



CINDERELLA
THE CURSED SLIPPER

Robin Wickens

Cinderella: The Cursed Slipper

Copyright © 2026 Robin Wickens

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Imprint: Independently published

First Edition, 2026

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

Portions of this book were created with the assistance of generative AI tools. The author has reviewed and edited the content.

Table of Contents

<i>Ashworth's Hollow Halls</i>	4
<i>The Glass Slipper</i>	9
<i>Whispers in the Peat</i>	13
<i>The Ball Invitation</i>	16
<i>Reflections in the Bog</i>	21
<i>A Dress of Shadows</i>	25
<i>The Ballroom's Gilded Cage</i>	30
<i>Midnight's First Breath</i>	35
<i>One Slipper Left Behind</i>	39
<i>The Prince's Hunt Begins</i>	43
<i>Tremaine's Gambit</i>	47
<i>She Steps Forward</i>	51
<i>The Sorcerer's Hand</i>	55
<i>Fugitive in the Mist</i>	59
<i>The Hunted and the Hunter</i>	64
<i>Echoes of the Umbral Weave</i>	69
<i>The Glimmer in the Dark</i>	74
<i>The Seeress Speaks</i>	78
<i>The Guard Arrives</i>	82
<i>Roots of the Ancient</i>	87
<i>Tremaine's Fall</i>	91
<i>The Prince's Choice</i>	95

***The Breaking* 100**

***The Scarred Guardian* 105**

Ashworth's Hollow Halls

The cold woke her before the bell. It seeped through the thin straw mattress, coiled around her ankles, and settled in the small of her back where the blanket had slipped during the night. Eleanor Vance opened her eyes to the grey pre-dawn light bleeding through the high, grimy window of the servants' quarters. The room held the smell of old ash and damp wool, and her breath misted faintly in the air above her face.

She lay still for a moment, counting the cracks in the ceiling plaster. Seventeen. There had been fourteen when she'd first been moved to this room, five years ago. The new ones branched like tributaries of a river she'd never seen, a map of slow decay drawn across the ceiling of Ashworth Grange.

Her body protested as she rose. The straw rustled beneath her, and her ash-blond hair fell forward in a tangled curtain. She pushed it back with fingers still stiff from sleep and swung her feet to the cold flagstones. The chill bit through her stockings instantly. She'd need to darn the left heel again; she could feel the hole widening against the stone.

The hearth came first. Always the hearth. She knelt before the kitchen fireplace and scraped the ashes from the previous night into a bucket, the fine grey dust puffing up and settling on her apron. Her hands moved without thought—arranging kindling, striking the flint, coaxing the first small flame into life. The fire caught, and warmth began its slow battle against the pre-dawn chill. She sat back on her heels and watched the flames take hold, and for a few stolen moments, the silence of the manor was hers alone.

Then the bell clattered upstairs, a sharp, insistent jangle that cut through the quiet like a blade. Lady Tremaine was awake.

Ella rose, brushed the ash from her skirts, and began her day.

By the time she'd hauled water from the pump and set the kettle to boil, the kitchen had lost its stillness. Footsteps thumped overhead, and voices carried down the servants' stairwell. Drizella's laugh—loud, unguarded, the laugh of someone who'd never been told to keep her voice down—echoed through the floorboards. Anastasia's followed, higher and reedier, a giggle that climbed and broke and climbed again.

'I'm telling you, the silk was the colour of a bruise. Utterly divine.'

'You'd need a bruise-coloured complexion to wear it, Ana. It would wash you out completely.'

'It would not!'

'It would. You haven't the bone structure.'

Ella set out three cups on a tray, her movements quiet and practised. She didn't need to see them to know the scene: Drizella sprawled in the parlour chair, her flushed face animated with the pleasure of her own pronouncements; Anastasia perched on the settee, her vanity pricked, already composing her retort. They

would drift down eventually, still in their dressing gowns, trailing complaints and demands like perfume.

The kitchen door swung open. Lady Tremaine stood in the doorway, her gaunt frame silhouetted against the dim corridor light. She was already dressed, her dark gown immaculate, her greying hair pulled back so tightly that the skin at her temples looked stretched. Her sharp features gave nothing away, but her eyes moved across the kitchen with the precision of a ledger being balanced.

‘Ella.’

The word was not a greeting. It was an inventory.

‘The pantry,’ Lady Tremaine said. She gestured with a flick of her wrist toward the storeroom door. ‘I require an accounting. Flour, sugar, salt, preserves. What remains of the cured ham. Do not dawdle.’

Ella dipped her head. ‘Yes, Stepmother.’

Lady Tremaine’s gaze lingered on her for a moment longer than necessary—a silent assertion, a reminder that Ella’s labour was not a gift but a levy. Then she turned and swept from the room, her footsteps receding down the corridor toward the parlour where her daughters’ voices still clattered against each other.

Ella exhaled and opened the pantry door.

The shelves were sparse. She counted the jars of preserves—six, down from eight last month. The flour bin was half-empty, the sugar lower than she’d thought. The cured ham, wrapped in muslin, was dwindling fast. She made a mental note of it all, her mind already calculating how many more days the stores would hold before Lady Tremaine would need to spend coin she claimed not to have. The stepmother’s desperation was a quiet thing, hidden beneath layers of cold authority, but Ella had learned to read the signs. The fewer the preserves, the sharper the tongue.

She closed the pantry door and went to scrub the flagstones.

The water in her bucket was already grey, and her knees ached from kneeling. She worked the brush in small circles, watching the dirt lift from the stone. Behind her, the parlour door stood open, and the voices of her stepsisters drifted through like smoke.

‘—absurd, the whole thing. A ball at the palace. Can you imagine?’

‘I can imagine myself dancing with the Prince.’

‘You’d step on his toes within the first measure.’

‘I would not! I’ve been practising.’

‘Practising with whom? The coat stand?’

Drizella’s laugh boomed through the house. Ella kept her eyes on the flagstones. Her brush moved in circles. The water in the bucket grew darker.

‘Ella.’

She looked up. Drizella stood in the parlour doorway, her dressing gown hanging open over her nightdress, her face already flushed with the pleasure of finding a target. Anastasia hovered behind her, simpering.

‘Mother says you’re to polish the silver today,’ Drizella said. ‘All of it. The candelabras especially. They’re tarnished beyond belief.’

‘I’ll see to it.’

‘And don’t think you’re going to that ball.’ Drizella’s smile widened. ‘I heard they’re inviting all the eligible young women of the kingdom. That doesn’t include scullery maids.’

Anastasia giggled. ‘Can you imagine? Ella at the palace?’

‘They’d take one look at those hands and throw her out with the refuse.’

Ella’s brush kept moving. The flagstone beneath her was clean now, but she scrubbed it anyway, her knuckles whitening around the wooden handle. She didn’t look up. She didn’t speak. The yearning beneath her ribs was a dull, familiar ache, and she pressed it down until it was small enough to ignore.

Drizella lingered a moment longer, waiting for a reaction that didn’t come. Then she snorted and turned away, pulling Anastasia with her. The parlour door clicked shut.

Ella’s hands stilled on the brush. She stayed kneeling on the cold stone, listening to the muffled rise and fall of their voices, and let herself breathe.

The library was her last task of the morning. It was a neglected room, its shelves thick with dust, its curtains faded to the colour of old bone. No one came here anymore—Lady Tremaine had no use for books, and her daughters had no use for silence. The room belonged to the house’s decay, and to Ella, who cleaned it because no one else would notice if she didn’t.

She worked her way along the shelves, running a damp cloth over the spines of books whose titles she’d memorised years ago. *A Treatise on Ley Line Cartography. The Histories of the Kingdom of Eldoria. Myths of the Umbral Weave.* She paused at the last one, her fingers brushing the worn leather. The book was old, its pages brittle, and it spoke of shadow magic and dark dimensions with the matter-of-fact tone of a farmer’s almanac. She’d read it twice, in stolen moments, and understood perhaps half of it. The rest was like trying to read a language she almost knew.

She set the book back and moved on.

It was near the window that she found it. The floorboard shifted beneath her foot with a sound that was wrong—a hollow click rather than the solid thud of stone. She stopped. Pressed her heel down again. The board gave slightly, and a puff of dust rose from the seam.

Ella knelt. Her fingers found the edge of the board, and she worked it loose with care, lifting it free. Beneath it lay a small cavity, dark and dry. And inside the cavity, something glinted.

She reached in and drew out a locket.

It was silver, tarnished to a soft grey, its surface smooth and cool against her palm. The chain slithered through her fingers like cold water. She turned it over and saw the crest on its face, intricate, unfamiliar, a design of interlocking curves

that seemed to shift slightly in the dim light. It wasn't the Vance crest. She knew that one well enough, had seen it on the old signet ring her father had worn until the day he died. And it certainly wasn't the Tremaine crest, which Lady Tremaine had emblazoned on every piece of silver she could afford to monogram.

This was something else. Something older.

Ella pressed the clasp, and the locket opened. Inside was empty, no portrait, no lock of hair. But as she held it, she became aware of something else. A hum. Faint, almost imperceptible, a vibration that seemed to come from the locket itself. It travelled up through her fingers and settled somewhere behind her ribs, a resonance that felt less like sound and more like the memory of sound.

She closed the locket. The humming stopped.

She opened it again. The hum returned, faint as a breath.

Her heart beat faster. She didn't understand what she was holding, but she understood enough to know it was not ordinary. The crest. The hum. The careful hiding place beneath the floorboard. Someone had put this here deliberately, long ago, and no one had found it since.

'Ella!'

The voice cut through the library like a whip. Lady Tremaine stood in the doorway, her gaunt frame blocking the light from the corridor. Her eyes found Ella instantly, and narrowed.

'Have you polished those candelabras yet, or do you intend to idle all day?'

Ella's hand closed around the locket. She slipped it into the pocket of her apron, the movement hidden by the folds of her skirt. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but her face was still.

'I was just finishing the dusting, Stepmother.'

Lady Tremaine's gaze swept the room, taking in the cloth, the bucket, the open book on the shelf. 'The silver, Ella. Now.'

'Yes, Stepmother.'

Lady Tremaine held her gaze for a moment longer. Then she turned and walked away, her footsteps sharp and precise on the floorboards. Ella waited until the sound faded before she let herself breathe.

She pulled the locket from her pocket and looked at it again. The crest gleamed dully in the grey light from the window. The hum had stopped, but she could still feel it, a phantom vibration against her palm. She turned the locket over once more, tracing the unfamiliar curves of the crest with her thumb.

Then she heard Drizella's laugh echo from somewhere downstairs, and the sound of Anastasia's voice rising in protest, and beneath it all the cold, measured tones of Lady Tremaine issuing commands. The sounds of Ashworth Grange settling back into its daily rhythm of petty cruelties and dwindling stores.

Ella slipped the locket back into her pocket. It was a small, cold weight against her thigh. She didn't know what it was or why it had been hidden. But it was hers now, and she would keep it close.

She knelt and fitted the floorboard back into place, pressing it down until it sat flush with its neighbours. Then she picked up her bucket and cloth and left the library, closing the door behind her. The silver candelabras were waiting, and Lady Tremaine would be checking.

The locket stayed in her pocket all afternoon, a secret weight she carried through the rest of her servitude, its faint hum a promise she couldn't yet name.

The Glass Slipper

The attic stairs complained under Ella's weight, each groan of the wood a familiar note in the long symphony of Ashworth Grange's decay. She climbed with one hand pressed flat against the locket in her apron pocket, the metal still carrying the chill of the library floorboards where she'd found it that morning. Lady Tremaine's voice still rang in her ears from the parlour below: 'The attic, girl. Every trunk, every box. Sort what's worth keeping from what's fit only for the rag-and-bone man. And don't dawdle — the candelabras need polishing before supper.'

The attic door stuck in its frame, swollen with years of damp. Ella put her shoulder to it and felt something give. The air that rushed out to meet her tasted of moth dust and the faint, sweetish rot of old paper. Thin blades of late-afternoon light cut through the single dormer window, illuminating a landscape of sheet-draped furniture and towers of hatboxes tilting at precarious angles. The floorboards ran the length of the attic in uneven rows, some dark with age, others pale where a rug had once lain.

She set to work on the nearest trunk, lifting out a fox-fur stole that shed hairs onto her skirt. Beneath it lay a child's wooden horse with one leg missing, a bundle of letters tied with faded ribbon, a porcelain doll with cracked cheeks. Each object felt freighted with a history that wasn't hers. The Tremaines had brought their past with them when they'd arrived at Ashworth Grange two years ago, but they'd stuffed it up here and forgotten it, the way they'd forgotten everything except their dwindling claims to gentility.

The dormer window faced west, and the sun was beginning its slow descent behind the moorland hills. The light in the attic thickened, taking on the colour of weak tea. Ella's back ached from bending over trunks, and dust had settled in the creases of her dress. She straightened up and pressed her palms against the small of her back, surveying what remained: a stack of mildewed curtains, a birdcage with its door hanging open, a rolled carpet that moths had reduced to a lacework of holes.

Near the chimney breast, where the floorboards ran under the shadow of the dormant fireplace, something glinted.

It was the kind of glint that didn't belong — not the dull gleam of old brass or the flat reflection of dust motes in a sunbeam. This was sharper, a needle-prick of light in the gloom. Ella crossed the attic, stepping over a hatbox and around a broken music stand. The chimney breast was cold, its brickwork stained with decades of smoke that no scrubbing would lift. At her feet, one of the floorboards sat a fraction higher than its neighbours.

She knelt. The board was shorter than the others, cut to fit around the chimney's base, and when she pressed one end with her thumb, the other end lifted — a seesaw of old, dry timber. Beneath it, a hollow no larger than a bread loaf had been carved into the space between the joists.

And in the hollow, cushioned on a bed of faded velvet the colour of old blood, rested a single glass slipper.

Ella's breath stopped somewhere in her chest. The slipper caught the failing light and did something to it — bent it, deepened it, set it dancing across the underside of the floorboard she'd lifted. The glass was impossibly thin, the heel delicate, the toe tapered to a point that seemed too fine to bear any weight. It wasn't merely transparent; it held light inside itself, a low, steady luminescence that pulsed like the slow beat of a heart.

She reached for it before she'd decided to. Her fingers closed around the heel, and warmth flooded her palm — not the heat of a sun-warmed stone, but something deeper, a warmth that seemed to recognise her. The slipper weighed more than it should, as though the light inside it had mass. She lifted it into a shaft of sunlight, and the glass flared white-gold, then settled into a soft, milky glow.

A hum rose from the slipper. Not a sound she heard with her ears — not at first, but a vibration that travelled up the bones of her wrist and settled somewhere behind her eyes. It was the same resonance she'd felt that morning from the silver locket, but amplified, focused, as though the locket had been a whisper and the slipper was a voice.

She ought to put it down. She ought to close the floorboard and walk back down the attic stairs and finish polishing the candelabras. Lady Tremaine would be checking. The thought was clear and rational, but it seemed to come from very far away, from a version of herself that was already fading. The slipper's hum had become a melody now, threading through her mind like a tune she'd known in childhood and forgotten until this moment.

It promised her things without words. The promise was a feeling first: the weight of silk across her shoulders, the brush of a dance partner's hand at her waist, the sound of her name spoken with admiration instead of contempt. Then images followed, a ballroom bright with a thousand candles, a staircase she descended while every gaze turned towards her, a life in which her hands were soft and her back did not ache and no voice ever called her name in anger.

Ella's thumb traced the rim of the slipper. The glass was cool now, or warm, she couldn't tell which, only that the temperature seemed to shift to match her skin. She lowered the slipper to the floor and, without quite deciding to, slipped off her worn leather shoe.

The moment the glass touched her foot, it changed. The heel adjusted, shortening by a fraction. The arch rose to meet her instep. The toe narrowed, then widened, then settled into a shape that was exactly the shape of her. The slipper was not merely being worn; it was wearing her, learning her, fitting itself to the contours of her bones.

She stood. The attic floor was uneven, but the slipper held her steady, distributing her weight as though she stood on a cushion of warm air. The hum intensified, and for a moment she saw, actually saw, as clearly as she saw the

dormer window and the dust and the sheet-draped furniture, a ballroom floor beneath her feet, polished to a mirror gleam, reflecting the swirl of dancers and the glitter of chandeliers.

Then the vision shifted. The dancers' faces blurred, their forms elongating into something too thin, their movements becoming jerky, puppet-like. The chandeliers dimmed, and behind them, vast shapes moved in a darkness that had no floor and no ceiling. The slipper's warmth spiked, pressing against her skin like a warning, and the hum became a chorus of whispers she couldn't quite decipher.

Ella gasped and reached down to pull the slipper off. It resisted. The glass clung to her foot, not painfully, but insistently, the way a child clings to a departing parent. She tugged harder, and the slipper loosened with a faint, wet sound, though the glass was dry, and came free in her hand. The warmth faded slowly, leaving her foot cold and ordinary inside its woollen stocking.

She stared at the slipper. It was only glass again, delicate and still, its inner light dimmed to a faint glimmer. But the hum had not entirely stopped. It had only grown quiet, waiting, like a voice holding its breath.

'Ella!'

Lady Tremaine's voice cut up through the attic floorboards, sharp as a shard of the slipper's glass. Ella flinched and nearly dropped the slipper. She caught it against her chest, where the locket still pressed cold through her apron, and for an instant the two objects seemed to recognise each other, the locket's faint hum rose to meet the slipper's, and together they sang a single, resonant note that vibrated in her teeth.

'Ella, I will not call again!'

She scrambled to the stack of old blankets near the chimney and thrust the slipper beneath them, burying it deep in the folds of moth-eaten wool. The warmth of it lingered on her palm, a phantom heat that pulsed in time with her heartbeat. She pressed the floorboard back into place and stood, brushing dust from her skirt with trembling hands.

The attic stairs groaned under her descent. The dormer window was darkening now, the sun slipping below the moorland ridge, and the shadows in the attic had grown long and deep. But beneath the blankets, the slipper was still glowing, she knew it without looking, could feel its light pressing against the darkness like a held breath.

At the foot of the stairs, the corridor stretched towards the parlour where Lady Tremaine waited. The house settled around her, all its familiar creaks and draughts, the smell of cold hearths and old dust. But something had shifted. The air felt thinner, charged, as though a door had opened somewhere that could not be closed again.

The locket in her pocket was cold now, but the slipper's warmth still clung to her fingers. She could feel it all the way down the corridor, through the kitchen,

into the scullery where the candelabras waited. The promise of it followed her, not the promise of a ball or a prince or a life of silk, but something simpler and far more dangerous: the promise that Ashworth Grange was not the end of her story.

She didn't yet know what the slipper would cost. She knew only that it had fitted her perfectly, and that somewhere beneath the blankets in the attic, it was still humming its wordless song, waiting for her to return.

Whispers in the Peat

The kitchen door swung shut behind her with a click that sounded louder than it should have. Eleanor Vance stood on the back step of Ashworth Grange, the chill of the evening finding every gap in her worn woollen dress. She had not planned to leave. She had been standing at the scullery bench, a candelabra in one hand and a polishing cloth in the other, when the pull had become impossible to ignore. The slipper's warmth had seeped down through the attic floorboards, through the ceiling plaster, through the very air of the house, until she felt it pressing against her skin like a second heartbeat.

She had set the candelabra down. She had walked out.

Now the moor stretched before her, a vast darkness punctuated only by the faint silver of the track and the distant, restless shapes of the Whispering Willows. The locket lay against her collarbone, cold as a promise. She had slipped its chain over her head before leaving, a gesture that felt less like choice and more like instinct. The metal was old, the crest unfamiliar, and it rested against her skin as though it had always belonged there.

She walked. The ground beneath her boots was soft from recent rain, the peat spongy and yielding. The mist that rolled in from the Blackfen was thicker than she had ever seen it, coiling around her ankles and rising in slow spirals that caught the last of the dusk light. It smelled of wet bracken and something older, something mineral and deep, like the breath of the earth itself.

She did not know why she was walking towards the willows. She knew only that the slipper's song had changed. It was no longer the wordless melody she had felt in the attic. Now it was a summons, a thread pulled taut between her ribs and the moor, and she followed it because not following felt like trying to hold her breath.

The track dipped. The ground grew wetter. She stepped over a rivulet of dark water that gleamed with an oily sheen, and the mist parted just enough to reveal the willows ahead. They stood in a hollow, their branches hanging like uncombed hair, and even in the fading light she could see that they were moving. Not swaying in the wind—there was no wind. The branches were writhing, twisting against each other with a sound like old rope straining under weight.

Ella stopped. The locket grew colder against her skin.

Something shimmered beyond the willows. A ribbon of light, pale green and violet, hung in the air above the peat like a wound that had opened in the dark. It pulsed, and with each pulse the slipper's hum in her mind grew louder. She had never seen a Ley Line before, but she had heard the old stories—currents of raw magic that ran beneath the kingdom, invisible except when they surfaced in places like this, where the veil between worlds was thin. The stories said they were beautiful. The stories did not mention how much they felt like a warning.

She stepped closer to the willows. A branch brushed her shoulder, and the touch was not accidental. It lingered, the bark rough against her sleeve, before

pulling back into the tangle of limbs. The humming in her mind separated into layers. She could hear the slipper's note, high and insistent. She could hear the deeper resonance of the Ley Line, a bass thrum that vibrated in her molars. And beneath both, she could hear something else.

Voices.

They were not human. They were not words, not at first. They were shapes of sound, fragments of meaning that brushed against her consciousness like moth wings. The willows whispered, and the whispers carried names she did not know and sensations she could not place—the taste of iron, the smell of snow, the weight of a crown she had never worn.

Then the fragments sharpened.

A queen's forgotten blood.

The words were not spoken aloud. They arrived in her mind fully formed, as though they had been waiting there for years and had only now chosen to surface. Ella's hand went to the locket. The metal was so cold it stung.

Shadows seeking their vessel.

The willows thrashed. A branch cracked somewhere in the dark, sharp as a shout, and the Ley Line flared. The aurora brightened until the hollow was lit in shades of green and violet, and in that light she saw the willows clearly for the first time. Their bark was not bark. It was something smoother, darker, veined with lines that glowed faintly in the Ley light. The branches were not branches. They were arms, too many arms, reaching and grasping and pulling back into the dark.

The slipper's hum rose to a shriek.

Ella stumbled backwards. The locket burned against her chest, and she clutched it through the fabric of her dress, as though the silver could anchor her to the solid world. The whispering grew louder, a chorus of voices that overlapped and diverged and came together again in words she understood only in fragments—*vessel* and *shadow* and *the weave hungers* and *she does not know what she wears*.

The Ley Line pulsed once more, and the willows bent inward, their branches tangling together like fingers interlacing. For a moment the hollow was silent. Then the voices spoke as one.

Turn back, daughter of Ashworth. The shadow magic knows you now.

She ran.

The peat sucked at her boots. The mist closed behind her, swallowing the willows and the Ley light and the sound of branches that were not branches. She ran until her lungs burned and the stitch in her side forced her to slow, to walk, to stand with her hands on her knees and her breath coming in ragged gasps. The moor stretched around her, featureless and grey in the last of the twilight. The track was somewhere to her left. She could see the dark shape of Ashworth Grange on the horizon, a smudge of stone against the sky.

The slipper's hum had quieted. It was still there, a thread of sound at the edge of her awareness, but it no longer pulled at her. The locket was warm now, warmed by her skin, and she pressed her palm flat against it. The crest was unfamiliar. The metal was old. She had found it beneath a floorboard in the library, and she did not know what it meant, but the willows had spoken of a queen's blood and a shadow seeking its vessel, and she was not fool enough to think those words were meant for anyone else.

She walked towards the manor. The mist parted before her and closed behind her, and the moor was silent except for the wet sound of her boots on the track. The whispering had stopped. The willows were behind her now, invisible in the dark, and she did not look back.

She thought of her father's study. It had been locked since his death, the key lost or hidden or simply forgotten, but she knew the room was still there at the end of the east corridor, its door painted shut and its windows facing the moor. Her father had kept books there. Old books, the kind Lady Tremaine had no use for and the stepsisters had never cared to read. If there were answers to be found—about the locket, about the slipper, about the voice in the willows that had called her *daughter of Ashworth*, they would be in that room.

The kitchen door was cold against her palm. She pushed it open and stepped inside, and the warmth of the range wrapped around her like a held breath. The scullery was empty. The candelabra still sat on the bench where she had left it, the polishing cloth draped beside it. She picked up neither.

She climbed the servants' stairs to her attic room, and she did not light a candle. In the dark she found the loose floorboard near the chimney breast, and she lifted it, and she felt beneath the blankets until her fingers brushed the glass. The slipper was cold now. Its hum was a whisper, barely audible, and its surface was smooth and dark and still. She wrapped it again in the blankets and replaced the floorboard and stood in the dark with her hand pressed against the locket.

The willows had spoken. The moor had listened. And somewhere beyond the mist, a figure with obsidian eyes watched the manor from the edge of the peat, and did not move, and did not speak, and waited.

The Ball Invitation

The cold had settled into the attic overnight, a chill that crept through the gaps in the roof tiles and pooled in the corners where the candlelight never reached. Ella lay beneath the thin blankets and watched the rafters emerge from the dark, their beams taking shape slowly as the first grey light of morning bled through the dormer window. The slipper was still hidden beneath the floorboard near the chimney breast. She had not dreamed of the willows. She had dreamed of nothing at all, which was worse, because waking felt like surfacing through water that had no bottom.

Her body ached from the moor. The memory of the whispering branches and the figure at the peat's edge sat in her chest like a stone she could not swallow. She dressed in the cold, her fingers clumsy on the buttons of her work dress, and she did not lift the floorboard to check the slipper. She knew it was there. The resonance from the locket told her, a faint warmth against her collarbone that pulsed in time with something beneath the attic floor. The rhythm had changed overnight. It was steadier now, less a question and more a statement, and she did not want to know what it was saying.

The locket lay flat against her skin, and she tucked it deeper beneath her collar before descending the servants' stairs. The house was silent. The kitchen range had burned low overnight, and she coaxed it back to life with kindling and breath, the familiar ritual grounding her in the ordinary. She filled the kettle and set it on the hob and stood with her hands flat on the scrubbed deal table, and she did not think about the willows or the voice that had called her daughter of Ashworth. She thought about flour and preserves and the cured ham in the pantry, and she counted the tasks ahead of her, and she waited for the day to begin.

Lady Tremaine's voice cut through the quiet before the kettle boiled.

'Eleanor.'

The word landed from the hallway, sharp and expectant, and Ella straightened and wiped her hands on her apron and walked through to the entrance hall. Lady Tremaine stood near the front door with a letter in her hand, her gaunt frame silhouetted against the grey light from the fanlight above. Drizella and Anastasia hovered behind her, their faces flushed with the effort of having hurried downstairs for once, their dressing gowns pulled tight against the morning chill.

'There is a Royal Messenger on the road,' Lady Tremaine said. She held up the letter, and the seal caught the light, and Ella saw the gilded crest of the Royal House of Eldoria pressed into the wax. 'He will be at our door within the hour. The house must be presentable. You will see to it.'

Ella nodded and turned towards the parlour, and Lady Tremaine's voice stopped her.

'And Eleanor? The silver candelabras. They must gleam.'

The parlour was cold. Ella lit the fire and swept the hearth and dusted the mantel, and she brought the silver candelabras down from the sideboard and set them on the table and began to polish. The cloth moved in small circles, and the tarnish lifted slowly, and the silver beneath was bright and clean and reflected her face in miniature, and she saw that her eyes were tired. The locket shifted against her skin, and she paused and pressed her hand to it, and the warmth was still there, steady and insistent, and she thought of the slipper hidden in the attic and the way its hum had grown louder in her mind.

She did not hear the knock when it came. She heard Drizella's shriek instead, a sound that split the quiet of the house and sent a tremor through the floorboards, and she set down the cloth and walked to the entrance hall and saw the door standing open and the messenger framed against the moor.

He was young, and his livery was crimson and gold, and the colours were so bright against the grey sky and the brown heath that he looked like a figure from a painting that had been cut out and pasted onto the wrong canvas. He held a scroll in his gloved hand, and his boots were muddied from the road, and his horse stood behind him with steam rising from its flanks in the cold air. Lady Tremaine received the scroll with both hands, and her sharp features arranged themselves into something that was almost gracious, and she did not invite the messenger inside.

The messenger remounted and rode back towards the moor road, and Lady Tremaine closed the door and broke the seal and read the scroll in silence. Drizella and Anastasia crowded close, their breath held, their hands clutched at their breasts. Ella stood in the doorway to the parlour and watched, and the locket was warm against her skin, and the slipper's hum was a distant pulse in the back of her mind, and she waited.

'A ball,' Lady Tremaine said. Her voice was flat, but her eyes moved over the words again, and a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. 'At Silverwood Castle. In honour of Prince Alaric's coming-of-age. Every eligible maiden is commanded to attend.'

Drizella's shriek was louder this time, and Anastasia joined her, and their voices tangled together in the narrow hall and bounced off the walls and filled the house with noise. They clutched each other and spun in circles, and their dressing gowns flared out, and they talked over each other about gowns and dancing and the Prince and the castle and the Prince and what they would wear and how they would be noticed and how they would be chosen, and the words tumbled out in a flood that washed over Lady Tremaine and left her unmoved, her smile fixed and calculating.

Ella stepped forward. The movement was small, and she did not speak, but Lady Tremaine's eyes found her anyway, and the smile sharpened.

'You will need a gown,' Lady Tremaine said to Drizella, and her voice cut through the chatter and silenced it. 'Both of you. The finest we can manage. There

is fabric in the storeroom, and the seamstress in the village can be summoned. We will not be shamed.'

'And Eleanor?' Anastasia's voice was sweet, and her simpering smile was a blade. 'Will she be attending as well?'

The silence that followed was brief and absolute. Drizella snorted. Lady Tremaine turned, and her gaunt frame blocked the light from the fanlight, and her shadow fell across Ella and held her in place.

'Eleanor has duties,' Lady Tremaine said. 'The household will not run itself. There is the pantry to inventory, the library to dust, the archives to sort. The manor's records have been neglected for too long. She will be occupied.'

Ella's hands tightened at her sides. The hope that had flickered in her chest, the desperate imagining of a single night away from the grime and the labour and the contempt, guttered and died. She did not speak. She had learned long ago that words were wasted on Lady Tremaine, that argument only sharpened the cruelty, that silence was the only armour she had left. But the locket burned against her skin, and the slipper's hum rose in her mind, and the whisper of the willows echoed beneath it, and she felt something shift in the space behind her ribs.

'The archives,' Lady Tremaine continued, and her voice was pleasant now, and her eyes were bright with amusement. 'All of them. The ledgers, the correspondence, the estate records. Your father was meticulous. It will take you days. You will begin this afternoon.'

Ella nodded. The gesture was automatic, the servant's reflex, and she turned to go, and Lady Tremaine's voice stopped her again.

'And Eleanor? That gown you keep in your trunk. The faded one.'

Ella turned back. Lady Tremaine's hand was outstretched, and her fingers curled once, a summoning gesture that left no room for refusal. Drizella and Anastasia watched, their eyes bright and hungry, and the hall was very still.

'Fetch it.'

Ella climbed the stairs to her attic room. The gown was in the trunk at the foot of her bed, folded beneath a woollen blanket that smelled of cedar and dust. It was faded, yes, a pale blue that had once been deeper, with sleeves that were worn at the cuffs and a hem that had been let down twice. It was the only thing she owned that was not a work dress, and she had not worn it in years, and she held it against her chest for a moment and felt the fabric give beneath her fingers and thought of her mother, who had worn it once, before the fever took her.

The slipper's hum was louder in the attic. She could feel it through the floorboards, a vibration that travelled up through the soles of her feet and settled in her bones, and the locket answered it, and the warmth spread across her collarbone and down her arms and into her hands, and she carried the gown down the stairs and into the parlour and held it out to Lady Tremaine.

Lady Tremaine took it. She held it up to the light from the window, and her lips pursed, and she examined the faded fabric and the worn cuffs and the twice-let-down hem, and she nodded once.

'Unsuitable,' she said.

She walked to the hearth. The fire was burning high, the flames bright and hungry, and she held the gown over the grate for a moment, and Ella's breath stopped in her throat, and Drizella and Anastasia leaned forward, and the room was silent except for the crack of the logs and the whisper of the fire and the distant, rising hum of the Shadow Slipper in the attic above.

Lady Tremaine dropped the gown into the flames.

The fabric caught at once. The fire ate the faded blue and turned it to orange and gold and then to black, and the sleeves curled and vanished, and the hem that had been let down twice was gone in an instant, and the gown that had been her mother's was ash and ember and nothing more. Lady Tremaine watched it burn, and her smile was satisfied, and her eyes reflected the fire, and she did not look at Ella.

Ella did not move. The locket was hot against her skin, and the slipper's hum was a roar in her mind, and the whisper of the willows was there beneath it, and the stone in her chest was cracking open, and something cold and dark was seeping through the cracks. She watched the gown burn, and she did not speak, and she did not cry. The fire consumed the last of the fabric, and the flames settled, and the logs shifted, and a shower of sparks rose up the chimney and vanished into the dark.

And then she saw it.

In the ashes of the gown, where the hearthstone lay blackened and hot, a faint shimmer. It was almost imperceptible, a glistening residue that caught the firelight and held it, and it coalesced for a moment into something that was almost a shape, and then it was gone. The hearthstone where it had been was cold. The cold spread outward from that spot, and the air above it wavered, and Ella felt it against her ankles, a chill that had nothing to do with the draft from the door.

'The archives,' Lady Tremaine said. Her voice was pleasant again, and she turned from the hearth and brushed the ash from her hands. 'You may begin now.'

Ella turned and walked from the parlour. Her footsteps were steady, and her hands were steady, and her face was still. The locket was a coal against her chest, and the slipper's hum was a voice now, and it was promising her something she could not quite hear, and she climbed the stairs to the library and did not look back.

In the attic, beneath the floorboard near the chimney breast, the glass slipper glowed with a light that was not reflected from any flame. The resonance spread outward from it in waves, and the blankets that covered it were warm to the touch, and the dust on the floor around it had arranged itself into patterns that

had no name. The hum was steady now, and patient, and it waited for her to return.

Reflections in the Bog

The locket pulsed beneath her collar, a second heartbeat that had quickened the moment she'd slipped from the kitchen door into the yard. Twilight had drained the colour from Ashworth Grange, leaving it grey and flat as a tombstone behind her. She did not look back. The glass slipper was heavy in her apron pocket, wrapped in a square of cheesecloth she'd taken from the pantry, and its weight was disproportionate to its size — a dense, warm gravity that seemed to pull her forward across the yard and through the gap in the hedge where the iron gate had rusted off its hinges years ago.

She had not planned to come back here. The willows' warnings still rang in her memory, fragmented phrases that surfaced when she least expected them: *daughter of Ashworth* and *shadows seeking their vessel* and something about a queen's blood that she could not shake. But the slipper had been insistent. Not a voice, exactly — not yet — but a compulsion that felt like thirst, like hunger, like the body demanding something it needed to survive. She had tried to resist it after the parlour, after the burning of her mother's gown, after Lady Tremaine's dismissal. She had climbed to the library and pulled books from the shelves and found nothing, nothing, nothing. The slipper's resonance had become a needle behind her eyes. It had not let her sleep.

So she had come back to the moor.

The mist was thicker than the night before. It coiled around her ankles and rose in slow spirals that the breeze did not touch, and the ground beneath her feet was soft with peat and hidden water. She followed the pull of the slipper, or perhaps the slipper followed the pull of the moor — she could no longer tell which was leading and which was led. The Whispering Willows emerged from the fog like the ribs of some vast buried creature, their branches thrashing in a wind she could not feel. She heard them before she saw them: a low, guttural groaning that was not quite speech and not quite silence.

She stopped at the edge of a still pool. The water was black and flat and did not ripple, and the moon above was a sliver so thin it might have been a scratch on glass. The willows leaned over the pool like mourners at a graveside, and their branches hung motionless now, as if they too were waiting.

Ella knelt. The peat was cold through her skirt, and the mist pressed close, and the locket was a coal against her sternum. She unwrapped the slipper from its cheesecloth and held it in both hands. In the darkness it glowed with a light that was not reflected from anywhere — a soft, milky luminescence that seemed to come from deep within the glass itself. The warmth spread up her wrists and into her arms, and the needle behind her eyes dissolved into something else: a spreading, honeyed calm that felt like the first sip of hot tea after a day in the rain.

She removed her left shoe. The air on her bare foot was cold, and the peat squelched beneath her as she shifted her weight. She lifted the slipper.

The moment the glass touched her skin, the world stilled.

Not the world — *her*. Her breath stopped. Her heart paused between beats. The mist froze in its coiling, and the willows ceased their groaning, and the entire moor became a held exhalation. The slipper slid onto her foot as if it had been poured there, as if it had been waiting for the exact shape of her arch and heel and ankle since before she was born. It was not cold like glass should be. It was warm, and then hot, and then something beyond temperature — a sensation that bypassed her skin entirely and settled into her bones like a chord struck in a silent room.

She looked into the pool.

Her reflection was wrong.

The woman gazing back from the black water was not Eleanor Vance. She was taller, somehow, though the reflection showed the same kneeling posture, the same angle of head. Her hair was not ash-blonde but silver, a cascade of moonlight that fell past her shoulders in waves. Her dress was not the rough-spun wool she had put on that morning but a gown of something that looked like captured starlight, deep blue and shimmering with points of brilliance that moved as she breathed. A crown of woven light rested on her brow, delicate as frost on a windowpane. Her eyes were her own, the same deep-set blue, but they held a knowledge that the real Eleanor did not possess, a certainty that made her stomach clench with something between terror and want.

The reflection smiled.

Ella had not smiled.

The water did not ripple. The reflection raised a hand that Ella had not raised, and the crown of light pulsed once, twice, and the smile widened, and the eyes in the water were not kind. They were hungry. They were *hers*, but hungry.

The bog whispered. Not the willows, the water itself, or the peat beneath it, or the air above it. The sound came from everywhere at once, a voice that was many voices speaking in a single tone, resonant and low and so beautiful that it hurt somewhere behind her ribs.

You are not a servant.

The words were not sound. They arrived in her mind fully formed, bypassing her ears entirely. The reflection in the pool tilted its crowned head, and the starlight gown shimmered, and the voice continued.

You are the daughter of a queen. You are the blood of Ashworth. You are the vessel the shadows have sought, and the vessel they will serve.

The locket burned against her chest, and she gasped, and the reflection gasped with her, but the reflection's gasp was a performance, a mockery of surprise, and its eyes never left hers.

You will go to the ball. You will wear the slipper. You will stand before the prince, and he will see you as you truly are, not a drudge, not a servant, but a woman of

power. The Umbral Weave will clothe you. The Ley Lines will bow to you. The shadow magic will be your mantle, and the dark magic your crown.

The willows began to thrash. Their branches whipped against the sky, and their groaning rose to a pitch that was almost a scream. The voice in the water did not pause, but Ella felt the slipper tighten around her foot, not painfully, but firmly, a grip that was also a promise.

You need only accept.

The reflection extended a hand toward her, breaking the surface of the pool. The water did not ripple. The hand was white as the moon-silver above, and the fingers were long, and the nails were glass. They stopped an inch from Ella's face.

The locket was so hot now that she could smell scorching wool. The slipper's pulse was a drumbeat in her blood, and the willows were shrieking, and the reflection's smile was a gash of light, and somewhere beneath the moor, something vast and old and hungry was stirring in its sleep.

She tore the slipper from her foot.

The pool shattered. The reflection dissolved into a thousand points of light that scattered across the black water and sank without a trace. The voice cut off mid-word, and the willows fell silent, and the mist began to move again, coiling and drifting as if nothing had happened. The locket cooled. The slipper was just glass in her hand, faintly warm, faintly glowing, its hum reduced to a vibration she could barely feel.

She was kneeling in the peat. Her left foot was bare and cold, and her skirt was soaked through, and the moon was a scratch on glass above her. The slipper lay in her lap. It had not fallen off when she pulled, it had clung until the last possible instant, and the skin of her heel remembered the grip.

She looked at the pool. Her reflection was her own again: ash-blond hair escaping its pins, soot on her cheek, deep circles beneath her eyes. The woman in the water was nineteen and exhausted and afraid. She was also furious.

Ella sat back on her heels and breathed. The peat was soft beneath her, and the mist was cold in her lungs, and the willows were silent now, their branches hanging limp as wet rope. The moor stretched away into darkness in every direction, and the distant lights of Silverwood Castle were a cluster of warm pinpricks on the horizon. She had never been inside the castle. She had never been invited anywhere. She had scrubbed floors and blacked grates and polished silver until her fingers cramped, and she had watched Drizella and Anastasia parade in their new gowns while she wore their cast-offs, and she had buried her mother's locket beneath a floorboard because it was the only thing she had left that was hers.

The slipper pulsed once, gently. A question.

She looked at the castle lights. The ball was in three days. Lady Tremaine had burned her mother's gown and forbidden her to go, and the messenger's scroll

was locked in the parlour desk, and she had nothing to wear and no way to get there and no right to be seen among the eligible maidens of Eldoria.

The slipper pulsed again. The glass was warm in her hand, and the locket was a steady heat against her chest, and she could still feel the echo of the reflection's voice in her bones: *you will stand before the prince*.

She wrapped the slipper in the cheesecloth and stood. Her bare foot was numb, and her skirt was heavy with bog water, and the willows watched her with branches that did not move. She did not look at them. She looked at the castle, and the castle looked back with its warm, indifferent lights, and she thought of the reflection's crown and the reflection's gown and the reflection's hungry, knowing smile.

She had seen what the slipper could show her. She had heard what the voice in the water promised. She had felt the grip of the glass on her heel and the heat of the locket and the terrible, beautiful certainty of the woman in the pool.

She wanted it.

She wanted the crown and the gown and the prince and the power. She wanted to walk into the ballroom and watch Lady Tremaine's face crumple. She wanted to never scrub another floor or black another grate or hear another command delivered in that flat, dismissive tone. She wanted the life the reflection had shown her, and the wanting was a physical ache in her chest, a hollow that the slipper's warmth had filled and left empty again.

The willows stirred. A single branch scraped against another, and the sound was a word she almost understood.

Ella turned away from the pool. She did not run this time. She walked, and the mist parted before her, and the slipper was a weight in her apron pocket, and the locket was a steady pulse against her heart. The castle lights grew smaller as she descended into the valley, and the moor closed behind her, and the willows began to groan again, low and mournful, a sound that might have been a warning or a lament.

She did not look back. She was thinking of the ball. She was thinking of the crown of starlight and the gown of captured brilliance and the prince who would see her as the reflection had shown her. She was thinking of the voice in the water and the promise it had made, and she was not thinking of the willows' warnings or the grip of the glass on her skin or the way the reflection's smile had not reached its eyes.

The slipper hummed against her thigh, and the hum was satisfied, and the locket was warm, and the castle waited on the horizon like a question she had already decided to answer.

A Dress of Shadows

The locket woke her.

Not the cold — though the attic air bit deep enough to make her bones ache. Not the grey light seeping through the gaps in the roof tiles. The locket, warm against her collarbone, its steady pulse no longer matching her heartbeat but driving it. She lay on the thin mattress with the blankets twisted around her legs, one hand pressed flat against the silver as if she'd fallen asleep trying to hold it still.

The glass slipper stood on the floor beside her bed.

She had no memory of placing it there. She remembered unwrapping it from the blankets, remembered the way its glow had painted the rafters in shades of cold fire. She remembered lying down. She did not remember setting it upright, its toe pointing towards the door like a compass needle finding north.

She sat up. The locket's warmth spread across her chest in a slow bloom, and the slipper's resonance answered — not the frantic pulse of the bog vision, but something deeper, a vibration that travelled up through the floorboards and into her spine. The sound it made was less a hum now and more a voice speaking just below the threshold of words.

Dawn was still an hour away. She could tell by the quality of the grey — a thin, grudging light that picked out the dust motes suspended in the air and turned the attic's clutter into a landscape of soft-edged shadows. The gown her stepmother had burned was ash in the parlour grate. The gown she would need for the ball did not yet exist.

She reached for the slipper.

Her fingers closed around the glass, and the voice beneath the vibration sharpened into something she could almost understand. It was not the seductive whisper from the bog. It was older. Colder. A thread pulled through the fabric of the world, and on the other end of it, something waiting.

She lifted the slipper and pressed it to her bare foot.

The glass was warm. It was always warm now, as if it had absorbed the heat of her body and was giving it back with interest. The fit was seamless — not like wearing a shoe, but like stepping into a second skin. The locket flared against her chest, and the attic's shadows seemed to lean towards her, stretching across the floorboards like cats waking from a long nap.

She stood. The slipper's resonance steadied, and the shadows steadied with it. They pooled at her feet, thick as spilt ink, and then they began to climb.

Ella did not scream. She had screamed once, in the bog, when the vision had shown her a crown of starlight and a gown of captured brilliance. She had ripped the slipper off then, and the vision had shattered, and she had run back to Ashworth Grange with the moor's mournful groans chasing her heels. She had

spent the next two days scrubbing floors and polishing silver and pretending the slipper was just a slipper, just glass and magic and nothing more.

But the shadows were climbing her legs now, and she did not scream, and she did not run.

They were cold. That was the first surprise — not the warmth of the slipper, not the heat of the locket, but a chill that seeped through her thin shift like winter fog. The shadows coiled around her calves and thickened into something with texture, something that whispered against her skin like silk drawn over stone. She watched them weave themselves into fabric — not the coarse wool of her servant's dress, not the faded cotton of her nightshift, but something else entirely.

Threads of darkness spun themselves into a hem. The hem rose, and the darkness rose with it, shaping itself to her hips, her waist, her breasts. The shadows were not black, she realised. They were the colour of midnight sky just before the first stars appear — a deep, bruised blue that shimmered with faint pinpricks of light. The fabric breathed. It moved with her, not against her, and when she lifted her hand to touch it, the surface rippled like water disturbed by a stone.

The locket pulsed. The slipper hummed. The gown kept growing.

It spilled over her shoulders in a cascade of shadow and starlight, the sleeves forming themselves from wisps of mist that coiled around her arms and settled into something between lace and liquid night. The bodice tightened, not uncomfortably, but with the precise pressure of a hand pressed flat against her spine, and the skirt pooled around her feet in folds that seemed to drink the grey attic light and give back something darker.

She turned towards the shard of broken mirror propped against the chimney breast.

The woman who stared back was not the woman who had fled the bog. She was not the drudge who scrubbed hearthstones and polished silver and kept her head down when Lady Tremaine's voice cut through the manor like a blade. She was not the girl who had watched her mother's gown burn in the parlour grate.

The gown had a scent. Night-blooming jasmine, she thought, though she had never smelled jasmine in her life. And beneath it, something earthier, the damp richness of soil turned over in autumn, the mineral bite of stone that had lain undisturbed for centuries. The scent rose from the fabric and coiled around her, and for a moment she was not in the attic at all. She was standing in a forest that had never seen sunlight, and the trees were made of shadow, and the stars overhead were not stars but eyes.

She blinked. The attic returned. The mirror shard showed her a woman in a gown of midnight mist, and the woman's eyes were her eyes, and the woman's face was her face, but the expression on it was not one she recognised.

The slipper's voice sharpened. Not words, not yet, but the shape of words, the pressure of meaning against the inside of her skull. It wanted her to move. It wanted her to walk down the attic stairs and through the silent manor and out into the pre-dawn dark. It wanted her to follow the road to Silverwood Castle, where the ballroom waited and the prince waited and the crown of starlight waited.

She took a step towards the door. The gown swirled around her ankles, and the sound it made was the sound of wind through winter branches.

She stopped.

The glyphs were barely visible at first, a shimmer within the fabric, like heat-haze over summer tarmac. She might have missed them if she had not paused to steady herself against the chimney breast. But she had paused, and her hand had brushed the bodice, and the fabric had shivered, and the glyphs had risen to the surface like fish swimming up from deep water.

They were not letters. They were not any script she had seen in the dusty books of Ashworth Grange's library, not the curling script of the old ledgers or the angular runes in the margins of her father's forgotten lore. They were older than letters. They were shapes that reminded her of things, a spiral that echoed the curve of a ram's horn, a cross that suggested a figure with outstretched arms, a circle bisected by a line that could have been a closed eye or a keyhole or both.

She knew them.

The recognition hit her like a blow to the sternum. She had seen these symbols before, not in the library, not in the books she had sorted and dusted and stacked in neat piles for Lady Tremaine's inspection. She had seen them in a dream. Or not a dream. A memory. Her father's study, late at night, the fire burned down to embers. A book open on his desk. The same spirals and crosses and bisected circles, glowing faintly in the firelight. He had closed the book when she entered. He had smiled and said something about old stories, nothing to trouble her with, run along to bed.

The glyphs on the gown pulsed. The locket pulsed in answer. The slipper's voice rose to a pitch that was almost a scream, and then it fell silent, and in the silence she heard something else.

A door opening.

Not in the attic. Below. The kitchen door, by the sound of it, the creak of hinges that needed oiling, the scrape of wood against stone. Footsteps crossed the kitchen floor. A voice, sharp and familiar, cut through the manor's pre-dawn hush.

'Eleanor!'

Lady Tremaine.

Ella did not move. The gown clung to her body, and the glyphs still shimmered in its depths, and the slipper was a warm weight against her foot, and her stepmother was calling her name from the kitchen below. The absurdity of it, a drudge in a gown of shadow and starlight, summoned to scrub the breakfast dishes, struck her with a force that was almost physical.

'Eleanor! I know you are awake. Come down at once.'

The slipper's voice returned, quieter now, a murmur beneath the surface of her thoughts. It did not tell her to hide the gown. It did not tell her to answer the summons. It simply waited, patient as stone, and the warmth of it spread up through her ankle and into her calf and settled in the hollow of her knee like a promise.

She looked at the mirror shard one last time. The woman in the gown looked back, and her expression was still not one Ella recognised, but she was beginning to understand it. It was the expression of someone who had been offered a key to a door she had never dared to open.

The glyphs on the bodice shifted. The spiral became a circle. The circle became an eye. The eye became a mouth, and the mouth opened, and inside the mouth was darkness, and inside the darkness was a room.

She saw Lady Tremaine.

Not the Lady Tremaine of the kitchen summons, the sharp voice and the sharper tongue. A different Lady Tremaine. A Lady Tremaine standing in a room Ella had never seen, a room with stone walls and a single candle burning in a niche. Her stepmother's face was contorted in a sneer, but it was not the sneer of petty cruelty. It was the sneer of triumph. Her hands clutched a box, dark, intricately carved, its surface etched with symbols that were identical to the glyphs shimmering on Ella's gown. The box was open. Inside it, something moved.

The vision shattered. The glyphs on the gown settled back into the fabric, and the attic was just an attic again, cold and grey and full of dust. The slipper's voice faded to a murmur, and the locket's warmth subsided to a steady glow against her skin.

'Eleanor!'

The voice was closer now. Lady Tremaine had left the kitchen. Her footsteps were on the stairs.

Ella moved. Her hand found the slipper, and the gown dissolved, not like mist burning off in sunlight, but like water draining into sand. The shadows that had woven themselves into silk and starlight unwove themselves and sank back into the floorboards, and she was left standing in her thin shift with the glass slipper clutched against her chest and her heart beating fast enough to shake her ribs.

The footsteps reached the landing below. 'Eleanor, if I have to climb these stairs—'

She wrapped the slipper in its blankets and pushed it beneath the floorboard. The locket was still warm. The resonance was still there, a thread pulled taut between her chest and the glass hidden beneath the floor. She smoothed her shift, ran a hand through her hair, and opened the attic door.

'Coming, my lady.'

The words tasted like ash. But beneath the ash, something else. Something that had not been there before.

Hope. Or the beginning of it.

She went down to meet her stepmother, and the slipper waited beneath the floorboard, and the locket was warm against her skin, and the road to Silverwood Castle stretched out beyond the manor walls like a question she had already decided to answer.

The Ballroom's Gilded Cage

The carriage deposited her at the foot of a sweeping marble staircase, and for a long moment Eleanor Vance simply stood on the rain-slicked flagstones, her head tilted back, the castle towers needling into a sky the colour of ink.

Silverwood Castle was not merely large. It was a statement. Turrets clawed upward, lit from within by the amber glow of a thousand candles, and the windows of the Grand Ballroom spilled music onto the courtyard like honey poured slow. The gown the Shadow Slipper had woven around her caught the light and broke it into fragments of midnight-blue and silver, and she felt the fabric move against her skin as if it were breathing.

She climbed the stairs.

Each step sent a small tremor through the glass heel, and the glass heel answered with a resonance that travelled up her calf and settled in the base of her spine. The locket beneath the gown was warm, pulsing in a rhythm that matched the distant waltz. She had not needed to look for the entrance to the ballroom. The slipper guided her, a gentle pressure against her toes, steering her through the grand archway and into the light.

The Grand Ballroom of Silverwood Castle opened before her like a gilded lung.

Chandeliers the size of carriages hung from a ceiling painted with fading gods. The air was thick with the scent of lilies and beeswax, and beneath that, the metallic tang of old stone and the faint sweat of dancers. Hundreds of candles flickered in their sconces, and the nobility of Eldoria moved across the marble floor in a slow, deliberate tide of silk and jewels. The music was a waltz, melancholic and precise, and it wrapped around her like a second gown.

She stepped inside.

Heads turned.

Anastasia Tremaine spotted her first. She stood near the refreshment table, a crystal glass of champagne halfway to her lips, and the glass stopped moving. Her mouth parted, then tightened. Drizella, beside her in a gown of unfortunate mustard yellow, followed her sister's gaze and made a sound like a kettle coming to the boil.

'Who is that?' Drizella's voice carried across the sudden hush.

Eleanor did not look at them. She walked forward, and the crowd parted, and the slipper's whisper was a steady, seductive thrum in the bones of her ankle. *You belong here. You have always belonged here.*

She almost believed it.

The gown moved with her, the shadow-fabric rippling in colours that had no name, and the glyphs along the hem pulsed with a light that was not candlelight. She caught her reflection in a tall mirror framed in gilt and saw a woman she barely recognised: ash-blond hair swept up, deep-set blue eyes bright with

something that might have been triumph, the gown clinging to her form like poured night. She looked noble. She looked powerful.

She looked afraid.

The fear was there, in the mirror, a flicker at the corner of her own gaze. She blinked, and it was gone.

Prince Alaric stood at the far end of the ballroom, surrounded by a knot of courtiers and advisors, and he was bored. Eleanor could see it in the set of his shoulders, the way his kind, intelligent eyes drifted across the crowd without settling on anyone. He was tall, taller than she had imagined, and his formal coat was the deep blue of the royal house, trimmed in silver. He held a glass of wine he had not touched, and the woman speaking to him—a baroness, by the look of her tiara—was gesturing with a fan, and he was nodding without hearing.

Then his gaze found Eleanor.

The shift was almost imperceptible. His hand stilled on the stem of his glass. His shoulders straightened. The baroness kept speaking, but the Prince was no longer even pretending to listen. He was staring across the ballroom with the expression of a man who had been underwater for a very long time and had just broken the surface.

The slipper's resonance quickened against her skin.

Eleanor felt the warmth spread from her ankle, up through her belly, into her chest. The locket flared hot against her sternum, and she drew a breath that tasted of candle smoke and lilies and something else, something cold and ancient, like the air in the attic at Ashworth Grange. The Prince was walking toward her now, cutting through the crowd, and the crowd was parting for him as it had parted for her, and the distance between them closed with the inevitability of a tide.

He stopped before her. His eyes were grey, she saw now, the grey of winter sky, and they were fixed on her face with an intensity that made her skin prickle.

'I don't believe we've been introduced.' His voice was low, meant for her alone. 'I would have remembered.'

'I have only just arrived.' She heard her own voice as if from a distance. It was steady. Cool. A voice she did not quite recognise. 'The journey was longer than I anticipated.'

'Then you must be tired.' He extended his hand. 'Dance with me. The waltz will revive you.'

She placed her hand in his.

The contact was electric. The slipper's hum surged through her, and she felt the gown tighten around her waist, adjusting itself, and the glyphs along the hem flared once before settling. Prince Alaric led her onto the dance floor, and the other dancers drew back, and then they were alone in the centre of the ballroom, and the music swelled, and they began to move.

He was a good dancer. His hand was firm at the small of her back, and he guided her through the steps with an ease that spoke of years of practice. The waltz carried them across the marble, and the candles blurred into streaks of gold, and the faces of the court became a wash of colour and envy. Eleanor felt light. She felt free. The years of servitude, the scrubbing and the polishing and the cold attic and the stepmother's contempt—all of it fell away, and she was only this: a woman dancing with a prince, a woman of grace and beauty, a woman who belonged.

'You haven't told me your name,' the Prince murmured, his lips close to her ear.

'Eleanor.' She did not know why she gave her true name. The slipper had not prompted her. The word simply rose and escaped.

'Eleanor.' He repeated it as if tasting a rare wine. 'It suits you. Old. Noble.'

'It was my mother's choice.'

'She chose well.'

The waltz turned, and Eleanor caught a glimpse of Anastasia at the edge of the floor. Her stepsister's face was a mask of rigid courtesy, but her eyes were bright with fury. Drizella stood beside her, mouth still slightly open, and Eleanor felt a sharp, unexpected pleasure at the sight. She smiled, and the smile felt strange on her face, too wide, too knowing.

The slipper whispered approval.

They danced through three more waltzes. The Prince spoke of the castle, of the burden of court, of his father's expectations. Eleanor listened, and she replied with observations that surprised her—sharp, witty, edged with a confidence she had never possessed. The words came easily, as if the slipper were feeding them to her, and she let them flow. She made him laugh. She made him pause. She made him look at her with an expression that was no longer merely intrigued but something deeper, something hungry.

It was during the fourth dance that she saw the shadow.

They were passing a tall silver candelabrum, its polished base catching the candlelight and the dancers and the sweep of her gown, and in that fleeting reflection she saw it: her shadow, cast against the marble floor, moving a heartbeat behind her. She turned, and the shadow turned, but the delay was there, a fraction of a second, and the shape of it was wrong. It was longer. Sinuous. The arms were too thin, the fingers too long, and the head tilted at an angle that her own head had not.

Eleanor stumbled.

The Prince caught her, his hand tightening on her waist. 'Are you well?'

'A misstep.' She forced a smile. 'Forgive me.'

She looked again at the candelabrum. Her reflection was normal. Her shadow was normal. The music played on, and the dancers swirled, and there was nothing in the ballroom that did not belong.

But the cold dread that had been prickling beneath the surface of her euphoria now spread, a slow seep of ice water into her stomach. The slipper's hum had changed. It was still there, still seductive, but beneath it she could now detect a different note, a vibration that felt less like music and more like a chain being drawn tight.

'You're troubled,' the Prince said. He had not released her waist. 'Something has upset you.'

'I am only tired from the journey.'

'You are a poor liar.' He said it gently, almost admiringly. 'But I will not press. Come. There is a balcony overlooking the gardens. The air will do you good.'

He led her from the dance floor, and the crowd parted, and Eleanor felt the weight of a hundred gazes on her back. The Tremaine sisters were whispering behind their fans. Lady Tremaine was not present—she had not been invited, of course, her disgrace too complete—but her daughters had found their way here through some lingering connection, and their resentment was a palpable thing, a hot breath on the back of her neck.

The balcony was cold. The stone balustrade was slick with evening damp, and beyond it the gardens of Silverwood Castle fell away in terraces of sculpted hedge and marble fountain, silvered by a moon that hung low and fat above the treeline. The music from the ballroom was fainter here, the waltz reduced to a distant pulse.

Prince Alaric stood beside her, his hands resting on the balustrade. 'I dislike these affairs,' he said. 'The court is a machine for producing insincerity. Everyone wants something. Everyone performs.' He glanced at her. 'You don't perform.'

'Don't I?'

'No. You are...' He paused, searching for the word. 'Genuine. I can't explain it. There is something about you that feels true.'

The slipper warmed against her foot. The locket pulsed. Eleanor felt the gown shift around her shoulders, adjusting itself, and the whisper in her bones was a lullaby now, a promise of belonging, of power, of a life beyond the attic and the scrubbing and the cold. She looked at the Prince, at his kind, intelligent eyes, at the loneliness he wore like a second coat, and she felt a surge of something that might have been tenderness.

Or might have been hunger.

'I am exactly what I appear to be,' she said. 'Nothing more.'

'I don't believe that.' He turned to face her fully. 'I have been surrounded by masks my entire life. You are not wearing one. I would stake my title on it.'

The irony was a cold stone in her throat. She swallowed it down.

'You barely know me,' she said.

'Then let me remedy that.' He took her hand. 'Stay. After the ball. There are rooms prepared for guests. We can walk in the gardens tomorrow, and you can

tell me where you came from, and I can tell you how tired I am of being the kingdom's most eligible bachelor.'

The slipper's resonance quickened. *Yes. Stay. This is what you wanted. This is what you deserve.*

'I would like that,' Eleanor heard herself say.

The Prince smiled, and it was a genuine smile, the smile of a man who had not felt hope in a very long time and was surprised to find it still possible. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, and the warmth of his mouth against her skin sent a shiver through her that was not entirely pleasant.

Because in the polished surface of the silver balustrade, she saw it again.

Her shadow, cast by the moonlight against the stone floor of the balcony, was not her own. It was darker than the darkness around it, and it was moving, slowly, sinuously, like something swimming through oil. The head turned. The arms stretched. And for a moment—a single, frozen moment—the shadow had no face, only a void where features should have been, and the void was looking at her.

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, the shadow was normal. The Prince was still holding her hand. The music from the ballroom had changed to a gentler air, and the moon had risen higher, and everything was as it should be.

But the cold dread had settled into her bones now, and the slipper's hum was a reminder: *You are mine. You are becoming mine.*

'Are you cold?' The Prince frowned. 'You're trembling.'

'A little.' She drew her hand from his. 'Perhaps we should return inside.'

He nodded, but his eyes lingered on her face, and she saw the flicker of doubt there, the first faint crack in the enchantment. He sensed something. Not the truth, not yet, but the shape of it, the wrongness beneath the beauty. His obsession was taking root, but so was his unease, and the two would grow together, tangled and inseparable.

She walked back into the ballroom, and the Prince followed, and the crowd swallowed them both.

The night wore on. She danced again, and she laughed, and the slipper's dark magic coiled around her heart like a lover's arm. She was powerful. She was desired. She was free.

And in every reflective surface she passed, the silver candelabras, the polished marble, the windows that faced the moonlit gardens, her shadow moved a fraction too slow, and its shape was never quite right, and the void where its face should have been was waiting.

Midnight's First Breath

The waltz was dying.

Not the music itself—the orchestra still sawed and piped its way through the final bars, the melody tilting from romance into something thinner, a tune that had forgotten why it began. But the dance that had held the ballroom in its trance was fraying at the edges. Couples drifted apart, their steps less certain, their laughter too loud. The candles in the silver candelabras had burned low, and the mirrors that lined the Grand Ballroom now reflected more shadow than light.

Ella felt the change as a pressure behind her eyes. The slipper's resonance—that steady, reassuring thrum she had grown accustomed to—had sharpened into something with teeth. It gnawed at the bones of her foot, a glass jaw clamped tight around her arch. The whisper beneath the bone was no longer a promise. It was a command.

Stay.

The word arrived without sound, a pulse that travelled up her calf and settled in the hinge of her jaw. She found herself smiling, though the effort of it pulled at something raw behind her ribs.

'My lady?'

Prince Alaric stood before her, his hand still extended from their last dance. His eyes—those kind, intelligent eyes she had noticed in the garden what felt like years ago—searched her face with an intensity that bordered on hunger. The admiration she had seen there earlier had curdled into something more desperate, as though she were a glass of water and he had been crossing a desert.

'You seemed far away,' he said. 'Just now. I called your name twice.'

She had not heard him. She had heard only the slipper's call, the dark magic coiling around her thoughts like ivy on a crumbling wall. The glass heel pressed tighter, and the pain was almost sweet.

'Forgive me,' she said. 'The music, it carries one away.'

'Then let it carry you back to me.' He smiled, and the smile was genuine, and that made it worse. 'Stay,' he said. 'After the ball. Let me show you the castle gardens by moonlight. Let me—'

Forever. This is yours.

The words were not his. They rose from the slipper like bubbles from deep water, each one popping against the inside of her skull. *Yours. Yours. Yours.* The glass quickened, and the sentient gown, that impossible fabric of shadow and starlight, tightened around her waist as though drawing her into an embrace. She felt beautiful. She felt powerful. She felt the slipper's magic coil around her heart and squeeze, and the squeeze was love, and the love was a leash.

Alaric took her hand. His fingers were warm and dry and steady. 'Say you'll stay.'

She opened her mouth to answer, and the word that rose to her lips was yes. It would be so easy. The slipper's pulse thrummed in her ankle, and the gown breathed with her, and the mirrors showed her a woman who belonged in this glittering cage, who had earned her place among the gilded and the grand. She could let go. She could surrender to the dream, let it swallow her whole, and never scrub another floor or duck another blow.

Then the clock began to chime.

The first note was not a sound so much as a displacement of air, a low vibration that rolled through the marble floor and up through her remaining shoe. The chandeliers shivered. The candles guttered. And across the ballroom, near the great arched entrance, a figure in deep blue robes turned sharply, his brow furrowed, his eyes scanning the crowd.

Ella had not noticed him before. He was tall, grey-haired, his robes embroidered with silver thread that caught the light in patterns she almost recognised. A Royal Sorcerer, she had heard the courtiers whisper the title earlier, though she had paid it no mind. Now she watched as his gaze swept the room, lingering on the floor, on the walls, on the air itself as though he could see something invisible to everyone else.

His eyes found her feet.

The slipper screamed.

Not aloud, there was no sound that anyone else could hear, but the glass heel released a shriek that tore through her bones and set her teeth on edge. The resonance became a spike, a nail driven up through her heel and into the core of her. She stumbled, and Alaric caught her elbow.

'You're trembling,' he said. 'Are you unwell?'

'I'm fine.' The lie came out too fast. She pulled her arm free, and the movement was sharper than she intended. The slipper's voice, the call beneath sound, rose to a pitch that made her vision blur at the edges.

He knows. The sorcerer knows. Silence him.

The urge came from nowhere and everywhere at once. Her fingers curled. She imagined them around the sorcerer's throat, imagined the crackle of shadow magic leaping from her palms, imagined the satisfaction of watching him crumple. The desire was so vivid, so immediate, that she took a half-step toward him before she caught herself.

She stopped. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but the rhythm was wrong, it was not her own heartbeat she felt, but the slipper's, a foreign drum pounding in her chest. She looked down at her hands, half-expecting to see them wreathed in darkness. They were clean. Pale. Shaking.

'My lady.' Alaric's voice had changed. The desperation was still there, but now it was edged with something else. Doubt. 'Your eyes, for a moment, they seemed—'

She turned away before he could finish. The clock was still chiming, each note heavier than the last, and the sorcerer was moving toward her through the crowd. His expression was not hostile, not yet, but it was knowing, and that was worse. The nobles parted for him, their faces a blur of curiosity and confusion. Somewhere behind her, she heard Anastasia's shrill laugh cut short.

The slipper tightened. The pain was exquisite, a ring of fire around her ankle that made her want to weep and laugh at once. The shadow magic that had felt like liberation now wrapped around her throat, and the gown that had seemed a gift was a cage of silk and starlight, beautiful and absolute.

Run, the slipper whispered. *Or fight. But do not stand here. Do not let him touch you.*

She looked at Alaric. His face was a mask of concern, but beneath it she saw the prince who had been bored by every eligible maiden in the kingdom, who had found her mysterious and intoxicating, who had offered her a future she had never dared to imagine. She saw the man she might have loved, in another life, without the slipper's dark magic coiling between them like a serpent.

She saw the sorcerer, twenty paces away now, his lips moving in what might have been a spell or a prayer.

The clock struck its seventh chime. Eight more until midnight.

Ella pulled her hand from Alaric's grasp. The movement was violent, a wrench that left red marks on her wrist. He reached for her again, and she stepped back, and the slipper's pulse became a roar in her ears.

'I cannot stay,' she said.

'You can. You must. I—'

'I cannot.' Her voice cracked on the word, and the sound of it, the raw, human fear in her own throat, cut through the slipper's hum like a blade through fog. For one clear moment, she was not the slipper's thrall or the prince's obsession. She was Eleanor Vance, and she was nineteen years old, and she was terrified.

The sorcerer was ten paces away. His eyes had not left her feet. The air around him shimmered, and she felt the Ley Lines beneath the castle floor pulse in answer, a deep, resonant throb that matched the slipper's own rhythm. The ancient magic of the land recognised the dark magic of the Umbral Weave, and the recognition was a warning.

The clock struck eight.

Ella ran.

She gathered the skirts of the shadow-woven gown and fled toward the grand staircase, and the crowd that had parted for her arrival now scrambled to clear her path. The slipper's voice became a howl, a demand, a shriek of fury that clawed at the inside of her skull. *Stay. Fight. Claim what is yours.* The glass heel blazed with light, and the light was cold, and the cold was anger.

She did not look back. She could not. If she saw Alaric's face, if she saw the confusion and the hurt and the desperate, aching need, she would stop. And if she stopped, she would never leave. The slipper would see to that.

The staircase yawned before her, marble and shadow, leading down into darkness. The clock struck nine. The sorcerer shouted something, a word that might have been her name or a spell or both, and the stones beneath her feet trembled as though the castle itself was waking.

She ran, and the slipper burned, and the gown streamed behind her like a wound in the fabric of the night.

One Slipper Left Behind

The clock struck nine, and the sound was a physical blow that sent Eleanor stumbling against the cold stone wall of the staircase. The marble bit into her shoulder through the gown's strange fabric, and the slipper on her right foot flared with sudden heat, a spike of pain that made her gasp. She pushed off the wall and kept moving, her bare left hand skimming the banister as she descended into the thickening dark.

The sorcerer's shout had faded behind her, swallowed by the castle's depth, but the slipper's voice had not. It coiled through her bones now, no longer the seductive murmur of the ballroom but something sharper, a needle of sound that threaded through her thoughts and pulled. *You are mine. You cannot leave. You are mine.*

She reached a landing and paused, one hand pressed flat against the wall. The stone was damp, the chill seeping through her palm, and she focused on that sensation, on the grit beneath her fingers, on anything that was not the glass heel fused to her foot. The gown clung to her, the fabric that had felt like midnight mist now wrapping her ribs with a grip that tightened each time she tried to draw a full breath.

The staircase narrowed, the walls rougher here, the torches fewer. Servants' passages, she guessed, the hidden veins of the castle that carried footmen and maids between floors without troubling the nobility. She knew these corridors without knowing them, the way a servant always knows the back stairs, the low doorways, the smell of old tallow and stone dust.

A door stood ajar at the bottom of the stairs, and she pushed through it into a long, dim hallway lined with barrels and crates. The air smelled of wine and cured meat. A cellar, then, or a buttery. She moved quickly, the single slipper clicking against the flagstones, the bare sole of her left foot slapping cold stone. She had lost the other shoe somewhere on the staircase, a trivial thing she could not stop to mourn.

The slipper's whisper sharpened. *Stop. Turn back. You will regret this.*

Eleanor pressed her lips together and kept walking. The gown's hem dragged through something wet, and she did not look down to see what it was.

The corridor ended at a heavy door banded with iron, and she shouldered it open onto the castle's lower courtyard. The night air hit her face, cold and damp, carrying the scent of wet stone and the distant tang of the moors. She had never been this far from the Grange, not truly, not in all her nineteen years, and the vastness of the sky above the courtyard made her pause. The stars were out, hard and bright, and the moon hung low over the Blackfen moors like a silver coin balanced on a table's edge.

The courtyard was empty, the cobbles slick with recent rain. Across the open space, the outer gatehouse loomed, its portcullis raised, the guard station lit by

a single lantern. Two guards stood at the gate, their halberds crossed in lazy diagonals, their conversation a low murmur she could not quite hear.

She stepped out of the doorway and onto the cobbles, and the slipper on her left foot screamed.

Not a sound in her ears but a vibration that climbed her leg and settled in her spine, a shriek of glass and shadow that buckled her knee. She caught herself on a mounting block, the stone rough under her palms, and the gown's fabric tightened across her back like a second skin drawn too small. The slipper was fighting her now, its magic coiling up through her calf, her thigh, her hip, trying to turn her around, to march her back up the stairs and into the ballroom and into the arms of the prince who was not her prince, who was only a boy enchanted by a thing that wore her face.

You are nothing without me, the slipper hissed. *A drudge. A scullery girl. I made you beautiful. I made you seen.*

Eleanor's throat closed. The words hooked into something soft inside her, something that had believed, for one glittering hour, that she could be more than Ashworth Grange's servant. The slipper knew exactly where to press.

She forced her right leg forward. The slipper resisted, the glass heel dragging against the cobbles with a sound like a knife on a whetstone. Another step. Another. The guards at the gate had not noticed her yet, their attention fixed on something beyond the gatehouse, and she angled her path toward the shadow of the curtain wall, where the darkness lay thickest.

Halfway across the courtyard, the slipper changed tactics.

The glass grew warm, then hot, then searing, and Eleanor bit down on her lip so hard she tasted blood. The heat was not the clean burn of a flame but something wet and alive, a heat that pulsed like a fever, like infection. The slipper was fusing to her foot, the glass softening and reshaping, and she could feel it spreading upward, a cold fire that was somehow both ice and agony.

She reached the wall and pressed her back against the stone, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. The gown's fabric had gone rigid across her shoulders, and when she tried to flex her fingers, she found them slow to respond, as though her body was forgetting how to obey her.

You see? the slipper crooned. *You cannot leave. You are already mine.*

The guards laughed at something, a sudden bark of sound that made her flinch. One of them shifted his halberd, and the lantern light caught the edge of his helm, a brief glint of brass. They had not seen her. Not yet.

Eleanor looked down at her feet. The right slipper was gone, lost somewhere on the staircase, and she could not remember when it had fallen. The left slipper remained, its glass now dark as smoked quartz, pulsing with a sullen inner light. The skin of her ankle above it was pale and smooth, but the veins beneath the surface ran black, a web of shadow spreading upward like ink in water.

She had to get the slipper off. She had to run. She had to—

The slipper's voice shifted, and for the first time, it sounded almost sad. *Without me, you are only Eleanor. The drudge. The forgotten. Is that what you want? To go back to the ashes and the cold attic and the silence?*

She bent down and hooked her fingers around the heel of the slipper, and the glass burned her palm. She pulled, and the slipper pulled back, and the pain was so sudden and so vast that her vision went white. She heard herself make a sound, a small, choked cry, and the guards at the gate stopped talking.

'Who goes there?'

The voice was sharp, professional. A soldier's voice.

Eleanor straightened, her hand still clutching the slipper, her heart a frantic drum against her ribs. The guards were looking toward the shadows where she stood, and one of them had lifted his lantern, the light swinging in a slow arc across the courtyard.

She ran.

The slipper fought her every step of the way, dragging at her foot like a weight, like a chain, and the gown's hem tangled around her ankles, and the web of shadow crept past her knee and into her thigh, cold and crawling. But she ran, and the gatehouse blurred past her, and the guards shouted something she did not hear, and then the cobbles gave way to gravel and the gravel gave way to grass and the grass gave way to the open moor.

The fog swallowed her whole.

The mist was thick and wet, and it muffled the world, dampened the guards' shouts, softened the slipper's furious keening. Eleanor stumbled through the dark, her bare left foot sinking into cold mud, her right foot still encased in glass that pulsed with a light that was not light, a glow that seemed to drink the darkness rather than dispel it. The Blackfen moors stretched before her, trackless and vast, and she had no idea where she was going, only that she had to keep moving, had to put distance between herself and the castle and the sorcerer and the prince who had looked at her as though she were the answer to a question he had been asking his whole life.

The ground rose, and she climbed it, her lungs burning, her legs shaking. At the top of the rise, she turned and looked back.

Silverwood Castle stood against the night sky, its towers and battlements limned in moonlight, its windows glowing with the warmth of the ball that still continued within. The Grand Ballroom blazed brightest of all, a beacon of golden light that seemed impossibly distant, impossibly beautiful. She had been there. She had danced there. It already felt like a story she had told herself, a lie she had wanted to believe.

On the steps of the castle, something glinted. A single point of light, cold and blue, like a star that had fallen to earth and lodged between the stones.

The glass slipper. The right one. It lay on the third step from the bottom, perfect and whole, shimmering with the same sullen glow that pulsed through the slipper

still fused to her foot. The Shadow Slipper had shattered, she remembered that much, the glass exploding into a thousand fragments that had vanished before they hit the ground. But here it was, remade, waiting on the steps like a question left for someone else to answer.

The slipper on her left foot tightened, and the shadow-web crept another inch up her thigh.

He will find it, the slipper whispered. *He will search for you. He will bring you back. And when he does, you will be mine, and I will be yours, and we will never be parted again.*

Eleanor turned away from the castle and walked into the fog.

The moors were not silent. The wind moved through the heather with a sound like breathing, and somewhere in the distance, a curlew cried out, a lonely, looping note that hung in the air and faded. The ground was soft underfoot, treacherous, and more than once she stumbled, catching herself on tussocks of coarse grass that cut her palms. The slipper's glow was the only light, a cold luminescence that made the fog seem thicker, closer, as though the mist itself was pressing in to see her.

She walked for what felt like hours, though the moon had barely moved, and the cold had seeped so deep into her bones that she could no longer tell where the chill of the night ended and the chill of the slipper began. The shadow-web had reached her hip now, and her right leg moved with a slight delay, as though something else was deciding when to lift it and when to set it down.

She stopped walking.

The fog had thinned enough that she could see the ground before her, a stretch of boggy ground dotted with cotton grass that gleamed pale in the darkness. Beyond it, the moor rose again, and on the crest of that rise, a single light burned. Not the cold blue of the slipper's glow but warm and yellow, a lantern in a window.

A cottage. Or a shepherd's hut. Or something else entirely.

Eleanor stood in the dark, one foot bare and one foot encased in glass that whispered venomous promises, and looked at the light. The slipper's voice had gone quiet, but its presence was still there, a pressure at the base of her skull, a weight in her chest. It was waiting. It was always waiting.

The wind shifted, and the fog curled around her ankles, and the light on the hill did not waver.

She began to walk toward it, the cursed slipper dragging at her foot, the shadow-web pulsing with every beat of her heart. Behind her, across the moor, the castle's lights still burned, and on the cold stone steps, a single glass slipper waited for the dawn.

The Prince's Hunt Begins

The morning sun did nothing to warm the throne room. Light fell in pale shafts through the high windows, illuminating motes of dust that drifted like ash through the still air. Prince Alaric stood before his father's throne, the velvet cushion held in his hands as though it were a wounded bird. Upon it rested the glass slipper, catching the light in ways that seemed wrong for something so delicate—the refractions bending at angles that made the eyes slide away.

His father, the King, had not spoken for a long moment. The courtiers flanking the walls held their breath. The Royal Sorcerer, grey-haired and silent, stood apart near a pillar, his deep blue robes pooling around his feet like shadowed water. He had said nothing since the previous night, but his presence unsettled Alaric in ways he could not name.

'You would mobilise the entire guard,' the King said, his voice flat, 'for a woman whose name you do not know.'

Alaric's jaw tightened. 'I know her face. I know the sound of her voice. I know that this slipper—' he lifted the cushion slightly, '—belongs to her alone.'

'It is a shoe, Alaric.'

'It is a promise.'

The King leaned back in his throne, his fingers drumming once against the carved armrest. The sound echoed in the vaulted space. 'You would drag the kingdom apart for a promise.'

Alaric looked down at the slipper. The glass caught the light again, and for an instant he could have sworn he heard the faintest resonance, a note just below hearing, like the memory of music. It stirred something in his chest—longing, certainty, a hunger he could not name. His fingers tightened on the cushion.

'I would,' he said.

The court stirred. Someone coughed. The King studied his son for a long moment, and Alaric met his gaze without flinching. The older man's eyes narrowed, reading something in the prince's face that made him pause.

'You are not yourself,' the King said quietly.

'I have never been more myself.'

The lie came easily. Alaric did not know it was a lie. He believed it with every fibre of his being, even as the slipper's cold weight seemed to press against his palms through the cushion, even as his thoughts circled back to the girl with the midnight gown and the eyes that had flickered with something dark. He had seen it. He remembered seeing it. But the memory was already softening, blurring at the edges, becoming something else—a trick of the candlelight, a shadow cast by the chandeliers, nothing more.

The King exhaled slowly. 'Then go. Find your mysterious dancer. But do not let this obsession consume you.'

Alaric bowed, the cushion still clutched against his chest, and turned on his heel. The courtiers parted before him. The Royal Sorcerer's gaze followed him all the way to the doors.

Outside, in the corridor, the captain of the guard awaited. Alaric gave the order without hesitation. 'Every noble house in Eldoria. Begin with the estates nearest the moor. Take the slipper—' he hesitated, then thrust the cushion toward the man, '—and do not return until you have found her.'

The captain took the cushion with careful hands. 'And if the lady is not among the nobility, Your Highness?'

Alaric stopped. The question hung in the air. He had not considered it—the idea that she might not be noble-born. But the gown, the bearing, the way she had moved through the ballroom as though she owned it... no. She was noble. She had to be.

'She will be,' he said. 'Begin the search.'

He walked away before the captain could ask anything else. His boots rang on the stone floor, and the sound was too loud, too harsh, grating against the memory of the waltz. He could still feel her hand in his, the lightness of her steps, the way the gown had shifted around her like living shadow. He could not remember her name. He had never learned it. But he remembered the way she had looked at him, and the way she had fled, and the single slipper left behind like a promise or a taunt.

He spent the morning in his chambers, pacing. Maps of the kingdom lay spread across his desk, marked with pins and notes. He questioned the guards who had been stationed at the gates. Yes, they had seen a woman running. No, they had not stopped her. Yes, she had been limping. No, they had not seen her face. The reports were fragments, useless and maddening. He dismissed them all and sat alone, staring at the maps.

By midday, the first reports came back. The guards had visited three noble houses. Three hopeful young women had tried to force their feet into the slipper. Three failures. Alaric received each report with a tightening knot in his chest. The slipper would not yield. It held its shape, its cold perfection, refusing every foot that was not hers.

He should have found this frustrating. Instead, he found it reassuring. The slipper knew. The slipper would not be deceived. It was the one true test, the one true measure, and it would find her when no one else could.

By late afternoon, the knot had become a constant pressure against his ribs. The reports came faster now—four more houses, five, six. Each failure was a small wound, but also a vindication. She was not among them. She was unique. She was the only one. He clung to that thought as the hours dragged on.

He ate nothing. He barely drank. When a servant brought wine, he waved it away without looking up from the maps. His finger traced the roads leading from the castle, the estates clustered near the capital, the distant holdings that

bordered the moor. She had run toward the moor. He was certain of it. The guards had seen her disappear into the fog. But the moor was vast, and the houses there were few, and none of them had reported a missing daughter.

As dusk began to settle, he summoned the captain again. The man looked tired, his uniform dust-stained from a day of riding. 'We have covered the eastern and southern estates, Your Highness. Tomorrow we will begin the northern holdings.'

'And the western?'

The captain hesitated. 'There is only one estate of note in the western moor, Your Highness. Ashworth Grange. The Tremaine household.'

Alaric's finger stopped on the map. Ashworth Grange. The name was vaguely familiar—a minor noble house, fallen on hard times, if he recalled correctly. A widow and her daughters. He had never met them. They had been invited to the ball, of course, as all eligible maidens had been. He did not remember seeing them there. But then, he had not been looking for them.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'Send the guard to Ashworth Grange.'

The captain nodded and withdrew. Alaric remained at his desk, staring at the map. The candle at his elbow had burned low, wax pooling in the holder. Outside, the sky was darkening, the last light fading behind the towers of Silverwood. The castle settled into its evening quiet, and Alaric sat alone with his maps and his certainty.

He did not notice the way his thoughts circled, the way they always returned to the slipper. He did not notice the hunger in his own chest, the way it had stopped feeling like love and started feeling like need. He did not notice the cold that seeped from the glass, even now, even from across the castle where the guards kept it wrapped in velvet. He noticed only the absence of her, and the absolute conviction that finding her would make everything right.

In his chambers, alone, he opened the velvet wrapping and lifted the slipper from its cushion. The glass was cool against his palms, smooth and unyielding. He turned it over in his hands, watching the light catch in its depths. For a moment, he thought he saw something move within, a curl of shadow, a whisper of darkness. But then it was gone, and the slipper was just a slipper, and he was just a man holding a piece of glass.

He wrapped it again and placed it on his bedside table. The glass seemed to pulse once, a faint thrum that he felt rather than heard. He told himself it was his own heartbeat, his own exhaustion. He climbed into bed and closed his eyes, and the slipper sat beside him in the dark, patient and waiting.

Tomorrow, he would send the guard to Ashworth Grange. Tomorrow, he would be one step closer to finding her. Tonight, he would sleep, and dream of a woman whose name he did not know, whose face he could barely recall, whose absence felt like a wound that only she could heal.

The slipper rested on the table, and in the silence of the royal chambers, it seemed to hum with something that was not sound, a resonance that threaded through the dark like a promise, or a snare, or both.

And Alaric slept, and did not dream, and woke with the cold glass still waiting beside him, patient as hunger, patient as the Umbral Weave itself.

Tremaine's Gambit

The royal guard arrived at Ashworth Grange in the late afternoon, three men on horseback leading a fourth horse bearing the kingdom's crest upon its saddlecloth. Lady Tremaine spotted them from the upstairs window, her gaunt fingers curling against the sill. The slipper. They had brought the slipper.

She swept down the staircase with a speed that belied her years, her heels striking the worn wood like a hammer on an anvil. 'Anastasia! Drizella! The drawing-room, this instant!'

Her daughters stumbled in from the kitchen, Anastasia clutching a half-eaten biscuit, Drizella wiping flour from her bodice. Neither had time to protest before their mother descended upon them, tugging at sleeves and smoothing hair, her sharp fingers pinching colour into their cheeks.

'The royal guard is at our door,' Lady Tremaine hissed, her voice a blade wrapped in silk. 'They carry the slipper. The prince's slipper. And one of you will fit it.'

Drizella's face split into a grin. 'The prince's slipper? Mother, do you mean—'

'I mean you will compose yourself and act the part of a lady, not a fishwife at market.' Lady Tremaine straightened Drizella's collar with a jerk. 'You will be gracious. You will be elegant. And you will fit that slipper if I have to break every bone in your foot to make it so.'

Anastasia paled. 'Mother, surely—'

'Silence.'

Ella stood in the corner of the drawing-room, half-hidden by the heavy velvet curtain she had been ordered to mend three days ago. The mending lay unfinished in her lap, needle still threaded, forgotten. The slipper on her left foot had begun to hum the moment the guards dismounted in the yard. She felt it now, a vibration that travelled up through the bones of her leg, settling somewhere behind her knee like a purring cat. The sensation was not unpleasant. That was what frightened her most.

The glass on her foot was warm. Warmer than skin. Warmer than blood.

She pressed her back against the wall and tried to make herself small.

The front door opened. Lady Tremaine's voice rose in practised welcome, honeyed and false, as she ushered the guards into the drawing-room. There were two of them, both wearing the silver-and-blue livery of the Royal House. The taller one carried a velvet cushion, and upon it rested the glass slipper.

Ella's breath seized. Not her slipper — the other one. The one she had lost on the staircase. It gleamed on the cushion with a light that seemed to come from within, cold and patient. Waiting.

'Her Royal Highness Prince Alaric has commanded that every maiden of eligible station try this slipper,' the tall guard announced. His voice was flat with

repetition. 'Should the slipper fit, she shall be taken to Silverwood Castle for an audience with the prince himself.'

Lady Tremaine clasped her hands together, a gesture of maternal delight that did not reach her eyes. 'My daughters shall be honoured to comply. Anastasia, Drizella — step forward.'

Drizella went first. She shoved her foot toward the guard with the eagerness of a hound scenting meat, her face flushed with anticipation. The guard knelt, the glass slipper held steady. Drizella's toes touched the rim.

The slipper did not yield. It did not stretch. It did not warm.

It bit.

Drizella screamed. The sound tore through the drawing-room, high and ragged, as the glass rim dug into her flesh. She wrenched her foot back, stumbling into a side table and sending a porcelain vase crashing to the floor. Her toes were unmarked — no blood, no bruise — but she clutched her foot as though it had been seared.

'It burned me!' Drizella's voice cracked. 'Mother, it burned!'

Lady Tremaine's smile did not waver, though a muscle in her jaw jumped. 'Nonsense. Anastasia, you try.'

Anastasia approached the slipper as though it were a serpent. She lowered herself onto the settee with trembling grace, extending her foot with the delicacy of a court lady. The guard, expression unchanged, offered the slipper.

Her toes entered. The glass accepted her foot for the span of a heartbeat. Then Anastasia's face contorted. She bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood, but a whimper escaped anyway, thin and keening. Her foot spasmed, and the slipper rejected her with a force that knocked her backward into the cushions.

'I can't,' she gasped. 'Mother, please, I can't—'

'Try again.' Lady Tremaine's voice had lost its honey. 'Drizella, sit down. You will try again as well.'

The guard cleared his throat. 'Madam, if the slipper does not fit—'

'It will fit.'

Ella watched from her corner, the needle cold between her fingers. The slipper on her own foot had grown very still. It was listening. She was certain of it now — the glass was listening, and it was pleased.

Drizella tried a second time. The scream that followed brought the housemaid running from the kitchen before a look from Lady Tremaine sent her scuttling back. Drizella's foot would not enter past the toes. The slipper's rim glowed faintly each time she pushed, and each time she pulled away with a cry, as though the glass had turned to ice, or fire, or both at once.

Anastasia's second attempt ended with her in tears, her carefully arranged hair coming loose around her shoulders. She cradled her foot and rocked on the settee, whispering something that might have been a prayer.

Lady Tremaine seized the slipper from the guard's cushion. 'Let me.'

'Madam, protocol requires—'

'Protocol requires that my daughters be given every opportunity.' She knelt before Drizella, her gaunt face inches from her daughter's trembling foot. 'Hold still.'

'Mother, please, it hurts—'

'Hold. Still.'

The slipper resisted Lady Tremaine's hand. Ella saw it clearly — the glass did not merely refuse to accommodate Drizella's foot; it actively repelled her. The air around the slipper shimmered, and the light in the drawing-room dimmed for half a breath. The corruption in the glass was not passive. It was choosing.

Drizella's scream this time was not a yelp but a wail, the sound of something tearing that should not tear. She collapsed off the chair onto the floor, and Lady Tremaine did not move to help her. She was staring at the slipper with an expression that made Ella's stomach clench.

It was not fury. It was hunger.

'Anastasia.' Lady Tremaine's voice was soft now, and that softness was worse than the shouting. 'Give me your foot.'

'Mother, I can't—'

'Your foot.'

Anastasia extended her leg as though offering it to the headsman. Lady Tremaine's grip on her daughter's ankle was white-knuckled. She guided the foot toward the slipper, and the glass began to glow before Anastasia's toes even touched the rim.

The rejection was violent. Anastasia was thrown backward, her head striking the arm of the settee. The slipper remained in Lady Tremaine's hand, unmarked, unmoved, humming with a sound that was not sound.

The tall guard stepped forward. 'Madam, I must insist. If there are no other maidens in this household, we shall take our leave.'

Lady Tremaine rose to her feet. Her daughters were weeping on the floor behind her, but she did not glance at them. Her eyes were fixed on the slipper, and Ella saw something shift in her stepmother's face, a calculation, a decision, a door closing on whatever mercy might have remained.

'There are no other maidens,' Lady Tremaine said. 'My household is as you see.'

Ella's slipper pulsed against her foot. A warning. A reminder. A promise.

She did not move. She did not speak. The curtain hid her, and she let it.

The guard nodded, replaced the slipper on its cushion, and turned toward the door. His partner followed. Lady Tremaine watched them go, and her hands were trembling, not with fear, but with the effort of restraint. The slipper had shown her something. It had shown her power.

Ella knew that look. She had worn it herself, the first night the glass had whispered to her.

Drizella sobbed on the carpet. Anastasia lay still, breathing shallowly. The front door closed behind the guards, and the sound of hoofbeats faded down the lane. Still Lady Tremaine did not move. She stood in the centre of the drawing-room, staring at the space where the slipper had been, and her lips moved silently, forming words that might have been a plan.

The slipper on Ella's foot grew warm. Not the gentle warmth of comfort, but the insistent heat of possession. She pressed her palm against the wall and felt the hum travel up through the floorboards, through the bones of the old house, through the corruption that was spreading beneath her skin like ink through water.

She understood now. The slipper had not rejected her stepsisters because they were unworthy. It had rejected them because it already had what it wanted.

It had her.

And Lady Tremaine, standing amid the wreckage of her ambitions, had just begun to understand what the slipper could do. Her eyes were not on her weeping daughters. They were on the window, and the road beyond, and the distant towers of Silverwood Castle visible on the horizon.

Ella slipped out of the drawing-room and climbed the stairs to the attic, one hand pressed against the wall for balance. The slipper's heat had spread to her knee now. She could feel it in the joint, a steady throb that matched the rhythm of her pulse. Or perhaps her pulse had begun to match the slipper.

She could no longer tell the difference.

She Steps Forward

The royal guard had packed the velvet cushion away. The captain, a weathered man with a jaw set from too many wasted afternoons, had already motioned to his men. Lady Tremaine stood in the centre of the front chamber, her hands clasped so tightly the knuckles showed white through the skin. Drizella was still weeping on the settee, her foot wrapped in a strip of linen where the glass heel had seared the arch. Anastasia sat beside her sister, not touching her, staring at the floor with a blankness that spoke of humiliation so complete it had passed into numbness.

Ella watched from the alcove near the servants' door. The Shadow Slipper on her left foot had gone very still. Not silent—the glass resonance had simply dropped below the threshold of hearing, a vibration that registered in her molars and the fine bones of her ankle rather than her ears. She had stood in this alcove for the better part of an hour, watching her stepsisters fail. She had felt the enchanted sole warm against her instep each time the other slipper rejected a Tremaine foot, a pulse of something that was not quite satisfaction and not quite hunger.

Lady Tremaine's voice cut through the room. 'There are no other maidens in this household.'

The captain paused with his hand on the door-latch. 'You are certain, madam.'

'Quite certain.' Her stepmother's tone was smooth as polished silver, but Ella caught the tremor beneath it. Not fear. Fury. Lady Tremaine had watched her daughters humiliated, and the ambition that had burned in her since the messenger first arrived had curdled into something volatile.

Ella stepped forward.

She did not plan it. The Shadow Slipper did not compel her—not in any way she could name. But the glass heel on her foot had grown suddenly, radiantly warm, and her legs had carried her out of the alcove before she had formed the thought to move. Her ash-blond hair, usually scraped back into a knot, had come loose during the hour of watching. It fell across her shoulders in a way that caught the late-afternoon light from the tall windows, pale as winter wheat. Her deep-set blue eyes held a stillness that had not been there before the ball at Silverwood Castle.

Lady Tremaine saw her first. The gasp that escaped her was not theatrical. It was the sound of a woman whose careful plans had just encountered an element she had not accounted for. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again. The fury in her face warred with something sharper: calculation.

'You,' she breathed.

Ella did not answer. She walked across the front chamber with a grace that was not her own, her steps silent on the floorboards. The captain had turned back

from the door. His men, two young soldiers with the castle livery still stiff on their shoulders, exchanged a glance.

'I believe,' Ella said, and her voice was quiet but it carried, 'the proclamation said every maiden.'

Drizella looked up from the settee. Her face, blotched and swollen from crying, twisted with disbelief. 'She is not a maiden of this house. She is a servant.'

'I am Eleanor Vance,' Ella said. 'Daughter of Lord Vance, whose estate this was before his death. I have lived in this house since I was a child. I am as much a maiden of this household as your daughters.'

The words came out steady. Inside, her pulse had begun to match the bone-deep thrum of the cursed heel, and she could not tell which was driving which. The glass shoe on her left foot had been silent all morning, but now it woke. The warmth spread upward, past her knee, settling in the joint of her hip.

The captain looked from Ella to Lady Tremaine. 'Is this true?'

Lady Tremaine's expression had settled into something fixed and terrible. The calculation was complete. Ella saw it happen: the shift behind her stepmother's eyes as ambition reasserted itself over fury. If the servant girl could fit the slipper—if she could be the one the Prince sought—then Lady Tremaine could still claim proximity to power. She could still climb.

'It is true,' Lady Tremaine said. 'Eleanor is Lord Vance's daughter.' She paused, and the smile she forced was a masterwork of self-interest dressed as maternal pride. 'She may try the slipper.'

Anastasia made a small sound. Drizella's mouth fell open. Neither sister spoke. The humiliation of the past hour had stripped them of whatever authority they had once wielded in this house.

The captain hesitated. Then he nodded to one of his men, who drew the glass slipper from its velvet wrappings and placed it on the cushion. The slipper caught the light from the windows, and for a moment it seemed to glow with a radiance that was not reflection. The captain looked at Ella. 'You understand that the Prince's command is absolute. If the slipper fits—'

'I understand.'

She crossed the remaining distance to the cushion. Her left foot, already encased in its own glass heel, throbbed in time with the one on the cushion. The two slippers were calling to each other. She could feel it now, a pull that was almost gravitational, a resonance that made the air between them feel thick and charged.

She sat. The chair was the same one Drizella had occupied minutes earlier, still warm from her stepsister's body. Ella lifted her right foot and removed her worn shoe. The sole was thin as paper, nearly worn through. She had walked miles in these shoes, scrubbing floors and hauling water and climbing the attic stairs. They had been resoled twice with leather cut from an old saddle.

She slid her foot into the glass slipper.

It did not resist. It did not burn. The glass was cool against her skin for the briefest moment, and then it warmed, and then it fit—exactly, perfectly, as though the slipper had been poured around her foot while still molten. The glass heel settled against her arch with an intimacy that was almost obscene.

Anastasia made another sound, this one sharper. Drizella's weeping had stopped entirely. The silence in the front chamber was absolute.

The captain stared. His men stared. Lady Tremaine's forced smile had frozen on her face, and beneath it something dark and hungry was moving, the same hunger that had driven her to stare toward Silverwood Castle the night before, dreaming of power she could touch through a glass slipper.

The door opened.

Prince Alaric entered with the suddenness of a man who had been waiting in the corridor, listening. His tall frame filled the doorway, and his intelligent eyes—usually kind, usually measured—were bright with a hope that bordered on desperation. He had not slept. Ella could see it in the shadows beneath his eyes, the slight pallor beneath the royal composure. He had been hunting for days, chasing a memory of a girl in a midnight-blue gown, and the hunt had worn him thin.

He saw her. He saw the slipper on her foot.

'It is you,' he said. His voice cracked on the last word. Joy flooded his face, and for a moment he was not a prince but simply a young man who had found what he had been searching for. He took a step toward her, his hand outstretched.

Behind him, in the doorway, the Royal Sorcerer went very still.

The sorcerer was a tall man, grey-haired, dressed in deep blue robes that pooled around his feet like shadowed water. His eyes, which had been calm throughout the long afternoon of rejections, had widened. His face, usually impassive, had gone slack with something that was not surprise. It was recognition. And it was dread.

Ella saw the sorcerer's gaze drop to her feet. Both of them. The left foot, hidden beneath her worn skirt, encased in its own glass heel. The right foot, now fitted with its twin. The pair was complete. The matched set glowed with a light that did not belong to the afternoon sun.

The sorcerer's hand moved, a small gesture, a warding sign that was old before the kingdom had a name. His lips shaped a word that Ella could not hear. The air in the front chamber dropped in temperature, a sudden chill that made Drizella shiver on the settee and Anastasia wrap her arms around herself. No one else seemed to notice. The captain was staring at the slipper. Lady Tremaine was staring at the Prince. The soldiers were staring at the girl who had been a servant and was now something else.

But the sorcerer had felt it. The dark magic that pulsed from the glass heels, the foul resonance that only he seemed to perceive. He looked at Ella, and his

expression was not unkind. It was the look of a man who had just found a bomb ticking in a crowded room.

Prince Alaric noticed none of this. He crossed the distance to Ella in three strides, and he took her hands in his, and he looked at her with a relief so profound it was almost painful. 'I have been searching for you,' he said. 'Since the ball. I have thought of nothing else.'

Ella looked up at him. The Shadow Slipper on her left foot was warm and satisfied, a contented hum that had spread now to her waist. It was pleased. She could feel its pleasure as a kind of pressure in her chest, a sense of arrival, of homecoming. The slipper had wanted this. It had been waiting for this.

She should have felt joy. The Prince was holding her hands. He was looking at her as though she were the answer to a question he had been asking all his life. The freedom she had yearned for, the escape from Ashworth Grange, the life she had dreamed of while scrubbing floors and hauling water, all of it was within reach.

But the sorcerer was still watching her with those calm, horrified eyes. And the slipper was warm against her right foot now, a warmth that was spreading, and she could no longer tell whether the satisfaction she felt was her own.

Lady Tremaine stepped forward. Her voice was honeyed, triumphant. 'Your Highness,' she said, 'I am so pleased that my stepdaughter has fulfilled the proclamation.'

Prince Alaric did not look at her. He was still holding Ella's hands. 'You will come to the castle,' he said. 'Tonight. We will announce the betrothal immediately.'

The sorcerer made a small sound. It was not a word. It was the kind of sound a man makes when he is trying very hard not to say something that would shatter the peace of a room. The chill in the air deepened, and Ella felt the glass heel on her left foot pulse once, a warning.

The sorcerer knew. The slipper knew that the sorcerer knew. And the slipper was not afraid. It was patient. It had waited a long time for this moment, and it could wait a little longer.

Ella looked at the Prince's hopeful face, and she smiled. The smile felt like her own. She could not have said, if asked, whether it truly was.

The Sorcerer's Hand

The drawing-room held its silence like a wound too deep to close.

Lord Alaric, the Royal Sorcerer, had not moved from the doorway. His hand remained raised, the warding gesture still frozen mid-air, though the chill it had summoned now clung to the furniture and the drapes and the skin of everyone present. Ella saw the way his grey eyes tracked downward, past her face, past the folds of her servant's dress, to her feet. To the matched pair of glass slippers that glowed with a light that did not belong to any candle in the room.

Prince Alaric stepped closer to her, his hand reaching for hers. 'You see?' he said, his voice bright with a joy that had not yet caught up to the room's new temperature. 'The slipper fits. It has found its match.' He turned to the sorcerer, his brow creasing only slightly. 'Lord Alaric, what troubles you? The search is over.'

'Step away from her, Your Highness.' The sorcerer's voice was low, a blade wrapped in velvet. 'Step away from the girl, and do not touch the glass.'

Ella felt the slippers pulse against her soles, a double beat that matched the rhythm already thrumming through her calves and thighs. The warmth that had pooled in her knees earlier had spread, climbing higher, threading through her like a second circulatory system. She could feel the glass soles flex with her arches, could feel the way they gripped the floorboards as though they had grown roots into the wood.

'Lord Alaric,' Lady Tremaine began, stepping forward with a smile that had calcified into something hard and bright. 'Surely this is a moment for celebration. My stepdaughter has been found by her prince.'

The sorcerer did not look at her. His gaze remained on Ella's feet. 'The glass is singing,' he said. 'Can none of you hear it?'

Ella could hear it. She had been hearing it since the second slipper had sealed itself to her foot, a note just below the register of normal sound, a frequency that made her teeth ache and her thoughts blur at the edges. The slipper had been humming to her for hours, and now it was humming to its twin, and the harmony was building toward something she could not name.

Prince Alaric's hand paused an inch from her fingers. 'Singing?'

'It is not a gift.' Lord Alaric stepped into the room proper, his deep blue robes sweeping the floor. The fabric moved with a weight that had nothing to do with cloth, and the air around him shimmered faintly, as though he walked through a heat haze only he could see. 'It is a tether. A binding. The glass is not of this world, Your Highness. It belongs to the Umbral Weave.'

Lady Tremaine's smile did not falter, but something behind her eyes shifted, a door opening onto a room that had been locked for a very long time. 'The Umbral Weave,' she repeated, her voice soft with an interest that made Ella's stomach tighten. 'How fascinating.'

'Mother,' Anastasia said, her voice thin and reedy. 'What does he mean?'

'Quiet, girl.' Lady Tremaine did not look at her daughter. Her eyes were fixed on the sorcerer now, and on the glass slippers, and on the space between them where the air had begun to warp and shimmer.

Ella tried to step back, but the slippers held her. Not physically—her feet could move, she could walk, she could run—but the glass had fused to her skin with a grip that was more than physical. It was a grip of intention, of purpose, of a will that was not her own. The slipper did not want her to retreat. The slipper wanted her to stand her ground.

Lord Alaric crossed the room in three long strides. His hand reached for her foot, fingers outstretched, and the air around his palm crackled with a blue-white light that smelled of ozone and burnt sugar.

'Do not—' he began.

The Shadow Slipper struck before he could finish.

It was not a light. It was not a sound. It was a darkness that moved like a living thing, a tendril of shadow that erupted from the glass on Ella's left foot with a speed that made the candles gutter and the fire in the hearth flatten against its grate. The tendril coiled around Lord Alaric's arm from wrist to elbow, and where it touched, his robes smoked and his flesh sizzled with a cold so absolute it burned.

The sorcerer cried out. It was not a scream—the man had too much discipline for that—but it was a sound of genuine pain, wrenched from somewhere deep in his chest. He staggered back, his arm still extended, and the shadow released him only when he had retreated far enough that his fingers could no longer reach the glass.

The room fell into a silence that was louder than any scream.

Drizella was the first to make a sound, a high, keening whimper that she stifled with both hands. Anastasia had gone the colour of old milk. Lady Tremaine stood perfectly still, her eyes bright with a hunger that had nothing to do with fear.

Prince Alaric stared at Ella. His face had drained of colour, the hopeful warmth in his eyes collapsing into something that looked like the slow-motion fall of a great building. 'What,' he said, and his voice cracked on the word. 'What are you?'

Ella opened her mouth to answer, but the slipper's pulse surged through her, and the words that came were not the ones she had intended. 'I am what the glass has made me.'

She did not recognise her own voice.

Lord Alaric had pulled back his sleeve. The skin beneath was laced with a black mark that spiralled from his wrist to his elbow, a pattern of scorched flesh that still smoked faintly, the edges of the wound rimed with frost. He looked at Ella, and his expression was not angry. It was sorrowful. It was the look of a man who had seen this before, or something like it, and had hoped never to see it again.

'The shadow magic is not in the glass alone,' he said, his voice hoarse. 'It is in her. It has been in her since the moment she put the first slipper on.' He turned to the Prince. 'Your Highness, the girl is not your bride. She is a vessel. The slipper has chosen her, and the slipper is not a thing of love. It is a thing of hunger.'

Prince Alaric took a step back. It was a small step, a mere shuffle of his polished boots on the floorboards, but it was the most terrible thing Ella had ever seen. The distance between them, which had been closing for hours, now yawned open like a chasm.

'Ella?' he said, and his voice was the voice of a man who was watching something he loved drown and could not swim.

The slippers pulsed again, and this time the pulse brought with it a whisper, a voice that spoke in a language Ella did not know but somehow understood. The whisper told her that the sorcerer was a threat. The whisper told her that the Prince's horror was a blade, and the blade would cut her if she stayed. The whisper told her to run.

She looked at Prince Alaric. His eyes, which had been kind and intelligent and full of a hope she had barely begun to trust, were now wide with a revulsion he could not hide. He was trying—she could see him trying—but the sight of the shadow tendril, the smell of the sorcerer's burnt flesh, the undeniable evidence of dark magic coiling around the feet of the woman he had just declared his betrothed, was too much for any man to swallow.

'I did not,' Ella said, and her voice was her own again, small and cracked and nineteen years old. 'I did not mean to hurt him.'

'But you did,' the sorcerer said. He had wrapped his wounded arm in a fold of his robe, the fabric darkening with frost. 'The glass acts on your will, girl, but it also shapes your will to its own ends. You cannot trust what you want, because what you want is being written by the slipper.'

Lady Tremaine took a step forward. 'Lord Alaric,' she said, and her voice was silk drawn over steel, 'you speak of the slipper's power as though it were a curse. But power is only a curse to those who do not know how to wield it.'

The sorcerer looked at her with an expression of profound distaste. 'You do not know what you are inviting.'

'Don't I?' Lady Tremaine's smile returned, and this time it was not hard and bright but slow and deep, the smile of a woman who had just seen a door swing open onto a landscape she had only ever dreamed of. 'I have spent years in this house, Lord Alaric, watching my fortunes dwindle and my daughters grow plain and my stepdaughter scrub floors. Do not presume to tell me what I am willing to invite.'

Ella heard the words, but they reached her as though from a great distance. The slipper's whisper was louder, a constant murmur that wrapped around her thoughts like fog around a tower. The whisper told her that Lady Tremaine was not her concern. The whisper told her that the Prince's revulsion was turning to fear,

and fear would turn to action, and action would turn to chains. The whisper told her to move.

She looked at Prince Alaric one last time. His face was a ruin of confusion and horror and something that might have been grief. He had loved her, or thought he had. The slipper had made him love her, or made him think he loved her, and now the slipper had shown its true nature, and the love was crumbling into ash.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Then she turned and ran.

The slippers carried her across the drawing-room floor with a speed that was not entirely her own. She heard Lady Tremaine call her name, heard Anastasia shriek, heard the Prince shout something that might have been 'Wait' or might have been 'Stop' or might have been nothing at all. She did not look back. The slippers did not want her to look back. The slippers wanted her to run, and so she ran, through the door and into the corridor and toward the great front door of Ashworth Grange, the glass heels striking the floorboards with a sound like a hammer on an anvil, a sound that rang through the house and out into the darkening afternoon.

Behind her, the drawing-room was a tableau of shock. Lord Alaric, cradling his frost-burned arm, stared at the empty doorway. Lady Tremaine, her face alight with a terrible new purpose, stared at the same door with an entirely different expression. Prince Alaric, his hands hanging empty at his sides, stared at the space where Ella had stood, and his face was the face of a man who had just watched a miracle curdle into a nightmare.

The sorcerer was the first to speak. 'She will head for the moors. The glass will guide her to a place where the veil is thin.'

Prince Alaric did not seem to hear him. He was still staring at the doorway, and his lips moved soundlessly, shaping a name he had spoken with such hope only moments before.

Outside, the afternoon had begun its slow slide into evening, and the mist was rising from the bog beyond the willows, spreading across the moor like a grey cloak laid over the heather.

Fugitive in the Mist

The mist did not wait for her to be ready. It closed around her shoulders like something hungry, and the Grange was gone.

Eleanor ran because the slipper demanded it. Her feet struck the hard-packed earth of the yard, then the wet heather beyond, and the rhythm of it was not her own. The left foot came down first each time, the glass heel striking the ground with a chime that rang too pure for stone or soil. The right foot followed, obedient, and the glass answered with a note that shivered up through her bones. She could not have stopped if she had wanted to. She was not certain she wanted to.

The moor opened before her, grey-green and rolling, patched with black where the peat lay bare. The afternoon light was already failing, the sky curdling to a low yellow bruise above the horizon. She crested the first rise and the wind hit her, full of the smell of wet heather and the older, darker scent of the bog. The slipper pulsed against her instep, a steady thrum that matched the beat of her heart. It was pleased. She could feel its satisfaction spreading through her calf, a warmth that was not warmth, a pressure that was not pain.

She stumbled, caught herself on a gorse bush, and the spines bit into her palm. The pain was clean and real. She clung to it, a small anchor in the flood of sensation that was not her own. The slipper did not like the pain. It pulled her hand away from the bush and set her running again, deeper into the mist.

The Blackfen moors had a voice. She had grown up hearing it from the attic window, a low moan that the wind drew from the peat hags and the standing stones. But out here, with the mist pressing close and the ground soft beneath her, the voice was different. It was not the wind. It was the bog itself, sighing, and the sound had words in it.

Come, the slipper sang. Come and be free.

She did not know if the words were real. She did not want to know.

The heather gave way to a stretch of cotton grass, the white heads bobbing in the wind like tiny flags of surrender. She splashed through a shallow pool, and the water was cold against her ankles, but the glass on her feet did not feel it. The glass did not feel anything. It only wanted.

Her hair fell across her face, and it was darker than it had been. She saw it without wanting to see it, a strand caught on her lip, and the colour was wrong. Ash-blond had been the colour of the ashes she swept from the hearth every morning. This was the colour of the hearth after the fire had died and the stones had cooled and the night had settled into the corners. Sooty charcoal. The colour of something burned out.

She kept running.

The ground began to slope downward, and the mist thickened. The cotton grass vanished, replaced by tussocks of sedge that caught at her ankles. The slipper did not stumble. It found the firm ground between the tussocks, and her right foot

followed where the left foot led. She was a passenger now, a frightened girl carried along by glass and want.

The trees appeared without warning. Gnarled willows, their branches twisted into shapes that had nothing to do with wind. They leaned toward her as she passed, and their leaves whispered in a language she almost understood. The Whispering Willows. She had heard the stories. Every child in the Grange had heard the stories. The willows grew where the veil was thin, where the Ley Lines crossed and the old magic pooled like water in a hollow. The stories said the willows listened. The stories said they remembered.

The slipper pulled her toward them.

She was inside the grove before she realised she had entered it. The willows closed behind her, their branches interlacing like fingers, and the mist was so thick she could taste it. The air smelled of peat and copper and something older than either. The ground was soft beneath her, and the slipper slowed at last, letting her stop. She bent over, gasping, and her breath came in white plumes that the mist swallowed.

Her hands were on her knees, and her hands were wrong.

She straightened slowly, and she looked at her hands, and they were not her hands. The skin was too pale, too smooth, the colour of alabaster. The blue veins beneath were faint, almost invisible, as if the blood had retreated deeper into her body. She turned her hands over, and the palms were the same, pale and strange, and the lines on them seemed shallower than they had been that morning when she had scrubbed the kitchen floor.

The slipper pulsed, and the warmth of it was stronger now, spreading up through her ankle and into her calf. It was not unpleasant. That was the worst of it. The warmth was not unpleasant. It felt like stepping into a bath after a long day of labour. It felt like being held.

She touched her face, and her fingertips found her cheekbones, and the skin there was smooth and cold. Her hair fell forward again, and she gathered a handful of it and held it in front of her eyes, and it was black. Not the black of a raven's wing or a starless night, but the black of the bog pools, the black of water that had no bottom.

The slipper sang, and the song was a promise. *You are becoming*, it sang. *You are becoming what you were always meant to be.*

She let the hair fall. She did not scream. She did not weep. She was too tired for either, and the slipper's warmth was spreading through her chest now, and it was hard to remember why she should scream. The warmth was a blanket. The warmth was a cage.

The willows rustled, and she turned, and a figure stood among the trees.

The Seeress was old in a way that had nothing to do with age. Her skin was lined like the bark of the willows, and her eyes were the colour of obsidian, dark and depthless and full of reflected light. She wore a cloak of undyed wool, and her

hands were bare, and she did not seem to feel the cold. She looked at Eleanor, and her expression did not change.

'You have come,' the Seeress said. Her voice was low, and it had the same quality as the bog's sighing, the same undertone of something ancient and patient.

Eleanor opened her mouth, and the words that came were not the words she had meant to say. 'I did not choose to come.'

'No,' the Seeress said. 'You did not.'

The slipper pulsed, and the warmth in Eleanor's chest tightened. She felt it coil around her heart, and the pressure was not pain, but it was not comfort either. It was possession. It was the glass learning the shape of her, the way she had once learned the shape of the Grange's corridors in the dark.

'You are standing at a crossroads,' the Seeress said. 'The Shadow Slipper has chosen you. The Umbral Weave has tasted your desire, and it finds you sweet.'

'I did not ask for this.'

'You asked for escape. You asked for beauty. You asked for freedom.' The Seeress tilted her head, and her obsidian eyes caught the last of the light. 'The Weave does not distinguish between a wish and a plea. It hears only the wanting.'

Eleanor looked down at her hands again, at the alabaster skin and the fading veins. 'What is happening to me?'

'You are becoming a servant of the Weave. Your body is being remade to suit its purpose. The glass is a door, and you are walking through it.'

'I do not want to walk through it.'

The Seeress was silent for a moment. The willows creaked around them, and the mist coiled at their feet, and the bog sighed its endless sigh. 'Wanting is what brought you here. Wanting will not bring you back.'

The slipper pulsed again, and Eleanor felt her heart stutter, and then the rhythm steadied, and the warmth was deeper now, settled into her bones. She could feel the glass on her feet as if it were part of her, as if it had always been part of her, and the sensation was not entirely unwelcome. That was the horror of it. The warmth was not unwelcome. The darkness was not unwelcome. The song was not unwelcome.

'The Ley Lines cross here,' the Seeress said. 'The old magic runs deep beneath this ground. The willows drink from it, and they remember what they drink. They remember the Weave. They remember the last time a slipper was worn.'

'The last time?'

'The Weave is old. It has hungered for this world since before this world had a name. It sends its relics through the veil, and they find the wanting, and the wanting become the bound.' The Seeress took a step closer, and her obsidian eyes were unreadable. 'You are not the first. You will not be the last. But you are the one standing here now, and you are running out of time.'

Eleanor felt the slipper's warmth pulse in answer, and she knew, without knowing how she knew, that the Seeress spoke the truth. The glass was not a gift. It was a leash, and the leash was tightening, and the warmth that felt like comfort was the warmth of the collar closing around her throat.

'How do I break it?' she asked.

The Seeress looked at her for a long moment. The mist coiled between them, and the willows whispered, and the bog sighed. 'You must want something more than you want what the slipper offers.'

'What does it offer?'

'Power. Escape. Vengeance. The end of servitude.' The Seeress inclined her head. 'It offers everything you have ever wanted. That is the trap. The Weave does not lie. It gives you exactly what you ask for, and it takes exactly what you are.'

Eleanor looked down at her feet, and the glass slippers glowed faintly in the mist, and their light was beautiful. It was the light of stars reflected in water. It was the light of promises kept. She wanted to believe it. She could feel the wanting in her chest, a hunger that had nothing to do with food, a thirst that had nothing to do with water. She had wanted to be free. She had wanted to be seen. She had wanted to be loved. The slipper had given her all of it, and the giving was the taking, and the warmth was the chain.

'The shadow magic is not subtle,' the Seeress said. 'It does not need to be. It knows that the wanting is stronger than the fear. It knows that you will choose the warmth over the cold.'

'I did not choose this.'

'You chose the slipper. The slipper chose the Weave. The Weave is choosing you now, and you are letting it.'

The words landed in the silence, and the silence was heavy, and the willows leaned closer, and Eleanor felt the slipper's warmth spread up through her spine and into her skull, and she knew that the Seeress was right. She was letting it. She was letting the warmth take her because the warmth was better than the cold of the attic, better than the loneliness of the Grange, better than the years of ash and scrubbing and silence.

'What do I do?' she whispered.

The Seeress reached out, and her hand was gnarled and brown and steady. 'You remember what you are. You remember that you are not the glass. You are not the wanting. You are the one who wants, and that is not the same thing.'

'I do not know if I can remember.'

'Then you will be lost.'

The slipper pulsed, and the warmth was a song, and the song was a promise, and the promise was a lie that felt like truth. Eleanor closed her eyes, and she tried to remember the girl who had scrubbed the floors and dreamed of the ball, the girl who had hidden the slipper beneath the floorboard and wondered at its light. She tried to remember the girl who had been Eleanor Vance, and the

memory was there, but it was distant, as if she were seeing it through water, as if the glass had already begun to cloud the surface.

She opened her eyes, and the Seeress was watching her, and the willows were whispering, and the mist was thickening, and the bog was sighing, and the slipper was singing, and she did not know which voice to listen to.

'The Prince will follow you,' the Seeress said. 'He is already gathering his guard. He will come for you, and he will not come with love. The slipper has poisoned that well. He will come with fear, and fear is a hunter that does not tire.'

'What should I do when he finds me?'

'That depends on what you are when he does.' The Seeress drew her cloak around herself, and the mist coiled at her feet, and her obsidian eyes reflected the faint glow of the slippers. 'You are still Eleanor Vance. You are still the girl who chose to run. But the glass is patient, and the glass is strong, and the glass will not let you go.'

The slipper pulsed, and Eleanor felt it in her throat, a warmth that was almost a hand, and she knew that the Seeress spoke the truth. The glass would not let her go. The glass would hold her until she forgot that she had ever wanted to be free of it, until she forgot that she had ever been anything but its servant.

'Go,' the Seeress said. 'The willows will hide you for a time. The mist will cover your tracks. But the Prince will find you, and when he does, you must decide what you are.'

'How will I know?'

'You will know because you will choose.' The Seeress stepped back into the mist, and the willows closed around her, and her voice came from everywhere and nowhere. 'The glass cannot choose for you. It can only want. You are the one who must decide.'

Eleanor stood alone in the grove, and the slipper sang its warm song, and the mist pressed close, and the bog sighed its endless sigh. She looked down at her hands, and they were pale and strange and not her own, and she looked at her hair, and it was black as the water beneath the willows, and she felt the warmth of the glass spreading through her chest, and she did not know if she was Eleanor Vance or the thing the slipper was making her.

The willows whispered, and the mist coiled, and somewhere in the distance, beyond the grove and the bog and the sighing dark, a horn sounded. The Prince was coming.

The slipper pulsed, and the warmth was a promise, and Eleanor ran.

The Hunted and the Hunter

The horn sounded again, closer now, its note swallowed almost at once by the peat and the fog and the aching silence of the moor. Eleanor ran. The glass on her left foot was no longer a shoe but a second skin, a living sheath that flexed with each stride and sent little ripples of not-warmth spiralling up through the marrow of her shin. She had stopped trying to name the sensation hours ago. It was simply there, like breath, like blood.

She crested a low rise and the ground beyond fell away into a basin of heather and black pools that stared up at the darkening sky like wounds that would not close. The Whispering Willows lay ahead, their twisted limbs dragging through the fog, and the slipper quickened against her instep, a steady insistent rhythm that matched nothing in her chest. She could feel it tugging her toward the grove, a compass needle made of glass and hunger.

Her hands caught her attention as she steadied herself on a jut of granite. The skin had gone the colour of whey, the blue veins beneath faded to faint grey threads, and the nails had taken on a pearlescent sheen that reminded her of the inside of a mussel shell. She lifted one hand and watched the fog curl around her fingers, and for a moment she could not remember whether she had ever worn a ring, whether her mother had pressed a kiss to that knuckle, whether the hand belonged to Eleanor Vance or to something the moor was making.

Behind her, the horn. Three short blasts, then two. A signal she did not recognise, but the slipper understood it. The glass contracted, a quick tightening that made her gasp, and the fog seemed to thicken in answer, drawing itself around her shoulders like a cloak. The cursed thing was protecting her. Or corralling her. She could no longer tell the difference, and the not-knowing had become a dull companion, padding along beside her like a dog she had not asked for.

She stumbled down into the basin, heather snatching at the hem of the gown. The midnight-blue fabric had begun to change. Threads of silver moved through it now without pattern, writing glyphs that flared and faded before she could fix them in her mind, and the skirts clung to her thighs in a way that was not quite cloth, not quite liquid. She had stopped looking at it directly. The sight made something behind her eyes ache, a pressure that built until the world swam.

The bog breathed. That was the only word for it. The peat exhaled a cold vapour that smelled of metal and old water, and the sound was a low wet murmur, as though the moor were dreaming. The slipper pulled her left, toward a stand of willows whose roots disappeared into a pool of ink. She followed. She had been following for what felt like hours, and she had begun to suspect that the glass knew the moors better than she did, that it had been here before, that it was not leading her so much as returning.

She paused at the pool's edge and saw her reflection. The face that stared back was hers and not hers. The hair had gone fully black, a dark fall that drank the light, and the eyes had lost their blue to something deeper, a violet so dark it was nearly the colour of the bog itself. The cheekbones sat higher, or seemed to, and the mouth was a pale curve that did not move when she told it to. She lifted a hand and the reflection lifted its hand a half-second late, as though it had to think about it first.

The slipper thrummed. She felt it in her teeth.

In the distance, the horn again, and this time she heard voices. The Prince's party had reached the rise. She could make out the flicker of torchlight, a smear of orange against the grey, and she could hear the jangle of tack and the suck of hooves in wet ground. They had brought horses onto the moor. The animals would not last long. The bog would see to that.

She should call out. She should wave her arms and let them find her, let the Prince take her back to the castle and the sorcerer and the cold iron of a cell. The thought arrived with the clarity of a bell struck once, and then it was gone, replaced by something else, something that rose from the glass and spread through her like ink in water. She did not want to be found. She wanted the fog to swallow them. She wanted the moor to open beneath their hooves and take them down into the peat, down where the cold was eternal and the light never reached. The desire was so sharp, so sudden, that she pressed a hand to her mouth and bit down on the knuckle until she tasted copper.

That was not her thought. That was the slipper.

But it had felt like hers.

She crouched beside the pool, the gown pooling around her in folds of shadow, and watched the torchlight bob and dip on the ridge. The Prince was there. She could not see his face, but she knew the set of his shoulders, the way he held his head when he was afraid. He had looked at her in the drawing-room with horror, with revulsion, and she had fled from that look, but now she felt something else stir beneath the fear. A cold curiosity. A hunger to see that look again, to watch it deepen into something worse.

The slipper was singing. Not aloud, but in a frequency that vibrated along the bones of her foot and up into the hinge of her jaw, and the song was a promise. Power, it said. Vengeance, it said. You could make him kneel. You could make them all kneel.

She shook her head, a violent jerk that sent her hair whipping across her face, and the singing subsided to a hum. She was still Eleanor. She was still the girl who had scrubbed the grates and polished the silver and slept beneath the eaves with the mice rustling in the walls. But the memory felt distant now, a story she had been told about someone else, and the face in the pool was not the face of a scullery maid.

Movement on the ridge. A figure separated from the torchlight and stood silhouetted against the pale glow of the fog. Not the Prince. This figure was slighter, gaunt, wrapped in a travelling cloak that flapped in the moor wind like a broken wing. Lady Tremaine. She had followed them. She had followed her.

Eleanor watched her stepmother pick her way down the slope, and the slipper sent a pulse of warmth up her leg, and the warmth was not a comfort. It was a question. It was an offer.

The willows whispered. The fog coiled. And the Prince's horn sounded once more, closer now, a note of brass that cut through the moor's dreaming silence and set the slipper ablaze with cold fire.

Eleanor rose from the pool's edge. Her reflection stayed crouched a moment longer, then followed her up, and for that half-second lag she hated it, hated the thing she was becoming, hated the glass and the gown and the glyphs that crawled across the fabric like living things. But beneath the hatred was something else, something that thrilled to the power singing in her bones, and she could not separate the two any more than she could separate her foot from the slipper.

She turned from the pool and walked into the willows, and the fog closed behind her like a door.

On the ridge, Prince Alaric reined in his horse and stared down into the basin. The fog was too thick. He could see nothing but the suggestion of trees, the glint of black water, and a shape that might have been a woman or might have been a trick of the light. His hands were cold on the reins, and the cold had nothing to do with the moor. He had seen the sorcerer's arm. He had seen the wound, the black spirals that ate into the flesh, and he had seen Eleanor's face as she fled, and the face had not been Eleanor's. It had been beautiful and terrible and utterly strange, and he had loved it still.

That was the worst of it. He still loved her. Or loved the thing she was becoming. Or loved the memory of the girl who had danced with him in the ballroom, whose hand had rested on his shoulder like a promise, whose eyes had held the light of a thousand candles. He could not separate the memory from the monster, and the not-knowing was a hook in his chest, pulling him forward into the fog.

'Your Highness.' The captain of the guard drew up beside him, his horse snorting and stamping at the peat. 'The moor is treacherous after dark. We should turn back.'

Alaric shook his head. 'She is down there.'

'We do not know that.'

'I know it.' He did not know how he knew. The knowledge was a pressure behind his eyes, a certainty that had no source. Perhaps the sorcerer had been right. Perhaps the glass had done something to him, too, some lingering enchantment that bound him to the girl in the slippers. Or perhaps he simply could not bear to let her go. Either way, the distinction no longer mattered.

'We go on,' he said, and spurred his horse down into the fog.

Behind them, half-hidden by a stand of gorse, Lady Tremaine watched the Prince descend into the basin. Her gaunt face was alight with something that was not quite greed, not quite awe. She had seen the girl's transformation. She had watched from the library window as Eleanor fled across the moor, and she had seen the gown ripple and shift, the glyphs burning silver against the twilight. She had seen power. Real power. The kind that could topple kingdoms, the kind that could restore fortunes, the kind that could make a disgraced noblewoman into something more.

The slipper had chosen Eleanor. That was a setback. But Lady Tremaine had spent twenty years bending circumstances to her will, and she did not intend to let a piece of glass dictate the terms. If the girl could be controlled, she could be used. And if she could not be controlled, she could be broken. Either way, the power would be hers.

She pulled her cloak tighter and began to follow the Prince's party down into the fog, keeping to the shadows, her eyes fixed on the willows where Eleanor had vanished. The moor groaned beneath her feet, and she smiled.

Deep in the grove, Eleanor felt the slipper contract again, and this time the sensation was not pain but something sharper, a spike of cold that shot up her leg and into the base of her skull. She gasped and caught herself on a willow trunk, and the bark was cold and wet and alive beneath her palm. The glyphs on her gown flared bright enough to light the grove, and in that sudden silver glare she saw the faces in the trees. The willows were not wood. They were something else, something that had been waiting here since before the kingdom had a name, and their eyes were the colour of the bog, and their mouths were open, and the sound they made was not wind.

The slipper sang, and the willows sang back, and Eleanor pressed her forehead to the bark and wept without tears, because the song was beautiful and she could feel herself dissolving into it, her name peeling away like old skin, her memories unspooling into the dark. She was Eleanor Vance. She was nineteen years old. She had a mother who had died when she was small, and a father who had loved her, and a stepmother who had broken her, and a Prince who had danced with her once, and none of it mattered, none of it was real, none of it could stand against the song of the Umbral Weave.

She lifted her head. The willows were silent now. The fog had stopped moving. The world was holding its breath.

And then the Prince's horn sounded, so close that she could hear the catch in the note, the tremor of human breath behind the brass, and the slipper screamed.

Not aloud. Inside her. A shriek of cold fury that doubled her over and sent the glyphs blazing across her gown like lightning, and she understood, in that instant, what the glass wanted. It wanted her to turn. It wanted her to face the Prince and the guards and her stepmother and the whole wretched world, and it wanted her to destroy them. It wanted her to become the thing the moor had been waiting for,

the servant of the Umbral Weave, the vessel of shadow magic, the end of everything.

And part of her wanted it too.

That was the horror. That was the monstrous transformation, the truth she could not escape. The slipper was not forcing her. It was offering her what she had always wanted. Freedom. Power. Escape from the grates and the cinders and the endless, grinding servitude. It was offering her vengeance on the woman who had tormented her, on the Prince who had recoiled from her, on the kingdom that had let her suffer. And the offer was sweet. The offer was so sweet that she could taste it, a cold honey on the back of her tongue.

She straightened. The willows watched. The bog breathed. And somewhere in the fog, the Prince was coming, and Lady Tremaine was scheming, and the slipper was singing its dark magic into her bones, and Eleanor Vance stood at the centre of it all and tried to remember her mother's face.

She could not. The image was gone. The glass had taken it.

She turned toward the sound of the horn and began to walk. The cursed slipper guided her steps, and she let it. She was not sure she had a choice. She was not sure she wanted one.

Echoes of the Umbral Weave

The grove had no name. It had no place in the maps she had seen in the library at Ashworth Grange, and no path led to it. The trees here were older than the kingdom, their bark blackened and split, their branches twisted into shapes that had never known sunlight. The fog lay thick among them, not drifting but standing, a held breath that refused to release.

Eleanor Vance walked because the glass upon her left foot commanded it.

The cursed shoe had grown warm again. Not the spreading comfort she had first felt in the attic—that treacherous, honeyed glow that promised escape and delivered this—but a deeper heat, a pulse that matched the rhythm of the grove. She could feel it through the sole, through the skin that was no longer quite her own. The warmth travelled up her calf, her thigh, settled in the base of her spine like a hand pressing her forward.

She stopped walking only when her shoulder struck a tree.

The bark was rough against her cheek. She stayed there, breathing, her breath a ghost in the fog. Her hair had fallen across her face and it was black. Not the ash-blond of Eleanor Vance, not the sooty charcoal of the girl who had fled across the moors, but a black so deep it drank the light from the grove. She pushed it back with fingers that had grown pale as bone.

The Shadow Slipper thrummed.

Not the whisper it had been. Not the seductive murmur that had guided her from the attic, through the ball, across the moor. This was a voice.

You have come far, little vessel.

Eleanor pressed her back against the tree. The voice did not come from the grove. It came from the glass. It came from inside her.

'I am not a vessel,' she said. Her voice was hoarse. She had not spoken in hours. She had not spoken since the horn had sounded across the moor and she had turned toward it, not away.

You are whatever I require you to be.

The slipper contracted around her foot. Not a spasm—a slow, deliberate squeeze, the glass reshaping itself against her bones. Eleanor gasped. The pain was sharp and brief, and when it passed, the fit was tighter. More intimate. She looked down and saw that the glass had crept higher on her ankle. The skin beneath it was no longer visible. The glass and the flesh had become a single surface.

She slid down the tree trunk and sat in the roots.

The grove was silent. Not the silence of emptiness, but the silence of listening. The twisted trees leaned inward, their bare branches interlaced above her like the ribs of a cathedral. The fog hung motionless. The ground was soft with centuries of fallen leaves that had never fully rotted, preserved by the peat and the damp.

She could smell the moor—the sharp tang of bog myrtle, the deeper rot of something older.

And beneath it, a vibration.

She felt it through the soil. A low, steady hum, like the note of a bell struck far away and never quite fading. The Ley Lines. The Seeress had spoken of them—invisible currents of raw magic that criss-crossed the land. Here, in this forgotten grove, they rose close to the surface. The trees themselves had grown around them, their roots tangled in the old power. Eleanor could see it now, a faint shimmer in the fog, a distortion like heat rising from summer stone.

The slipper pulsed in answer.

The Weave is vast, the voice said. It is older than the stone beneath you. It is hungrier than the fire that burns in mortal hearts. And it has waited so very long for one such as you.

Eleanor closed her eyes. The voice was inside her skull. It did not pass through her ears. It spoke directly to the part of her that had once dreamed of the ball, of the prince, of escape.

'What are you?' she whispered.

I am the key. I am the door. I am the contract you signed when you first slipped me onto your foot and felt the world open to you.

The slipper's heat spread upward. It moved through her leg, into her hip, coiled around her spine. It was not painful. That was the horror of it. It felt like stepping into a warm bath. It felt like being held.

The Umbral Weave is not a force, little vessel. It is a place. A dimension. A living hunger that exists alongside your world, separated only by the thinnest of veils. And I am its conduit. I am the needle that sews the veil shut—or tears it open.

Eleanor opened her eyes.

The fog had changed. The shimmer of the Ley Lines had grown brighter, and within it, shapes moved. They were not trees. They were not reflections. They were silhouettes, tall and thin, and they were watching her from the other side of the mist.

'The Weave has a master,' the slipper said, and this time the voice was not inside her. It came from the glass itself, a resonant tone that vibrated up through her bones. 'A shadow that has hungered for a foothold in the mortal realm since before your kingdom had a name. It cannot cross the veil alone. It requires a vessel. A bridge. A servant.'

Eleanor's hands were shaking. She pressed them flat against the earth, feeling the Ley Lines humming beneath her palms. The vibration was stronger now. It was matching the rhythm of the slipper's pulse.

'You have been chosen,' the slipper said. 'From the moment you lifted me from beneath the floorboard. From the moment you desired escape more than you feared the unknown. Your yearning was the spark. Your will is the kindling. And your body is the door.'

She tried to stand. The slipper held her. Not physically—the glass did not weigh her down. But the command was absolute. Her legs would not obey her. She was rooted to the earth like the trees around her, and the roots of the grove were drinking in the power of the Ley Lines, and the Ley Lines were feeding the slipper, and the slipper was feeding her.

She could feel the Umbral Weave now. Not as a concept, not as a warning from the Seeress. As a presence. It pressed against the edges of the grove. It breathed through the shimmer in the fog. It was vast and patient and terribly, terribly hungry.

'What will I become?'

The slipper's voice softened. It was almost kind. 'You will become magnificent. You will become eternal. You will become the bridge between worlds, and the Weave will flow through you, and you will never scrub another floor or bow to another petty noblewoman. You will never be small again.'

Eleanor looked down at her hands. The alabaster skin. The dark veins beneath, visible now, carrying something that was not blood. The fingers that had grown longer, more elegant, more strange. She was beautiful. She was monstrous. She was halfway to something that had no name.

'And my will?' she asked.

The slipper was silent for a long moment. The silhouettes in the fog had drawn closer. She could see their shapes more clearly now—tall, robed, their faces hidden in the folds of shadow. They were not trees. They had never been trees.

'Your will will be the master's will,' the slipper said. 'And you will rejoice in it. That is the gift. That is the horror you still cling to your mortal fear long enough to recognise. But fear passes. Desire remains.'

The word *horror* echoed in the grove. The slipper had spoken it. The slipper had named what it was doing to her.

Eleanor laughed. The sound was ragged and strange, and it did not echo. The fog swallowed it whole.

'You are honest,' she said. 'That is worse than the lies.'

'I am beyond honesty and lies. I am the contract. I am the desire you fed me. I am the freedom you chose.'

She looked up at the twisted branches above her. The sky was invisible. The fog was a ceiling, low and grey, and the Ley Lines shimmered through it like lightning trapped in gauze. She thought of Ashworth Grange. She thought of the attic, the floorboard, the moment she had lifted the glass slipper from its hiding place and felt its warmth against her palm. She had wanted so badly to escape. She had wanted so badly to be seen.

She was seen now. The silhouettes in the fog were watching her. The Weave was watching her. The master of the Weave, whoever or whatever it was, had been watching her since the moment she slipped the shoe onto her foot and felt the world rearrange itself around her desires.

'There is a way out,' she said. It was not a question.

The slipper did not answer.

'You said I was chosen. You said I was being prepared. That means I am not yet what you want me to be. There is still time.'

'There is always time,' the slipper said. 'Until there is not.'

Eleanor pushed herself up from the roots. The slipper allowed it. She stood in the centre of the grove, surrounded by the ancient trees and the shimmering Ley Lines and the silent, watching shapes in the fog. The glass on her foot had crept past her ankle now. It was climbing toward her knee. The transformation was accelerating.

She looked down at the still pool at the base of the gnarled tree. The water was black as ink, and it did not ripple. She knelt beside it and stared at her reflection.

The face that stared back was not Eleanor Vance.

The hair was black, slick as oil, falling past shoulders that were too sharp, too elegant. The skin was pale as moonlight, and the eyes, the eyes were the worst. They were still blue, but they were not human blue. They were the blue of deep ice, of glacial crevasses, of something that had never known warmth. And in the depths of those eyes, something moved. Something that was not her.

She lifted her hand. The reflection lifted its hand. She touched her face. The reflection touched its face. But the expression, the expression was wrong. The reflection was smiling.

Eleanor was not smiling.

The reflection smiled wider. It tilted its head. Its lips moved, and a voice came from the pool, a voice that was hers and not hers, a voice that echoed from the other side of the veil.

'You are almost ready.'

She scrambled backward. The pool remained still. The reflection remained, watching her from beneath the black water, smiling with her face.

'This is the monstrous transformation,' she said. 'This is what I am becoming.'

'This is what you are,' the slipper corrected. 'The transformation is nearly complete. The shadow magic has remade you. The dark magic of the Umbral Weave flows through your veins. You are no longer Eleanor Vance. You are the conduit. You are the door.'

She pressed her hands against the earth again. The Ley Lines hummed beneath her palms, and she could feel the Weave on the other side of the veil, pressing, pressing. It wanted her. It had always wanted her. Not her specifically, anyone desperate enough, anyone hungry enough, anyone who would trade their will for the promise of escape.

She had been so hungry. She had been so desperate. She had walked into the attic and lifted the floorboard and taken the slipper into her hands, and she had not once asked what it would cost.

Now she knew.

The silhouettes in the fog had drawn closer still. She could see their robes now, the dark folds of fabric that did not move in the still air. She could see their hands, pale and long-fingered, clasped before them. She could see their faces, or the absence where faces should have been. Hollows. Voids. The spaces where identity had been scooped out and replaced with service.

'They were like you once,' the slipper said. 'They desired. They chose. They serve.'

'I have not chosen yet,' Eleanor said.

'You chose the moment you put me on.'

She looked down at the glass creeping up her leg. It was beautiful. It caught the shimmer of the Ley Lines and threw it back in fragments of silver and blue. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever worn. It was a cage.

She thought of Prince Alaric. She thought of the ball. She thought of the way he had looked at her, the way his hand had felt on her waist, the way the music had swelled and the candles had burned and the world had seemed, for one impossible night, to be something other than cruel. She had wanted him to see her. She had wanted to be seen.

She was seen now.

The reflection in the pool was still watching her. Still smiling. And in its eyes, behind the ice-blue, something vast and dark and patient stared back.

The Ley Lines flickered. The silhouettes bowed their heads. The grove held its breath.

And Eleanor Vance, who had once scrubbed floors in Ashworth Grange and dreamed of a prince, knelt in the roots of an ancient tree and felt the last threads of her will begin to fray.

The Glimmer in the Dark

The reflection in the bog pool did not blink when Eleanor did.

She had crawled to the water's edge without deciding to. Her legs had moved, the glass sheath tightening around her calf with each step, and now she knelt on the peat, and the pool lay before her like a wound in the earth, black and depthless. The willows leaned close, their branches still. The fog had thickened until the grove felt like the inside of a sealed room.

She looked down.

The face that stared back was not hers. Alabaster skin stretched over cheekbones that seemed sharper than they had been that morning. Hair the colour of wet ash fell past her shoulders, darker than the water it brushed. And her eyes—she had known they would be wrong, had felt them changing behind her lids, but the confirmation struck her like a physical blow. The irises were obsidian, the pupils lost in the dark. The whites had gone grey, as though smoke had been trapped beneath the surface.

She was beautiful. That was the horror of it. The face in the pool had the terrible, arrested beauty of a frozen scream.

The Shadow Slipper hummed against her foot, a low thrum that travelled up the glass and into the bone. The sound was almost pleased.

Look at what I have made of you.

Eleanor tried to look away. Her neck refused the command. The reflection held her, and she understood with a clarity that emptied her lungs that the thing in the water was not a mask. The transformation was complete. The girl who had scrubbed floors at Ashworth Grange, who had hidden a locket beneath a floorboard and dreamed of a prince, was gone.

Except.

The reflection tilted its head. Eleanor had not moved. The reflection smiled, and the smile was slow and cold and did not reach the eyes. But the eyes themselves—

Deep within the black, something flickered. A blue so pale it was almost grey, the colour of winter sky through dirty glass. Her blue. Eleanor Vance's blue. The colour she had seen every morning in the scullery mirror, when she had paused with a rag in her hand and wondered if there was more to life than ash and tallow and Lady Tremaine's endless demands.

The blue was weeping.

Tears welled up from somewhere behind the obsidian, spilling down the alabaster cheeks of the reflection that was and was not her. The tears were clear, ordinary, human. They cut silver tracks through the monstrous beauty, and Eleanor felt her own face—her real face, the one beneath the corruption—scream without sound.

She reached for the water. Her hand stopped an inch above the surface, and the reflection's hand rose to meet it, palm to palm, separated by a membrane of bog water and the weight of everything she had lost.

'Please,' she whispered. She did not know who she was asking. The slipper. The Weave. The girl in the water. 'Please.'

The glass around her leg contracted. The sensation was intimate, almost tender, a lover's embrace tightening into something else.

You asked for freedom. I am giving it to you.

'This is not freedom.'

You asked for beauty. You asked for escape. You asked to be seen. The voice was silk drawn over stone. I have given you all of it. The prince saw you. The ballroom saw you. Lady Tremaine sees you now, even from the shadows, and she is afraid.

Eleanor's hand trembled. The reflection's hand trembled with it, but a heartbeat late. The lag was worse than before. The thing in the water was learning to move on its own.

'She is watching,' Eleanor said. The knowledge arrived without source, a certainty that settled into her gut like cold water. 'Lady Tremaine. She followed.'

She followed the prince. She saw what you became. She wants it for herself. The slipper's pulse quickened, a rhythm that felt almost like amusement. *She thinks she can take me. She thinks she can master the Umbral Weave.*

Eleanor's reflection smiled again. The tears still fell, but the smile did not falter. The effect was grotesque, a weeping mask of moonlight.

She forced herself to look past the reflection, into the depths of the pool. The water was not still. Beneath the surface, shapes moved. The silhouettes she had seen in the fog were there, robed and hollow, their faces turned upward. Waiting. The Ley Lines beneath the grove thrummed, and the water vibrated with a frequency that made her teeth ache.

The trees responded. The ancient oaks of the forgotten grove had stood longer than the kingdom, their roots sunk deep into the moor, tangled with the invisible currents of raw magic that criss-crossed the land. Now those currents flared. A shimmer ran through the bark, aurora-light flickering in the grain, and the willows at the grove's edge groaned. The sound was low and long, a note of distress that vibrated through the peat and into Eleanor's knees.

The land knew. The Ley Lines knew. Something that did not belong had taken root in the heart of the moor, and the moor was crying out.

They cannot stop me. The slipper's voice had changed. It was not speaking to her anymore. It was speaking through her. *They have tried before. The sorcerers. The seers. The old things that walked this land before your kingdom's stones were laid. They all tried.*

The glass crept higher. Eleanor felt it slide past her knee, cold and smooth, and she could not move her leg. The sheath was hardening, fusing with the joint. Soon

she would not be able to bend it. Soon she would not be able to walk without the slipper's permission.

She thought of the locket. Warm against her skin, beneath the floorboard in the library. She thought of Gareth, his calloused hands holding out a half-loaf of bread on a morning that felt like a lifetime ago. She thought of the attic at Ashworth Grange, the dust and the silence and the single window that looked out over the moor. She had been so lonely. She had wanted so badly to be someone else.

The reflection in the pool stopped weeping.

The blue vanished. The obsidian swallowed it whole, and the face in the water was nothing but shadow and glass and the terrible smile of something that had been hungry for a very long time.

Eleanor screamed. The sound tore out of her, raw and human, and the willows answered with a groan that shook the grove. The Ley Lines flared, aurora-light blazing through the bark, and for one moment the pool was lit from below, and she saw the silhouettes clearly—tall figures in robes of shadow, their faces empty, their hands outstretched, vessels that had once been people who had wanted too much.

And behind them, deeper than the water, deeper than the roots, something vast and dark and patient stirred in the Umbral Weave.

The glass reached her thigh.

You will be the bridge. You will be the door. And when you open, I will walk through.

Eleanor's hands clenched in the peat. She felt the cold mud under her nails, the wet soak of the moor, the tiny roots of the heather snapping as she gripped the earth. The world was still there. The real world. The ground beneath her. The air in her lungs. The taste of salt and bog water on her lips.

She was still here. She was still Eleanor Vance.

She looked at the reflection one last time. The monster in the water looked back, beautiful and terrible and utterly alien. But somewhere beneath the glass, somewhere behind the obsidian, a girl with deep-set blue eyes was still crying.

The slipper pulsed. The Weave pulled. And Eleanor, who had once scrubbed floors and dreamed of a prince, held onto the peat and refused to let go.

In the fog beyond the grove, Lady Tremaine watched.

She had followed the prince's hunt, staying low in the heather, her gaunt frame pressed to the earth like a fox tracking wounded prey. She had seen the girl transform. She had seen the glass crawl up the leg, the hair darken, the eyes empty. She had seen the power in the slipper, the raw, unshaped force of it, and she had felt something she had not felt in years: hope.

The girl was losing. That much was clear. The slipper was consuming her, and the girl was fighting, but the fight was bleeding out of her with every pulse of that cursed glass. Soon she would be gone. And when she was, the slipper would need

a new vessel. A stronger vessel. Someone who understood power and how to wield it.

Lady Tremaine's lips parted. The fog coiled around her, cold and damp, but she did not feel it. She was already planning. The girl's distress was a door. The slipper's hunger was a lever. She only needed to find the right moment, the right word, the right crack in the armour, and she could turn this catastrophe into an opportunity.

The shadow magic that had ruined her fortunes could restore them. The dark magic that had taken her stepdaughter could give her everything she had lost.

She retreated into the mist, her gaunt frame swallowed by the grey, and her eyes were bright with a light that had nothing to do with the Ley Lines' fading aurora.

Eleanor did not see her go. She was still on her knees at the pool's edge, her hands in the peat, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The glass had stopped at her thigh. The slipper's voice had gone quiet, as though it was waiting for something. The willows had fallen silent. The grove held its breath.

She lifted her head. The reflection in the pool was hers again—monstrous, alien, wrong—but hers. The tears had stopped. The smile had faded. The face in the water was simply watching her, patient and empty, a mirror that had learned to wait.

She did not know how long she knelt there. The fog pressed close. The Ley Lines dimmed. The silhouettes sank back into the depths, and the pool was only a pool, black and still and cold.

But the glass was on her leg. The slipper was on her foot. And somewhere in the darkness of her own reflection, a girl with blue eyes was still weeping, and Eleanor Vance, who had once been that girl, heard her.

She did not know if she could save her. She did not know if there was anything left to save. But the sound of those tears, silent and constant, was the only thing in the grove that still felt real.

She held onto it.

The fog thickened. The willows waited. And deep beneath the moor, the Umbral Weave stirred in its ancient sleep, dreaming of a door that was almost open.

The Seeress Speaks

The peat squelched beneath Eleanor Vance's remaining human foot. The other, sheathed in glass to mid-thigh, made no sound at all. It simply pressed into the bog-rotten earth and left no print, as though the ground refused to acknowledge it. The Shadow Slipper had crept higher during the night. She could feel it now as a cold collar around her femur, a second skeleton growing inside her own.

She moved because the glass commanded movement. Not in words—the voice had fallen silent since the pool—but in the way a hooked fish moves toward the angler's hand. The willows parted before her. Their trailing fronds, grey-green and heavy with condensation, drew back like curtains touched by an unseen hand. The grove wanted her here. Or the thing inside her did.

Eleanor tried to stop. The muscles in her right leg locked, and she stood trembling on the border between volition and surrender, a territory that had shrunk to the width of a single heartbeat. The glass pulsed. She took another step.

The trees were different here. Older. Their bark ran in vertical ridges like the spines of ancient books, and the phosphorescence that clung to their roots was not the cold blue of marsh-gas but something warmer, yellower, the colour of old ivory held to a candle. The air tasted of wet stone and something sharper beneath—ozone, she thought, though she had only read of it in the library's mouldering texts. The smell before lightning.

'You are the Vance girl.'

The voice came from everywhere. It rustled. It was the sound of dry leaves skittering across packed earth, of paper being folded, of a thousand tiny legs brushing bark. Eleanor spun, or tried to—the glass leg dragged like a dead thing—and saw nothing but the shifting curtain of willow fronds.

'I am Eleanor Vance,' she said. Her own voice startled her. It was hoarse, human, utterly fragile. 'Who speaks?'

A figure detached itself from the trunk of the largest willow. Not stepped out—detached, as though it had been pressed into the bark like a pressed flower and now peeled free. The Seeress Elara was smaller than Eleanor had imagined. The old woman's frame was twisted, her spine curved like a question mark, and her skin had the texture of river stones worn smooth by centuries of water. Her robe was not cloth but something that might once have been moss, now dried and fibrous, the colour of old tea. Her eyes were obsidian from lid to lid, two black pools in which Eleanor saw no reflection of herself.

'You know my name,' Eleanor said.

'I know the name you were given. I know the name you have forgotten. I know the name the glass is writing on your bones.' The Seeress tilted her head. The motion was birdlike, a sparrow considering a crumb. 'You have come to ask whether the slipper is good or evil.'

Eleanor's throat closed. She had not spoken the question aloud. The glass on her leg grew warm, then hot, then warm again, as though it were thinking.

'Is it?' Eleanor managed.

Elara did not answer. She turned and began to walk, her bare feet making no impression on the bog, and Eleanor found herself following. The willows leaned closer. Their branches wove together overhead, and the yellow phosphorescence dimmed to a twilight murk. The ground trembled—a low, almost sub-audible vibration that travelled up through Eleanor's human leg and stopped dead at the glass.

'The Umbral Weave is not evil,' Elara said at last. 'It is hungry. Those are different things. A wolf is not evil. A flood is not evil. But the village still drowns.'

'That is no answer.'

'It is the only answer that is true.'

They emerged into a clearing. The willows here were colossal, their trunks wider than a man's arm-span, and their roots plunged into a pool so still it looked like a sheet of polished jet. The phosphorescence was stronger here, rising from the water in lazy spirals like embers drifting up from a dying fire. At the centre of the pool stood a stone, no, not a stone, an altar, its surface carved with glyphs that Eleanor's eyes refused to focus on. The glyphs moved. They squirmed at the edge of vision.

'You want to know if you are damned,' Elara said. She stopped at the pool's edge and turned. Her obsidian eyes held Eleanor's gaze. 'You want me to tell you that the slipper can be removed, that the corruption can be reversed, that you will wake one morning with pink flesh and blonde hair and the memory of this nightmare fading like a fever dream.'

Eleanor said nothing. The glass on her leg contracted, a gentle squeeze, almost reassuring.

'I cannot tell you that,' Elara said. 'I can tell you what I know. The slipper was forged in the Umbral Weave by hands that are no longer hands, for a purpose that has outlived its makers. It is a bridge. You are the keystone. Break the keystone, and the bridge falls.'

'Break it,' Eleanor repeated. The word felt dangerous. The slipper's warmth vanished, replaced by a cold so absolute it burned.

'Break it,' Elara agreed, 'or become it. The choice is yours, little shadow.'

The words landed like stones dropped into still water. The Ley Lines beneath the grove flared in answer. Eleanor felt it, a surge of energy that rose through the roots of the willows, up through the altar, out into the clearing in waves of shimmering aurora-light. The colours were wrong, bruised purples and sickly greens, the palette of a healing wound. The trees groaned. Their branches thrashed, though there was no wind.

The Shadow Slipper screamed.

Not a sound, a sensation. A spike of malevolent energy that drove up through Eleanor's spine and into her skull. Her lips curled. She felt them move without her consent, pulling back from teeth that felt too sharp. The sneer that crossed her face was not her own. She knew this. She watched it happen from somewhere deep behind her own eyes.

'You see,' Elara said softly. 'It already speaks for you.'

Eleanor tried to answer. The slipper's grip tightened, and the words that came out were not the words she had shaped. 'I am not its voice.'

'No. You are its throat.'

The shadowy tendrils that had flickered at the edges of Eleanor's vision now materialised. They coiled around her arms, her waist, her glass-encased thigh. They were cold. They were intimate. They were the slipper's embrace, and Eleanor felt her body lean into them before her mind could object.

'Who are you?' Eleanor forced the question through clenched teeth. 'You speak as though you know me. As though you have been waiting.'

Elara's expression did not change. The ancient woman raised one hand, and the tendrils recoiled, not destroyed, but pushed back, held at bay by a warmth that radiated from the Seeress's palm. The warmth of a hearth-fire in a room one has not entered for many years.

'I knew your mother,' Elara said.

The clearing went very still.

'I knew her before she was Lady Tremaine's servant. Before she was Vance's wife. Before she was your mother. She came to this grove when she was nineteen years old, the same age you are now, and she stood where you are standing, and she asked me the same question.'

Eleanor's heart was a fist against her ribs. The slipper's cold receded, just slightly, as though it too were listening.

'She asked me if the thing she had found, a relic of the Umbral Weave, a slipper of living glass, was good or evil. She asked me if she was damned. She asked me if she could be saved.'

'What did you tell her?'

'I told her the truth. That the slipper is a hunger. That it feeds on desire the way a flame feeds on air. That the only way to break its hold is to break its vessel.'

Eleanor felt the glass pulse. A question. A warning.

'She broke it,' Elara said. 'Your mother broke the slipper. Shattered it against this very altar and scattered the shards across the moor. She chose to become nothing rather than become the bridge.'

'But the slipper—' Eleanor looked down at her leg. The glass was seamless. Whole. 'It is here. It is on me.'

'The Umbral Weave does not die. It waits. It gathers its fragments. It finds new hands to do its work.' Elara's obsidian eyes dropped to the slipper. 'It found you.'

The daughter who yearned for escape. The daughter who wanted what the slipper promised. You called to it, Eleanor Vance. And it answered.'

The words struck harder than any blow. Eleanor remembered the attic. The floorboard. The hum. The glow. She had thought she was discovering a secret. She had been answering a summons.

'Break it,' Elara said again. 'Or become it. The choice is yours, little shadow. It was always yours. Your mother made her choice. Now you must make yours.'

The ground trembled again. Harder this time. The willows groaned, and the phosphorescent spirals flickered like guttering candles. Elara turned her head, listening to something beyond the clearing.

'They are coming,' she said. 'The Prince's guard. They have tracked you across the moor. They bring swords and torches and the certainty that all darkness can be cut.'

'Alaric,' Eleanor breathed.

'He will try to save you. He will fail. The slipper will not permit itself to be removed by force. It will defend its vessel.'

Eleanor felt the truth of this in the way the glass tightened, readying itself. The shadowy tendrils around her arms pulsed with a dark light, and she knew, knew with a certainty that was not her own, that they would strike at anything that threatened the slipper. Including the Prince. Including his men.

'What do I do?' she whispered.

'You choose,' Elara said. 'Before the choice is made for you.'

The Seeress stepped back into the shadow of the great willow. The bark seemed to welcome her, folding around her stooped shoulders like a door closing. Her obsidian eyes were the last to fade, two black pools that held Eleanor's gaze until the very end.

'Break it,' the rustling voice echoed, 'or become it. There is no third path.'

Eleanor stood alone in the clearing. The Ley Lines still pulsed beneath her, their aurora-light painting the willows in shades of bruise and bone. The slipper's grip was absolute, a second heartbeat now, steady and patient. She could feel the Prince's approach as a tremor in the earth, the distant sound of hoofbeats, the faint call of a horn across the moor.

She looked down at her hands. The fingers were long and pale, the nails darkening to a colour that was not quite black. These were not her hands. Not the hands that had scrubbed floors and polished silver and turned the pages of a mouldering book in a forgotten library. But they were the hands she had now.

The slipper pulsed. A question. A command.

Eleanor closed her eyes. The ground shook beneath her, and the ancient trees of the Whispering Willows leaned in to listen.

The Guard Arrives

The tremor began beneath Eleanor's feet before the hoofbeats reached her ears.

She felt it through the glass sheath that encased her right leg—a vibration that travelled up from the sole of the Shadow Slipper, through the creeping crystal that had climbed past her knee and now gripped her thigh like a frozen gauntlet. The peat beneath her trembled, and the ink-black pool at the base of the Seeress's willow shivered in concentric rings.

Elara had not moved. The ancient woman stood with one hand pressed flat against the gnarled trunk of the largest willow, her obsidian eyes fixed on Eleanor with an expression that held neither pity nor judgement. The sentient trees had ceased their groaning. The clearing had fallen into a waiting silence, the kind that presses against the eardrums and makes the pulse audible.

Then the sound came—a distant thunder that resolved into the rhythmic percussion of shod hooves on soft earth, the jangle of bridles, the snap of torch-fire in damp air. The mist parted in shreds as the first riders broke through the tree line.

Prince Alaric dismounted before his horse had fully stopped. His left arm was bound in linen, a dark stain seeping through at the shoulder where Lord Alaric's ward had not been enough to turn aside the shadow-tendrils. His face was drawn, the kind intelligent eyes that Eleanor remembered from the ball now shadowed with exhaustion and something else—a desperate, hunted hope. He looked at her and stopped as though he had walked into a wall.

'Eleanor.'

His voice cracked on her name. She watched him take in the transformation: the hair that had been ash-blond and now hung in sooty ropes against her cheeks, the skin bleached to alabaster, the eyes that she knew had gone fully obsidian. The glass sheath glinted in the torchlight, and the Shadow Slipper pulsed against her sole with a warmth that felt like welcome.

The Royal Guard fanned out behind him, twelve men in the deep blue livery of Eldoria, their swords drawn but unsteady in their grips. Behind them, limping through the undergrowth with a satchel clutched against his chest, came Lord Alaric. The Royal Sorcerer's grey hair was dishevelled, his robes torn at the hem, and his face bore the grey pallor of a man who had used too much of himself in the warding. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and stared at Eleanor with an expression she could not read.

'By the old stones,' one of the guards whispered. 'What is she?'

The slipper contracted against her arch. A voice, silk-smooth and patient, slid through the bones of her skull. *They fear you. Good. Fear is the first thread of the Weave.*

Eleanor tried to answer—to say she was not a monster, that the glass was not her, that she was still Eleanor Vance of Ashworth Grange, who had scrubbed floors and polished silver and hidden a locket beneath a floorboard—but her tongue lay still in her mouth. The slipper held it.

Prince Alaric took a step forward. 'Eleanor. I know you are still in there. The woman I danced with. The woman who spoke to me on the balcony. I saw her.'

She wanted to tell him that the woman on the balcony had been half a lie, a gown of midnight mist woven by the same magic that was now consuming her, that the slipper had chosen him as the lure and her as the vessel. But the glass pulsed, and what came out was not her voice.

'You saw what the slipper allowed you to see.'

The words dropped from her lips like stones into still water. Her mouth shaped them, but the resonance beneath them was not her own—a harmonic, a second voice layered beneath the first, older and hungrier. Alaric flinched. His hand went to his sword.

'You see?'

The voice rang out from the edge of the clearing, sharp and carrying. Lady Tremaine stepped from the undergrowth, a torch in her left hand, its flame guttering in the damp air. Behind her came Drizella and Anastasia, their faces pale and gleaming with sweat, their own torches held high. Drizella's mouth hung open. Anastasia had one hand pressed to her chest as though her heart were trying to escape.

'A witch,' Lady Tremaine declared. She pointed at Eleanor, and the torch-flame leapt as though in agreement. 'I have known it for months. The strange hours. The whispers in the attic. And now look at her—a creature of dark magic, standing in a grove of sentient trees with glass fused to her flesh. What more proof does the Crown require?'

The guards shifted. One of them muttered a prayer.

Eleanor felt the slipper's warmth spread upward, a slow creep of heat that pushed the glass higher along her thigh. The sheath was past her knee now, the crystal lattice working its way toward her hip. She could feel the Ley Lines beneath the peat—a thrumming web of energy that answered the slipper's pulse, that flared with aurora-light in the roots of the willows. The trees shuddered. A low groan ran through the grove, and the branches overhead swayed without wind.

'Lady Tremaine,' Prince Alaric said, and his voice had gone cold. 'You will step back.'

'I will not.' Tremaine's gaunt face was alight with something beyond fear, a hunger that Eleanor recognised because she had felt it herself, the first time the slipper had promised her freedom. 'That creature has deceived you, Your Highness. She deceived us all. The slipper is mine by right, I have studied it, I have prepared for it, and I will not see it wasted on a servant girl who stumbled into power she never earned.'

Lord Alaric had not spoken. He had knelt at the edge of the clearing and opened his satchel, his grey hair falling across his face as he searched through its contents. His lips moved silently. Eleanor caught the words *counter-weave* and *the spirit of the lost* and something that sounded like a name she had heard before, in the Seeress's grove.

The slipper tightened. *He seeks to undo us. He will fail.*

'Be silent,' Eleanor hissed, but she did not know if she was speaking to the slipper or to herself.

Lady Tremaine stepped closer. The torch in her hand cast long shadows across the peat, and in the flickering light her face looked like a skull. 'You think I don't know what you are?' she said, her voice dropping to a hiss. 'I have read the same books you have, girl. The *Myths of the Umbral Weave*. The accounts of the vessels. I know what happens to those who bond with the glass. You are already lost.'

'Mother,' Anastasia whispered. 'Perhaps we should—'

'Quiet.' Tremaine did not look at her daughter. Her eyes were fixed on the slipper, and Eleanor saw in them the same desperate avarice she had seen in her own reflection in the bog pool. The desire for power. The terror of being nothing. The slipper had promised her freedom, but it had promised Lady Tremaine something else, restoration, perhaps, or revenge, or simply the chance to be seen as more than a disgraced noblewoman scrabbling at the edges of a world that had cast her out.

The slipper pulsed. *She would be a better vessel than you. She does not resist.*

Eleanor felt the glass creep another inch up her thigh. The cold was spreading now, a numbness that was worse than pain because it felt like forgetting. She could not remember the colour of her mother's eyes. She could not remember the weight of the locket in her palm.

'Lord Alaric,' Prince Alaric said, his voice tight with strain. 'Whatever you are going to do, do it now.'

The sorcerer looked up from his satchel. His face was grey, and Eleanor saw that the magical wound in his side, the wound the shadow-tendrils had torn through his ward, was seeping again, a dark stain spreading through his robes. But his hands were steady as he drew something from the satchel: a branch of willow wood, no longer than his forearm, its bark intricately carved with glyphs that pulsed with a faint silver light.

The Seeress Elara spoke for the first time since the riders had arrived. Her voice was the rustle of dry leaves.

'You found it.'

Lord Alaric held the branch up to the torchlight. The glyphs flared. The willows around the clearing groaned in answer, their roots shifting beneath the peat, and Eleanor felt the Ley Lines surge, a wave of raw energy that made the slipper contract so violently she gasped.

He has the keystone. He has the heart-wood. Destroy him.

The command hit her like a physical blow. Her right arm lifted without her consent, and shadow magic poured from her fingers, tendrils of darkness that coiled and snapped toward the sorcerer. Lord Alaric threw himself sideways, and the tendrils struck the willow behind him, gouging deep furrows in the ancient bark. The tree screamed, a high, thin sound that was not wind and not wood but something between.

'Eleanor!' Alaric's voice was raw. 'Fight it!'

She tried. She dug her left foot into the peat and felt the cold mud squelch between her toes, and she remembered the kitchen floor at Ashworth Grange, the rough stone beneath her bare feet, the ache in her back from scrubbing, the way the locket had warmed against her skin when she had first found it beneath the floorboard. She remembered Gareth's calloused hand steadying her elbow when she stumbled in the yard. She remembered the library's dust-motes dancing in the afternoon light.

The slipper pulsed. *Forget. Forget. Forget.*

The word was a tide, and it washed through her mind like ink through water. The memories dimmed. The kitchen floor blurred. Gareth's face became a smudge of colour, then nothing.

'She's losing,' Drizella breathed. 'Mother, she's losing.'

'Good,' Lady Tremaine said. She dropped her torch and strode forward, her hands outstretched toward the slipper. 'The glass is mine. I have waited—'

The willows moved.

Roots burst from the peat, thick and gnarled and glowing with Ley Line energy, and wrapped around Lady Tremaine's ankles. She shrieked and fell, her fingers clawing at the mud. Drizella screamed. Anastasia stood frozen, her torch trembling in her grip, her mouth working soundlessly.

'The grove protects its own,' Elara said. Her obsidian eyes had fixed on Eleanor, and there was something in them that might have been sorrow. 'But the grove cannot protect her from herself.'

Lord Alaric had regained his feet. The willow branch was glowing now, a steady silver radiance that pulsed in counterpoint to the slipper's dark rhythm. He began to walk toward Eleanor, and the guards parted to let him pass. Prince Alaric moved to follow, but the sorcerer held up a hand.

'No, Your Highness. This is old magic. Older than the kingdom. If I fail, you must be ready to do what is necessary.'

The Prince's face twisted. 'I will not—'

'You will.' Lord Alaric's voice was gentle, and terrible. 'You are the Crown. You will do what the Crown requires.'

Eleanor watched them through eyes that were no longer entirely her own. The slipper's voice had become a chorus now, a thousand whispers layered into one, and they were telling her to reach out, to seize the branch, to snap it, to silence

the sorcerer before he could complete the counter-weave. Her right hand was already lifting, shadow magic coiling around her fingers like smoke.

But her left hand, the hand that had worn the locket, the hand that had scrubbed floors and polished silver and pressed against the warm glass of the attic window, her left hand reached down and pressed against the glass sheath that encased her thigh.

The cold bit into her palm. She pushed.

The slipper screamed.

It was a sound that existed only in her skull, a shriek of pure malevolence that made the willows shudder and the Ley Lines flare. The guards stumbled back. Drizella fell to her knees. Lady Tremaine, still pinned by the roots, let out a howl of rage and thwarted hunger.

You cannot break me. You are the bridge. You are the vessel. You are,

'I am Eleanor Vance,' she said aloud, and her voice was her own. It was thin and cracked and terrified, but it was hers. 'I scrubbed the kitchen floor. I hid a locket beneath a floorboard. I danced with a prince. And I will not be your servant.'

The glass did not break. But it stopped creeping.

Lord Alaric reached her. The willow branch was inches from her face now, and she could see the glyphs carved into its bark, symbols that matched the ones that had flared on her gown of midnight mist, the ones that had pulsed in the library book, the ones that Elara had traced in the air with her ancient fingers.

'The spirit of the lost,' he said, and his voice was a thread. 'Your mother knew the words. She spoke them here, in this grove, when she broke her own slipper. I can only hope they will work again.'

He pressed the branch against the glass sheath.

The clearing exploded with light.

Roots of the Ancient

The light did not fade so much as shatter into splinters of silver and green. Eleanor felt the willow branch's touch against the glass encasing her leg as a shock that travelled through bone and sinew, a cold so absolute it registered as burning. The clearing around her blazed with Ley Line energy, the ancient trees leaning inward, their bark splitting with seams of emerald radiance. She heard Lord Alaric's voice through the roar, shouting words she could not parse, his hand still pressed against the branch that now flared like a torch of frozen fire.

Her leg buckled. The living glass that had climbed past her knee now flickered, its surface crawling with reflections that were not her own. Faces she had seen beneath the still pool's surface—hollow-eyed, mouthing silent warnings—now swam across the crystalline sheath. The Shadow Slipper screamed without sound, a vibration that travelled up her spine and lodged behind her eyes.

'The branch is not a weapon,' Lord Alaric shouted, his voice strained. The Royal Sorcerer's grey hair stood wild, singed at the tips from the discharge of magic. He held the willow branch before him like a staff, its carved glyphs now alive with moving light. 'It is a conduit. The Seeress meant the spirit of the lost—the Ley Lines themselves.'

Eleanor tried to answer, but the slipper's voice rose in her skull, honeyed and venomous. *He lies. He would sever you from power. From me.*

She pressed both hands against her temples. Her left hand—still flesh, still hers—trembled against skin that felt too cold. Her right hand had changed. The fingers were longer, the nails darkened to obsidian, the knuckles sharp beneath alabaster skin. She stared at it, and the slipper's whisper coiled tighter.

You are becoming what you were always meant to be.

'Eleanor.' Prince Alaric's voice cut through. He had dismounted, his sword drawn but lowered, his face a mask of anguish and resolve. Behind him, the Royal Guard had formed a loose perimeter, their torches guttering in the charged air. 'Listen to Lord Alaric. Fight it.'

She wanted to answer. She wanted to tell him that fighting felt like drowning, that every surge of resistance was met with a counter-wave of seductive promise. The slipper showed her visions: a throne of woven shadow, a kingdom where none could command her, a beauty so absolute that even the stars would bow. The images were sweet as poisoned honey.

Lord Alaric took a step closer, the willow branch humming in his grip. 'The Ley Lines are rising. Do you feel them?'

She did. Beneath the slipper's cold burn, beneath the corruption threading through her veins like ink through water, she sensed a deeper pulse. The earth beneath the Whispering Willows thrummed with ancient magic, a current that predated the Umbral Weave, predated the kingdom, predated memory. It was the

land's own heartbeat, slow and patient and utterly indifferent to the struggles of mortals.

'The branch channels that power,' Lord Alaric said. 'But it needs an anchor. A will to direct it.'

Lady Tremaine's laugh cut through the clearing like a blade. She had wrenched free of the roots that held her, her grey hair unpinned and wild, her gaunt face alight with fevered purpose. 'You speak of anchors and conduits as if the girl could understand them. She is a vessel. Nothing more.'

Anastasia and Drizella huddled at the edge of the thicket, their ball-gowns torn and mud-spattered. Drizella's face was blotched with tears. Anastasia stared at Eleanor with an expression that might have been horror or might have been longing.

'Mother,' Anastasia said, her voice thin. 'Please.'

Lady Tremaine did not look at her daughters. Her gaze was fixed on the slipper, on the way it pulsed with malevolent radiance. 'Do you know what that relic is worth? What it could command? I will not be reduced to nothing while a servant girl stumbles into power she cannot comprehend.'

Eleanor felt the slipper's attention shift. It had been focused inward, weaving its corruption through her, but now it turned outward, assessing the threat. Lady Tremaine's desire was a beacon—sharp, desperate, uncomplicated. The slipper recognised hunger when it saw it.

She would take me from you.

The whisper was silk-wrapped steel. *She would use me as she used your mother. As she used you. End her.*

'No,' Eleanor breathed.

The ground shook. The willows groaned, their branches thrashing, and the Ley Line energy that had been rising in a steady tide now surged. The bark of the nearest tree split with a crack like thunder, and from the fissure poured light the colour of spring leaves, of moss after rain, of life stubbornly asserting itself against winter.

The Seeress Elara stood at the edge of the clearing, her void-dark eyes reflecting the emerald glow. She had not moved since the ritual began, her wizened hands folded into her sleeves, her expression unreadable. But now she raised one hand, and the willows answered.

Roots erupted from the soil. Not the slow, creeping roots that had restrained Lady Tremaine earlier, but thick, ancient tendrils that glowed with the same green fire as the trees. They coiled around the clearing, forming a barrier between Eleanor and the guards, between Lady Tremaine and the slipper, between the world of men and the Umbral Weave's encroaching darkness.

'She shields us,' Lord Alaric said, his voice hushed with something like awe. 'The Seeress. She is channelling the Ley Lines through the willows.'

Eleanor felt it then, the ancient magic pressing against the slipper's hold, not attacking but enveloping, as if the earth itself were offering her an alternative to the cold perfection of the glass. The sensation was terrifying in its gentleness. The slipper's corruption was a cage, but it was a cage she understood. This, this vast, impersonal pulse of life, was incomprehensible.

They would trap you in flesh. In weakness. In death.

The slipper's voice had lost its honey. It was sharp now, urgent. *I offer eternity.*

The willow branch in Lord Alaric's hands flared brighter, and he cried out, his knuckles white where he gripped it. 'Eleanor, the Ley Lines are not your enemy. They are the land's own magic. Let them in.'

She could not. The slipper's hold was too deep, the glass too tightly fused to her flesh. But she could feel the Ley Line energy pressing against the corruption like water against a dam, seeking cracks, seeking entry. And she understood, with a clarity that cut through the slipper's whispers, that she did not need to break the dam herself. She only needed to stop holding it together.

She stopped fighting.

Not surrender, she had surrendered to the slipper too many times already. This was something else. A cessation of resistance. A willingness to let the ancient magic flow through her rather than against her.

The effect was immediate and devastating.

The glass sheath flickered. The dark glyphs that had been etching themselves into her skin wavered, their lines blurring. The slipper's voice rose to a shriek that was not sound but pressure, a spike of pure malice that drove her to her knees. The earth was cold and damp beneath her, and she pressed her palms against it, feeling the Ley Lines thrumming just below the surface.

'Yes,' Lord Alaric breathed. 'Yes. The land knows its own.'

Lady Tremaine moved.

She had been circling the edge of the clearing, her gaunt frame slipping between the glowing roots with a predator's patience. Now, with Eleanor on her knees and the slipper's hold wavering, she lunged. Her hand, bony, white-knuckled, the fingers hooked like talons, reached for the Shadow Slipper.

'Mother, no!' Drizella's cry was swallowed by the groan of the willows.

The trees responded before anyone else could. The roots that had formed a protective barrier now whipped inward, wrapping around Lady Tremaine's wrist, her arm, her waist. She screamed, a sound of pure, incandescent rage, and clawed at the roots with her free hand. Her fingers tore at the glowing bark, and the bark held.

'It is mine,' she spat. 'I have sacrificed everything for this. Everything.'

Eleanor looked up. Her vision was blurred, her body caught between the slipper's dark magic and the Ley Lines' surging power. She saw Lady Tremaine struggling against the roots, saw the woman's face contorted with a desperation that was almost indistinguishable from the slipper's hunger. And she understood,

in that moment, that Lady Tremaine was not her enemy. She was a mirror, a reflection of what Eleanor might become if she let the slipper's promises consume her.

The Seeress Elara lowered her hand. The roots tightened, pulling Lady Tremaine back from the slipper, from Eleanor, from the heart of the grove. The ancient woman's void-dark eyes met Eleanor's, and for a heartbeat, something passed between them. Not words. Not even understanding. Just the weight of shared knowledge: the slipper had been shattered once before. It could be shattered again.

The willows unleashed a guttural groan, a sound so deep it vibrated in Eleanor's chest. The Ley Line energy pulsed violently around the slipper, and the glass flickered once more. The faces trapped within the sheath, the hollow-eyed vessels of the Umbral Weave, opened their mouths in silent screams.

And Lady Tremaine, still straining against the roots, still reaching, laughed.

It was a terrible sound. Not triumphant, not even sane. Just the sound of something breaking.

'You think you can resist it?' she called to Eleanor. 'You think the land's magic will save you? I have studied the Umbral Weave for decades. I have read the texts your mother tried to destroy. The slipper does not let go. It only waits.'

The green light of the Ley Lines surged, and the slipper's malevolent glow dimmed in response. But it did not die. It pulsed, steady as a heartbeat, waiting.

Eleanor felt the ancient magic of the willows flowing through her, and beneath it, the slipper's corruption coiling tighter. The battle was not over. It had only begun.

Tremaine's Fall

The light was still dying when Lady Tremaine moved.

Eleanor saw it happen through a haze of green afterglow—the Ley Lines still shivering through the willow roots, the glass sheath on her leg still pulsing its steady, patient rhythm. Lord Alaric knelt three paces away, the carved branch trembling in his grip, his grey hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. The Royal Guard stood frozen in a loose ring, their torchlight guttering in the vapour that clung to the grove floor. Prince Alaric had taken half a step forward, his sword half-lowered, his face a confusion of longing and horror.

And Lady Tremaine, still tangled in the willow roots that the Seeress had commanded, lunged.

Not with grace. Not with calculation. With the raw, scrabbling desperation of a woman who had watched her last advantage slipping into the peat. The roots tore as she wrenched free—Eleanor heard the wet snap of living wood, saw the Seeress stagger at the grove's edge, her void-dark eyes widening. Lady Tremaine's gaunt frame hurtled across the clearing, her sharp features twisted into something that was not triumph. It was hunger. Pure and absolute.

'Mine,' she spat, and her fingers closed around the glass slipper.

Eleanor felt it. Not through her own body—the slipper was still fused to her foot, the sheath still climbing past her knee—but through the slipper itself. A jolt of recognition passed through the glass. A surge of something that was almost eagerness. The pulse beneath her skin quickened, and the whisper in her skull sharpened into a voice she had never heard before: cold, appraising, and deeply satisfied.

At last.

Lady Tremaine screamed.

It was not a scream of rage. It was a scream of agony, high and ragged, tearing out of her throat before she could shape it into words. Her hand, still wrapped around the slipper's curve, was dissolving. The flesh did not burn. It did not bleed. It simply... unravelled. Threads of shadow peeled away from her fingers, her knuckles, the fine bones of her wrist, each strand pulling free like wool from a torn garment. The darkness that had been her hand swirled upward, coiling around her forearm, her elbow, her shoulder, and the slipper drank it in.

Eleanor tried to pull back, but the sheath held her fast. She could only watch as her stepmother's arm vanished into the Umbral Weave, consumed by the very magic she had sought to command.

'It was... never... for me!' Lady Tremaine's voice gurgled, her sharp features contorting into a mask of pure terror. Her eyes—those cold, calculating eyes that had watched Eleanor scrub floors and empty chamber pots—went wide with a comprehension that had come too late. 'I only wanted—'

The shadow swallowed the rest.

Anastasia shrieked. Drizella's cry was louder, more guttural, the sound of a woman watching her world collapse into nightmare. They clutched each other on the far side of the clearing, their fine gowns mud-splattered, their faces white as chalk. The ambition that had burned in them since the ball was gone, replaced by a terror so absolute that Eleanor could smell it, sharp and metallic, like fear-sweat on cold skin.

Lady Tremaine's body was half-gone now. The shadow had consumed her arm, her shoulder, the right side of her torso. Her face remained, the gaunt cheeks hollowing further as the darkness pulled at her, and her mouth was still moving, still shaping words that no longer had sound. Her eyes met Eleanor's. For one breath, one heartbeat, the hatred in them flickered into something else. Something that might have been regret. Or simply the recognition of a trap sprung.

Then the shadow closed over her face, and she was gone.

A wisp of darkness hung in the air where Lady Tremaine had stood. It coiled once, twice, like smoke from a snuffed candle, and then the slipper drew it in. The glass sheath on Eleanor's leg flared cold, so cold that she gasped, and the whisper in her skull laughed. A soft, private sound, rich with satisfaction.

A willing vessel. She offered herself. The Weave accepts all who reach for it.

Eleanor's stomach lurched. The slipper had not merely killed her stepmother. It had claimed her. Added her to whatever dark reservoir it fed upon. The silhouettes beneath the pool's surface, the former vessels, the hollow-eyed servants, had gained another shape.

Lord Alaric was the first to speak. His voice was hoarse, scraped raw by the ritual he had barely survived. 'The Weave does not discriminate. It takes what is offered. She offered everything.'

Prince Alaric had not moved. His sword was still half-raised, his knuckles white on the hilt. His face was a study in fracture, the man who had danced with Eleanor at the ball, who had searched the kingdom for her, who had ridden to this cursed grove believing he could save her. Now he stared at the space where Lady Tremaine had been, and Eleanor saw him understand, truly understand, what the slipper was.

'She wanted it,' he said. His voice was flat. 'All along. She knew what it was, and she wanted it.'

'She knew enough to covet it,' the Seeress said. She had not moved from the grove's edge, but her hands were raised, the willow roots still stirring at her feet. 'She did not know enough to fear it.'

Anastasia made a sound that was half-sob, half-wail. 'Mother, she's, you let it—'

'I let nothing.' The Seeress's void-black eyes turned toward the Tremaine sisters. 'She grasped the slipper of her own will. The Weave does not compel. It waits.'

Eleanor felt the truth of that in her own leg. The sheath had not forced her to put the slipper on. It had only offered. She had accepted. And every step since, the ball, the dance, the flight down the castle steps, had been a step toward this grove, this moment, this choice that was not yet fully made.

The slipper pulsed. The whisper coiled through her thoughts like cold water finding its level.

You see now. You see what becomes of those who reach without understanding. But you, you are different. You are chosen. You are noble blood, touched by the old line. You can wield what she could only covet.

Eleanor's throat tightened. Noble blood. The locket beneath her bodice, the tarnished silver crest she had found beneath the library floorboard, seemed to warm against her skin. The Seeress had known her mother. Had known what ran in her veins. The slipper had not chosen her by chance.

Prince Alaric took a step toward her. His sword was still raised, but his eyes were on her face, searching for the woman beneath the corruption. The glass sheath had climbed past her knee. It was working toward her thigh. Her hair, once ash-blond, hung in sooty strands against her cheek. Her fingers had grown longer, paler, the nails faintly blue. She knew what she looked like. She had seen it in the still pool's reflection.

'Eleanor.' He said her name like a question.

'I'm still here,' she said. Her voice was her own. She held onto that. 'The slipper hasn't, I can still—'

You can still be free. The whisper was silk and shadow. You can still be beautiful. You can still be powerful. You need only let me in.

The grove had gone very quiet. The willows had stopped their groaning. The green light of the Ley Lines had dimmed to a faint shimmer beneath the peat. Even the Royal Guard, trained to stoicism, stood in rigid silence, their torchlight painting the twisted trees in flickering orange.

Lord Alaric turned to the Prince. His face was grey with exhaustion, the wound on his arm still seeping through its linen binding. 'Your Highness. The ritual, the branch, we must complete the counter-weave. The Ley Lines are still resonant. If we act now—'

'I know.' Prince Alaric did not look at him. He was still looking at Eleanor. 'I know what we must do.'

But he did not lower his sword.

Eleanor understood. She saw it in the set of his jaw, the anguish in his eyes. The slipper had fused to her. The corruption was spreading. If Lord Alaric used the keystone now, if he channelled the Ley Lines through the carved branch and shattered the glass, what would become of her? The sheath was part of her now. The slipper's voice lived inside her skull.

And the Prince, who had danced with her, who had searched for her, who had ridden through the moors believing he could save her, was being asked to choose.

He will choose the kingdom, the slipper murmured. He will choose duty. He will let the sorcerer destroy you. But I will not. I will protect you. I will make you strong.

'No,' Eleanor whispered. She did not know if she was answering the slipper or the Prince or the terror that was climbing her throat. 'No. I will not be protected by this.'

Prince Alaric heard her. His sword wavered. His eyes, those kind, intelligent eyes that had first seen her across a ballroom, were wet with something that might have been grief.

'I cannot,' he said. His voice broke on the second word. 'I cannot lose you to this.'

'Then don't.' Eleanor forced her left hand to move, pressing it against the glass sheath. The cold bit into her palm, but she held it there. 'I am still Eleanor Vance. I am still here. But I will not be her—' she jerked her chin toward the empty space where Lady Tremaine had stood, '—I will not reach for power and be consumed by it. If the slipper must be destroyed, then destroy it. Whatever it costs me.'

The whisper in her skull went silent. Not appeased. Waiting.

Lord Alaric raised the willow branch. The silver glyphs along its length began to glow, and the Ley Lines beneath the peat surged in answer. The ground trembled. The willows shuddered, their branches thrashing though there was no wind.

Prince Alaric did not lower his sword. But he did not step aside.

'Do it,' he said. 'And may the old magic forgive us both.'

The Prince's Choice

Prince Alaric did not lower his sword. But he did not step aside.

'Do it,' he said. 'And may the old magic forgive us both.'

Lord Alaric raised the willow branch. The carved glyphs along its length kindled with emerald fire, and the Ley Lines beneath the grove answered with a sound that was not sound at all. It was a pressure in the bones, a vibration that made the standing water in the bog pool shiver into concentric rings. The Whispering Willows groaned, their roots shifting beneath the peat like the limbs of something vast stirring from a long sleep.

Eleanor's hand lifted without her willing it. The glass sheath had climbed past her knee now, working its way toward her hip with the slow, patient hunger of ice forming on still water. Her fingers were longer than they had been an hour ago, the knuckles sharp beneath alabaster skin, the nails obsidian and faintly curved. The slipper's voice coiled through her thoughts, cold and intimate as a lover's whisper.

They will destroy you. They will destroy us. But we can stop them. We can stop them together.

She tried to answer, tried to form the words of defiance the Seeress had taught her, but her tongue was no longer entirely her own. The slipper had learned to speak through her mouth now, and she felt it gathering itself behind her teeth, ready to use her voice for its own purposes.

Lord Alaric began the counter-weave. The willow branch traced a pattern in the air, and where it passed, the Ley Lines answered with threads of silver light that hung suspended like cracks in the world itself. The threads wove together, forming a lattice of pure, ancient energy that pulsed in time with the earth's hidden currents.

'Eleanor,' Prince Alaric said.

His voice was not loud. It was not a command, not a plea. It was simply her name, spoken as if he were testing the weight of it, as if he were holding something fragile and precious and trying to remember its shape.

She looked at him. The slipper's influence made her vision swim with shadow, the world reduced to a grey haze through which only the brightest lights could pierce. But his face was there, at the edge of the clearing, his sword still raised, his left arm bound in linen where the shadow-tendrils had wounded him at the ball. The stain on the bandage had darkened, seeping through in a slow bloom of rust and black.

He was afraid. She could see it in the way his grip shifted on the sword hilt, the way his eyes moved from her transformed face to Lord Alaric's weaving and back again. But he was not afraid of her. That was the thing she could not quite understand. He was afraid *for* her.

'Eleanor,' he said again, and this time his voice cracked on the second syllable. 'I know you're still in there.'

The slipper surged. Her features twisted, the shadow-stuff of the Umbral Weave rushing to the surface, and for a moment her face was not her own. It was the face from the pool, the hollow mimic, the silent twin. Her hair writhed with tendrils of living darkness, and her eyes went full obsidian, the whites swallowed by void-black.

He lies. He wants to cage us. He wants to shatter us as they shattered us before.

But beneath the slipper's voice, beneath the cold fury of its possessiveness, Eleanor heard something else. She heard the Prince's breathing, ragged and quick. She heard the wet, heavy sound of the willow roots shifting in the bog, the Seeress Elara's low chant threading through the trees. She heard Drizella and Anastasia, huddled together at the edge of the grove, one of them weeping, the other utterly silent.

And she heard her own heart beating. It was still there. Still hers.

'My lord,' Lord Alaric called, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining the counter-weave. The lattice of Ley Line energy was growing brighter now, the silver threads thickening into bands of liquid light. 'I need a diversion. The slipper is fighting me. If she can find even a moment of clarity, a moment when its grip is loosened, I can sever the connection.'

Prince Alaric looked at the Royal Guard, who had formed a defensive perimeter around the clearing. Their faces were pale, their hands unsteady on their weapons. They had seen Lady Tremaine consumed. They had seen the willows come alive with ancient magic. They were loyal, but loyalty had its limits, and those limits had been crossed an hour ago.

'Stand fast,' the Prince said. 'Hold the line.'

He turned back to Eleanor. The sword in his hand was a fine blade, silver-chased, the pommel set with a sapphire that caught the Ley Line light and threw it back in scattered fragments of blue. He had carried it since his coming-of-age, had trained with it, had sworn oaths upon it. It was the sword of a prince, forged for ceremony and defence and, if necessary, for killing.

He lowered it.

The blade dipped toward the earth, the tip resting in the mud at his feet. His grip loosened, and for a moment it seemed he might let it fall entirely. But he did not. He simply held it at his side, useless, a weight he no longer needed to carry.

'Eleanor,' he said, and this time her name was not a question. It was an answer.

The slipper screamed. It was a sound that did not come from her throat but from the glass itself, a high, thin keening that set the willow leaves trembling and sent ripples racing across the bog pool. The shadow-tendrils in her hair lashed outward, striking at the air, at the Prince, at Lord Alaric's lattice of light. One of

them caught the Prince across the cheek, opening a thin line of red from temple to jaw.

He did not flinch.

'I see you,' he said. 'Not the slipper. Not the shadow. You. The woman who came to my ball in a gown of midnight mist and looked at me as if I were a man and not a crown. You asked me what I wanted. Not what the kingdom wanted. Not what my father wanted. What I wanted.'

Eleanor felt the slipper's grip falter. It was only a flicker, a momentary loosening of the cold bands around her thoughts, but it was enough. She remembered the ballroom. She remembered the chandeliers, the swirl of dancers, the way his hand had felt on her waist. She remembered thinking that he looked lonely, surrounded by all that splendour, and that she understood loneliness better than she understood anything else.

'I wanted to dance with you,' he said. 'That's all. I just wanted to dance with you.'

The glass sheath on her leg pulsed, and for the first time since it had begun its climb past her knee, it wavered. The Ley Lines surged in answer, Lord Alaric's lattice brightening until the grove was lit as if by a second moon. The Whispering Willows groaned, their roots pressing upward through the peat, glowing with emerald fire.

'Now, my lord!' Lord Alaric shouted. 'Strike now!'

But Prince Alaric did not strike. He stepped forward instead, closing the distance between himself and Eleanor, and when the shadow-tendrils rose to meet him, he did not raise his sword to parry. He let them come. They wrapped around his arms, his chest, his throat, and still he did not fight.

'Eleanor,' he whispered. 'Come back.'

She saw herself reflected in his eyes. Not the monster. Not the vessel of the Umbral Weave. She saw the girl who had hidden a glass slipper beneath the floorboards of an attic, who had dared to dream of a life beyond servitude, who had worn a gown of living shadow and danced until midnight. She saw the girl who had been loved, briefly and impossibly, and who had loved in return.

The slipper's voice rose to a shriek. *He will betray you. He will destroy you. He is like all the others. He wants only what we can give him.*

But Eleanor had spent her whole life being told what she wanted. She knew the taste of that lie. She knew its weight.

'No,' she said.

The word was hers. It came from her throat, shaped by her tongue, pushed out into the cold night air on her breath. The slipper fought her, tried to swallow the sound, tried to turn it into a scream of rage. But the word had already left her, and it hung in the space between her and the Prince like a hand extended.

Prince Alaric reached out and took it.

His fingers closed around her transformed hand, the one with the elongated fingers and the obsidian nails and the alabaster skin. He did not flinch at the cold. He did not recoil from the glass sheath that had crept past her knee. He simply held on, his grip firm and steady, and when the shadow-tendrils tightened around his throat, he smiled.

'I am not afraid of you,' he said, and she understood that he was speaking not to her but to the slipper. 'You cannot make me fear her.'

The Ley Lines roared.

Lord Alaric drove the willow branch into the earth, and the counter-weave erupted outward in a wave of silver fire. The shadow-tendrils recoiled, screaming in a voice that was not a voice, and the glass sheath on Eleanor's leg flickered, thinned, showed for a single heartbeat the pale flesh beneath.

The slipper fought back. The Umbral Weave surged through its vessel, and for a moment Eleanor's features twisted again, the shadow-stuff rushing to reclaim what it had lost. But the Prince's hand was still wrapped around hers, and she could feel the warmth of his skin through the cold of the glass, and she understood, with a clarity that cut through the slipper's whispers like a blade, that she was not alone.

She had been alone in the attic. She had been alone at the ball. She had been alone in the grove, kneeling at the edge of the pool, watching her reflection become something monstrous.

But she was not alone now.

'Do it,' she said, and her voice was her own. 'Lord Alaric. Do it now.'

The Royal Sorcerer did not hesitate. The willow branch blazed with emerald and silver, and the Ley Lines answered with a sound like the earth itself crying out. The lattice of light contracted, pressing inward, and the slipper's scream became a shriek of pure, undiluted fury.

The glass sheath on Eleanor's leg cracked.

It was a small sound, a sharp, brittle snap that might have been a twig breaking underfoot. But it echoed through the grove like thunder, and the shadow-tendrils that had wrapped around the Prince's throat went slack. The slipper's voice faltered, stumbled, fell silent.

And in the silence, Eleanor heard the Prince whisper her name one more time. 'Eleanor.'

She looked at him. Her hair was still dark, her skin still pale, her fingers still too long and too sharp. But her eyes were her own. Deep-set blue, the colour of the sky before a storm, and in them was a desperate, fragile hope.

'I'm here,' she said. 'I'm still here.'

The Royal Guard shifted uneasily at the edge of the grove. Drizella had stopped weeping. Anastasia had not moved. The Seeress Elara stood beneath the willows, her void-dark eyes fixed on the lattice of Ley Line energy, her lips moving in a silent chant.

Lord Alaric held the counter-weave steady, the willow branch trembling in his grip. The crack in the glass sheath had not spread. The slipper's voice had not returned. But the Umbral Weave was patient, and its corruption was not so easily undone.

Prince Alaric did not let go of Eleanor's hand.

'We will find a way,' he said. 'Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs.'

She wanted to believe him. The slipper's influence still coiled through her thoughts, a cold pressure at the base of her skull, a whisper waiting to return. But his hand was warm, and his eyes were kind, and she had spent so long believing that kindness was a thing that happened to other people.

'The counter-weave is holding,' Lord Alaric said, his voice hoarse with exhaustion. 'But it will not hold forever. The slipper is wounded, not destroyed.'

'Then we wound it again,' Prince Alaric said. 'And again. As many times as it takes.'

He looked at Eleanor, and she saw that his eyes were wet. The line of blood on his cheek had begun to dry, a dark crust against his skin, and the bandage on his arm was soaked through. But he was smiling, and the smile was not the polished, practised expression of a prince greeting his subjects. It was the smile of a man who had been given something he had not expected to receive.

'You came back,' he said.

'You called,' she answered.

The Whispering Willows groaned, and the Ley Lines pulsed beneath the earth, and the crack in the glass sheath glittered like a promise.

The Breaking

The crack in the glass sheath held, glittering like a promise.

But promises, Eleanor had learned, were the Umbral Weave's favourite currency.

The Ley Lines surged beneath the forgotten grove, and the Whispering Willows groaned as their roots drank deep from currents older than the kingdom. Lord Alaric kept the willow branch raised, its carved surface humming with borrowed light, and the fracture in the obsidian encasement pulsed with a rhythm that matched Eleanor's faltering heartbeat. Prince Alaric's hand remained pressed against her shoulder, his fingers warm through the living glass, and she could feel the tremor in his grip. Not fear. Restraint. He was holding himself back from pulling her free, because there was nothing to pull free from. The slipper was her. She was the slipper. The crack in the glass was a crack in her own body.

The cold thought threaded through her mind, and this time it did not whisper.

You will not survive this severance.

The voice came from everywhere. From the glass sheath fused past her thigh. From the pool's black surface. From the space behind her own thoughts where her mother's face used to live. The slipper's voice had fallen silent when the crack appeared, but this was different. This was the Weave itself, speaking through the part of it that had grown inside her.

Eleanor opened her mouth to answer, but the words that emerged were not the ones she chose.

'I am the vessel,' her voice said, flat and resonant. 'I am the conduit. I am the—'

'No,' she gasped, and the effort of reclaiming her own tongue sent a spike of pain through her jaw. 'You are *nothing*.'

The glass sheath tightened around her ribs.

Prince Alaric's hand pressed harder against her shoulder. 'Fight it. Whatever it's saying, whatever it's showing you—'

'It's not showing me anything,' Eleanor said, and her voice cracked on the last word. 'It's *using* me. My mouth. My breath. I can feel it shaping my tongue.'

The Seeress Elara stepped forward, her obsidian eyes reflecting the aurora-light pulsing through the willow roots. Her wizened hands moved in a pattern Eleanor could not follow, and the grove answered. The trees shuddered. The pool rippled. The silhouettes beneath its surface stirred like disturbed sediment.

'The Ley Lines are rising,' the Seeress said. 'But the Weave will not release its hold willingly. It has grown deep roots in you, child. Deeper than the glass.'

Eleanor looked down at her right hand. The fingers were still long. Still wrong. The nails gleamed like polished obsidian. But the skin between her knuckles had begun to shift, pale grey fading to something closer to flesh. The transformation was reversing, but slowly. Too slowly. The slipper was fighting back.

'Lord Alaric,' the Seeress said, 'the branch. Again.'

The Royal Sorcerer's face was grey with exhaustion, his deep blue robes torn and singed from the earlier warding. He raised the willow branch a second time, and the glyphs carved into its surface flared with Ley Line light. The crack in the glass sheath widened by a hair's breadth, and Eleanor felt the change like a splinter of ice driven into her hip.

She did not scream. She had screamed enough.

'It's not enough,' she said, and her voice was her own. 'Breaking it piece by piece won't work. The Weave will just grow back. I can feel it. Every time we crack the glass, it pulls more shadow from the pool. It's *feeding*.'

Prince Alaric turned to Lord Alaric. 'Is she right?'

The sorcerer's silence was answer enough.

Eleanor closed her eyes. The slipper's voice had fallen silent, but the cold thought was still there, waiting. She could feel it coiled behind her heartbeat, patient and certain. The Weave did not need to speak. It had already won. All it had to do was wait until she exhausted herself, and the glass would seal itself anew.

She remembered the Seeress's words from what felt like a lifetime ago. *The Weave takes only what is offered*.

She had never offered it anything. It had taken anyway.

But the Ley Lines were not the Weave. The Ley Lines were older. Wilder. They ran beneath the Whispering Willows like veins of light, and the trees drank from them, and the trees had no masters. The Weave could not touch them. The Weave could only corrupt what it could reach.

Eleanor opened her eyes.

'Lord Alaric,' she said. 'The branch. I need you to touch it to the glass.'

The sorcerer hesitated. 'If I do that, the Ley Line energy will flow directly into the slipper. It could destroy you.'

'It's already destroying me.' She met his gaze. 'At least this way, I choose how.'

Prince Alaric's hand tightened on her shoulder. 'Eleanor—'

'You said you wanted to dance with me.' She did not look at him. She could not. 'Let me finish this dance first.'

Lord Alaric stepped forward. The willow branch hummed in his grip, and the glyphs along its length pulsed with a light that had no colour Eleanor could name. It was the colour of roots drinking deep. The colour of old magic, patient and slow.

'This will hurt,' he said.

'I know.'

He pressed the branch to the glass sheath.

The world went white.

Eleanor felt the Ley Lines surge through her body like a river breaking its banks. The light was not gentle. It was not kind. It was the raw, untamed current that had carved the Blackfen moors and fed the Whispering Willows since before the

kingdom had a name. It poured into the glass sheath and filled every crack, every fissure, every invisible fracture the counter-weave had opened. It did not ask permission. It did not care about the cost.

And the Shadow Slipper screamed.

The sound was not a sound. It was a vibration in the marrow. A resonance that bypassed the ears and struck directly at the place where fear lived. Eleanor felt it in her teeth. In the roots of her hair. In the glass sheath that encased her leg, which began to glow from within, not with the slipper's cold luminescence, but with the fierce, burning light of the Ley Lines.

The slipper fought back.

Shadow poured from the pool. The silhouettes beneath its surface rose, their robed forms breaching the black water like drowned things surfacing. They had no faces. They had no voices. But they reached for her with hands made of absence, and Eleanor understood what they were. The Weave's former vessels. The ones who had not been strong enough. The ones who had not had a prince's hand on their shoulder, or a sorcerer's branch at their side, or a seeress chanting in the grove.

The cold thought threaded through her mind one final time.

You will join them.

'No,' Eleanor said, and the word was a blade. 'I will not.'

She reached for the Ley Lines.

Not with her hands. With whatever part of her was still hers. The part that remembered her mother's locket, warm against her chest. The part that remembered Gareth's calloused fingers pressing a bread crust into her palm. The part that remembered a stable boy's kindness and a prince's hand on her shoulder and a ballroom floor she had crossed like a woman who belonged there.

The Ley Lines answered.

Light poured through the willow roots and into her body, and the glass sheath began to glow so brightly that Eleanor could see her own bones through the glare. The shadow-shapes recoiled. The silhouettes in the pool sank back beneath the surface, their reaching hands dissolving into mist. The slipper's scream rose to a pitch that shattered the air itself, and the glass sheath that had climbed past her thigh began to crack, not in one place but everywhere, a web of fractures spreading like ice breaking on a winter pond.

Eleanor felt the Weave's grip loosen. Just for a moment. Just enough.

She pushed.

The Ley Line energy surged through her and into the slipper, and the slipper, which had been made to consume desire, could not consume this. The Ley Lines were not desire. They were not hunger. They were the opposite of the Umbral Weave. They were the world's own heartbeat, ancient and indifferent, and they had no interest in what Eleanor wanted. They only flowed where they were channelled.

The Shadow Slipper shattered.

The sound was not a scream this time. It was a detonation. A thunderclap of obsidian and shadow that sent shards of living glass spinning into the grove, each fragment trailing darkness like smoke from a dying fire. The Weave's hold on Eleanor's body snapped, and she felt the cold thought in her mind go silent, truly silent, for the first time since she had slipped the glass onto her foot.

She collapsed.

Prince Alaric caught her before she hit the ground. His arms were around her, and his voice was saying her name, over and over, but she could barely hear him. Her body was her own again. She could feel every part of it, and every part of it was screaming. The glass sheath was gone. Her leg was flesh and blood and bone, and the skin was raw and new and stung as though she had been burned. But it was her skin. Her leg. Her body.

She lifted her right hand. The fingers were shorter. The nails were pink and human. The alabaster pallor had faded to a living flush, and the veins beneath her wrist were blue, not black.

Her hair fell across her face, and it was ash-blond again.

'Eleanor,' Prince Alaric said, and his voice broke on her name. 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I can hear you.'

The grove was silent. The Whispering Willows had stopped groaning. The pool was still and black, but the silhouettes beneath its surface were gone. The shards of the Shadow Slipper lay scattered across the moss like fallen stars, their light fading, their edges crumbling into dust.

Lord Alaric lowered the willow branch. His face was grey, and his hands were shaking, but he was smiling. 'It's done,' he said. 'The Weave has withdrawn. The slipper is destroyed.'

The Seeress Elara stepped forward and knelt beside Eleanor. Her obsidian eyes, which had seen centuries of shadow and light, regarded the girl with something that might have been pride.

'You did what the slipper's maker could not,' she said. 'You let go.'

Eleanor closed her eyes. She could feel the locket against her chest, still warm. She could feel the prince's arms around her, still trembling. She could feel the Ley Lines humming beneath the earth, patient and eternal.

She was free.

And she was scarred, and she was exhausted, and she did not know what she was now, but she was free.

From the edge of the grove, Drizella's voice broke the silence. 'Is she dead?'

'No,' Prince Alaric said, and his voice was fierce with relief. 'She's alive.'

Anastasia made a sound that might have been a sob. 'And the slipper?'

'Destroyed,' Lord Alaric said. 'The Umbral Weave has no hold here.'

The Royal Guard, who had stood frozen at the perimeter throughout the ritual, began to lower their weapons. One of them crossed himself. Another muttered something that sounded like a prayer.

Eleanor opened her eyes and looked up at the prince. His face was etched with relief and sorrow, and she understood the sorrow. She had seen her reflection in the pool. She knew what the slipper had made of her, and she knew that some of those changes might never fully fade. The scar on her leg where the glass had fused to her skin. The memory of a voice in her mind that had worn her like a gown. The knowledge that she had been, for a time, a vessel for something that hungered.

But she was still here.

'You caught me,' she said.

Prince Alaric looked down at her, and his eyes were wet. 'I told you I would.'

The Seeress rose, her ancient bones creaking, and turned to face the grove. The Whispering Willows stood silent, their bark still glowing faintly with Ley Line light. The pool was a mirror now, reflecting only the evening sky.

'The Weave will not return to this place,' she said. 'But it will not forget. The slipper was only one of its relics. There will be others.'

Eleanor closed her eyes again. She did not want to think about other relics. She did not want to think about the Umbral Weave, or the shadow-dimension that had almost claimed her, or the cold thought that had tried to erase her memories one by one.

She wanted to sleep.

But before she slept, she wanted one thing more.

'My mother's locket,' she said. 'Is it still warm?'

Prince Alaric's hand moved to her chest, where the tarnished silver rested against her skin. He did not touch the locket. He only felt the air above it, and his expression shifted.

'It's cooling,' he said. 'But it's still there.'

Eleanor nodded. The locket had pulsed in time with something beneath the attic floor. It had known the slipper was there. It had known what she was becoming. And it had stayed warm, even when the cold thought had tried to take her mother's face from her memory.

She would learn what that meant. But not tonight.

Tonight, she would let the prince hold her, and she would feel the Ley Lines humming beneath the earth, and she would remember that she had been strong enough to break free.

The shards of the Shadow Slipper crumbled into dust, and the wind scattered them across the Blackfen moors, and the Whispering Willows stood silent beneath the fading light.

The Scarred Guardian

The locket against her chest had cooled.

Ella noticed it before she noticed anything else—the small oval of silver resting against her breastbone no longer warm, no longer pulsing with that steady rhythm that had once seemed to beat in time with something beneath the attic floorboards. It was simply metal now. Simply a locket. She could feel its edges pressing into her skin through the torn remnants of the gown of midnight mist, which had dissolved into wisps of shadow-smoke the moment the slipper shattered, leaving her in the simple shift she had worn beneath. The fabric clung to her, damp with bog water and sweat, but it was her own body inside it. Her own unglassed flesh.

The realisation came slowly, the way cold seeps through a cracked windowpane. She was lying on her side in the wet earth at the edge of the still pool, her cheek pressed into moss that smelled of peat and copper. The grove was silent now—no hum, no resonance in the marrow of the willows, no vibration beneath the earth. Just the drip of water from leaf to pool, and the distant call of a moorland bird settling for the evening.

Her fingers twitched. They were her fingers. Short, blunt, the nails ragged and lined with grime, but hers. She flexed them, watching the knuckles whiten and flush pink again, and the relief that flooded through her was so sharp it almost hurt.

‘Ella.’



The voice came from somewhere above her. Prince Alaric. She knew the timbre now—had learned it in the ballroom, in the balcony gardens, in the desperate moments when he had held her and refused to let the slipper’s voice claim her. She turned her head, and the movement sent a dull ache through her neck and shoulders, as though she had been running for hours. He was kneeling beside her, his tunic torn at the sleeve where the shadow-tendrils had caught him, the linen beneath dark with dried blood. His face was pale beneath the fading light, but his eyes—kind, intelligent, the eyes she had first noticed in the Grand Ballroom—were wet with something she could not name.

‘You’re here,’ he said. ‘You’re still here.’

She tried to answer, but her throat was raw. She swallowed, tasted copper and bog water, and managed a single word. ‘Yes.’

His hand found hers, and the warmth of his palm against her cold fingers was almost too much to bear. She did not pull away.

Beyond him, the grove was coming back into focus. The Whispering Willows stood in a circle around the still pool, their bark no longer crawling with glyphs, their branches no longer twisted into faces. They were simply trees again—ancient, gnarled, their roots drinking from the Ley Lines that still hummed somewhere far beneath the earth, but quiet now. Resting. The Seeress Elara knelt at the edge of the pool, her obsidian eyes fixed on the water’s surface, which had gone utterly black and motionless. The silhouettes beneath—the robed figures

that had once been vessels—were gone. The pool reflected only the darkening sky and the first faint stars.

Lord Alaric stood a few paces away, leaning heavily on a staff of willow wood. His grey hair was dishevelled, his deep blue robes torn at the shoulder where the same shadow-tendrils that had wounded the prince had caught him. His face had the grey pallor of a man who had poured too much of himself into warding, but his eyes were clear. He was speaking to the Royal Guard—three of them, their armour dulled by moorland mist, their faces tight with the effort of understanding what they had witnessed.

‘—not a curse in the traditional sense,’ he was saying, his voice hoarse but steady. ‘The Shadow Slipper was a relic of the Umbral Weave. A conduit. It granted desires, yes, but each desire fed the Weave itself, drawing the wearer deeper into its influence until the boundary between servant and master dissolved entirely.’ He paused, coughing into his sleeve. When he lowered his hand, there was no blood. ‘The entity behind it, the intelligence that spoke through the glass, is ancient. Older than Eldoria. Older than the kingdom’s oldest oaths. It feeds on yearning, on want, on the desperate hope that somewhere, somehow, life might be better than this.’

One of the guards shifted his weight. ‘And now, my lord? Is it destroyed?’

‘Weakened,’ Lord Alaric said. ‘Not destroyed. The Ley Lines of this grove, the Whispering Willows, are one of the few forces in the kingdom capable of shattering such a

relic. The willows have stood here for millennia, their roots sunk deep into the raw magic beneath the moor. When the Seeress channelled that energy through the willow branch, it was not merely a counter-weave. It was a flood. The slipper could not withstand it.' He glanced at the shattered remnants scattered across the moss, shards of glass no larger than grains of sand, already sinking into the earth. 'But the Umbral Weave itself is not gone. It has simply withdrawn. There are other relics. Other conduits.'

Ella listened, and the words settled into her like stones dropped into the still pool. The slipper was gone. The voice, the cold thought that had threaded through her mind, that had spoken through her lips, that had worn her body like a gown, was silent. She was free. And yet the freedom felt less like victory and more like waking from a fever: her limbs were heavy, her mind slow, and the world around her seemed too bright and too loud, as though she had been living in a half-dream for weeks.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows, and the prince's hand moved to her back, steadying her. The shift she wore was torn at the shoulder, and beneath it, her skin was marked with faint, shimmering streaks, silver-grey, like moonlight caught in cobwebs. They traced the path the glass sheath had taken, from her left foot up past her knee, and when she moved, they caught the light in a way that was not quite natural. Not quite human.

She stared at them for a long moment, and the prince said, 'They will fade. Lord Alaric believes they are scars of the Weave's touch, residual magic, nothing more.'

‘Nothing more,’ Ella repeated. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. Hoarse, but hers. No echo. No whisper beneath the words.

The Seeress rose from the edge of the pool and crossed to where Ella knelt in the mud. Her obsidian eyes, void-dark, mirror-black, met Ella’s, and for a long moment, neither spoke. Then the old woman reached out and placed a hand on Ella’s cheek, her palm rough and warm.

‘You broke it,’ the Seeress said. ‘You let the Ley Lines flood through you, and you did not break. You bent, child. You bent until you were almost broken, but you did not break.’

Ella shook her head. ‘I almost didn’t. I almost let it take me. If the prince hadn’t—’

‘If the prince hadn’t spoken to you, you would still have fought,’ the Seeress said. ‘I saw it. In the pool. The moment you said no, the moment you chose to resist, that was yours. Not his. Not the Ley Lines. Yours.’

Ella closed her eyes. The locket was still cool against her chest. She could feel the shape of it beneath her shift, the unfamiliar crest pressing into her skin, and she thought of her mother, the mother she could barely remember, whose eyes she had once known by heart, whose face the slipper had stolen from her memory. The memory was returning now, slowly, like ink bleeding through wet paper. She could almost see her mother’s eyes. Almost.

‘The locket,’ she said. ‘It was warm before. Pulsing. Now it’s just, cold.’



‘Because the Weave has withdrawn,’ Lord Alaric said, limping closer. The guards parted to let him through. ‘The locket was resonating with the slipper’s presence. Now that the slipper is shattered, the resonance has ceased.’ He studied her for a moment, his grey eyes sharp despite his exhaustion. ‘You found the locket beneath a floorboard in the library, you said. Before the slipper ever touched your foot.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it is not a relic of the Weave. It is something else. Something older, perhaps. Something of your mother’s.’

Ella’s hand moved to the locket, pressing it against her chest. The metal was still cold, but it felt solid. Real. Hers.

Lord Alaric turned to the prince. ‘Your Highness, the guard should apprehend the Tremaine sisters. They are witnesses to the ritual, and they were present when the slipper was delivered to Ashworth Grange. Their mother is still at large, and she may attempt to reclaim them.’

Prince Alaric nodded, his jaw tight. He gestured to the guards, and two of them moved toward the edge of the grove, where Anastasia and Drizella huddled together beneath a willow. Drizella’s face was blotched and swollen from weeping; Anastasia’s was pale and frozen, her mouth open as though she had been about to speak for the past hour and had never quite managed it. Neither resisted when the guards took them by the arms. They simply went, stumbling over the roots, their fine gowns torn and mud-spattered, their schemes undone so thoroughly that even their protests had died in their throats.



Ella watched them go, and felt nothing. Not satisfaction. Not pity. Just a hollow ache where the slipper's hunger had once been.

‘Eleanor Vance,’ Lord Alaric said, and she looked up. He was standing over her now, leaning on his staff, his grey hair lifting in the moorland breeze. ‘That is your name. The name your mother gave you. But names can be given more than once.’ He paused, and the grove seemed to hold its breath. ‘The Seeress Elara has spoken of you. She has watched you since the moment you first set foot in this grove. She believes, and I concur, that you have a connection to the Umbral Weave that no one else in this kingdom possesses. You have worn its relic. You have felt its hunger. You have broken its hold. That knowledge cannot be unlearned.’

Ella stared at him. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I am saying that there are other relics,’ Lord Alaric said. ‘Other conduits. The Umbral Weave has withdrawn, but it will not remain withdrawn forever. And when it returns, when its other relics begin to stir, the kingdom will need someone who understands them. Someone who can sense them.’ He met her eyes. ‘I am offering you a new name. Elara. The Scarred Guardian. And a purpose: to help me study and protect Eldoria from the dark magic that created the Shadow Slipper.’

The name hung in the air between them. Elara. The Seeress's name. The name of the woman who had knelt beside her in the mud, who had channelled the Ley Lines



through the willows, who had watched over this grove for longer than anyone could remember.

‘You want me to become a guardian,’ Ella said. ‘Like the Seeress.’

‘I want you to become what you are already becoming,’ Lord Alaric said. ‘The slipper chose you because you yearned for something more than servitude. That yearning made you vulnerable to its corruption. But it also made you strong enough to resist it. The Weave does not understand that kind of strength. It does not understand that desire can be a shield as well as a snare.’

Ella looked down at her hands. They were still her hands. Still scarred, still trembling, still marked with faint silver streaks that shimmered when she moved them. But they were hers. She could feel the Ley Lines humming beneath the earth, faint and distant, like a song heard through thick stone. She could feel the locket against her chest, cool and silent. She could feel the prince’s hand on her back, steady and warm.

She thought of Ashworth Grange. The attic. The floorboard near the chimney breast where she had hidden the slipper. The library where she had found the locket. The pantry where she had measured out flour and sugar and preserves, her hands moving automatically while her mind dreamed of escape. That life was over. She could not go back to it. She could not unsee what she had seen, unknow what she had learned.

‘I don’t know how to be a guardian,’ she said.

‘Neither did I,’ the Seeress said, and when Ella looked at her, the old woman’s obsidian eyes were bright with

something that might have been tears. ‘But I learned. And so will you.’

Ella took a breath. The air tasted of peat and willow and the first cold bite of evening. She looked at Prince Alaric, and he was watching her with an expression she could not quite read, pride, perhaps, and sorrow, and something else. Something that might have been love, if love could survive the shattering of enchantment.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ he said quietly. ‘You don’t have to become anything. You could come back to Silverwood. Rest. Heal.’

‘I can’t,’ she said. ‘You know I can’t.’

He nodded, and his hand tightened on hers for just a moment before he let go. ‘I know.’

She turned back to Lord Alaric. ‘If I accept this, if I become Elara, what happens to Eleanor?’

‘Eleanor remains,’ he said. ‘She is the woman who broke the slipper. She is the woman who said no. Elara is the woman she will become, the guardian she will grow into. One name does not erase the other.’

Ella looked at the Seeress. The old woman’s face was lined and weathered, her hands gnarled, her obsidian eyes ancient beyond measure. She had spent centuries in this grove, watching over the willows, waiting for the day the slipper would be destroyed. And now that day had come. Her vigil was over. She was free, too.

‘I’ll do it,’ Ella said. ‘I’ll learn.’



The Seeress smiled, and for the first time, her ancient face looked almost young. ‘Then rise, Elara. The Scarred Guardian. Rise and begin.’

Ella rose. Her legs were unsteady, and the prince caught her elbow before she could stumble. The silver streaks on her skin shimmered in the fading light, and the willows around them seemed to lean in, their branches rustling with a sound that was almost, but not quite, a whisper.

The grove was quiet now. The Ley Lines hummed beneath the earth, faint and steady, and the still pool reflected the first stars of evening. The shattered remnants of the Shadow Slipper lay scattered across the moss, already sinking into the soil, already becoming part of the moor. And Eleanor Vance, Ella, Elara, the Scarred Guardian, stood in the centre of the grove, her ash-blond hair lifting in the breeze, and felt the weight of the locket against her chest, cool and silent and hers.

She was free. She was scarred. She was beginning.



Thank you for spending time in this story.

We hope it made you smile, wonder, and perhaps even imagine something new. Every page you've turned is part of a little adventure we've shared together—and that makes this book very special.

As you close the final page, remember that stories don't really end. They travel with you—into your dreams, your games, and the next tale you choose to explore.

Until we meet again in another story, keep reading, keep imagining, and keep being wonderfully you.

Goodbye for now—and thank you for being part of this adventure.

Robin <https://robinwickensbooks.com/>









