



Speak My Name Upon the Wind

A sequel to [Voiceless, a Galebound story](#).

By Jo Michelle W.

*Set in the Galebound universe, which is owned by Madeleine Ethridge,
and available to read for free at galebound.com.*

Cover art by Madeleine Ethridge.

*... I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.*

*But this I know, that every Law
That men have made for Man,
Since first Man took his brother's life,
And the sad world began,
But straws the wheat and saves the chaff
With a most evil fan.*

*This too I know – and wise it were
If each could know the same –
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim. ...*

*... For they starve the little frightened child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
And gibe the old and grey,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say. ...*

“The Ballad of Reading Gaol” by Oscar Wilde

• Chapter 1 •

It was one of those mornings. The ones when Tess woke up crying.

They were becoming less frequent after nearly six years,¹ but whenever she had *that* dream, it felt like no time had passed at all. It felt like she'd just held him as he took his last breaths of life.

His right hand glowed from his heartbreaking attempt to repair the damage – obeying that final obligation from the frantic Lafarge. A last refusal to allow Jacques even this one choice. But of course, Jacques had made sure he'd be past saving.

He shifted his left hand to rest across her lower belly. He opened his eyes and gave her a final – even triumphant – crooked smile. Then, the light faded from his hand. From his irises.

She opened her eyes. Sunlight leaked in around the shutters, filling the sparsely furnished room with gray light. She pushed up onto her elbow, wiped her eyes, and smiled down at the disheveled little mop of brown curls on the pillow beside hers. He was curled on his side, his breathing soft and even.

If only she could wrap her arms around him as tight as she could hold, and never let go. Her hand trembled slightly as she reached out brush hair away from his face. He had red highlights – lighter than she remembered Adele's. Closer to his papa's.

¹ I completely forgot that years are not quite the same for the Dusk, and in Voiceless, I used earth years/ages for characters. For continuity, I'm doing the same here. I'm not entirely sure how the character ages translate, but, eh, whatever. ￣\ (ツ) ￣/

“Good morning, Jacqui,” she murmured. He sighed, fidgeted, and then wormed his head deeper into the pillow.

She slipped from under the blanket, into the cold. After snatching up a shawl to wrap around her shoulders, she knelt before the little black stove set in the center of the room. Its hinge screeched loudly in the quiet when she opened it to toss in a scoop of coal, and strike a light.

She shivered. This city – Ninove – built on the low slopes of a mountain range at the edge of the Shadow, was so cold after her life in Galeland Lorraine.

Jacques appeared at her shoulder, blinking. He raised chubby fists to rub the sleep away. “G’morn’n, mama,” he announced.

She straightened, stretching, and her joints protested. Her knees and back were stiff and sore from yesterday at the laundry. Like the day before, and the day before that.

She reached out and caught him in an embrace – squeezing his wriggling little body against her own. She planted a kiss on the center of his frizzy curls. “How did you sleep?”

“I’m hungry,” he protested.

Of course he was. He’d started eating like a little bear, and she’d had to let out all his seams and hems twice in the last cycle.

She let him go, and he bounced over to his stool set by the table.

There was both cheese and biscuits in the cupboard today. She cut thick slices of the sharp, dry cheese and warmed two biscuits at the stove.

Jacques devoured the food, and she gave him more. It would be okay – Cavendish often gave the women who worked for him at the laundry a free lunch. Workers who ate did better work, he’d say.

She’d been fortunate to find him.

But Cavendish – he never quite had enough money for the full pay he’d promised, but he made it up to them in a dozen small ways that kept them coming back to work each day. They were all pretty sure that the short, balding man – a lifelong bachelor – had started the business to find

someone desperate enough to have him. She never felt quite comfortable around him, but honestly, with the number of soldier widows in this city, the women were grateful to find anything.

Her stomach twinged painfully, but she ignored it. She didn't need to eat now. She'd eat at lunch – Jacqui could have her breakfast.

His happy grin – free from fear, pain, and Noblemen's Obligations – that was all the breakfast she needed.

For a child of Lorraine's Taudis district, hunger was neither unknown, nor unbearable.

• • •

Thirty-one years ago

Tess's legs weren't quite long enough to reach the floor from the bench, so she kicked them back and forth, skimming across the muddy wood floor. She bent her head over the slate, set on the long narrow table running from one side of the classroom to the other, and twisted her face in concentration. Which side *did* the round part on the letter D go?

Three flies buzzed in the heavy air overhead.

Shally elbowed her roughly. "It's backwards – again," she whispered.

Tess shot her an angry glance, and smudged the letter out with her finger.

Madame Collette, the teacher, swept over. She was all dark rustling fabrics and smelled of rosewater. She wore her gray hair pulled back in a tight knot, and she carried a perpetual frown on her face. They whispered that she was bitter that only the cheapest school in Lorraine would have her.

She smacked her ruler across Tess's fingers. "No talking."

Tess bit her lip, fighting the hot temper surging in her chest. There was no point in arguing that *she* hadn't been the one talking. Madame Collette assumed she and Renn were misbehaved, *mannerless ruffians*, just because they had to walk all the way from the Taudis district. And it

wasn't like the other pupils at this single-room school were gentry. But they weren't from Taudis, and that was what mattered. She'd heard all about it from Renn for three years. He'd shouted about it to ma and pa, and muttered colorful tales of unfair fights and nasty pranks to her. Pa always listened quietly, and always said that's the way the world is, and if Renn wanted it to change, he'd just have to earn their respect. Show them he deserved to be there, one step at a time.

Renn said Pa's way didn't work.

But Pa's way *did* get Pa a foreman's position in the coal mines three years ago, which allowed her parents to afford this school's fees. And pay for chalk and slates. And Renn's books. And hire help for ma's laundry, so she wouldn't need them during the day.

School was frightfully expensive, Tess had noticed.

She wasn't sure it was worth it. After a week of this, she was inclined to agree with Renn. It wasn't fair. Renn was the smartest boy his age and he worked twice as hard as all of them, but they still thought he was stupid. She saw the way Madame Collette talked to him.

She bit her lip, and tried the D again, begging the creaky old clock to strike noon. Breakfast had been extra small today. Her stomach hurt, and her head felt wooly.

Shally snickered again, and Tess realized she'd written the next word backwards. She aimed a small, vicious kick at the larger girl, and her heel caught her, right in the shin. The girl squawked with pain. Tess froze.

Madame Collette was indignant when she appeared behind Tess again.

"That's it," she snapped. "On your feet. If you're incapable of copying a sentence like a gentlewoman, you'll do it up front with me, at the board."

Tess bit her lip, her heart racing and her eyes stinging. Moving carefully, she slid from the bench and followed the teacher to the front. She took stiff, measured steps in her new shoes. Those shoes cost more coin than Tess had ever seen ma spend, and they pinched her feet.

She hated those shoes.

She kept her eyes locked forward, trying to ignore the giggles.

Madame Collette pointed to a square of the board that was just within Tess's reach. "Right here. Write your sentence until you've learned it."

Tess's hand was shaking as she raised her stub of chalk, and tried to picture the letters in her mind. "*A DOG SAT...*" More titters sounded behind her, and she blanched, checking her letters. She'd got the D right this time –. She clenched her free hand into a fist. She'd written *T-S-A*, not *S-A-T*. She rubbed the mistake out and started again.

Every set of eyes watched her – waiting for her to make another mistake. They were laughing at her shabby, patched dress and horrible, pinching shoes.

She missed her old, comfortable shoes. Ma had cut the toes out, and they flapped deliciously when she stamped in the mud.

They would have been much more comfortable to stand here in.

An itchy trickle of sweat rolled down her back, and her arm felt weak and shaky, held up above her head, to reach the board.

She clenched her teeth.

"*A DOG SAT...*"

She wasn't going to give up and cry.

"*... ON A LOG.*"

She *wasn't* going to give up and cry.

"*A DOG ...*"

She wasn't going to cry.

"*... SAT...*"

It was a stupid sentence. Dogs didn't sit on logs. They growled at each other and dug for rotting rubbish and chased rats, and snapped at you, if you got too close.

"*... ON ...*"

She blinked rapidly.

“... A L ...”

Her arm hurt, but she wasn't.

“... OG ...”

Going.

To.

Cry.

A scream of feminine horror sounded from behind her. “It's ruined!”

Tess risked a glance over her shoulder. A girl was on her feet, hands waving in horror at a large splatter of ink running down the front of her light blue dress. She was one of the bigger students. Renn sat beside her, a look of deep concern plastered on his face.

Madame Collette's face twisted with fury. “What is going on here?” she thundered.

“He knocked my inkwell all down my new frock,” the girl wailed, pointing at Renn. Her classmates laughed.

Renn's expression shifted to bland innocence. “I shifted my slate and my big clumsy elbow just didn't see your beautiful inkwell there. How can I ever apologize enough?” His words brought more laughter.

Tess turned back to the board to hide her grin, and let her arm drop and rest for a few minutes. Yesterday, Renn had kicked mud in her face then laughed at her furious attempts to retaliate. She'd been bitterly angry at him for the rest of the day, but right now, she forgave him from the bottom of her heart.

The clock began to chime noon, and the laughter went silent, as every eye fastened on their teacher, begging her to release them for lunch.

She glared at Renn. "Lisette, you may go home and change. Renn? If you can't control yourself, you'll stay in here and have no lunch. The rest of you may go."

Tess slipped into the crowd of students flowing out the door, to eat in the sunlight after retrieving her bundle of food that ma had tied up with a bright handkerchief. She retreated to a hidden corner to eat. The ache in her head and her belly subsided, and were replaced by empathetic pain for Renn, who'd have to spend the rest of the day hungry.

He'd had the same breakfast she'd had.

At least Renn's prank with the ink seemed to have driven Tess's own infraction from Madame Collette's mind, and she didn't object when Tess slipped into her normal place at the bench after lunch.

When they were finally dismissed for the day, she waited by the door for Renn to find her. He poked her on the shoulder.

"You owe me," he muttered around a mouthful of his uneaten lunch. But then he grinned. "I'll call it in one day."

She nodded and followed him out as he crammed more food into his mouth. He'd be eager to get home in time to see Maria before ma needed them to deliver the clean laundry. Clara – Maria's younger sister and Tess's friend, was convinced her sister was in love with Renn.

Renn refused to admit to the same, but Tess had her own suspicions, and teased him about it as often as she dared.

She had to take two steps for his one as he hurried away from the school yard. Finally, he swallowed his last bite, slowed, and spoke. His voice was low, and sharp with anger.

"They think they're better'n us."

"Pa says –"

"I don't care what pa says," he snapped. "He doesn't have to smile and bow and scrape for 'Madame Collette.'"

Tess scuffed the toe of her new shoe in the dirt. "I don't wanna go back."

“Hey,” he said.

She glanced up.

Renn forced a grin. “They don’t *want* us there. So, every day we’re there? That’s a punch right back at em. So you can’t quit.”

• • •

• Chapter 2 •

After fourteen hours of scrubbing white cuffs and collars at the laundry, Tess trudged back up the steps to her flat. The staircase was narrow, dark, and the steps sagged.

Her knees and back ached, but she forced her fogged brain to focus, and her body to keep moving. Her day wasn't over.

Jacqui clutched one of her hands. His little legs had to move twice as fast to keep up with her on the stairs. He'd whined for her to carry him, but with the basket of food in her other arm, she'd given him a firm no. He could hold her hand, or walk by himself.

He'd blinked back petulant tears, sighed dramatically, and then taken her offer.

His small body was at least as tired as hers. He'd spent the day working with her at the laundry – performing small and simple tasks. He stumbled, and she tightened her grip on his hand, holding him upright.

Once inside their room, he flopped down in front of the stove with his slate and chalk to copy the letters she'd drawn onto the side of the stove for him, while she started chopping vegetables. Purchased at the end of the day, they were whatever the farmers had failed to sell, offered for less as they packed up. Two squishy tomatoes. Broken carrots. A bag of just-soft potatoes.

Her stomach twinged. She'd given half her lunch to Jacqui, after he'd devoured his own.

She glanced down. He lay on his stomach, tracing out a crooked line of Es, his face wrinkled with concentration.

He was improving.

Even if she had the extra money for school, she couldn't trust him to not betray himself, yet. Fortunately, with dark hazel eyes, his glowing

turquoise rings rarely showed any time other than the dark hour. And she'd brought him here, to Ninove, because they said there hadn't been a real Magician at their king's court for fifty-something years. She was gambling that most people wouldn't know what they were seeing, if he accidentally manifested his aura. But she couldn't be too careful.

She was so close – he was almost ready. Soon, they'd leave this life she'd built here, and they'd go find Adele.

Her daughter would be eighteen soon. Each birthday Tess missed weighed on her heart like a stone. She'd have transformed from a child to a woman, and Tess hadn't been there. The fear and confusion on her face as Alexandre Lafarge took her away, was Tess's last memory of her first child.

That image would consume her if she dwelled on it.

Alexandre had been missing when Lafarge sent for him – to bring Adele back to the manor, after–

She swallowed hard.

Lafarge spent those following three days alternating between terror, rage, and utter despondency. He'd pinned his last hope on his son's return with Adele. Tess, too, had waited with that same hope pushing her through.

She'd had a few weeks left, before anyone would guess her secret. Naturally, if Lafarge had even suspected her secret, he'd have locked her safely away.

After the attack, with Margot taken by Roland, without any other options, and pregnant with a Magician's child, Tess had made the agonizing decision to disappear – to take this new child somewhere he'd have a chance at freedom, and wait for him to grow.

She wiped her eyes on the back of her wrist and stirred the stew, breathing in the savory aroma of bone broth and wild herbs. Judging it ready, she placed a lid over the simmering pot, and, taking a thick dishcloth, lifted it from the stove. She adjusted her grip to carry it more comfortably, and called for Jacqui to get the door.

He leapt up – brimming with fresh energy – and dashed over, holding the door open for her. He'd learned how to use the key to lock it behind them, and she nodded encouragingly, as he did so.

The dim halls always made her nervous about his eyes, but no one seemed to notice or remark on it.

He reached up a hand. "Can I carry it?"

She shook her head. "It's too hot and heavy. But," she shifted her grip. "If you take a corner of the towel, you can hold this handle and help me."

She shifted her grip further, to give him a place to hold as he twisted the towel around his hand. Naturally, this made the pot that much harder to carry, but he so loved to help. She couldn't bear to refuse.

They reached her first stop, and knocked on the door. A hoarse voice from inside muttered that it wasn't locked.

Hellen Faw sat in a narrow bed, her legs wrapped in filthy blankets, and her shoulders draped in shawls. Her wispy white hair floated around her head, and she glared at Tess through filmy eyes. The room was heavy with body smells of an old woman.

Her lips formed their habitual scowl, now etched permanently on her face in a thousand wrinkles.

Jacqui let go of the pot, and rubbing his nose, bounded forward.

"Hullo, Gran Faw."

She narrowed her eyes. "I can't imagine why you bring that brat along."

Tess ignored her, setting the pot on a stool, and stoking the fire in Hellen's stove. Jacqui joined her, and using a second stool to clamber up, brought down the woman's single bowl from the shelf. Tess ladled the steaming stew into it, and placed it in the woman's arthritic hands.

Hellen squinted, tisking. "I swear to the saints – this blasted soup gets thinner every day – why don't yeh mind your own business – feed your own brat before yeh end up on the street? Yeh think any of the ingrates here will take you in? Nah – give any of em a bit and they'll take it all, without so much as a thank you, and shut their doors in your face," she

raised her head, grinning nastily. "Trust me girl – they'll always turn on yeh. Yeh can't trust nobody."

Tess smiled, and adjusted one of Hellen's shawls. "And yet you trust me enough to eat my stew."

Hellen raised the bowl to her lips, and slurped through toothless gums. She snorted. "'Cause you're stupid enough to bring it around. But don't come to me when you're out on yeh head, or yer brat's cryin for supper."

Tess's stomach growled assertively as she waited while Hellen to slurp down the rest. Then took the woman's bowl and rinsed it with a small amount of the water she'd brought up for her that morning.

As she carefully changed the woman's filthy linens, Hellen launched into a retelling of her story with a dark relish. This was the reality of life and how people will always treat you in the end, she muttered. She'd worked her hands to the bone keeping her husband and children alive and fed, and the moment her husband died, his family took the children and kicked her onto the street.

"Never trust no one – what I say," Hellen announced, prosaically. "You'll see. You young people – believe the world'll treat yeh fair. Yeh gotta see reality. No one'll care for yeh. No one'll –."

The soiled sheets placed in a pile by the door where she'd pick them up in the morning, Tess hefted the stewpot again. "Good evening, Hellen. It was lovely seeing you."

The old woman sniffed, and Tess left the room, Jacqui closing the door extra gently behind them. Hellen had yelled at him for slamming it a few days ago.

Tess glanced down at his curly head. "Thank you for being kind to Gram Faw," she said softly.

He took his place beside her, helping with the pot, and raised his eyes. They were large and thoughtful. "You said she's sad."

"Yes. She needs friends."

He wrinkled his forehead, the expression aching like his father. "But, then, why's she mean to everyone?"

“She’s scared. She’s scared that people will be mean and cruel to her.”

“She’s scared that you’ll be mean to her?”

“Yes,” she said, softly.

He chewed on his lip, thinking, as they reached her second and final door. A widower who worked as a day laborer left it to his daughter, ten-year-old Emma, to keep her two younger brothers alive and fed. Their big eyes were always hungry.

Every surface in this single room was covered with grime, dirt, or dust. The single chamberpot usually smelled, and the two beds were covered with ragged blankets. Emma did what she could, but all three children were rarely anything close to fully dressed, washed, or fed.

When Tess entered, their shouts of joy at the food made Tess very nearly start crying.

Tess filled bowls with stew as Emma set the table. The two boys and Jacqui scrambled for stools. The youngest was about a year or so younger than Jacqui, and Tess let her son play with them, as long as it wasn’t dark. Balancing the safety of her son, against his need for friends – the compulsion to shut him safe away forever was a daily battle in her heart. But this was why she’d brought him to Ninove.

If she let herself, she’d drown in regret for not doing the same for Adele the moment they realized the princess had taken their secret to her pyre. That not even her husband Edouard knew about their union or their child. Jacques had begged her to leave him then – to take Adele, and go somewhere far away where he could never find them. She’d refused, but, if she’d known Edouard would take a child from her parents out of pure spite –

No.

Stop.

The children were slurping down the stew, the bowls held to their mouths. This was probably the first time they’d eaten today.

Jacqui wasn't as ravenous, but his own stew disappeared rapidly as well, and Tess refilled their bowls. Her pot was quickly emptying. Finally giving into the insistent urging from her stomach, Tess served herself a bowl, and ate quickly. The warmth of hot, good food flooded through her, washing away some of the dark thoughts lurking in the back of her mind.

Then she served up the rest, dividing it evenly between the four children.

After emptying her bowl for a third time, Emma used her fingers to wipe the remaining drops of stew from her bowl, then sucked them clean.

Tess closed her eyes, finally allowing herself to feel the day's exhaustion. There was food in her belly. Jacqui had eaten.

Feed your own, Hellen had said.

Happy childish chatter began to fill the room. *These are mine*, she thought, angrily. And so was Hellen – whether she liked it or not.

• • •

Twenty-six years ago

Tess stopped to rest on the fifth landing and shifted the rough basket handle from one hand to the other. Her chest was heaving with the effort. The air was heavy and hot inside where the wind couldn't reach her.

Every step of the never-ending staircase creaked, and she had to be careful – the mouldering wood was slippery, and there was nothing to hold herself, if she started to fall. At each landing, she could just see the halls that stretched away into the gloom. Those would lead to rooms and rooms and rooms filled with people, just like where Clara's family lived, one more level up. People shouted, sang, and muttered at each other. Footsteps creaked. Flies buzzed. Dishes clattered.

The hall across from this landing seemed to belch a particularly strong stench of urine and gin. Her eyes watered, and shuddering, she hefted the basket and started her final climb.

Visiting Clara always made her grateful for pa's job in the coal mines, even if he did come home covered in black and coughing like he'd break a rib. At least, that's how ma described it.

As a foreman, he made more than the average laborer, and their three rooms felt like a palace compared to this warren of rotting tenement buildings crowded into Tatter's court. Of course, no one lived like a king in the Taudis district.

When she reached the door, tip-toeing carefully around piles of something rotten, she knocked. A wracking cough was her only answer, so she pushed the door open.

It creaked inward, hanging on rusting hinges, and revealed a room filled with hanging dirty sheets, to create a tiny bit of privacy for the family members.

The rusty stove in the center of the room was unlit, but still, the air was hot and sticky.

Tess shuffled forward, plopping the basket on a single stool beside the stove, and pulled one of the sheets back as more coughing filled the air.

Clara, Tina, Maria, and Cal were all in one large bed together. Clara's ma and pa were in the other.

Cal was awake and coughing. The boy's dark hair was soaked with sweat and plastered to his face. He opened bleary eyes.

Tess inched forward. Ma would have felt all their foreheads, and made tea, and given them broth, all somehow at once. But this time, it was just Tess. She stared back at Cal, hoping for some idea of what to do, now that she was here.

"Do – water?" He asked, voice rasping.

She nodded, and spun around, to grab the jug she'd brought. Of course no one had brought them any from the well in the center of the courtyard. Selfish – all of them, their neighbors.

She poured Cal a cup full, and, after propping himself up, he gulped it down.

“Tess.” It was Clara’s ma. Her voice was weak, but clear. She sat up.
“Thank y’kindly, dear. For comin’. But y’can’t stay.”

Tess nodded. “Ma told me to come straight home.”

The woman shook her head. “Na, Tess. Y’need to leave right away. It’s na safe.”

Tess frowned. “But, ma said –”

Clara’s ma waved her hand. “Na the sickness, dear. There’s talk’a spies an’ rebels hidden here. Y’shouldn’t be here right now. You shouldn’a come.”

Tess frowned. “But, what –?”

Clara’s pa stirred and coughed. Her ma glanced his way, concerned.
“Y’need t’go. An’ don’a let ‘em see ya go.”

Tess frowned. “I will, ma’m. But –” She reached into the pocket in her skirt. “Renn wanted me to give this to Maria.”

The woman frowned, then smiled. “She’ll feel the better for’n it.”

Tess hadn’t planned to wake the eldest sleeping girl, but she’d sat up at Renn’s name, and she grinned weakly up at Tess.

“Did Renn send me somethin’?”

Tess held out the small crudely carved figures her brother had placed in her care that morning. A man and a woman, embracing. At least, that’s what it was supposed to be. On the woman was a rough “M” and on the other, an “R.”

Maria took it, squinting at the letters. “These – that’s –”

“That’s an M, for Maria, and an R, for Renn.”

Maria bit her lip and looked away. “Right,” she muttered.

Tess studied her muddy toes, trying to think of something to say, and feeling very odd. Of course, like Clara, Maria couldn’t read. She nodded.

“Yeah. So – well, Renn said to tell him what you said – so – you – you like it?”

Maria brightened. “Oh, yes. It’s lovely. I’ll keep it with me, right here – until I feel better.”

Tess grinned back at her. Renn would light up at those words. If she told him straight off. She might make him beg a bit. Maybe even make him trade her for it.

She unpacked the basket. Tea. Broth. Coal for the stove. Fresh water. Half a loaf of bread tied up in a napkin.

She filled the kettle, and started a small fire. She placed the corked pots with broth and water on the stool. She balanced the bread on top, then looked around for something else to do, reluctant to just leave them.

“Go, dear,” Clara’s ma commanded firmly from behind the sheet. “We’ll be fine. We live here – they wonna suspect us’f treason.”

Tess lifted the now light basket. “Yes, ma’am. Saints preserve all in this house.”

She slipped from the room. Back into the fetid heat of the halls, down the terrifying staircase. Finally, she reached open air and light. A soft breeze was blowing, and it brought fresher scents to Tatter’s court.

She skipped from sunken cobble to cobble on her toes, light and free after that gloom.

She was nearly out to the street, when she heard the stamp of feet. Marching in time, their boots landing on cobblestone and mud.

Heart pounding, she dashed for the nearest alley, then came to a stop. Pa’s voice in her head said to go home directly, to get out of the way. But – but she wanted to watch. She wanted to know what was going to happen.

She stood there, quivering between curiosity and fear for several minutes, listening to the marching feet enter and fill the open space.

A halt was called. And she slipped back up the alley, to watch from the dim shadows.

A rat the size of a cat scratched through some foul smelling refuse nearby. It was lucky no one around here had trapped and stewed it yet. It shot her glances with bright little eyes, and she glared back, then turned to watch the soldiers form up in a half circle, facing Clara's building.

They carried spears propped against their shoulders, and in the center, mounted on giant horses, sat two figures in splendid clothes.

Heads poked out of windows around the court and then disappeared as quickly. She could see blankets and sheets tacked over windows shift and wave as they were pulled back, just enough for an eye to peek out, then dropped in place again.

Tess had seen one of the mounted figures before. The Bastien's Feast royal parade. When he'd tossed handfuls of coin into the crowds, and watched them trample each other into the mud. Old men in rags with tangled white hair. Half-naked children with eyes that were too big and arms that were too skinny. Screaming women shoved aside by burley labourers.

He'd watched, laughing.

Pa had held her and Renn back from joining the rush, their backs pressed against the wall of a bakery. Away from the street. She'd decided then that she would hate him forever.

This was the son of King Lorraine. Prince Marceau.

The other mounted man had graying dark hair, and, unlike the prince, he wore subdued colors. He kept his horse a shoulder behind Prince Marceau, and looked to the younger man as they drew reign.

Marceau nodded to one of the soldiers. The man stepped forward and took a deep breath. "People of Lorraine, your most Majestic King, Alexandre Fernand Grégoire Lorraine, whose sacred duty is to protect this city from enemies without, and within, is also a gracious and compassionate sovereign," the soldier announced in a loud voice. "He offers life and pardon to all who will place themselves on his mercy, and surrender. Either spies of Roucy, or those who harbor these foul enemies of our peace. For all who dare to trouble our city, if you refuse this offer, your blood will be on your own head."

The court was silent. No one moved. All these buildings were a mess of stairs and halls, leading to a thousand different rooms. Tess smiled. Prince Marceau would never find them, and he'd have to leave in shame.

But Prince Marceau laughed. "Last chance? No? Right." He turned to the older man. "An example it is. Dumont? Burn it down."

The words seemed to ripple through the suddenly still air, and Tess stared at the elegant figure who'd spoken so casually. Surely – surely – he didn't mean –

She glared at the other man – Dumont. He wouldn't – couldn't –

But Dumont slipped from his saddle and walked forward. He raised his hand, glowing yellow, and then struck a light. The flame exploded into something alive, wicked, and bright.

Both horses shied, and soldiers stepped forward to help the prince, but Marceau waved them away.

Tess gasped. This was magic. She watched, frozen with horror, as the flame seemed to rise into the air, swirling into a flickering vortex that shot tongues of fire around the massive, rotting building with Clara and her family.

She screamed, then, and like an echo, terrified shouts and screams began from every building around the courtyard.

A roaring, crackling heat filled the air as people fought to get out by the door. They climbed out of windows, and hung by their hands, wanting to jump, but afraid of the fall.

Then, Tess was running, down the alley, away from the horror. She just wanted to get home, to hide her face forever in pa's shoulder.

"Tess!" She skidded to a halt, at her name, and looked around. Renn was hurrying up a side street, covered in coal dust. "What's going on?"

Why wasn't he at work? She dashed to him, barreling into his chest.

"I heard about the spies at Tatter's," he whispered frantically. "What's going on?" He squinted up at the sky. Smoke was boiling up, catching in the wind, and flowing off over the city through the forest of chimneys.

Tess, suddenly sobbing and shaking, managed to just mumble the words “magic” and “fire” before he’d slipped from her grasp and taken off again at a sprint. Refusing to follow, she sank, shaking, onto the front step of a building, pulled her knees up to her chest, and hid her face.

Crowds of people began to fill the street, talking in soft, bitter tones, or just, staring blankly.

Eventually, Renn returned, more black than ever. He sat heavily on the step beside her, his hands clenched into fists. Finally, he spoke in a rasping voice. “I couldn’t find any of ‘em, Tess.”

He dropped his head to rest in soot-covered hands. “That Gale-blasted *butcher*.”

One of the men nearby, heard his remark, glanced down, then joined them. Sitting on Renn’s other side, he added his own thoughts. “If I ever find who sold ‘em out t’Lorraine, I’ll see ‘em roasted – slow an’ alive.”

A second man spat, and chuckled. “Yeah’d be strung up fer that.”

“It’d be worth it, though,” Renn muttered darkly.

“That’s the Gale-blasted truth,” the first man replied.

The second man shook his head. “Nah. The ones yeah want are the bloody fools eatin’ Roucy’s lies. The ones that brought ‘em here – blasted bloody idiots.”

Renn pushed to his feet, his face twisted with rage. “At least they aren’t burning women and children in their home, like our own *sovereign majesty*.”

• • •

• Chapter 3 •

Tess had just slipped into bed beside an already sleeping Jacqui when she heard the soft knock.

She groaned and sat up, grabbing her shawl. She glanced at her son. He was still asleep, his eyes safely closed.

Who could possibly – ?

A small, desperate face peered up at her as she cracked the door. Two big eyes set in a face with too many bones for a child.

He sucked in a breath that was nearly a sob. “I don’t know what to do,” the boy lisped, the words tumbling out of his mouth nearly on top of each other. “Neighbor said I should come to you. My sister Baby Essie – sumthin’s wrong with her – an’ ma – she ain’t back. I don’t know what to do. An’ I’m scared.”

“Where is your sister?” she asked, softly.

“In th’ room,” he said, pointing down the dark hall.

Tess nodded, pulled her shawl tight, and glanced over her shoulder one more time at Jacqui. Still asleep. “Will you lead me to your sister?”

The boy led her through several halls, down several flights of stairs, and to a narrow little room. A lone mattress lay on the floor, covered with a single blanket. A baby was there, fighting to breathe, her cries coming out in gurgling, desperate gasps.

“She’s sick,” the boy explained, helplessly, as Tess scooped her up, moving almost without thinking. She held the baby against her shoulder, gently slapping her tiny back, trying to dislodge the phlegm filling her airway. Steam – a kettle? One sat on the unlit stove, but there was no coal.

Tess glanced down at the boy’s wide, terrified eyes. Watching her. She couldn’t tell him to stay here, alone, and take his sister away.

But – Jacqui. In the dark.

What if he woke up?

The baby struggled, moving feebly in her arms.

Feed your own.

Just because these little ones weren't *hers*, did that mean their lives should be worth less?

That was exactly how you built a world where a baby could die in the dark while her brother watched – too young to do anything, but old enough to believe it was his fault.

She took a deep breath, and told the boy to follow her back up to her room.

Jacqui was awake when they arrived, his eyes greeting them as two little glowing points in the darkness as she opened the door.

She hurried to the stove and relit the fire. The fire diminished their glow, but she could still see his rings. She ordered him back to bed. Jacqui obeyed, but sat with the quilts draped over his head like a tent, and asked the other boy what his name was.

"Teddy," he said. "An' that's Baby Essie. She's sick."

Jacqui nodded solemnly. "Mine's Jacqui. Do you wanna see my tin soldiers?"

Tess shook her head firmly. "Not now. Time for sleep. Teddy – why don't you climb in with Jacqui. Essie will be okay – I'll make sure. You go to sleep."

Teddy rubbed his eyes, yawning. "I can't – ma said to stay up and watch Baby Essie."

Tess winced. "And you did. You did exactly right. Now you can sleep."

He yawned again, and Jacqui called to him. Teddy wavered, then grinned and nodded. Tess chose to ignore their excited whispers, knowing they'd tire themselves out and drop off soon.

This baby was her concern now.

She alternated between holding her little face over steaming water to open her nose and throat, and pacing back and forth, the baby held to her shoulder. Her knees were tired and sore. Her shoulders and back ached. Her eyes were heavy.

The hour dripped away. Beyond the window shutters, Foncé slipped away from the sun on its course through the sky, and light poured in through the cracks. The whole building was silent. Both boys slept, as Tess fought to keep one little baby breathing for another hour.

For another day.

This was her own personal revolution.

She couldn't protect Jacqui forever, but she could show him a war was worth fighting, no matter how many battles she lost along the way.

She did it for Jacques. She did it for the daughter she had yet to save. She did it for Clara and Maria and Renn. She did it for her own heart.

Because if she ever gave up fighting – if she sat down, and let the darkness claim her, that meant surrendering to Edouard Lafarge, Alexandre, and Marceau. And the princess – Claudette. And hundreds of faceless wealthy lords and the Noblemen they supported, who used and disposed of lives like so much rubbish.

• • •

Twenty years ago

Talli Prison loomed over the square like an ancient stone monster. The kind that ate anything it could reach, and gave nothing back.

Tess shivered in the warm wind and clutched her basket tighter. She took a deep breath, and glanced down at her light shawl. It was properly pinned to cover her shoulders and bodice. A pretty young woman shouldn't offer anything for free around soldiers and prison guards, ma had solemnly warned her. Her stomach twisted at the thought, and she shuddered, adjusting the shawl again.

She didn't have time to hesitate. She'd been up since the fifth hour to deliver clean laundry for ma on her way to wash morning dishes for the Crescent Sun. She was due back at noon for more dishes. On her way home that evening for supper, she'd pick up dirty laundry, and then help ma iron until dark. Finally, she'd drop exhausted onto her bed and sleep for a few hours before the day would start over.

She glared up at the narrow windows that looked like so many tiny black eyes. With Renn in there and pa – and pa unable to work, it fell to Tess and ma to carry them all.

She presented herself at the guardhouse, careful to keep her voice even and polite, but not too friendly. Don't look them in the eye. Don't be angry, but don't smile either. She was there to visit her brother and bring him food and blankets, she said.

"His name? Offense?"

She swallowed, fighting to keep her voice even. They called what he'd done an *offense*.

"His name is Renn Olivier, sir. He – he's a miner."

He laughed nastily. "Ah. One o'that rabble." He held out a grimy hand. "Alright. Lemme see the basket."

A raging temper was growing in her chest, but she handed it over without protest. He rifled through the carefully packed food and supplies. He pulled out a meat pie and took a giant bite, nodding appreciatively.

"See, now. I don't see what those Gale-blasted miners were rioting over," he said, taking another bite. "Yeh lot can't be sufferin' if yeh eat like this." He spat crumbs as he spoke.

Tess clenched her fists at her sides as her insides churned with rage. He dropped the half eaten pie into the basket and pulled out the clean

blanket. He shook it, eyeing it judiciously. “Now see here – prison ain’t a nursery now. We give those boys blankets.” He tossed it over his chair. “But thank yeh kindly, dear.”

This was too much. Tess’s voice wasn’t totally even, but it was the best she could do, as she quietly pointed out that it was perfectly legal to bring prisoners clothing and blankets. He laughed. “Well, now. Legal don’t mean nothin’ in here, sweetheart. I say what goes in and what doesn’t. And I say this stays here – nice and cozy with me.” He reached out and flicked a finger over her cheek. “If yeh like, you can use it here with me.”

She jerked away, her face burning where he’d touched her. “May I see my brother now, *sir*?” She choked the words out. ²

He laughed, but complied, calling for a second guard. That guard led her across the prison yard and into the noisome labyrinth of stone passageways and cells. Someone was shouting far away, and someone else was laughing down another way. A cold, humorless sound. She shivered.

They stopped in a small room where a pinched-faced woman searched her clothing with rough hands. That ordeal over, the guard led her through another endless series of steps and lines of cells, finally stopping at a door. He unlocked it. “Ten minutes,” he muttered, and then slammed the door shut behind her.

Renn sat on a folded filthy blanket, leaning against a wall, his legs stretched out before him, and staring into empty space.

A bucket in one corner contained water, and one in the far corner smelled strong enough she had a guess what that one was for.

Those were all the comforts this empty square room of stone and mortar provided. The only light and air came from a narrow slit in the top of the back wall. It wasn’t the sun – it was light from a gas lamp. This cell was deep in the center of the prison.

He looked up as soon as the door opened, and his face split into an attempt at a grin. “Tess!” His voice rasped, as if he hadn’t used it for several days.

² Dude. You’re getting close to stealing the Dirtbag No. 1 title from the prince.
:grimace: Yes, I do feel dirty writing him, thanks for asking.

She dropped onto the uneven stone floor beside him.

“Renn –” she started to say half a dozen things. But her face wasn’t working properly. The guard’s leering. The ruined food. The stolen blanket. This cell. The helpless rage boiling in her chest forced its way out in a sob. She was angry. And scared for Renn. And tired. And tired of being angry and scared.

He wrapped his arms around her, but she pushed him away, fighting for control of her face and voice. She didn’t have time to cry helplessly in his arms.

He dropped his chin. “Thanks for coming.”

She handed him the pie. “Best eat this first – the cheese and bread will keep better.”

“The guards?”

She nodded as he bit eagerly into the food. “How’s –” he swallowed a bite. “How’s pa?”

She bit her lip and studied her hands. They were dry and cracked from hours of scrubbing dishes. “He’s well.”

Renn frowned. “Really.”

“He’s fine, Renn.”

He glared at her, his eyes accusing her of lying. Finally, he grunted, leaning back against the wall. “He needs medicine.”

“We’re managing.” That *was* a lie – but really, the expensive medicine would only extend his life. There was no cure for miner’s cough.

He narrowed his eyes. “I gotta –” he muttered to himself, then broke off and leaned forward, his face lighting up. His voice dropped to a whisper. “There’s a way you can help pa *and* the cause.”

She frowned. “The – the *cause*?”

He leaned closer. "I've got a – a *friend* who'll pay a load of coin for some information."

"Wh—" she froze. In her mind, she heard the crackle of flames and those screams of terror. "You – you're talking about a Roucy *spy*?"

"*Gale*, Tess," he snapped. "Roucy's not the enemy. Our own bloody king is. Look – I'll tell you *exactly* how to find him. You can go sell him out – or you can make a Gale-blasted difference for this city."

She stared at him, her heart racing in her chest.

He grimaced. "What about justice for – for Clara? For Maria? For the miners? This could bring down one of the king's own blasted Magicians." He clenched his fists. "There's nothing I can do from here, and they won't let anyone but you or ma in to see me. They think you're harmless." He grinned, but she still didn't respond. Finally, he sighed. "Tess," he whispered. "You owe me one, remember? I'm calling in that favor from your first year at school – that time with the ink?"

"Saints – Renn, that's not fair." She stared at her hands, thinking. "What do you need me to do?"

He gave her two sets of instructions – how to find the Roucy spy, and what to tell him. The king would pay well for this information too, he said with a bitter note in his voice. It was up to her – betray a man – send him to his death – or change their world.

And then the cell door ground open on rusty hinges. Her time was up.

She followed the guard back outside in a daze. She barely noticed the prison yard, or the first guard grinning at her. She carried a man's life inside her head. But – she'd seen the consequences of dealing in any way with Roucy.

She walked down the street, blindly making her way back to the Crescent Sun.

These parts of the city felt normal enough. There weren't soldiers at every corner here, like in Taudis, where Lorraine obviously expected something to snap, soon.

Then, a headline on a broadsheet nailed to a notice board caught her eye. *"Our heroic prince stops a mob of violent miners from destroying the city."*

She stopped, anger surging back. Lies – vicious lies. The soldiers had started the fighting. The miners just decided they were done not fighting back. The city was never in danger. But their mere presence marching down Main Way, between fancy tea shops, expensive dressmakers, and exclusive gentlemen's clubs, had just been too much for the rich and powerful to endure. How dare they demand safer conditions and pensions for the widows left by the shaft collapse.

When Prince Marceau showed up with a Magician, it ceased be any kind of fight. They said about twelve of the marchers were dead, and another thirty were injured. Many would never walk or work again. Another twenty or so had been rounded up, both abled-bodied and injured, and tossed in prison. Now, the mine was operating with a skeleton crew, and they were hiring new bodies from all around Lorraine – she'd heard they'd even sent notices to the outlying towns and villages.

Naturally, the broadsheet downplayed the numbers dead, proclaiming that the prince had stopped and rounded up more than one hundred bloodthirsty violent anarchists to await his justice for their crimes against the city.

The writer of the piece was so shameless as to even question whether the deadly shaft collapse had been intentional sabotage by the miners for an excuse to start trouble. She clenched her fists. Thirty-one men died in that collapse. Cal had been a sweet friend. Bryn left three babies at home without food. Linder was engaged to be married, and –

And nineteen had died years ago at Tatter's court. Family and friends sifted through the smoking ruins for days, looking for bodies to properly cremate and plant in the pauper's garden. Cal – Clara's brother – had made it out of that blaze with only his baby sister, just to die in the mine collapse.

They said Tatter's court was still haunted by the souls of those who were left behind – without family or friends to care. A vengeful daemon that prevented any landlord from rebuilding another rat-infested tenement house that would charge too much, and give too little. She wasn't sure if it was actually true, but there was something frightening about Tatter's court, even six years later.

This could bring down one of the king's Magicians, Renn said.

She glared at the broadsheet, and raised her chin, resolve replacing her fear.

This was justice for Tatter's court. For the shaft collapse. For the miner's march. For Clara. For the hundreds who were slowly starving to death, while their king lived on fat and sweets.

• • •

• Chapter 4 •

The soft knock on the door startled Tess awake. She'd been dozing.

She sat across the foot of her bed, propped upright by the wall. The baby was still on her shoulder. Asleep. Breathing softly.

Tess had won this battle.

She yawned, her face splitting in half as she fought to fully wake up. She shifted her hold on the baby and slipped off the bed.

So opened the door to reveal a young woman. Cheap makeup was smudged across her face. The dress hanging from her bony shoulders might have been fine once, but now it was ragged and soiled. Her cheekbones stood out from sunken cheeks, beneath eyes with that hollow, dull look of hunger and deprivation. The effect made the woman look old, but Tess was pretty sure she was barely more than a girl – possibly half Tess's age.

She glanced at the baby in Tess's arms, then up at her face, then back to the baby. "That's – that's mine, I think," she stammered.

Tess smiled as warmly as she could manage after so little sleep, and stepped back, gesturing with her head inward. "Come in for a cup of tea first."

"I – I should take my children and go – she's sleeping." She wouldn't meet Tess's eyes. "The – the neighbor – she said she sent Teddy your way last dark."

"No," Tess replied, her voice quiet but firm. "You need to sit down, take a cup of tea, and then join us for breakfast."

Teddy sat up, rubbing a fist in his eye. Jacqui rolled over, blinking. He grinned, then sat up as well.

Tess nodded toward the boys. "My name is Tess. Teddy's a smart boy – he knew he needed help with Essie and found me."

As if on cue, the baby released an ear splitting wail. Tess patted her. "I imagine she's hungry. You sit down and feed her while I get some food together." She led the dazed girl to a stool, sat her down, and placed the baby in her arms. Moving mechanically, the girl presented her baby with a swollen breast and Essie latched on. Silence filled the room, broken only by the baby's contented sucking. The young woman sat there, rocking forward and back, her eyes on the floor.

"Just say it," she mumbled. "I'm a worthless mother – what decent woman leaves her sick baby all evenin' and dark." She drew in a quivering breath.

Tess pulled over another stool and sat, facing her. "Dear girl – you're simply a mother. You're doing whatever you can to keep your babies fed." She smiled. "Would you tell me your story?"

The girl shrugged, and then started talking. "I'm Alice. There's not much to tell. I – I was married to a ... a dock worker. Married – right and proper. He'd – he'd – they caught him smuggling. Put 'im in prison. 'E died in there a few months later." She shifted her hold on the baby. "A man who knew 'im – the one who'd give him work – he was all sweet, and, and I had nothing I could do with a babe. That would be Teddy there. So, I went with him. Then 'e moved us here. But –" she started to sob. "The 'e was up 'n gone, no'a word, an' me six months pregnant."

The baby pulled away to scream again. She fumbled, trying to get her to eat more, but Essie just screamed. Tess reached out, and the young mother handed over her baby. Tess stood up, baby pressed to shoulder, and started heating the kettle.

Alice watched her, a helpless look in her eyes. "I got no skills, an no one wants a pregnant girl all alone. So, w'Jamie gone, I took what work as'n I could find. An' it wasn't never enough. An', with little Essie sick now, an' the doctor said the medicine was – was so expensive, an' rent due." She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders, shuddering.

Tess nodded. "I'm so sorry Alice. That's," her own voice caught, remembering those first few cycles – pregnant and alone, in a foreign city. "I'm so sorry."

"I was a 'spectable woman once," Alice whispered. "Ah swear I was. Married right an' proper –" she wrapped her arms around herself, shuddering again. "I didn't never mean fer –"

Tess took the stool beside her again, placing her free hand on her shoulder. The girl flinched, and Tess pulled back.

“Alice,” she hesitated. “I see you – I see your children, and I see a mother who loves her children more than anything. I see you fighting to keep them alive, and whole, even if it costs you everything.”

Alice’s eyes swam with tears, and she hunched over, hiding. Tess reached out again, and Alice didn’t pull away.

Behind her, both boys whispered in the bed. She glanced over her shoulder. Wrapped in blankets, and framed with tousled hair, they watched their mothers with big, uncertain eyes.

Tess grinned at them. “Jacqui, would you show Teddy where to find biscuits? And we’ll use the watberry preserve this morning.”

Her son’s face lit with joy at the mention of the sweet jam, and he jumped out of bed, with Teddy following. Teddy still cast concerned glances at his crying mother, but Jacqui’s enthusiasm was contagious.

The baby at Tess’s shoulder quieted. After a whole evening without eating, Essie would be making up for it this morning, demanding another meal soon. Finally, Alice’s sobs quieted as well.

The kettle began to whistle as her son set dishes and food on the table. Tess pushed to her feet, and, one-handed, placed a skillet on the stove. She tossed in one narrow strip of fatty bacon to snap and sizzle in the center. As it browned, she added four eggs. The room filled with the smell of bacon.

She filled a chipped teapot with tea leaves and boiling water, then set it on the table beside the biscuits and watberry preserve.

Alice sat up, wiping her eyes, as Tess brought over the steaming skillet. The boys clambered onto the last two stools.

“Alice, This is my son, Jacques.”

Her son grinned. “How do you do,” he said with practiced politeness, then added in an eager tone, “I’m five. Teddy’s my friend now.”

The other little boy nodded. “Jacqui sa’e’s got toy sol’jers we’ll play wit.”

Tess smiled. “After breakfast.”

Alice’s eyes widened at the food, as Tess went to serve up the eggs. Her stomach growled, but she ignored it, shifting to divide the eggs three ways. More for a rapidly growing Jacqui, more for a ravenous Teddy, and Alice looked like she hadn’t eaten in the last day or so – she’d never be able to keep feeding Essie if she didn’t eat.

Alice opened her mouth to protest, but snapped it shut again. The poor girl was starving. She wasn’t going to protest any extra food.

Tess would eat biscuits. She’d be fine.

Alice hesitated for a moment, then, shoveled the food into her mouth, mirroring her son. Tess smiled. Some things were nourishing to your soul, rather than your body.

• • •

Twenty years ago

The Magician stalked beside her as Tess led him through the twisting mess of tenement buildings and dark alleys. He’d insisted they avoid the king’s soldiers, just as Renn had said. This Magician was trying to hide his actions from Lorraine.

He’d dressed in subdued colors, but any pickpocket would recognize the impossibly expensive make and cut of his suit and cravat. The coin it cost would feed a whole family for a cycle.

He recoiled from the piles of refuse in the street, and carefully skirted the drunks passed out anywhere with half a shelter. He stepped carefully but even so, his shiny boots were rapidly splashed with thick mud. Of course he’d be discomforted by the world his kind had forced her family and friends to live in.

She must not think about the terrifying power lurking behind those eyes. Whole families burned to ash at Tatter’s court just for the crime of living there. This Magician even shared a name with that monster.

Her palms were damp, and her heart raced as memories of that day – and then miner's march – hung at the edges of her thoughts.

Percy said it would be good if she looked timid and afraid. "He'll see you as nothing," he'd said. "A scared rabbit who'd never be able to harm him. He'll never suspect a thing."

That was fine for Percy. He wasn't the one who'd spend all of tomorrow tethered to this terror.

Percy – the only name the Roucy spy had given when she'd met him – was tall and handsome, with a narrow pointed black beard and dark skin. He was everything she'd expected from a spy. True to Renn's word, he'd paid handsomely for the news she'd brought.

Then, Percy made her a second offer – twice the coin, for a day of her service. He had a plan to capture a Magician and rescue the imprisoned miners.

She'd agreed immediately. Whatever it was, if it meant Renn's freedom, she'd do it for free. *Saints* – she'd *pay* every coin she'd earned for the chance. Hot with fresh rage over that broadside, the idea had been exciting.

Now, five days later, in the growing darkness as the sun disappeared behind Foncé, all she felt was cold dread at being alone with a Magician.

Beside her, the Magician suddenly hopped awkwardly, just avoiding something particularly foul that had appeared out of the growing gloom. He covered his nose, then, flashing her an uncomfortable grin, he made a joke about being overdressed. She refused to reward him with a smile – whatever he had planned for Percy, it certainly wasn't sitting heavily on his conscience.

If Percy's plan failed – how many people would be dead before the sun returned? Herself, certainly. Percy. And how many of the innocent people asleep all around them?

She took deep breath. Focus.

Percy should be here. Somewhere. The tension surging through her body was almost more than she could stand.

"How much farther," he asked quietly, his voice coming from the almost complete darkness nearby.

She jumped, then, answered in a quivering voice. "Down the next alley."

"Could we see it from here?"

"No, not yet."

"Good," he muttered, and raised a hand that was suddenly glowing with green light.

She sucked in a startled breath, freezing.

She *knew* he was a Magician, but, to *see* it – that light was so strange. Eerie. It was *wrong*.

She shivered, pulling her shawl close, and moved to the far reach of the low light.

They were a stride past a dark doorway, when a low, commanding voice spoke from the darkness. "Stop walking. For the next hour, starting immediately, do not attempt to capture or kill the Roucy spy, myself, or Tess – the woman who guided you here."

The light from the Magician's hand disappeared as he sucked in a sharp breath, the air whistling between his teeth.

Tess cringed, and her heart leapt into her throat. This all was going to go wrong. Percy would fail, and this alley would explode with deadly magic.

A tinder sparked, and a candle flared to life in the doorway. Percy's face appeared, lit from below. "Follow me inside."

Illumined by the candle's flickering light, she could see the Magician comply with the commands, his motions wooden.

Tess gaped, scarcely able to believe her eyes. Was this actually going to work?

Percy had told her about his unique magical ability. It gave him the power to control a person for short periods of time – long enough to make a

Magician fight for them. After they'd freed the prisoners and seized the palace, the Magician would be given the choice between renouncing his allegiance to King Lorraine and using his powers to serve a liberated city, or hang for his crimes against the people.

Considering what Magicians had done to her city, the choice was more than merciful.

Inside the tiny room, several sheets of paper with pen and ink filled a small table in the center. Percy pointed. "Sit. Write out every Obligation you currently have – be completely honest."

Incredibly, the Magician sat, picked up the pen, and began to write.

Tess hung back – Percy hadn't told her much of how his magic worked, or what his role would be. But now she had to believe him. Percy – a Magician who was using his powers to help and serve people in need, rather than growing fat supporting bloody tyrants. He stood there, behind the Magician – in control, unafraid. Her heart gave a little lurch, and she turned away, trying to hide the sudden flush she felt on her cheeks.

The Magician set down the pen. "Finished."

Percy leaned over his shoulder, reading. "Your liege oath is to Claudette only? Not to the king?"

"Yes," he said. His voice was low and tense. "I'm only forbidden from inflicting bodily harm on King Lorraine and his other children."

"What of your brother? – Is his liege oath –?"

"The same, but to Prince Marceau."

Percy laughed. "Wonderful. That spiteful old fox outfoxed himself." He slid another sheet of paper from the table, already covered with writing, wrote a few additional notes as he spoke. "Starting *now* until the *end* of the *next* dark hour – for a *full* day – you will stay within ten meters of this woman – Tess. During that time, you must do Tess no harm, and you must protect her from any and all harm. You must do nothing that will attract the attention of any other person, and you will do *exactly* as she commands you, just as if it were I speaking. When, and only when, she speaks the name 'Saint Martyn,' you will destroy the wall around Talli Prison. You will do so in a way that renders it easily crossed by humans on foot. When

she speaks the name 'Vespas,' and indicates a specific wall, you will create an opening in that wall large enough for two people to easily walk through. Do you understand?"

The Magician flinched at the mention of Talli Prison, but he nodded.³

Percy smiled at Tess, and held out the paper he'd been writing. The instructions he'd promised. The code names – those were important to get right, he'd said. She'd have to say them exactly correct, or he might find a way around them. And the list of things she *must not* tell the Magician to do. Some made sense, but the one about hearing was odd.

"Do not give him any orders to attack. (Other than the failsafe – see note at end.) If you are in danger, he will protect you. At the prison, use the code words. I will try to meet you there as soon as possible."

"Do not tell him to do or to not do anything that relates to myself or Roucy."

"Do not tell him to do anything that relates to his ears, hearing, or not hearing. Do not tell him to touch or cover his ears in any way."

Finally, at the bottom, he'd added one final direction.

"If it becomes obvious that the Magician will be rescued by Lorraine forces, or has found a way to free himself from my spell, if, in that moment you are able, give him one final command: to kill King Lorraine. I'm not sure how the magic will work, exactly, coming from you, but, think of this as a last failsafe. DO NOT use this unless you are sure our plan is failing."

And then, he'd written a reminder of his verbal warning:

"Remember: do not trust anything he tells you. He will try and trick you into releasing him, and he'll say whatever he thinks will help. My truth spell will not work without me present, I'm afraid."

He met her eyes and gave her a reassuring smile. The kind that made her heart skip and her head feel wooly. "Do you have any final questions for me?"

³ If you're wondering what's going on in his mind right now, it's all silent screaming at himself for screwing up *BIG TIME*. But, he's really young. T_T

Tess pressed her lips together, and shot the Magician – still seated at the table – a dubious glance. Now that it came to it, she was reluctant to see Percy go.

Percy reached out, gripping her shoulder, and flashed her with his smile. “Trust me, Tess. I know what I’m doing. You’ll be safe. Just follow my instructions, stay hidden, and your brother – Renn – he’ll be a free man by this time tomorrow.”

She nodded, and her face flushed with warmth again as he touched her. She ducked her head, trying to hide the blush that must be there. He squeezed her shoulder, and then was gone.

Leaving her alone. With the Magician.

• • •

• Chapter 5 •

After bundling Alice, Essie, and Teddy back to their room for some needed sleep, Tess returned to find Jacqui still seated on the floor, surrounded by his army of tin soldiers. They were painted in Ninove royal green.⁴ Frozen at parade attention, they wore tiny white sashes and held pikes against stiff shoulders.

She settled down on one of the stools, fighting a wave of exhaustion after a nearly sleepless evening.

This would be a long day at the laundry.

Her mind was wooly and her eyes itched. She let them close, and leaned back against a wall.

Jacqui was humming the Ninove marching song.

As often as she dared, she'd let him watch their military parades through the city. She'd fill his ears with plugs of soft wax, lest random words or commands spoken by any Noblemen reached him. He'd stand perfectly straight, with sheer delight on his face as they marched past, rank upon rank. But wax was only a temporary prevention. He hated it, and – in her experience, voices, like water, always had a way of getting through. Even with the wax, when she spoke directly to him, he'd hear and respond.

A dark corner of her mind was always searching for a way – one, blessed, horrible way – to deafen him. Without pain, or any other damage. Permanently.⁵

She opened her eyes and leaned forward, fighting to wake up. To get moving.

⁴ I know, I know, green pigments were all totally toxic. I'm just pretending they invented a non-toxic one. Okay?!?

⁵ I swear I wrote this long before Res commented in the closed channel: *"It's a scary thought, but given the opportunity and a way to do it safely, I kinda figure a lot of Magicians would opt for deafness.....and Din, of all people, would probably have a good idea of how to do it "safely" with his medical background"* And I just about dropped a massive Jacqui spoiler right there. xD

Below her, the tin soldiers were marching toward the table in two neat rows.

“Where are they going?” she asked.

His head spun around, curls bouncing. “They’re flyin’ on the wind daemon to attack the dark on Foncé.”

She smiled, hiding the twinge in her heart – he’d absorbed the idea that darkness was a danger to him, so naturally, “the dark” was an enemy to be attacked and vanquished. “Foncé – the planet?”

He nodded. “Yep. There’s a whole city of abercorns there.”

“What are –?” She tried to ask, but he wasn’t finished.

“They climbed up Mount Teirlinck and that daemon gave them a boost to ride on the wind.”

“Does – does Mount Teirlinck *have* its own daemon?” She honestly wasn’t sure how that worked.

He smiled slyly. “Yep. Knotweed told me. All the plants talk to Mount Teirlinck and they say Mount Teirlinck is boring. But I don’t believe them. A mountain’s gotta see everything. So Teirlinck’s jus’ tryin’ to ‘member everything.”

Tess studied her son, trying to sort out truth from fantasy. *Did* he know things from the daemons around them? Had – had he been talking to the knotweed vine clinging to the back corner of the tenement building? She smiled at the image of her child engaged in a serious conversation with a weed, but, she also cringed. What if someone saw him? What would they think?

“Okay,” she said. “So then they fly on the Gale –”

He shook his head vigorously. “Nope. Not the Gale. It’s *another* wind daemon. It’s named the – the Nale.” He broke into a laugh, and Tess had to join, even as her brain searched fruitlessly for the joke he saw there.

Oh dear sweet child of mine, she thought.

If only the Gale *was* a joke.

She noticed one soldier sitting alone, away from the rest. “What about him?”

He scooted over to the solitary toy. “He needs a friend, but he’s scared. Like Gram Faw.”

“What’s he scared of?”

Jacqui shrugged and picked up the soldier, his small face pinched in thought. Then he looked up. “Teddy’s mama was cryin’ – does she need a friend?”

Tess slid from her stool to sit beside him on the floor. “Yes, she does. Her heart hurts, and she needs a friend.”

He thought for a moment, then dropped the toy and tackled her – wrapping his arms around her neck. “An’ you’re her friend now.”

She grunted, falling backwards. Then, recovering her balance, she squeezed him back, burying her face in his fluffy curls. She planted a kiss on the top of his head.

“I hope so,” she whispered, to herself as much as to her son. Teddy wouldn’t have missed those eye rings in the dark. Would he tell his mother? Could Alice possibly know what they meant? Or would she take it as a child’s fanciful story?

Take care of your own – that was Hellen’s mantra. But what kind of a world did that build? What kind of a man would Jacqui grow into, if she guarded and protected him, ignoring the lives around her?

He’s my brother – I’ve got to think of him first, she’d once said. How might things have ended if she’d taken another way?

• • •

Twenty years ago

This was *not* the time to look worried.

Even so – Tess felt like she was leading a lion on a string. Like the one she'd seen once at a traveling circus. Coiled and deadly, looking for a way out of its cage. Despite the warm wind, she shivered, pulling her shawl closer.

They had all day to make their way to the inn Percy had told her about. *Take your time*, Percy had said. *Go slow, stay away from soldiers. Don't attract attention, and forbid the Magician from using magic, and from speaking with anyone, when you're out on the street.*

That morning, after Tess made tea and they ate the small amount of food Percy had left for them in icy silence, Tess had given the Magician those orders in a stumbling voice, feeling strange for it. Then she'd ordered him to go change into the normal clothes that Percy had left for him.

So far, as they wound their way through the morning market, he seemed to be doing exactly as she'd said. There'd been no hints of magic, and he'd kept his mouth shut. The Magician glanced her way, and she turned back to looking along the stalls for some decent food.

As she watched the faces around her, she realized they all looked worried and frightened. Everyone in Taudis seemed to know something was about to give. People made their way along the stalls with their heads down, making their purchases, and moving on without the normal chatter that usually filled the square.

But even so the market was still filled with the sharp tones of savvy haggling, arguing over the price of melons, crates of chickens, and skeins of wool. Children ignored their parents tense commands to be still, and chased each other between carts and stands, screeching just as loudly as ever. The wind carried the smells of manure and damp straw, mixed with garlic and ginger.

Her inner skirt pocket bounced against her leg, heavy and bulging with coins that Percy had said to demand from him. Another order that had felt so strange to give, but then he'd promptly pulled a handful of coins from empty air. He could create *money*.

The Magician's arms hung limply at his sides, but his hands were clenched in fists, and his eyes constantly moved through the crowd.

She snapped her gaze forward again, and pushed her way through to a vendor selling meat pies. The savory smell made her stomach growl.

“Miss Olivier – ”

She stiffened at the Magician's voice, suddenly right behind her, his hand on her shoulder. She pulled away. “What?” she hissed.

He nodded his head in the direction of three children, mostly hidden behind a cart loaded with cabbages.⁶ Could he use magic to stop them, he asked.

She followed his gaze. Two children in rags were tossing something back and forth over the head of the third child. His eyes were covered by a narrow strip of filthy cloth, but it didn't hide the helpless rage on his face, as he attempted to catch the object, following it by sound. He was blind.

Tess spun around, glaring. How dare he use a blind child to manipulate her.

“You don't need magic for that,” she snapped.

He returned her angry glare, but then turned and stalked away from her, heading for the children anyway. The bullies saw him coming, and scampered away. He started after them, only to come to a stumbling halt. Percy's ten-meter tether.

Stepping back, he turned, and bent down by the blind child, who was sitting on his heels, sobbing. What was the bastard up to now?

She hurried over as the Magician reached out to touch the boy's filthy little head. He stopped, his hand hanging in the air, and muttered a sullen request to speak to the boy.

“Leave him alone,” she snapped, and he pulled back. The boy looked like he'd do anything for a coin. Like carry a message.

She crouched down by the child herself. “Hey there,” she said. She meant to sound reassuring, but when she touched him on the shoulder, he flinched and pulled away. “Are you hurt?” she asked. “Can you tell me why you're crying?”

The boy mumbled something she didn't catch.

⁶ MY CABBAGES!!

The Magician, standing behind her, said the boy had a flute, but the two larger boys took it. She didn't miss the reproachful edge in his voice. As if this child meant a wit to him.

Tess tried another question. "Where did you get the flute?"

"Made it," the boy finally answered.

The Magician tried wheedling this time. He might *just* be able to make a new flute, if she let him do some magic. *Just* enough to make a flute. She glared into his eyes, searching for a key to his plan. To break through that mask of studied innocence.

Finally, she huffed out a frustrated breath, and nodded. "Fine. You can do *just* that magic. Don't you dare pass any kind of message in or on or with the flute to the boy, or anyone else. Don't draw the attention of anyone – don't let anyone see *anything* suspicious."

The Magician hesitated.

"What?!"

She needed to *tell* him to make a flute, he said. What did he want – her permission engraved in gold and presented with trumpets?

Something felt wrong about this, and a thread of fear twisted in her stomach. There *was* a trick here, and she was missing it. "Why?"

The Magician opened his mouth, shut it, then finally spoke. He needed a direct command to do the magic, he said. Without it, Percy's magical binding would hold him back.⁷

The child had stopped crying, and sat there, listening. This wasn't good. She shouldn't have let the Magician talk at all. But, now that she'd agreed to the flute in the boy's hearing, disappointing him would be cruel.

So, glaring up at the Magician, she told him to make a flute. He gave her a thin, mocking smile, and stalked over to a sickly tree growing up near

⁷ If you're wondering, no, that's *not* what he said. That's what Tess heard.
:grimace:

one building where it had found a ray of sunlight. He reach up, and placed his hand on a branch.

She'd seen his green magic in the dark, and she saw the hints of it now, glowing just where his hand touched the branch. He shifted, and his back hid whatever he was doing. Then, he turned around, clutching a short length of the branch. It seemed to have shed its insect-infested bark and smoothed out.⁸

He stopped behind her, and held out a rough flute. It wasn't rough the way a carving knife would leave it. It was rough the way nature seemed to make things never quite straight. The outer edge rippled slightly, flowing along the grains of wood and knots.

He muttered that he could have done better without Percy's control. She moved to take the flute, then grimaced. She'd seen the binding magic work – he couldn't do anything she didn't allow him to. Maybe talking to a suffering child might actually be good for him.

"You may speak *quietly* to the boy – only the boy. Don't tell him anything about who you are or where you got the flute, or give him any messages for anyone."

He gave her a little nod, and knelt down by the boy, placing the flute in his hands. He shifted the boy's fingers to the holes, and lifted the end to his mouth. Hesitantly, the boy placed it between his lips, and blew. The sound was – it wasn't good, but, as the child moved his fingers up and down, there were definitely variations of tone there.

His little face split into a grin.

He held the flute out, to the Magician. The man shifted to sit cross legged on the muddy ground, and placed the flute to his own lips. It warbled out a short, jaunty tune.

The boy laughed and clapped his hands.

The Magician handed back the flute, and, placing the boy's grubby fingers back on the holes, began to teach him the series of notes, whistling each one, and manually shifting the boy's hands.

⁸ I'm not sure *how* much magic he can actually do in this situation, but, eh. I figured with this being something he really wants, this isn't *impossible*.

Finally, he asked the boy's name, and started to offer his in return. Tess, mesmerized, had missed the danger, but Percy's magic stopped him anyway, and the Magician cut off abruptly.

The boy didn't seem to notice, fortunately, and informed the Magician that he was San, and that he was seven. Then, he smiled slyly, and lowered his voice to whisper. "How come you're not suppose'ta tell me your name an' how you made'a flute? Are you the Raven Piper?"

The Raven Piper – a popular figure in stories Tess had been raised with – he had a magic flute, and when he'd play it, cruel people and misbehaved children would turn into ravens, who were then forever trapped to obey the song of his flute.

It sounded an awful lot like Percy.

She suppressed a grin. Maybe there *was* some truth to the story after all – a man who could control and command an enemy of the people. Had Percy's sort of magic been the inspiration long ago for the Raven Piper?

But the boy's guess was also frighteningly near the truth. She shot the Magician a warning glare, but he wasn't looking at her. No – he wasn't he, he said.

"Oh." The little mouth twisted into a disappointed frown.

Tess opened her mouth to say it was time for them to leave, but the boy spoke again, smiling brightly. "Can you teach me that song again?"

Tess stepped back, frowning. How *did* she reconcile the powerful monsters she'd seen Magicians to be, with this man, who was patiently walking a filthy child through a simple tune, over and over. His face reflected the child's innocent – exuberant – delight.

He looked so – *young*. Was he much older than Renn? Or –

The sparse, uneven stubble growing on his smooth chin caught her eye. Could he *younger* than Renn?

A distant clocktower began to ring. Noon. Tess jumped. They'd been out here where anyone might recognize the Magician for nearly two hours.

Was that his game? To delay her, or increase his chances of being seen and recognized by a soldier?

It was time to go, and she said so.

The Magician pushed heavily to his feet, all while San begged him to stay. "I do'n' know the song yet."

The Magician ruffled his hair, reassuring the boy that he knew it better than he did, now. San grinned, but it slipped into a frown as they left him.

Crossing Lorraine on foot, while moving with the crowds and blending in took hours. Last evening, the Magician had met her just outside Taudis district, traveling there in a coach. He'd probably never even seen some of these parts of the city before.

Taudis – once a mining town separate from Lorraine, had been swallowed by the growing population of the city, and had finally been encircled by the newest city wall about seventy years ago. The concentric city walls and gates precluded any direct route from Taudis to the prison. The walk was double that to avoid any areas where the wealthy frequented – anywhere the Magician might be noticed and recognized.

They only had a few hours left before dark when Tess reached the inn where Percy said she'd meet the freedom fighters.

The main room was occupied by just a few old men muttering to each other over watery ale when she entered. The woman behind the counter glanced up when they entered. Tess gave her the short passphrase, and the woman directed her to a door in the back.

Stuffed into the room were possibly twenty men. They grinned as she entered, their eyes locked on the Magician.

"He did it – that blasted Percy actually did it," one muttered.

"Is it – he – safe?" asked another voice.

Tess nodded, smiling. It was time to test Percy's next step. She called the Magician to the center of the room, and read from the instructions paper. "Give these men as many weapons as you can right here and now. You may not harm any of them in any way."

He shot her an angry glance, and she could see his jaw clench, but, he held out his hand, glowing green, and a dagger appeared there. Followed by another, and another. After he'd made a large pile of those on the table, other weapons followed: disassembled parts of crossbows and their bolts. Heads of polearms.

Tess watched him, frowning. The Magician could create money and weapons – some with wooden parts, but he needed a tree to make a flute?

Finally, he flexed his hands, shot her another resentful glance, and announced that there were no more he could summon. She gave him a nod, and he found a chair set against the wall at the back of the room, as the men divided up the weapons, hiding as many as they could under clothes and in bags to distribute to the rest of the freedom fighters. Eventually, they slipped, one by one, from the room. She'd see them again at full dark. They'd be waiting, lurking in every alley and dark corner, ready for the moment the prison wall came down.

For a few minutes, Tess sat in the room, alone with the Magician again. Then the woman who'd been working at the bar brought in a platter of food. "Percy wanted to make sure you had a good meal," she said, smiling. "This is on us. We're all with you."

Tess met her eyes. They were glowing with a fierce pride, and took the tray from her. "Everything's going to change after today."

Tess placed the food on the table, and selected a crusty bun baked with sausage and greens inside. She told the Magician to help himself. He took just an apple, then stalked back to his chair in the far corner, refusing to look her way.⁹

She settled into her own chair, watching him as she ate the savory treat.

She'd almost forgotten her fear while he'd played with San, and then in the excitement of the freedom fighters, but alone with him again, she felt the tension return. His free hand drummed nervously on the edge of his chair.

⁹ CinamaSins: "Give him an apple," the director said. "It will make him look like more of an asshole to Tess." [DING!] xD T_T

Don't trust him, Percy had written. *My truth spell won't work without me.*

"What do you mean – you had no more to summon?" She'd asked the question almost before she'd thought it. "And why didn't you make the flute from nothing – like the money and weapons?"

He swallowed a bite. "I didn't make anything. I just summoned things. From the castle armory." His tone was surly – belligerent. But then, he stopped, the apple halfway to his mouth, and just stared at the far wall for a few seconds. "You don't know." He said it quietly, a statement, not a question. "The spy didn't tell you."

Tess flushed. Sure, she didn't understand how magic worked, but she didn't need to, did she?

The Magician turned to face her, a crease between his eyebrows. "That Roucy spy – he's just using you. Whatever he's told you about magic – whatever promises he's made – he's lying. Those men? They're going to die."

"Our *own* king is murdering us – so it's a reasonable risk, I think."

He snorted. "That's ridiculous."

Don't talk to him, Percy had said. But she couldn't help it – all these words she'd choked back for so long surged into her mind. It wasn't like she had anything to lose now. And the Magician was doing a horrible job of it if he thought *this* would convince her. She pushed to her feet, glaring.

"The miner's march? Prince Marceau killed twelve and injured – permanently – plenty others."

"They were a dangerous mob." ¹⁰

"That's a Gale-blasted lie!" she shouted, not caring about who heard her. "They were *defending* themselves – there were women and children there!"

The Magician looked away, into the far corner, refusing to answer – to even try and justify the act. He took another loud bite from the apple.

¹⁰ Does he *really* believe that? Eh, not really. But it feels better to hide in the lie. It's not like he's got a choice. :sob:

Now that she'd started, she couldn't stop. "I knew most of them – the ones who died. They were fathers – husbands. Brothers. Others were so injured they'll never be able to find work again. Their families are going to starve. Babies – they'll be on the street. You new friend San? Chances are *he* lost someone, between the cave in and the march. Because his king doesn't give a fig for his little life."

She had to pause, taking a breath.

"Those miners didn't have to do the work," he muttered. "*Gale* – they could *leave* if they hate this city so much."

"Oh, and how do you suggest we do *that*? That takes money – or do you expect these families – they've got children and babies – to cross hundreds of miles walking. Without a coin for food. And what do they do when they get wherever they're going? Beg? Take work from the citizens? I'm sure that will go well." She laughed, humorlessly. "We'll die if we stay. And die if we go. And you ask why we're risking our bet on Roucy."

He didn't respond.

"Look me in the eye and tell me to my face that you support those deaths. That you really don't regret selling yourself – your magic – to that *tyrant*," she demanded. "Tell me you're content slavishly supporting his every whim."

He spun around, his motions wooden. Stiff.

His eyes met hers. "I support those deaths," he whispered. "I don't regret selling myself – I'm content." ¹¹

Saints – Percy's magic. She'd forgotten. But, she hadn't expected the haunting look in his eyes. He – he looked like he was in pain.

She stumbled over her words. "I meant – I mean *if* you do."

He dropped his eyes to the apple in his hand. "It doesn't matter – I don't have a choice."

¹¹ If this made you scream, you're not alone. This makes my heart hurt every time I reread it. :sob: *Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.*

“You’ve always got a choice between right and wrong. You *could* help people instead of yourself. *Saints* – you just helped San – why don’t you use your magic for that? You made one child happy – think what you could do – ! Tell me this – why ever do you have no choice?”

He let out a long breath, hunching forward, his arms resting on his knees, and began to talk. He described a complex system of control and the Gale’s power. Of daemons, Noblemen, and Magicians. He spoke in a soft, halting voice. His fingers, moving with nervous energy, played with the half-eaten apple, twisting the stem around and around, until it broke off.

She frowned. This – this was nothing like what Percy had said.

He’ll lie – try to trick you into releasing him. Saints – if the Magician was actually telling the truth – she couldn’t release him if she *wanted* to.

A horrible thought made her stomach lurch. That couldn’t be right.

Could it?

She chewed on her lip as a heavy silence filled the room. “But that’s –” she cleared her throat. “Are you saying –? If that’s how an Obligation works, you – that’d make you King Lorraine’s – slave.”

He winced, then nodded. “Yeah. Something like that. But – a slave could chose to disobey. Escape. Defy an order. Saints – I *wish* I had that kind of freedom.”

This had to be an elaborate lie – didn’t it? Was this what Percy had warned her against? Or – or was Percy hoping she wouldn’t learn the truth?

She pulled out the folded sheet of instructions. That strange one about hearing. She’d never mentioned it to the Magician, but, he’d all but answered that very question. “What if two of – of them tell you to do things that are opposite?”

“What?”

Her instincts screaming to not trust him, she pushed to her feet, and, crossing the room, held out the paper.

He took it in his free hand. He glanced over the instructions, then, he sucked in a sharp breath. “That – his failsafe – it’s not to kill the king. It’s to kill me. Two mutually exclusive Obligations’Il – that will –” he shuddered.

She blanched. “*Why?*” Percy didn’t say anything about killing him. “Why would he want – ?”

The Magician shrugged. “Strip Lorraine of a weapon in this game with Roucy?”

Tess tried to take a breath, tried to calm the horror tightening around her chest. This all fit with a horrifying perfection. If this were true – could she *use* a person like that? Wouldn’t that place her on level with the king?

“If – if I asked you – if you had the choice – would you help us? Rescue Renn – my brother – and the others?”

He lifted the half eaten apple, still in his other hand, studying it. “No.”

“No?”

“It’s hopeless. People – *your* people – will die. I *can’t* help you against the prince. Or Lorraine. And if – if I *could*, I’d have to fight my own brother. Or my father.”

Renn’s face – alive with hope and eagerness – hung in her mind. He was depending on her – he trusted her. She wanted to scream. Or cry. Or – or something. They were so close – but –

But, *Renn*. She’d never save Renn without the Magician. She bit her lip, her insides twisting into knots.

“Miss Olivier –” he said softly. “Please – *don’t* trust the spy. He won’t use me to take the palace – I *can’t*. He’ll use me to cause chaos and then –” He glanced down at Percy’s instructions that he held limply in his hand. “If he’s got an idea to keep my Obligations suppressed – he’ll take me back to Roucy. I – I could be useful –” He let the paper drop from his hold. It slid to the floor, landing at Tess’s feet.

He just sat there – in that same hunched position, his hands now perfectly still.

She opened her mouth, shut it, and then opened it again. “But –” it sounded like a sob in her ears. “But – he’s going to help me rescue my brother.” She bit her lip, fighting to keep control of her face, to stop her chin from trembling. “I’m – I’m sorry – *Jacques*. He’s my brother – I’ve got to take care of my own brother. Can you understand?”

He nodded, then, he sat up, speaking in a rush. “I – there’s another way to save him. Without fighting. If you took me to the princess – Princess Claudette, I mean – and if you told her everything – I know she’d release your brother.”

Tess froze, and the spell he’d been weaving over her broke. *He’ll lie – try to trick you into releasing him*. Had the Magician been building to this from the first? Carefully manipulating her emotions?

So that was his game all along. The manipulative bastard. She’d all but fallen for it. She took a step back. “And *what* will happen to all these freedom fighters?”

He looked away. “You’d probably have to help set a trap for them.”

“What? Who do you think I am?” Her voice shook now with shock and fury. “Betray my friends? They *trust* me. You think I’d buy my brother’s freedom with their deaths? And you acted like you *cared* about my friends dying.” She snatched up Percy’s paper. “But all you really cared about was your mistress!”

Tess turned and stalked away from him. True, she wasn’t sure what to believe about Percy and his magic anymore, but – Gale blast it – she wasn’t going to betray her friends, and they were counting on her.

• • •

• Chapter 6 •

Tess's feet ached. Her head ached. Her knees ached. Her shoulders ached. Her body begged for rest and sleep as she forced her legs to move, one stair at a time.

Her day at the laundry was brutal after skipping most of her sleep. This evening, Jacqui seemed to understand, and didn't pester her for a ride up the stairs.

She was just too exhausted to make her normal detour through the closing market this evening, so today, the soup would be extra thin. Some boiled barley, some more root vegetables, and a few slices of bacon.

Finally in her room, she leaned against the door to shut it, fighting the urge to slide down and sleep.

Right.

There.

Jacqui could get himself food.

But.

Emma. And her brothers.

Hellen.

And now Teddy.

And Alice, with Essie.

But, she –

She opened her heavy, itching eyes. Jacqui sat on the floor, dutifully bent over his slate. He shot her a concerned look, his eyes wide. She forced a reassuring grin onto her face, and pushed away from the door.

She wasn't done yet.

A soft knock sounded on the door, just as she started the soup. Jacqui's head spun around, a question in his eyes. She nodded, and he bounded up and to the door.

It was Alice, with her children.

She shot Jacqui a quick, thin smile. It didn't reach her eyes.

Tess beckoned. "Come in, please."

Alice flushed, averting her eyes. She was wearing the ragged dress again. Her face was covered with a fresh layer of cheap paint. "I just – please," she whispered. "Essie is still sick – an' – an' I have to go out. Would – can I beg you to look after my babies? You don't have to feed 'em. I gave Teddy 'is supper."

Tess reached out, but Alice stepped away from her touch. "You don't have to go," Tess said, softly. "I can help you find work – the laundry – I can teach you –"

Alice turned away. "I – I can't ask that ah'you, it's too much."

"Alice – ? Please let me help you."

Alice shook her head. "If you juss look out fer my babies – they're everythin' in the world t'me."

Tess sighed, and nodded, holding out exhausted arms to take Essie. Alice handed her the baby, then, shooting her final timid glance, she slipped out the door.

Jacqui plopped down by his slate, but shot her a pleading look as he picked it up, as if it were a great burden to be shouldered. Teddy sat quietly beside him. Tess propped Essie against her shoulder and turned back to the soup, smiling at her son's dramatics. "You can leave that for tomorrow, Jacqui. You can get out your soldiers."

He squealed with delight and dashed for his box, Teddy following. Essie squawked at the noise, and Tess bounced her, humming a lullaby as she finished the soup.

Behind her, she could hear the tin soldiers engaged in a violent conflict.

• • •

Twenty years ago

Tess clung to her hot, comforting fury.

The Magician had tried to trick her into betraying her friends, Renn, and Percy. This painful, churning feeling in her stomach was only nerves about the coming conflict. Good men would die today. That was unavoidable.¹²

In the final rays of the rapidly vanishing sun, she led the Magician through emptying streets, a short walk from the inn to the prison. Its walls rose up dark and forbidding in the gloom.

She couldn't see them, but she trusted the freedom fighters were all around, waiting for the moment she'd command the Magician to drop the wall.

She stopped, facing it. As high as a house with two floors, it was built of heavy stone blocks, held together with mortar. The light winked out like a snuffed candle, just as she reached out to touch the rough surface, plunging the alley into total darkness.

She took a deep breath. This was her last chance to walk away.

She spoke the name.

It started with that green glow, then, the ground shook and in a roaring, grinding, crashing rush, the wall collapsed into a narrow crevasse that opened beneath it.

She coughed from the dust, then, her sleeve over her mouth and nose, she started running. This was it – either Percy's magic – or his Obligation

¹² [Singing at the top of my lungs] *"Some will fall and some will live / Will you stand up and take your chance? / The blood of the martyrs / Will water the meadows of France! / Do you hear the people sing? / Singing the songs of angry men...!"*

– would protect her, or she was dead. He ran beside her, his hand casting just enough light to avoid tripping on the scattered and broken stones – remnants of the wall. The rest of the freedom fighters followed right behind.

The first prison guards appeared out of the darkness, pikes driving straight at Tess. She missed a step, startled, but a wave of green light slammed into them, tossing them off their feet and back, into the darkness.

Despite her heart thumping in her chest, Tess grinned. That had been spectacular. Exhilarating.

The men behind her dispatched the remaining guards as she reached the wall of the prison building proper. The Magician was breathing lightly beside her. She spoke the second name. “Open a way through this wall.”

His hand glowing, he touched it, and with more grinding and scraping, a dark hole appeared, rapidly growing to human sized.

She stepped through, into the dark passage, and the Magician raised a glowing hand. She nodded. “Lead me to the cells where they’re keeping the miners.”

He glanced around, hesitating a minute, then set off. She followed, and soon several of the freedom fighters had joined her.

As they rounded a corner, they walked straight into a group of startled guards. Tess simply stepped further into their circle, trusting the Magician’s green light to stun them when they moved to respond. They went down, and the other fighters dispatched them.

She found herself grinning again. A Magician made this almost too easy.

Then, they arrived at a row of cells she knew well. Tess pointed, giving him the code again. “Open up all those cell walls.”

He stepped forward and his green light shot down the line. Stone, doors, and mortar crumbled away. The first bewildered prisoners emerged.

One was Renn.

She shouted to him, and, for a moment, he searched through the dim green light and dust filling the passage. Then his eyes met hers, and his face split with joy. He dashed forward, and she met him halfway, wrapping her arms around him. He felt even thinner, but he returned her embrace with a fierce urgency.

He was the first to pull back. "Time later for this – let's go!"

She nodded, and let him take the lead.

The armory was their next target, and on the way, she explained her strategy with the Magician. "He won't let them hurt me – you have to see it."

The guards had rallied at the armory, and filled the passage, hunkered behind spears and shields.

Tess glanced over to make sure the Magician was with her, then, taking a deep breath, she raised a short spear she'd taken from a fallen guard, and stepped forward.

They held their formation, waiting for her to come to them.

For a heartbeat, she hesitated. Then, shooting another glance at the Magician, she sprinted forward, her breath catching in her throat.

A wave of green crashed into the shield wall, and she skidded to a stumbling halt, almost among the sprawling guards. The fighters charged around her, she released the breath she'd been holding.

Once in the armory, they added spears, shields, and heavy crossbows to their light weapons. Most grabbed helmets. Tess stood at the door, the Magician beside her.

He stared at his feet, not looking her way, or watching the freedom fighters.

It was such a strange feeling – he was both her enemy and their secret weapon. His power – it was like an intoxicating drug – to charge straight at leveled spears, knowing he'd have the soldiers on their backs before she reached them. It felt like – like nothing could hurt her. Like she could do anything and go anywhere.

Was that how it felt to be a Nobleman? Her conscience twinged.

The freedom fighters were ready to head out, and she settled comfortably back into her place of command, directing the Magician to lead them out.

It was time to face the king. And rendezvous with Percy.

She carefully avoided the Magician's eyes.

They formed up, moving as an army now. Two abreast, smiling grimly, ready to march on the castle.

At the door the Magician led them to, Tess stepped back, letting the freedom fighters enter the prison courtyard first.

That was how she avoided the wave of blue that, for an instant, illuminated the yard. She stared, trying to understand what had happened. Then, the Magician seized her arm, dragging her back down a flight of steps.

Behind her, voices shouted, and several screamed.

A Magician. There was a Magician out there.

Panic washed through her, and for a minute, she just stood there in the dark.

There was a Magician out there.

But, she had one too.

She had to get out there – she had to protect her friends and – and Renn!

She jumped away from the wall, and dashed for the steps, taking them two at a time. The Magician caught up with her, just as she reached the open doorway.

His hands closed around her wrist, holding her back. Before she could shout at him to let her go, his voice was hissing in her ear.

“No – don't go out there! Please – no!” The desperation in his voice shocked her, and, she turned, eyes wide. His eyes reflected the blue

flashes from the courtyard, and – she realized with a start – they glowed with their own light.

His breath came in short, panicking gasps. “Please,” he whispered. “Don’t make me go out there. I – I can’t – If you go out – please – that’s my brother.”¹³ I’m *begging* you – please – don’t go!”

Tess froze, letting her arm hang limply in his grasp. From behind, the sounds of a hideously one-sided battle raged. Someone shouted, rallying the freedom fighters.

Renn.

She spun, to see the fighters follow her brother, as he took cover behind a pile of fallen stones in the dim light of a few lit torches carried by the soldiers now filling the courtyard.

“My brother’s out there too, Jacques!” Her own voice sounded like a sob in her ears. “He’ll die!”

He dropped her wrist, and pulled back. “At least he chose to be there,” he said to the floor. The pain in his voice physically hurt.

But so did watching as Renn suddenly emerged from his cover at a sprint, leading a small force straight toward the source of the blue light. He made it only a few steps before the line of soldiers closed around them, stabbing with their spears.

She didn’t even have time to react – to run to him.

She slid, numb, down the stone wall to sitting in the darkness.

She was shaking.

Renn.

Jacques took her wrist again, gently. “Tess – I have to get you out of here. *Please.*”

¹³ And if his brother is there, he’s pretty sure the prince will be there too. A prince who, on top of everything else, might just jump at a chance to “accidentally” kill him, so as to strip Claudette of her Magician. Right in front of his brother. It’s – it’s a just a whole world of terrible for him if Tess steps out into that battle. T_T

She couldn't move.

His grip on her wrist tightened, and he took her arm with his other hand, pulling her to her feet.

Back down the stairs, where she couldn't see out anymore.

Into the passage filled with black darkness.

Out another door.

Into the alley, still and quiet on this side of the prison.

The voice that came out of the darkness was smooth and crisp. "Jacques – for the next twenty-seven hours, do not attempt to capture me, do not harm me in any way, and protect me from any injury. Do not move more than ten meters from my person."

Jacques flinched beside her and dropped his hold on her arm.

"I release you from all Obligations to, for, from, and about Tess," Percy added.

"Percy," she whispered, picturing his face in the darkness. His voice carried that confident assurance. And then, she was sobbing out an account of what had happened in jumbled rush. But she didn't include Renn. It was like her mind and mouth refused to say what she'd seen.

She felt the man step to her, pulling her into a tight hug, and she clung to him, trying to hold back tears.

"Oh, Tess, I heard. I know," he murmured. "We were betrayed. One of our people sold us out – I came to find you as soon as I heard. My binding spell will wear off soon – you'd be totally in the Magician's power."

He stepped back, his unseen hands on her shoulders. "Tess. There's still a chance – you made sure to keep the Magician safe, so we've still got our ace. And I've got a plan – we can make sure today wasn't in vain. I need your help one more time – do you think –?"

"Yes." The words sprang from her mouth before she even thought. To do something – anything – to not let the numbness smother her again. "What do you need from me?"

She could hear the grin in his voice. “The same thing you so brilliantly did before. Go to the prince. Tell him you’ll sell me to him – me, in trade for the freedom fighters’ lives.”

From the darkness, she heard Jacques’s voice, choked with fear. “Please – *no* –!”

“Shut up,” Percy snapped.

She couldn’t see Jacques’ face in the darkness, but she vividly remembered the terror and pain she’d seen there earlier.

Don’t trust him, Jacques had said earlier. *He doesn’t care about you.*

Saints – she was only here because Percy said they’d free Renn.

Renn was dead.

A cold, terrible certainty suddenly settled the turmoil in her heart. She straightened, and smiled grimly into the darkness. “I’ll do it. Tell me what to say.”

Something like a sob came from Jacques’ direction, but she could hear the triumph in Percy’s voice as he gave her the instructions she needed.

• • •

• Chapter 7 •

Tess brought all the children with her to Hellen's room, carrying Essie tied to her back with a shawl.

The old woman was deeply indignant that Tess invaded her room with twice the childish noise and curiosity, and was extra dour and intimidating. Teddy hung back, against the wall, but Jacqui trotted up to the old woman, shamelessly covering his nose, and began to chat with her around his hand.

Tess turned away to hide her amusement from the old woman. *Oh, Jacqui.*

Then it was on to Emma and her brothers. They gaped at the new children for a moment, but then quickly welcomed Teddy into their circle.

As Tess warmed the soup, Emma hovered nearby. Tess frowned, then knelt down on aching knees – carrying Essie's extra weight – to look the girl in the eye.

"Emma? Is something wrong?"

She bit her lip, and traced a deep scrape in the wood floor with her bare toe.

"I – you put your hair into pretty braids and things. And –" she looked up, her brown eyes pleading. "Can – can ya teach me, Miss Tess?"

Emma's father generally kept her blonde hair chopped off at her shoulders, where it hung in a dirty tangled mess.

Tess placed a hand on her shoulder. "Oh – yes of course. Tomorrow morning, I'll stop in, and we'll wash your hair and put it into something pretty. I've got some ribbons I'll bring. How does that sound?"

Emma's face split into a grin. "Oh – oh yes! Please! Yes!" She bounced away to lay out dishes on the table and Tess pushed heavily to her feet again. It was amazing how heavy a baby could be when you'd been on

your feet for two days. But that joy on Emma's face was like a drug to her exhausted body.

She found herself humming as she ladled out the soup, then sat down at the foot of the bed with her own bowl. It felt so good to sit.

The children didn't talk for several long minutes as they soaked up every drop until the pot was empty. Then Teddy loudly announced that Jacqui's eyes glowed.

Tess snapped out of a doze, her heart pounding. The other children were looking at him quizzically. He nodded solemnly. "I sawed it." He turned around on his stool. "Tell em – Miss Tess – Jacqui's eyes glow."

Tess forced a laugh. "Don't be silly, Teddy. Why would Jacqui's eyes glow?" She shot her son a sharp look. He ducked his head, sucking in his lips.

Teddy pouted. "Ma didn't laugh at me. Ma didn't say I was silly."

Tess took a deep breath, trying to calm her heart and the nerves screaming at her to take Jacqui and run.

This moment.

This very second.

Far away.

But she couldn't do that.

She couldn't leave Alice's children here with Emma.

She took another deep breath. "What did your ma say when you told her, then?" She felt her voice shake, and Emma shot her a confused look. Tess gave her a smile.

Teddy wrinkled his face up, thinking. Then he shrugged. "I don't a-member."

One of Emma's brothers leaned over, and demanded to see Jacqui's eyes. Jacqui turned away, pulling back. Tess pushed to her feet. "It's time

for all of you to be in bed. It'll be dark soon. Jacqui, would you get the pot please?"

He leapt to help.

• • •

Twenty years ago

Two hours after parting from Percy and Jacques, Tess found herself ushered into an opulent room, still dressed herself in the dirty and torn dress she'd worn through the battle. The silks and velvet furnishings walked the balance between imposing and tasteful. Expensive woods, worked until they shone in the crescent rays. Every inch of the room spoke of a wealth beyond anything she'd ever known.

The wall across from the heavy desk was set with long, narrow windows that revealed a storm-filled sky.

The door opened, and a tall woman swept into the room. She moved with a dancer's grace, and something about the set of her shoulders – of her mouth – spoke of someone who had power and authority, and knew how to use it.

Her dress was expertly cut to set off her figure to her best advantage. Her hair was swept up into an elaborate style, set with feathers and a single gem. Most people would be asleep, this soon after dark, but she was perfectly composed.

She smiled warmly with perfectly painted red lips, beneath eyes that were cold and calculating.

This was the princess. Claudette Felicity Lafarge. Tess chewed on her lip and offered an awkward curtsy. The woman nodded and waved to a chair.

"Please, sit, dear. May I offer you some tea?"

Tess shook her head, dumbly.

Princess Claudette slid gracefully into a chair behind the desk. "I'm told you know where I can find my Magician."

Tess nodded.

The princess pressed long, elegant fingertips together, her elbows resting lightly on her desk. “Please speak freely, dear. I value honesty more than a false history of loyalty.”

She took a deep breath, and told her story. All of it. Her brother’s arrest. His plan. Her meetings with Percy. Her day with Jacques. The disastrous prison assault. Her last conversation with the man.

Renn was dead, his friends were killed or captured – the truth couldn’t hurt any of them now.

“He’ll kill him,” Tess added. “If he thinks you’re close to rescuing Jacques.”

Claudette leaned forward, smiling gently with her lips. “Tell me one more thing, dear. Why did you come to me?”

Tess dropped her gaze to her hands, clenched at her lap. “Your highness, I –” she hesitated. *Why indeed?* “I don’t want him to hurt Jacques.” She winced at way her voice cracked with emotion as she said it.

“Yes,” the princess said. “I see. I happen to agree with you, dear. I want my Magician back alive and healthy as well. So,” in several quick movements, she pulled out paper, pen, and ink. “Since we understand each other –”

She wrote several short, quick lines on the paper, dusted them with powder, then folded it the paper and sealed it with red wax. “Can I trust you to deliver this note to your friend Percy?” ¹⁴

Tess stared at the proffered paper. “I – I don’t understand.”

The princess arched a shaped and colored eyebrow. “Percy is expecting your return. He will be less concerned by your approach than by any of my agents. All you need to do, is give him this note.” She smiled. “I think this will solve our problem.”

¹⁴ She may look and sound calm, but inside, she’s super pissed that she’s got to use up some leverage she was hoping to get more mileage out of.

Percy was waiting in another hidden alcove when he stepped out, greeting her.

“Did you deliver the message? He didn’t come at once – or send someone?” There was just an edge of suspicion there.

Tess studied his face for a moment, her stomach twisting. How had she ever found him handsome?

She raised her chin, and handed him the paper. He took it, frowning.

Then his face changed. From red, then to white. “This is Claudette’s seal.”

She nodded, her heart pounding.

“What did you *do*, girl?”

“I told her everything.”

He was snarling with rage. “Everything your brother’s worked for? The miner’s march? Did you sell out Renn –?”

“Renn is dead.” Her voice surprised her with how cold and even it was. “He’s dead because you used him. You used me. You used us all.”

“You little bitch!” His hands shook as he snapped the seal. “You’ll regret – !” he broke off, reading the note. When he met her eyes again, she saw fear. Then, he spun around and stormed back through the door he’d emerged from. She followed, uncertainly.

A flight of stairs rose straight up from the door, and he was already halfway up, taking them two at a time.

Saints – what was in that note?

He was shouting for Jacques as he burst through the door at the top. She arrived a few seconds later, wide eyed and breathing hard.

Jacques emerged from an inner room. He looked exhausted. And scared. His shoulders slumped, and he shrank back from Percy’s fury.¹⁵

¹⁵ FYI: he and Tess are both 17 here, if you were wondering. Yeah, he’s basically a baby. T_T (They were both 19 when Adele was born.)

Through clenched teeth, Percy rescinded every Obligation except for one – Jacques was to wait two hours before trying to capture him. Then he snatched up his cloak, and dashed down the steps.

Jacques stared, bewildered.

Tess flushed, and looked away. “I went to Princess Claudette. For help. She wrote a note. I don’t know what she said.” She bit her lip. “I’m – I’m sorry. I should have listened, and – and I was horrible to you.”

He let out a long breath. “I’m grateful. And, I’m – I’m so sorry about your brother.”

She opened her mouth, but she’d lost control of her face. Saying it – saying he was dead brought the pain in her chest crashing back into her awareness.

Saving Jacques had kept her focused. Given her a task.

She hugged herself, as if to keep the sobs from exploding out of her chest.

She was shaking.

He reached out cautiously, to place a hand on her arm. She looked up, meeting his eyes through tears. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “The truth is – I’d give *anything* to trade this power for a chance to stop all this death. To save lives instead of take them.”

She reacted without thinking as she unfolded her arms and reached out. Right now, she just needed someone to hold her while she fell to pieces.

He wrapped warm arms around her, and she sobbed onto his shoulder.

• • •

• Chapter 8 •

Back in their room, Tess sat Teddy down, and explained that Jacqui's eyes were an important secret.

"Horrible things could happen to Jacqui if people find out his eyes glow," she said.

Teddy's shoulders slumped, and his eyes filled with tears. "Oh," he mumbled.

Tess reached over to wrap her arms around his narrow shoulders. "You didn't know – I'm not angry with you." She knelt down to look him in the eye. "Just – don't talk about it anymore, now that you know – yes?"

He nodded, his lower lip protruding.

Tess glanced over at her son. He sat stiffly, sensing her fear and unsure of what to say to his new friend. She pulled back, and grinned. "I think there's a little time you can play before bed."

Jacqui jumped on the suggestion, and retrieved his soldiers. The unease of a moment ago forgotten, they settled back into their game of war with tin soldiers.

Rocking Essie, Tess watched the little men fall on the imaginary battlefield, one at a time – still frozen at attention – their little pikes held against metal shoulders.

She'd nearly dozed off, when she heard the footsteps. Heavy, booted feet, stomping without regard for who might be asleep. Down their passage. The footsteps of powerful men.

Her heart seemed to stop, and for a minute, blind panic filled her mind. She push to her feet and sternly instructed Jacqui to crawl under the bed – as far as he could go, and to not come out until she said, no matter what. To press his hands over his ears.

“Teddy,” she snapped crisply, “Can you do something for me? Can you pretend to be Jacqui? It’ll be a game we’ll play.”

He nodded, eyes wide, as a fist slammed against her door.

Tess’s heart was pounding in her chest, but, at the same time, she felt as if she were separated, far away from this moment.

This couldn’t be happening.

There was no way they’d know about Jacqui.

This was a mistake.

They couldn’t have found him in a city of thousands.

She opened the door.

A man in expensive livery stepped back, to reveal a tall man dressed in a fine suit. He wore a short, carefully trimmed gray beard. A narrow scar marked one cheek.

He held himself with the air of established power. And then he nodded to the slight figure beside him.

Tess’s heart beat once.

One, painful, crushing thump.

It was Alice.

Pale, hunched, eyes on the floor. She nodded, and the man stepped forward. Tess stared at her in horror. How did she know? Where did she learn what Jacqui’s eyes meant?

“Jacqui – come here.” His voice was loud, commanding.

Tess opened her mouth. To – to say what? To tell her son to stay hidden?

Teddy moved to respond, but seeing his mother, he drew back, looking between his mother and the Nobleman with concern in his eyes. His mother beckoned, and he slunk out to slide behind her ragged skirt.

Meanwhile, Jacqui emerged from the bed, his face pinched in confusion. He shot Tess an apologetic look.

The Nobleman knelt down, to look him in the eye, his beard twisting with a slow smile. "Tell me your name, and your father's name," he said.

Jacqui shot Tess a worried look before answering. "I – my name's Jacqui –" He looked to Tess again, his eyes pleading for help.

Tess's throat felt thick when she spoke – and her voice sounded strange in her ears. "Your name is Jacques Dumont, and that's –" She was shaking.

"That's my papa's name too," he finished, a little note of pride in his voice.

The Nobleman nodded. "Perfect. Jacqui, you must never ever plug your ears in any way, or hurt them, or let anyone else do that – do you understand? Not even –" he glanced up briefly at Tess. "Not even your mother." Jacqui nodded, eyes wide, as the Nobleman went on, slowly. Rewording that horrible liege oath to be understood by a child. "You must – you must not hurt me or my family in any way, and you must not let anyone or anything hurt me or my family in any way. Do you understand?"

Her son nodded again, his eyes wide.

The Nobleman pushed back to his feet, lightly brushing gloved hands together. "Right. Where's that woman?"

Alice shuffled forward, Teddy clinging to her skirt. The Nobleman nodded to one of the liveried men with him, who handed Alice a heavy bag of coins. She snatched it, then turned to Tess for the first time.¹⁶

"My baby," she mumbled at the floor. "May I –"

Tess stepped back. "Why?" she asked, her voice cracking with emotion. "Why did you do it?"

¹⁶ I don't know if I'll be able to state it explicitly in the text, but Alice's late husband's smuggling career also involved looking for stray Magicians to kidnap and sell to Nobleman. As did his "business partner." So she knew both what the eyes meant, and what they were worth.

Alice raised her chin, her face pale. “*Why?*” she snapped back, but in a quivering voice “He’ll be fed and cared for and given everything – an’ – an’ you – acting better’n the rest of us – why shouldn’t I take a chance when I see it – for me and mine?”

She held out her hands for Essie, who’d begun to cry, and Tess numbly handed her over. Alice took the baby, turned, and fled.¹⁷

The Nobleman nodded. “Right. The boy comes with us. Jacques – you must come with me to the palace.”

Tess opened her mouth, forcing her exhausted – terrified – mind to work. “Wait – please. You – you must let me come with him.” The man glanced her way, irritation in his eyes, and Tess pushed on. “Please – he’s five. You – he’ll be more use to you if I’m with him.”

He shrugged. “I *could* command the boy to forget you.”¹⁸

“Sir –,” she choked out, recoiling at the thought. “I’m his whole world. What do you think that might do to him – to his mind? You’ve got him completely in your control – what danger could I be? *Please.*”

Jacqui’s wide eyes were locked on her, making this somehow even worse. Her stomach twisted violently.

The Nobleman shrugged again. “Fine. Come.” He turned and began to walk briskly away, Jacqui moving to follow him, like he was on a string.

Then, with effort Jacqui pulled back. “My – my soldiers –” he said, his voice small and frantic. “Wait – I need to get my soldiers.”

“Leave them,” the Nobleman snapped. “Let’s go.”¹⁹

Her son shot a final despairing glance at his scattered toys, then followed. There were tears on his cheeks.

Then, a different childish voice echoed down the hall. “Wait!”

¹⁷ <https://youtu.be/FBIqHQU9k0E?t=29>

¹⁸ Res says this is totally possible. Blame her for making this 100 times worse. *I’m so glad I didn’t know this was possible for Alex to do with Adele when I was writing Voiceless.* :grimace:

¹⁹ I’m sorry. This is the line that just hurts me down deep and makes me want to murder this character dead.

Tess turned.

Emma.

The girl stood in the darkness. Her eyes filled with fear and confusion.
“Miss Tess – where are you going?”

Emma’s hair. The morning. She’d *promised*.

The Nobleman and Jacqui were already at it to the end of the hall. Tess would have to run to catch them.

“I’m sorry – I’ll come back when can,” she called to Emma. “I promise. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t – don’t go,” she repeated, her small voice desperate. “Don’t leave me!”

For a horrible heartbeat, Emma’s face blurred into another girl from Tess’s memory. Adele had that same look on her face, the last time Tess saw her.

The child Tess had failed to save.

Would never save, now.

Why?

Why did it always have to end like this?

Why couldn’t she save even one?

• • •

Twenty years ago

Tess was wearing her best dress, freshly washed. She smoothed it out, and sat.

Princess Claudette could look regal even pouring tea. She glanced up, a perfectly practiced smile in her lips. "Do you take sugar, dear?"

Tess shook her head, and the princess handed her a teacup.

"Now – Miss Olivier. I thought we should have a short chat."

"Yes, your highness?"

She poured a second cup for herself. "I want to thank you for your service to me." She looked appropriately sad. "This whole business with Roucy – the miners – it's been tragically mishandled by my father. And my brother is only making it worse." She glanced up. "I'd like to offer my deepest sympathies for the loss of your brother. How very heartbreaking," she murmured. "If only you'd come to me at the first – I'd have been able to free him and set your family up for life."

Tess studied the lacy pattern on her cup, hiding the surge of anger, grief and resentment that those words produced. She gripped the delicate cup tight enough for her knuckles to whiten.

The princess went on. "I shall have his ashes released to your family, of course. You are free to choose any garden you like for him. All expenses are on me. And your father – he will have all the help my physician can offer. I take care of my own, you see. And for your safety – it would be *deeply* unfortunate for you and your family, should your fellow conspirators hear how you've served me."

Tess nodded, her stomach twisting.

"I have a manor outside the city – I keep a very small staff there. I think I'll move you and your family to a small cottage on the grounds – set into the forest. You and your mother will be able to help where you best can, and your father will have better air."

Tess's mouth dropped open. Was the princess *actually* going to help her family?

"Now – there's another little matter," she said, as she stirred her tea with a silver spoon, each motion careful, graceful. She placed the spoon gently on the saucer, and lifted the cup. She met Tess's eyes over the rim. "You're quite taken with my Magician, I believe."

Tess choked on a sip of tea, feeling her face flush with heat.

The princess continued. “I happen to think you could add a healthy – *stability* for the boy.” She smiled with just her lips. “Do you think he feels the same about you?”

“I – I don’t know.”

She arched an eyebrow, and Tess looked down, flushing again. “I – I think so,” she amended.

“I could, of course, Obligate him to feel so,” she remarked blandly.

Tess froze. “You – can – ?”

The princess set her cup down. “Oh – I’d never want to intrude upon his will in that way – I’m sure I’ll never have to do such a horrible thing.”

Tess’s stomach twisted violently. The princess took another graceful sip of tea. “It’s such a crude way to do things. But I doubt he needs any encouragement where you’re concerned. Now – there *is* something I need from you, dear.”

“What is it?” Tess choked out the words.

“I need this connection between the two of you to stay absolutely secret. No one on *my* staff or in your life can know.” ²⁰

Tess frowned. This wasn’t what she’d expected. “Yes, your highness?”

“In return, you and your parents will have the hidden little cottage.” She smiled slyly. “It’s a perfect place for my Magician to come see you in perfect secrecy. I take care of my own, you see, dear.” She lifted the pot. “More tea?” ²¹

²⁰ She’s hoping they’ll make lots of Magician babies that are totally unknown and unaccounted for by her enemies. Secret weapons are the best weapons, doncha know?

²¹ They were there at the manor until Tess got pregnant, then Claudette moved Tess to a more secret and secure location to have and raise a Magician baby. That was where they were hidden when she met her untimely death.

Tess shook her head, and the rest of the time passed with the princess asking her questions about every aspect of her life, and Tess numbly answering. Her hands were shaking when Claudette finally dismissed her.

Jacques was waiting just down the hall, exactly where he said he'd be. He pulled her into an alcove, hidden behind a draped curtain. He took one of her hands, unfolding her clenched fist, and squeezed it in one of his.

"What did she threaten?" he asked softly.

Tess bit her lip, not meeting his eyes, horrified to even say it. Instead, she buried her face in his shoulder. She could feel his rapid heartbeat.

"She – can –" Tess finally whispered. "She said she could make – *make* you care about me, if she wanted to."

He drew in a sharp breath. "She could," he said. "She *could* – she hasn't. She won't. She just wanted you to know what kind of power she really has over me." He shifted so that he could see her eyes. "You *do* need to know that –" He grimaced. "You're not a Magician – you still can – you *should* – run away. Hide."

She shivered. "She'd never let me go now." Even if Tess thought she could get herself and her parents safely away – alone, without money, she wasn't going to try it. Not if it meant leaving Jacques behind.

He was shaking too, she realized. "This won't end well," he murmured.

She closed her eyes. "Maybe. But even then, we'll still have the beginning and the middle."

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After Tess and Jacqui climbed into the Nobleman's carriage waiting on the street outside their building, he stiffly introduced himself as Tobias Cheval Faverau, the brother to Queen Therese Ninove.

The queen was ill, and her crowned consort Henri was currently absent from the city, he said. And Tess and Jacqui would likely never meet either.

Tess barely heard him, sitting in the dark with Jacqui wedged against her, his little hands gripping her arm like a lifeline.

When do you give up?

When do you stop fighting for how the world *could* be?

When do you surrender to the way things *are*?

Take care of your own, Hellen said.

Hellen had lived through the ends too often to care about the middle.

I'm sorry Jacques, she thought at the darkness. *You're right. The ends just hurt too much.*

It was so dark.

The light had all gone.

● End Part One ●