



TREASON
OF
THORNS

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Chicken
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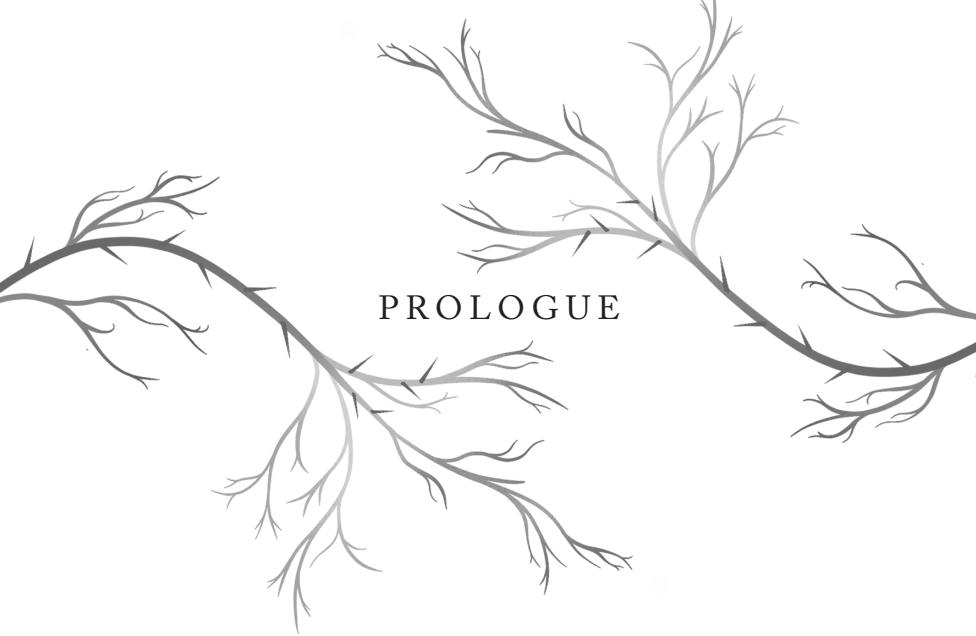
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PROLOGUE

I remember the smell of damp soil.

The sound of rain running down my bedroom windows at Burleigh House. The weight of a full valise, tugging at one arm.

Below, the king's carriage stands on the drive. I press my face to the glass, still only a child, just ten years old, not ready for any of this. It's past time to leave, and Mira's already come up to my bedroom to ask if I need help with anything. I sent her away, because I can't bear for anyone to see how broken I am at the thought of leaving Burleigh House, which has been the only constant presence in my life since the day I was born.

But the House sees, and that hurts me worst of all. I want to be brave for it, to be a good Caretaker, but I can't stop silent tears from tracking down my face.

Wind moans in the chimney, rain sobs against the windows, and white funeral flowers bloom from the cracks in the wall. Hurrying towards the doorway, I stumble over one of my dolls lying abandoned on the bedroom floor. My valise falls and bursts open, scattering hastily packed clothes about the room.

Always, always, it is one last insignificant thing that finishes me. I crouch in the midst of the mess and sob, shoulders shaking, stomach aching, my heart torn to shreds. The House trembles on its foundations, but there's nothing it can do.

And then, though I didn't hear the door, my father's ward, Wyn, is in front of me, picking up the mess I've made, pushing pinafores and stockings back into my valise. When everything is packed away once more, he holds the bag out to me. I look up and his face too is tear-stained and pale.

'It's time to go, Violet,' he says, small and solemn, just as I am.

'I know,' I tell him. 'You're finally getting your wish. We're running away.'

Wyn's already wretched expression grows a little more miserable, and he peers at me from beneath his ever-present mop of untidy sandy hair. 'This isn't what I wanted. You know that – I'd never want anything that hurts you so.' He reaches out and takes my hand, a rare gesture from a boy who seldom bridges the gap

between himself and the rest of the world.

I swallow and look down at our clasped hands. 'Don't let go, Wyn. I can't do this all by myself.'

'You can do anything you set your mind on,' he tells me fiercely. 'Anything, Vi, don't you know that?'

But all the way down the stairs and out the door on to the drive, the only thing that keeps me from falling apart again is his hand, warm in mine.

Jed and Mira are waiting for us. We stand with them and watch as Papa emerges on the front steps of the House, flanked by half a dozen royal guards. Thunder rumbles low on the horizon and the darkened sky weeps endlessly, water pooling in low spots on the lawn and making wide puddles, rain dripping cold down the back of my neck.

When the guards bring Papa out and he catches sight of us, his jaw clenches and his gaze clouds over.

'Wyn, Violet,' he says, voice rough from unnumbered sleepless nights. 'Come here to me.'

Wyn and I look at each other, and I see my own fear and despair mirrored in his eyes. Wordlessly, I tighten my grip on his hand and he does the same. We climb the front steps together as a peal of laughter sounds from the king's carriage – His Majesty's waiting to see Papa's sentence carried out, but even today he's brought a trio of courtiers along to make up a foursome for whist. I'd like nothing more than to snatch the

cards from his hands and tear them to bits.

Papa can't put his arms around me – they're bound behind his back, but he's never been much of a one for displays of affection anyway. Nevertheless, I let go of Wyn and cling to my father for a moment, choking back tears.

'Be brave for the House, Violet,' Papa whispers. I gather my scant courage and pull away, reaching for Wyn again.

But before the boy can take my hand, Papa shakes his head. 'No. Wyn, come stand at my side.'

Wyn turns towards him, wide-eyed.

'Come on now, Wyn,' my father says. 'You'll stay with me, just like we talked about.'

'*What?*' My voice rings loud across the front lawn, even with the rain to deaden it. Papa won't meet my eyes – he just looks at Wyn, who stares up at him and finally nods, stepping away from me.

The tears I've kept in check burn their way down my face and I feel as if something on the inside has shattered.

'Papa, don't take Wyn,' I beg. 'You and the House, and him now too? It's too much – it's everything I have. I don't know how to live without any of you. You'll make a ghost of me.'

'Don't be hysterical, Violet,' Papa says, and there's steel in his tone. 'You'll upset Burleigh.'

'That's because Burleigh loves me,' I stammer. 'And

I love the House, everyone knows it. So . . . let Wyn go free, and if someone has to stay, keep me instead. I would do it willingly. I don't care – you know I don't. Let the king seal us in together. I will stand by your side and be just what you taught me to be – a good Caretaker, who puts her House first. Please, Papa, please.'

'Jed, take Violet,' my father says. Indomitable as he is, Papa's voice breaks on my name.

Jed steps forward and takes me by the hand. 'Miss Violet. It's time to go.'

Mira appears at my other side and puts an arm around my shoulder, but I cannot tear my eyes away from Wyn, standing by Papa, his shoulders hunched in silent resignation.

'No. No!' I'm shouting now, and the king and his courtiers peer out of the carriage windows with interest. But I don't care. Let them watch me make a scene. 'It isn't fair – look at Wyn. He doesn't want to stay! Let him go, and let me be with Papa and the House.'

It's true Wyn's pale face is pinched and unhappy. He hurries down the steps and throws his arms around me and I hold him tight.

'Don't do this,' I say tearfully. 'You don't have to – they can't make you. We should be together. Wyn, run away with me.'

'No,' Wyn answers. 'I can't. Not any more. But promise me something.'

‘Anything.’

‘Once you’re gone, Violet, stay away. Don’t come back.’

I hardly have time to feel another stab of hurt and betrayal, because at his words, the ground bucks and heaves beneath us, jolting us apart. I stumble and nearly fall, and when I’ve righted myself, Wyn is at my father’s side again.

‘You have to go, Vi,’ Papa says. ‘Think of the House.’

I am. I do. I always think of the House. So I square my shoulders and turn my back on Papa, taking the first steps down the drive and away from everything I’ve ever known.

‘Violet Helena Sterling,’ my father calls after me. ‘I love you.’

I’ve never heard him say those words before and I can’t answer back, because if I do, they will have to drag me kicking and screaming from the grounds of Burleigh House. I carry on without a word, and when I draw up alongside the king’s carriage, His Majesty looks out.

‘I’m sorry, Violet,’ he says, though there’s little in the way of remorse in his eyes. ‘The law is the law, and your father broke it. I never pegged him for the sort who’d be weak enough to insist a child bear his punishment as well, though. Funny about the boy.’

‘Shut up,’ I hiss, infusing the words with every ounce of venom my ten-year-old self can muster. ‘Just shut up. I never want to see you again.’

‘Now, now,’ the king chides. ‘Is that any way to speak to your own godfather? Who’s going to look after you, if not me?’

I step up to his carriage window, small and furious and heartbroken. ‘I have one father, and you’re killing him. I’d rather die than take your charity.’

‘Suit yourself,’ the king says with a shrug. ‘But you’re still standing on my land. Burleigh, see Miss Sterling off the grounds.’ A peal of thunder breaks overhead and suddenly I’m outside the front gate in the lane, with Jed and Mira at my side. His Majesty’s coach has been transported as well, along with the royal guards.

Through the rain and the ironwork of the gate, I can make out Papa and Wyn still standing on the House’s front steps.

The king steps down from the carriage and walks over to the wall surrounding Burleigh’s grounds. When he reaches out a hand, the stonework trembles beneath his touch, but he is the deedholder – my father may be able to channel Burleigh’s magic, but it’s the king who truly controls it, who can bid and bind it, and the House cannot refuse him.

‘Burleigh House,’ His Majesty says. ‘George Sterling has been found guilty of treason. I leave him to your care. Let no one in or out of these walls until he lies dead. No new Caretaker will be afforded you until his punishment is carried out.’

The harsh, scraping sound of stone on stone grates through the air as the wall begins to fill in the space where the gate once stood. Dimly, I'm aware of Jed lurching forward and the guardsmen holding him back as he struggles towards the wall. I stare at Wyn's distant form through the narrowing gap until the last inch closes. Then I turn to the king with fury written across my face.

His Majesty only smiles. 'Someday, little Violet, you will come begging to me,' he says as he climbs back into the carriage. 'You are your father's daughter, and I know you. George won't even be cold in his grave before you crawl back, asking for the key to Burleigh House. Sterlings never can resist this place.'

'I'm a Caretaker,' I snap. 'I was born to look after Burleigh, and yes, I will do whatever must be done to see it safe. A good Caretaker puts her House first, even if it means begging favours from a monster like you.'

The king shakes his head and reaches into his pocket, dangling a skeleton key before me. My breath catches at the sight of it – there's a dull chip of grey stone set in the bow, and I'd recognize it anywhere. I've seen my father toy with Burleigh's key a thousand times in idle moments, and hold fast to it when he needed its protection while working House magic. I fight down the urge to snatch at it and run.

'You're not a Caretaker without a key, are you?' His Majesty says softly. 'In fact, Burleigh House has no

Caretaker now. We'll see how long that lasts. How long before the House must deal with the fact that your father stands in the way of its well-being.'

He tucks the key away and I stand by, staring at him belligerently, refusing to be the first to falter.

'What a game we'll have when all this is over, and you want the key.' The king smiles. 'Don't doubt that I will make you dance for it. That is, if I don't give it to someone else first.'

I have nothing to say to that. The idea of His Majesty giving Burleigh's key to anyone else and forcing Burleigh to accept a stranger as Caretaker pours ice through my veins. I watch as the carriage pulls away, the king's guardsmen marching in its wake. The wall surrounding Burleigh House is unbroken and impermeable stone now. Jed stands near the place where the gate used to be, shoulders slumped in defeat.

I take a few steps up on to the grassy verge and lean my forehead against Burleigh's wall, once the boundary of my world and now a prison.

'Look after him,' I say to the House. I feel empty and hollow, as if there's nothing inside me but grey fog. 'I know you can't do anything for Papa, and you're not meant to care for anyone but yourself. Perhaps I shouldn't even ask – maybe a good Caretaker wouldn't. But, oh, Burleigh, if you can, look after Wyn. And someday, I promise I'll be back to look after you.'