

THE DARK FABLE

By Katherine Harbour

BEGINNING

It's not a memory anymore. It might be a nightmare. Because how could it be real?

I am eight years old. I'm standing in my room streaked with rain shadows, listening to my dad arguing with my mom. Thunder crashes.

I peer through the half-open door. I see the monster. I see the bones twisting in a crown from its head, its white skin scarred with symbols that make me want to cry, to hide. Only its eyes are beautiful, a burning blue. When it comes to kill me, it wears my dad's face.

It doesn't take me. I don't let it. (It isn't my dad.)

It moves toward my little brother and sister instead. (It isn't my dad.)

I can't protect them. I can't save them.

I've been living with that nightmare ever since.

PART I: AMUSEMENT ET JEUX

CHAPTER ONE

INITIATION

Evie's favorite color was black. Black was as comforting as shadows, as night, and, like an ink spill or a fall of darkness, it changed the rules. It was the color of magic and elegance. Of alchemical transformation. Of the mysterious spaces in the universe before stars or stories were born.

Gazing at her galaxy of black clothes, she reached into her closet for her uniform. She slid the white dress and the pinafore on over her slip; the catering company preferred their employees to look as though they'd stepped out of a silent film. She glimpsed her pale face in a darkened mirror. The bruises beneath her eyes were tragic.

Shrugging into a jacket, she hurried from the attic of the apartment building in which she'd been illegally squatting for over a year. It was raining, but the Plaza La Mer, the hotel where she was working tonight, wasn't far, so she ran through the neighborhood, past pawnshops and raggedy palm trees.

The hotel – ebony and chartreuse, all Art Nouveau decadence – stood at the end of the boardwalk. She pushed through the employee entrance. As she wound through the kitchen dense with the aromas of salty preserved meats and ancient cheeses, she spotted her supervisor, Tyrone, a lanky figure in white, wrapping an apron around his waist. He was eighteen like her, majoring in Physics, and holding down two part-time jobs.

"Evie. You're late." Tyrone pointed to the trays scattered with appetizers. "We can't let these rich folks wait." Lifting two platters shoulder-height, he glided past her, the light

gleaming pink on his black braids. “Good luck.” He pushed through the doors, into the party, a gala for the Silver Cove Museum, where the California elite pretended to care about art, fossils, and dead civilizations.

Evie swept the snaky tendrils of her short, dark hair into a clip and lifted the appetizer platter, the antique rings she wore on each finger clinking against the silver. She followed two other servers into the huge ballroom gleaming with satin cocktail dresses and silk ties. She offered appetizers to people who didn’t even look at her. One woman, arms banded with gold bracelets, flicked her fingers, shooing Evie away.

Another woman straight out of French Vogue stepped onto the dais. She wore a jet-black sheathe dress, her golden hair coiled. A gorgeous necklace snaked across her cleavage, all gold and black opals studded with sapphires – a cobra, its head resting above her heart. She began to speak, her words revealing a faint accent. “Welcome, all of you. I am Lila Pearce. My husband loved the museum we are here to support. Thank you for coming, and for your generosity. Our first piece for auction is the Queen Cobra.” She touched her necklace. “Once worn by the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, and donated anonymously . . .”

Evie turned and collided with someone. Pink champagne splashed over her pinafore.

She met the amused gaze of a young white guy in a perfectly tailored black suit, his dark brown hair swept up like a 1960’s idol’s. His silvery eyes looked her up and down. He set his empty glass on the tray without a word to her and continued walking.

As Evie stood there, fuming, champagne dripping from her skirt, she imagined chucking a wine bottle at the back of his head. Her temper was a problem – last month, a man had flung a hundred dollar bill to her as a tip and she’d ripped it to pieces in front of him. She’d spent an

hour taping it back together later that night and cursing herself.

She made her way to Tyrone, who was leaning against a wall, arms folded as he supervised.

“Hey, boss.” She set down the empty platter.

“Look at these people. You can see the old money, over there. Near the window, those are the self-made bastards. The ones circulating barely got in and are trying to make nice with the popular kids. And the people not mingling, but just observing? They’re trying to figure out who’s going to be the most useful. Social engineering is like chaos theory. You can control something if you figure out its patterns. I’m figuring out which ones’ll tip.”

“And her?” Evie nodded to the blonde woman wearing the snake necklace. She was speaking to a man with a silver beard. They stood out, all stylish arrogance, in the mosaic of Rolexes and old pearls.

“Lila Pearce. She owns a lot of resorts around the world. This is her shindig.”

“I hate everyone here, Ty. It’s my break time.”

“Enjoy it. Please come back.”

Evie began to work back through the party as a brunette in a white gown and a fancy rabbit mask produced several small spheres of pink paper and tossed them into the air. The pink paper unraveled and glitter shimmered down. Another person in an expensive suit and tiger mask tossed other paper spheres in the air. More glitter misted over the crowd. People laughed in surprise. There was a delicate round of applause.

Evie narrowly evaded the shower of glitter as she headed for the powder room. Inside, she dabbed at the champagne stain with paper towels and heaved in a breath. She wanted to

scream. She always wanted to scream.

A girl in a silver cocktail dress and a cropped jacket of pink feathers entered. Her blonde hair, streaked with pink, glittered with diamond pins. As she began applying lip gloss in front of the mirror, she slid her black-rimmed gaze to Evie and said, "What big eyes you have."

"Thanks?" Evie thought the other girl had eyes like a wolf.

The girl snapped the lip gloss shut. She turned and leaned against the counter, flicked a glance over Evie's uniform. "You look like Little Bo Peep in that get-up." She leaned close, confidential, her wolf eyes sly. "I can see you're having a rough time."

"I'm kind of working, so yeah."

"I'm sorry. No one deserves that."

Evie stared at her. "Deserves what?"

"Indentured servitude." The girl tilted her head. "I'm Mad."

That was her name, Evie realized. "Evie." She wondered why a rich girl was bothering to speak to her. She wanted to retort that she actually liked this job.

"Here." The girl – Mad – slipped off the little jacket. "Take it. It'll cover that stain."

Evie reluctantly accepted the jacket. The designer on the label made her eyes widen.

"You sure –"

"I've got lots. So, you do anything else besides this?"

The girl must be bored. "I've got two other jobs." Evie suddenly felt ashamed. She shrugged. "I paint."

"You do?" Mad's uninterested expression faded into delight. "Do you know your art stuff? Go to school for it?"

Evie's throat tightened. "No school." Fiercely, she added, "But I *do* know my art stuff."

“That’s perfect. The Pre-Raphaelites and the Surrealists are my favorites. There are some amazing films the Surrealists created.” Mad checked a fancy watch on her wrist. She looked up. “Want me to smuggle you in a fancy drink and some goose liver paté?”

“No thank you.” Evie laughed. In this Baroque powder room, she didn’t feel like the clockwork creature she became at most of her jobs. She checked her tousled hair in the mirror, her smudgy eyeliner. “I’d better get back.”

“Suit yourself, pretty elf.” The wolf-eyed girl glided from the powder room. She paused in the doorway and said, without looking back, “Tall, Dark, and Handsome is going to wonder where his wallet went. I hope you took the cash and ditched the crocodile skin.” The door swung shut behind her.

Evie went still. She *had* ditched the wallet she’d lifted from the gorgeous jerk who’d spilled the champagne over her. The bills were tucked into her bra.

A text pinged on her phone: *Ready for fun?*

She squinted at the unknown number.

“Wrong number, weirdo.” She set the phone on the counter and stared into the mirror. The thought of returning to that pack of entitled euffers made her stomach clench.

She slipped back into the kitchen. It was empty. Where *was* everyone? She stepped into the catering area and lifted a platter. As she moved down the corridor, she heard a ruckus beyond the swinging doors to the ballroom. She slipped through.

And halted.

Mayhem had erupted among the guests. One tuxedoed man punched another, while two women in gowns crashed against a table of desserts. Spilled champagne glistened like rosy

blood on the white marble. It was as if old grudges had risen like an evil spell, the fancy clothes and civilized conversation forgotten. Evie ducked a thrown bottle, a swinging arm. Across the room, two girls in masks – the rabbit and an owl – weaved through the fray.

The gorgeous young man who'd spilled champagne on Evie earlier leaned against a sarcophagus on the dais, pouring himself a glass of bubbly as security cut through the crowds.

Evie stepped back, avoiding a flying cake. She watched the melee with a sort of horrified hilarity, flinching as one of her fellow servers clobbered a shouting man with a silver tray.

The gorgeous guy near the sarcophagus straightened, set aside his glass, and pulled a metal dragon mask down over his face. He moved to Lila Pearce, who was yelling at everyone, and discreetly unhooked the Cobra necklace from around her throat. His gaze sought someone behind Evie. She glanced over her shoulder, saw the brown-skinned man in the tiger mask raise one arm.

The unknown number pinged on Evie's phone again. She glanced swiftly at the text:

Success=Ur the best. Fail=U go to jail.

Dragon Mask tossed the necklace to Evie.

Evie, unthinkingly, instinctively, reached out and caught the necklace. It was s heavier than she expected.

Lila Pearce shrieked, "The necklace!"

The four masked people had vanished into the fray.

Two fierce-looking young men in suits – security – pushed toward Evie through the mayhem. Evie panicked. She knew people like Lila Pearce – entitled, impatient folk who wouldn't believe someone like Evie, who didn't have the cleanest record anyway. She wondered how many years one could get for grand larceny. She thought, *Don't see me. Don't see*

me.

Darkness ribboned around her like eels, as if an eclipse had come, and only hung over her. She could see everyone around her, in monochrome, all color gone. She could hear sounds, but they were muted. And she was suddenly so *cold* . . . As the veils of shadow ebbed, she heard whispering she couldn't understand. She stood in an uncanny stillness, as if she'd stepped out of the world. What was happening? Was she having a panic attack? A stroke?

The two militant young men stalked past her without a glance – and she still clutched the Cobra necklace.

The shadows and cold slid away from her like a caul. The noise returned full blast, in a dizzying wave.

She jammed the necklace into a pocket and ran. Avoiding a pair of men grappling with one another, she clambered onto a table, picking her way through pyramids of shrimp cocktails and towers of little cakes. She jumped down and dashed into the hall.

She collided with someone, a young Asian guy, his suit bespoke, his spiky hair blue, his smile vicious. “You’ve got something that doesn’t belong to you.”

She stepped back, instinctively knowing this stranger wasn't security. He grabbed her arm. She twisted free –

The shadows coiled around her again – it was as if she were slipping deeper into a world beneath the skin of this one. Veiled in that cold and whispering darkness, bewildered, Evie fled.

In another hall, she slid behind a pillar, fighting to catch her breath, which misted in the freezing air. Opposite her was a mirrored wall.

She did not see herself in it. She stepped forward, raised one hand –

The blue-haired stranger appeared, slinking down the hall. Evie ducked back behind the pillar.

"I know you're here," he called. "I *know* you're here." He prowled closer. He said, "I get it. You're new. I'll walk you out of here before security gets you. I'll keep you safe. And that's something, 'cause people are usually running *away* from me —"

She broke from the pillar and raced down the hall. She heard a girl shout, "Knife, what are you *doing*?"

"Looking for that girl . . ." Knife replied.

Evie bashed through the kitchen doors and crouched behind a counter. She reached for her phone, groaned, and pressed her brow against her updrawn knees. She'd dropped it somewhere.

When she heard a door open, her head jerked up. Tyrone sauntered in, wrapping his apron back around his hips. She snapped up, grabbed him, and dragged him down behind the counter. "Where *were* you?"

His eyes widened. "In my car, studying. *What* is all that noise —"

She lifted a finger to his lips. She rose, saw the outside doors sweep open to admit three figures in masks — the dragon, the owl, and the tiger. The girl in the owl mask looked directly at Evie.

Evie crouched back behind the counter. She whispered, "I think we're being robbed."

"We need weapons," Tyrone whispered back, frantically reaching for the knife drawer.

Evie smacked his hand away. "We're not knife people." She indicated the nearest cabinet. "*Hide.*"

They crammed themselves into the cabinet. As Evie closed the door and darkness folded over them, she heard a male voice speak in a Liverpool sing-song. "How do we find her if we can't see her?"

The second male's voice was deep and velvety. "We don't need to find her yet. Just make sure Nara crew doesn't get her."

"This rivalry with Nara and Fenrir. It really needs to stop." Liverpool spoke.

"Silence and Night say it keeps us on our toes." The girl's voice – Evie recognized it. *Mad*. The blonde girl whose jacket she wore.

"The Deer and the Wolves'll never beat us." Liverpool's voice was so close. "We cheat."

The cabinet doors flew open. Evie grabbed Tyrone's hand as the thief in the tiger mask peered in. Her skin iced. There was a weird buzzing in her ears. Her scalp prickled. Her vision blurred and a coppery taste filled her mouth.

The thief's gaze passed over them. Evie held her breath until he withdrew and shut the cabinet doors. "Nothing here."

She felt Tyrone's hand in hers tighten. She waited, her stomach churning, for the cruel punchline. Surely, the crook was just playing games. Any moment, the doors would open and they'd be dragged out . . .

The voices faded as the trio left.

Evie, opposite Tyrone, saw the gleam of his eyes in the dark. She didn't know how long they waited, scarcely breathing, wondering if they were going to die.

Then she heard the sirens, faint at first, growing closer. She breathed out. Tyrone finally exhaled.

They pushed open the cabinet doors. Blue and red lights swirled on the ceiling from the

parking lot. The police had arrived.

Evie's encounter with the Silver Cove Police Department was a blur of procedure and authority, two things Evie passionately disliked. But she had become a master of evasion. When asked about her parents, she replied: "They're dead." The female officer interviewing her seemed startled, then genuinely sympathetic, which only irritated Evie further.

"What happened?" Evie needed to know exactly what had transpired tonight.

"Everyone went crazy."

The officer glanced around at the police swarming the kitchen. Tyrone sat at the opposite end speaking with another cop. "Something in the champagne, they think. Won't be identified until the evidence goes through forensics."

No. It wasn't the champagne. Evie remembered the dark-haired girl in red tossing paper balls into the air, the glitter that had fallen. Her breath shook. The blonde girl – Mad – had *distracted* Evie while the pandemonium unfolded. It was an unnerving realization.

There had been four of them. And, for some reason, they had *selected* Evie. Even before the necklace was tossed right at her. And the strange texts on her phone . . . they had *targeted* her, made her an accessory.

The idea was terrifying. Like playing with a Ouija board for fun, then realizing one had actually summoned something helluva dangerous.

Evie clutched at her seat with both hands as the officer sauntered away to speak with another colleague. Evie was still wondering why people hadn't been able to see her. It had been bothering her for hours. She couldn't figure out what had happened. How those security guards and then Knife and Tiger Mask had failed to see her. And that moment of terror when her

reflection had been missing in the mirror . . . From childhood, she'd had a tricky relationship with mirrors . . . and with the shadow girl she sometimes glimpsed behind her while brushing her hair or her teeth. An imaginary friend that had faded as she'd grown older.

But . . . tonight . . . had it been the *necklace*? Had the Queen Cobra affected her in some way?

She *hadn't* become invisible.

Had she?

She spotted a young man speaking with the officer who had questioned her . The officer pointed to Evie, who frowned as the stranger walked toward her. His cashmere coat and shoes looked expensive. There was a formidable intelligence in his dark eyes. His name badge, on a lanyard, read 'Jason Ra.'

"You're Evie Wilder?" The smoky timbre of his voice glinted with a posh British accent. He sat in the chair the officer had vacated. Light gleamed in his dark hair, classically side-parted and sculpted to emphasize a somewhat hawkish face. Despite the curve to his lips, and a cute black freckle dotting one nostril, he radiated all the warmth of an icicle. "May I ask you some questions?"

"Ra." She played it cool. "The name of the Egyptian sun god."

"Everyone knows mythology these days." He studied her. "My last name's Korean, but I was born in London."

"Aren't you young to be a cop?"

"I'm not a police officer." He didn't look amused.

"What are you then?" Evie was suspicious.

"I'm a private investigator."

“Can you be a PI at your age?”

“I’m nineteen, and, yes, you can. My dad was Interpol. The officer who spoke with you – she’s from L.A. She knew my dad from a case involving her partner’s car accident.”

Evie narrowed her eyes. “Are we suspects? There are security cameras – ”

“All the footage was scrambled. We’ve only got you and your friend as witnesses.”

“I told the co – the officer – everything.” Evie scrutinized her interrogator.

He smiled and it was breathtaking. “You don’t mind speaking to me as well, do you? You saw two males. A girl was with them?”

“Yeah.” Evie remembered the dark-haired girl who had tossed paper balls into the air. The glitter. She kept quiet about that.

Jason Ra produced a small notebook and wrote in it. “Didn’t see their faces, just what they wore?”

“They wore animal masks. Fancy ones.” Evie told him what the two males had said.

“They spoke in some sort of poetic robber jargon.”

His mouth curved, a slight, telling dimple. “No names?”

“No.”

Jason Ra closed the notebook and returned that and the expensive-looking pen to a place inside his blazer. He studied her with remote interest. “You didn’t exchange any words with them?”

Evie thought of Mad. “We were hiding in a cabinet. Why would I speak to crooks?”
Aside from being evasive, she was also a good liar.

“Have you ever heard of La Fable Sombre?”

She blinked. “That French?”

“It means ‘The Dark Fable.’ They’re a gang of thieves – some say nothing but an urban legend – who’ve been committing thefts around the world. Odd thefts, usually of obscure valuables and ancient objects.”

Evie listened, her brow crinkled. The necklace slithered in her pocket. If they searched her . . .

“A necklace called the Queen Cobra was stolen tonight. It belonged to Cleopatra, a queen of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Its value is phenomenal.”

“Huh. Maybe the museum shouldn’t have advertised that they had it.”

“It *was* an auction.”

“Too bad then.”

His gaze never left her face. Evie thought he could tell, he could *sense*, that she was leaving something out. She stood up abruptly. “Nice speaking to you, detective. But I’ve got to pee.”

Evie brooded in the passenger seat as Tyrone drove his Ford Ranchero past the hotels on Ocean Avenue. The pink neon cross above a chapel, the red torpor of a liquor shop sign, contributed to the unsettling smoke-and-mirrors atmosphere of the evening. Silver Cove’s downtown was seedy, its once glamorous Art Nouveau hotels rehabbed into grungy apartments. The glitz that had once appealed to 1920s’ film stars and gangsters was now tarnished.

Tyrone pulled up in front of the apartment building Evie had dubbed the Pink Blight. On its hill, with the shops below huddled around it like courtiers, it reminded her of a decrepit queen.

“Evie,” Tyrone said as she got out. He was gripping the steering wheel as he stared

straight ahead. "We didn't die today."

"No. We didn't." She shut the Ranchero's door. "See you later, Ty."

"I think I'm looking for another job," he called after her.

"I'll miss you." She knew he'd be back in the morning.

She ignored the catcalls from a gathering of guys as she trudged up the Pink Blight's stairs. She didn't become invisible, which relieved and disappointed her. She was too tired to make decisions concerning reality vs fantasy.

The thieves would come after that necklace. La Fable Sombre. And, when they did, she'd need to be a damn good liar. She fumbled with the keys and stepped into the hall.

When she heard someone enter behind her, she didn't look back. In front of her, a girl was sitting on the interior stairs. Elegant in tartan leggings and a leather jacket, her dark brown hair sleek over one shoulder, she watched Evie, a cherry-red vape pen glowing between two fingers. Feline eyes, an upturned nose, and a wry smile gave her a roguish look.

And, Evie knew that this was the masked brunette from the museum gala, the one who had flung balls of glitter confetti.

"Hey." A male voice came from behind Evie. "I wanna speak to you. Snitch."

Evie's stomach dropped. It was her downstairs neighbor. Lanky and sneering, he slinked around the apartment steps with his minions at night. The Brute. She met the girl's gaze and saw amusement. The girl said, "I'd hurry if I were you."

Evie slid past her, up the stairs. She glanced back.

The Brute was blurred by a cloud of smoke that had come from the girl's lips. It was an awful lot of smoke. He coughed and stumbled a little. The girl rose, vanishing into the bluish smoke, leaving Evie to fend for herself.

Evie hesitated. The Brute stopped waving his arms and glared up at her.

She whirled and ran. She reached the third-floor hallway and the stairs to the attic. She got her door open. She slammed it shut and shot home the bolts.

When the door shuddered beneath a violent blow, she stumbled back. She heard drunken laughter and obscenities. Fists bashed at the door.

“Bitch! You tell the landlord I bothered you?”

She couldn't do that – the landlord didn't even know she was here. She also didn't know who the landlord was.

As the door shook beneath more kicks, she sank down with her back against it, her arms over her head. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend she was floating in the ocean, in the night. Sometimes, she sensed another girl stirring inside of her, a hidden part of her psyche, a self-defense mechanism born from ten years of precarious circumstances and uncertainty, whispering, *I will always love you. I will always take care of you.*

The lights flickered. She thought of her brother and sister – they'd be seventeen and sixteen now, if they hadn't . . . they weren't lying in an unmarked grave. She told herself that every day.

She lifted a hand toward the medallion she wore for luck, a lacquered image of a girl's face painted with a skull, her dark hair blooded with roses. *She will protect you*, Evie's mother had promised.

She touched the divot between her collarbones – the medallion was gone, lost in the chaos of this evening. Tears blurred her vision.

For most of her life, Evie had been in foster homes, in a recurring state of fight or flight, her only constant a caseworker named Amy Rodriguez, who had taken Evie shopping for

school supplies and brought her to the doctor to get her birth control. What did Evie have to show for those years? No higher education. Dead dreams. Dead-end jobs. Just a future of wandering and luck. A future without seeing her brother and sister grow up.

The Brute eventually went away.

Evie looked around her attic. With its tiny half bath, it had once been an artist's studio, now forgotten. When it rained, she had to keep buckets in several places. And, sometimes, there were mice. But the electric and the water worked, and it was rent-free because only her neighbor Ava knew she was here. Well. Until now.

She rose and flicked on the lights, avoided her reflection in the only mirror she owned, a sunburst above the bathroom sink. The black walls and the few pieces of salvaged furniture were comforting after this evening's shock. She walked to the bulletin board pinned with Polaroids. She pressed her palm against the photo of Ezra and Juliet, who had been six and seven years old.

Evie's world had ended when she'd been eight, when her father had shot her mom and himself, and she'd never seen her brother and sister again. She hadn't come out of her room, had been found curled in her closet, her arms over her head. Years later, those headlines were still burned into her brain: *Local musician, father of three, murders wife, dies by suicide. Two missing children assumed dead. One survivor.*

Three years ago, Evie had scraped together enough money to hire a private detective who had been willing to listen to her. He'd believed her when she'd told him that a murderer had tricked his way into their house –

There were nights when she doubted, when she remembered her father's temper, and her mom weeping quietly in the bedroom. Her dad had never raised a hand to any of them, but

there had been broken and repaired objects in the Los Angeles bungalow, hallmarks of his moods and her mom's stubborn resistance to them. Evie sometimes wondered if what the psychiatrists said had been true, (*Typical dissociation – you replaced your father with a monster because you couldn't deal with the truth,*)

She would do anything to see her little brother and sister again, to embrace them grown, even if they were strangers. Sometimes, she thought she'd been tricked, that the monster she'd imagined hadn't –

She drew the Queen Cobra from her dress with shaking hands and stared at it. She stood before the mirror in her bathroom. She closed her eyes. She willed the shadows around her, sought out some break in reality that would allow her to be unseen. Cold whispered across her skin.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped as a shadow flickered behind her, vanished. Her reflection stared back at her with eyes that were all pupil. What was she doing?

The thieves, La Fable Sombre . . . she would have to be very, very careful when they came for the Cobra.

For her.

Ava Dubrowska always had tea and a scrumptious babka from the Polish bakery around the corner. Evie wasn't quite sure of Ava's age, as she had the fine bones of a ballerina and the vibrant manner of a Bohemian. Evie loved wandering around her apartment with its teal wallpaper scrolled with silver flowers and peacocks, its antiques and objects from all over the world. The photographs of Ava when she'd been a concert pianist were absolutely cinematic. She had been teaching Evie how to sing.

“How are you doing?” Ava, seated in her chair, her silver hair in its usual elegant up-do, added a sugar cube to her tea.

Evie told her: “There was a weird heist or something at the party I worked tonight.”

Ava arched an eyebrow. “It was all over the news .”

Evie turned back to the wall of photographs. “They only stole from the rich guests. One of my co-workers found a hundred-dollar bill in his pocket.”

“How fascinating.”

“There were a lot of assholes at that party.”

Ava sighed. “Don’t be savage, Evie. It doesn’t suit you.”

Evie thought it suited her just fine.

“Did they only steal from the guests? Not the museum?” Ava asked.

“They took a necklace called the Cobra.”

“No artifacts?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They wore masks?”

“Yeah. Animal faces.”

“When I was your age, in Romania, there were rumors of a gang of thieves. They had stolen a crown from a Babylonian gravesite. They had thieved Greta Garbo’s fox bracelets. I believe there was even an incident with the Prussian crown jewels. They called themselves La Fable Sombre. Anyone who crossed them regretted it. They were quite the bogeyman, slinking beneath all of the other horrors of the war.”

Evie pretended she wasn’t listening intently. She tilted her head, gazing at a photograph of Ava with her husband when they’d been young. Ava wore a necklace of sapphires and

silvery mermaids. "Your husband was a hottie, Ava. That necklace is fabulous."

"Will was a jeweler. He made that for me. It was a copy of my mother's, one I lost." She smiled wistfully. "He called me his mermaid."

Evie sat down and reached for a slice of cinnamon babka. Ava's cat, a sleek tabby, curled beside her. Evie petted it cautiously. She didn't have any pets, afraid to love anything. One of her foster moms, Betty Gordan, had had cats. She'd neglected nine-year-old Evie, but not her cats. Evie had loved those cats. While sleeping in her curtained cubby at night, the cats had curled around her and kept the cockroaches away.

She glanced up at Ava, who spoke matter-of-factly, "They took all of our jewelry when they came for us. My mother's necklace . . . it's in a museum in Austria now." She looked at the photograph. "At least I have these. And St. Stanislaus. Oh dear." She picked up a statue of some pretty saint and frowned at it. "He has a crack in his face. That's new."

Evie reached out and laid a hand over one of Ava's. She said, "Next time, could you teach me a song from the Roaring Twenties?"

"How old do you think I am?" Ava laughed. "I'll teach you a lovely tune I know. Something for young people."

Evie sat back, cradling her teacup. "I'm sorry, Ava. About those bastards taking your mom's necklace."

"It was only a thing."

Evie gazed down into her tea. She delicately asked, "How did you get through it? Being so powerless?"

"Powerless?" Ava smiled proudly. "I was not powerless. I watched. I waited. I learned. I found their weaknesses. I grew stronger. I am not a survivor, Evie. I am not a victim. I am a

victor.”

And Evie thought about being a victor.

Back in her apartment, Evie sat on a pink railroad trunk and studied her latest unfinished painting. It stood in a corner cluttered with mason jars spiky with brushes, canvases of all sizes stacked against the walls. The half-finished painting was of a boy with scarlet wings on a red background spattered with gold. Her figures emerged from chaos, from the mosaic of jewel-like colors she plastered onto canvases painted black. She’d discovered painting when she’d been thirteen. She loved the fury and the mess of the medium. And she’d sold a few of them as a side hustle.

She knelt beside the pink trunk. At least once a month, she opened the trunk to sort through the objects within, talismans from her childhood.

1. The nine albums that had belonged to her dad, including her favorite, *Prince’s Purple Rain*.

2. Her dad’s leather wallet containing a Hermes dime and a Polaroid of her parents when they’d been very young, the sun setting behind them and five of their friends. They looked happy.

3. A red leather copy of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* with an inscription inked on the inside cover: *To Trick – LEARN THIS*. It was signed with a sharp and elaborate **B**.

When she dropped the Queen Cobra into the trunk’s false bottom, the Cobra’s eye glinted as if it were winking at her. She glanced out the grimy window, to the boulevard below. An old-fashioned Rolls Royce was parked opposite the Pink Blight.

Apprehension whispered up her spine. She rose and crept closer to the window.

A figure in a suit leaned against the car. He lit up a cigarette, cupping a match against the wind. The flame briefly lit the hollow of his cheekbone, the sweep of dark, glossy hair. He looked up.

Evie ducked down, her heart slamming. It was the gorgeous stranger from the museum gala.

A black envelope slid beneath her door. She scrambled back, staring at it. She reached up, opened a drawer, and fumbled out a pair of chopsticks. She picked up the envelope and tore it with one of the chopsticks. A piece of black parchment floated to the floor. The letterhead and the writing were silver. *Take care of the Queen Cobra. We'll be in touch. LFS.*

Evie curled back against her bed, the copper taste in her mouth returning. So. Her desperation *had* summoned something dangerous. She crawled to the light switch and flicked it off. She moved back to the window and peeked out.

The Rolls Royce was gone. Hanging from the parking meter was the dragon mask the lead robber had worn, a lit cigarette stuck in its mouth like a flaming tongue.

