

The Prince

He had been hunting for her since the moment she was taken from him.

His mate.

He barely remembered his own name. And only recalled it because his three companions spoke it while they searched for her across violent and dark seas, through ancient and slumbering forests, over storm-swept mountains already buried in snow.

He stopped long enough to feed his body and allow his companions a few hours of sleep. Were it not for them, he would have flown off, soared far and wide.

But he would need the strength of their blades and magic, would need their cunning and wisdom before this was through.

Before he faced the dark queen who had torn into his innermost self, stealing his mate long before she had been locked in an iron coffin. And after he was done with her, after that, then he'd take on the cold-blooded gods themselves, hell-bent on destroying what might remain of his mate.

So he stayed with his companions, even as the days passed. Then the weeks.

Then months.

Still he searched. Still he hunted for her on every dusty and forgotten road.

And sometimes, he spoke along the bond between them, sending his soul on the wind to wherever she was held captive, entombed.

I will find you.

The Princess

The iron smothered her. It had snuffed out the fire in her veins, as surely as if the flames had been doused.

She could hear the water, even in the iron box, even with the iron mask and chains adorning her like ribbons of silk. The roaring; the endless rushing of water over stone. It filled the gaps between her screaming.

A sliver of island in the heart of a mist-veiled river, little more than a smooth slab of rock amid the rapids and falls. That's where they'd put her. Stored her. In a stone temple built for some forgotten god.

As she would likely be forgotten. It was better than the alternative: to be remembered for her utter failure. If there would be anyone left to remember her. If there would be anyone left at all.

She would not allow it. That failure.

She would not tell them what they wished to know.

No matter how often her screams drowned out the raging river. No matter how often the snap of her bones cleaved through the bellowing rapids.

She had tried to keep track of the days.

But she did not know how long they had kept her in that iron box. How long they had forced her to sleep, lulled into oblivion by the sweet smoke they'd poured in while they traveled here. To this island, this temple of pain.

She did not know how long the gaps lasted between her screaming and waking. Between the pain ending and starting anew.

Days, months, years—they bled together, as her own blood often slithered over the stone floor and into the river itself.

A princess who was to live for a thousand years. Longer.

That had been her gift. It was now her curse.

Another curse to bear, as heavy as the one placed upon her long before her birth. To sacrifice her very self to right an ancient wrong. To pay another's debt to the gods who had found their world, become trapped in it. And then ruled it.

She did not feel the warm hand of the goddess who had blessed and damned her with such terrible power. She wondered if that goddess of light and flame even cared that she now lay trapped within the iron box—or if the immortal had transferred her attentions to another. To the king who might offer himself in her stead and in yielding his life, spare their world.

The gods did not care who paid the debt. So she knew they would not come for her, save her. So she did not bother praying to them.

But she still told herself the story, still sometimes imagined that the river sang it to her. That the darkness living within the sealed coffin sang it to her as well.

Once upon a time, in a land long since burned to ash, there lived a young princess who loved her kingdom . . .

Down she would drift, deep into that darkness, into the sea of flame. Down so deep that when the whip cracked, when bone sundered, she sometimes did not feel it.

Most times she did.

It was during those infinite hours that she would fix her stare on her companion.

Not the queen's hunter, who could draw out pain like a musician coaxing a melody from an instrument. But the massive white wolf, chained by invisible bonds. Forced to witness this.

There were some days when she could not stand to look at the wolf. When she had come so close, too close, to breaking. And only the story had kept her from doing so.

Once upon a time, in a land long since burned to ash, there lived a young princess who loved her kingdom . . .

Words she had spoken to a prince. Once—long ago.

A prince of ice and wind. A prince who had been hers, and she his. Long before the bond between their souls became known to them.

It was upon him that the task of protecting that once-glorious kingdom now fell.

The prince whose scent was kissed with pine and snow, the scent of that kingdom she had loved with her heart of wildfire.

Even when the dark queen presided over the hunter's ministrations, the princess thought of him. Held on to his memory as if it were a rock in the raging river.

The dark queen with a spider's smile tried to wield it against her. In the obsidian webs she wove, the illusions and dreams she spun at the culmination of each breaking point, the queen tried to twist the memory of him as a key into her mind.

They were blurring. The lies and truths and memories. Sleep and the blackness in the iron coffin. The days bound to the stone altar in the center of the room, or hanging from a hook in the ceiling, or strung up between chains anchored into the stone wall. It was all beginning to blur, like ink in water.

So she told herself the story. The darkness and the flame deep within her whispered it, too, and she sang it back to them. Locked in that coffin hidden on an island within the heart of a river, the princess recited the story, over and over, and let them unleash an eternity of pain upon her body.

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