

PROLOGUE-- ESCAPE

In a ballroom packed with those who live their lives governed by strict decorum, a harried woman elbowing her way through the crowd attracts considerable attention. This is doubly true when the woman in question has been on the arm of the crown prince for most of the evening. She does not bother excusing herself. She plows on regardless of who blocks her path, be it a strapping soldier or a frail grandmother. Her corset is a tight fist around her chest, and she fights for a clean breath through a hundred conflicting perfumes and the scent of burning candles. The spell is slipping through her hands. She trips over pieces of tulle dangling from her petticoats and is jerked backwards as others step on what trails behind. It seems inevitable she will be left standing in the middle of the ballroom in her servant's rags.

The tide of her luck changes as the very person who seeks to prevent her from leaving unwittingly allows her escape. Trumpets blare, but the poor buglers are so suddenly and

unexpectedly called upon that their normally synchronized fanfare becomes the braying of a troupe of confused donkeys. Callers bedecked in the royal colors of purple and green shout commands through golden megaphones.

“Fall back! Make way for Prince Gregory! Make way for the prince!”

Like hundreds of trained dogs the assembled guests retreat to the far sides of the ballroom. She finds herself alone in a wide aisle, a stranded bride in the heart of a great chapel. Prince Gregory jogs toward her, followed by assorted friends and advisers. The king himself huffs along at the end of the procession. Apprentice magicians check their enchantments. Fireballs hover with subdued crackling above the guests’ heads, and giant butterflies freeze mid-flutter. The musicians grind to a halt, but the room hums with chatter and expectation.

“Wait!” calls Gregory. “Please, stop.”

She hesitates, pulled by his insistent voice and crestfallen face, and in those few seconds the delicately embroidered sleeve of her silver gown slips over her shoulder. She hoists her skirts and sprints the last hundred or so steps.

The whispering crowd heaves a collective gasp that explodes into an uproar. She can no longer hear Gregory, but the voices of the callers ring out.

“Guards! Do not let her pass!”

The soldiers manning the entrance bumble about, not knowing who they’re after in the milling throng of full silk skirts and polished black boots. She blows past them, a silver blur. Once through the archway she still has to maneuver a flight of stairs, cross the cavernous expanse of the Great Hall, pass the next set of guards at the two-story wooden doors, and descend another flight of stairs. She must find her coach, with its driver and six white horses that,

upon close examination, bear a distinct resemblance to a parrot and a half-dozen goats. Most daunting, the two Unicorn Guards in full war regalia standing sentry at the head of the drive.

*I'll never make it, she thinks.*

She does not slow down when she reaches the first staircase and has no chance of recovery. Her right heel strikes the edge of the second slick marble stair, and her leg shoots out from under her. She crashes to her bottom and slides down the rest of the steps. Her dress hikes up past her knees as the marble flies past in alternating stripes of black and white. Both elbows scrape along behind her, but her attempts to stop only succeed in turning herself sideways. Her right slipper flies off and a sharp pain slices through her left foot as it bangs off the banister. By the time she comes to a rest at the base of the staircase she is looking up the way she came. She pushes her petticoats out of her face.

She has no time for humiliation, and jumps to her feet. Her shoe sits halfway up the staircase, too far away to retrieve. She reaches under her skirt and yanks off the other one. She is used to running barefoot.

And here she will be remembered, a thousand times, a million times, until the tumble down the stairs is forgotten and she flees with perfect poise and grace in one unbroken glass shoe. Few will know her as she is now. Just an unnamed girl, disappearing into the night, clutching a cracked slipper.

PART I

CHAPTER 1-- CONCILITORY SENTIMENTS

In the days of Eleanor Brice's childhood her teacher had high hopes for her, perhaps a calling to magic. Unfortunately, Eleanor showed herself to be decidedly unenchanted at an early age. No matter how Rosemary cajoled, she could not draw one spark from Eleanor's skinny arms, or pull one spell out of her perpetually tousled blond head. Odd eyes or not, strange signs be damned, Eleanor would not be a witch. So, after her father's death and her stepmother's inheritance of the family estate, Eleanor became a maid. So she remained until age eighteen, when she became the most envied woman in the kingdom of Cartheigh.

Three days after the Second Sunday Ball and her unexpected change in fortune, Eleanor returned to the Brice House to collect her few belongings. She climbed from the elegant white carriage and wrapped her arms around herself, uncomfortably aware of the bare skin above her tight bodice. She greeted the liveried carriage horses. They bowed, the plumes between their ears waving like purple cattails on a marsh breeze, and nickered their respects.

“Mistress Brice. M’lady, m’lady, m’lady.”

The soldiers fell back as she passed, a line of stiff, uniformed dominoes. Eleanor smiled at them, but not a one met her eyes. She lifted the skirts of her pale pink afternoon gown and stepped over a few puddles. It seemed the cobblestone drive had lengthened by several miles in the two days she’d been gone. Her wounded foot throbbed in her leather shoes, and she longed for the comfort of her glass slippers. She climbed the steps of her father’s house and found the fire-iron door unlocked, so she opened it.

“Hello?” Her voice bounced off the crystal chandelier, with its missing candles in need of replacing, and floated up the spiral staircase.

“They’re hiding.”

Eleanor started at the familiar warbling voice. She glared at the red and blue parrot perched on a disintegrating trellis.

“Chou, you mustn’t creep up on me like that.”

Chou Chou shook himself. “Is it my fault I blend with the roses? Besides, you’re as jittery as a thirsty drunk on a fasting day.” The parrot lit on her shoulder and whispered in her ear. “You were born to be the lady of this house, even if you’ve served in it for years.”

“Mother Imogene and Sylvia would disagree with you.”

“Dragons teeth, darling, it wouldn’t be the first time.” Eleanor jumped when Chou opened his beak. “*Go sit in a tree where you belong! Eleanor, find my parasol or I shall brain you with my lace hanky!*”

Eleanor laughed through her nerves and pinched his beak. “Why, Mother Imogene, red feathers do suit you. You sound just like Chou Chou, and I know you two are such good friends.”

She closed the door behind her, shutting out her guardians' awkward reverence. Long-dead relations peered down at her from the walls, as if they did not recognize the young woman who had wiped their painted faces and dusted their gilded frames for the past eight years.

She walked through the front hall, the sound of her shoes sharp, muffled, sharp as she crossed planks then rugs then planks again. Out of old habit, she gave wide berth to the decorative table below the chandelier. A crude sculpture, two intertwined roses carved into a lump of raw ashwood, sat in the middle of the luminous Fire-iron tabletop, like an ugly bonnet atop an elegant coiffure. Years ago she'd accidentally knocked the statue onto the floor with her clumsy ten-year-old fingers. Mother Imogene had beat Eleanor until blood ran from the child's nose. It stained her gray dusting cloth the purplish color of her bruised face. She'd never touched Imogene's statue again, nor forgotten the shock of her stepmother's enraged protection of such a seemingly trivial knick-knack. The statue remained perpetually and mysteriously dust-free, so Eleanor could only assume Mother Imogene looked after it herself.

Eleanor ran her fingers along the walls, with their wide vertical stripes. Blue, green, gray, repeat. She peered into the empty sitting room. The shadows announced afternoon tea with their long faces, but no one had laid out biscuits or folded the napkins.

"Perhaps you're right, Chou," she said to the bird on her shoulder. "Maybe they are hiding."

The swish of petticoats behind her proved him wrong. She turned, Chou Chou's red wings flapping around her head, and faced her stepmother.

Imogene Easton Brice descended the spiral staircase in that stiff way Eleanor had always hated, where her head did not move except as one with the rest of her body. According to the lady herself, Imogene was known for her beautiful dancing when she first arrived at court. Even

at near forty years of age she was clearly beautiful, with her dark shiny hair and delicate features, but Eleanor could never imagine anyone so stiff as a wonderful dancer.

Imogene's daughters, Margaret and Sylvia, trailed behind her. Their matching red and gold pinstriped gowns against the equally stripy walls made Eleanor's eyes want to cross. The three women stopped before Eleanor, their silk skirts bumping up against one another in a discomfited receiving line. Margaret stood between her mother and sister like the cracked cup in a mismatched tea set. Sylvia, at seventeen the younger sister by two years, was a replica of her mother from her eyes to her hair to her nose in the air. Margaret, on the other hand, had her late father's frizzy brownish hair, and his pinched face. *Just-like-that-miserable-drunk*, Imogene often said.

Margaret joined Imogene in a deep curtsy and held the pose. Sylvia curtsied, but kept her eyes pinned on the floor. Eleanor could practically see the heat rising off her head. She had a brief picture of Sylvia bursting into flames in the front hall. If she did so, Eleanor would make no move to put her out.

Eleanor was unsure of how to proceed. "Stand up, please."

The three women straightened. Eleanor still looked down on them, as she towered over each one by several heads. Imogene did a quick sweep of the pink gown, but her gaze lingered on the Fire-iron and diamond necklace resting on Eleanor's chest. Her white hands clenched one another. Eleanor did not trust them, even folded demurely before her stepmother's tiny waist. She was aware of her own hair hanging down her back. She'd always worn it twisted up off her neck while she worked, and this afternoon it felt like a blond banner of rebellion. Margaret's mouth twitched a wordless hello, but still Sylvia did not look up. The silence stretched on.

"Did you want to speak with me?" Eleanor asked.

“Welcome home, my lady,” said Imogene. “Happy rumors have reached us. Are they true?”

“Yes. Prince Gregory has proposed.” Margaret gasped and covered her mouth. Eleanor went on. “We’re to be married in two weeks.”

“Our deepest congratulations.”

Sylvia muttered something that sounded like *dragonshit*.

“Pardon?” said Chou. He hopped onto Eleanor’s head. His talons clenched in her hair.

“Yes—pardon,” said Imogene, with a glance at her younger daughter. “Your pardon, lady, if I’ve ever appeared...harsh. You must know I carried your best intentions in my heart.”

“Indeed,” said Eleanor.

The impartial reply seemed to encourage Imogene. “Of course. Your father’s lack of decorum—and the influence of those conjuring oddballs—”

“You mean the witches of Afar Creek Abbey?”

Imogene nodded. “Your father allowed Rosemary too much sway over you. After he passed on, HighGod bless him, I—I hoped to teach you to be a lady.”

“Many girls find the path to ladyship by starving, freezing, and emptying chamber pots,” said Chou.

Imogene flushed an ugly red.

“Frequent beatings only encourage only good posture. Long sessions locked in a broom closet lead to the most elegant manners. Lye soap has a wonderful effect on the hands—”

“Peace, Chou,” said Eleanor.



“Please,” Imogene said, “would you put in a good word at court for your stepsisters, if only for the sake of Margaret? I know you’re fond of her. Perhaps you would even have a place for her in your chambers, if it’s not too much.”

Chou let out an outraged squawk, but Eleanor shushed him again. “Your apology means nothing to me,” she said to Imogene. “I won’t deny Sylvia a place at court, because I will not embarrass the prince or the king by joining in petty behavior. I will prove those connected with the Brice name are worthy of their association. Sylvia will have to secure her own place, and I hope she has the brains to do so without humiliating us. As for Margaret...” At the sound of her name Margaret smiled weakly.

“I’ve not forgotten your past kindness. I’ll think on your request to join my ladies.”

“It’s as much as we could expect,” said Imogene.

Chou seethed in her ear, but Eleanor dropped a shallow curtsy. Her stepfamily had to follow her. Chou left her shoulder and fluttered about the front hall. He hissed and dropped a pat of bird shit on the floor.

Eleanor called over her shoulder as she walked down the kitchen passageway. “I believe I left a mop on the porch.”

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