyone anymore. I'm brought to the floor. Their weight squeezes all the air from my lungs. I struggle to get up but their weight keeps me down. They ease up a little and I take in as much air as I can. My face is presses against the cool wood floor. They grab my arms so hard I wince in pain.

“Get her up.”

I'm lifted up so I'm standing, but they don't loosen their grip.

“Let go of me!”

“Take her outside.”

The doors open and bright sunlight hits my face. The people that were going about their normal day stop and stare, some with shocked faces and some with devious smiles. And I know

those are the traitors. I refuse to move my feet. They continue to drag me to city center. Almost everybody started to follow. My arms grew sore of their tight grip.

“Why are you doing this?!”

They don't say anything they just look ahead with stern faces. It doesn't take long to get to city center. Before I know it I'm in the center of a huge crowd. Miss Darla comes and stands in front of me. She looks at me with disgust then turns away from me and starts to talk to the crowd forming.

This is your Princess. Most of you would think she would make a wonderful Queen, but would you think she is so wonderful if you knew she was marked by the devil.”

Shocked noises come from the crowd.

The guards come over and yank off my gloves and sleeves before I can resist. The crowd goes silent. I look down. Never have I ever felt so discriminated and ashamed of my own skin.

“If you think that is bad just look at this.”

I know what they are going to do next. My hands fly to my head in an attempt to stop them.

“No please don't!” I shout.

They pry my hands away and yank off my wig and wrap not bothering to take out all the pins. They scrape my head, and I yelp in pain.

My long red hair flows falls down to my waist. I wrap my arms around myself wishing to curl up in a ball and disappear. Tears start to form in the corners of my eyes. I try to stop them, but I can't. They slide down my cheeks.

“Why are you doing this to me?!”

“Because, we can't have a Queen that's marked by the devil; the gods won't like it. And we can't have you rule like your parents.”

“My parents were great rulers, they loved everyone.”

She doesn't say anything, she looks at the guards and nods. A horse drawn carriage comes up. They pick me up shoving me in and closing the door. I am blanketed in darkness. I hear a rod slide between the door handles. I bang on the doors, but they don't budge.

“Let me out.” I scream.

I pound on the doors until my hands are sore. My mind is swirling out of control. I can't breathe. I find the wall and lean against it trying to find my breath. *Where are they taking me?*

The carriage starts to move. I can hear the clomping of the horse hooves on the dirt pathway. I'm not going to get out of here in this dress. I reach behind me and untie the bow. I pull on the strings, my arms tire not long after. The angle I have to have my hands is uncomfortable. I yank until it is loose enough I can get out of it. I pull my arms out and shove the rest off. I'm thankful for my nightgown I still have on.

I try to remember the turns we take so when I get out I can get home, but we take so many I lose track. My mind races. I ball my fists and pound them on the floor of the carriage. Screams escape my lips. Anger filled tears fall from my eyes. I curl up in a ball hugging my knees to my chest. I lay my head on the floor feeling the rough wood rub my cheek. I need you mom. I don't want you to go. My throat aches. I let my eyes close, and I try to relax my body. My muscles tighten with each aching sob. I don't know how long I have been crying but my sobs are cut off by the pole being removed from the bars. The doors swing open and light floods my eyes. My hands shoot up to my face. They reach in and drag me out by my arms. My bare legs scrape

against the wood. I fall to the ground. Twigs snap under me. Before I can get a good sense of direction they wrap a dark cloth over my eyes.

All I know is that I'm somewhere in the Shadow Forest. I hear the gruff voices of men talking around me. They hold me tight by the arms and we start walking. I stumble over twigs and branches. I'm thankful for my boots, but my legs are left open and under the mercy of the forest's limbs. I lost all sense of direction a while ago.

Ok, maybe if when we stop, and they loosen their grip I can rip myself free and take off my blindfold and start running. There are like 3 men. I could maybe do it, but I would have no idea where I would be running. What would happen if I did get back; they wouldn't want me. I'm marked. The sad realization hits me, I'm not wanted by anyone anymore. I slump, letting my weight be dragged.

“Pick yourself up girl. We ain't gonna drag you the whole way.”

I can't find my voice to say anything or to protest. I pick my feet up and start walking. If I have any chance at getting away I need to make them somewhat trust me. I don't have tears to cry anymore. I make a promise to myself that I won't look weak in front of anyone anymore. Wherever I'm going I'm going to get away, and I'm going to do it without fear. If I die at least I will be with Mother and Father, and if I live.... Then I will make do; I will start over.

All of a sudden a chill swept over my arms. It's almost like a damp, dark feeling. The feeling of the ground under my feet changed too. The soft ground of the forest floor is traded out for a hard and jagged rock terrain. Where am I? Never in my whole life of exploring and learning about my home land have I ever known about wherever I am right now. My hands start to get

clammy and my arms and legs are covered in goosebumps. I hear the steady drip of water and it threatens to drive me crazy.

Eventually the cold fades away and so do the drops. I sigh with relief. I didn't know how much longer I could stand it. The goosebumps fade and the terrain gets softer again. My legs are growing tired; I hope we don't have much longer. We walk for what I think is like 20 minutes I'm not really sure at this point.

I feel a sting on my leg.

“Ow!” I yelp.

I rub my leg against the other and I stumble a little when they keep dragging me. I hear them talk to someone. I don't think I have heard that voice at all during this trip. I hear a long buzz and chains clinking against each other. Then a creak of metal grates against my ears. They push me along and another set of hands grab me.

I can tell these aren't the same ones though. They are even rougher. My arms are tingling from the pressure of their hands. I'm sure they will go numb soon. I will not cry. They yank me higher off the ground and shove me forward. Their steps are much quicker. I have to jog to keep up. My feet are starting to sweat in the increasing heat of my boots. I can hear voices of other people come into range. They start off quiet then get louder until they feel only a few feet away.

I hear whistles and shouts from men. I try to hide behind my hair. I feel so exposed and violated. We walk a few more steps and then we stop. I hear the jingling of keys and bars opening. Hands shove my back and I stumble forward falling to my hands and knees.

The sudden freedom in my arms makes them feel light as a feather. The realization that they aren't holding me anymore makes my hands fly up to the blindfold and rip it off. My eyes

squint against the bright sun. I whip around and grasp the bars and make an attempt to open my eyes and see the people that were dragging me. My hands reel back at the heat of the bars.

“For the love of the gods.” I shout.

“Oh you're fine.” A voice says behind me.

I turn around just realizing I wasn't the only one in the cage. I'm staring at a woman in torn clothes. Her hair is short and is knotted from root to tip. Her skin is a deep golden brown, and her voice is gruff, almost like a mans. The thing I notice most are her eyes. They are ice blue, boring into your soul until you feel invaded.

“Who are you?”

“No one. What did you do to get thrown in here?”

Suddenly it clicks. This is the traitors camp. I was thrown in the traitors camp?! Why?!”

“Well you gonna answer me or not?”

“Look at my skin; I'm defaced by the gods, my village doesn't want me. And I have hair like fire. ” I say in a sour voice.

She looks at me like it's the first time she is noticing my appearance.

“Well who cares. They don't like your skin or the color of your hair. I would thank the gods to look like you.”

“I have never been told that.”

The thought that some people don't view me as deformed brings happiness to me. I let a small smile creep onto my lips.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

“Where are the other women?”

“We are the only ones.”

Silence passes over us. I sit on the dirt ground on the opposite end of the woman.

“I need to get out of here. I'm not supposed to be here.”

“Well good luck with that.”

My stomach rumbles, I realize that I haven't eaten since this morning, it must be getting close to night I can feel the heat of the day start to slip away. My arms are sore from the men's tight grip. I look at them and find purple and blue marks in the form of hands start to form. I untie my boots and slip them off setting them off to the sides letting my feet breathe. I can see small blisters forming on the backs of my heels.

I feel a small tug on my hair. I yank away realizing that it was an old man in the cage right against ours.

“You are very beautiful.” He says.

My heart begins to race as I scoot away. I catch the eye of a young looking man with dark hair and ice blue eyes like the woman in my cage. I look down immediately grabbing my shoes and scooting farther away from them. I wrap my arms around myself trying to make myself smaller. I sit there watching the light fade and trying to plot an escape. The woman is long asleep by the time it gets fully dark. I sit there, more alone than ever. I will not cry.

I stand up and pace, going over to the bars and tugging on them to see if they were strong or not. They are, no way am I getting out this way. I sit back down criss crossing my legs and staring at the entrance gate that is a little ways away. I don't take my eyes off of them.

The night passes and I feel like I haven't even blinked. I have been staring at the guard that mans the gate to see when they switch shifts. My eyes are growing puffy, but my brain won't let me sleep. The morning chill starts to dissipate when the sun peaks over the horizon.

By watching them all night I figured out they change guards every 3 hours with 2 minutes in between. That might give me enough time to run over to the gate press the button, open the gate, and run as far as I can before they realize I got out and come looking for me. All I have to figure out now is how to get out of this cage.

People are starting to stir awake. The woman in my cage sits up and rubs sleep from her eyes and looks at me.

“They will be serving breakfast soon.”

I don't say anything; I just nod. Soon enough the guards file out if the main building not far from all the cages. They are holding grey buckets like the ones used to feed horses. *You have got to be kidding me.* They approach with nasty grins on their faces. I peer inside the buckets which have what looks like uncooked oatmeal in them. I look up at them as they toss have the buckets contents on the dirt in our cage.

“Have a nice meal ladies.”

The woman rushes over and starts scooping the oatmeal into her mouth creepily.

“You better eat up. We won't be getting fed for another 9 hours.”

I stare in shock as I noticed how skinny she was. I should eat; I need as much energy as I can get if I'm going to escape. I look down in disgust at the uncooked oatmeal that lay in the dirt. I reach down and scoop some into my hands bringing it to my face. I'm so hungry, but this makes

my stomach churn. I shove some into my mouth before I can change my mind. It sticks to my cheeks and my tongue. I can barely swallow. I didn't realized how thirsty I have been until now.

My stomach greedily takes anything it can take. I ignore the taste and how thirsty I am and take as much as I can. I fear for what our next meal is. We stop eating when we start to taste the dirt coat the insides of our mouth. I sit back leaning against the bars that are growing warmer by the hour. I tilt my head back trying to get the rest of the oatmeal crumbs out of my mouth. The sun hits my face and I feel beads of sweat start to form on my hairline. I'm going to get out tonight; I can't stay here any longer.

I have never picked a lock but I'm sure I can figure it out, I just need a piece of metal that can fit in the key slot.

“What are you thinking about?” A voice says.

I look up and see the young man that has dark hair and ice blue eyes. My cheeks flush; I look away trying to hide it.

“Getting out of here.”

“That's all I have been thinking about since I got here.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I don't know; I lost track. All the days just melt together when all you think about is your next meal.”

“Yea.”

“We can help each other.”

“How can we help each other? I don't even know you.”

“Well I have been here longer than you; I know ever single thing about the workings of this place.”

“Ok so what is you plan to get out.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see something glint against the sun light. I spin around grabbing the bars and feels the heat penetrate my palms. He smiles at my sudden attention. I stare at the metal in his hands.

“Like I said I have been here for a while; I have had time to plan.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Well occasionally they make us do work, we don't get paid, but it's better than sitting in here day after day. Me and a group of guys were making parts for one of their vehicles.”

“What's a vehicle?”

“He looks at me without saying anything for a minute until he realizes I'm not kidding.”

“It's an automobile. It's like a carriage but not pulled by a horse.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I managed to take a piece of metal and hide it in my boots. I have been waiting for the right time to break out. All I need to do is find out how to get past the guards and outside the gate.”

“Well they change guards every 3 hours and there is a 2 minute break in between the shifts.”

“I've noticed that; I just don't know if we could get out of the cage, run over to the gate, and get far enough away that they don't see us when the next guard comes.

“We can always try, I'm sick of being in here.”

“How did you get in here?”

“I attempted to smuggle Vastilian Stone using the underground tunnel. I wanted the money to flee the island.”

“What tunnels.”

“You know the ones you used to get here.”

I sit there as the realization hit me. That why it got so cold and damp, and the dripping. They are underwater tunnels. I can't believe I never knew about those. Why didn't they tell me?

“Hey.”

I snap back to reality.”

“Yea, I'm listening.”

“We are doing this tonight.”

My heart starts to pound at the thought of getting out of here. And getting out of with with guy.

“What's your name?”

“Zaine.”

“I'm Mellah.”

“It's nice to meet you.”

He flashes me a smile that sends shivers down my spine. His teeth are as white as pearls.

“It's nice to meet you to.”

We talk the rest of the day until I can feel the temperature drop and sun starts to dip. The guards come by again and drop another half bucket of contents onto the ground. It's isn't oatmeal

but another grainy kind of food. I don't know what it is, but I decide to eat it anyway. I need energy. It tastes bland and dry in my mouth. I hear the creak of the cage door and a pale is set on the ground; joy leaps through me when I see the shiny surface. Water!! I rush over scraping my knees on the dry ground and scooping some in my hands.

I have never been so relieved. The water slides down my throat. I drink until my stomach is bloated. I sit back wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“I hear a whisper and notice that it's Zaine.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yea.”

I'm surprised that the woman in my cage hasn't listened in on our conversation and tried to get out with us. Time seems to pass so much slower now that I'm waiting for something. The woman hasn't talked to me since. I look at her and realize she doesn't look all that good. Her eyes are sunken into her face and she seems really pale.

“Are you ok?”

She doesn't respond; She doesn't even look up. I decide not to say anything else. I take my eyes off of her and stare at the setting sun. I want to remember something good from this. Or at least something that brought me peace in the midst of all my chaos.

I haven't been able to fully process the fact that my Mother and Father are dead. Just the thought makes my eyes sting. I remember the way her eyes softened when she looked at me. She was so caring. And my Father. He taught me so much. He taught me be confident in everything I do. He even taught me to not be brought down by other people that don't see the beauty in my

appearance. He said “You are beautiful Mellah, don't let anyone tell you different.” I smile at the memory.

I will not cry.

I will be the best Queen I can be. I will do it for them.

“Hey, are you ok?”

“Yea, I'm fine.”

“You might want to put your boots on, we will head out when the next guard comes in for his shift.”

I grab my shoes that I put in the corner of the cage. I look at the scabs that formed over the blisters on the back of my ankles, and I slip them on not tying them super tight. Just tight enough they won't fall off. I run my fingers through my knotted hair, and I look up to find him looking at me. He stutters a little and asks if I'm ready.

“Uh yea.”

“Good.”

The woman is fast asleep and the sun has gone down leaving the camp in darkness. I can feel the tiredness numbing my senses. The next guard should be coming in less than an hour. I sit still though I don't want to draw attention.

The heat of the day is almost gone, and it leaves a cool evening behind which I'm so thankful for. I sit leaning against the fence next to Zaine, and we talk until it's time to go. The rest of the men in his cage are fast asleep. We just have to make sure not to wake them up.

We are only a few minutes away, and my heart is racing.

“Zaine?”

“Yea.”

“What happens if we get caught?”

“We can't get caught.”

I don't question what they will do because I don't want to know. All of a sudden he runs to the door and starts picking it. I realize that this is happening, like it's happening now. Within a few seconds he is out he closes it behind him and rushes over to my cage. Picking it swiftly he has it open in a few seconds. I want to ask where he learned to do that, but I decide to do that later. He closes it once I got out. To our surprise no one stirred. I thank the gods.

We sprint for the gates. We have probably a minutes left. He pushes the button and we hear the buzz. We don't stop to check if anyone heard it. He opens the gate and closes it behind us hearing it click and lock shut. We sprint for the densest part of the trees not looking back. Our feet are almost silent on the soft forest floor.

I quickly lose my breath and am panting. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears I'm sure he can hear it too. I dodge twigs and uplified branches. In the distance I can see a hole in the side of a boulder. That must be the underwater tunnel. I can barely keep up with him. My legs are screaming at me to stop. I'm gasping for breath. Even in the cooling air my forehead starts to sweat.

We slow down as we near the opening.

“Are you ok?”

“Yea, are they coming for us?”

“Lets not stop to find out.”

We enter the caves which are dark and damp. Just like before except I can see. We don't run but we walk fast. The ground is so uneven we don't want to risk hurting ourselves. We walk for what I think is 15 minutes and I can see the opening into the Shadow Forest. Being focused on something made it so I barely noticed the dripping of the water above.

We haven't talk much in the 15 minutes of being in the tunnels. It's probably better we stay as quiet as possible. We emerge and I feel the temperature difference hit me. It's warmer than the tunnels, and I'm still sweating.

“We need to start running again.”

“Ok.” I say reluctantly.

We start jogging cuz I can't run any faster at this point.

“How long until we reach the village?”

“20 minutes maybe.”

“We jog in silence for a while.

“They won't accept me. I don't know if I can be queen.”

“Why? Because of your skin and your flaming hair?” He says with a smile.

“My cheeks flush.

“Yes.”

“Well we can always run away. We can sneak onto a boat at the harbor and go somewhere else. Start over.”

The thought of leaving everything I have ever known never occurred to me. It's almost scary. I have never travelled. I was always meant to be Queen, but maybe I was destined for something else. I look up at him and smile.

“That would be nice.”