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Shane

SHANE FOLLOWED FI down the stairs with more than a little trepidation. She was still trying to wrap her head around everything that had just happened—particularly the part where her partner had apparently been possessed by the spirit of an ancient Witch. Right before the coffin sprang open, Shane could have sworn she saw the image of a golden-haired woman with a kind smile flash over Fi's, but it had been Fi's hands doing the magic.

Watching her, Shane had felt like she was about to lose Fi to magic the same way they had lost Briar Rose. Now, staring at the back of Fi's head, Shane promised all over again that she wasn't going to lose her partner—not to magic, and not to Fi's own ridiculous stubbornness.

The lantern swung back and forth in Shane's hand as they moved down the cramped passageway, the light bobbing over the narrow stairs. Shane had no idea what was waiting for

them at the bottom, but after the dark chamber above, she wasn't getting her hopes up.

Fi stopped abruptly as the steps came to an end, blocking the way as she gaped in awe. Shane gave her a hard nudge. "This is a bad habit of yours," she pointed out. Then Fi moved aside, and Shane was the one left speechless.

They stepped out into sunlight. They had emerged in a niche cut into the wall of a high cliff, and at their feet lay a vast sea of roses. Water trickled down the cavern walls and gushed out of gaps in the sandy white and yellow rocks, forming a clear stream that rushed off the edge of the cliff as a waterfall. Rose vines spilled all around it, trailing down the rock wall as though the whole niche were a hanging basket of flowers. They had passed all the way through the mountain and come out the other side, where the high cliffs cut over a great rushing river that flowed to the southern sea. The air was full of flitting butterflies in a rainbow of colors and dust motes sparkling like gold in the sun. A few songbirds trilled from nests tucked into the walls.

Now Shane understood what Fi had meant when she called this Aurora's *real* tomb. This was the final resting place of a beloved queen.

"There she is," Fi breathed. Shane followed her partner's gaze.

There was no coffin, not even a platform of stone. Aurora's gleaming white skeleton lay in the grass among a tangle of roses and thorns. Green vines twined through the bones, and a haze of yellow butterflies had alighted on the rounded ribs. *Swallowtails*, Shane noted distantly.

Aurora had rested here so long that even her golden hair

was gone, and not a single scrap of her dress remained—only the gems that must have been sewn into the gown, now scattered through her bones like winking stars of sapphire. Her hands lay by her sides, buried in the blooms. On her bone brow rested the golden crown sparkling with the ruby rose.

Shane traded a look with Fi. She couldn't tell yet if the ring was even there, but she knew this was the end of their truce.

Fi seemed to have the same thought. She backed away slowly, curling her rope around one fist. "I don't suppose I could convince you to back off and let me get what I came for."

Shane snorted, sliding into a fighting stance. "Not a chance," she promised, eyeing the ring on the end of Fi's swaying rope. "The treasure is coming back with me, and so are you, whether you want to or not."

Shane locked her hands, cracking her knuckles. It wasn't an empty threat. She was beginning to think it might take a few knocks to the head to make Fi see reason on this subject—or, if that didn't work, Shane was confident that she could drag Fi's unconscious body out of here. One way or the other, she was getting her partner back.

"You can't beat me," she pointed out. Even with the rope, Fi was no match for her.

Fi sighed, swinging the ring up to catch it in her hand. "You're right," she admitted, dropping her gaze. "I could never take you." She took a step forward. "At least . . ." Fi's eyes shot up defiantly. "Not in a fair fight."

Shane saw it coming too late. Fi dropped low, sweeping her leg and taking out Shane at the knees before racing toward the skeleton. All Shane's reservations evaporated as she went

down in the roses and got an armful of thorns. She tore free of the leaves and vines, sprinting after her partner and cursing herself for letting her guard down. She should have expected a cheap shot like that. Fi always had a backup plan.

Flower petals and butterflies scattered as Shane and Fi ran through the hidden garden, birds crying in shrill warning. Fi reached the skeleton first, dropping to her knees in the deep red blooms and stretching out her hands.

Shane launched herself at her partner, tackling her away from the bones and sending them both tumbling into the roses. Fi gasped as Shane's shoulder drove into her stomach, forcing the air out of her lungs. Shane tried to follow up the move, pinning Fi as she had Red, but Fi slid her knee up between them, forcing Shane off with a sloppy kick to her gut.

They both scrambled to their feet. Fi was panting hard, her arms scratched up and bleeding a little. Shane wiped a sleeve across her bleeding knuckles, where the thorns had dug deep into her skin.

"I have a plan to stop the Spindle Witch," Fi said slowly, her eyes boring into Shane.

Shane found that even less convincing the second time. "Yeah, so you said. But does the first part of your plan involve giving her everything she wants? Gambling with countless lives to save *one boy*?"

"If it was Red, you would be doing the same thing," Fi countered, her voice a little desperate.

That thought had occurred to Shane, but so had another one. "And if I did, then it would be your job to stop me from making that mistake." Slowly, she unslung the ax from her back.

Fi's face paled as she studied the weapon, trying to gauge how serious Shane was. "I'll stop it before it goes too far," she promised.

That was the last straw. Shane swung down her ax, burying it into the roses between them. "It's already gone too far!" she shouted. "She's too close to everything she wants. This right here, this is me stopping the Spindle Witch by stopping you."

She'd learned when she first came to Darfell how seductive that little bit of logic was, doing the wrong things for the right reasons. There was no end to how dirty you could get thinking that way—or how fast you could lose control.

"You're on the wrong side, Fi," Shane warned. "Now it's time for you to trust me."

Fi's squeezed her eyes shut like she was in pain. When she opened them, she was smiling, a soft, sad smile that made Shane ache. "I do trust you," she said. "More than you could ever know. That's why I can take this risk. Because I know you'll be there to stop her if I can't."

"That's not the kind of trust I meant!" Shane growled in frustration.

"I know," Fi said, and then all at once she moved, fainting one way and then spinning on her heel to try to get around Shane.

She should have known the same trick wouldn't work twice. Shane used the handle of her ax as a pivot and swung her body into a high kick. She caught her partner right in the chest with full force. Fi gasped in pain as she was thrown backward, skidding through the dirt. A part of Shane cringed, but she forced herself to keep going.

Fi was bent over clutching her chest, but as soon as Shane

got close, she shot up, whipping out her rope. The metal ring hit Shane's shin so hard it buzzed against the bone. Shane gritted her teeth. A few inches higher and the ring would have crushed her knee.

Shane wasn't the only one fighting for real.

Her leg throbbed, but she wasn't going to let that stop her. Before Fi could pull back, Shane stomped down and caught the ring under her foot. Fi jerked forward, still tangled with the rope. She had no chance to wind it back before Shane was on her, smashing her boot into Fi's shoulder.

Fi went down hard. She leveled a kick at Shane's stomach, right at the floating rib—always wickedly clever, but not fast enough. With a silent apology, Shane caught Fi's ankle and flipped her face down into the roses, hearing the other girl hiss as she got a face full of thorns. Fi thrashed, tangled in her own rope, managing to smash one boot out wildly enough to throw Shane off balance and break her grip.

They were right by Aurora's skeleton, close enough that Fi rolled over into the bones as she squirmed away. Shane used the ax to catch her balance while Fi scrambled forward, grabbing the Rose Crown with her free hand. Then Fi leapt to her feet, backing away toward the edge of the cliff.

Shane straightened slowly, her fingers clenched around the ax's worn wooden handle. She didn't know what Fi planned to do with that crown, but she'd lost any chance of escaping. Shane was between her and the only way out.

"It's over," she said, resting the ax against her shoulder.

"It is," Fi agreed. Then she turned—not toward the door, but toward the cliffs. Without looking back, she took a few running steps and threw herself over the waterfall.

“Fi!” The name tore out of Shane’s throat. She ran for the edge, far too late to do anything. Falling from this height—even into a river—would kill her.

Shane skidded to a stop at the cliff’s edge, searching desperately for her partner in free fall. Or worse, her broken body on the rocks far below.

Great bat-like wings stretched across the chasm as the creature that had once been Briar Rose caught Fi in midair, pulling her to his chest and flying sharply upward. Shane gaped. Bone horns protruded sharply from Briar’s head, and even at this distance, Shane could see the glimmer of red in his eyes. He was even more monstrous than when she’d last seen him, his ragged coat no longer able to hide the twisted bones of his tortured form. Only his golden hair glittering in the sunlight reminded her of the boy prince she’d known.

“Damn it!” Shane screamed in frustration, kicking a heavy rock into the rush of the waterfall. Hadn’t she warned herself that Fi always had a backup plan? Now her partner was flying away with the Rose Crown of Aurora, and all Shane could do was watch her disappear in the arms of a monster. Again.

Breathing heavily, Shane turned back to the ruined garden, kneeling by the skeleton and pushing aside the thick undergrowth to reveal the delicate bones of the hand. A black ring encased Aurora’s middle finger. A metal butterfly perched on the band, sparkling. Shane set her ax aside, using both hands to work the ring free. Then she laid the hand back down gently, staring at the queen in her eternal rest.

If it really had been Aurora’s spirit that possessed Fi, Shane sincerely hoped that crusty old ghost knew what she was doing. Because Shane wasn’t sure her partner did.

At least she had gotten the butterfly ring.

Shane looked at the skeleton's brow, empty now of the legendary Rose Crown. Shane had just assumed she and Fi were after the same thing. She had no idea what Fi and the Spindle Witch wanted with that crown. But maybe that meant Fi didn't know what Shane was up to, either. She spun the little ring around in her fingers, looking up into the sky where her partner had disappeared.

Maybe Shane was one step ahead this time. But the price had been far too high.