

## *INTRODUCTION*

### **Asa**

The day I found out that my daughter was a fairy was a rollercoaster of emotions.

I had always expected that Lyra would be tremendously powerful once her magic came in, but I never dreamed that she might be a fairy. When I saw her wings burst from her back for the first time shortly after her fifteenth birthday, I was instantly overcome with awe and pride.

There have only been three known fairies recorded in our written history. All of them were women. These women were the most powerful magic users to ever live.

The first one shocked the kingdom with her incredible powers, which she used to influence nature – weather, plants, things like that. Unfortunately, many of the townsfolk found her powers to be frightening and suspicious. So, they decided to burn her house down in the middle of the night with her inside.

Tales of the winged woman circulated for ages after her death, capturing the interest of magic lovers for years to come. It was a few hundred years before the next known fairy emerged. Soon after her powers became known, she was abducted by a man who wanted to use her powers for his own gain. She eventually died by his hands.

It was another several hundred years before the third fairy emerged, and by this time, we were in a major growth period for the study of magical science. One particularly ambitious scientist found out that this third fairy was around and decided he couldn't let the opportunity pass: he captured this young woman and performed trials on her against her will for several years, until she took her own life. Most of what we now know about fairies has come from these trials. Whether it is ethical to study or use this information is hotly debated.

Behind my proud grin, I was slowly filled with abject horror and dread as I watched my daughter hover in the air, testing out her brand-new wings for the very first time, and the stories of these women's tragic deaths flooded into my mind.

Still, at some point, I managed to convince myself that Lyra was different – that nothing bad would happen to her. The third fairy lived hundreds of years ago; we've grown as a society since then. We're much more civilized. Besides that, Lyra was princess – surely she'd be treated with the utmost respect.

I was horrendously, tragically wrong.

Sitting in the hospital with her, waiting for her to wake up, gave me plenty of time to consider everywhere I had gone wrong.

I glanced at her heart monitor. It beeped in a predictable rhythm, yet every pause between beeps felt like an agonizing eternity. Maybe one day she would wake up. Or maybe one day it would just stop beeping.

I peeked quickly at her face, just to verify she was still unconscious, but I couldn't bear to look at her for long. Not today. I just didn't have the strength for it today. I could hardly recognize her after what had happened.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Lyra

"You and I are going to have a little chat until we reach an understanding." My father glared at me as he spoke from the other side of his desk. I gripped the edge of my seat, the smooth wood pressing into my hand, and glared back. His office was dimly lit by a desk lamp, and the room was so quiet, I was sure he would hear the sound of me swallowing my discomfort. By this point in the evening, no light was coming in through his tall windows. "We will be here all night if we have to," Father continued, "until we get to the bottom of your...*attitude problem*."

His patronizing tone of voice made my blood boil. "I think the real problem here, Father," I began, ignoring my dry mouth and turning my nerves to rage, "is your fiancée problem."

His eyes blazed. "This is exactly what I'm talking about! You will respect Charlotte..." he began, his glare deepening, "...or you won't like what happens."

"Father. I am nineteen years old." My heart pounded, my chest feeling like it may collapse beneath the tension.

"Then act like it."

"I'm not a child," I continued, forcing myself to ignore his dangerous tone of voice, "and you can't treat me like one."

"You live in *my* home," he said. "You *will* listen to me, and you *will* respect me and anyone else I bring into this home. So tell me..." He leaned back in his seat. "Why do you refuse to get along with her?"

"I've *told* you, Father." I lifted my chin slightly, hoping to signal the confidence I didn't feel. "But you never listen."

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm all ears now."

I hesitated. I had tried before – plenty of times – to tell him why I didn't like her. My throat began to tighten, remembering how all those other conversations had gone. *Will it really work this time?*

I decided to give it a try. "You should hear the awful things she says to me when you're not around, Father! About how I'm a nuisance, I'm in her way, I should just get lost—"

"I don't believe you." His words hit me like a knife, and my heart sped up. I knew this would be the outcome, but that didn't make it hurt any less. "This is what you always claim, and it's just not true. I don't understand why you're persisting with this false narrative." My chance to defend myself was over before it ever truly began. *He doesn't really want to hear my side. He just wants to force me to fall in line.*

And yet, I wasn't ready to give up. Pushing my fear to the back of my mind and pulling my growing resentment to the forefront, I persevered with my argument. "Well, what about the time she wanted me to go study abroad?"

"What about it?" He shook his head. "She thought it would be a great opportunity for you!"

"More like a great opportunity to get rid of me!" I stood up, my anger finally bubbling to the surface. "Admit it, Father! She wants me to get out, and so do you!"

He blinked in surprise and shook his head harder. "That's not true...!" His voice seemed somehow gentler now, yet still just as passionate.

This is where I messed up. This is where I should have just persisted in the discussion. This is where I should have let him console me, to convince me that I was still very much wanted at home – but I didn't.

"Yes it is!" I cried, hurt and rage swirling through me. "And if living in *your home* means I have to live with *her*..." I stomped toward the door. "...then I don't want to live in your home anymore!"

"Lyrallyn! You don't mean that!" Something in his voice was almost pleading by now. I ignored it. I was done here. "Come back here, we're not done talking!"

"Yes I do, and yes we are!" I left his office, slamming the door behind me, and marched to my room as quickly as I could, slamming my bedroom door shut as well.

Overwhelmed by the hurricane of emotions, I flung myself into bed and buried my face into my pillow. I didn't know why I even bothered trying. I had tried time and time again to tell my father the truth about his fiancée, but he never believed me.

Briefly, a thought slipped into my mind, wondering if I might feel better if I calmed myself down with a song. I could use my sonokinesis – my power to control and redirect the sound waves around me into any sound I liked. It was the first and only ability I had wanted to learn when I first received my magic, and I loved it dearly, conducting sound waves into complex and beautiful songs. Making music never failed to lift my spirits and take my mind away from the pain. And yet, even that didn't appeal to me when I was feeling this distraught. I just wanted to lie there and wallow in my hurt.

The worst part was knowing that it didn't use to be like this. Not before Charlotte came around. My father was my closest friend at one point. I could trust him with anything. I could tell him what was on my heart and be met with his loving, compassionate eyes. But somehow, she managed to turn him against me – to convince him that I'm a liar. Now my concerns were met with his skepticism and harsh rebuke.

I wept with the grief of the relationship I had lost, certain that my chest would eventually erupt from the pressure mounting inside, until my thoughts were interrupted by a hand gently stroking my hair.

"Father...?" My heart nearly stopped. *When did he get here?*

I turned around to face him, but when my face emerged from my pillow, the hand that had been on my head immediately clamped down on my mouth. My father was nowhere in sight – no one was. Sheer panic coursed through every vein in my body. I tried to scream, but the sound was muffled.

Another hand appeared in the room in front of me – it was dark and shadowy, and didn't seem to be connected to anyone. It snapped its fingers, and my window opened. While I tried to understand what was happening, the hand on my mouth pulled me down, into my bed, and teleported me away.

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## Asa

After Lyra stomped off, I could only sit at my desk in stunned silence, replaying the conversation in my head.

*Great going, Asa.*

*You really got through to her this time, Asa.*

*That will heal the rift you so badly want to repair, Asa.*

*The relationship is saved now, Asa.*

I buried my face in my hands, then peeked out to see a picture on my desk. Lyra and I – just a short year ago, wearing real, warm smiles on our faces. My dark green eyes peered back at me, unaware of how poorly I would manage my life in the year to come, framed by my straight, shoulder length orange hair, gray creeping in at the top. I beamed through my short rusty-gray beard. Lyra's long, dark red-brown curls wrapped around her grinning face, her bright green eyes twinkling with joy – an expression I hadn't seen recently. A rupture sliced through my heart while looking at the image.

*I can't accept this. I have to make it right. I'll do anything.*

"Lyra! Please come back," I called, knowing full well that she wouldn't. I wasn't even sure if she could hear me. Surely she was in her room already – I'd heard the door slam.

I made the slow ascent up the stairs and knocked tentatively on her bedroom door. "Lyra? Darling. Please, let's talk some more." I paused and heard nothing. Something grew in the pit of my stomach – some feeling of dread, fearing what I would find on the other side of the door. *But why?* It was just my daughter's room. We argued all the time, and there was nothing different about the argument tonight. But I couldn't shake the feeling that there was some dark energy awaiting me on the other side of the door – something sinister underlining the unnatural silence. No shuffling, no quiet sobs, and certainly no screaming at me to get lost. It wasn't right. "Lyra. Please, I... I'm sorry..." With each soundless second that passed, the dreadful feeling grew stronger.

Something wasn't right. I knew it wasn't. It wasn't like her to avoid me. She never cowered and hid. She always took the opportunity to shout in my face that I was awful. That night shouldn't have been different. *So why is this different?*

I knew what I had to do. Finally, I opened the door.

Lyra was nowhere to be seen. And her window was wide open.

For a moment, I could only take in the scene, wide-eyed and mouth agape, my heartbeat rising into a crescendo. *She said she didn't want to live here anymore. So does that mean she...*

The thought turned into an emergency in just an instant. "Lyrallyn!" I bellowed, hoping she would emerge from some sort of hiding place. *She's never run away before. So she wouldn't do it now, right? "Sweetheart, please come out! I'm sorry!"*

My pleas were met with a horrible silence. I noticed that her closet door was closed, so I yanked it open, clinging desperately to the hope that she was still here – that if I just said the right words or looked in the right places, I would find her and we would continue talking. That I could still fix the relationship. That it wasn't too late.

*"See, darling? There's no monsters in here." I turned around to give my four-year-old daughter a reassuring smile. "You're safe here. I promise, nothing can get in here and hurt you."*

I blinked away the memory, moisture beginning to blur my vision. *When was the last time I cried?*

"She's not here," I whispered to myself. I wasn't ready to give up hope. I left the room, trying to cling to my remaining determination. "Lyra! Please... I care about you more than anything. More than Charlotte. So if that's truly how she makes you feel, then—" I passed by the bathroom and glanced inside.

*I sat beside the bathtub – bath toys were strewn about the room, and the tub was overflowing with bubbles. My three-year-old daughter jumped up, bubbles stacked on top of her head.*

*"More bubbles!" she demanded gleefully.*

*"I think your bath is more bubbles than water by now," I chuckled warmly.*

The memory stung and forced more tears to come from my eyes. *Where did it all go wrong? My daughter is gone now.*

I tried to tell myself that it wasn't a big deal. *Teenagers run away sometimes, right? And they come back, right?* The words in my head didn't reach my tightening throat, or my vibrating heart, or my lead-filled stomach.

*Calm down, calm down.* I pulled out my phone, my finger hovering over the button to call my head guard. I drew in a breath, but as my lungs shook, I found that shame wouldn't let me press the button. I settled for a simple emergency text to him instead: *Lyra is missing. Search everywhere.*

Waiting for my team of guards to respond, I continued my own search, room by room. The memories were unrelenting and only served to torment me, twisting the knife in my chest and reminding me of the child I'd had and lost. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I collapsed on the floor, a sobbing mess, overwhelmed by my failures.

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## Elec

"Elec. Wake up."

I heard the voice, but that was it. I didn't see. I didn't move. I didn't think. I was aware, but just barely.

The awareness only lasted for a brief moment before a blast hit that seemed to tear apart my whole body. Then it ended.

"Elec. Can you hear me?"

The voice again. I still couldn't react to it, but now I recognized it. I wondered what it was.

"Trial failed. Terminating now."

Another blast. If I could have screamed, I might have torn my throat with the force of it. Then I was unconscious again.

"Let's try this again. Elec, stand up."

My head pulsed and throbbed. I had no memories, and no idea who or where I was. The voice I heard around me was terrifying. My whole body ached. The room was dark, but as I squinted, I could make out a shadowy figure ahead of me.

"Last chance. Stand up."

I dreaded the idea of disobeying that voice, but I couldn't move. As hard as I tried, my body refused to act. As I continued to watch the shadowy monster, I was able to make out the shape of a table just in front of him.

"Trial failed. Terminating now."

*No!* I panicked internally, but couldn't do anything. I watched as the figure seemed to move a shadowy hand over the table, then press down on a button.

Another painful blast. Then I blacked out once more.

"Trial begin."

I awoke with a start, desperate to avoid another blast. I resolved to do whatever I could to obey.

"Elec. Stand up now."

With all the strength I could possibly muster, I dragged myself to my feet. I stumbled forward and bumped up against a glass wall. It was then that I realized I was in a glass case. I braced myself against the wall, trying not to get knocked over by the overwhelming nausea crashing through my aching body. My head swam.

"Very good, Elec!" the voice cheered patronizingly. "Looks like the modifications I made to you are finally starting to work. Alright now, speak."

I heard his command, but I struggled to process it. My head felt like it was going to explode.

"Elec. One more chance. Speak now."

I opened my mouth slowly, but couldn't find the strength to produce any words.

"I'm getting very tired of this, Elec." The voice sounded dangerous. "Trial failed. Terminating now."

Panic coursed through me as I watched him reach for the button again.

"Wait!" I cried, out loud this time, as fear forced the word out of my mouth.

The shadowy man froze. "What was that, Elec?"

I gasped for breath. I felt so weak, so exhausted, and so terrified.

"I'm going to lose my temper with you, Elec," he growled. "I asked you, what was that?"

"I... I can speak," I panted.

He stood still for a long time, then brought his hand down on the table so quickly I couldn't protest again.

A shriek ripped out of my mouth as the blast knocked me to my knees. This time, there was no blackout. The waves of pain just kept coming. By the time it was over, I was doubled over, kneeling on the floor, heaving for air. And I was still awake. Eventually, most of the pain subsided.

"I...didn't black out," I gasped.

"That's because that one wasn't a reset, Elec," he hissed. "That was a punishment. Yes, I see that you can speak. What I want to know is, why it took you so long. How many times have I ordered you to speak? And you ignored all my commands. You seem to greatly misunderstand your place." He reached for the table once more.

"Please, no!" I begged.

He froze once more. "Please?" A faint chuckle emerged. "I guess you're learning. If you can behave, I'll let you out of your enclosure. Do you think you can behave?"

I didn't even think I could move. Not yet strong or brave enough to even think of making a snarky comment, I offered only a humble reply. "Yes."

Without a word, he reached for the table again. I flinched, but instead of getting hit by another shock, I watched as the glass in front of me slid open.

"Do you know who I am, Elec?" he asked.

I didn't. But I could probably guess. "You're my master."

"That's right," he said. "Not only that, but I'm your creator. And for that reason, you are to obey me. My name is Lord Seness.

My mind swam. *He...created me?*

"I created you to be my servant," he continued. "You are to do as I say, and carry out my orders. I have created you to be ruthless and sadistic. I have designed you to be incredibly strong and powerful, even more so than anything else alive today."

*That sounds like a stretch,* I wanted to say, but kept my mouth shut.

"Above all, you are to be loyal to me, and me alone," Lord Seness declared. "If you fail on any of these measures, I will bring you back here to reset you again, and I will correct your errors."

I felt the threat in my bones. I could never know what he did to me while I was blacked out, but I knew I didn't want it to happen. I knew I could only obey. "Yes, Lord Seness."

"Rise to your feet, Elec. I'm going to assign you your first job."

Much of the pain and nausea was gone by now. The longer I was awake, the better I felt. I complied with the request and stood up.

"I have in my possession the most powerful beast alive," Lord Seness explained. "It's stronger than even me. You are designed to be stronger than even this beast – you must tame and subdue it."

*Starting off easy, I see.* "You want me to tame the most powerful beast alive? How am I supposed to do that?"

He raised a hand, and I stumbled back so clumsily that I almost fell over. Fortunately, nothing happened – it must have just been a warning. He grinned. "You will need to use your special ability. I will show you how. Let's just hope you're able to manage. We wouldn't want to have to bring you back here, right?"

A chill passed through me. "Yes, Lord Seness."

"Very good." Lord Seness turned around. "Let's get started."

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Lyra

"Father!" I cried, attempting to see in the dimly lit room I had landed in. Everything felt hard, damp, and cold. Had he...sent me here somehow? Would he really do that? Where was I? Was I in the castle dungeon?

"Father, please!" I wailed. "I don't know where I am. Come get me!"

"Your father can't hear you."

I turned toward the source of the words and found a shadowy man whose body seemed to match the hand that had floated in front of me in my room. I froze. Shadows swirled around him, engulfing and obscuring his



body so that I could hardly see it at all – but I could tell that he was floating off the floor and seemed to have tentacles instead of legs. By far the most visible part of him were his eyes - they glowed a bright, blood red. His hands were held out at his sides, and looked like they weren't connected to his body.

A million questions swirled around my head, but I knew I didn't have time to ask them. I gathered all the courage I could muster to bark out a simple command: "Send me back!"

"Send you back?" His head tilted to the side. "But I thought you didn't want to live there anymore."

Terror struck me like lightning, pinning me in place. *So he was listening? Was he hiding inside the castle the whole time?*

"Look, I don't know who you are, but you're making a grave mistake," I warned him with boldness I did not feel. "You don't know who you're messing with. When my father finds out—"

"Do you really think your father will care if you've gone missing? Hasn't he been plotting to get rid of you this entire time?"

His words shook my false bravado. *How long was he listening?* It didn't matter. "Regardless of my father, you don't want to mess with me! I'm the most powerful being alive today!" I lifted my head. "I'm a fairy!"

"Yes, I know." He reached a shadowy hand toward me. "Now are you going to share your magic with me willingly, or should I take it by force?"

My blood ran cold, and I had to remind myself that I had the upper hand. "You'd better not try anything – I'm much stronger than you. I could kill you!"

"You've never tried any sort of combat with your magic before."

I didn't have time to wonder how he knew that. "It doesn't matter. I'm still stronger. You just got lucky sneaking up on me like that before!" His hand crept closer, and when it was within reach, I swung my fist at it. It disappeared.

"So, you're not going to cooperate with me. That's fine. You'll learn to cooperate eventually." With those cryptic words, the shadowy man disappeared, leaving me in the dark room by myself.

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## Asa

"In the days since Princess Lyra's disappearance, King Asa still has not commented publicly, although we have received messages from the castle," the newscaster announced. "Officials want to clarify that their intention is not to attempt to force Princess Lyra to return home, but instead to verify that she is safe. If you have any information on where the princess may be, please call the number on the screen."

*So this is what it's come to,* I thought wearily, pacing the castle grounds as I watched the broadcast on my phone. *Inviting the whole kingdom to spy on my adult daughter for me, just for my peace of mind.* I doubted

whether I was doing the right thing by searching for her, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she was in danger – that I needed to find her.

The bright, sunny day felt indifferent to my plight. Lush green trees adorned the courtyard, offering shade for the finely-dressed nobles who filled the space. Their excited chatter buzzed around my ears like persistent insects, as if this were just another social gathering, without a trace of concern in their tones. The warmth of the sun radiated on my skin, trying to warm me up, but the cold inside was too overwhelming.

I paced around the courtyard, hoping to be ignored by the crowd of people who had made their way in. I had hardly slept since the night she left. At first, it was only the police and my guards that I allowed in; today was the first day that I agreed to allow visitors – nobles with high statuses who claimed to want to check on me. In reality, they just wanted to gawk at my misery. I agreed to let them in for just one day, in the hopes that they would get bored with the whole ordeal and leave me alone afterwards.

Once I had managed to peel myself off the floor after Lyra went missing, I embarked on a series of phone calls to anyone I could think of who may have seen her. Unfortunately, this only served to draw more attention than I would have liked from the wrong people – and that's who was milling around my courtyard now. I was overwhelmed and exhausted. I was drained, mentally, physically, and emotionally – and this was only the beginning.

"Asa!" One voice stood out above the crowd's fascinated clamoring. I looked over to see my fiancée, Charlotte, approaching me.

I forced a smile, but seeing her only prompted mixed feelings within me. Normally, I would have been happy to see her, but having just argued with Lyra over her certainly dampened my enthusiasm. Especially with Lyra's disappearance immediately after.

"Oh, Asa, you look horrible! Just terrible!" Charlotte placed a hand on my face.

I smiled sadly. "It's kind of you to come, Charlotte. I just haven't been able to rest since Lyra—"

"Honestly, I just don't know why you allow this." Her tone was gentle, but the words melted the smile off my face.

"Allow what?"

She shook her head, her eyes soft. "Asa, don't you think you're being..." Her face fell into a slight grimace, as if hesitating to push the thought out. "...used?"

"Used?" I immediately didn't like where this was going.

"Asa..." Charlotte's soft, comforting hand slid down my shoulder. "I know how much you love your daughter. I know you're worried about her. But this is all normal for a teenager – they act out for attention all the time. You're feeding right into it. Don't worry, Asa, she'll come back on her own." Her smile slowly returned. "And in the meantime, we can enjoy some time alone."

The suggestion shocked me, and I tried to make sense of it. "What did you just—"

"She's okay, Asa. She'll come back," Charlotte insisted. "But for now, we can take advantage of the chance to see what our future together will be like. Just you and me, alone, no one else around to hover over us."

My stomach clenched as the pieces all started clicking into place. I bit back the urge to vomit, or cry, or both. Lyra had been telling the truth.

*I thought she was just acting out, out of jealousy. I thought she just resented change. I thought it was my job to stand firm and hold the line. I thought...*

The beginnings of a blind rage stirred up inside me. *I have to hold it together.* I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth.

"Get. Out."

"Excuse me?" I opened my eyes to see Charlotte with a hand to her mouth as it hung wide open, her eyes wide with false innocence. "Why would I leave? Isn't this to be my home, too? Weren't we just talking about me moving in—"

"Forget that and get out right now!"

My outburst had drawn the attention of everyone around us in the courtyard. Charlotte looked around, clearly embarrassed, then glared back at me. "Asa. I understand you're going through a difficult—"

"Leave! Now!" I didn't want to hear her rambling nonsense. I just wanted her gone.

"...So I will forgive this temporary lapse in—"

"I said *go*, Charlotte! My only lapse in judgment was believing you over Lyra."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on now, Asa. Don't be so dramatic. Calm down, we'll handle this together. She's probably just acting out because the wedding is so close. But we can't let her derail our plans."

I pinched my eyes closed, trying not to lose what was left of my temper.

"Just think!" she went on. "In just a few weeks, we'll be married, and—"

"No," I growled. "There will be no wedding. I will never marry you."

"Asa!" I opened my eyes and saw her visibly stewing. "Think past your anger and consider what you're actually saying. You don't really mean—"

"Yes, I do." I crossed my arms. "And I will be sure that when Lyra comes home, she comes back to a home where she is loved and welcomed, and I'm realizing now that that will never include you. Now *leave!*"

"Fine," Charlotte hissed. "But don't say I didn't try to talk some sense into you. You'll come back to your senses eventually, and when you do, don't bother trying to come crawling back to me." In a huff, she turned and marched off.

As she left, I was left with a faint feeling of peace and relief, on top of all the anger, guilt, and emptiness I felt. I couldn't even process the conversation we'd just had. I was just too tired.

What little peace I did have didn't last long.

"Oh, for the love of— Get a *grip*, Asa!" The voice of misery blasted toward me.

"Oh my *word*," I whispered, covering my face briefly before turning to face him. "How kind of you to come show your support, Father."

"Will you not be satisfied until you've sabotaged your entire life?" My father asked. "Go ahead, blow up that relationship, just like you blow up every relationship, because you *hate everyone*."

I scowled. The last thing I wanted was to get drawn into an argument with my father, but my remaining pride would not resist it. "I don't—"

"Oh really? Then where's your wife?" he demanded. "Your fiancée? Your daughter? When was the last time you saw your older brother? Or that fake son of yours, or his mother, your 'best friend'?"

Each person that he listed, now gone from my life, felt like a twist of knife. I glared into the narrowed eyes sinking into his withered face, scrambling to think of a way to refute him — but I soon found that I didn't have to.

"I'm right here."

Her voice was like a sword, cutting through the tense atmosphere as she approached. I whirled around and found myself face to face with my best friend in the world — the one who I hadn't seen in months.

"Raysha!" I greeted her warmly, torrents of shock, relief, joy, and guilt all fighting for space within my heart.

She did not acknowledge me, giving my guilt an edge. "It's so wonderful to see you again, Leland." She smiled at my father - an empty expression that did not reach her eyes.

"Raysha! I wasn't expecting to see you here!" He stroked his chin.

Her unfriendly smile grew. "And why would that be?"

"Well, I just thought that Asa had told you—"

"It's so kind of you to worry about Asa," she cut in, "but he can manage his relationships on his own."

*So she's defending me? She's actually defending me?* This wouldn't be unusual for Raysha to do, if it weren't for our estrangement.

"Ha!" he laughed. "Haven't you seen—"

"Lily feared commitment," she interrupted once more. "Charlotte only wanted the throne. I'm sure Lyra will be home soon. Your older son is a jerk. My son will stop by later. And I'm right here."

I noticed the hidden gem in her statement, and I didn't intend to let it pass. I pushed through the tension to force my question out. "Did you say Oliver will—"

"What did you say about my oldest son!" my father boomed, ruining my chance.

"He's a jerk, and so are you," she said. "What are you even doing here? I know you didn't come to look for Lyra."

My father crossed his arms. "I'm here to speak with my youngest son, since he clearly has no idea how to manage his own life."

My rage spiked once more. He was right, but he of all people had no right to say it. "You're one to—"

"Oh, come off it, Asa." He glared. "It's not my fault you turned out like this. Just look at your brother. You could have been like him. And if you had just raised your daughter the way I raised you both—"

The thought made my chest want to explode. "I would never *abuse* my daughter the way you—"

"Abuse? Ha! Asa, stop being so soft. You've always been much too dramatic."

I was so furious, I could hardly see straight. "You—!"

"Enough!" Raysha's voice crashed over the argument, throwing us all into silence. "Leland. I do believe it is time for you to leave."

"I believe you're right. I won't stand for this any longer." My father turned away, then cast one final glower in my direction. "Just remember before you go moping about as you always do, Asa, that you brought all this upon yourself." Finally, he skulked off, following Charlotte's footsteps.

*Well, that's one thing he's right about,* I thought, noticing my racing heart while my fury died down.

Raysha and I were left alone together, and I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye. My father was right about one more thing: I was shocked that she would show up. Finally, I forced myself to meet her gaze. "You actually came."

"Of course I did." Her face was smiling, but her eyes were intense. "Why are you so surprised?"

"You didn't answer the phone when I called you last night."

"No," she agreed, "but I listened to the voicemail. I came to tell you that I haven't seen Lyra."

*Is that really the reason?* "Well, thank you," I replied. "You could have just called—"

"...And to tell you that I'm not surprised she ran away." Her smile was gone, and Raysha's expression was cold and serious. Her words were like a slap to the face, but a well-deserved one.

"I'm surprised..." I mumbled. "I'm surprised...that it took her this long..." Once again, my eyes burned and watered, and I covered my face. I'd never been one to cry, but things were certainly changing.

"Asa. Asa!" Surprise was evident in her voice. I had always been cold, stoic, unemotional, unfeeling...or so people saw me. But I was just so tired, and it hurt so bad. My life was falling apart around me, and things couldn't possibly get any worse. At least, that's what I thought at the time. I didn't know what would come later.

"Asa, pull yourself together!" she insisted.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I felt a kind, gentle hand on my shoulder. "Well. At least you actually care again, like the Asa I've known for many years now. Not like the Asa I've come to know over the past year."

I uncovered my face. "I didn't mean what I said before."

She smiled coyly. "About what?"

"You know what I mean."

"I want you to say it."

I sighed. "I'm sorry I said I wanted nothing to do with you anymore. I didn't mean it."

"There you go!" She patted me encouragingly once again. "Now just apologize to Lyra that way—"

"If I get the chance," I mumbled.

"Don't worry, Asa," she said. "You know Lyra. She has a temper. She can be dramatic. Just like you."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, she turned out just like me. I should apologize to her for that too."

"There you are!" Raysha laughed. "There's that sarcastic sense of humor we all know and love."

There was one thing I still wasn't willing to let go. "Did you say Oliver will be stopping by later?"

"Ah, well." She smiled sadly. "Maybe not today. But I'm going to encourage him to come visit you soon. He misses you, Asa, I know he does. Just like I miss Lyra. And without her here for him to bicker with, he'll have no excuse not to stop by."

A faint chuckle escaped my lips. I felt guilty for laughing at Lyra's absence, but at the same time, it felt like a relief to find some humor in the dark situation.

"I always thought the two of them would grow out of it," I mused, "but they can't be together for two minutes without fighting."

"You want to know a secret?" She grinned. "I think he misses her, too."

I laughed again – a real laugh this time. “I’d like to see him admit to *that*! Or for her to admit to missing him.”

Her warm smile grew, and she gave me one last pat on the arm. “It’s good to see you feeling better, Asa.”

I smiled back. For just a moment, it was like the dark cloud over me had lifted. “Thanks for coming, Raysha. Truly. It means a lot to me.”

Somehow, she was able to make me feel like everything would be okay.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Lyra

I couldn’t tell how long I had been in the dark room for the first stretch. You could have told me it had been hours, days, or weeks, and I would have believed you. The floor and walls were all cement, with no cracks or openings to be found. An unrelenting chill persisted throughout the room and permeated through my body, with no apparent options for relief; my hands were too cold to warm my arms by rubbing them. There was a damp smell, and the cement around me felt slightly moist, leading me to fear that I might fall ill if I didn’t find a way out soon. The ceiling was so high that I couldn’t even see it from the floor; it was obscured by a light source that I couldn’t quite identify. This had led me to believe, initially, that I may be able to simply fly away, but I sadly found that I did indeed reach a ceiling eventually. The light source was just a glowing yellow orb; seemingly some kind of magical object.

There were a few more instances where the shadowy man returned and tried to grab me, but I evaded his grasp each time. I had no idea what he wanted with me, but I imagined it was related to the chains on the wall, and I did not want to find out exactly what he intended. All I could think about were the stories my father had told me about the first three fairies, and the realization that I was about to meet a similar fate.

He did, however, leave some sort of drink behind each time. Its consistency was like a milkshake, and it tasted like nothing. Yes, I drank it – although I was worried it could have been drugged or poisoned, I became so desperately hungry and thirsty that I stopped caring. So I drank it. Nothing bad happened – it seemed to keep me alive.

The end of the first stretch of time alone in the cell was marked by a glimmer of hope – an opening.

It happened while I was curled up in the corner, wishing for a way to fight off the cold. The room started to rumble, ever so slightly. Just barely. I was convinced that the floor was about to open up and swallow me, so I summoned my wings and flew about ten feet into the air, then waited in a corner while I watched to see what the room would do.

To my great surprise, a long vertical opening appeared in the wall across from me, as the wall pulled itself apart, creating a doorway.

This was my chance! I wouldn't wait to see what else would happen. I wouldn't let the opportunity pass. I darted toward the opening as fast as my wings could carry me.

Unfortunately, they couldn't carry me quite fast enough. In the time it took for me to cross the room, a man – not the shadowy man, a new one – had entered through the new doorway and stood just inside the room, chains in his hands. I collided with him at full speed, throwing him to the floor with myself on top of him. The chains that had been in his hands were thrown several feet away and hit the floor with a loud clang. The opening slammed shut behind him, and just like that, my opportunity was gone.

As I tried to comprehend all that had just happened in one short moment, I stared, bewildered, into the face of the man beneath me, and was met with an equally bewildered gaze back at me. At first glance, I had assumed he was human, but now that I looked into his glowing yellow eyes, I realized that he wasn't – not quite, anyway.

"Are you..." he began to ask, sounding breathless, before he trailed off, seemingly trying to process something he just couldn't understand.

I wouldn't wait for him to find his thoughts. "I am going to *kill you* unless you let me out of here." I grabbed his neck. I felt my power coursing through me, lending me strength. This man was almost twice my size, but I knew he was no match for me. The strength of a fairy is unparalleled.

His face fell into a glower, and his eyes seemed to glow brighter. Without replying, he grabbed my arms forcefully. Unwilling to be intimidated, I began to squeeze on his neck. The air around me felt off, as if it was filled with static electricity. I ignored it, assuming it was some sort of adrenaline rush.

A surge of electricity hit my arms where he was holding them. I howled in pain – the shock felt like it was filling my entire body. I released my grip on his neck and was quickly flung across the room. The force with which I hit the hard floor hurt almost as much as the shock.

I laid there, gasping for breath, and watched as the man stood up, picked up the chains, and towered over me. Trembling, I could only remain in place and take in the sight. He was certainly tall – taller than my father, even – and wide-chested. His dark, wavy hair framed his pale face in a way that made him look almost undead and fell at his shoulders. His color was...off. It looked like a human skin tone, but was almost gray. He looked young for the most part, but something about his grayish hue made him look ancient. His eyes were piercing yellow and emitted a light similar to the one on the ceiling. As he stood in front of me, I could see sparks and arches of electricity circling his arms.

He reached an arm out toward me, his open palm facing me, and I realized he was preparing for another attack. I knew I had to find my energy and move. My wings had receded at the shock, but I summoned them once more and launched myself into the air. He paused for a moment, seeming somewhat taken aback, which gave me my chance.

I didn't know how to use my magic to attack. I knew how to use it to increase my physical strength to superhuman levels, far stronger than anyone else, but it was clear that brute force alone wouldn't be enough to save me.



All I had ever used my magic for was music. I knew how to manipulate sound waves, to control them, change them, and redirect them. I could create the most beautiful music, but maybe I could try to use sound to defend myself. I always moved sound waves gently, understanding that when wielded improperly, they could hurt people.

That seemed to be the key here. I raised my hand swiftly, aiming for the area just around his head, and created a loud, shrill ringing, booming around his ears.

He dropped the chains once more as his hands flew to his ears. He doubled over and stumbled back, and I took advantage of his state of weakness. Once again – on purpose, this time – I flew into him as hard as I could and knocked him over. Before he had a chance to react, I grabbed his wrists, gathered all the strength I could muster, twisted them around, and pinned his hands to the floor, palms down. He struggled against me, and I realized he was alarmingly strong. He was almost strong enough to pull out of my grip, which should have been impossible. As the most powerful being alive, there shouldn't have been anyone even remotely as strong as me. *What is this guy?*

Nevertheless, he couldn't quite prevail. I could feel an electrical buzzing from his wrists, but I persisted, not letting his palms leave the floor.

"You can't shock me from this angle, can you?" My question seemed only to enrage him, as he kicked up his legs and began thrashing around, trying to throw me off of him. I quickly pulled my knee up into his neck and pressed it in hard. "Stop struggling or I'll crush your windpipe!"

It took him a moment to obey my command; he continued to struggle against me, but as I began to add pressure with my knee, he finally relented and stopped moving. His glare deepened and mouth was pulled into a snarl, making him look like a cornered animal. I pulled my knee back, just a little bit, panting and trembling.

"Who are you?" I demanded, trying to still my shaking hands.

He maintained a silent glare for long enough that I didn't think he would answer me. He seemed to be mentally calculating – determining what his best course of action was. When I decided that he was maintaining his silence for too long, I started pushing down with my knee once more, only releasing the pressure again when a low growl emerged through his gritted teeth. "No one," he finally said.

"Don't give me that bullshit."

"I don't have an identity."

"Then where did you come from?"

His glare persisted, yet in a way seemed less furious and more annoyed – as if I were simply pestering him. "I came from here."

"If you're going to keep giving me non-answers—"

"I don't have a better answer for you. It's the truth." His mouth twitched as if he was fighting something inside himself. "My name is Elec. That's the best I can tell you."

I noticed then that the buzzing on his wrists had stopped, and the glow in his eyes had dimmed. They were still a striking yellow, but didn't seem to emit nearly as much light as they had before. "Are you human, Elec?"

"It's complicated."

"If the answer isn't yes, then it's no," I said.

"I guess not then."

"So what are you then?"

"It's complicated."

I gave a frustrated sigh. "You're being difficult."

Another long silence entered between us before his angry expression became tinted with despair. Even so, he didn't offer any other answers. I wondered if he even knew.

For a moment I felt bad for him. I almost got off of him, before I reminded myself of the way he had attacked me just minutes ago. "What are you doing here, then?"

He tilted his head slightly, calculating once more, but seemed somewhat resigned now, the threat of my knee remaining at his neck. "I was sent here to subdue you."

"By the shadowy guy?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. His name is Lord Seness. That's all I know."

I leaned in closer. "Is he your dad or something?"

"I guess you could say that. Sure."

"Did he create you?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"It's complicated. And I'm not sure."

"I'm not getting anywhere with you," I sighed. "Can you let me out of here, Elec?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't."

"Just open the door and let me out!"

"I can't open the door!" he growled. "Only Lord Seness can open the door. In a few hours he's going to teleport in here. If you're chained up, great, we can proceed to the next step. If not, *I'm screwed.*"

Once again, a pang of sympathy hit. Elec clearly wasn't the mastermind – he was a terrified servant obeying orders. "Elec."

"What."

"I'm going to let you up," I said. "But if you try anything, you're going to be even more screwed than if Seness gets ahold of you."

"I doubt that," he scoffed dryly. "But fine. I won't do anything."

Slowly, cautiously, I let go of his wrists and crawled off of Elec. I sat on the floor across from him and studied him. He sat up and stared right back at me – still frowning, calculating, but no longer looking quite so dangerous.

"You're in just as much danger as I am," I observed. "Aren't you?"

He tilted his head thoughtfully, not offering an answer.

"Do you know what he wants with me?"

His eyes drifted to the wings still present on my back. "Your magic."

Instinctively, I released my wings, letting them disappear in a puff. "He wants my magic?"

Elec gave a single nod. "He wants to harvest it."

The word 'harvest' made me shudder. It just sounded so...sinister. Inhuman. "And you're here to help him do that?"

"That's the plan," he muttered.

"Is that what you want?" I asked.

For the first time, he smiled. It wasn't a true smile, though – it seemed to taunt me. "I don't *want* anything except to obey Lord Seness. Otherwise—"

"He'll kill you?" I interrupted.

He paused. "In a sense. But he'll bring me back and reset me. I'll be different. I'll be stronger."

His words unnerved me. *Who could this Seness guy be, that he could have power over Elec's life and death like that?* "And if I kill you?"

"Same thing," he answered glibly. "You won't get out of here. He'll just remake me and send me in again. And I won't lose the next time."

I frowned deeply. *Could it really be so hopeless?*

We were at a stalemate. There was no way for either of us to win.

"If you help me escape..." I began carefully, "you can come with me."

His eyebrows flew up so quickly, it seemed they would hit the ceiling. His tilted head straightened, then tilted back down in the other direction. "Go...with you?"

"Don't you want to get away from Seness?" I asked. Elec looked away. He seemed deep in thought. "You help me by getting me home, and I'll help you to get away from him."

Elec's face twitched, clearly struggling with the idea. "I can't open the door. I told you that." I could see him tensing up as he considered the idea even more. "I don't even know your name, and you want me to risk my life for you?"

"You're going to die either way, aren't you?" I reminded him. "You can't subdue me. Either I'll kill you, or Seness will kill you for failing. Why not try another way?" I paused. "And my name is Lyra."

"I'm dead either way." He laughed – a dark, hopeless laugh. "Alright, Lyra." He finally looked at me again. "I guess I have no choice. But I still can't open the door."

"So what, then? We just ambush him when he comes in?" I suggested.

Elec shook his head. "He's going to teleport in. He won't open the door. And I don't think our ambush would work. I think he'd kill us *both*."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" I demanded.

"Yes. I'll have to chain you up." He watched me expectantly.

"You're trying to trick me! It won't work!"

"I'm not trying to trick you." He pointed to the chain tethered to the wall. "I bet you can break it."

"You think I can...?" I stood up, crossed the room to the chain he had pointed at, and picked it up. I yanked on it as hard as I could, and sure enough, a link burst, leaving me with one strand of chain in my hand, and the remainder still attached to the wall.

Elec stood up and picked up the chains he had dropped. "Let me chain you up," he insisted. "You'll be able to break free later. We just need for Lord Seness to think that I won. Then we'll both survive today, and I can figure out how to get you home."

I considered his suggestion carefully. It felt like a trap. I knew now that I could break the chain, but... "What if the chains you're holding are stronger?"

He held them out to me. "Want to check?"

I accepted one from him, holding a piece of it in each of my hands, and pulled it apart as hard as I could. I felt it beginning to break. I stopped just before it did. If they were all broken, the plan couldn't work. "I... I guess it's fine..." I looked at him warily.

He took the chain back from me. "Sit down right there."

I hesitated. *Am I really going to do this? What if it's a trap? Do I really have a choice? What if what he said is true? What if there's no way for me to escape on my own?*

"Lyra." Desperation was written all over his face. "Please just help me. I'll get you home alive. I promise I'll get you home."

I relented. I knew that I had no other choice. Neither of us had any other choice. Finally, I sat down, and let him chain me to the wall.

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## Asa

"Are you sure you want to proceed with the interviews? Given the...circumstances?" My head guard stood before me, a nervous look on his face.

I shot him a glare. "Remind me of the circumstances, Reko?"

"Well, Princess Lyra... She..." He faltered. He knew where I would go with this. He knew why I was angry. "She's been missing for over a week, and..."

"And despite having a fully staffed team of guards on the premises, none of them saw her leave? Not a single one? Is that what you were going to say?" I crossed my arms.

Reko hesitated. He was normally so confident, the only one of my staff willing to stand up to me, that I almost felt guilty seeing him in this state. Almost. "Be that as it may, I don't see why now would be a good time to hire a bodyguard for her."

"Because I need someone to be responsible for her safety, and nothing but her safety," I said. "When Lyra comes home, I need to have someone here who will protect her." I frowned. *I should have done this ages ago. Maybe then I wouldn't have lost her. Maybe then someone would know where she went. Just one of the many ways I have failed her.* I sighed deeply. "I can't do anything about her going missing, Reko. Nothing more than

I've already done. I have the whole kingdom searching for her, and there's nothing more for me to do. But I can at least do this for her."

"Your Majesty," Reko began cautiously, "I want you to know how deeply sorry I am that none of my men or women saw her leave. But—" My glare deepened, stopping him in his tracks. Yet, he persisted. "But you know, Lyra has always been a clever young woman. She easily could have snuck out in a way that no one could have noticed."

"If your people can't even notice a fairy with glowing, shimmering wings flying over the castle grounds, then how in the world am I supposed to trust you all to defend my home against an intruder!" I huffed. "You're claiming that she's too stealthy? How much stealthier do you think an intruder would be?"

"That's not what I meant!" Reko exclaimed hastily. "Lyra is an adult, and she's not a prisoner being held here against her will. She can come and go as she pleases. Of course we would let her leave without stopping her. We don't know that she flew off over the castle grounds – she could have walked straight out the door, and no one would have thought anything of it. That's probably why no one noticed her leaving."

I looked away and stewed silently. He was right. She was an adult who could leave any time she wanted. And yet... "It's not just that she left, Reko. It's that she left without telling anyone and hasn't come back. I don't even know if she's alive."

"I'm sure she's alive," he said softly. We both remained silent for a long time. "I have the names of the final candidates. The interviews are all scheduled. The first one is this afternoon. I just wanted to make sure you didn't want to reschedule."

"Who are they?"

"Let's see." He consulted a clipboard I hadn't realized he was holding. "Matilda H. Pryde. She impressed us with her long history of defending noble families. Finn J. Lawson. We contacted his references, and they raved about his combat skills. Isa B. Hawke. She has a unique background in magical combat. And..." He paused, clearly puzzled.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't remember interviewing this guy."

"What do you mean?" I made my annoyance known with my tone of voice.

"I-I mean, it's been a chaotic week, and it feels like it's been so long since we interviewed these people... I'm sure he must have been good to make the list," Reko insisted. "Let's see... His name is Elec T. Richards, and I noted that he has unprecedented magical combat abilities, the likes of which no intruder could ever contend with. He's the one coming in this afternoon."

"Very well," I replied. "I'll be ready to meet him."

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Elec

I sat on the floor across from the chained-up girl, my heart beating out of control. I had come *this close* to failing my mission completely and facing punishment from Lord Seness. Now I found myself in a deal with the very beast I had been sent to control. She had claimed she would help me to find a life outside of Lord Seness' control. In the short time I had been alive, I hadn't dared to dream of such a life. Yet the question remained – could I trust her?

Her appearance had truly caught me off guard. Lord Seness had prepared me for a beast – instead, I had encountered a young woman. I had expected a monster with a huge body, a head crowned with horns, and bloodshot eyes. It took me some time to process what she really looked like – her long, curly brown hair and bright green eyes on a small, pale frame.

"I wonder if this would have happened if I hadn't argued with my father," Lyra mused, forlorn. "I told him that I didn't want to live with him anymore. That's when Seness took me – when I stormed off."

"He was going to take you one way or another, Lyra. You just gave him a great opening."

She frowned at me. "So you're saying he was watching me?"

I smiled ruefully. "He's everywhere, Lyra." The realization hit me like a lightning bolt, and my eyes widened. *Was he watching me agree to betray him? Can I play it off as a manipulation tactic?*

In truth, I still wasn't sure if it actually was a manipulation tactic or not. For now, it was just a way to buy myself some time while I decided what to do. Either let Lord Seness know that I wasn't strong enough to overpower her, or betray the man who had created me. *How could I make such an impossible choice?*

While I was mentally rehearsing how I would explain myself to my master, I found that my time was cut short by his sudden appearance in a burst of shadows. I scrambled to my feet.

"Elec!" he greeted me, with more enthusiasm than I had ever heard from him. "You did it! You actually managed to overcome the beast!"

I flashed him a confident grin and nodded in her direction. "She's not going anywhere."

"Oh, I'll make sure of that," he chuckled darkly, pulling a small device out of his shadows. In a flash, he teleported to Lyra's side, grabbed her arm quickly and, before she even had a chance to pull away, pressed the device into her wrist.

I heard a small click just before Lyra let out a wail, grabbing her wrist with a pained expression. While she was distracted, Lord Seness grabbed her other arm and pressed another one into her remaining wrist. She screamed, swinging at him wildly until he teleported away and reappeared beside me.

I watched the whole thing, wide-eyed and alarmed. "What *are* those?"

"They're modified magic inhibitors," he said. We both watched as she struggled against her chains, still screaming. It looked like she was trying to break through them. She couldn't do it. "Usually, the police use these on magic-using prisoners to prevent them from using magic. Mine are a little different." He grinned. "Instead of blocking the magic, mine harvests it. It steals it from her and sends it instantly to a storage tank in my lab."

"So..." I watched her continue to struggle. "...She can't use magic now?"

"Well, she *can*," he replied. "But now it's much more difficult. It's a painful process, fighting against my inhibitors. It makes her a lot weaker."

"I see." I could hear my heart beating in my ears. She couldn't break out of the chains now. She couldn't use her magic to give her enough strength. "Did you...listen in while I was fighting her?"

"Don't you think I have better things to do?" he scoffed. "No, I wasn't listening. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," I mumbled.

"Well, I didn't create you for your curiosity." He raised an arm, and the door in the wall opened up. "Meet me in the lab. We have more to discuss." With that, he teleported away.

Once again, I was alone with Lyra. Just me, her, and the open door. I looked at the door. Then I looked at her.

She was screaming wildly, and I couldn't tell if it was pain or rage. From the look on her face, I suspected both. She looked like a deranged animal, ready to tear me apart.

I turned around and ran out the door, listening to it slam shut behind me.

"You could have warned me." I glared at Lord Seness once I arrived at his lab. "You didn't say she was a girl."

"Does it matter?" Lord Seness didn't look at me. He was focused on something on his computer.

"Well, I was certainly caught off guard," I replied. "I didn't expect her to be as strong as she was, by the looks of her."

Suddenly he whirled toward me with an air of hostility, and I flinched. "That was your first mistake, boy. You should have known better than to underestimate her. I told you that you would be fighting the most powerful magical beast in all the land, didn't I?"

"Well, yes, but--"

"So then, what? You didn't believe me once you saw her?" I shrunk under his glare. I couldn't think of an answer that wouldn't feed his anger.

"I had my doubts," I confessed, and was immediately met with a blow to the head, which nearly knocked me over.



“Stupid boy,” he grumbled, turning back to his computer. “I don’t even know how you managed to defeat her. You’re on thin ice, Elec. Just one step away from being reset.”

*Don’t I know it.* I knew I hadn’t come out right. I was designed to be a vicious, ruthless, unstoppable, sadistic tormenter. Instead, I was barely holding it together, gripped by anxiety, terrified to step one toe out of line.

“Stop moping around here and get ready for your interview.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What interview?”

“You’re getting a second job, Elec. The king of Betani is searching for a bodyguard for his daughter. Since she’s away for the time being, this bodyguard will train directly with King Asa. Which gives you the perfect opportunity to spy on him.”

“You want me to spy on King Asa? Why?”

“You ask so many questions,” he sighed. “You just never learn. Your job is to obey me unquestioningly.” He glared at me resentfully. “I have reason to believe King Asa will try to track me down when he finds out that I’m operating here. I need you to keep an eye on him. I don’t have time to do it myself. Oh, and do be careful.” He chuckled to himself. “He does have a temper, and makes more enemies than friends. Now *no more questions*. Get ready and go.”

“Yes, sir.” I marched off to my chambers to prepare for a mission I still didn’t understand. As I went, my mind drifted back to Lyra. She was surely still thrashing around in those chains. It seemed like she wouldn’t be able to overpower me again. *So maybe I could get away with disregarding our deal. But why does the idea stress me out even more?* I forced myself to stop thinking of her and focused on my new mission.

If I had realized what was coming, I’m not sure if I would have done it.

---

## Asa

The heart monitor was still beeping in its same predictable rhythm. Lyra continued to lie there, unconscious, just barely alive. *Today, I decided, I will look at her. I will really look at her. I will see what my negligence caused.*

Her skin was pale. So pale. It was like she hadn’t seen the sun in years, even though it had only been a few months. She was so thin. The doctor told me that she was gaining weight – she was now up to 80 pounds.

Her whole body was covered in marks. Scars, cuts, bruises, burn marks, and more. All that I would have expected to heal by now, but hadn’t.

I looked away. I couldn’t bear it anymore. My own baby – I had let this happen to her. I covered my face with my hands while some tears escaped. There was a time when I said I never cried. That was before Lyra had gone missing.

"How's she doing?" I heard Raysha's soft voice and looked to see her standing in the doorway. She wore a sad, compassionate smile.

My voice was barely above a whisper. "Same as she was yesterday."

My closest friend in the world closed the distance between us and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "So she's alive. That's great news."

"It is," I agreed. I glanced at Lyra one more time, and my eyes landed on electrical burns on her arm. My blood boiled. I knew exactly where those had come from – they had come from *him*. The double agent who had fooled me in my very own home.

I turned to Raysha. "Whatever punishment Elec faces is too good for him."

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## Elec

"Elec Tesla Richards." King Asa read my name off his paper, then raised an eyebrow at me. "So you want to be my daughter's bodyguard."

I nodded firmly, seated in the smooth wooden seat across from his desk. "Yes, sir."

In the broad light of the day, King Asa's study was the most brightly lit room I had seen so far. The walls were lined with shelves stuffed with books, and between the shelves were massive floor-to-ceiling windows which let the sun in and revealed a thriving garden just outside.

The king had a look to him that was somehow intimidating, though what exactly that was, I couldn't place. Maybe it was his height – he was a tall guy, almost as tall as me. Maybe it was his sharp green eyes that seemed to look right through me. Maybe it was the way he so confidently showed his age – the creases on his face indicating plenty of experience, and the gray roots growing out of the copper hair which nearly reached his shoulders, and the gray speckling his matching facial hair.

"Well, you clearly must have impressed my head guard to have made it this far." He turned his attention back to his paper. "Your qualifications are impressive on paper... Too impressive." He glanced back at me with a glare. "Aren't you a bit young to have this much experience?"

"I'm flattered that you think so," I chuckled. *What did Seness write?* It was clear to me that he was responsible for my application skipping the first few rounds of interviews and getting straight to the king. I just didn't know how he did it.

Asa held his glare. "I just need to make sure that whoever I hire can protect my daughter. She..." His expression softened. "She went missing recently." His sad eyes drifted to a picture on the wall next to us, and I followed his gaze.

When my eyes landed on the picture, I audibly choked, my heart nearly stopping. The picture on the wall was of Lyra, the girl I had just fought.

*Get it together, get it together, get it together...*

*So this is why Lord Seness wants me here. This is why he thinks King Asa will come after him.* It all made sense now. We were holding the king's daughter, Princess Lyra, as our prisoner.

"Are you quite alright?" King Asa demanded, irritation evident in his voice.

"Yes, I just..." I shook my head and looked back at him. "I just can't believe she went missing. It's so...upsetting." *I thought I only had to worry about Lord Seness or Lyra killing me, but now I have to worry about this king executing me when he finds out what I've done to his daughter.*

"Well, I'm glad you care so much." I thought I saw him roll his eyes, but I couldn't quite tell. "My head guard tells me that you have some significant magical combat abilities. Could you tell me what that means?"

*There it is. That's Lord Seness' plan.* I forced myself to calm down before answering. "Of course I can. But it would be easier if I show you." I glanced around the room for an opportunity, my eyes landing on a tall, simple vase sitting on a small end table along the wall behind where the king sat. *I'll play along with my master's idea.* "Are you attached to that vase over there?"

He raised his eyebrows. "What? Not particularly, but—"

"Great!" I jumped to my feet and held out my hand toward the vase behind him.

The king shook his head. "Wait, Elec, what are you—"

Before he could finish his question, I let out a burst of electricity, destroying the vase.

Asa leapt out of his seat. "What in the world was that!"

I turned to him with a grin. "That was my magical ability."

"No, I mean, what *was* that?" Asa ran a hand through his hair. "I've studied magic, Elec. Possibly more than any other magic scholar I've met. And I've never heard of magic like that. I've seen healing, telekinesis, sonokinesis, teleportation, invisibility, manipulating nature, shapeshifting...I've seen enchantments, potions, and abilities to control plenty of different elements, but I've never heard of someone shooting *lightning* out of their hand!"

I hesitated. *Why did Lord Seness have to make me so suspicious?* "I'm not quite sure what to tell you. This is just the magic I have."

"I see." King Asa leaned forward and looked into my eyes carefully. I suddenly felt exposed – like if he looked closely enough, he would know the truth about everything. His eyes narrowed even further. "I think I know what's going on here."

I stood frozen, keeping absolutely silent. *Don't admit anything, Elec. Whatever you do...*

"You're one of the Obsidian Dominion."

The accusation sounded sharp, but I had no idea what he meant. "I... What?"

"That was Obsidian magic, wasn't it? That's why I haven't heard of it before. It's not legitimate magic." He studied my face closely. "Obsidian magic corrupts the user's body and turns their skin gray. I can't quite tell if that's starting to happen to you. But it would certainly explain that odd glow in your eyes."

"I-I can't help that!" I stammered without thinking. "I'm just... My, uh, father..."

King Asa studied me for another moment, then sighed. "I suppose if you were born with Obsidian magic, you're using it legitimately." He turned around to face his bookshelf, pulled down a book, then placed it in the desk between us. Its title was *The Obsidian Dominion*.

"The original Obsidian Dominion was a group of magic users who lusted for more power, and would do anything to get it. Including hurting other people to steal their magic." He opened the book and flipped to an illustration of a man with deep gray skin. "They would combine different types of magic, creating new types that no one had seen before. The magic they created was more powerful than their bodies could handle, which is what caused the corruption." He flipped through a few more pages, and landed on an illustration of a woman with wings. "The Obsidian Dominion has been around for hundreds of years. We know that one of them captured a fairy once for her magic – the second fairy to ever live. We think the third one was captured by an Obsidian as well, but we're not sure."

Asa closed the book and continued. "They're still around today, though they're smaller in number. They claim that in this modern age, they're no longer willing to steal magic from others. Regardless..." he sighed, "...with my daughter being a fairy, I must remain suspicious."

I stared at the closed book on his desk, completely bewildered. *Is Lord Seness an Obsidian? Am I an Obsidian? Does this explain everything?* "I understand completely," I announced. I didn't know if it was true, but at the very least, I understood his distrust.

"That power of yours is impressive, Elec." I made eye contact with Asa and saw that his glare was still firmly in place. "But you have to understand my hesitation. If you're really an Obsidian—"

"So what if I am?" My heart raced. *How am I going to argue my way out of this one?* "Just because I have Obsidian heritage doesn't mean I want to hurt anyone. I've never stolen magic from anyone."

"Then how did you get those strange powers?"

"I've always had this kind of magic!" I held my hand defensively, as if cradling my magic. "I'm sorry you've never heard of it, but that doesn't make it illegitimate. And it certainly doesn't make me want to hurt people. If anything, it should make you *want* to hire me, since it gives me an edge in protecting your daughter."

Asa stared back at me, eyebrows raised, with a look that reminded me that I was speaking with a king - one who probably wasn't used to getting my kind of attitude. My stomach dropped while I mentally scrambled for a way to explain to Lord Seness how I had managed to screw this up.

“I’ll keep your application under consideration,” Asa finally said, sitting down. “In the meantime, you are dismissed.”

I spent the long, agonizing journey back home silently practicing my script for Lord Seness. *He didn’t like my magic. He thought I was an Obsidian, and wasn’t willing to hire me.* I reminded myself to keep my tone humble, to not argue, and to accept whatever punishment I received. Maybe then it wouldn’t be so bad.

While standing outside his lair, my mouth dry and my hands clammy, I steeled myself for the conversation and reached for the door.

Then my pocket started vibrating. *Oh, right. The communication device Lord Seness gave me.* I pulled out the phone and found that I was getting a call from an unknown number. I answered it.

King Asa’s voice came crackling through the other end. “I’ve decided to take a chance on you.”