

PROLOGUE

"My Lady!" a voice shouted.

"What is it?" Blackheart mumbled from under her bed covers.

"It's the queen, My Lady," the voice replied.

"What can she possibly want at this hour? Tell her I'm asleep," she said.

"She's gone into labor. The doctor says it's not long now until the baby arrives."

Blackheart sat up and rubbed her eyes. A dark silhouette, one of her guards, stood in the doorway.

Faint screams echoed from down the hall.

"All right, all right. I'm coming," Blackheart called out. She stretched her long, slender arms and yawned before getting out of bed. She winced and took in a quick breath as her bare feet pressed against the cold floor.

"I swear she can never do anything on her own. Now, where are those damn slippers? Ah, there they are," she mumbled while slipping her boney feet into the white puffy pads and draping a floral patterned robe over her shoulders.

Blackheart shuffled down the hall and into the queen's room, "Everything will be all right, dear cousin. I'm . . ."

The queen lay on her bed with her legs spread open. The sheets, once pristine and white, were now soiled with birthing fluids. She clawed at the pillows beside her and groaned.

"Lady Blackheart is here, My Queen," the doctor said.

Breathing heavily, the queen looked up at her cousin.

"Elzana," she gasped, "there is something wrong."

"There's nothing wrong," Blackheart said, "Stop being so

weak. You'll get through this."

The doctor stepped in front of Blackheart. "My Queen, we are going to lay you on this cot and move you to the birthing room, okay? Are you ready?"

The queen nodded. Her servants snapped into motion and helped her off the bed and onto the cot.

"Guards, grab the cot and follow me," the doctor said.

The queen called out again, "Elzana, I feel it. Something's not right."

Flashes of lightning and the clap of thunder from an approaching storm bounced off the walls. This type of weather normally excited Blackheart, but tonight all she could think about was her cousin and the coming baby.

"In here," the doctor said as the group rushed into the birthing room. "Quickly, lay Her Majesty on the bed."

Blackheart cringed at the queen's appearance. "You look awful, just so you know. Seeing you like this makes me forget that you're actually a queen. You look more like one of your three servants right now, thrown together and unladylike."

Blackheart raised her nose at Marie, Josephine, and Therese. They were the queen's most trusted servants, and Blackheart's least favorite people.

The queen wiped fresh sweat from her face and fidgeted at the wrinkles in her gown, but stopped abruptly as she burst into another bout of screaming.

"What's wrong with her?" Blackheart asked.

"Another contraction," the doctor said.

Blackheart knelt down beside the queen and grabbed her hand. "Try and hurry this up so I can get back to sleep."

"She's ready," the doctor said, and then shouted, "push!"

"Ahhh!" Blackheart groaned. Her fingers pressed sharply together within her cousin's grip.

The queen's shrill screams drowned out the rumbles of thunder. "What is happening to me?" she cried out. "The baby, it's . . . it's pushing back!"

Blackheart glared at the doctor. "Do something, you imbecile."

The queen screamed through her final push. The child was finally delivered.

Silence shrouded the room. Thick dark blood oozed down the side of the bed, and tears as clear as crystal ran down the queen's soft, porcelain-like cheeks. She exhaled a final breath and collapsed.

The doctor quickly wrapped the newborn in a clean cloth.

He backed away from Blackheart and the queen and handed the bundle to her most trusted servant, Marie. "Look at the baby," he whispered. "What are we going to do?"

Blackheart stood over her cousin's lifeless body. "Rosaline? Rosaline, wake up!" she called out.

The queen's complexion faded to grey. The skin on her face, arms and legs dried and cracked. Her silvery hair, once shiny and wavy, thinned and withered like scorched paper. Her hazel eyes, still and open, darkened into pools of blackness.

"Wake up!" Blackheart repeated.

CHAPTER 1

The queen thrust herself up to a sitting position, startling everyone. "What happened to me?" Her voice

was flat and emotionless.

"My Queen," the doctor said from across the room. He

stopped washing his hands and rushed back to her side.

"I feel nothing. No pain, just stillness," the queen continued
in a monotone whisper with her hand over her chest. "Doctor?
What's wrong with me?"

The doctor's mouth opened but no words came out. He
examined the queen. His nose crinkled. He tried to speak again,
but instead just sighed.

"Where is my child?" the queen asked. Marie, handed her
the baby, bowed, and stepped back. The queen removed the
cloth that concealed the newborn.

The baby was not screaming or crying. Her lips and cheeks
were crimson and her head was adorned with wisps of red
hair. Bright red blotches, birthmarks, were splattered like paint
across her body. Many resembled the perfect shape of a heart,
like those on a printed playing card, while others resembled
deflated caricatures of such.

"What's wrong with her?" the queen asked. "What're these
markings all over her body?"

"That's no baby," Blackheart said. "That's a monster!"

The queen trembled.

The old man continued to examine the queen's body. He then
paused for a moment and fidgeted with his tools.

"Doctor," the queen said. "Answer me."

The methodical doctor shifted his gaze back and forth before
finally responding. His eyes constricted and his brow beaded
with sweat. In a quiet, trembling voice he said, "My Queen, I
can't find your heartbeat. It's as if it's not there."

"What do you mean?" the queen asked. "How is that possible?"

"And what of this hideous baby?" Blackheart added. Marie gasped. She stepped forward and cautiously replied,

"My Lady, she is your niece."

Blackheart laughed. "This is not my niece. Have you seen the illegitimate bastard? She's no better than a leper. This monster is a disgusting poor excuse for life. Besides, she looks nothing like the queen. She looks like the man who fathered her."

Leper. The queen hated that term. That was what Blackheart called any walking and talking animal, as if they were diseased or impure. While the term itself was relatively new, such animals had been around for generations, or longer. As far as anyone knew, they had been in existence since the beginning of time. Humans and these unique creatures always lived together, peacefully. It was only recently that the two were pitted against one another by Blackheart's manipulation and abuse of power.

Blackheart reached down and snatched the baby away from the queen's arms. "Do something with this. Take it to the river and drown the devil."

"Nooo!" the queen shouted.

"Get this out of my sight," Blackheart said. She dropped the infant as if it were a stack of books. Gasps and screams erupted from the servants as the baby thudded onto the floor and finally cried out. Undaunted, Blackheart looked away.

The queen jumped out of bed and onto her feet. She lunged for her child but Blackheart pushed her back onto the bed. Marie quickly knelt down and picked up the crying newborn.

She inched away from the squabbling cousins.

"It's for your own good, My Queen," Blackheart said.

"Yes," the doctor agreed. "You should lie down. Don't overexert yourself."

"Give me my baby," the queen demanded.

"No," Blackheart said.

"Give me my baby," the queen repeated in a softer tone.

"That . . . that thing was not meant to be," Blackheart said.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you share your bed with that man.

How would you explain this child to the governors? Think about what people will say."

"Other people. That's all you care about," the queen said.

"I care about you," Blackheart replied. "And yes, I also care about the stability of our kingdom." She draped one of her lanky arms over the queen's shoulder. "Let us take you back to your room, clean you up, and get you ready for bed. I'll take care of all this."

"But, that's my baby," the queen whimpered.

Blackheart grabbed the queen's chin and stared into her eyes.

"That is not your baby. I told you I will handle this."

The queen sat on the side of the bed, slumped forward. She didn't know what to do. Arguing with Elzana always proved futile. Even while growing up, she always possessed the stronger personality. She was stubborn and only saw things her way, so it was always easiest to let her do what she wanted. Years of giving a spoiled child what she wanted had ruined both of them.

Blackheart called out to one of the servants. "You there, girl, take Her Majesty to her room and prepare a bath."

The young servant stepped forward and bowed. "Yes, My

Lady."

The queen stared at Blackheart. There was nothing she could do. She was far too deep in her cousin's web to stand up to her now. "I can walk myself," she said. As she rose slowly, the servants stepped aside to let the queen pass.

Exposed, wearing nothing but bloody sheer garments, the queen left the room and her baby. With the young servant following, she dragged herself down the hallways and across the large and ornate foyers. Her stone black eyes stared straight into nothing. Torches mounted on the walls flickered and extinguished as she walked by.

The queen looked over her shoulder, past the servant. "That's odd," she said. The corridor behind them was shrouded in darkness and smoke. She took a few steps forward, toward a lit torch, and reached for it. Air whirled past her fingers. The flame danced vigorously for a second before disappearing. This can't be, she thought.

The young servant softly gasped from behind. "What is it?" the queen asked.

"Nothing, Your Majesty," the servant replied between heavy breaths.

"If you don't want to be here, you can leave. I don't need an escort," the queen said.

"Oh, no I couldn't do that. Lady Blackheart asked that I . . ."

"Do not speak that name to me. No one has the willpower to stand up to Lady Blackheart. Fine. Do as you were told, but stay quiet." The queen walked to her bedroom. The servant followed close behind her.

When the two arrived at the bedroom door, the young

girl gasped for air. "What's wrong with you? Are you okay?" the queen asked. She turned and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

The servant stumbled and collapsed at the queen's feet. The queen's gaze lowered and fixed onto the girl's body. A long moment passed. The room started spinning. The queen put her hands over her face and sighed. Unwilling to acknowledge everything that was happening, she entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

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In the birthing room, Marie clenched her teeth and bit at her lower lip, trying to stifle the urge to slap Blackheart across the face. Blackheart ordered her and the other two servants to clean the room and dispose of the baby before it ruined her and the queen.

As soon as Blackheart left, Marie adjusted her grasp of the newborn and cradled the child against her chest. The baby stopped crying. She could feel the girl's heartbeat. It didn't feel normal. Marie tilted her head slightly and squinted in concentration. Was it beating twice as fast?

Josephine and Therese looked up as Marie studied the baby. "Stop that, Marie. Pay no attention to the child," Josephine whispered as she scrubbed the blood off the floor.

"Josephine is right," Therese added. "For once be reasonable. We have to finish here and find a way to get rid of that child."

"You wouldn't," Marie said.

"Who's to stop Blackheart from drowning us along with the baby if we don't do what she says?" Josephine asked.

"Yeah . . . you're probably right," Marie replied. "Lady

Blackheart has always had the queen wrapped around her finger. It's too bad your brother's not here. It's only gotten worse since his mission to explore the open sea. You know that better than any of us," Marie said, knowing how much the subject of her brother, the king, bothered Josephine.

"I'm lucky to even still be alive," Josephine whispered.

"Alive, but with not much of a life, trapped in here all the time," Marie said.

"Don't listen to her, Josephine, your poor brother probably just ran away and never looked back," Therese joked.

Josephine dropped her brush and scowled. "Don't say that!" "It's been years, and who could blame him?" Therese continued. She burst into laughter. "I would run away too if I were married to a Blackheart. You marry one, you marry both of them."

Marie slowly detached herself from the others. She gently cradled the baby. Staring kindly at the infant, she asked in a soft and uncertain voice, "What would you do if I took this girl as my own?"

Josephine and Therese stopped arguing.

"Old habits die hard, don't they?" Therese asked.

"Don't look at me like that. I know neither of you share in Elzana Blackheart's cold hatred. You are both good-hearted people. Don't let her bully and intimidate you into doing something you'll regret for the rest of your lives. It's bad enough she does it to the queen."

"My brother would have never allowed her to do the things she has done," Josephine said.

"She's asking too much from us this time," Marie said. "I

know I can make this work."

"Have you lost your mind?" Therese asked. "It will never work. How would you feed her?"

"The doctor already prepared feeding bottles with milk," Marie said. She pointed to a shelf at the far end of the room. On it stood several small bottles, wide at the base and narrow at the top, with a bit of cloth packed into the small opening.

"Where would you keep her?" Josephine asked.

"I'll figure that out," Marie said. "But I can't do this on my own. If you won't help, at least keep this to yourselves." She wrapped the infant in fresh cloth. "The queen is easily pushed around by her cousin and cares more for her reputation than her own child. I'm doing this because it is the right thing to do. And if I get caught, at least I will die with a clear conscience."

Marie rushed out of the birthing room and to her room in the West Wing, concealing the ill-fated baby girl beneath her frock. Nothing in comparison to the rest of the palace, the West Wing was a labyrinth of narrow, dark, and damp hallways lined with old stone gargoyles, relics of the past. Hardly any windows existed in this area of the palace and the ceiling often dripped dirty, briny water.

Once in her room, Marie laid the newborn on her bed.

Never taking her gaze off the child, she filled a bowl with water and washed herself with an old, tattered towel. When finished, she dried her round and tired face and stared into the broken mirror on the wall. Am I ready for this?

Marie changed into her night gown and fed the baby some of the milk. As the girl suckled on the cloth that protruded from the top of the bottle, Marie held her and reclined against the

wall until she and the baby drifted off to sleep.

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Later that morning, before the ringing of the morning bells,

Blackheart woke to another voice.

"My Lady," the voice said.

"What?" Blackheart moaned.

"My Lady, there is something you should see."

"What, what is it this time?" she asked.

"There is a body lying outside the queen's bedroom," the

voice said.

Blackheart sat up. Predawn light trickled through the undraped bedroom windows. She admired the purple twilight while the guard stood patiently. "A body, you say?"

"Yes," the guard replied. "It appears to be a servant. She's dead."

"I'm up, I'm up." Blackheart got out of bed, stepped into a pair of slippers, and draped a silk robe over her shoulders.

"This way, My Lady," the guard said.

"I am fully aware of where my cousin sleeps." She rushed past him to the corridor just outside the queen's bedroom. A young woman lay by the doorway. Her eyes and mouth gaped open, fixed in a silent scream.

"What's this girl's name and what happened to her?"

Blackheart asked.

"Trinity, My Lady," the guard replied. "I don't know what happened. I found her like this."

"Does anyone else know about this? Have you awakened the queen?"

"No," the guard replied.

"Good. Wrap the body and take it to the tower before the morning bells ring. Have the executioner cremate the body."

"Yes, My Lady," the guard said.

"And tell no one of this," she continued. "Not even the queen."

* * *

When the morning bells rang, the queen sat up in her bed. The room was dark, but hints of early morning sunlight peeked in from behind the window coverings.

Before the queen could get out of bed, her ladies-in-waiting entered the room one at a time. The first was Amanda, with her usual large, beaming smile. She pulled back and pinned the heavy window drapery to the side while humming. As dawn's light bathed the room in reddish and auburn hues, Beatrice, another of the queen's ladies, rushed in. Dressed in light blue, she passed through the room swiftly and entered the washroom to prepare the queen's bath.

Amanda then cleaned and replaced the candles situated atop the large wooden furniture. Celine, the third woman who entered, was older. Slower and steady in her gait, she approached the giant four-poster bed at the center of the room and pulled back the layers of sheer linens that adorned it. "Good morning, My Queen," she sang, as she worked at the linens.

Several other women glided into the room. Each carried an assortment of clothes, powders, and other items to aid in preparing the queen for her day.

Therese was the final woman to enter. She brought in breakfast pastries and dishes and quietly laid them out on a long, narrow credenza situated at the back of the room. She bowed toward the queen, stepped out of the room, and closed

the bedroom door.

"I swear, you women are exhausting," the queen said as she stepped onto the cold floor and winced.

Two of the nearest women rushed toward the queen and offered assistance.

Celine, from behind a pile of bed linens, warned, "Don't overdo it, Your Majesty. You should probably stay in bed today. Let them help you."

The queen waved her hand and walked to the spread of food even though she didn't have much of an appetite.

Heavy breathing replaced the chatter and clatter of the ladies working.

"What's wrong with all of you?" the queen asked.

The women exchanged glances with one another. Their heavy breathing turned to loud and labored gasps.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I'm having trouble breathing," Amanda explained, breathless.

Looks of panic swept from face to face across the room.

"Why is my skin burning?" one asked.

"Mine too!" another said.

Celine, standing closest to the queen, collapsed. Another passed out immediately after.

The other women quickly discarded or threw what they were holding and stumbled into one another while trying to aid those who lay lifeless on the floor. Powder and undergarments flew across the room.

"You women must be joking!" the queen shouted. "Humph!" Dodging clouds of powder and stepping over clothes, she walked into the washroom and slammed the door closed behind her.

Beatrice poured a pail of steaming water into the half-filled tub.

The queen shrugged. "Get out, and fetch the doctor to examine the women who fainted."

"Fainted? Who fainted? Which women need examining, Your Majesty?"

The queen closed her eyes, took a slow deep breath, and groaned. She jerked the door open and stomped her foot angrily while gesturing for the young woman to leave the washroom.

Finally alone, the queen relished the silence. After bathing, she tiptoed across the washroom to get a towel. Since becoming queen, someone always drew her bath and washed her hair. This was the first time she was left alone and she was a little hesitant.

When done drying herself, she stepped out of the washroom and paused at the site of her quiet bedroom. The women were gone. Powder and clothes covered the floor and were the only remnants of the bizarre scene that occurred earlier.

The queen picked up a few pieces of clothing and started dressing. She was amused at how long it had been since she had completed these ordinary tasks herself. She walked to the mirror, picked up a small finger-length brush, and applied a layer of white powder over her face. She almost did not recognize the woman gazing back at her from within the mirror. She tried not to think about her altered appearance and instead compensated with her wardrobe. She picked out a white multi-layered dress that shimmered brightly and added a false dab of color to her skin. She crowned her head with jewels and white ribbons of satin and silk to distract people from her noticeably damaged hair.

Standing in front of the mirror, she frowned. "I look like a corpse bride." The white dress only drew attention to her cracked skin and to the dark circles around her eyes. "Ugh!" A cloud of white erupted around her as she layered more powder onto her arms, face, and neck. There was nothing she could do to cover up or hide her corpse-like appearance. She threw the brush and makeup on the floor. "This can't be," she whispered. "Is this The Caterpillar's Curse?"

The Caterpillar's Curse was an old wives' tale about a woman who had lost her husband during an accident in the Caterpillar's Forest. While mourning her loss, the widow walked deep into the forest to weep. Feeling the woman's sorrow, the spirit of the forest appeared in the shape of a caterpillar as a sign of condolence. But the woman, blinded by sadness and anger, stepped on the caterpillar without any regret or respect for life.

The trees around her shuddered. The spirit of the Caterpillar flared back to life as a pair of large eyes, one colored red and the other green. Its voice filled her ears with a curse. Widow, you mourn death yet kill without a blink. Your inner lament shall be your torment. You will age, but never die. You will live, but life around you will be sucked dry.

The queen dismissed the thought. Impossible. That was just a story that kept widows up in the middle of the night. She trudged down the winding stairway alongside the large gleaming crystal chandeliers that hung over the marble foyer. Sunlight poured through the undraped windows of the massive room. Bustle from the main floor echoed upward. Every little sound combined into waves of clashing noise.

As the queen walked down the staircase, the buzz and

movement stopped. Everyone bowed and waited for her to pass. The only sound coming from the foyer was the clack of her heels hitting the marble floor as she crossed to enter her Court Room.

A monolithic entrance constructed of large slabs of marble separated the foyer from the Court Room. Swirls of black and grey cascaded across the surface in a dizzying fashion.

A court steward stood by the entrance and cleared his throat. The young man bowed and ceremoniously pounded his staff on the ground. Upon announcing the queen's arrival in a loud and confident tone, the steward stammered slightly and barely choked out the last word before gasping for air. "Her Majesty the Queen of Wonderland."

"What's wrong with you this morning, boy?" the queen asked before entering.

The Court Room was where the queen and her governors carried out their day-to-day tasks. There was no rhyme or reason to the cases they heard or the rulings they made, as long as they were what the queen and her cousin wanted.

Also assembled, behind the governors, were the queen's ladies-in-waiting. Everyone stood and bowed.

After taking her seat in front of her court, the queen opened the session. Stiff and poised on her chair, she said, "There is something wrong with the torches in the palace. We need them all replaced. On my way down, just now, I noticed that the torches on the walls faded and burned out along the way. Either they were not replaced earlier this morning or there is something else wrong. I find it difficult to believe that all the torches are defective. Who here is in charge of maintenance and

housekeeping?"

A fat, round woman slowly raised her hand. It and her voice trembled. "I am, Your Majesty."

"Ah, good!" the queen shouted from across the room. "Come closer!"

As the young woman approached the throne, the queen asked, "What's your name, dear?"

"Jeannine Hoggle, Your Majesty," the woman whispered, her voice still shaking.

"Louder," the queen said. "I can't hear you."

"Lady Hoggle, Your Majesty. Your third cousin through marriage."

"Yes, of course you are. So, you're responsible for these torches?" the queen asked.

"I'm embarrassed to say that I am, Your Majesty."

"Well, Lady Hoggle. I don't want to take too much time on the subject. I'll leave it to you to make sure this doesn't happen again tomorrow," the queen said, gesturing for her to return to her seat.

The queen maintained her stone-like demeanor. She licked her dry lips and stretched her neck to loosen her collar. "Before we move on to business, I want to discuss another issue that needs your attention."

The queen addressed her ladies and relieved them of their duties. She told them that they were no longer needed for something that she could easily do herself. "Just look at me," she said, "I managed just fine on my own. And now that you have more time, you can make yourselves useful by cleaning my bedroom from top to bottom. You left it a mess this morning. Not

even a street rat would sit its disease-infested ass on my floor."

The women gasped.

After a slight pause, the queen screamed, "Now! You can start by cleaning it now!"

The group of women rushed out of the Court Room.

Agitated, the queen dismissed the governors as well. She stepped into the corridor and told Marie, Josephine, and Therese that she would like a word with them, upstairs in her private study.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the three replied in unison.

When the four were alone, the queen closed the door and asked, "Where is my child?"

Marie stepped forward. "We did what we were told, Your Majesty."

The queen's brow rose. She turned to Josephine and Therese.

"Is this true? So soon?"

Therese lowered her head and avoided the queen's gaze.

Josephine nodded. "Yes . . . Yes, Your Majesty. We took the baby out of the palace and drowned her in the river."

The queen flinched. Her face sagged into a deep frown, "My dear ladies, I . . . I had no idea you would act so swiftly." She walked across the room to an open window that overlooked the sprawling city. Cool air from outside flowed in. "Well . . . what's done is done."

Marie stepped forward. "May I speak freely, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"Of course," the queen whispered.

"You've stood up to Lady Blackheart before. Why not this time?" Marie asked. "This was your child, your own flesh and

blood."

The queen scowled in regret. "I've had my disagreements with Elzana. If it were up to her, every leper and sympathizer would be dead. That includes you, Marie."

Sympathizer. Another term that made the queen's stomach churn. This was what Blackheart called anyone caught aiding or hiding a leper during or after the inquisition—the relocation of lepers to the Caterpillar's Forest.

"Elzana is only looking out for what's best, for all of us," the queen said. "Besides, no one would have accepted that child as their princess."

Marie took a step forward and opened her mouth to respond, but the queen lifted her hand to stop her. "Marie, don't worry about it. What's done is done. Please go now."

* * *

Marie and her two companions returned to the foyer. Blackheart approached from a distance, dressed in a cloud of soft fabric laced with gold ribbons and decorative bows. Her silvery spun-up hair was adorned with crystals and towered over those around her.

Marie quickly parted from Josephine and Therese. As she rounded a corner and hastened her approach to the West Wing, she could hear Blackheart's shrill voice. "Where do you think you two are going? And where's the third withered hag, that dirty little swine who completes your trio?" Blackheart asked.

"I am asking you witches a question. And why are you just standing around? You heard the queen. She wants her room cleaned from top to bottom. Let's go. Get to cleaning, wench! And don't forget your old friend here." The sound of Blackheart's

laughter filled the foyer.

"Oh, thank God," Marie whispered, grateful to have escaped Blackheart's path. She rushed through the obscure halls of the West Wing, knowing she couldn't keep the child in the palace. She couldn't even begin to imagine what she would do if she walked into her room and found the infant eaten by rats and dead on the floor.

Halfway back to her room, she tripped over a loose stone and fell into a murky puddle. Wet and a bit scraped, she got back onto her feet and shook the dirty water off.

A strange sound echoed through the darkness.

Marie paused. What was that? It sounded like a person but nobody was around. With no time to waste, she continued on her way.

Before Marie could open her door, an elderly woman, nearly naked and drenched in her own waste, approached. Balding, with only a few decaying teeth left in her mouth, the woman could barely speak. "I heard noises coming from your room." "Noises?" Marie replied. "I'm sorry, dear, but your ears must be giving out on you like the rest of your body."

"My ears are perfectly fine, you old cow."