

"GENIUS."

—JENNIFER LYNN BARNES,

#1 *New York Times*–bestselling

author of the *Inheritance Games* series



GARDEN *of the* CURSED

KATY ROSE POOL

GARDEN
of the
CURSED



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The Age of Darkness series

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GARDEN *of the* CURSED

KATY ROSE POOL

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For Brian

Your trust in me as a writer is the real magic

ONE

They say summer storms in Caraza bring more than rain. When lightning crackles across the sky and the air gets thick enough to chew, it means trouble isn't far behind.

Marlow wasn't one for superstition, but when the sky broke open the moment she stepped onto the dock at Breaker's Neck, even she had to admit the timing was portentous.

On the muddy isthmus below the dock, husks of rust and steel sat beached like whale carcasses, some of them nearly intact and some already gutted. Laborers stripped the hulls like scavengers picking the bones of some great behemoth, the crash of falling debris indistinguishable from the thunder shaking the sky.

Generally, Marlow avoided Breaker's Neck as much as possible, and not just because of the noise and the thick stench of scorched metal and brine that emanated from the ship-breaker's yard. Most parts of the Marshes were loud and smelly, but Breaker's Neck presented an additional threat—it was Copperhead territory. A dangerous place for anyone in the Marshes to find themselves, but especially risky for Marlow.

But it wasn't like she had much of a choice. This case had dragged on for almost two weeks, and time was up. Tonight was the grand premiere of *The Ballad of the Moon Thief*, and if its prima ballerina had any hope of performing, Marlow was going to have to brave the danger.

Tugging the hood of her jacket over her head, she sloshed across the

crooked plankway that sagged along the isthmus, heading for the rusted remains of an empire dreadnought. The ship was keeled over and half sunk in the mud, but unlike the other ships around it, there was no one stripping this one apart.

Marlow carefully climbed down the steel ladder that rose from the dreadnought's cavernous belly, hopping down the last few rungs and landing on what had once been the bulkhead of one of the compartments. A hermetic hatch led to the main deck. Pushing a wet strand of hair out of her face, Marlow marched over to it.

"Nightshade." As she uttered the password, the handle spun and the hatch swung inward.

With her stomach squirming like a bucket of crayfish, Marlow stepped into the Blind Tiger.

Bioluminescent lamps glinted off the corrugated walls of the dreadnought, turning the whole bar a malevolent dark purple. Voices clambered over one another, punctuated by the high notes of clinking glasses. This early in the evening the crowd was thin, with no real entertainment save a lone zither player plucking in the corner.

Marlow made a slow circuit of the speakeasy, cataloging each face: The soothsayer reading some bright-eyed young woman's fortune, the bracelets on her arms jangling as she shook a bowl of runestones. A man drinking alone, gaze darting around the room as though worried someone might catch him there—an off-duty cop, or a cheating husband, Marlow guessed. A group of gamblers clustered around one of the tables, arguing over dice.

But none matched the description of one Montgomery Flint. Marlow's curse dealer contact had provided a fairly detailed account—long dark hair, a mole under his lip, and a jade earring stud in one ear.

There was still no sign of Flint by the time Marlow reached the long, curved bar that took up the stern of the hollowed-out deck.

Sliding onto one of the silver stools, she waved the bartender over and ordered a Maiden's Prayer. She leaned back in her seat as if she were merely taking in the atmosphere rather than keeping an eye out for Flint.

Her gaze lingered on a tall woman who sat a few stools down, simply but elegantly dressed in a sharp black suit. Short-cropped dark hair fell in a gentle wave over her eye and a row of silver earrings glinted against the shell of her ear. One slender hand was curled around a thick-rimmed tumbler, and when she noticed Marlow staring at her, she raised the glass in a tiny salute before taking a sip.

Marlow's pulse picked up, and it took her a second to realize why. She'd seen this woman before—not long ago, in fact. She'd boarded the same water-taxi that had ferried Marlow to Breaker's Neck.

Marlow turned back to her drink, heart hammering as she raised it to her lips. The cocktail burned on its way down.

It didn't necessarily mean anything. Lots of people took water-taxis. And lots of people came to speakeasies, even ones owned by Copperheads. But that thought did little to soothe the unease prickling up Marlow's spine.

Because for the past few weeks, Marlow had been growing more and more convinced that she was being followed. Coincidence after coincidence—seeing the same old man pass by the spellshop where she worked some days, and again browsing a crayfish stall at the Swamp Market. A messenger boy that Marlow had seen not twice but three times in a single day earlier that week.

It was a pattern. And in Marlow's line of work, patterns didn't go unexamined.

You're here for a case, Briggs, she reminded herself. *Don't get distracted.*

A flash of movement at the very end of the bar seized her attention. Marlow watched as a man with long dark hair swept into a shadowy

corridor that branched off from the main deck. Caught in the glow of the violet light, a jade stud winked in his earlobe.

There you are. Marlow threw back the rest of her drink and pushed away from the bar to follow, the elegant woman forgotten for the moment.

The corridor that Flint had disappeared into was empty, and dimly lit with sickly green bioluminescent lamps. Three lavatory doors lined the right side, with lights above the doorknob indicating whether they were occupied. Only the nearest one was illuminated.

Marlow rolled her shoulders against the wall across from the door and waited. She toyed with her lighter, flicking it open and shut as she hummed softly along to the faint twang of the zither, trying to remember the name of the song. As the notes reached a crescendo, the lavatory door swung open.

“Hi there,” Marlow said as her mark stepped into the hallway. He glanced at her, surprised but not scared. Not yet.

“Can I help you, sweetheart?” he drawled.

Sweetheart? It was like he wanted to get hexed.

“You sure can!” she chirped, shouldering off the wall. “You can start by telling me why you cursed the prima ballerina of the Monarch Ballet.”

He stilled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Here’s how this is going to go,” Marlow said, pushing her hands into her jacket pockets. “I’m going to ask you once, very nicely, to hand over the curse card. And if I have to ask a second time, well—I won’t be as nice.”

Flint stared at her, weighing his options. Then, without warning, he shoved Marlow back and bolted down the corridor. Marlow stumbled, her legs slipping out from under her as she careened against the wall. But she already had the hex card pinched between her thumb and her knuckle.

“*Congelia*,” she muttered. Glowing red glyphs swirled out from the

card and shot toward her target like an eel slicing through dark water. The spell struck him between the shoulder blades and he crumpled like wet paper.

Marlow climbed to her feet and stalked toward him.

"I lied," she said, nudging his arm with her boot as he groaned in pain. "I'm not going to ask a second time."

She rolled him over and briskly patted down his jacket while he let out a few thready breaths and whines of pain. Marlow resisted rolling her eyes. It was just a simple Immobilizing hex. No need to be such a child about it.

Something crinkled in one of his inner pockets. Throwing a glance over her shoulder to make sure they were still alone in the corridor, Marlow withdrew a pamphlet.

No, not a pamphlet. A playbill, emblazoned with the same black-and-gold promotional image that Marlow had seen plastered across the city for the past few weeks. The golden Sun King's court and the face of the prima ballerina, Corinne Gaspar, staring up at it, her dark skin luminous against the silver moon. *The Ballad of the Moon Thief*, the playbill read in bold, dark letters.

Marlow thumbed through the playbill. Tucked inside was a ticket to the ballet and a black curse card, marked with stripes of interlocking gold diamonds. She turned the card over, revealing an intricately etched illustration of a girl dancing with music notes floating above her. The illustration moved, showing the girl falling back, one arm thrown dramatically over her face. Gold and white glyphs ran along the edges of the card. Marlow could tell that the spell had been cast because the glyphs were no longer glowing, their magic used up.

"What's this?" Marlow said, waving the curse card in Flint's panicked face as she pocketed the ticket. "A curse that afflicts its subject with debilitating vertigo every time they hear a certain piece of music. Such a

strange coincidence, because I happen to know that Corinne Gaspar is suffering from this exact problem. How do you suppose that happened?”

Flint gurgled in reply, his face locked in a rictus of surprise. Seizing a handful of his gold silk shirt, Marlow hauled him upright so he wouldn't choke on his own spit.

“You want to tell me why a midlevel ship-breaker foreman spent over two hundred pearls to curse the prima ballerina in the Monarch Ballet?”

She'd considered a host of theories about who was behind Corinne's curse and what had motivated them. Corinne had suspected a jealous ex-boyfriend out to sabotage her—an easy, if obvious, answer. But the ex-boyfriend had turned out to be a dead end, and Marlow had turned her attention to the Monarch Ballet's biggest competitor, the Belvedere Theater. After all, what better way to ensure the Monarch took a loss than to sabotage their biggest draw? But she hadn't been able to link them to Flint. The only things she knew about him were his name and that he'd bought this curse off a dealer who, as luck would have it, owed Marlow a favor.

“You want to know?” Flint slurred. “I'll tell you.”

He spat in Marlow's face. A glob of saliva landed wetly on her cheek, and for a moment Marlow was stunned into silence. Slowly, deliberately, she wiped her face and said, in a taut voice brimming with violence, “You're *really* going to regret that.”

But before she could make good on her threat, a chillingly familiar voice sounded from the end of the hallway.

“Do my eyes deceive me? Or is that Marlow Briggs I see skulking around this very fine establishment?”

Marlow rose on shaking legs and swung around to face Thaddeus Bane—second-in-command of the Copperheads, and the second-to-last person she ever wanted to see anywhere, but especially here. He took up nearly the breadth of the hallway, his barrel-like chest stuffed into an ostentatious purple waistcoat bedizened with shining gold-linked chains.

Two Copperhead lackeys stood on either side of him, wearing slightly more subdued threads, but the same bronze snake tattooed around their throats.

“You know, when our doorman said he’d seen you come in, I thought he must be mistaken,” Bane went on in a lazy burr. “Surely the brilliant *Marlow Briggs* wouldn’t be stupid enough to set foot in a Copperhead joint again.”

He bellowed her name like an announcer at a pit fight, his eyes gleaming manically in the green light. A cold trickle of fear slid down Marlow’s spine. Thaddeus Bane had every reason to want revenge on Marlow after she had humiliated him and his boss, Leonidas Howell, nine months ago—and it seemed his chance had finally arrived. He was incandescent with delight.

“Guess you’re not as smart as you think you are,” he sneered.

“Still smarter than you, Thad,” Marlow replied sweetly.

Bane chuckled, shaking his head as he strolled toward her with the air of an indolent predator who knew its prey was cornered. “And you came alone. Where’s your friend Swift? Been a while since we’ve seen him, and we miss him something awful.”

Bane’s two cronies pushed deeper into the hall, flanking Marlow. She stood her ground, sizing them up. The one with a red beard she vaguely recognized, and the other, a wiry youth with a squid beak nose, looked like he couldn’t be much older than she was. A new recruit. Maybe even Swift’s replacement.

Marlow smiled as she slipped a hand into the pocket of her rain jacket. “Actually, he had a message for you.”

“Oh?”

“He says he’s really flattered, but this obsession your boss has with him is starting to get embarrassing.”

Bane flashed a crocodile grin, advancing. “Speaking of, I wish the boss

was here now. But don't worry—I'll be sure to describe your screams in detail to him later."

For a moment Marlow's fear dulled the edges of her mind. She swallowed it down and forced herself to meet Bane's cruel gray eyes with another smile.

"With all the time I've spent occupying that vacant head of yours, you should really think about charging rent," she said, thumbing through the slim stack of spellcards in her pocket and hoping she could somehow divine by touch which one she needed.

"You really think you're better than the rest of us," Bane snarled. "Because you used to rub shoulders with the noblesse nouveau. But then your bitch of a mother dumped you back in the Marshes, didn't she?"

Marlow clenched her jaw, fury pouring through her veins like hot acid.

"Guess she figured out what the rest of us already knew—you can't wash the swamp off the swamp rat."

His cronies guffawed. Marlow's fingers closed around what she deeply hoped was a temporary Blinding hex.

As she opened her mouth to cast it, the red-bearded crony flicked open a switchblade and held it to her throat.

"Hands where we can see them," he said in a low voice.

Marlow sucked in a breath that felt closer to a sob and jerked her hands up, showing them her palms. Squid Beak pushed right into her space, roughly grabbing her wrists and pinning them behind her back.

She was alone. Swift and Hyrum had no idea where she was. And she couldn't talk, think, or hex her way out of this.

The blade pressed into her skin, and Marlow bit down on a pathetic whimper as Bane leaned into her, his breath on her cheek as warm and wet as a summer storm.

“Tell you what,” he said conspiratorially. “I’ll let you choose what we take from you, how’s that? A few ounces of blood, perhaps? Or I could take your nose, so you’ll stop poking it where it doesn’t belong. Or maybe you’d rather I take some of your memories—all your memories of dear old mommy, perhaps?”

Marlow growled low in her throat.

“What’ll it be, Briggs?” Bane asked. “Make it quick, before I lose patience and take all three. Our spellwrights could always use the ingredients.”

There was no doubt in her mind that Bane would love nothing more than to carve her up for spare parts to make more illegal curses. Tears stung her eyes. She squeezed them shut. Whatever horror Bane was planning to inflict on her, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

“Put the knife down,” a voice said, crystal clear and commanding.

Marlow opened her eyes to the sight of a woman leaning casually against the wall at the end of the hallway. Marlow’s heart jolted as she recognized the elegant woman from the bar. The one who’d been on Marlow’s water-taxi.

Definitely not a coincidence, then.

“Sweetcakes, maybe you don’t understand how things work around here,” Bane said, rounding on her. “Or maybe you just don’t know who you’re talking to.”

A thin smile curled the corner of the woman’s lips. “I know exactly who you are, Thaddeus Bane. The real question is whether you know who I am.”

Bane stared at her for a moment and then erupted into braying laughter. Following their leader’s cue, the others guffawed along.

The woman pushed one sleeve of her jacket up, subtly flashing a black

tattoo. It was too fast for Marlow to make out the shape, but it seemed to have the desired effect—Bane stopped laughing abruptly, his jaw slack, eyes bulging.

“Oh, so you *do* know who I am,” the woman said, tilting her head. “Now tell your friends here to let the girl go.”

“Who are you to order us around?” Red Beard demanded. “This is *our* territory.”

“That’s a bit above your pay grade, I think,” the woman said, flicking her gaze back to Bane.

“Let her go.” Bane straightened his shoulders, doing his best not to look rattled in front of his men. But the damage had already been done. “She’s not worth our time anyway.”

The two men backed away from Marlow haltingly, obviously wrong-footed by their boss’s sudden change of heart, although they didn’t dare question it. As soon as their hands left her skin, Marlow jerked away, steadying herself against the wall, gaze flickering from Bane to the woman and back.

“Come along now.” The woman cast one final appraising look at Bane and spun on her heel, striding effortlessly across the speakeasy floor, clearly expecting Marlow to follow.

Marlow hesitated at the edge of the room, weighing her options. In the end, her unrelenting hunger for answers won out, the way it always did.

Tossing a regretful glance at the still-immobilized Flint, she trailed the woman across the bar, back through the hatch, and up the ladder into a damp, muggy twilight. The storm had subsided, but the air was still sharp with the taste of lightning.

“Hold on,” Marlow commanded, halting at the edge of the plankway. “Stop right there and tell me who you are and why you’ve been following me.”

She brandished her Blinding hex in one hand.

The woman spun in a wide circle to face her, her short dark hair falling over her eye. “A thank-you wouldn’t be out of order. What do you think Thaddeus Bane would have done to you if I hadn’t stepped in?”

“I didn’t need your help,” Marlow lied. “I’ve handled him before.”

“I know,” the woman replied. “Which raises the question of how exactly a seventeen-year-old girl managed to piss off the most ruthless street gang in Caraza.”

Marlow flashed a blithe smile. “I just seem to have that effect on people.”

The woman’s lips twitched and she held up her hands. “You can put away the spell. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The sleeve of her jacket had slipped down, revealing the tattoo that Marlow had only glimpsed in the bar. A flower of midnight black bloomed over her forearm, its petals as sharp and dangerous as fangs. Marlow had the sense that the woman wasn’t letting her see it by accident.

“That’s not a gang emblem I’ve seen before,” Marlow said warily.

“That’s because it’s not a gang emblem.”

Marlow met the woman’s gaze again. She looked back at Marlow, an anticipatory gleam in her amber eyes.

Marlow’s skin prickled, hair standing on end. It was a feeling she knew well. The feeling she got when something didn’t quite fit, when she noticed something that most others didn’t. When that strange, unknowable part of her—the thing she called *instinct*—slotted a clue into place, connecting two seemingly innocuous truths together.

But it wasn’t Corinne’s case or even the Copperheads that Marlow’s mind went to.

Instead, it was her mother, and a memory of the night she’d disappeared.

It wasn’t a memory Marlow revisited often anymore, but when she

did, it was like she was transported instantly back to their lavish quarters in Vale Tower. Like she could still smell the burning candle and the hint of vetiver and bergamot perfume beneath it, could still see her mother sitting at her writing desk, holding a spellcard to the flame.

“What are you doing?” Marlow had asked, standing in the doorway.

Her mother had startled, knocking her elbow into a bottle of perfume, which spilled across a pile of papers on the desk. “Minnow! I didn’t hear you come in.”

The spellcard caught fire, the flames chewing quickly through it, leaving ash in their wake. But not before Marlow spotted a symbol on the back—a black flower, with claw-sharp petals.

Marlow slammed the door on the memory before it went any further. She raised her eyes back to the woman, and saw in the slight glint of satisfaction that she knew Marlow recognized the symbol.

A crash of thunder split the air. Marlow startled despite herself, throwing her gaze to the sky on instinct. The storm clouds had dissipated, the evening clear, and Marlow realized belatedly that the sound had come from the ship-breaker’s yard. Of course.

When she looked back to the woman with the tattoo, she was gone.

TWO

It had been over a year since the last time Marlow had entered Evergarden. Through the cable car window, she could see the gleaming skyline rising from the center of the city. The last rays of the sun splashed vermillion across the spokes of the five canals radiating out from Evergarden's center, so different from the twisted, muck-filled waterways of the Marshes.

As the cable car zipped over the outermost edge of the Marshes, Marlow couldn't shake the chill crawling up her spine after the encounter with Bane and the woman with the black flower tattoo. Part of her wished she could just go home, curl up on the couch with Toad, and play a game of Casters with Swift, but the job wasn't finished.

With her feet propped up against the side of the cable car, Marlow paged through the playbill she'd lifted off Flint, worrying at her lingering questions like a scab she couldn't stop picking at. Yes, she could break the curse, but she'd never figured out who Flint was or why he'd cast a curse on Corinne in the first place.

If there was one thing Marlow couldn't stand, it was unanswered questions.

The cable car swung to a stop at Pearl Street Station, and Marlow shoved the program back into her jacket and disembarked onto the platform.

The air on this side of the city was far sweeter than the sulfurous stench that clung to every crevice of the Marshes, in part because it was upwind, but mostly because every conceivable surface was blanketed with

bougainvillea and jasmine vines. The scent instantly propelled Marlow back in time, to over a year ago when she'd called this part of the city home.

But that was a different time. And she was a different Marlow now.

Evergarden hummed with magic. The broad promenades were charmed to remain gleaming and pristine no matter how many feet treaded over them. Planters filled with mosquito-repelling blossoms floated above the canals. Marlow made her way down Pearl Street, the main shopping district of the Outer Garden. Soothing scents wafted from perfumeries and salons selling magic elixirs that promised flawless skin and everlasting youth. Ateliers showcased the latest fashions, from cloth made of enchanted flames to dresses that changed color according to the wearer's mood. A charming patisserie offered free samples of mood-lifting candies and colorful meringue confections with a variety of effects according to flavor. Spell emporiums far grander than any dingy spellshop in the Marshes sold nearly endless selections of spellcards and enchanted objects.

There was more magic in a single block of the Outer Garden District than in all of the Marshes combined—though of course, none of these flashy enchantments and charms would even exist without ingredients culled from the people who lived in the Marshes.

As Marlow crossed Azalea Bridge to Starling Street, the lanterns were just beginning to glow, painting the paved bricks scarlet and gold. The Monarch's crown-shaped facade reigned over the square at the end of the street. *The Ballad of the Moon Thief Grand Premiere!* declared the crimson-and-gold marquee.

Marlow paused beside one of the terra-cotta planters that lined the square and picked a handful of coral amaryllis blossoms before climbing the steps to the gleaming gold doors of the Monarch Theater.

A doorman dressed in a sharp crimson dinner jacket trimmed with intricate gold embroidery eyed Marlow as she approached, his face pinched in disapproval.

“Doors don’t open for another thirty minutes,” he intoned.

Fixing him with her most winning smile, Marlow clutched the flowers against her chest and simpered, “I just want to wish my friend good luck on the show tonight. She’s been so nervous all week, and I know she’d love to have the extra encouragement before she goes out there.”

She couldn’t just tell the doorman the real reason she was here—for one, Corinne had begged her to keep the curse quiet, and Marlow knew how to be discreet. And for another, it seemed like a stretch that this doorman would believe her anyway.

“Your friend. I’m sure,” the doorman replied with a rather scathing look at Marlow’s attire—an oversized olive-green rain jacket thrown over a thin black top and ratty shorts. Practical for running around in the summer humidity, but not exactly presentable for a night at the theater. “Doors still open in thirty minutes.”

Marlow held out the ticket she’d lifted off Flint. “I have a ticket.”

“Ticket or no ticket, doors are open in—” His gaze dropped to the ticket and he stopped talking abruptly. “My apologies,” he stuttered. “I didn’t realize you were a friend of Miss Sable’s!”

Marlow blinked at him. After a too-long pause, she said, “Miss Sable. Right. That’s the friend I was talking about. How did you . . . know that?”

“The ticket?” he said, waving it in front of Marlow. “It’s one of her comped seats. Both leads get their own private box for opening night.”

“Leads?” Marlow echoed.

“She didn’t tell you?” the doorman asked. “Miss Sable is playing the role of the Moon Thief tonight. Of course it must be devastating for Miss Gaspar to miss opening night—but I know Miss Sable will make a stunning Moon Thief. She must be so excited to finally debut as the prima ballerina after all those years of falling short. She really didn’t say anything?”

“I’m sure she wanted it to be a surprise,” Marlow replied faintly, her mind whirring to slot this new information in place.

The doorman's eyes narrowed. "How did you say you knew Miss Sable again?"

"We grew up together," Marlow lied smoothly. "Are you going to let me go congratulate her, or do I have to stand outside explaining myself to you while Viv has a breakdown about her debut?"

He let her inside before Marlow could contemplate using her Blinding hex on him. She blew through the front doors, charging across the gilded floor of the atrium, past the grand, sweeping staircase.

Marlow had learned a long time ago that people rarely tried to stop you if you looked like you knew where you were going and strode with purpose, so she was halfway down the corridor that led backstage before she was stopped by a girl dressed in all black, her dark hair pulled back into a neat ponytail.

"You can't go in here," she said.

"I'll just be a second," Marlow said, maneuvering toward the open door of the greenroom, where she could see dancers and technicians preparing for the night's show, applying glittering makeup and getting dressed in elaborate costumes.

"I can't let you—"

"Marlow, is that you?" Corinne's musical voice called over the din. Marlow spotted her floating toward them, her face bare and her simple cloth robe flowing behind her like a cape. She looked much like Marlow felt—utterly exhausted—but she danced across the room like the prima ballerina she was. "Teak, let her in."

The black-clad girl stepped away from the threshold immediately, and Marlow made a beeline for Corinne, ducking around two stagehands carrying a large golden throne.

Corinne reached for Marlow's hand as she approached. "I'm so glad you're here. They just told me a few hours ago that I can't—" She took a breath, holding back tears. "That I won't be performing tonight. With

the”—she lowered her voice—“the *curse*, they said it’s too big a risk. Please tell me you have some kind of lead.”

“Oh, I have better than that,” Marlow promised. “Come with me.”

She looped her arm through Corinne’s, dragging her toward the row of lit-up mirrors where a few of the dancers were getting their makeup applied and their hair styled.

“Marlow, what are you—?”

Marlow ignored her, marching over to the dancer preening at the last mirror, her raven hair piled on her head, silver glitter shimmering on her pale skin. She looked just like her picture in the program.

“Vivian Sable?” Marlow asked, coming to a stop at her elbow.

“Y-yes?” Vivian replied, blinking at Marlow’s reflection in the mirror.

“I just wanted to congratulate you,” Marlow said, “on getting the starring role of the Moon Thief. In fact, I was hoping you could sign something for me.”

She pulled out Flint’s curse card, slapping it down on the vanity in front of Vivian.

“I don’t . . . I don’t understand,” she said, going white.

“Sure you do,” Marlow replied. “You got your boyfriend or whoever to buy a curse on the black market to make sure Corinne couldn’t perform in the show. Leaving you, her understudy, to take over the role.”

Marlow could see Corinne’s face in the mirror, her mouth going slack with shock, her dark eyes clouding with hurt.

“That . . . that isn’t true,” Vivian said meekly, her bright green eyes filling with tears. “Corinne, I would *never*—”

“Save the theatrics for the stage,” Marlow advised. “Or not, I guess, since you won’t be performing tonight once I break the curse and you explain to the producers what you did.”

“I *swear*—” Vivian started.

“Oh, and if you don’t?” Marlow added. “I’m going to curse your feet to rot off.”

She didn’t actually have such a curse, but it made for a better threat than the Blinding hex.

Vivian burst into noisy tears. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed into her hands. “Corinne, I’m so sorry, I *never* wanted to hurt you. I just—I’ve danced with this company for *years*, and every time I think I’ve finally made lead, I lose out to the shiny new star. I couldn’t take it anymore!”

“And you knew you couldn’t earn it on your own,” Marlow said. “Because Corinne is five times the dancer you’ll ever be.”

Corinne just stared at Vivian, stunned. “I never thought you’d be capable of something like this. You were my *friend*.”

Marlow recognized the devastation in her voice. She was learning the lesson Marlow already knew too well—that the people you cared about would only let you down in the end.

Vivian blinked at her through watery green eyes, but Marlow knew she wasn’t sorry for what she’d done, just that she’d been caught.

Marlow waved the ponytailed stage manager over. “You. Take Miss Sable here to see the producers. She has something very urgent she needs to tell them.”

With a quick, confirming glance at Corinne, the stage manager led a sniffling Vivian away. The scene she was making had begun to draw the attention of the other dancers and show technicians, but Marlow’s focus was on Corinne as she moved slowly toward the curse card sitting on the vanity, touching it with a shaking hand.

Marlow dug into another jacket pocket and held out her lighter. “You want to do the honors?”

Corinne swallowed, taking the lighter. “I burn it? And the curse will break, just like that?”

“Just like that.”

With a fortifying breath, Corinne flicked open the lighter. It took a few tries to ignite it, but finally Corinne held the curse card over the flame. Instead of catching fire, the curse card glowed a dark purple—and so did Corinne, a shadowy aura threaded with black veins that drew toward the curse card like water being sucked through a straw. The curse card absorbed the magic and then the glow died out, the card flickering purple before turning a dull graphite.

Corinne stood holding the spent curse card and the lighter, stunned.

“Well?” Marlow said.

Corinne handed her the card and the lighter, spun in a neat circle, and flew over to a dark-haired boy with a violin slung over one shoulder.

“Xander! Play ‘A Thief in the Sun King’s Court.’”

He did at once, the first chords of the song curling through the room like smoke. Corinne snapped into position, her body moving in precise, controlled lines as she danced the number that, until one minute ago, she hadn’t been able to hear without fainting. Even dressed in a simple robe instead of the intricate costume of the Moon Thief, she was captivating.

Applause erupted through the room as the other dancers and musicians watched Corinne leap and dance, their relief and joy at having their prima ballerina back palpable. She was going to be incredible tonight. No one would be able to keep their eyes off her.

Marlow smiled as she slipped the burned-out curse card into her pocket. Its power was entirely used up, and it would never hurt anyone again. But for Marlow it was a reminder—that as long as there were curses, she would go on breaking them.

“I don’t know what you did, exactly, but thank you.”

Marlow turned and found the stage manager with the sleek ponytail—Teak—standing beside her, watching Corinne move to the crescendoing violin.

“I just did my job,” Marlow replied easily.

“Well, you saved the ballet,” Teak replied. “All the critics come on opening night, and if we’d had to premiere with Vivian playing the Moon Thief, we’d be waking up to some pretty unpleasant words in the morning papers. Not to mention, I heard a rumor from one of the ushers that the Five Families scions are attending tonight’s show. I can’t even imagine the embarrassment if—”

“What?” Marlow asked abruptly, her ears ringing. “The Five Families scions are coming here? Tonight?”

Teak gave her an odd look. “Yes, but no offense, I doubt you’ll be able to stage an accidental-on-purpose run-in with Adrius Falcrest, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

A high, hysterical laugh squeaked out of Marlow. “I can promise you that is *not* what I was thinking.”

Teak narrowed her eyes. “All right. I’m just saying this from experience. Not that *I’ve* tried to—”

“Right, yes, got it,” Marlow replied. “Listen, tell Corinne I’ll be in her dressing room when she’s ready to settle. I should probably get out of here before the crowds show up.”

“You’re not going to stay and watch?”

Marlow smiled, tight-lipped. “Maybe another time. I’m sure Corinne will be great. But I’ve had a pretty long day and I just need to get out of here.”

As fast as she possibly could.

The doorman had evidently begun letting people inside. When Marlow reentered the lobby, her jacket pockets a few pearl strings

heavier, it was teeming with people. Everyone wore their finest—suits and gowns in rich jewel tones with exaggerated silhouettes and magical flourishes—all for the dubious honor of being noticed amongst the crowd and hopefully mentioned in tomorrow's fashion columns.

Marlow accrued her own fair share of notice for entirely different reasons, though she supposed she'd be a shoo-in for the Fashion Follies section with her still-damp jacket, muddy boots, and the tangle of dirty-blond hair hanging at her shoulders.

Even more reason to make a clean getaway.

That plan came to a crashing halt the moment she descended into the atrium and stopped cold—along with the rest of the crowd. It seemed every gaze in the lobby was pinned to Gemma Starling and Amara Falcrest as they sailed through the doors. Murmurs bubbled through the room like fizz in a bottle of sparkling wine.

Amara and Gemma paid their onlookers no mind, accustomed to such attention. Gemma shimmered beneath the light of the chandelier in a daring fuchsia dress with a voluminous train that resembled the plumage of an exotic bird. Golden circlets floated up her arms, adorned with jewel beads orbiting like little planets. Her rose-colored curls were gathered in an elaborate updo, and her face was painted with a stripe of gold across her eyes that deepened to a rich bronze along the ridge of her brow.

Amara wore a dramatic, sculptural gown in deep amethyst, her pin-straight midnight-black hair coiled like a crown around her head and studded with pearls. Smaller pearls flecked the corners of her eyes and along her high cheekbones. Marlow's gaze lingered on the delicately filigreed silver carcanet encircling her throat—an accessory usually only worn by women engaged to be married.

Marlow stood frozen on the steps as they neared, snatches of their conversation floating toward her.

“—if Adrius wanted us to wait up for him, then he shouldn't have

wasted all that time flirting with what's-her-name at the teahouse. I swear, by now he must have bedded every suitable prospect in Evergarden."

"And plenty of the unsuitable ones," Amara added cuttingly.

Gemma trilled with laughter, and Marlow let out a relieved breath as they breezed past without a glance.

But because it seemed her luck today was determined to be dismal, a second later she heard Amara's voice again.

"Gemma, hold on—is that *Marlow Briggs*?"

Bullfrog butts. She'd been made. Ducking her head low, Marlow slunk toward the exit.

Gemma laughed loudly. "Right, because I'm sure Marlow Briggs frequents the— Gods, that *is* her. Marlow!"

Marlow cast a desperate glance at the open doors, wondering if she could simply make a break for it before Amara and Gemma reached her.

Instead, she pulled in a bracing breath and spun to face them.

"Hi, Gemma," she greeted as amicably as she could manage. "Amara."

Gemma let out a low whistle. "Wow, Marlow Briggs. It's been *ages*."

A year and five weeks, but who could remember the exact day Marlow's mother had vanished, taking Marlow's entire life with her?

"We thought you must've disappeared like your mom," Gemma went on, with no indication that she'd considered whether this might be a sore subject. "What are you doing at the Monarch? Do you *work* here?"

She sounded dubious, though Marlow was unsure if it was the concept of work itself she objected to or the thought of Marlow being employed by a place as glamorous as the Monarch. Marlow couldn't exactly fault her for the latter—she had no doubt that the rest of the crowd, still buzzing over Amara and Gemma's arrival, were wondering what exactly Caraza's most sought-after socialites were doing talking to her.

"I just came by to help a friend," Marlow answered. There was an

awkward pause, and it seemed like as good an opening as she'd get to make her retreat. "Anyway, so fun seeing you, but I have to—"

"Marlow?" A rich, deep voice joined the fray as Darian Vale approached. "Gods, it's been—"

"Ages," Marlow finished for him. "Or so I've been told."

Darian pulled up next to Amara, winding an arm around her waist. Marlow's gaze tracked Amara's delicate hand as it smoothed over Darian's cobalt waistcoat to fix his herringbone cravat. She glanced again at Amara's silver carcanet, making the connection. They were engaged.

Marlow felt suddenly, immeasurably distant from the girl she'd been a year ago, when she'd been completely ensconced in the social world of these people, kept abreast of every tryst and dramatic separation. It was just the air she'd breathed back then, an inescapable part of life amongst the noblesse nouveau.

At Darian's heels was his brother, Silvan, unmistakable with his long, ice-blond hair, the haughty look on his angular face, and the pet snake curled indolently around his arm, a shock of bright blue against Silvan's pearlescent silver sleeve. Indifference sharpened to sneering contempt as his gaze glided over Marlow and landed on the crowd, a clear dismissal.

Marlow's pulse drummed in her head, not because she cared that Silvan detested her—which he did, although she was hardly unique in that regard—but because if he was here, then that meant, without a doubt, that his best friend was, too.

"Well, how have you been?" Darian asked politely. Unlike his brother, his good manners were always on display. Marlow assumed it was because there was very little substance beneath his strong jaw and honey-blond hair.

Gemma, on the other hand, was not so constrained by civility. "Seriously, where *did* you disappear to?"

Marlow knew her curiosity didn't derive from any sense of friendship.

Her interest in Marlow was the same interest a child might have for a shiny new toy. There had never been any chance of friendship, even when Marlow had been part of Evergarden society. Girls like Amara and Gemma didn't have friends, they had sycophants and victims. Even back then, Marlow was too thick-skinned to make a satisfying victim, and too wary to be a biddable sycophant. She had therefore been largely invisible to them, which had suited her just fine.

She wasn't the daughter of some lesser lord, but the daughter of the former Vale chevalier—not quite a commoner, but definitely not noblesse nouveau, though she'd been allowed to be educated alongside them. A rare allowance for someone of her status, and one she was grateful for, even now.

It was precisely that education that had taught her enough about spellcraft to become such a successful cursebreaker.

But none of these scions, the upper echelon of the upper echelon, had been Marlow's *friends*. None, of course, except—

Marlow stumbled over her answer to Gemma's question as she caught sight of a familiar head of carefully tousled chestnut curls. The crowd parted as neatly as curtains before a stage, and Adrius Falcrest emerged, his flame-gold dress coat sweeping out behind him, a matching cravat peeking out from his ruby waistcoat. Gilded by the light of the chandelier, he strode across the lobby with the leonine grace of someone perfectly aware that he commanded every set of eyes in the room—and perfectly content to.

Marlow could tell that he hadn't yet realized who it was his friends had accosted in the middle of the Monarch's lobby. Vindication fizzed in her chest as she watched him recognize her. The affable charm faded from his face, his smooth gait faltered for a split second before he recovered himself, an insouciant grin sliding comfortably into place.

Even the other scions, Marlow knew, were not unaffected by the

inexorable glow of Adrius's presence. She felt them shift around her, accommodating Adrius and drawing toward him, like flowers seeking the sun.

"Well, this is certainly shaping up to be an interesting night," Adrius said, his whiskey-gold eyes lighting on Marlow, one elegant dark eyebrow cocked. "If you wanted to see me this badly, you didn't need to follow me all the way to the ballet, Minnow."

Marlow seethed, mortification kindling her anger. No one had called her that in over a year. The only two people who ever had were her mother and Adrius, who'd read it off a note her mother had slipped her on her very first day of classes in Evergarden. He'd refused to call her anything else since. It hadn't bothered her back then—or rather, it had bothered her in an entirely different way. Before Marlow recognized it for the cruel jab it was.

"Just an unlucky coincidence," Marlow replied, clipped. She considered, briefly, the appeal of wasting her last hex on Adrius, just for the fun of it. "I was on my way out, actually."

"So soon?" Adrius asked, brows pinching together with mock concern. "If it's a matter of affording a seat, I'm sure we can find room in the box, you need only ask. We are old friends, after all—aren't we?"

Gemma stifled a high-pitched giggle, and Amara elbowed her sharply. Silvan's gaze climbed skyward, as though he was praying for the Ibis God to swoop down from above and put an end to this awkward reunion. Marlow found herself in the unfamiliar position of wholeheartedly agreeing with him—although at this point, she'd also welcome the Crocodile Goddess rising from the depths of the swamp. Or better yet, snapping Adrius up in her jaws.

"Speaking of our private box, shouldn't we head up?" Silvan grouched, shooting Adrius a pursed look. "I feel it's high time we take our leave of the . . . crowds." He punctuated this with an unsubtle glance at Marlow.

Adrius, however, made no sign he'd heard him, fixing Marlow with a taunting smirk as he awaited her riposte.

She was delighted to disappoint him. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass." She couldn't resist tacking on a sarcastic smile. "Enjoy the show."

She turned her back, but her escape was immediately thwarted by Teak, the stage manager she'd met in the green room.

"Miss Briggs!" Teak exclaimed. "I'm glad I caught you before you left."

"Corinne already paid me," Marlow said, stepping around her to reach the doors.

"Of course," Teak said, hurrying to follow. "The producers just wanted to extend their thanks—for your help as well as your discretion. Please accept this as a token of their gratitude."

She thrust a pair of tickets at Marlow, and Marlow, aware that Adrius and the others were still staring, took them without argument.

"They're valid for any night you wish to attend. The doorman will let you in on sight," Teak explained. "If you're ever in need of something the Monarch can provide, we'd be happy to assist you."

"I'll keep that in mind." Marlow could not imagine a scenario where she might require the aid of a ballet company, but she'd learned that it never hurt to have someone indebted to you. In Caraza, favors were often a more powerful currency than pearls. Especially for a cursebreaker.

As Teak marched away, ponytail swinging, Marlow was at last free to make her escape. She could feel Adrius's eyes on her back as she fled out the doors. Anger and mortification burned in her gut, but she was content at least with the knowledge that in less than an hour she'd be back in the Marshes where she belonged, and she'd never have to see Adrius Falcrest again.