

AS IN A MIRROR

CHAPTER ONE

It was always dark in my mother's chambers, because she was hiding me from the gods. There were candles and the occasional slant of sunlight between the curtains. But that night, when Tristen snuck me out, I saw moonlight for the first time.

"We need to hurry," he whispered, his hand tight around mine. He half-dragged me through the palace halls. "She'll have me flogged if she finds out I let you see it."

He was my only friend, and I didn't want his mistress to punish him. But how could I resist the colors of the imperial palace? The rich mahogany of parquet floors, tapestries with rainbow threads, slate sparkling blue-gray beneath lamplight. As a fledgling yearns to fly, I yearned for light and color.

But Tristen pulled me onward. Grasping at him, I stole second glances at what I could. "I don't even know what it is!"

"It's beautiful. I promise," he said. We careened around a corner and then came to an abrupt stop in front of a pair of doors. Pulling with all of his strength, he heaved them open. "In!"

I stepped into the chamber. More sounds and colors. The soft, downy white of a rich carpet, the crackle of the flames in the fireplace. Then I raised my eyes to the windows, partially covered by deep burgundy curtains. Just then, the moon came out from behind the clouds, a silver ship sailing across the black sky. Tristen tugged me across the chamber, oblivious to my wonder. "Let's go, Mileni!"

We passed through an arch. I blinked, the silver light lost. We stood in a small, darkened chamber, empty except for something round and shining on one wall.

“What is it?” I asked. “Is it water?”

“It’s a mirror, silly. It’s made of glass.”

Gripping my shoulders, he moved me closer to the shining surface. I blinked again. A little girl — dark-eyed, wild-haired, dusky-skinned — stared at me from inside the mirror. A taller boy was standing behind her. “That’s you,” I said, turning to Tristen. “And that’s...”

He reached down and caught my hand. The figures trapped in the glass mirrored our movements. “That’s you and me, Mileni,” he whispered. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

I stared. It was beautiful and horrible at the same time. Half of me wanted to run from our mirror images, who were trapped in glass and would be trapped in glass forever. The other half of me wanted to step closer and touch the mirror, to see if bridging the gap between myself and my image might liberate one or the other. And Tristen — might he not escape orders and floggings by vanishing into a world of glass? I stepped towards the mirror, raising my hand to touch it.

But he caught my wrist. “You shouldn’t,” he said, guiding my hand back to my side.

I pulled away. “Why not?”

He ran a hand through his hair, giving me a look. “Because I’m older than you, and I said so.”

I was silent. He was only two years older than me, and my mother had always said that I’d been born old enough to die. I stared at my mirror image. She didn’t look old enough to die. She looked young. I watched Tristen out of the corner of my eye. “I’ll give you a kiss if you let me touch it,” I said suddenly.

He stared at me, narrowing his eyes. "Fine," he said at last, bending towards me. I stood on my tiptoes and pecked his cheek.

"How sweet," came a voice from the doorway, and we leapt apart. Lady Helaina, the empress's sister, stepped into the chamber, resplendent in a deep purple robe. I stared. How could Tristen be afraid of someone so beautiful? She ran a hand across his cheek, her eyes sparkling at me, and bent her head towards him, her hair catching the light like spun gold. "You didn't tell me you had a little friend," she murmured in his ear, her hand lingering on his face.

He lowered his eyes to the floor, shifting from side to side. "I'm sorry, my lady," he said in a low voice.

She kissed him on the cheek, right where I had moments before. "Never you mind," she said. "Go wait in my bedchamber. I'll take your friend back to her mother."

Tristen glanced at me, his eyes fearful, but he left the chamber quietly. I still didn't understand why he was afraid. Lady Helaina stood behind me and gathered my hair in her hands, and bent to kiss my brow. "You're a beautiful girl, Mileni."

"How do you know my name?" I asked her, staring at our reflection in the mirror. Why did she lie to me? She was beautiful. I was not. I was skin and bones and eyes.

"I know many things." She ran her hands through my hair, her fingers catching on knots, and then leaned down towards me again. Her lips brushed my ear. "Would you like to touch my mirror?"

I stared at the shining glass. "Yes, m'lady," I whispered.

She raised my hand to the mirror with hers, light and dark intertwined, and pressed my palm against its surface. When it didn't give way like water, I quailed in surprise. But she held

me in place. Dark ripples radiated from my fingertips and spread until they covered the glass from edge to edge, gaping at me like a giant, toothless mouth. “Now look into it,” she whispered.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away. Thousands of dark tendrils, like the feelers of a hungry vine, reached out to me, wrapping around my arms and legs. The room faded, and I floated in a sea of nothingness. Screeching, the monster in the mirror circled me.

“Come, child,” it hissed with a thousand tongues. It slid by me, changing shape, some bits breaking off, others rejoining: thousands of many-winged shadows joined as one. “We have a gift for you.”

Then I knew what it was. It was darkness, and I had lived with it all my life. It had whispered to me before, in my sleep, through the hours when I sat alone. It had been my only companion. And it had whispered to Tristen, too, and led him to me. I was sure of that. We were two secret things, this darkness and I, and secret things could not survive alone. I needed it, and it needed me. When it called for me again, I answered it in a shaking voice. “Give me your gift,” I said.

Shrieking its triumph, it lashed out and seized me. Then I stood at its gate, its gaping mouth. “Wait!” I screamed. “You didn’t say it would be like this! You didn’t tell me about — ”

The pain. I thought I heard it laughing, somewhere far away. And it took aim at me, its power like a fiery bow, the images like fiery arrows. When it had finished, it slunk away, diminished, and Helaina’s darkened chamber returned. I fell, and my head hit the marble flagstones. Her robes trailed across the floor by my face, colors distorting, breaking off from each other, rejoining. Darkness danced before my eyes. Then it wrapped itself around me, a snake with no end, and I knew nothing more.

That was also the first night that I saw the lonely island of Albria, which in the godtongue they call *l'terr prossa deiium* — the land close to the gods. Lying near-death, I watched a scene unfold in an Albrian fortress called Pontem at the end of a long road. A man with no name — a slave — was begging his master, the lord of Pontem, for freedom. “I beg you, my lord. I’m running out of time. I’ve given you...” His teeth clacked together. “I’ve given you a child!”

The lord snarled and lunged for the slave, catching him by the collar of his cloak. Their faces were inches apart. “And was that my choice, slave?” he hissed, eyes narrowed to slits. “Did I want it that way?”

“No. No, sir,” the slave whimpered.

The lord pushed him away, disgust penned across his face. “I will raise your child as my own, if it survives past birth. But you will die before the sun rises into the sky on the morrow. You deserve that fate.”

“And what of your wife?” The slave caught his lord’s cloak. “She coerced me! Does she not deserve the same fate?”

“Unhand me!” The lord stepped back, his eyes blazing. “Her labor pangs are beginning. The gods will decide whether she and the child will live or die.”

The slave raised his eyes to the dark, clouded heavens. “I will pray for mercy on their heads. Forgive me, for I have sinned. Forgive me!”

“Swine. Cast him out. He’s hardly fit to feed the crows,” said the lord, spitting on the ground near the slave’s feet. He turned away.

Two guards caught the slave’s arms and dragged him to the fortress gate, heaved open by the sentries on night watch. They threw him into the road and rained blows on his back. All the while, the slave brand on his arm grew fainter and fainter, counting down his time left in the world. The lady had chosen him to die. And with him would die the truth of the twilight exchanges and midnight fumbings, the sweep of her auburn hair and her frantic breathing, her smell and the taste of her mouth, the truth of her sins. The moss between the cobblestones clung to his skin. He’d played his role. She’d conceived, and the child would be born. Delirious, he reached for one of the guard’s hands.

“This child...”

“The magic will take you,” said the guard with a laugh, his torch bobbing in the darkness.

The slave reached into his cloak. In a flash of silver, he plunged the hidden dagger into his heart. The guard cried out, but it was too late. The slave fell back, a faint smile on his face. No magic would take him that night, nor any other. His blood trickled between the cobblestones, saturating the moss. The guard, his cruel mirth gone, lifted the slave’s arm to examine the brand, which glowed brightly and then faded to nothing. He was a slave no more. His lips moved, bearing his dying words. “Maxian. My name is Maxian. Tell the lady. Tell my child,” he whispered.

Then he slumped back, dead.

Beneath the Albrian moonlight, the gods granted the adulterous lady an easy birth, while her husband watched stone-faced. Now there was a baby born to a noblewoman, begotten by a

slave — a child as pale as the dawn, with a tuft of hair that might prove red or gold, and eyes flecked with the azure of infancy. The midwives had marked her forehead with a star. And the new mother, blankets tucked around her, looked up at the priestess of Dessa, who stood over her. “And sons?” she asked, her eyes expectant. “Will we have sons?”

The priestess leaned over the star-marked infant, pressing her hand to the baby girl’s head. Then she straightened. “You will bear no sons,” she said to the lady. “There is this daughter. And if you are righteous, there will be one more.”

The newborn baby may have been safe in her mother’s arms, but I was fading, slowly but surely, drained by the vision. *My mother*; I thought through a haze of agony. *My mother has me and no other*. Screaming, I pulled away from the vision and found myself in the darkness of my bedchamber, a cool cloth covering my forehead, my mother’s face swimming above me. I coughed, hacking blood between my parched lips, my breath rattling in my chest, and she moved the cloth across my forehead, wiping sweat from my brow. When she bent over me, her tears fell on my cheeks. I lapsed in and out of consciousness. If she was crying, then I had to be dead or dying. Perhaps that was why I was seeing the world as if through a third eye.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. She was speaking to someone else. Gold... white... a long crimson robe. Not Lady Helaina, but Empress Marianna, her sister. “She was meant to die. The oracle told me that she would die. The gods were going to kill her.”

“Perhaps they’ve changed their plans,” said the empress.

My mother looked down at me. “Mortals are not meant to see like she sees,” she said, her voice shaking. “I’m afraid. She’s gazed straight into the abyss. How can she live now?”

Blood rose in my throat, and I choked. No one helped me. Then I was coughing, wheezing, drawing in air, fighting for life, living. The pain. The vivid agony. And the visions, the visions that seared my head, splitting my mind. “Why do I not die?” I croaked. “Why do I not die?”

But neither my mother nor the empress had an answer.
