

Mother of Death and Dawn

— THE WAR OF
LOST HEARTS III —



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MOTHER *of* DEATH & DAWN

THE WAR OF LOST HEARTS; VOL. III

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For you.

I did this last time, but I cannot imagine dedicating this book to anyone else. Thank you for following Tisaanah and Max on their journeys, and for giving me the ability to take this journey of my own.

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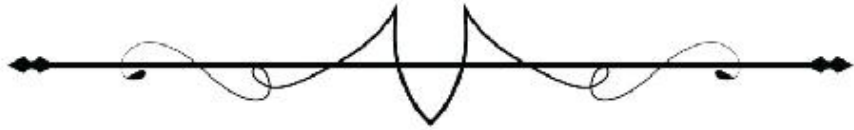
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PROLOGUE



ell me, little butterfly, what would you do for love?

The woman knows the tower, now.

T She knows every angle of its imposing shape as it rises from the surf. She knows the way the whorls carved into its surface feel beneath her palms. She knows how the bone-white stone looks smeared with her blood. She knows its scent, acrid and stagnant, like death itself.

She knows everything, except for how to break it.

This place has taken something from her, you see. Taken the most precious thing.

Tell me, little butterfly, what would you do to get him back?

Anything. Everything.

The first time she tries, it is an act of pure desperation. She has conquered cities and defeated armies. She has ended wars. Surely she is powerful enough to do this.

Now she does not need to conquer a city, just a single prison.

She does not need to free a civilization. Just one person.

The stone strikes her down like a palm to a fly. Minutes, and she is crashing back into the surf, pulled out again by friends who barely manage to escape with their lives.

But the woman knows nothing if not how to fail.

So she tries again, again, again. She collects another scar, another night of an aching heart, and a little more of her dies. She gets up and goes again.

The last night is stormy and dark—the sort of night yanked from horror stories. Her friends beg her not to go. *Wait one more day*, they say. *If the guards don't kill you then the storm will.*

What's one more day, they say, *after all of this?*

What's one more day? She would have laughed if she wasn't choking back sheer rage. One more day is twenty-four hours—one thousand four hundred and forty minutes—eighty-six thousand seconds of torture for the man trapped within those walls.

The storm is a monster. It is so dark she can barely see, the white tower of Ilyzath lit only in garish blue-white flashes as lightning cracks the night. Rain shreds the air like silver blades. As always, she makes it to the prison. And as always—faster than they once did—the eyeless guards are upon her in seconds.

She fights back. But there are many of them, and only one of her. Her head smashes against the ground.

CRACK.

The sky splits open, just as her skin does, just as her heart does.

She rises to her feet. Blood is in her eyes, staining the world crimson.

And there, in that moment of desperation, she feels a sliver of the magic that had so evaded her for these last weeks—a flicker of a familiar soul, contorted in pain and buried within layers of stone.

He is so, so close.

It cuts something primal loose in her.

The next time a blade opens her flesh, she doesn't feel it. She fights back like an animal. These are not people before her—they are obstacles. Obstacles keeping her away from her most precious person, obstacles who dared deny her broken heart every time she came here, fighting for the queen that had put a dagger in her back.

She becomes nothing but the desire to burn down the world that did this to him.

CRACK.

Lightning illuminates flashes of blood, of opened bodies, of rotting flesh.
Flashes of her own seeping wounds.

She fights and fights and fights as tears stream down her cheeks.

Tell me, little butterfly, what would you do for love?

PART ONE: LOST



CHAPTER ONE

TISAANAH



e liked me.

But then, of course he did. I anticipated his every need, every discomfort, every desire. I never stopped listening. Never stopped watching. When I danced, I counted every footfall.

Months had passed and my magic remained, for the most part, painfully out of reach. Once, I had easily drawn from its deepest levels, making me a force of nature. Now, ever since the collapse at the Scar, I struggled to even use it at all. But I had learned that I didn't need it to be the perfect slave. I had gotten so good at being exactly what men wanted me to be.

Lord Farimov smiled at me. It would have been a pleasant smile in any other context. He was not an unattractive man, with grey-streaked, sandy hair and a warm face. Perhaps if I was someone else—a different “someone else” than the someone I pretended to be now—I might have thought he was kind.

But I was not another someone. I was a slave. And Farimov perhaps seemed kind, but it was the sort of kindness that one bestowed upon a sweet dog. Even the kindest people corrected undesirable behavior in dogs. I never needed to be corrected, and that was why his smile was so pleasant as I placed the plate of berries at the table.

“Good, Roza,” he said.

Roza. My name, as it had been for the last two weeks. I gave him a demure nod as I straightened, pushing a sheet of smooth chestnut hair behind my ear. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the movement.

The face that stared back at me was unfamiliar, though if I looked closely, I could find traces of the one I had worn my entire life. No Fragmented skin, just smooth sandy tan. No silver hair, just deep chestnut. No scars. A slightly wider mouth, narrower nose, softer brow. Me, but... not. The only thing that remained was the eyes. One silver, one green. Eyes, Ishqa had said, were impossible to hide with any illusion, even with the advanced Fey potions he had taken from Ela'Dar.

But no illusion was perfect, and no illusion could last forever. I had been wearing this one for too long. Every time I looked at myself, I half expected to see my own Fragmented skin.

I was supposed to be out of here days ago. But each time the Fey's visit to their Threllian allies was delayed, I thought to myself, *I've stayed too long to give up now*. I decided that the illusion would just need to hold up a little bit longer.

I had spent weeks here, monitoring the rhythm of the household, waiting for this meeting.

Farimov frowned down at the berries. The feast was something to behold—flowers and fruits and meats and cheeses. Maids flurried about the room, adjusting each detail of the display.

“Do you think that Fey even like fruit?” he mused, to no one in particular. “I heard once that they only eat living flesh. Perhaps I should have gotten something... alive.”

I imagined Ishqa chomping down on live creatures and almost laughed. *Ishqa*, who barely managed to hide his disgust at the very thought of eating something that had once been moving.

“How could they not be impressed?” I said. “It is magnificent. And so clever, to showcase the best of every region of the Threllian empire. A brilliant idea, and a feast worthy of royalty, my Lord.”