



CHAPTER ONE

A NEW MARK

I have two faces. Both are wanted criminals. I'm meant to stay hidden—safely tucked away in my room until the new King deigns to summon me—but tonight, after days trapped indoors, I finally have a new mark.

Is it dangerous? Sure. But the thrill is worth the risk.

I feel clumsy as I scramble out my window. It's been a while, but some instincts never fade. My fingers send ripples across the glassy surface of the Palace wall. I'm not sure what it's made of, but I heard from a trusted source that it reflects the mood of the reigning King. Tonight, it's smooth and still. Which means the King is either sleeping or deceptively calm.

I land softly on the ground and pause, listening to the night: soft coos of nearby birds, low whines of crickets, and rustling tree branches in the wind.

Missing from the blanket of sound: footsteps. Alarmed shouts that a fugitive siren just climbed from a Palace window.

Good. I'm alone.

I take a running start from the base of the Palace toward the surrounding gate. I leap and catch the metal bars to pull myself up and over.

In the process, my hood slips. For the briefest moment, I'm

exposed. As soon as I'm on the other side, I pull it back up. Look around.

Nothing. It's past midnight. The streets of Keirdre remain deserted, and I remain shrouded by the velvety night and dark fabric of my navy cloak.

I creep through Vanihail in the periphery of the streets, making my way to my mark for the evening.

One week ago, I was informed I'm leaving Keirdre. Traveling to the other side of the impenetrable barrier I've been trapped inside my whole life. Since then, I've been separated from my family, given a secluded room in the Palace, and told to stay put.

For one week, I obeyed, sitting still and docile, waiting for vague updates from a King who used to confide in me without reservation.

Tonight is blessedly different. Tonight, I shirk rules and embrace the exhilaration of a few fleeting hours of freedom and a fresh mark.

This part of Vanihail—South Vanihail—is a collection of short, navy-bricked buildings and shop signs faintly illuminated by chaeliss torches. The cobblestones are perfectly even, with alternating shades of muddy brown and cloudy gray.

My pulse quickens as Haraya comes into view, towering over the rest of Vanihail. My tongue toys with the groove carved behind my false tooth. A habit. Useless now. I used to keep *keil* beads there, but they're rarer now than they used to be. Besides, everyone in Keirdre already knows who and what I am. I'm a fugitive no matter what face I wear.

Moonlight and starlight flicker like torches as clouds swoop in and out, intermittently blanketing the sky. I hide in the shadows their light creates along the building. Haraya is home to Vanihail's sentencing chamber—a foreboding hall where

lawbreakers are tried and sentenced. The sentencing chamber is empty this time of night, but what I'm after lies underneath. The dungeons. Where the accused wait to stand trial and the guilty go to rot.

Keirdre is not in the business of freeing the accused.

Haraya's front doors and locking mechanism are made of marble—too heavy for normal lock picking.

Fortunately, the doors aren't the best point of entry for what I have planned.

I trace a hand over the crevices of the outer wall. My fingers dig into the grooves in the rough mortar as I start to climb. Wind bludgeons me from all sides. Its attack grows more vicious the higher I scale.

My arms burn when I reach my destination: the massive glass clockface on the front facade of the building. It's made of blue stained glass with metal clock hands on the inside and outside.

Working quickly, I grab the smaller of the two clock arms with one hand and reach the other into my pocket for my knife. A harsh breeze billows my cloak and shoves the hood off my shoulders. I don't let it distract me.

I wedge my knife's blade between the glass of the window and the stone of Haraya. Back and forth, over and over . . .

Recently, I learned a few secrets from a trusted source about Haraya Hall.

Fact one: its clock is cleaned regularly.

Fact two—

I yank on the knife and the clockface swings inward.

—the clock is on a set of hinges. Apparently, it makes it easier to clean. And, right now, it makes it easier for me to duck inside.

Fact three: there's a ledge *just* inside the window. Also used for cleaning. Also making it easier for me to enter.

I balance on the stone ledge and push the clock closed with a soft *thud*.

Pause. Catch my breath. Wait for someone to come sprinting.

All I hear is the steady *tick, tick, tick* of the clock.

I'm on edge as I pivot to face the sentencing chamber. Rows and rows of deserted benches facing a wooden stage at the front of the room.

For a flash, I see a spatter of red in my mind's eye—the haunting memory of human blood splashing across the stage. Hear the raucous cheers in response.

I shiver. It has nothing to do with the cold.

The chaeliss chandeliers have been snuffed for the night, but there's the faintest orange glow coming from under a door beneath me.

Homed in on that light, I climb down from the ledge and make my way to the door. I lean forward on the balls of my feet to absorb the sounds of my footsteps. One hand clutches my knife, the other seizes the *erstwyn* door handle.

The old wood creaks as I eke open the door. Which means I should assume the guards on the other side can hear it and are aware of my arrival.

My lips part. A song flows out like a stream. The melody starts slow but builds until the door is fully out of the way and I come face-to-face with two guards. Both frozen like ice. Their eyes are already glazed over from the sound of my singing, and when they catch sight of me—of my face, left eerily perfect without the disguise of a *keil* bead—they tremble from a combination of bone-chilling fear and aching desire.

The flavor of their want for me invades my senses, bathing my tongue in something sweet like honey and spicy like powdered chilis.

Lune above, I've missed this. Missed the feeling that accompanies reducing marks to drooling lightbrains, desperate to do as I command.

I survey the room. Small. The walls are decorated with wanted posters. Some are yellowed at the edges and have clearly been here for years. Others are fresh, like the one of a girl split in half. Half her face is monstrously beautiful. The other has her hair pulled back, revealing a burn on her cheek.

Both faces—both girls—are me.

There are two doors. The first is the one I came through, and the second is behind the guards. *That* is my destination—it leads into the deeper fortress of Haraya's dungeons.

A tingling sensation in my fingers mixes with a hum in my heart—there's water in this room. It's above me, suspended in a large basin, ready for the guards' use. A benefit of having a King—*former* King—who overvalued water fae: a steady supply of water on hand.

The guard on the right has one hand stilled over his belt. The fight must've seeped out of him when he caught sight of me.

I look into his eyes. Smile. Still singing, singing, singing.

The water overhead sings me a deliciously tempting song. Its tune is as soothing to me as my voice is to the guards. It entreats me to reach for it—use it, wield it, *unleash* it on the men before me.

Kill.

But now isn't the time for that.

I grit my teeth against the water's plea and move closer to the guards.

Their bodies are immobile but their eyes dart over my face, soaking it in like fresh honey on warm cornbread.

The guard on the left speaks first. “Y-you’re—”

Beautiful? A criminal? Both are correct, but the guard’s voice trails and he doesn’t finish the sentence.

Conflict wages in the man closest to me. He’s torn between his duty to capture me and his desperation to please me.

The guard on the right never stood a chance. As his partner eyes me, fighting himself, the one on the right stares in enraptured awe. From the moment he heard my voice, loyalty to Keirdre became an exasperating afterthought.

I focus all my attention on him. Smile wider. It’s cruel and taunting, but he doesn’t notice. Can’t see anything but me through the fog of his desire.

My song builds. I move closer. Hold his gaze with flashing silver eyes.

His companion watches, but I know he won’t strike me. He’s stronger-willed than his partner, but he’s under my spell just the same.

The water sloshes in the basin above us. *Kill.*

It would be all too easy and blissfully familiar to tell them to plunge their blades through their own hearts, keep pushing until they keel over, stone dead. I swallow the urge.

No kills tonight. No matter how refreshing it would feel after the past week cooped up in the Palace with no one to sing to.

I’m half a pace away from the guard on the right. He holds his breath, as though afraid if he releases it, I’ll blow away in a cloud of smoke.

“Hi,” I say softly. “I need to take a peek into the dungeons.

Let me pass?" I sing a few more low and haunting notes. Place a hand on his shoulder, so gentle it's barely a touch at all.

His body wracks with shivers. Without a word, he lurches aside, granting me access to the door behind him.

I square my shoulders so I brush him as I pass. I smirk as he tenses from the brief contact.

Was it necessary?

No.

But damn it all if it wasn't *fun*.

Torches bracketed to the stairwell walls light my path as I descend into the dungeons. The door thuds closed behind me and I pick up my pace. I only have so much time before the effects of my Siren Song fade and the guards sound the alarm to apprehend me. It's not an exact science, but I give myself seven minutes before the Palace is alerted to my presence.

Including, of course, Keirdre's new King.

I reach the base of the stairs. Three stone corridors branch from where I stand, each lined with small, dimly lit cells more befitting caged animals than people.

I start down the middle path. My eyes scour each cell for my mark. Above each set of cell bars is a number carved into a wooden plaque.

321, 322 . . .

Prisoners move to the front of their cells and stare as I pass, jaws unhinged.

325, 326 . . .

A man reaches for me from between his cell bars.

I ignore him.

329, 330, 331 . . .

I stop. A familiar figure is tucked in the back of cell 332.

His back is pressed against the far wall of his cell, head ducked to obscure his face. Not that it matters. I could pick his silhouette out from a wall of shadows.

It's odd to see him reduced to a prisoner. Throughout our years of friendship, he struck me as some kind of invincible. Or, at the very least, above the law. He lied to the Keirdren military for years and lived to tell the tale. As far as I'm concerned, for a time, he *was* invincible.

Until he betrayed me—took my sister, threatened to kill her, and shattered my heart in the process. He's mortal. I know that now. Just as disappointing as everyone else.

He doesn't look up as I approach, but his breathing changes—he knows I'm here.

The last time I saw him, I hated him—wanted him dead. I still do.

I've spent my life fighting myself. Over the past few lunes, I've gained a bit of stability over my instincts. Still, restlessness and anger are my enemies. After a week of silence, with nothing but fury and memories that burn like acid to keep me company, my impulses are on edge. Singing to the guards above was thrilling. Seeing my biggest heartbreak now is infuriating.

Temptation prickles my senses, and I'm all too aware of how easy it would be to kill him.

It makes me even angrier. Seeing him reminds me how volatile I am. How easy it is to slip back into violent habits.

I dig my fingernails into my palms, forcing myself calm.

He's a mark tonight, yes. But I'm not here to spill blood. I'm here for answers.

I crouch in front of his cell. "You look cozy. I like seeing you like this."

“Saoirse.” His head is still ducked.

It irritates me—feels like a dismissal—so I mimic his tone and say, “Spektryl.”

His eyes snap up. Brilliant green and flooded with hurt he hasn’t earned. The look dissolves, like sugar in tea, almost instantly, but the brief flash was unmistakable. There was a time those eyes were comforting. A time when seeing them flicker with pain would move me. Now, they make me cold and I savor his displeasure.

“What are you doing?” he asks. “Does your Prince know you’re here?”

“He’s a King now.” *And about as far from “mine” as he could be.* I shove that thought aside.

Carrik’s face twists with disgust and his emotions sour on my tongue. “He’s a boy with a crown. Doesn’t make him a King. Certainly not mine. You didn’t answer my question. Does he know you’re here?”

“I don’t answer to you. I’m out here. You’re behind bars.”

“For now.” He smirks. “But what is your Prince going to do when he discovers you here? Who knows? Maybe you’ll join me.”

“I have questions about the other side of the barrier.” I ignore his questions about Hayes. I’m trying *not* to kill Carrik right now. Thinking about Hayes—and all the jumbled emotions that come with it—isn’t the best way to do that. “I suspect you have answers. You work with the Resistance, and at least some of you have contact with the other side. Laa’el told me, so don’t bother denying it.”

“Who says I’m denying it? But why are you—” His smug expression warps into wide-eyed fear. “Is he— He’s not thinking of sending you there, is he?” Carrik’s on his feet, gripping

the cell bars and staring at me with chilling intensity. “He is, isn’t he?”

I don’t confirm or deny the accusation, but he can read my thoughts clearly enough without me breathing a word.

Carrik scowls. “That *lightbrain*. What the hell is he thinking, putting you in danger like that?”

“Don’t pretend to care about my safety,” I say. “Why do you say the other side is dangerous?”

“They *hate* the Royals. Anyone from Keirdre, but especially Larster and his family. Anyone affiliated with them will have a target on their back. There’s a hierarchy in Keirdre, and fae are on top. It’s not like that over there. There are other creatures.”

“What kind?” I try to mask my interest. I’m here for answers about the other side. I’m here because I need to know where the doorway to cross over is, what dangers I might face over there, and how to prepare myself.

But I have another secret, maybe irrational reason for traveling to the other side: hope that Larster *didn’t* kill all other sirens. Maybe it’s silly, but I came from somewhere—someone. Someone else who’s unbearably beautiful but terrified of mirrors. Someone with a constant war waging inside.

I want to find someone like me—someone *better* than me. Someone who learned to quiet the raging storm of their desires. I managed it briefly on the deck of the *Sea Queen*, only for it to be immediately shattered the moment I was angry again.

I’ve been inhaling chaos like I breathe underwater, and I want it to stop. Want someone to tell me it *can* stop. Somewhere out there, there’s someone like me. I know it.

Carrik’s eyes soften, and he answers the question I refused to ask outright: “I don’t know if there are sirens, Saoirse.”

I feel the cold sting of crushed hope. I shove it aside. I don’t

want him to see. “I didn’t ask about that. What *do* you know? Do you know where the doorway is?”

He wavers for a tick before shaking his head. “No. But even if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Why not? I thought you wanted me to forgive you?”

“I do.” He meets my eyes with sincerity so raw I hope he chokes on it. “And I’ll keep apologizing for however long it takes. But you have to be alive to forgive me. I’d rather you live long enough to hate me forever than die absolving me. If your Prince asked you to go to the other side of the barrier, tell him no. Please.”

“He’s not *my* Prince,” I say, annoyed.

“Actually,” a deeper, huskier voice speaks from behind me, “he’s not a Prince at all.”

I go rigid. I hadn’t heard his approach, but I sense him now—feel his glare on the back of my neck, scalding enough to rankle my nerves.

I half turn. “Your Majesty.” I bow. This should be familiar, but it feels awkward now.

His eyes, blue like the ocean and somehow even more captivating, are uncharacteristically blank as they look me over. The look is brief—just a swift once-over to ensure I’m upright and breathing—before they shift to Carrik.

I hate myself for missing the way his gaze used to linger.

“What are you doing here?” Hayes’s words are directed at me even though he’s no longer looking.

“I—”

“This was reckless.” He asked the damned question but he talks over my answer. “If it was *anyone* else who responded to the alarm, you’d be locked up. Maybe even dead.”

“I wanted answers,” I say.

He scoffs. “You’re fortunate I told the guards to contact me directly if they saw you.”

I raise my brows. “You thought I’d come here?”

Hayes finally looks at me again. His expression is dripping with derision. “You think you’re complicated, but I’ve got a foolproof way to figure you out. Just think of the last possible thing I’d want you to do—the most *reckless* thing you could possibly do. It’s a safe bet that’s exactly what you’ve already done twelve times over.”

His words are so harsh, even Carrik flinches.

I stand my ground. “Your Majesty—”

“Never mind.” He turns on his heel and starts back down the hall. “We should go.” He doesn’t motion for me to follow or even ask. Just assumes I’ll trail behind him like a well-trained ox.

Carrik watches him leave with a scowl. “You’re really going to risk your life to keep *that* asshole happy?”

“It’s not about him. It’s about my family. I need proof that whatever is over there is better for them than Keirdre. But since you won’t help . . .” I turn away. Manage a single step before—

“*Wait!*”

I smirk to myself before schooling my features and facing him again. “What?”

“Saoirse, *please*. Don’t cross the barrier.”

“Why? You haven’t given me a reason not to.”

He pauses.

I sigh. “If you’re just going to waste my time—”

“It’s one-way,” he blurts.

That’s not what I was expecting. “What?”

“Once you leave Keirdre, you can’t come back. Not unless the barrier comes down.”

I'm freezing. Like I plunged headfirst into the Jeune River in the dead of winter. "I don't believe you." My words feel hollow.

"I'm telling the truth," he says. "If you go over, you'll be trapped. You'll never see Rain, your family, me, or that damned Prince you like so much again."