

PROLOGUE

She crept up on him from behind. He was pretending to be asleep as usual, and she knew the moment she pounced, he would seize her. But this was always the best part of the game. Lore clutched her imaginary sword and made her attack. Fallon grabbed her and they tumbled off his fake throne and onto the floor.

“Fallon, you’re dead!” She laughed, wriggling away from him a little quicker than she normally would.

At twelve years old, her body was starting to change and it was embarrassing when it came to spending time with her two best friends. No longer could she rough house or take a ball to the chest without the two little lumps that had begun to swell there aching in protest.

“Am not, I woke up and caught you in the act!” Fallon ignored her squirming and pulled her close to him again.

He was also changing, but in a good way. His already husky voice was growing deeper, his body was getting taller and broader. He was looking more and more like a man every day. Ironically, more and more like his guardian, Lord Percival Berclay, the current emperor of Vitruvia.

They lay on the floor of his private dorm catching their breaths. As a woman, Lore would reminisce about these moments – their faces close, her dark locks splayed out, his fingers grasping one of her long curls and swirling it around on his face, and everything surrounding them white. The rooms at Chersely Bartlett Academy were as formal as those in her parents’ estate, but uniform in the pure, unmarred hue like the innocence they contained. From his elevated and protected quarters high next to the cathedral, they could hear the choir practicing, the voices echoing through the halls like so many seraphim. During languid Saturday mornings when they were allowed to pass the time as they would, Lore deactivated her orbis caputs and left them to toddle around on her desk. Her thoughts were free and clear.

On cue, Gideon busted into the room, air guns blazing, his blond hair hanging in his eyes and a triumphant smirk in place. “And now you’re both dead,” he said, joining them on the floor. “I always catch you two like this.” He said it, but there wasn’t suspicion in his voice.

Lore imagined there should be. She was, after all, promised to him, wasn’t she? The two boys couldn’t be more opposite. Gideon was so fair, his features elegant and flushed with rosy innocence. His eyes were a crisp, sky blue, always full of humor and positivity. Fallon was dark, both in looks and attitude. He had a wry humor, a biting wit. He was often moody and brooding. And yet, Lore had always gravitated towards him. Gideon should have been jealous of her obvious preference for Fallon, but maybe it hadn’t even entered his mind because they’d all been friends for so long. Or maybe, it was simply because she had no choice or say in the matter. She had to marry him. It had been agreed upon by their parents when they were two years old, and decreed by the Tree Vale’s bishop.

“Anyway,” Gideon continued, “don’t you think we’re getting too old to play ‘Rebellion?’”

Rebellion, a game made up six years ago in lower school, had become their favorite weekend morning activity. The mention of this childhood frivolity roused thoughts of her grandmother, Lady Mathilde de Bellereve. She was transported back to her family home during the one St. Lucien’s Day only months ago that Mathilde was allowed to visit, supervised, of course, by someone from the special place where they sent batty aristocrats. There was some supreme scandal surrounding her grandmother’s life, Lore could tell. Her mother, Miranda, who couldn’t stop talking under normal circumstances, clammed up like a mollusk when Lore tried to ask questions about why the old woman was in a home and could not live with them.

On this holiday, while a sour-faced male servant cut the dime cake, Lore prayed for a moment to speak with her grandmother alone. Mathilde sat as demurely as her gnarled limbs would allow and her tight, white curls shone like a soft halo of lamb’s wool around the creviced plain of her face. Everything about her screamed that she had been living a life of pain,

every part of her seemed stretched and frowning. Yet in her eyes – the same brown, doe eyes that Lore had inherited in spite of her mother’s cheery cornflower blue – she could see that her grandmother wasn’t insane like her parents and others would have her believe.

Lore sat next to her on a curved, velveteen chaise, as elegant and uncomfortable as the other furnishings in her parents’ Victorian home, full of deep mahogany and heavy ornamentation. She began to notice that while her grandmother hadn’t spoken during her visit, but nodded with childlike complacency when addressed, she was now surreptitiously looking at Lore and then at the lit candlesticks in their brass holders on the coffee table in front of them. The girl understood. She was imploring.

“Great Lucien, Lorelei!” her mother managed to take the name of the day’s patron saint in vain while cursing at her daughter for starting a small house fire.

During the commotion that ensued, Lore ushered her grandmother into a broom closet underneath the stairs, now trampled by servants rushing to help. She reached for the light.

“No, don’t–” a whisper stopped her. Mathilde’s voice still had that affected lilt of the upper class.

“Grandmother...,” she breathed out. “Why won’t they ever let me see you?”

Mathilde let out a bitter laugh. “Because of what they know I will tell you.”

“What’s that?” Lore whispered, leaning in.

The closet door swung open and a plump arm reached in and turned on the light, exposing them. Constance, her mother’s young maid stood with her hands on her wide hips, glowering at them with smug triumph. Before Lore could plead with her to be quiet, she gave a robust, “MADAM! Look who I’ve found sneaking around!”

In the instant before her parents arrived on the scene, Mathilde slipped something into Lore's hand. Lore closed her fingers tightly around it and watched as her grandmother transformed back into a dumb mute.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" Her father removed his monocle so that his brow could furrow without inconvenience. He took her roughly by the arm.

"I was only trying to keep Grandmother safe from the fire." She gave what seemed like a logical defense, but he wasn't biting.

"Go upstairs to your room and there will be no dime cake," he hissed.

"But Father, I—"

"That will be quite enough from you."

The menacing look in his eyes implied that there would be harsh ramifications if she disobeyed. He may even send her away to that place that no one spoke of where they treated young girls who suffered from malcontent. Her best friend, Sawyer, had been sent there a few times and she always returned quietly submissive, at least for a while. However, Sawyer had a much higher tolerance for any kind of pain or discipline, especially since she refused to mend her ways. Lore decided that headstrong behavior was not an option for today.

Her mother looked on with affected rage peppered with histrionics that could give the most celebrated stage actresses of the age a run for their money. Constance stood behind Miranda, her thick, livery lips with their light fringe of a moustache still in a victorious sneer. The other servants haunted the background, all taking satisfaction in their power over her at the moment.

Lore wished for a second that they were porcelain galateans, even though she feared such creatures, but they were no longer allowed within the aristocracy. The lovely, soulless servants, once a programmable race of automata, now remained a coveted privilege of the bishops and the Imperial Family. Those salvaged after the violence of the Great Rebellion thirty years ago were rumored to be kept locked away in a secret room

deep within the Seat. There they stood in the dark like a silent army waiting for someone to reanimate them.

Lore climbed the stairs to her room, keeping her eyes on Mathilde, certain she would never see her again. The old woman locked eyes with her and before she was completely out of sight, winked. Only when she had closed her bedroom door did Lore open her palm to see what treasure Mathilde had given her. It was small key of darkened brass.

As she wondered at the object, she heard her own door being locked from the outside. Father's chosen mild form of punishment, and she guessed who was doing it, too, since Constance's breathing was so heavy and brutish that it permeated walls. But even locked inside her room, she still knew more freedom than her jailer ever would.

Her orbis caputs immediately appeared around her head. They were tiny yocto creatures – two flying squirrels and a fat chinchilla riding in a miniature hot air balloon – a gift from Miranda when she first went away to school. They would instantly swarm her when she returned from classes, hovering around her head, spewing out phrases in her mother's voice that were both reactionary and linked to Miranda's own emotional state, which, unlike this instance, was usually intensely droll.

“HOW COULD YOU BE SO DECEPTIVE, YOU IMPERTINENT, LITTLE TWIT?!” screeched Lord Izzy Holt Hempel from his hot air balloon.

She could not take solace in them in her punishment. She could instead sit and stew about how she had always resisted any kind of closeness with her mother, always preferred her father's stoicism above Miranda's erratic moods. She could wonder why her father seemed distant from her lately when they'd before been close, inseparable almost, when she was a young girl. Was it because she was becoming a woman that he was letting go, or was it because she suddenly shared the rest of the nation's contempt for his lofty position? But instead of indulging negative thoughts to boil inside her stomach, she would remove her tattered notebook, from its hiding

place at the very bottom drawer of her desk, to document this occasion so she could remember it. It was her only release.

Now, as Gideon spoke of their game, Lore couldn't imagine what it would be like to be a servant, or worse, one of the dregs. As it was, because she was from the Tree Vale, a lush area in the Northeast, she had more rights than most, and she was given an education, albeit most of it was in the domestic arts. At least this was the case in the Tree Vale and the Seat. She knew that in the Granary and the Turbine, children were made to start working as early as four years old. She knew that from Fallon.

Apparently, that's where Lord Berclay had found the handsome little boy and rescued him from a dire situation. No one knew what had happened to him, save for the strange scar he tried to hide with his watch on most days. And he certainly never spoke about it, if he even remembered.

She looked at him now, staring at the pale ring of skin that wound its way around his wrist like a snake. By his response to Gideon's question she could only imagine that he hadn't forgotten at all.

"We'll never outgrow this game."