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My father once described magic as an invisible beast, an unseen enemy that could snatch our lives away at any moment. As a small, impressionable child, I had imagined a lupine creature lurking outside among the whispering pines, breathing over my shoulder in our garden. For years, I didn't even leave the house; it was magic that had killed my mother, after all.

I was old enough now to understand that magic didn't work that way. But as I hurried down the dark road, past the woods that had become my haven during daylight hours, my childhood fears didn't feel so foolish. I glanced behind me, sure I'd find Belle Sabine, the fabled witch of every young woman's nightmares, swooping down as silent as an owl, ready to steal my youth and leave an empty husk behind.

To my relief, there was nothing there. My only traveling companion was the wind nipping at my heels, spurring me forward. But in my brief distraction, I tripped over a rock in the road, falling hard onto my knees. Cursing myself for my clumsiness and superstition, I dusted off my hands, wincing as a sharp pebble dislodged from my palm. I couldn't afford this kind of delay. It was close to midnight, and there was no moon to speak of, which made my situation even more precarious; my exposed skin glowed so brightly that moths circled me like a flame. But my little sister, Mina, was missing. I had to tell Father.

As I rose, I heard the sound of footsteps up the road. I glanced around for a place to hide, but there was no time. A moment later, a figure loomed at the margins of my glow.

Some said Belle Sabine had died, others that she was biding her time until the townspeople became complacent once again. But I was convinced she had come to kill me on the one night I had dared to venture past our threshold.

I shrank back as skirts and slippered feet came into view, followed by a woman's arms cradling a basket, and finally, the face of Margana, the weaver who lived next door. Not here to kill me, then. But a witch, nevertheless. And one arguably as dangerous as Belle Sabine, given who she worked for.

"What are you doing on the road, Liora? It's the middle of the night."

"Mina is gone," I said. "Father is still at work, and I didn't know what else to do."

Margana scrutinized me for a moment. "You're a witch."

A chill that had nothing to do with the cool night air crept over my scalp. No one had ever called me a witch to my face before, though of course I knew what I was. My entire life revolved around my glowing skin and the fear that the kingdom's most powerful warlock would discover it. Lord Darius was employed by the king himself, gathering mages and torturing them if they didn't do his bidding.

I pulled Father's cloak tighter around myself, but it was futile. She already knew. I had wasted too much time getting up the nerve to leave the house after I found Mina's bed empty, wringing my hands at the window, wondering if she'd been kidnapped by drifters or lured into the forest by a ghost lantern. Then, once I was on the road, I had foolishly stopped to look at the devil's footprints, little white mushrooms that grew in pairs of two, resembling the cloven hooves of a demon. I'd seen them in daylight plenty of times, but never at night. They had caught my eye because their glow was so similar to my own.

Oddly, Margana's basket was full of the mushrooms. Her cornflower-blue eyes and auburn hair were pale and otherworldly in their light. As if sensing my curiosity, she shifted the basket to her other hip. Margana was one of the few people who lived outside the gates of the ancient village of Sylvan, like us. She was also my best friend Evran's mother—and the only other witch I knew.

"I always wondered why your father moved you girls out here after your mother died," she said. "Now it all makes sense. But something tells me your father wouldn't be pleased to know you're outside, exposing yourself." She grabbed one of my hands and turned it over, examining it like a bruised apple at market. Against Margana's dull skin, mine looked false, as if I wasn't a real person at all.

I pulled my hand free as politely as possible. "I should go."

She sighed. "Keep your head down, and pray you don't meet anyone on the road. Darius's spies are everywhere."

My eyes widened in fear, and she chuckled to herself. "Not me, silly girl."

I swallowed audibly. If there really were spies in Sylvan, Margana was the most likely suspect. After all, she did work for Lord Darius. She might not be his servant by choice, but he was dangerous enough that no mage dared cross him. No mage who had lived to tell about it, anyway.

I was about to step around her when my eyes drifted to the basket once again. "I thought the devil's footprints were poisonous."

Her lips curved in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Oh, they are. Highly. Fortunately, I don't plan on eating them. Good luck, Liora."

I nodded and hurried to the stone steps leading down to Sylvan, which was tucked away in a gorge, hidden from the roving eyes of river pirates. Above me, a heavy iron chain was suspended between the cliffs. As far as I knew, Sylvan was the only village in Antalla—maybe the world—that could boast having attracted not one, but two falling stars. A fragment of the first had been melted into the shape of a five-pointed star and hung from the chain. At night, it was only a glimmer overhead.

The second star—my star—had disintegrated amid the flames when it landed.

I wound my way silently through Sylvan's narrow streets, toward Father's shop. He and Adelle, my older, more responsible sister, were likely the only ones working at this hour. Just as I quickened my pace, I heard a high-pitched shriek from somewhere above me. I looked up to where a lamp winked on in an apartment window, illuminating two silhouettes, then down to the shop on my left. The tailor's shop.

Mina.

Without thinking, I grabbed the cast-iron boot scraper sitting by the front door of the shop and hurled it through the window. Glass shattered, leaving a jagged hole that gaped like a mouth midscream.

Heart racing, I flattened myself against the alcove by the door as a man shouted and a window screeched open. The tailor, a young man nearly as alluring as the fabrics he sold, poked his head out for a moment, then disappeared, likely heading downstairs to look for the culprit. I scurried to the nook in front of the butcher's, hoping my light would be hidden there.

"Get behind me," Luc said from somewhere inside the shop. "The thief could still be out there."

“You’re so brave.”

I sighed in relief at the sound of Mina’s voice, before fury shot through me like an arrow. I should have known she would come to the tailor’s; she had flirted with Luc relentlessly today, which was how we’d acquired four yards of the champagne-colored silk she wanted for the dress I’d spent all evening working on.

A moment later, they emerged onto the street, Mina clutching at Luc’s sleeve as he lifted his lamp and peered into the darkness.

He tossed his black hair out of his eyes and frowned. “It doesn’t look like they stole anything. Just vandals, I suppose.”

“Or someone trying to send you a message,” Mina breathed, dramatic as ever. “Do you have any nemeses?”

When he turned his dark gaze on her, something tugged at my heart. She was wearing a dress I’d made for myself when I was her age. It hung loose on her thin frame, but the hem grazed her calves, a sure sign she had altered it. She had nothing but a shawl pulled around her shoulders, and from where I stood, it was painfully clear that the tailor was not interested in her the way she no doubt hoped.

“I have to find a member of the night guard and report this. You shouldn’t be here. If your father catches you, he’ll have me hanged. You’re a sweet girl, Mina, but this is inappropriate.”

“But the silk...”

“That was for your sister. Now, please, go home.”

Mina caught her lip in her teeth to keep from crying. With a nod, she hurried away, tears already streaming down her cheeks. I waited for Luc to start up the street before I ran out of the alcove to catch her.

She squealed in alarm when I placed my hand on her shoulder, and I quickly clapped my other hand over her mouth.

“It’s me,” I whispered, lowering my hand slowly when I was confident she wouldn’t scream.

She swiped at her tears. “Liora? What are you doing out? What if someone sees you?”

My anger softened at her concern, until I remembered that she was the reason I was out in the first place. “I might ask you the same questions. If Father had come home and found you missing, he’d have killed you.”

“And what if he goes home and finds both of us missing? Have you considered that?”

I opened my mouth to scold her, but she was right. “You can explain what you were doing once we get back,” I said.

In typical Mina fashion, she stuck her tongue out at me, then turned and ran toward home.

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We were indeed lucky. We made it home not long before Father and Adelle. By the time he came to our room to check on us, we were both in bed. I waved sleepily at him and Mina let out an emphatic snore, but once the door was closed, I threw back my covers and leaped out of bed.

"I hope you have a good explanation for this," I hissed.

Her voice was muffled by the thick blanket pulled up to her nose, but I could hear the tremor in it when she said, "I thought Luc liked me."

"And I thought you were dead!" I whisper-shouted, then stalked to the window ledge to keep myself from throttling her. I plucked a pendant from the collar of my nightgown, running my fingers over the five points on the star charm to calm myself. Evran had given it to me, years ago, and its contours were as familiar to me now as the feel of his hand in mine as he pulled me through the Sylvan woods toward home at twilight. Perhaps I was being too hard on Mina. I would risk a lot of things for Evran.

"Luc told me he was having a party tonight," she said. "I didn't realize how late it was when I got there. Everyone else had already left."

I was surprised that the thought of her getting ready for a party, the excitement she must have felt as she sneaked into Sylvan to meet a handsome young man, made me more envious than angry. "I heard you cry out."

The whites of her eyes flashed in the dark.

"Don't you dare roll your eyes at me," I snapped.

"I'm just stretching them, Ora." The world-weary tone was classic Mina: so eager to be a grown-up, ever since she was little. "A moth got tangled in my hair. Anyway, Luc was a perfect gentleman. And as it turns out, it's not me he wants."

The silk was for me. The last of my anger waned as I imagined how sure Mina must have been of Luc to do something so foolish, only to find she'd made a huge mistake. This was his fault as much as it was hers. "He was just being kind because I spend so much money in his shop."

She snorted. "He spoke about you the entire time. He asked why you hadn't come to the party, and what you liked to do in your free time, and why he never saw you out in town."

"What did you tell him?" I dropped the pendant into my collar and pulled back the edge of the curtain just a bit to gaze at the real stars.

"I told him you were making me a dress, that that's what you're doing most of the time."

I sighed and let the curtain fall. For a girl with glowing skin, I sounded unbearably dull. But it was the truth. If I wasn't sewing, I was cooking, cleaning, or rereading one of our few books.

Father trusted me enough to let me go out on sunny days now. The smallest stars don't shine at noon, he said, and my glow could be kept dim as long as I stayed in control of my emotions. But the downside of having even just a little bit of freedom was that it came with responsibilities. Father had only given me permission to go to town for errands, never to dawdle, which made taking Mina along particularly frustrating. She had made an art form out of window-shopping. I missed my afternoons in the woods

with Evran, those glorious days when I could sneak out unnoticed while Father was working and my sisters were in their lessons.

I climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up, a wave of guilt washing over me. Had I really believed Mina was in mortal peril? Because if not, there was no excuse for my own behavior. What if some part of me had risked going out tonight because I wanted to prove to myself, finally, that my magic wasn't as dangerous as Father feared?

If that was the case, I had failed spectacularly. It had only taken a few minutes for me to undo all our years of hard work, and I couldn't blame my sister for that.

"Promise me you won't sneak out again, Mina. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you."

She twisted onto her side to face me. "I'm sorry. I should never have put you at risk like that. I won't do it again."

"It's all right. Get some sleep now."

Mina responded a moment later with a very genuine snore.

I smiled and tried to fall asleep myself, but I lay awake for hours, thinking about Margana. Would she tell Darius about me, potentially destroying not just my life but those of everyone I loved? I thought of Father and wondered if all this time it hadn't been me he was protecting, but them.

Because as much as I had wanted to believe that the invisible beast was out there, that if I simply hid myself away like a secret, we would be safe, I had known for quite some time that the beast Father feared most lived inside of me.