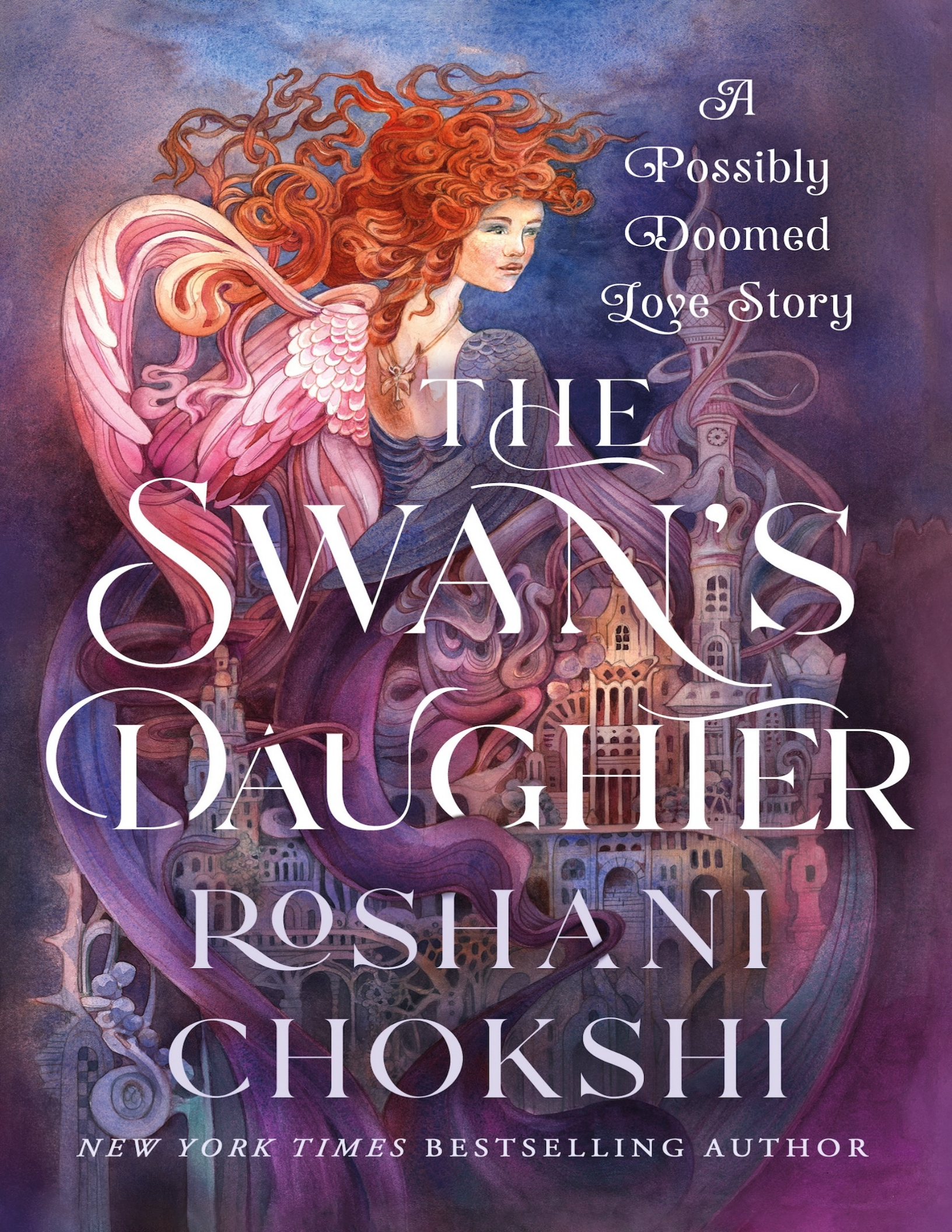




*A
Possibly
Doomed
Love Story*

THE
SWAN'S
DAUGHTER
ROSHANI
CHOKSHI

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The SWAN'S
DAUGHTER

A Possibly Doomed Love Story

ROSHANI
CHOKSHI



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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*To my kids, may you grow up to possess an abundance of
choices.*

*And your father's eyebrows.
If his eyebrows were blocks of marble, Michelangelo
would've wept.*

1

The Swan

Araminta had no reason to suspect anything would be amiss with her hatchlings. For more than a hundred years, Araminta had hoped and waited and now, finally, it was happening and she refused to be anything but joyous.

In the manner of the veritas swans from whom she had descended, Araminta had brooded for six years. Her long, golden hair grew ever more thick and lustrous until a terrible itch set into her scalp. For a whole month, she paced the polished stone floors of Hush Manor. Her husband, the wizard Prava, concocted all manner of potions to soothe her and for the first time, Araminta did not fight his draughts. But a dozen of them made no difference.

“This is simply how it is,” she said miserably as she scratched at her head.

Prava was a monster, but he took his duties as a husband with uncommon solemnity. “What can I do to help?”

Araminta sighed and stared longingly through the carved windows. If one were to look at Hush Manor from a distance, one might remark that it looked as though the manor had been built atop a pile of clouds. Perhaps that person would shake their head in disbelief, convinced this was mere folly and a trick of the weather. But as it so happened, Hush Manor was built

upon clouds. Long ago a handful of lazy cirrus and cumulus could not be bothered to stay in the sky and so they had dropped like apples into the Silent Lakes district. Once there, they had slowly hardened until they were as sturdy as the surrounding black oaks and silver elms. But although they had made their home on the Isle of Malys, their nature was still that of the clouds. In the evening, they thundered, and lightning skittered through their translucent blue-gray bellies. And despite possessing no desire to move through the sky, sometimes they could not help but drift in their sleep. One might look out the window before bed and see the Mourning Pond only to wake up and find oneself on the other side of the Soundless Mere by dawn.

This was where the wizard Prava made his home. In his mind, the location was a kindness to his wife, a reminder of the clouds that had once been her home. Usually, Araminta found it more of a cruelty than a kindness, but this particular week she was grateful for any reminder of the sky.

“I need a place to nest,” said Araminta. “When our daughters hatch, I want their first breath to be only the sweetest and coldest air.”

Prava took his wife’s warm hand and kissed it. “My love, I shall have the most wondrous nest for you by nightfall.”

Araminta harrumphed and kept scratching her head.



The wizard Prava hastened to his quarters, which took up the entire north wing of Hush Manor. Here, he had his study, his room of experiments, his chamber of mirrors in which he conversed with other wizards of import, and, most importantly, his library. The library lay beneath a dome of polished crystal. The floor was nearly hidden beneath colorful rugs of woven silk and tufted armchairs. Prava could not remember what the walls looked like, for the library’s remaining space had long since been taken up by leather-bound tomes, vellum scrolls and a couple of unsettling novels printed upon thin slices of bone and bound with human hair.

The moment he entered the library, the books fluttered in excitement. The novels, which tended to be anxious, shed a few pages—oftentimes prologues, for these were considered largely useless—hoping to gain his notice. Some of his books did not even wish to be read, but longed to be used as tables for mugs of tea that might only be sipped from once or twice before being sacrificed in the pursuit of endless daydreaming.

“Settle, settle,” said the wizard. “Araminta is brooding, and I must make her a nest. Which amongst you shall help me?”

The books quivered. A few of the cookbooks dustily settled back in their shelves. After a few moments, a shy, slim volume of pure white drifted toward him. The book was freezing to the touch and the pages within were delicate panes of frost etched in the small, crimped writing of the Aatos Mountains’ scholars. Prava opened the book and felt the secrets of the wind and snow rush through his thoughts.

He smiled.

2

The Wizard Becomes a Father

By nightfall, the nesting tower was ready, which was good because Araminta had begun to pull her hair out by the handfuls. Prava found her in the kitchen, walking in circles around the great hearth. Araminta did not normally venture into the lower levels of Hush Manor, but brooding had filled her with strange cravings. The cooks had offered bone marrow stews and hearty loaves full of milled seeds, butter cakes and winter berry porridge. But Araminta wanted none of that.

“Oh, the very thought of such food turns my stomach!” she moaned. “Don’t we have any pondweed? Or perhaps salt-marsh grass! Goodness, what I would not do for juicy little tadpoles! And algae cakes! Perhaps a couple of spiders...”

When she began scouring the kitchen for lonely beetles, the cooks fled.

“Beloved!” announced Prava.

Araminta honked. Veritas swans were breathtakingly beautiful women. But their natures were still swanlike and as such they were wildly aggressive and prone to squawking.

“If you have not come bearing a basket of widgeon grass and dragonflies, then I must beg of you to leave me,” she said.

“I have something better,” said Prava.

He snapped his fingers and a delicate glass staircase appeared at Araminta’s feet. Every time Prava performed magic, Araminta felt the familiar tug of wonder coupled by a small wave of revulsion. She glanced at her husband, who was smiling. They had been married for some time now, and from the moment she had fallen in love with him, he no longer bothered to hide his true form.

Prava was tall and lean, with auburn hair that curled around his jaw and accentuated the slender knives of his canines. His eyes were speckled green with vertical black slits like a serpent. He was handsome and looked to be somewhere in his third decade though he was far, far older than that. When he was a young wizard, he had traded one magical text for another and thus figured out how to carve the time out of his bones. He was still mortal—something which infuriated him to no end—but time could not touch him. It was one of the many magics he possessed and it was the reason why Araminta both loved and loathed him.

Hundreds of years ago, Prava had found her by the glimmering salt pools hidden in a maze of clouds far above the Isle. It was unheard of for a mortal to find their way to the sky, let alone know where the salt pools of the veritas swans might be found. Araminta had been so impressed, she ignored her mother’s warning about the Isle’s men.

“Bad things befall those who consort with humans,” she had warned. “Even worse things befall those who love them.”

“What things?” Araminta had demanded.

But her mother only shook her head. “Things that are bad enough that there is no one left to speak of them, my love.”

This had seemed like a load of nonsense to Araminta. Besides, she knew she was powerful. She could turn into a swan and fly away whenever she wished. Her voice drew out the truth. The man posed no threat, and besides ... he was beautiful.

Araminta did not tell her sisters. She was the middle hatchling of her parents’ brood and as such often went unnoticed. All she had she was forced

to share. But this ... these secret meetings ...

They were all hers.

Prava left her gifts of daydreams baked in candies that melted on the tongue. He wove her a necklace of stars that sparkled at her throat. He planted a garden of songs that trilled her name in clouds of perfume. At the time of their courting, he had magicked away his fangs and wore a pair of bright-blue mortal eyes. Later, he would tell her that he had plucked them from a human prince who had traded his eyes for the ability to taste music from the air.

One day, Araminta sang for him and Prava fell to his knees, weeping. Araminta could feel the magic of her song thrumming through the air. Prava would be powerless before it and forced to tell the truth.

“What do you want from me?” Araminta had demanded.

“Your love,” said Prava, humbled. “Only your love.”

Little by little, she gave it to him. He would never hurt her. After all, he loved her. It would be years before Araminta realized she had asked him the wrong question.

One day, as they sat by the shore of the salt pool, Prava told her he loved her and Araminta knew in her heart she loved him too. The moment she uttered the words, a necklace with a small, winged key appeared in Prava’s hand. Araminta felt a pressure at the base of her throat. It was as if someone had collared her, but when she touched her neck, there was nothing there. For the first time, she felt nervous.

“What is that?” Araminta asked. “Is it for me?”

She reached for it, but Prava closed a fist around the jeweled key. He smiled. For the first time, she noticed the length of his teeth.

“My love, it is you.”

Dread settled in her bones, but when Araminta tried to turn into a swan and flee ... she found that she could not. She strained to beat the wings she knew were folded tightly within her, but all that flapped were the delicate glass feathers on the dainty necklace.

“What’s happened to me?” she asked, choking.

Prava rolled his neck from side to side, dislodging the mortal prince's fair, blue eyes—oh, how many times she had dreamt of those eyes—and revealing his green, serpentine gaze. Araminta still found him beautiful, a fact that he seemed to know, for he smiled widely.

Perhaps she should have left the truth alone. Knowing would make no difference, and in that moment, Araminta understood that the life she had known was gone. That she had been imprisoned, somehow. She sang—it would be the last song Prava would permit her to sing in his presence—and her magic sparkled in the air. Prava shuddered beneath the force of it, and his serpent eyes glazed over. For a few moments, he was in her thrall.

“What have you done?” she asked. “And why?”

Prava licked his lips. His tongue was forked. She had not noticed until today.

“I have done nothing to you ... not yet, at least,” he said. “I courted you in the hopes that you would fall in love with me, for the moment you gave me your heart, you gave me control over you. You did not know such a thing was possible, which I am grateful for, as that would have made this task terribly difficult.”

Araminta heard her mother's voice. *Bad things befall those who consort with humans*. Oh, how she longed for her mother. But she could not call to her. Nor could she reach any of her sisters.

“Few are aware that such a feat is even possible, but I have read the forgotten texts and I know how to find the kernel of truth buried in the heart of a legend,” said Prava with a haughty grin. “I want power, my darling. Endless amounts of it. And for that, I need something more valuable than my own magic. This is where you shall help me.”

“You mean to kill me,” said Araminta.

“Perhaps at first,” admitted Prava. “But the truth is that I have fallen in love with you. Do not breathe a sigh of relief, my love, for there will be times where you will prefer death to my affections. I will keep you close, my darling. But I will keep you in every comfort. If you try to escape, I will break

your wings. But whatever cruelty I inflict, I shall endeavor to erase from your memory.”

Araminta’s stomach turned. “You are a monster.”

“I am, but you love me anyway, I can see it in your eyes. You like the sharpness of my teeth. You like that, trapped as you are, I would burn down the heavens to make you smile,” said Prava. “I am a monster, yes, but I will be your monster and yours alone. Now come, my love. It is time for us to wed.”

In time, Araminta would understand that the necklace could not control her will, only her form. If he wanted, Prava could keep her trapped in swan shape for as long as he liked. But he did not do this very often, for he loved her too much to be apart from her for long. It did not matter how many times she told herself that he was a monster and that he had destroyed her life. Prava was too powerful, and he did not resort to the vulgarities of brute force or threats to keep her in his thrall. What he did was far more subtle.

Every morning, he brought her a cup of tea in which he had distilled a drop of hope.

“Drink,” he said. “You will die without it.”

Araminta had considered death, but Hush Manor was attended by a legion of phantom servants and she had no wish to be tied to him in death as well. She thought of killing him too, but the death of one’s beloved was the death of a veritas swan. How cruel a trap was love.

“This is to make your life on the Isle more comfortable,” said Prava, holding out the tea.

“You mean my imprisonment.”

Prava shrugged. “It could always be worse.”

And so, each day, Araminta gulped down the hope. She hoped that Prava would change. That he would free her. Barring that, she hoped that what he said was true.

It could always be worse.



Araminta's nesting tower was a thing of extraordinary beauty. The glass staircase led to a platform lofted into the clouds themselves, which skimmed the edge of a marble platform shaped like a star. A carved onyx pillar stood at each point, connecting a hanging garden that arced above the floor. Araminta spied tendrils of billow lilies and gloom violets, bone lichen and great tufts of drifting roses. Her heart ached, for these flowers did not grow on the Isle of Malys. They belonged to the sky realm and grew by the edges of the salt pools.

Araminta knew nothing of motherhood, but some ancient instinct reared up inside her as she brooded. The moment she saw the nesting tower, she sat in the middle of the floor and brushed her hair until she had amassed what looked like a pile of combed gold. She hummed and she sang, she braided and she wove. She grabbed glass baubles from Prava's study and the fallen prologues from the library, which shushed and murmured as she tucked them amongst the strands. She took bales of straw and silk dresses, cobwebs and calligraphy pens. For two whole days, she waited by the edge of the platform, snatching snowflakes out of the sky so that her daughters would have only the softest lace upon which to rest their heads. Once her nest was complete, she crawled into its center and did not move.

Twelve days later, Prava checked on his wife. Per her request, he had left baskets of tadpoles and marsh grass outside the behemoth of her nest. But today, the nest was noisy. Little cries and chirps echoed and Prava held his breath.

"Come see! Come look!" called Araminta.

Prava walked to the nest. It was a huge structure, shaped like a beehive, with the hanging garden of the tower serving as a living ceiling. The fragrance of the billow lilies suffused the warm nest. All around, the walls sparkled from Araminta's hair woven into and around a thousand books and baubles. The floor was strewn with eggshells that were a riot of colors—mint and persimmon, sapphire and garnet. And the sound. Even when they were hatchlings, the powerful magic of truth glittered in the air like stars pulverized to a fine grit.

It was thus that the wizard Prava beheld his daughters for the first time. Since they were part veritas swan, they were not red and wrinkled like typical newborns, but appeared more like toddlers. They were plump and mobile, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, with a pair of fuzzy wings folded between their shoulder blades. They sat amidst the wreckage of their eggshells, so that it looked as if they had emerged from shattered rainbows. His daughters had big, wet eyes and their mother's rosebud mouth, and the love that he felt in that moment was unlike any he had ever known.

"They are ... they are perfect," he said. He turned to Araminta and kissed her hands. "Thank you."

At first, Araminta beamed. She could not stop staring at her chicks. She was certain that any moment now she would collapse beneath the weight of this new love. She could see in Prava's eyes that he was equally smitten ... but a monster's love is its own cage.

Thank you.

Her mind snagged on this. She swallowed.

By then, Prava had waded into the nest. He sat amongst their chicks, cooing at them, counting fingers and toes, blowing raspberries on little bellies. Prava named them one by one. "Eulalia, Euphemia, Evadne, Eustacia, Dulcinea and—"

One chick, with chestnut curls and a dimple, clambered into his lap. Prava stroked her wings.

"And you shall be Corisande," he said, gently depositing her amidst her sisters.

"What do you mean to do with them?" asked Araminta.

"Why, use them, of course! What else does one do with daughters?" said Prava. "They will be my greatest weapons. They will level empires. They will destroy kings. They will bring me the secrets of the universe ... and all thanks to this."

Araminta's heart sank. She had been too exhausted to notice it before, but the slender chain around each of her daughters' necks was unmistakable. Prava lifted one of the chains, revealing the pendant of a small, winged key.

“But that isn’t ... that can’t be possible,” said Araminta.

Prava gathered his daughters’ necklaces. With them, he took control of their ability to transform. The chicks did not notice. They were sleepy and had crawled over their shattered eggshells to gather in a soft, downy pile.

“I did not think such a thing was possible either,” said Prava, with all the indifference of remarking on the weather. “I came across the theory in a text made of mist, which wrote itself upon the moors for only a week before dispersing, presumably until the next decade.” The necklaces chimed like bells in Prava’s grip. “Such a powerful idea that the union of a mortal and a veritas swan might bring forth a brood whose transformation is not tied to love. Can you imagine, Araminta? One merely has to possess the necklace and all the powers of the veritas swan are theirs. Imagine what a ruler of a distant land would do to have such a beauty in their court! A courtesan who can sing before enemies and draw out the secrets of their military strategy? Invaluable. Imagine what they would give me in return...”

Prava smiled.

“You will barter them off!” said Araminta, stunned. “You will leave them powerless—”

“I will make them formidable,” said Prava, patting one of the chicks’ heads. “They shall not be powerless. They will have the magic of their song and the weight of my instruction. They will be bartered, yes, but armed with such skill that they will soon take over the ones they are betrothed to. Our daughters will be unstoppable.”

At that moment, a soft crack disturbed the silence. Prava raised an eyebrow. The sound was coming from the edge of the nest. Araminta followed the noise to a small egg nearly obscured by a trellis of gloom violets. The egg was the color of an emerald and veined all over in gold. It was beautiful and exquisite and smaller than all of its siblings. A crack appeared down the center.

“A late bloomer!” said Prava, excited. “Six necklaces were already more than I had hoped, but seven is a very good number indeed.”

When her daughters had begun to hatch, their chirps were the sweetest music to grace the Silent Lakes district in hundreds of years. Birds paused mid-flight. The sun halted its course.

The sound coming from this egg was Araminta's first clue that something was deeply wrong. To call it a song would be an insult to music. It sounded like a cat trying to expel a cursed bell from its throat. Prava clapped his hands over his ears.

"What in Wrate's name!" he said, shuddering.

The top of the egg popped off. The chick inside squeaked. Alone of her sisters, Demelza was her father's double. She had his russet hair, but by way of her mother's ethereal nature so that it looked as if her locks were woven from the sunset itself. She had his serpent green eyes, though the pupils were not vertical slits. She had his pearly skin, so different from the golden tones of her siblings. When the little Demelza toppled over, her parents gasped.

Demelza had no wings.

And when she was raised out of her cracked eggshell, there was no key around her neck. It was locked deep, deep in her heart. And like any veritas swan, only one thing would summon it into being:

Love.

3

Woe, Woe, Woe Shall Cry the Men Who Know You!

Demelza loved to sing.

That she was abysmal at it made no difference since she rarely had an audience anyway. Before her sisters had flown the nest, they used to hold contests seeing who could listen to Demelza the longest before finally clapping their hands over their ears. The last one standing was allowed to choose that night's bedtime story.

"Father could offer you to a warlord, sister, and surely all his enemies would fall upon a sword rather than endure that screeching," Eulalia had once said with an admiring sigh.

Eulalia was the most violent of Araminta and Prava's brood. She wore spikes of glass in her elaborately braided golden hair and had filed her teeth to points. Long ago Eulalia had been promised to a lesser baron far from the Isle in exchange for a torn scroll. The baron thought the wizard Prava was a fool, for the torn bit of parchment was nothing but an obscure cooking recipe passed down as an oddity. Prava did not correct the baron of its true import: a piece of the puzzle to life everlasting. Once the marriage contracts were struck, Prava gave thanks that the baron was a fool, for he loved his

daughters and hoped they'd be quick about dispatching any husbands, if only so they could come home faster.

Once Eulalia's wings turned white, she would be wed to the baron. The baron planned to use her to lure out his brothers' secrets and take control of his father's land. After that, who knew what the future held. Eulalia's betrothed might think he could control her since he possessed her swan key, but he was no match for her.

With the exception of Demelza, all the girls were promised to rulers in distant lands. Although the day they would fly the nest loomed over all of them, such an occasion felt as distant to Demelza as the horizon. At least, it did until it abruptly ... didn't.

As a hatchling, Demelza's differences hardly mattered. There was only ever the warm weight of her sisters' fuzzy, fog-colored wings, the sound of their mother's humming and the wind rustling the gloom violets above them. In the dark nest, the chicks' sole source of light was Araminta's hair sewn through the twigs, snowflakes and book pages like a living wisp of sunshine. Each night, their father, Prava, kissed their heads and sang them a lullaby to sleep:

*My darlings, my dears, my sweet little fears
Together, the world will be ours
Your keys are my might
Your truth songs my sight
Woe, woe, woe
Shall cry the men who know you!
Now sleep and sleep, grow strong
Sleep now and develop your song
For one day you'll fly and you'll be my eye
Over mountains and river and streams
You'll bring me power and you'll be my spy
And soon, I shall have all my dreams
Woe, woe, woe*