

This book is dedicated to all my friends and family who showed me support throughout this endeavor and to Paul, my best friend, sweetheart, husband and hero!

Heroes and Hearts

By

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## Prologue

Isabel opened her eyes with the distinct feeling that something was wrong. Though it was still dark outside, she could hear voices speaking quietly in the kitchen. Grabbing her Holly Hobbie doll she slipped out of bed, the edge of her nightgown brushed the tops of her feet as she padded over to the door. Her parents were fighting. About what Isabel didn't know, but occasionally her mother's words would drift out when she raised her voice, words like coward and danger. Isabel tugged on Holly's braid, opening her slumbering eyes, as she stepped out of the room. Whatever was happening, the little girl didn't want to face it alone. She took another step, but the moan of a metal chair rubbing against the linoleum floor sent her scurrying back into her room. Peeking her head out again, the moppet saw her parents had moved into the living room.

"We can't come with you, Omar," her mother was saying as she threw her arms into the air. "It would put Isabel's life at risk!"

"Then use the mirror maze and move her. She can stay with your cousins in Puerto Rico until it's safe for us to return."

"And how long would that be? What if something happens to both of us?" Her mother shook her head violently. "No, I won't have Isabel thinking we abandoned her."

"Just me."

Isabel thought for sure her parents would be able to hear her heart pounding in her chest as the silent minutes ticked by. What was happening? Why were they in danger? Why did any of them have to leave?

"I was a coward," her father said so softly she could barely make it out, "a spoiled, selfish brat who thought only of himself. I let everyone down, but I was too frightened to care."

He grasped his wife's hands and continued.

"You gave me strength, Leticia. You showed me what was right, taught me how to love. It's my love for you and for Isabel that makes me strong now but I need to go back. I need to make amends for what I did. I need to put a stop to this before you and Isabel get hurt."

Leticia placed a hand on her husband's face. "If they gain your power all will be lost."

Omar gave a nod.

"Do what you must."

Isabel saw her mother hesitate a moment before placing a mirror the size of a compact on her father's chest, just over his heart. The dim light of the lamp flashed off a small silver rod her mother held in her hands now placed on top of the mirror. Her father placed his hands on top of hers and their eyes locked. Isabel shook her head. No, whatever this was, it was wrong. She made to step out of the bedroom again when suddenly it felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the house. A bright red light began to glow from her parents' hands and Isabel clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her cry, squeezing Holly into a headlock. After what seemed like forever, the light faded. Her father blinked once, his face blank of emotion, then turned and walked out of the apartment. Her mother looked down into her cupped palms and a single tear ran down her cheek.

## Chapter One

Isabel's eyes sprung open. She stilled her sobs and wiped the tears from her cheeks sighing. Every June sixteenth, without fail, Isabel would have the same dream, only now, twenty years to the day her father had walked out on them, the dream was a lot more vivid. Leticia never did explain why Omar left. She never explained why the two of them had to suddenly fly to San Juan the next morning and stay with her cousins in the *campo*. She'd hated the way the aunts fawned over her all summer with cries of "*Pobrecita!*" She had been angry with her mother for not going after her father, wherever he was, to get him back. She had even spent the summer wracked with guilt wondering what she'd done to drive her *papi* away.

When they finally returned to the mainland, Isabel and her mother moved into a little apartment in Hoboken where her mother picked up a job as a bus driver with the local school district. The woman devoted her life to raising her daughter, her vigilance sometimes becoming maddening. Her mother busted her hump to give Isabel everything she wanted, from an Easy Bake Oven and a 10-speed bicycle to Judo lessons to protect her against bullies in the schoolyard. The memory of his face began to dim as

she grew up, and though Isabel slowly developed a hatred for her father she suspected her mother still held a torch for him because Leticia never said a negative word against the man and never dated anyone else. Isabel figured perhaps her mother was using the excuse of raising a child to keep interested men at bay, but as her mother's attempts to set her up began to grow more frequent, the subject became the heart of many fights between them.

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"I just want you to be happy, *mija*," her mother said after Isabel blew her top in the kitchen.

She had come to dinner, as she had every Sunday night since graduating college, to find a tall, greasy looking man sitting on her mother's plastic encased sofa in the living room. He wore a blue pinstripe suit over one of those two toned dress shirts Isabel hated, where the shirt was blue but the collar was white. This he adorned with a thick gold chain. His legs were crossed over one knee making his imitation alligator shoes hard to miss. The man's jet-black hair was slicked back and shiny making Isabel wonder whether it would be crunchy or greasy but hoping she would never have to find out. He licked the tip of a pinky, fat gold rings flashing from his hairy knuckles as he smoothed his eyebrows, and beneath a pencil thin mustache he flashed Isabel a smile with, God help her, a gold tooth.

"Ah, you must be the delectable Isabel," the man exclaimed. The couch made a rude noise as he rose and grasped her hand. "I'm Nick."

Isabel sighed as the man peered into her eyes.

"Hello, Nick, I take it my mother asked you to have dinner with us."

"She did and when I get an invite to meet a gorgeous dish that can also cook, I'd be a *stunad* to refuse. Am I right?"

Isabel removed her hand from his hairy mitts and smiled as she turned away.

"You would know."

“Ya know,” Nick said in a conspiratorial tone as he draped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, “I know you’re a good cook and all, but I’m no slouch in the kitchen either.”

The powerful combination of cheap cologne, mouthwash and sweat nearly sent Isabel reeling and she swallowed hard as she gave him a quizzical look.

“You don’t say?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a recipe for love,” he replied, waggling his eyebrows. “Take one cup of you, add one cup of me, knead until hard and serve *hot!*”

Isabel grit her teeth and gave Nick a watery smile as she removed his arm from her shoulders.

“Excuse me, I have to see what’s keeping Ma.”

“The man is a total cretin! What makes you think I would go for someone like that?” Isabel demanded as she angrily paced back and forth in the kitchen.

“I know he looks a bit flashy but his mother is a lovely woman. You know Rosario, the little Italian lady who goes to Bingo with me?”

“That’s Rosario’s boy?”

“Yes! He owns his own car dealership and makes lots of money. He would be a good provider and give you lots of good strong sons. Don’t be such a snob!”

Isabel rolled her eyes.

“Ma, I’m a college graduate with a good job and a home of my own. I don’t *need* a man to provide for me, *I provide for me!*”

“Yes, *mija*, but you shouldn’t have to. I don’t want you to end up a lonely old woman like your mother.”

Of all the things to be concerned about, this was not something Isabel wanted to burden her mother with. She was not lacking in male

companionship by any means. It seemed many men had found Isabel attractive over the years, unfortunately those men ended up being just like Nick. Isabel didn't ask for much in a boyfriend, just that he be intelligent, reliable, honest, and didn't hop into another woman's bed at the first invitation. Not that looks mattered but it did help if the man was good looking and made her toes curl when he kissed her. Most important, Isabel wanted a man she could like and respect and who could feel the same about her. The princess in her wanted a man who would fall head over heels for her and could come to her rescue if she needed him to. Not that Isabel had ever thought to rely on a man for anything. Her father was proof enough how unreliable men could be. However, it would be nice to know someday that she had the option. So far, no man in her life had measured up.

Isabel sighed and hugged her mother.

"You're not old, Ma, and if you spent as much effort on fixing yourself up as you do me you wouldn't be alone. I see how the men look at you when you get all dressed up and I think Mr. Garza is sweet on you."

"The produce manager?"

"*Now* who's the snob?" Isabel chuckled. "And he's not the produce manager, he owns the store, which of course makes him a good provider..."

Isabel winked and nudged her mother who waved a dismissive hand and smiled.

"Alright, I give."

"Good, now if you can get rid of Rico Suave out there maybe we can have dinner in peace!"

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Isabel glanced at the clock on her nightstand. 3AM. Well, she'd have to be up in an hour for work anyway. The club would be busy getting ready for the Donatelli/Graziano wedding; she might as well head out early and see what she could get a jump on.

## Chapter Two

The ominous looking sky rumbled as Isabel's bright yellow jeep rolled into the driveway. Fat drops of rain began to patter along the ground as she strode through the front door. The first thing the brunette noticed as she brushed the curls from her face was that the light switch wasn't working. *Great, the storm hasn't even started and I've already lost power.*

A flash of lightning revealed that the house had been ransacked. Isabel stood in the living room, gaping, as she took in the chaos and destruction. Not only had someone rifled through everything but they actually took time out to destroy whatever they didn't take! Smashed picture frames dotted the floor, having fallen from the massive cracks and dents that marked their place on the walls. Her curtains and other parts of the walls bore slash marks as if from a large blade. Her furniture lay upended and whatever hadn't been smashed into kindling lay beside their cotton innards. A quick survey of the kitchen and dining room revealed the same results. Standing in the remains of her dining room, Isabel began to grow angry. Who would do such a thing? It was one thing to be robbed, a marvel in itself as she always locked the doors and windows tight even when she was home, but to destroy all her belongings was just pouring salt into the wound. Isabel realized whoever had broken into her home probably had it out for her, but she couldn't think who she might have pissed off so badly that they would ransack and destroy her home.

Isabel was the executive chef at a private country club and although she didn't get along with everyone on staff, nothing had ever escalated to the point of vandalism. She usually tried to avoid confrontation with those she didn't like and who didn't like her. In fact, unless work forced them to interact with each other, she tended to avoid those she didn't get along with at all costs. Life was stressful enough without adding unnecessary drama.

Isabel pulled her cell phone from the pocket of her jeans to call the police but there was no signal. From the thunder crashing overhead Isabel knew the storm was far from over and with the power already out, reporting the break-in to the police would have to wait. Another crash of thunder and a gust of wind caused the French doors in the dining room to suddenly burst open and a large black bird careened into her. She fought to untangle herself from the frightened bird, feathers flying everywhere, before managing to push it away. There was a bright flash of lightning and in the doorway leaned a large man. Isabel's heart thudded in her chest. She didn't recognize the man but undoubtedly this was the culprit who broke into her home. Her mind flicked to the sharp knife set sitting in a block on the

kitchen counter, and she wondered if she could get to it before the man attacked. A deep throaty chuckle filled the room.

“Fear not, little one,” the baritone said. “No harm will come to you this day.”

Fear not; had she been burgled by an unemployed renfaire actor?

“The cops are on their way so unless you want to spend the night in jail you need to leave my house.” she replied, strengthening her voice not to betray the fear in her heart.

Another chuckle and the silhouette waved his hand and straightened in the doorway.

“You and I have business.”

The dining room lights suddenly sprang to life, giving Isabel a better look at the burglar. At 5’10” Isabel was not a short woman by any means, yet the stranger stood at least a head and a half taller than she. His raven hair fell to his broad shoulders in waves. He regarded her with deep purple eyes above a strong Roman nose, square jaw and a thick neck. His heavy muscular body was clad in a close-fitting leather doublet that opened just to his ribs to reveal a mass of thick curly hair beneath it. His trunk-like legs were encased in snug leather pants tucked at the knee into a pair of heavy black leather boots with metal toe and shin guards. He was a formidable looking man but bulky, and Isabel decided she could outrun him if she had to, though there would be no way she could successfully wield her knives before he snapped her like a twig.

“What business?” she asked, still struggling to keep her voice from trembling. “I don’t know you.”

His lips curled into a smile that chilled her very soul and he bowed replying, “I am Rakad, Lord of the Underworld. I come bearing tidings of your brother’s kidnapping by the hand of the sorceress, Zenobia.”

Isabel shook her head and breathed a little easier, giving him a watery smile.

“I’m sorry, Rakad, but you have the wrong house. I don’t have a brother and I don’t know any sorceress named Zenobia.”

“Are you not Isabel, daughter of the Duke of Kendra?”

“I *am* Isabel Kendra, but my father is a worthless bastard who ran out on us when I was a baby. He isn’t *Duke* of anything.”

Rakad’s lips tightened as he thought and he gave a quick nod.

“The Duke of Kendra is a spineless coward who abandoned his country and his people during the onslaught of Zenobia’s armies.”

Isabel chuckled bitterly.

“Sadly there are plenty of cowardly men in this world.”

Rakad nodded again.

“And in mine. Your brother’s kidnapping is a result of the Duke’s continued cowardice, only you stand between the boy and death. You must visit the Crystal Palace of Calfragor, there you will find allies to the Duchy of Kendra who will aid in returning your brother to safety.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Rakad blinked, the question taking him aback.

“What?”

“Why is the Lord of the Underworld so concerned about the imminent death of a child? Are they not welcome in your realm? What’s in it for you?”

The man’s face took on a stony expression, his amethyst eyes glowing with a fire that nearly stopped Isabel’s heart. He walked towards her slowly with a kind of spectral grace. It was as if his feet did not quite touch the ground. She looked down at his thick heavy boots upon the tiles and realized his footsteps made no sound.

“The death of a child is a sad and tragic thing, but when a child arrives in my kingdom, he is surely welcome.”

Then just as suddenly, the man chuckled. Isabel might have considered him handsome if he wasn’t so damn frightening.

“You are a shrewd woman,” he said. “No doubt you get that from your mother.”

“The witch who has your brother and the queen I serve is one and the same, the evil sorceress Zenobia. I need you to tell the Dowager Empress Ilythia that Zenobia’s forces are massing outside the kingdom of Rune, readying to invade in three days’ time.”

Isabel’s eyes narrowed and she cocked her head.

“You betray your queen to her enemies?”

Rakad chuckled bitterly. He reached out and caressed her cheek with a single gloved finger that was colder than she ever thought leather could be. A chill went through her.

“Well, if truth be told, serving under any woman can be tiresome, but the sorceress is starting to get carried away with her power, I find her tedious. Dowager Empress Ilythia and the Alliance of the Crystal Palace have the power to stop her.”

“More power than the Lord of the Underworld?” Isabel found herself asking.

“My dear girl, if I had any power left would I be serving under some upstart witch?”

Isabel shrugged.

“What happened to your power? Did the sorceress take it from you?”

Rakad looked at her so sharply she could feel her blood run cold. The Lord of the Underworld did not answer and Isabel knew pushing the

issue would be both dangerous and stupid. Clearly there was more to the story than Rakad was letting on, however, Isabel only ever knew her father as a coward and there was a remote possibility that some poor kid was living a horrible existence because the man chose to run the other way rather than stop and protect him. After all, he had left her and her mother to fend for themselves without a hint of communication so many years ago. Rakad turned back toward the doorway and when he gestured an arm towards it, the air began to shimmer and her backyard was replaced with a dimly lit stone room.

“You want me to go in there?”

“It is the entryway to the Crystal Palace.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Rakad smiled.

“You shouldn’t.”

Isabel knew it would be a mistake to enter what could only be perceived as a dungeon, however, she didn’t appear to have much choice in the matter. The storm still raged outside. Help would not come any time soon and he was standing so close to her now, she could never get out of the house before he caught her. Even if she did manage to get to the jeep she suspected Rakad would be more than capable of preventing it from going anywhere.

She walked towards the portal, gave Rakad a final glance and receiving a wink in return, she entered the room. A cool blue light bathed the dank stone room but from what source Isabel didn’t know. She could make out various stone pillars and statues reminiscent of those the Greeks and Romans used to honor their deities long ago. Though this was not a dungeon, it was definitely devoid of people.

“Hello,” she called out. “Is anybody here?”

Suddenly from high above a pair of fiery red eyes appeared and a voice bellowed “WHO GOES!” Isabel leaped back as an enormous stone creature emerged from the darkness. Its body was that of a burly man with the head of a bull. Steam emerged from its ringed nose, its mouth arranged in a toothy snarl.

“I-I am Isabel Kendra,” she stammered before throwing her shoulders back and straightening to be heard. “I am here about a child in danger and need assistance from Dowager Empress Ilythia and the Alliance of the Crystal Palace of Calfragor.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Kendra? You are the daughter of the cowardly Duke of Kendra?”

“I am the daughter of a coward and a worm named Kendra, however, whether or not he is a Duke remains to be seen.”

The statue steamed silently and suddenly a door opened, bright blue light pouring in. Isabel walked into the light and found herself in the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Sunlight created a blue hue inside the palace walls, which were so polished they reflected images of the neighboring city on the outside but maintained the neutral color of sea glass on the inside. Light danced in rainbows through high windows on statues and pillars that resembled the room she had just left.

Approaching were two men and a very old woman. She was tall and willowy with diamonds and sapphires weaved through her silver tresses that had been pulled up and twisted into an elaborate design and held in place with little silver combs. The long white silky gown that adorned her person was accented with silver outlines upon the bodice and glittered with diamond dust in the fabric. Her porcelain skin was so smooth that Isabel wondered whether she even was elderly, yet her eyes, deep glimmering liquid pools of blue, radiated an ancient wisdom. This woman was the embodiment of grace and moved with a sureness and smoothness of step that could only belong to a royal monarch.

Beside her walked a tall, slender man who was just as finely dressed as the Dowager Empress. His white tunic and leggings also shimmered with diamond dust and his silver knee-high boots glimmered against the silver inlay of his tunic. His smooth sable hair was short and wavy with a few errant locks flying just above a pair of deep cobalt eyes, a long nose and firm jaw.

Walking just behind them and looking a bit wary was an older man of stockier build with dark short cropped hair that had been kissed with flecks of silver, dark squinty eyes, a wide nose and a finely trimmed dark mustache and beard that was also speckled with silver. His black velvet tunic was covered in silver stripes over black leggings that had been tucked into the knee of a pair of black leather boots. Standing in such a magnificent room with such regal looking people, Isabel suddenly felt seriously underdressed in her simple red t-shirt, jeans and sneakers.

“Welcome, Isabel of Kendra,” the Dowager Empress said, her voice cool and smooth like silk.” I am Ilythia, Dowager Empress of Calfragor. This is my son, Prince Alaric.”

She gestured toward the handsome broad shouldered young man with sparkling eyes who looked every bit as Isabel imagined a prince should. The older man stepped forward as the Dowager Empress introduced him.

“And this is Omar, Duke of Kendra.”

Isabel and her father regarded each other as a lion regarded a gazelle. So this was the man who had left her mother so bitter and alone

these 23 years. Standing half a head beneath him, she surmised she had gotten her height from this man. She already knew her often-unruly mop of ebony curls was inherited from her mother, however, despite the deep crow's feet that had been etched into his face over the years, Isabel recognized her own cocoa brown almond shaped eyes as his. Her pert button nose obviously was not a gift from him but the cavernous dimple that appeared in her right cheek when she laughed appeared before her now as a smile formed upon the Duke's face.

"Daughter, how you have grown!" he exclaimed, stretching his arms to embrace her as he stepped forward.

The smile disappeared as the young woman stepped back, placed her hands on her hips and gave him a withering look.

"Yes, children tend to as the decades pass," she replied in a flat tone, "and don't call me daughter, Omar, you are nothing to me. I am only here because I'm told your cowardice has put a child in danger and in need of help."

A range of emotions flashed quickly across the Duke's face before settling into a stone mask that revealed nothing. So, she had inherited that trait from the man as well.

"Yes, your brother was snatched from his bed in the night. His nursemaid discovered a letter on his pillow stating that before the sorceress can successfully conquer the world she must finish her business with Kendra. That is why I am here; I fear she means to end the bloodline of Kendra. The Allies of the Crystal Palace have gathered for a dinner and meeting tonight at which time I shall ask for assistance."

"Then why am I here if you have already come for assistance?"

"Yes," remarked the prince with a guarded expression, "why are you here and how did you come to know about the kidnapping?"

"The Lord of the Underworld came to me tonight with the news. He also wanted me to alert the Dowager Empress that Zenobia's armies are amassing outside the borders of a country called Rune and will invade in three days' time."

Mother and son exchanged glances.

"The Lord of the Underworld serves the sorceress," the Dowager Empress replied with lips pursed. "You would not know this of course, which he will be counting on. This is a trap and a poor one at that."

"Actually he *did* tell me Zenobia was his queen. When I asked him why he would betray her with this information he said the sorceress was growing too powerful and he found her tiresome."

The Dowager Empress gasped and spoke softly to no one in particular, "Ah, he is afraid!"

“I will mobilize my forces at once, your majesty,” the Duke said to the Dowager Empress, clapping a fist to his shoulder and bowing before sweeping out of the room.

“Alaric, you must send word to our commanders as well,” Ilythia said. “Isabel, you will be escorted to your quarters where you may rest and refresh yourself before dinner.”

“Just a moment, your majesty, if you please,” Isabel interrupted before she could summon the servants and as Alaric turned to leave. “There’s something else.”

“I don’t exactly know what’s going on, but in meeting Rakad, I found it hard to believe he himself lacked the power to take care of the sorceress if he wished.”

Alaric’s eyebrow cocked as a crooked smile played across his face.

“He admitted this?”

Isabel ignored the way her heart fluttered in her chest in that moment and nodded, her throat suddenly parched.

“Obviously he would assume I would relay this information to you as well, so what would be the point of sending me to you with this news?”

“The old man is slipping,” the prince surmised, shaking his head.

“Rakad and Zenobia *want* us to focus our forces on Rune,” the Dowager Empress said slowly. “They have been giving us a lot of trouble in that region of late.”

“Where is Rune?” Isabel asked.

“On the far Northeastern corner of the kingdom,” Alaric replied. “They have also been hitting Shayndel and Dwarf Kingdom of Abiloth, in the West as well.”

“What’s in the South?”

“The Crystal Sea,” the Dowager Empress replied. “It is bordered by steep unforgiving cliffs and mountains; a ring of volcanoes long dormant.”

Alaric shook his head.

“The earth is black as pitch and rumbles from time to time. An unearthly heat and deadly stench rises up from great cracks and fills the foul yellow sky. Nothing can survive in that region; an invasion would mean certain death. The sorceress is a known sadist but even she would not waste good strong men in the attempt.”

“Nothing *living* would survive,” Isabel nodded, “but Rakad rules the Underworld. Couldn’t he raise an army of undead?”

Ilythia and Alaric looked at each other in horror.

“I will raise the alarm,” said Alaric and he strode out of the room.

“I wouldn’t mention this to the Duke, Highness,” Isabel told the Dowager Empress. “Maybe I’m biased, but I just don’t trust the man.”

“My child, your father may have made mistakes in the past due to cowardice, but he is not a traitor,” Ilythia replied shaking her head sadly.  
“Still, perhaps it would be best to keep him in the dark for now.”

### Chapter Three

As Isabel was escorted to her chambers she noticed a peculiar aspect about the Crystal Palace. Just like in the room she had arrived, the outer walls seemed to act like a two-way mirror. While no one could see into the palace she was able to see out. She saw the ocean shimmering in the distance on one side, snowcapped mountains on another and below her she could see the beautiful gardens and grounds. Isabel also noticed that the light changed color from one area to another with the occasional rainbow dancing in a corner. It was as if she was walking inside a diamond or prism and guessed this was the reason for the palace’s name.

Her room was the most beautiful she had ever seen. The massive doors swung open to reveal a receiving room furnished with a settee and chaise of polished mahogany and plush white satin. Back near the balcony was a pretty little bistro set for dining, and just outside the bedroom door sat a mahogany roll-top desk on which sat a neat stack of parchment, a quill and an inkwell. Inside the bedroom was an enormous round bed that Isabel estimated she could roll across three or four times without falling off. The overstuffed pillows and fluffy duvet looked so inviting that Isabel, after glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was alone, ran and dove onto the bed. Oh, was it comfortable! Isabel thought she could easily sleep for a week in that bed and sure enough sleep began to take her. She turned over, preparing for a quick nap, when she suddenly started and sat up, not sure she could believe her eyes. Surely the Crystal Palace had a roof and yet she found herself looking up at bright clouds sailing lazily across a brilliant blue sky. *Well*, Isabel thought, *that’s a bit unnerving*. Once the initial shock wore off she settled back against the pillows.

Both her mind and her heart were in turmoil as she relayed the events of the day. It had started out ordinarily enough, yet it could not have ended in a more bizarre fashion. She wondered why her house had been trashed and kicked herself for not asking Rakad. Clearly he was looking for something but she couldn’t imagine what. Perhaps it was something that had belonged to her father? She turned over in the large plush feather bed, causing the silver chain she wore around her neck to slip out of her shirt collar, the pendant coming to rest on the bed. It was a small, intricately detailed pewter dragon with small rubies embedded in the eye sockets, mouth open in a roar, its tail wrapped around a crystal orb beneath it.

Having worn it her entire life, she barely remembered the day her mother slipped the chain and pendant over her head, telling her to always keep it safe and tucked away because it was very valuable and monsters would get her if she ever took it off. As an adult she knew her mother was just trying to scare her into not losing the necklace and wondered why the woman trusted such a priceless item to a small child, but her mother had a tendency to do odd things from time to time. She touched the cool shiny dragon and suddenly raised herself up onto her elbow, holding the pendant closer for a better look. Odd, she knew every detail of the pendant and yet as she turned it over she discovered the wings, which had always been folded and etched into the dragon's back, were now spread wide open. She tapped them with her finger and found the wings to be as solid and immovable as the rest of the pendant, as if the dragon had initially been cast in this position, though she knew it had not.

Isabel sighed and tucked the pendant back into her shirt. It was just another odd thing that had happened today. She had come face to face with a frightening man calling himself the Lord of the Underworld, an eerie concept in itself, who spoke of witches and magic and royalty with the nonchalance of someone giving directions to the post office. Then there was her meeting with the beautiful people; the refined and elegant Dowager Empress and her son, the devastatingly handsome Prince Alaric. Isabel's heart fluttered again as her stomach flipped at the thought of him. God, he was gorgeous! She had always been a sucker for tall men with longish hair, light colored eyes and a sexy accent and this man hit every notch on her list! Still, she was not the swooning type and had to remind herself not to become some silly female around him. With his looks, wealth, and prestige, Isabel suspected the prince actually took the fawning of women for granted. He had probably bedded every noblewoman in the kingdom and the odd tavern wench or three besides. Why was she even giving this man a second thought? He was a royal from a long line of royals.

"You're the daughter of a Duke!" a voice inside said.

No, she told herself, *I am the daughter of a school bus driver who had to work 2-3 jobs at a time, sometimes in order to make ends meet because the man she married was a Duke already disgraced for cowardice before running out on her.* Duke or not, her father shamed her and in no way made her the Prince's equal. Besides, now that she had delivered the message and found her father was already there to do his part for his son, she had no reason to stick around. When next she saw the Dowager Empress she would ask about returning home. Isabel hated the twinge of envy she felt over her father's efforts to rescue his son. Had it been she who was kidnapped she knew he just wouldn't give a damn.

A pair of servants appeared to bathe and dress Isabel for the ball. One was a willowy blonde who looked to be much younger than Isabel. She wore a plain blue gown and black bodice, and her hair was done up in elaborate looking braids. The second woman was far older, in deep purple with a black bodice. Her dark hair was swept up and greying at the temples.

“Good evening, milady,” the older woman crooned. “I trust you are well rested and ready for your bath.”

*Bath?* Isabel thought watching as the younger woman disappeared behind an ornate partition in a corner of the room. The pattern looked a bit Oriental with odd symbols and pictures of roses, dragons and little fish. She followed the girl and found a small fluffy towel and several small vials of colored liquid sitting on a little mahogany table. Beside that was a large white marble basin. The young woman was holding a single white pitcher in her hands and Isabel could see the palace had no running water.

“Where are the others?” she asked.

“Others?” The girl blinked.

“To help you fill the tub.”

The girl shook her head and smiled as she lifted the pitcher and replied, “Tis all I need, milady.”

Isabel frowned. Either their royal highnesses were stingy with their guests or they took water conservation to the extreme in this world, adapting to the custom of bathing in three inches of water. The girl tipped the pitcher over the basin and Isabel gasped as a seemingly endless torrent of hot foaming water poured out and began to fill the tub. Placing her hands on the edge, she leaned in for a closer look, gaping.

“That’s incredible!”

The servant girl giggled. “Do you not have bathing pitchers where you come from?”

Isabel shook her head. “Not like this, back home water comes out of the wall.”

“You mean the walls of your home are full of water?”

Isabel looked up at the confused woman and shook her head, deciding it would be too complicated to explain the concept of plumbing. The older woman appeared and drizzled the liquid from the vials into the steaming bath before taking the pitcher away. A lovely blend of exotic floral scents filled the air. The younger servant came towards Isabel and began to pull up her shirt. Isabel jumped back and pushed her hands away.

“What are you doing?”

“Does milady not wish for her bath?” she asked, looking confused again.

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