FALLEN BEAUTY



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The peaceful realm of Ekalia had not known war for centuries.

Until the twins were born.

Both children fell grievously ill before their first birthday and so their parents journeyed across Ekalia visiting every healer within the realm.

Many potions were ingested and spells cast.

The twins survived and the name of the Hallowed Twins was bestowed upon them.

They were forever changed,

as was the realm.

—*INTRODUCTION TO* THE ALCHEMY OF LIFE AND DEATH

THE BEGINNING

Thorelea Winyard did not know she was a prisoner until her tenth birthday.

Before then, she had everything a little girl could ask for: more toys than she could play with, more dresses than she had the occasion to wear, and more books than she could ever read. She didn't know that it wasn't normal to be confined inside a stone tower, with only her mother for company. She didn't know that her mother had failed to hide from the very people who now held them captive.

She was a contented child, as she could not yearn for the one thing she'd never had.

Freedom.

Her mother, Vallaine, filled their days with cooking and cleaning and singing and dancing. The only times Vallaine left her daughter's side were when a letter was slipped under a mysterious locked door. Vallaine would use the key hanging around her neck to disappear inside, locking her daughter out. Thorelea would wait by the door, her bony knees drawn up to her chin, wondering what her mother was doing.

When Vallaine returned hours later smelling of tart chemicals, Thorelea would always ask what lay beyond the bolted door. Vallaine simply shook her head and said she did not remember, before retreating to their shared bedroom to rest.

As years passed, Thorelea began to ask her mother of life outside their tower. But Vallaine's blue eyes would glaze over, shoulders slumping in exhaustion.

On Thorelea's tenth birthday, her mother gave her a new book to add to her collection. The author described a world of beauty: tall ships drifting across Kartana's ebony seas, the cerulean blue spruce forests of the north, the floating embers in the fields near Mount Vurne. Thorelea asked her mother when she could follow in the author's footsteps and travel the land and seas of Ekalia.

"Are you not happy?" her mother had replied.

While Thorelea treasured their life together, she longed for adventures of her own. Thorelea wanted to ride a horse, attend a party, and befriend someone her own age. Why was her life contained to this tower when everyone else was free to roam?

"Tell me more about Ekalia," Thorelea asked.

Vallaine headed to their bursting bookshelf. "I know just the story."

"*No.* Not a story. I want to know what *you* know."

Vallaine frowned. "Your books can tell you much more than I can."

Thorelea didn't want secondhand events recounted by people she'd never met; she wanted a personal connection to the realm she longed to see. She wanted to break free from the shadows of her tower and explore a realm of color.

"Were you also born in here?" Thorelea asked.

"No." Her mother's distant look returned. "I—I don't think so."

"Why don't you remember?"

Vallaine shook her head, her long blond hair falling around her shoulders. "I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm tired." She tucked a golden curl behind Thorelea's ear. "I'll tell you later."

Her mother swayed as she headed up the stairs to their bedroom to sleep, despite it only being midday. Thorelea knew that *later* would never come. Her mother was unwell. Yet Vallaine had not spent hours in the mysterious locked room causing the fatigue to set in. Something else was to blame.

She heard the familiar sound of a letter slid under the door.

Thorelea snatched it up and read eagerly.

Your next subject is ready.
Don't be late.

Subject? Who was the letter from? And what would happen if her mother didn't unlock the door?

Thorelea headed up to the bedroom they shared, but her mother was fast asleep. The key around her mother's neck called to her. A temptation she could not ignore.

Thorelea's hand shook as she carefully unclasped the key from the necklace. Still Vallaine did not stir. Emboldened, Thorelea bounded down the stairs and slid the key into the lock.

The door swung in and the overwhelming stench of chemicals stung Thorelea's nose and eyes. The room beyond wasn't large, much smaller than the adjacent living area. She stepped inside, squinting in the low light as her eyes adjusted, and let out a scream.

A dead animal lay on a workbench along one side of the room, its amber eyes staring at her accusingly as though she had been the one to break its neck.

She stumbled backward into something warm and soft. And screamed again.

"It's all right!" Her mother's arms went around her, turning her away from the ghastly sight.

"What is it, Mama?" she asked, hot tears running down her cheeks.

"A fox." Her mother gave her a gentle smile.

Thorelea had never seen an animal aside from the drawings in her books.

"What happened to it?" Her chin trembled. "Did you kill it?"

Her mother's eyes held much sadness. "Oh no. This is the way animals always arrive in here." She gestured to their surroundings. A blank canvas was set up on an easel in the corner by a burning lantern and tubes of paint were strewn across the workbench. A few small paintings hung on the walls, of various animals Thorelea couldn't even name.

Her mother's *subjects.*

"You paint dead animals?" she asked. "Why?"

Her mother placed a cloth over the fox's still form. "Because it's the only way for us to be free." She gestured to a barred door at the end of the room. There was no door handle or lock.

Thorelea gasped. “We’re prisoners?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“*Why?*” she demanded. “What did you do?” Prisoners were evil people who had done something dreadful to incur such punishment, at least that was what she had learned from the stories she’d read.

Her mother shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

Was that the truth? Or was her mother hiding a horrendous past like she’d hidden this room from her?

“Who wrote this?” She held out the cursive letter that demanded her mother paint. “Who imprisoned us?”

“I don’t know,” her mother repeated. “I only know this.” She handed over a stack of paper from a nearby shelf.

More letters—most of them informing another subject was ready to be painted. Older letters, yellowed and faded by time, told more of the story.

Dearest Vallaine Winyard,
Paint this animal before the death chill claims it.
Paint it as though life still floods through its veins.
Succeed and you will go free.
You have twelve hours.

“That was my first letter.” Her mother rubbed her temples. “From what I can remember.”

While the paintings on the walls were beautiful, something was missing in the animals’ eyes, a spark of life.

“I have failed you,” Vallaine whispered. “Each painting that displeases our captor is another week in this tower.”

A single tear tracked down Vallaine’s fair cheek. She scooped her daughter’s hands into hers. “Perhaps you can help me.”

Thorelea shook her head. “I don’t want to paint dead things.”

“Of course you don’t.” A fractured smile settled upon Vallaine’s lips. “You can paint whatever you like. I’ll teach you.”

Thorelea wasn’t sure she wanted to spend any time in this dark room of death. But she also couldn’t turn away from the truth now

that it had been revealed. This room, these paintings, held the key to their freedom.

"I've always wanted to see flowers," she admitted. "Or trees. Or mountains. Or—"

Her mother laughed and all of Thorelea's fears faded away.

"I will ask for flowers," her mother promised with a smile. "Lots of flowers."

Thorelea watched her mother paint, keeping her eyes on the canvas rather than the fox.

Vallaine wielded the brush like a dancer moving to an instinctual rhythm, the strokes swift yet graceful. A burning desire to emulate her mother's movements rose within Thorelea.

When the painting was complete, Vallaine wrote a note on the back of a letter asking for flowers to practice her skill and pinned it to the painting of the fox.

After hours confined in the small room, the smell of turpentine had given Thorelea a headache. Vallaine brewed herbal tea to ease the pain and wash away any worries.

It was the best birthday Thorelea could remember. She decided to focus her efforts on learning to paint and forget her desire for adventures in the outside world. For now.

The next day another letter arrived, and Vallaine unlocked the door to reveal a room blooming with all kinds of flowers. The sweet scent almost masked the smell of oil paint and turpentine, and there wasn't a dead animal in sight.

"This one reminds me of you," Vallaine said, picking a single, brilliant blue flower from a vase. "The brightest in the room."

They got to work, and the first time Thorelea swept paint over the canvas, a surge of affinity washed over her. She could see why her mother enjoyed painting, even though her subjects were dead and decaying. A feeling of calm settled in her bones as she followed her mother's instructions. Her work was terrible, but her mother promised that she would improve.

And she did. After two years of painting by her mother's side, she was almost her mother's equal. And Vallaine's latest painting of a fowl looked so real its feathers appeared to flutter under candlelight.

"It's beautiful, Mama." She stood watching while her mother brought flecks of light into the fowl's eyes. She no longer cried when dead animals were deposited in the art room, although she hadn't painted them herself, preferring to stick to her flowers.

Vallaine dropped her brush and her legs collapsed under her. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as she slumped to the floor.

"Mama!" Thorelea cried.

Sweat beaded on her mother's fair skin, her eyes twitching behind her lids.

"Mama!" She shook her mother's shoulder. "Wake up!"

Thorelea had seen the toll long painting sessions took on her mother, always needing to rest for a few hours, but she had never collapsed like this.

Fear clutched her chest. She wouldn't sit there and watch her mother die.

She banged on the barred door.

"Help!" she shouted. "Someone help! Please!"

Thorelea had never heard anything on the other side of the locked metal door, and that day was no different.

"Please help my mother!"

She slammed her fist against the door over and over until her hand was numb from pain.

"Please!" she pleaded. "I think she's dying!"

The metal door finally screamed open and Thorelea stumbled back. A man stood over her with marked, greasy, suntanned skin. His black hair was cropped close to his skull and a sneer was stretched across his spittle-flecked lips.

Was this their captor?

"Where is she?" His gruff voice was like the screech of the metal cell door. Blunt and painful.

Thorelea pointed to her mother on the floor, but the man's gaze locked on the body of the fowl and the recently finished painting. She watched in confusion as he threw a cover over the dead bird, shoved the still-wet canvas under his arm, and walked back out of the room, shutting the door behind him with a bang.

"Come back!" Thorelea screamed. "Help her!"

She flinched when the door swung open and the man stomped back inside.

"She collapsed while painting," she explained. "I don't know why."

The man pulled Vallaine from the ground and hauled her over his shoulder with a grunt.

"Will you help her?" Thorelea asked him.

He turned his eyes to her, as though remembering she was there. "Yes."

Vallaine's long fair hair ran down the man's back as he headed for the metal door.

"Thank you!" Tears of relief spilled over Thorelea's cheeks as she followed him.

"Where do you think you're going?" He held out a dirt-streaked hand, halting Thorelea behind him.

"I—" She'd never spoken to anyone but her mother, so she didn't understand the hard expression on his face. "I'm coming with you."

"You stay here."

"No." Being separated from her mother was incomprehensible. "Where she goes, I go."

Vallaine lifted her head groggily. "Thorelea?"

"Mama!" She reached for her mother's hand.

The man twisted to the side to shift Vallaine out of reach.

"What's happening?" Her mother's voice was sluggish.

"You're leaving the tower," the man said without feeling. "Say your goodbyes."

"No!" Thorelea wailed.

Vallaine struggled to be free of the man's hold. "I'll take any punishment, but please don't make me go. Not without my daughter."

Something flickered behind the man's dark eyes. "I have my orders."

"I'm not leaving," Vallaine said.

"You don't have a choice." His voice was like a knife between Thorelea's ribs.

Her mother wrestled against him, beating her hands against his back. "Let go of me!"

"Don't leave me here alone!" Thorelea grabbed on to her mother's arm, pulling her backward.

The man shoved her free from her mother; she screamed as she skidded across the stone floor.

"Please, don't do this!" Vallaine pleaded as the man hauled her through the doorway. "Please!"

"Mama!" Thorelea ran for the opening.

She was too late.

The metal door slammed behind Vallaine, separating mother from daughter.

"Thorelea!" her mother called.

"No!" Thorelea cried, thumping her fists against the door. "Mama! Come back!"

She crumpled to the floor as her mother's voice faded away.

1

THORELEA

I hated painting the eyes. At once focused and unfocused. But always accusing. *I* was the cause of the animal's demise. Just like my mother had been before me.

Most of the time, I could pretend the animal was merely sleeping. I would ignore the knot at the back of its neck, clearly broken. I would pretend that once I was done the animal would take in a deep breath and rise from the stone floor.

But not while looking into its eyes.

Today's subject was a rabbit. I said my apologies to the poor creature before selecting a small canvas from my collection and placing it upon the easel. I'd organized my paint tubes by shades: grays for the mice, browns for the rats, greens for the lizards, and white for the fowl. I placed a squeeze of white onto my palette. Next to it, the red paint glistened like a clot of blood.

To begin, I covered the background with slick dark charcoal—it would contrast nicely against the rabbit's white fur and make the creature leap from the canvas. And look more alive.

I studied the rabbit intently, hoping today would be the day I achieved the realism my mother had reached before she'd been freed from this tower. Despite the morbid subject, the act of painting made me feel

closer to her—a connection through time. I wondered if she still remembered my face, and wondered how the past six years had changed hers.

A letter had arrived the day after she had been taken from me, along with a dead rat.

My dearest Thorelea,

First, know that I am well, although I already miss you fiercely.

Secondly, I was wrong to believe we were prisoners. I was wrong about so many things.

We are in the care of the king and queen of Lagonia, who promise to protect us from those who wish us harm.

The world outside Castle Lagonia is a cruel place. Trust that we are safest here.

I am now in the king and queen's employ as their court painter, and while we cannot be together, I will write to you as often as I can.

In the meantime, you must paint, as I did.

Paint the animals as though they are alive. Paint the animals before the death chill claims them. You have twelve hours.

In return, we will receive the king and queen's protection.

Don't fight. Don't question. Be patient. Stay safe. I will see you again.

Love, your mother

The letter made no sense. Why couldn't we be together if we weren't prisoners?

I refused to paint, screaming for my mother until I lost my voice.

The next day, another dead animal was left behind. I had no choice but to follow my mother's instructions. I was rewarded with milk, eggs, yeast, flour, and a recipe for making bread. As the weeks went by, more letters arrived, along with more subjects to paint.

My mother told me about Lagonia's king and queen and how they protected their people from a deadly war that raged between Lagonia and the nation of Hetchnik. She told me how she was learning the ways of the court: how you must curtsey when meeting royalty, how to correctly use silverware and the art of conversation. She suggested I practice for when I would join her.

I lived for her letters, poring over every word as I imagined her

sitting beside me, her hands braiding my long hair as she told me about her day. And always, how much she missed me. I wasn't sure if she received any of my correspondence, as she never responded to my questionings of when I would join her.

Over six years of being on my own, I stopped tracking time by sunrises and sunsets, instead by the bodies of the animals, which were deposited in the tower once a week. In the in-between days, I read. My books not only kept my mind sharp, but filled in the missing details of when the animals were alive: how they ran, how they breathed, what they ate. The details a carcass could not provide.

My only hope of seeing my mother again was to complete my task.

I returned to my painting of the white rabbit, rubbing away at the charcoal background with a turpentine-soaked rag. The sharp tang of the chemicals spread through the air. Once I achieved the rabbit's rough shape, I began to add shades of white with quick, loose brushstrokes to mimic the fur patterning.

My body tingled with warmth while I worked; it must have been a sunny day outside. I lifted my hair from the back of my neck and bunched it up at the top of my head, smearing sticky paint across my skin. I would smell like paint and turpentine for days. Then again, I *always* smelled like paint and turpentine. I relished it, the bitterness reminding me of my mother.

It was almost as though she was standing beside me, guiding my hand.

"Painting is the act of capturing the subject's soul," she'd once said. "Revealing the inner beauty one brushstroke at a time."

"Animals have souls?" I'd asked.

"Of course." She smiled, her whole face brightening. "All living creatures do. It's our role as painters to capture the spark of life—the glimmer of stars in the darkest of night. Like you are to me, my starshine." She tapped me on the tip of my nose.

What did I know of life? In my eighteen years, I'd never seen the night sky, nor the sun brightening the day. The tower's windows were too narrow and too high. How could I ever capture a spark of life when I'd never seen a living, breathing animal?

My head pounded from the potent chemicals and I shut my eyes against the pain.

My mother stood before me in the dark, just as I remembered her.

"You're almost there," she encouraged me. "Keep going."

I opened my eyes and took a sip of the herbal tea that she used for her headaches.

To finish the painting, I touched my smallest brush into the starkest white and added quick, light strokes for the whiskers. With the same brush, I added a highlight to the rabbit's blue eyes and a little to its mouth, which still glistened with saliva.

I stepped back to admire my work. It was far and away my best painting yet; I could almost feel the fur under my fingertips and see the little nose twitch and eyes gleam with life. I imagined my mother whispering how proud of me she was, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. Her presence felt so real, the weight pressing me to the floor.

I stumbled over to a pile of cushions in the corner—where I used to sit and watch her paint. I unwound my hair, a sigh escaping my lips as the weight was released. I'd asked for a pair of scissors to cut my long blond locks more than once, but my request had been denied. Perhaps the king and queen thought I would attempt to break out of the tower. Or threaten to hurt myself in order to see my mother.

But I abided by her first letter's pleas.

Don't fight. Don't question. Be patient. Stay safe.

I pressed my throbbing temple to the stone floor—a cool, calming embrace that lulled me to sleep. Behind my eyelids, the world spun before me. The world of Ekalia that I'd only glimpsed through my books. A simple cottage in the woods. A boy and a girl holding hands. A dead flower blooming to life. And my mother's smiling face as she reached for me.

I remembered the way she would brush her fingers through my hair, singing a soothing lullaby. The memory was so strong, I could almost feel my tresses being stroked.

It felt real. *Too real.*

I opened my eyes and screamed.

The rabbit was in my hair.

And it wasn't dead anymore.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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