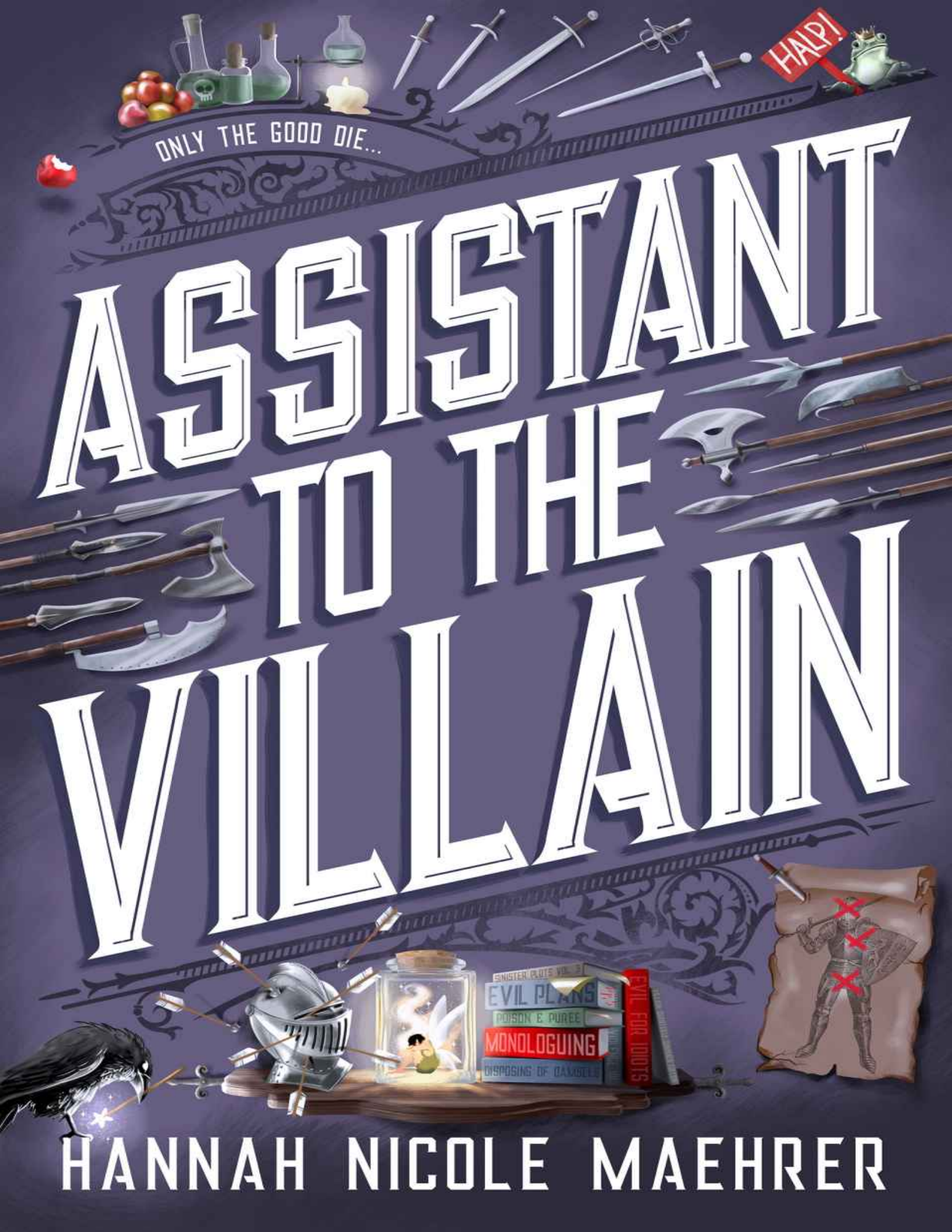


ONLY THE GOOD DIE...

ASSISTANT TO THE VILLAIN

HANNAH NICOLE MAEHRER



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TO THE
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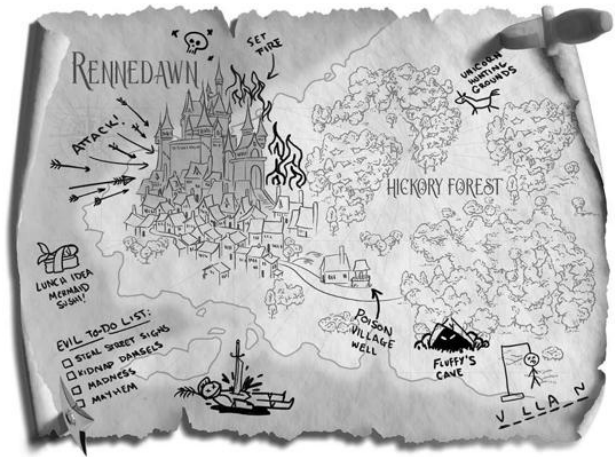


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*To Mom and Dad,
for the hours of my childhood you spent telling me stories
and the years you spent listening to mine,
know that yours will always be my favorite.*

*And for all of you,
this is what I think it would be like to be the morally gray
fantasy villain's personal assistant.*



Prologue

Once Upon a Time...

It was an ordinary day when Evie met The Villain.

Another failed attempt at the job fairs in her village. Another day with no source of income. Another day she was letting her sick father and little sister down. Which was why her mind was preoccupied as she wandered to the trees lined like fences at Hickory Forest's edge—and walked right in.

The forest had once been frequently populated but was now the very last place anyone with common sense would choose to wander. Especially alone. Well, unless your name was Evangelina Sage and a forbidden forest seemed far more inviting than going home and admitting to your family that you'd finally found a job...and given it away.

Evie sighed, reaching out to let her fingers drift across the scratchy bark of several nearby trees as she wandered past. The forest really was quite beautiful.

The Kingdom of Renedawn was one of the more modest of the enchanted kingdoms, and avoiding Hickory Forest when it took up so much of its land was a challenge. Still, its citizens had managed it well enough so far.

It had remained that way since a dark figure known as The Villain's emergence nearly ten years ago. There were too many rumors of him hiding out near the forest's edge to steal victims to torture. Evie knew little about the evil figure, but she was almost certain he had better things to do with his time than stalk the trees like a forest sprite. Though she'd not seen any of those, either—they tended to live farther north.

“The Villain,” Evie scoffed, walking deeper into the trees and shoving her

hands into the deep pockets of her simple brown dress. “Perhaps he would be less murderous if his moniker wasn’t so ridiculous.”

Unless, of course, the name had been bestowed upon him at birth, in which case Evie would applaud his mother for her incredible foresight.

Evie stumbled over a wayward branch, yanking her hands out of her pockets to catch herself with a nearby tree, then trudged toward the murmuring sounds of a stream.

As she walked, she sifted through her meager knowledge of the man, most of which she’d gotten from poorly drawn WANTED flyers. In them, he was always portrayed as older, with a gray beard broken up by large scars running down his face from grappling with his victims, and his teeth were often drawn jagged, like he’d rip out your heart with them—or perhaps needed to see a dentist.

So many rumors had trickled through the lands about the kingdom’s greatest foe that Evie wasn’t certain what to believe. She knew The Villain had burned one of the fishing villages in Western Rennedawn to the ground years ago. The kingdom had been devastated with famine after the loss of fishing for months afterward until they’d finally rebuilt. And there were many other stories of horror. Petty larceny seemed a staple of The Villain’s to-do list as well, often stealing into noble homes to frighten the families and make off with their precious heirlooms.

Slowly approaching the stream—wider than she thought it would be—Evie marveled at the beauty of the sun coming in through the gaps in the trees, giving the flowers bordering it an ethereal glow. For a moment, she almost forgot about her predicament, it was so breathtaking a view. But then it all came rushing back.

Her father still didn’t know she’d lost her job at the blacksmith last month. She’d been so sure she could find something else before her family noticed that the table was a little sparser at dinner or that their small cottage was colder for lack of firewood. She’d have to tell him tonight, though. They were down to their last meager food stores.

With a heavy sigh, she knelt down along the edges of the stream, her knees sinking into the spongy moss. She ran her hands through the clear blue water, then splashed some of the cool liquid against her face and neck, hoping to calm her racing heart.

She was in trouble this time. And not from some mythical villain.

No. She'd done this to herself.

The worst of it was that she'd nearly had a good position handed to her. At the fair this morning, she'd been offered the sole new maid posting for a noble family on an estate not far from her village. It wasn't ideal because of the distance, but she'd been ready to take it happily. Until, of course, she'd turned to see another woman standing beside her with such hope in her smile-lined eyes that Evie's heart had constricted in her chest. More so when she'd seen three young children standing behind the woman.

Evie had handed her the certificate of employment and watched her face light up as she grabbed Evie and kissed her on both cheeks.

I did the right thing. So why do I feel like my chest is going to cave in?

Sighing and splashing another bit of red water against her face, she began to list the other upcoming job fairs. Perhaps she could travel to one of the neighboring villa—

Wait... *Red?!*

Gasping and edging backward into the flowers, Evie felt her eyes widen in horror at the once-clear-blue water now clouded with a deep crimson color.

Blood.

She shut her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. After counting to ten, she got to her feet, nearly tripping over the hem of her long dress, and inched slowly toward the water again. It was clear to see the blood was coming from farther up the stream.

She took a step in that direction, inching one leather boot in front of the other, wholly unprepared for what she might find.

The stream was beginning to resemble a river of blood the farther she

walked up it, the opaque red engulfing any remaining blue. It had to have been an injured animal, a large one if the amount of blood was any sort of indication. Certainly not something that warranted Evie's personal investigation.

And yet, here she was, in the forest that was suddenly getting darker as the sun began its descent behind the trees...following a river of blood.

Shaking her head, she felt plants getting crushed under her feet as she grinded to a halt. She was going to turn around. In fact, her body had been halfway turned when she spotted a beast with black fur hunched over and hidden slightly among the tall grass surrounding the stream and a giant tree.

Whatever manner of creature it was, the thing was alive—groans and muffled sounds of pain were coming from its general direction. Evie crouched, gently lifting her skirts to reach the small blade she kept in a sheath around her ankle for emergencies.

She'd put the poor beast out of its misery. Showing it that much kindness was hardly a burden. But the closer she inched, the less it looked like a creature at all. It almost looked like...

A human hand whipped out from beneath the black fur, which she now realized wasn't fur at all but a dark cloak. The hand circled around one of her wrists, pulling her down beside it.

"Oof!" She hit the ground hard, her shoulder connecting with the forest floor as an arm banded around her waist and pulled her against their body. She lay on her side, her back pressed tightly against something solid and warm behind her—which was when her good sense kicked in and she started to squirm and shout.

The arm around her waist cinched tighter as a hand closed over her lips. A low voice was in her ear, sending shivers throughout her entire body. "Be quiet, you little urchin, or you'll get us both killed."

Just then, Evie saw another foreboding figure across the way—several, in fact. All men dressed in silver. Carrying very large weapons, some of them glowing. *The king's Valiant Guards!*

She struggled against the hand, but the man's other arm was locking her against him and he wrapped a heavy leg over her ankles, effectively holding her still.

"Lwet meh go." She'd dropped her knife when she fell, so she felt around in the grass for it with her free arm.

"Relax," he ordered again.

Right. That was likely, considering a strange man, whom she was certain was the thing these men were hunting, had her pinned to the ground. But she'd sought this out, hadn't she? She'd followed a literal river of blood—what else did she think was going to happen?

"Em suc a fwool." Evie sighed long and hard.

Suddenly, the hand was gone from her mouth and the voice was in her ear once more. "What are you mumbling about?"

"This is just very typical for me," she whispered.

"Being pulled to the ground by a stranger?" he said in a tone that sounded suspiciously curious.

"Well, not this *exact* situation. But if I told someone about how I ended up here, nobody would think it out of the ordinary." She jabbed her elbow into his ribs, causing her captor to curse and grunt. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did that hurt?" She did it again, making her point.

"Enough!" he hissed before he pointed a tanned hand to the men searching the trees on the other side of the stream. "Those men do not care that you are an innocent who stumbled into the arms of a demon. They will kill you without a moment's hesitation, and they will do it laughing."

"A demon?" Evie chuckled quietly, attempting to turn her body to get a look at this man with such a high opinion of himself, but his arms tightened around her once more, keeping her in place.

"You know who I am, don't you?" he asked without a hint of arrogance in his tone. And yet, the casualness with which he just *knew* his reputation had preceded him made Evie's stomach do backflips.

She'd been called many disparaging things in her life. Alarmingly all

beginning with the letter F. Flighty, foolish, forgetful, and, by a strange turn of events, she was finally able to add the final F.

Fucked.

She knew. She didn't know how she knew, but she did.

The Villain, King of Darkness, Haunter of Dreams, had his arms around her. Worse, even, she was not nearly as afraid as she should've been. In fact, she wasn't afraid at all, so much as she—

Oh dear. Was she *laughing*?

She was. She couldn't help it, and if she was any louder, those men would be over here in seconds. The Villain seemed to sense this, too, because she blinked and his hand was wrapped around her mouth once more.

“We're going to slowly crawl behind that tree.” He pulled Evie up so she could see the large oak in question. “And then we're going to run.”

“We?” she asked as she was suddenly flipped around and shoved in the direction of the tree. There was no room to argue, so, as instructed, she kept low and crawled until she was safely leaning against the other side of the trunk. Breathing heavily and startled to see blood brushing the back of her arm, Evie turned to see if The Villain was still there.

Gone.

“Where in the deadlands did he—”

“Here.”

Evie spun in the direction of his voice, stunned. “How did you get over th—” But her words cut off when she saw him.

In her defense, there was a lot to take in.

Her first thought was the WANTED posters had it all wrong. This was not an older, scarred man with a gray beard. In fact, no gray laced through his thick, dark hair, either. He had high cheekbones above the two-day shadow that ran along a very hard jawline. She figured he couldn't be more than six or seven years older than she was. If she had to guess, she'd put him at no more than...twenty-eight, twenty-nine? That couldn't be right, though. There had to be a rule somewhere that evil overlords needed to be at least

fifty, maybe sixty if they were pushing it.

But not young! And not, even more disastrously, beautiful.

He was, though: beautiful. His skin was tanned and smooth. As if his off time from terrorizing people was spent lying in the grass, perhaps daintily drinking out of a teacup and reading poetry with his pinky raised.

The thought brought a hysterical giggle to Evie's lips. The Villain lifted one of his perfectly thick brows that framed the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. Eyes that assessed her in pinched confusion. It seemed he didn't fully put together that she was another living, breathing human being, because he looked at her as if her very existence was a mystery.

"You really shouldn't look like that," she said and surprised herself by almost thinking the befuddled look on his face was endearing.

He's a murderer! Her conscience rebelled, but the rest of her, the part that wasn't attached to her very wise brain, found him far too pretty to care.

Taking a careful step in his direction, Evie tried to dig inside herself for the fear she knew was there. Any minute now, she'd be paralyzed with fright and run screaming in the other direction, but he was within arm's length now and she hadn't turned yet.

Hmm. No fear, but she did feel mild concern—a sound indicator she hadn't completely lost her good sense. Until, of course, her mild concern was clouded with embarrassing thoughts of what he would smell like if she leaned in close and took a whiff.

"Is there something about my face...that is displeasing to you? Or is it perhaps that I'm bleeding from three different wounds, courtesy of the men in your village?" His voice was quiet, and outwardly he appeared calm, but Evie could see a muted fury behind his dark eyes.

Did he think she was judging him?

"Um, yes— The blood's not great...but I was referring to the fact that you look like you were carved out of marble, and I just think that as a rule of thumb, inherently evil people should be grotesque-looking."

The fury winked out as if never there in the first place, his only response

to blink.

“You just can’t kill people and be pretty. It’s confusing.” Evie began unwrapping the wool scarf her little sister, Lyssa, had given her on her last birthday, stepping closer to The Villain and holding it up like a signal of peace. “For the blood, Your Evilness.”

Taking it from her in a gripped fist, The Villain twisted the scarf around his middle and cinched it tight to stanch the bleeding. “You think I’m *pretty*?”

Oddly enough, Evie had the feeling he would’ve preferred to have been called *grotesque* for the way his face twisted with distaste.

“That’s not a think scenario—that’s just objective. Look how symmetrical your cheekbones are.” She closed the distance between them and placed her hands on either side of his face.

His eyes widened and so did hers when she realized what she was doing.

“You’re touching my face,” he said flatly.

“...Yes.”

“Are you happy with that decision?” He raised one dark brow again.

He’s a professional killer, right? Maybe he’ll murder me now if I ask very nicely.

“I was trying to prove a point.” She shrugged, letting her hands drop back to her sides.

Shaking his head, a small dose of wonder in his eyes, he said, “You are chaos.”

“Would you mind writing that out as an employment reference? I’d have a job within the week, and I desperately need work.” Before he could reply, there was a quiet rustle in the bushes beside them that caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end.

Twisting her head in the direction of the noise, she took a wary step closer to The Villain, who grabbed her shoulders quick as lightning and tugged her toward him. “What—”

She heard the arrow before she felt it.

Pain sliced through the skin of her back as the arrow skimmed her shoulders, sending her reeling into the solidness of The Villain's chest. "That hurt." The words came out matter-of-factly, like she'd just gotten a splinter.

They'd been spotted, but there was still no panic in his voice when he said, "It only grazed you. I know it hurts, but we must run." He turned her quickly but gently, and they started in the other direction, The Villain with a slight limp from his injuries.

"Put your arm around me." He winced as they dashed around several trees, Evie a step behind.

"Why?" she huffed back as he tugged her closer. "You're moving just as slow as I am!"

A flash of amusement crossed his face like a burning star, bright and beautiful for a moment, then gone beyond the horizon. "I'm going slower to keep pace with you."

It struck Evie then. How her predicament had escalated from unemployed butcher's daughter to aiding and abetting this kingdom's greatest enemy in an alarmingly short amount of time.

Good grief, maybe she *was* chaos. Had it even been half an hour?

Which suggested a very delicate question. One Evie should do well not to remind him of. But it was too late—the thought formed on her lips before she could push it back in. "Why are you bothering to keep pace with me in the first place? You could easily leave me in the dust and use the time they're dealing with me to get away."

Yes, Evangelina. Give him reasons to leave you behind and explain why you were running with The Villain in the first place. Sign your death warrant. Well done!

He held her gaze for a second, still managing to dodge an arrow that whizzed by without breaking eye contact. Evie was jealous. She couldn't dodge a dead tree if she was staring right at it.

"Such ruthless thinking, Miss...?" She was pleased to hear notes of

fatigue behind his words. He wasn't a skilled runner. He wasn't perfect, wasn't invincible.

He was, however, asking her name. "Evangelina Sage...or just Evie." Okay, perhaps his voice was a little weary, but hers sounded like it had been through a cheese grater. Running had never been her friend, and running *fast*, she believed, was her mortal enemy.

"Hmph" was his only response, which was discomfiting, since he hadn't revealed if he was going to take her viciously good advice and leave her behind.

It was probable that some of the men from the village would recognize her, but the chances of them letting her live, when they seemed in such a bloodthirsty state, were slim. Especially considering she was running beside the person they were hunting, who was probably about to trip her and feed her to the wolves.

Of course, because the universe was against her, she didn't need to wait for him to do the deed himself. A stray branch hidden beneath the bramble jutted out just enough to catch the tip of her boot, and then she was falling clumsily to the earth.

The call of more male voices was nearly upon them. They were screwed.

Or rather, she was screwed. The Villain would probably take her wool scarf and ride his evil countenance into the sunset. She stared at the back of his head from the ground. At the clean, efficient way his body moved. As if the world was made to bend to his will.

She watched that ridiculously perfect head turn to the empty spot beside him and then back toward where she was helplessly sprawled on the ground. Back stinging, shoulder aching. With the addition of a large bruise forming after hitting the ground for the second time that day.

The voices were closing in, and they sounded angry. Evie attempted to climb to her feet to at least find a hiding place. But a familiar hand appeared in front of her, and she gripped it despite the shock overriding her decision-making skills.

“You fall down often.” The Villain looked her up and down as he said it, seeming to catalog the fact like he was making a scientific discovery. “Let’s move, Sage.”

Ignoring the formality in his usage of her surname, she blustered, “The first time I fell, it was because you pulled me down!” She gripped his offered arm for support, and they moved away from their pursuers as quickly as they could manage.

“But you fell so easily. I barely tugged.”

“You cannot possibly be blaming me for not being sturdy enough to withstand someone *yanking* me by my wrist?”

He didn’t dignify her question with an answer, just gripped her tighter as they hustled through the forest like a pair of bandits. Eventually, the scenery of unending trees began to take on a darker tone. Not only because of the fast-fleeting sunlight, but the color of the trees was a different kind this far in. Long, twisted trunks and branches held warped leaves of a lush moss color, and the high-pitched screeching of strange birds filled the thick air, sending deep, unsettling chills through her.

“Where are we going?” she asked hesitantly. The little light that was left in the sky seemed to vanish within seconds, and night cloaked over them like an unwelcome blanket. Well, unwelcome to her, at least. The Villain looked around at the blackness, and for the first time since she had encountered him, she saw a truly wicked glint in his eyes.

He belonged to this, the night, the darkness. It was his.

And Evie...was still not afraid.

So incredibly odd.

“To safety. My home and where I conduct my business.”

Evie attempted to pull her arm from his and turn in the other direction. “Safety in a place the public has nicknamed Massacre Manor? I’m okay, thank you. I’ll take my chances with the village brutes.”

His arm was a steel hook around hers, and she couldn’t move an inch. She may as well have been welded to him. “If I’d wanted you dead, I would

have left you back there.”

She arched a brow. They were moving at a far more leisurely pace than before, the low buzz of voices behind them fading into almost nothing.

They’d lost them. For now. The safety in that caused Evie’s inappropriate curiosity to get the better of her. “Why were they chasing you in the first place?” she asked, angling her head at him and the pouch he gripped at his side. “Did you steal something? Weapons? Money? Someone’s firstborn child?”

The Villain halted for a moment, and Evie yelped as the pouch moved. Before she could protest, The Villain reached inside and pulled out a larger-than-average-size frog, so green in color that it nearly blended against its gold-rimmed eyes. It sat peacefully in The Villain’s hand, staring at her. She stared right back at it.

“Is that frog wearing a crown?” Evie asked after a few beats of silent staring.

The Villain ignored her question, holding the frog up a little higher. “I will not deny that thievery is one of my better traits. However, in this case, those men were attempting to rob *me*.”

The dots were connecting, just in a way that was too strange for even Evie to understand. “Rob you of...a *frog*...that’s wearing a *crown*?”

The Villain turned and continued to walk, and Evie followed quietly. “This is no ordinary frog,” he reasoned. “He can...understand and communicate with humans as well as if he were one.” The frog let out a healthy ribbit as if to demonstrate his fine communication skills, but The Villain ignored him. “And he is in *my* care.” The words prickled over Evie’s skin like a warning. “Magical animals get auctioned for quite a bit of money. The men from your village thought it would be prudent to find out how much stealing him on my daily stroll would cost them.”

Evie gasped in horror. “And the crown is because...?”

The Villain paused, raising his hand holding the frog toward Evie as though the reason were obvious. “His name is *Kingsley*.”

Evie blinked at him for a moment. “Are you serious?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

Fair point. Evie actually hoped he wouldn’t attempt a joke—the shock might kill her.

He lifted the open pouch and gently laid Kingsley the Frog back inside it before turning to Evie. “Just a little farther until we reach the manor.”

Evie followed, but not quietly this time. “How do I know you aren’t just keeping me alive so you can kill me in a more fun way later?”

“What is a fun way to kill someone, I wonder?” His face was inscrutable, but she could tell she’d surprised him again.

“Well, I don’t know! I’m sure one must find some joy in an activity they partake in so often.” She reached out a steadying hand and grabbed his shoulder as she stepped over a fallen log.

His shoulder tensed under her fingers, something Evie didn’t completely hate the feeling of, but his face remained impassive. “You’re correct. There are a few fun ways.” He stepped out of reach once she was safely past the log, and she dropped her hand back to her side. “But I hardly have need to implement them when your two left feet will be your undoing.”

“For the last time, I am not clumsy. I fell once. The first time was your fault, too.” She strutted in front of him, arms crossed. “I have my faults, Your Evilness, but one of them is not being prone to—”

Smack!

Evie’s head reeled back sharply. *Ouch.*

She blinked at the open night air, wholly confused about what had just happened.

A heavy sigh sounded behind her as The Villain moved around her small form to place his hand against her invisible attacker. But the minute his fingers touched the space, a barrier began to dissolve around them in a flash of blue light. The corners of the scenery melted away, revealing large stone walls and a black iron gate. Behind it, high-rising cobblestone towers.

His castle was hidden by magic—that had smacked her in the head.

The gate swung open, and The Villain motioned for her to walk in front of him. As though resigned to dive headfirst into a moat of hungry sea dragons, she followed his instruction. Honestly, at this point, what else could she do? She'd exhausted any other options when she'd agreed to help him and let him help her in return. May as well see this through to its bitter, bloody end.

Massacre Manor was far too large to just be considered a manor. It could probably house her entire village, plus another two villages of the same size, comfortably. It was dilapidated and crumbling in some parts, but there was a charm to its dishevelment. The stones making up the structure were muted grays and browns, moss and vines overgrowing in the crevices and spaces between. But its disorder made it appear inviting and mysterious.

Perhaps even a little comforting.

They stepped around cracked fountains covered in more moss as Evie's gaze bounced about the surrounding garden. It was surprisingly well-kept. In fact, she was sure she saw a patch of daffodils and choked back a giggle.

But the grandeur of the space was truly the most frightening, as it somehow seemed to grow bigger the closer they came—increasing at the same level as Evie's impending doom.

In short, it was huge, and what a very grand place to die.

Swallowing hard, staring at the dark wood of a large door, Evie turned toward The Villain, signaling a question with her eyes.

"If you push on it lightly, the door will open." There was a confusing dryness to everything he said. Like he either had a secret sense of humor or he truly believed everyone else in the world was incompetent.

"I know how doors work," she said, exasperated.

He squinted, as if he didn't quite believe her. "Then why isn't it open yet?"

Ah well, incompetent people everywhere it is, Your Evilness.

"Let me get that for you, sir!" A gravelly voice sounded from the window above them, and Evie shrieked in surprise, stumbling back into The Villain.

“Hurry, Marvin. Ms. Sage seems to be having some sort of attack.”

“How long has he been up there?” She pulled away from the solidness of his chest and found herself alarmed to catch the freshness of his scent. Shouldn’t he smell like death? Not faintly of cinnamon, whiskey, and cloves.

“He’s one of my guards. He’s always up there.” As if they’d timed it, the heavy door swung open with an ominous creak.

Evie followed him inside to the dimly lit entry hall. “Okay, I’m inside your lair, Your Evilness. Why have you brought me here?”

He rolled his black eyes and trudged across the massive room toward several large stone stairs against the far wall, leading to who knows where. He called out over his shoulder, “If you’re going to work for me, Sage, you cannot continue to call me that.”

His strides were long, and Evie rushed to catch up as they began their ascent. “Work for you?” The idea was too ridiculous. “I can’t do that. You’re...you’re...bad.”

He froze on the second flight, leaning against a stained glass window. “I am,” he said, not even attempting to deny it. He walked toward her, looming. She knew he was trying to intimidate her. “But you said you needed employment.”

She had? Oh yes, she had, when she was in a ramble-induced state. Evie was used to people tuning out those musings, not marking them as job applications. “I do,” she admitted wearily. “But why would you possibly offer me a job? What about today has told you I’m qualified for any of the kind of work you do?”

“You have a cutthroat way of thinking I find valuable, and you helped me, despite all you’ve heard about my reputation.” He looked down at the blood-soaked scarf around his waist.

“Your injuries!” Evie reeled back, looking at him with disbelief. “I completely forgot. Are you in a lot of pain?”

He grimaced but didn’t pull the scarf from his waist. “I heal quickly.

What of *your* injuries?”

The bruise on her hip was going to be ugly and purple. As for the bite of the arrow that had nearly flayed the skin off her back, it was stinging, but the worst of it had subsided.

“I’ll live.” She shrugged, neglecting to mention the additional knife wound on her left shoulder. Put there by her last employer.

That still hurt like a bitch.

He nodded, holding his hand out, and said, “What do you say, Sage?”

Evie paused, knowing admitting this could get her killed, but she couldn’t bring herself to lie. “Would you still be offering me this position...whatever it is...if you knew that my father was once a knight for the king?”

His face remained impassive; in fact, he looked bored. “Is he still?”

“No no! It was well before I was born. It was just a way for him to save money for his butcher’s shop. He retired after he married my mother.” The next part was painful, so she said it quickly. “He’s far too ill to work anymore anyway, and his only loyalties are to his family.”

The Villain shrugged. “Then I do not see why that would be any sort of issue.”

Well, that one aside, she was certain she could still find quite a few.

“What would working for you entail?” she asked, eyeing his hand like both a lifeline and a death sentence. “I have no interest in hurting people or helping you to hurt people. Or being one of your...lady friends.”

Hand dropping back to his side, his lips twisted upward, almost as if he were attempting to...smile? “You’re hardly the kind of woman I’d take to my bed.”

Evie’s face burned, and the sting on her shoulder was suddenly no comparison for the burn of rejection she felt in her chest. Which was ridiculous, because she hardly wanted to be desired by this man, but for goodness’ sake, she had a little pride.

Putting his hand before her once more, his beautiful face becoming an impassive wall, void of emotion save for the slight softness around his eyes,

he said, "I will be frank. I will not force you, but you know where 'Massacre Manor,' as you so eloquently called it, is located now. You know that I am not immune to the slice of a blade and, the worst of all your offenses, you've seen my face."

He stared hard at a curl lying against her forehead. She must have looked a wreck after running through the forest like a criminal.

"You are a liability, and I do not have the time to allow Tatianna to weave through your mind, removing the memories of this day. I am bleeding on my favorite shirt. You need work, and I'm willing to give you a generous position with an even more generous salary." When she didn't move, he sighed and added, "And I can assure you I have never harmed an innocent."

"But what of my village?" she blurted out before she could think better of it. "What if I help you harm someone I know?"

"That would be very awkward for you," he said unsympathetically.

She narrowed her eyes at him until he relented.

"I will spare the *villagers* from my *truly* murderous intents." His tone was agreeable, but she couldn't shake the feeling he was saying more than she was guessing.

She couldn't believe she was actually considering it, but the thought of being able to provide for her family had her heart racing in her chest. Before she knew what she was doing, her hand was clasped in his.

She'd expected it to be cold, but it was warm, and the sensation of his fingers curling around hers was making her feel drugged. "Fine, I accept your offer. What depraved things am I going to be doing for you, Your Evilness?"

Keeping their hands clasped and their eyes locked, he let a smirk dance across his full lips. "Congratulations, Sage, from this day forward, you are my new personal assistant." He dropped her hand and turned away to continue up the stairs, but he'd barely moved three steps before he turned back toward her dazed form. "And if you must call me anything, 'sir' will do just fine."