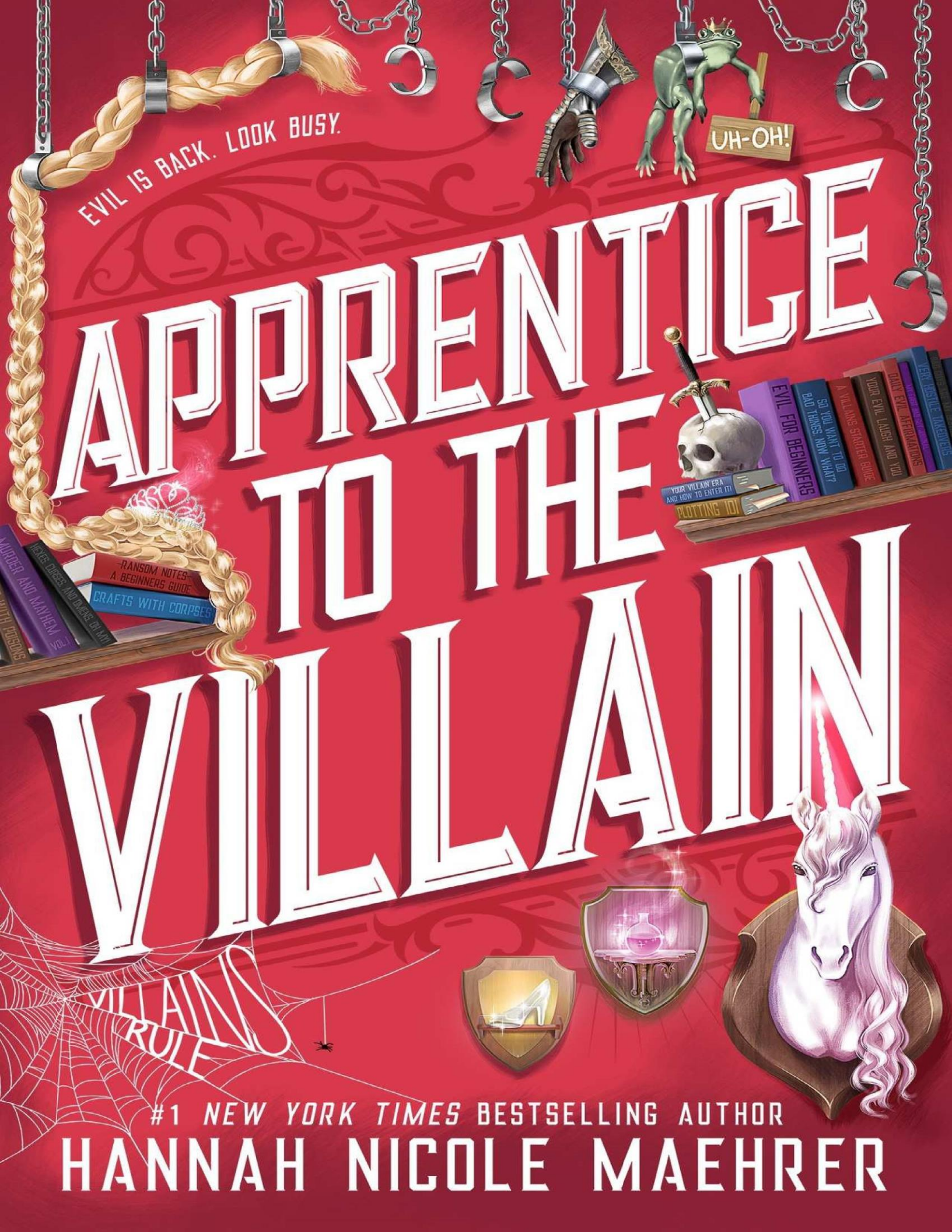


EVIL IS BACK. LOOK BUSY.

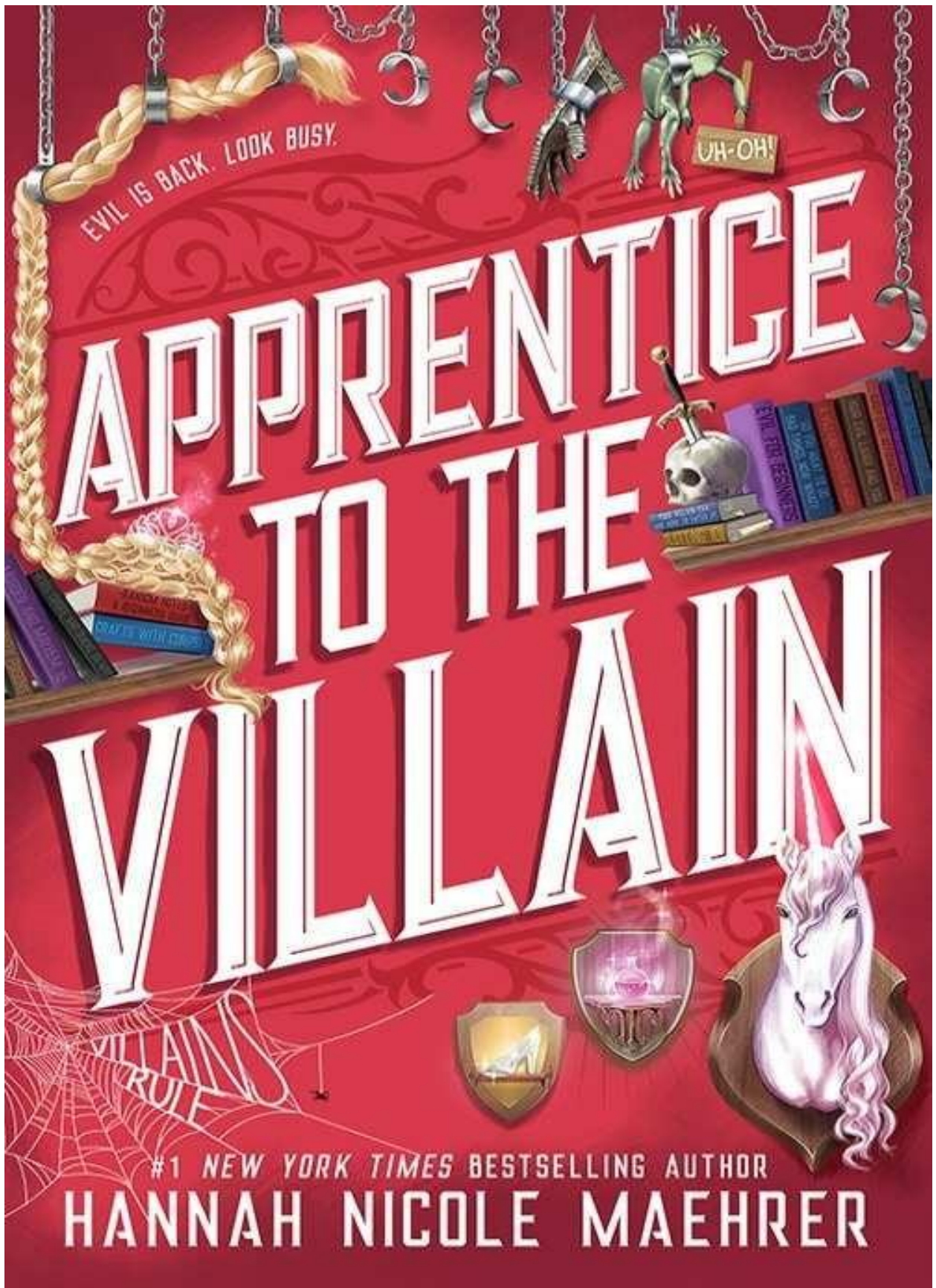
APPRENTICE TO THE VILLAIN



VILLAINS RULE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HANNAH NICOLE MAEHRER



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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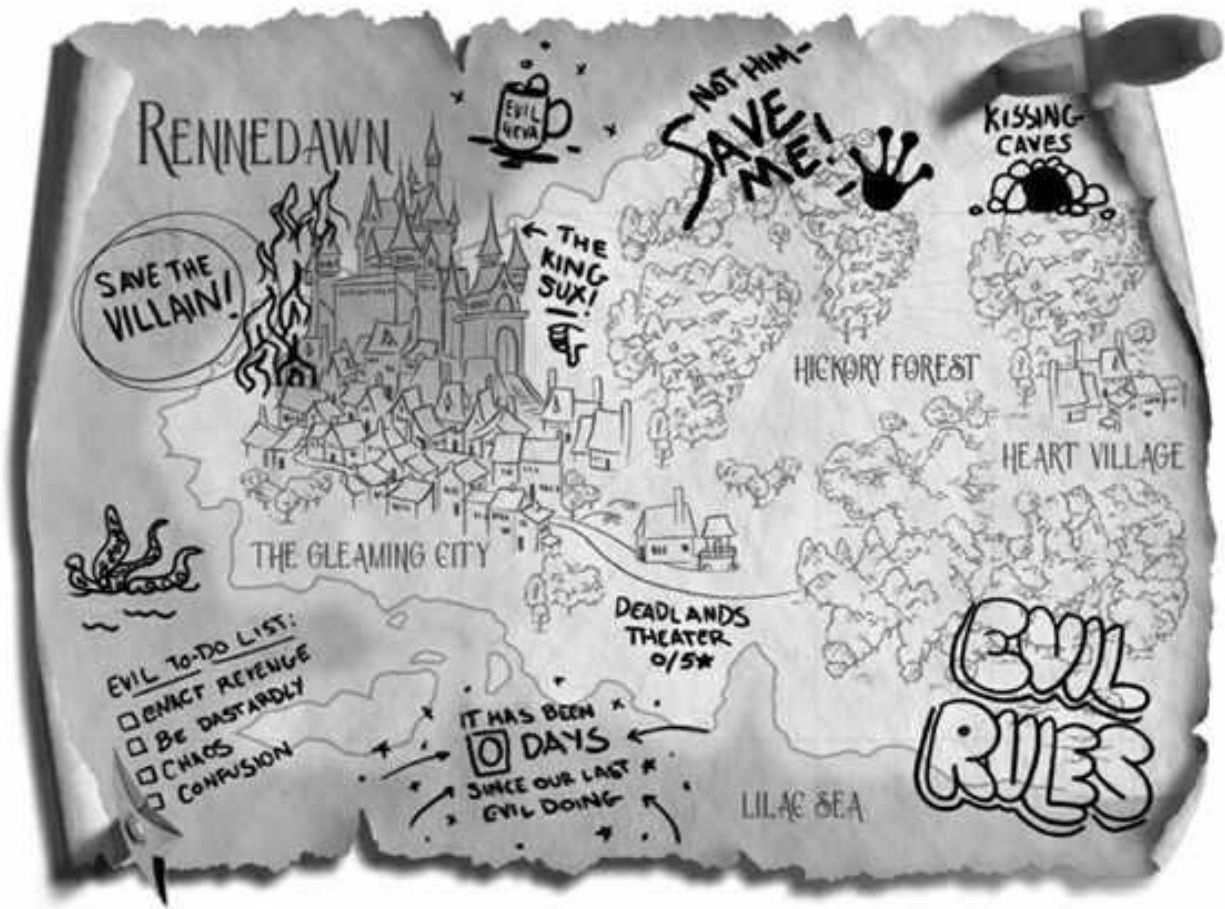
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Apprentice to the Villain is a laugh-out-loud fantasy romance with severed fingers rolling across the office floor and a murder incident board that hasn't left o this quarter. As such, the story features elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including familial estrangement, perilous situations, graphic language, battle, violence, blood, death, torture, injury, imprisonment, illness, burning, drowning, accidental intoxication, and alcohol use. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.

To my brothers, Avery, Jake, and Ben, for every time you made my heart lighter even at its heaviest and for every time you told me I smell (I know that was code for I love you).

And for all of you, this is what I think it would be like to be the morally gray fantasy villain's apprentice.



Prologue

Once upon a time...

It was an ordinary day for The Villain, aside from his body being on fire.

Evie Sage's first week on the job was terrible—at least for Trystan Maverine. Wax dripped from one of the candles before him onto the parchment he was reviewing, just missing the tiny rim of its holder. He sneered at it. Its defiance mimicked the woman he'd hired when he'd been bleeding out and losing all sense of himself in Hickory Forest.

An excellent time to make life-altering decisions about new hires.

In his defense, he'd been certain she would quit almost immediately. But the woman was unbreakable. He'd tried everything, and not short of murder—he'd done that, too. But even a body on her desk didn't make her or her wretched smile falter. No matter what tasks he threw her way, no matter the danger or the disgust they should've evoked, she smiled. And worse yet, she *stayed*. Her persistent presence inspired a feeling that he couldn't figure out for the life of him.

He could sense her standing off to his side, practically glowing with heat, like an array of flickering light. Light he had to fight to stop himself from looking at, like it was physically tugging at his attention, his mind. But he wouldn't let her distract him. Instead, he stared intently at the deep onyx of his desk, where another drop of wax fell. He was near the tipping point—he could feel it like lighter fluid tipping near a powder keg.

The correspondence in his hands wasn't helping. *Blasted nobles*. Another invitation from Lord Fowler, the only noble in the land willing to do business with The Villain. It would have been a mark in his favor, if the lord didn't consistently send him dinner party invites. May as well send him dynamite. Fortunately, friendliness over mail correspondence was easy to ignore. It was decidedly less so when the source of friendliness was a mere five feet away, smiling and...dear gods, was she *humming*?

No one should be this cheery. It was unnatural.

He wondered if the assistant he'd hired was, in fact, not human—perhaps she was some sort of manic sun sprite that had never seen darkness. And unfortunately, that unnatural disposition didn't end with her. Her contagious energy was spreading through the office faster than the Mystic Illness, which had been brutally claiming victims through Renedawn for the last decade. He seemed to be the last one unscathed by her. His workers seemed happier, the murderous depictions on the stained-glass windows brighter; even his guards seemed more amiable, less bloodthirsty.

He'd seen an intern skip through the office that morning. That had been his final straw.

Sage let out a second hum from across the room. He wanted to grab her shoulders and demand to know where it came from, this endless well of pleasant emotion. She hummed again, and his eye twitched. He was wrong. *That* was his final straw.

He turned from his correspondence, his mouth open to chastise her, but stopped when he took in the dreamlike state of her expression. She was leaning into the wide-open office window, her profile illuminated by the moon and stars. The night air caressed her dark hair, creating the illusion she was flying.

He stared at the slope of her nose, almost...charmed?

Something had to be done.

He tore his gaze away from her before growling, "This paperwork won't sort itself, Sage." He glowered, his calluses sliding over the smooth parchment as he pretended to sort the pages. A corpse on her desk might not be the thing that broke her, but late-night paperwork had an honest chance.

Her face danced into view as she neared his desk, nose scrunched as she angled her head toward him, black curls falling over her shoulder. "But wouldn't that be convenient!" she responded brightly.

He was going to be sick.

Coughing, disgusted by the warmth spreading through him, he looked back toward his desk, at Kingsley—one of his oldest friends and his near-constant companion for the past decade. The once-human prince was the reason Trystan was in this mess in the first place. Kingsley's wayward walks had led the amphibian right into the arms of the king's magical guard. Which had led Evie Sage right into the arms of Trystan, literally. He could still feel her warm body pressed against him; her hair had smelled of roses.

The troublemaking frog's crown currently was slipping precariously to the side as he held up one of his signs. It read: PRETTY.

"You think I'm unaware of that?" Trystan grumbled, taking the sign from the precocious frog's tiny, webbed foot, then slamming it face down on the desk before Sage could see it.

"Unaware of what, sir?" she asked. *Shit.*

"How your daydreaming is interfering with getting this done in a timely manner," he grumbled, glaring when Kingsley shook his tiny head at him. *I won't be commanded by a damned frog.*

Sage practically floated back to his desk, her light eyes a meld of mischief and sincerity. “I wasn’t daydreaming. I was making a wish.” Her bright-green skirts covered in little flowers swirled around her as she cast the full force of her joy at him.

He almost ducked.

But he distracted himself with her comment instead. “A wish?”

She sat down in the new chair across from him, pushing her curls away from her face, grabbing a stack of papers to sort. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you that stars listen for wishes?” she asked, perplexed, as if *he* was the absurd one.

“I was never afforded that particular lesson in school,” he replied dryly and turned his attention back to a report from the head of his Malevolent Guard, Keeley.

Her brow furrowed. “Oh, no, I didn’t learn about stars in school. I learned from my mother and her family. Uncle Vale was an expert on them. My cousin Helena and I used to spend our summers learning of them—we’d lay in the grass at night just talking to the sky. It was fun.” Her joyful eyes were suddenly far away, the smile faltering just for a second. But he tracked it. Odd.

She kept speaking regardless—on instinct, it seemed.

“My school lessons were never so interesting, but I missed them after I left.”

He trained his eyes on the candlewax on his desk. “Your education was not listed on your résumé.”

She was too casual in her response. “I had to leave after my mother disappeared. My father had his business, and someone needed to stay home with my little sister.”

Don’t press. It matters not.

“How old were you?” he asked. *Damn it.*

He heard the papers in her hands rustle. She must have been gripping them firmly. “Thirteen.” His chest went tight.

Kingsley had another sign up now, clearly meant for him. The frog swung it in front of his face. Ass.

“Sage, I—” He halted his words. An apology tipped against his tongue. *An apology?* The Villain didn’t *apologize*. The mere urge to do so stunned him so much, he closed his lips.

Her surname hung awkwardly in the air between them. He crumpled up a letter and threw it in the waste bin so he wouldn't look at her, but of course he ended up looking anyway.

A horrified mien had overtaken her cheery facade. Her horror turned sheepish when she caught his uncomfortable stare. "Oh— Oh, I'm sorry. I don't usually talk this much."

Well, that certainly wasn't true. In the last seven days alone, he'd heard the little liability speak more than any other human being of his acquaintance... and he alarmingly could recall every word.

"I think you are lying." He said it gruffly, not kindly.

"Oh, I am," she deadpanned and then promptly giggled. "About the talking, anyway, but I *am* sorry."

There was that sunny ease she possessed. So quick to apologize. She made it look so simple. "It's fine," he grunted.

She brightened, and he blinked. Did he do that?

"I must be growing comfortable with you," she observed. My gods, the woman was like the sun. He needed tinted glasses just to look at her.

He squinted and frowned. "Well, comfort is unacceptable in this office. Perhaps now you *should* apologize."

She bit her lip, but the curve upward came through anyway. Her head turned back toward the window, toward the brightest star gleaming through it. Wistful.

Too much to bear. He needed her out of here. Now.

Before he could scare her off, though, she looked back to him, her cheeks blushing a rosy hue. Her small fingers loosened on the papers in her hands as she said with the most open sincerity, "I'm sorry. But it's true. This is the best job I've ever had."

He muttered a curse under his breath. It had felt like a blow, so harsh he was almost knocked backward. He pulled at his collar so he wouldn't choke.

The mystery feeling that appeared after every test he'd given her, after she smiled through them, finally revealed itself. Relief.

His heart pounded, signaling the danger in the emotion, but he sucked in a breath anyway and replied, "I'm...pleased to hear it." He stood, taking the papers from her

hands. She released them readily. “You’re dismissed for the day, Sage. I think I’ve tortured you enough.”

Her eyes flashed to his office doors as she stood, too, placing a hand against her hip and lifting a brow. “I don’t think the men downstairs in the dungeons would agree, sir.”

He choked and hit his chest to smother the laugh, the urge shocking him. Instead, he flattened his lips into a firm line. “Unless you’d like to join them, I suggest you take your leave.”

She scrunched her nose once more before making her way toward the door, but she stopped again to look out the window, something drawing her to the pearly gleams up in the sky reflected in her eyes.

He couldn’t help it; he didn’t know why. But he had to know.

“What did you wish for?” His words came out in a raspy whisper.

She faced him fully as she slowly backed all the way to the door, reaching behind her and gripping the handle. There was a soft look on her face that made his bones feel like jelly. “I’ll let you know when it comes true.”

The door closed gently behind her, and the stars glimmered once more in the corner of his eye. He scoffed at them and moved swiftly to his desk, digging in the top drawer for a caller’s ruby. Wishes. Ridiculous.

The caller’s ruby, like many other gems in his possession, was used to communicate with the members of his guard. Different sectors had different magically enchanted jewels depending on status, but this situation called for the Ruby Sector. The most lethal. His favorite.

He swiftly called an order for someone qualified to follow Sage into the darkness, to make sure she arrived home in one piece. There were many dangers in Hickory Forest, waiting to sink their claws into someone precisely like that young woman, and he’d already invested a week of his time into her. He wouldn’t let that go to waste.

I won’t let her go to waste.

After all, what good was having an assistant...if they were dead?

Chapter 1
THE KNIGHT

“Evie Sage is dead.”

The knight’s words echoed through the airy entryway of the king’s study, rebounding off the opulent walls like a cry of mourning.

King Benedict’s face was tipped down, his unblemished hands flat against the pages of an open book. The sunlight from the large window spilled over the silver-lined pages, its heat making the room stifled and cloying. The knight fidgeted beneath his tight armor, but when the king’s head tilted up, he went deathly still.

This was a mistake.

King Benedict shut the book, and the light from the sun dimmed a little, like it was disappointed. He stood slowly, a sympathetic smile tipping at his lips.

“A pity,” he said, rubbing a hand through his sandy-colored hair. There were only a few small streaks of gray in it, which was surprising for a man of the king’s advanced years. “The poor girl was corrupted by The Villain. I suppose, though, in its own way, it was a merciful death. There’s no saving someone who has tread so close to the darkness. Now she can be at peace.” It was self-satisfied, the king’s smile.

I hate you.

The knight’s fist tightened at his side, but he released it before the king could notice. He nodded. “You are ever merciful, my king.” The words burned on his tongue.

Benedict’s eyes narrowed as he gestured to a cushioned chair. “Please have a seat. The journey back to the palace must have been strenuous. How does

Sir Ethan fare? He remained with you to see the job done, did he not?”

The knight moved carefully toward the red velvet chair; the cushion gave as he lowered to sit. Only his green eyes were visible beneath his helmet as he gently corrected, “Sir *Nathan*, Your Majesty.” “Ah yes! Sir *Nathan*.” The king chuckled. The knight said bluntly, “Dead.” “Oh?” The king’s brows shot up.

The knight said the words exactly as he’d practiced. “Otto Warsen, I’m afraid, became a bit lustful for blood. I dispatched him myself after he turned on Sir *Nathan* and me.” He was proud he kept the shaking from his voice at the lie.

The king did not appear saddened, a shock to no one—well, at least no one in the room. “Very well. The fewer loose ends, the better. I trust that you took care of Warsen’s corpse?”

The knight’s lips twitched beneath his helmet, remembering exactly how Mr. Warsen’s head had been...*taken care of*. “Yes, my king.” More sweat began to build at the back of the knight’s neck. He knew what the king was about to ask him. “And Evie Sage’s body? May I see it?”

Stray light from the window slid against the back of the knight’s hands, now covered by a fresh set of gloves. No blood splatters. The light gave him a sense of peace as he said, “I’m afraid the healers need time to repair her wounds and make her presentable, as you requested. They ask your benevolence in not being disturbed while they work.”

Silence followed. The knight held his breath lest the king notice his rapidly moving chest. *Keep it together*, he ordered himself, sure his heart was pounding so loudly the king could easily hear it.

The king smiled; it did not reach his eyes. It never did. “I suppose I can oblige them. Just be certain she’s prepared for the unmasking at the end of the week.”

The knight nodded, slowly exhaling. “Yes, my king.” He didn’t need to ask about what this “unmasking” was. The king was rather good at boasting about his achievements.

I give it three, two, one—

“Come the week’s end, we are to unmask The Villain in front of every notable noble in the land.” *Huh, I thought he’d only make it to two*. But His Majesty *was* eager. Something manic shone in his eyes as he boomed the news.

“A true accomplishment, my king.” The knight squinted to fake a smile. “Congratulations.”

The king stood with a flourish, his fur-lined cape flying behind him as he tossed a book from his desk onto the small tea table in front of the knight. It jarred the wood, rattling the silver chalices with mere drops of wine left inside. He could use a cup. Or several.

“It is only the beginning of a new era for Rennedawn.”

The knight’s brows shot to his hairline. That sounded...ominous.

The king kept speaking. “Presenting Evie Sage as the perfect victim will solidify the kingdom’s hatred for The Villain. Finally, proof of all his wrongdoings—” He gestured to the book, the cover an opulent array of shimmering colors. “*Rennedawn’s Story*.”

The children's fable? *Rennedawn's Story* was the epic tale of how Renedawn came to be and the enchanted rhyme that would save its fading magic, supposedly handed down by the gods themselves—though more often heard from the mouths of parents chastising children. Each of the magical kingdoms on the continent of Myrtalia held its own origin story, many equally outlandish or nonsensical. The knight had never seen a published version of Renedawn's before today, but the colorful cover did little to proclaim the text's legitimacy. Was the king having trouble differentiating between fiction and truth?

Perhaps his crown is a little too tight.

Though there were whispers, rumors, that Renedawn had truly begun to fade into the earth. If the story were true... Could there be merit to those rumors?

The king sighed. "I'm afraid that to ensure we remain the strongest of the magical kingdoms, I need you to do me a great favor."

The king had asked the knight for *many* great favors, and every time, without fail, his reply was, "Yes, my king."

"I need you to go to the Sage family home and retrieve Nura Sage's letters. Return them promptly by the day's end." The knight proceeded cautiously. "Whatever His Majesty commands. But might I ask what need you have of them?"

"I'd been hopeful that the older Sage girl might possess the same powers as her mother, but despite Griffin's best efforts, the girl was useless." Benedict tapped his chin and gave a mock frown. "Well, useless *alive*." The knight remained impassive. "In any event, the letters will help us find Nura's location. She hasn't been seen in years."

The knight's voice barely leveled above a whisper. "And the younger Sage girl?"

The king waved a hand. "As good as dead. Taken by The Villain's horde."

The cloying heat had become so suffocating, the knight felt dizzy. "And what of the guvres, sire? The venom of one of their lets? I was of the understanding you need them, too. Starlight and Fate, or something to that effect?"

A vein pulsed in the king's forehead, but his face remained blank. He reached down, retrieved the book, and placed it gently in a crystal-paneled case by the windows. His clear, almost melodic baritone rattled the walls with his disdain.

“Fortunately, I have in my possession just the man to help with that.” The knight knew who he meant, but a shiver still cooled the heat in his blood. The Villain.

Chapter 2 THE VILLAIN

The Villain didn't miss light. He missed color.

Trystan's eyes drew upward, head ringing against the wails of the other prisoners trapped with him in the dark. The stone beneath his palms was rough against his clammy skin, the only thing grounding him through the unending blackness. It was like death, the dark. Death without peace, a dark without light—the pain in his limbs was the only indicator that he was alive.

His heart rate climbed; he couldn't breathe. There were no bars to hold on to. No power to summon, like his mist had been walled in, trapped like him. But he could feel it twisting and curling inside him. It begged for freedom—that made two of them.

“Enough.” He stumbled, and his shoulder landed blessedly against a bumpy, uneven surface. Brick. Thank the gods. There was a wall, its sturdy weight comforting against his greatest fear: the dark. His blistered hands followed its curve around and around, but there was no end in sight. Where was the godsdamn door?

He halted to take a deep inhale. *Breathe, Trystan.* He had to get out of there, had to find Sage. Evie—Otto had Evie, was hurting— *No.* He couldn't focus on that now. Not yet.

He kept following the wall, feeling from top to bottom. Moving himself in an endless mind-altering loop. For minutes? Hours? He didn't know.

Fatigue forced his eyes to close for a moment. What difference did it make? There was no way in the deadlands he'd be able to break out of here—not with his magic out of commission. This wasn't his cell in the king's summer home: it was a chamber meant specifically for his imprisonment, his torture.

The irony was not lost on him.

Hopelessness was a horrid feeling, not to mention a useless one. But he felt hope leech away as he dropped to his knees for the second time that day.

He groaned, missing indifference, missing smothering his feelings like banking a fire. It was preferable to the burning eating at his insides. But he'd been powerless against indifference with Sage. He knew that now, just as he knew—prickling awareness raised the hairs on his neck—he knew he wasn't alone in this room.

“You look just terrible, my boy.”