



A SPLIT OR
SWALLOW NOVEL

KISS OF THE BASILISK

LINDSAY STRAUBE

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OF THE
BASILISK

LINDSAY STRAUBE

 Bloom books

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This book is for anyone who has ever wanted more.

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About this Book

I'm told it's best to go into this book with absolutely no knowledge of its contents. As such, you'll find no blurb or summary here. Instead, I will leave you with some sincere advice: buckle up. The Split or Swallow series is unlike anything you've ever read before, and you may not read anything like it ever again.

Say goodbye to the person you were before this book. And once you've read it, hand it to your friend so they can read it too.

Part One

Chapter One

“You’ll never guess what happened to me last night,” Vera whispered.

Tem sighed. She had come to the bakery to deliver eggs and had gotten gossip instead. It was always that way with Vera.

“What happened?” she asked.

Vera leaned over the counter so only Tem could hear. “Jonathan took me under the bridge.”

Tem’s mouth fell open. Everyone knew what happened when a boy took you under the bridge. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Vera smirked. “I saw his”—she glanced over her shoulder, then back at Tem—“cock.”

Tem blushed at the word.

“You’ve never seen one?” giggled Vera, tossing her blond curls over her shoulder in haughty satisfaction.

“No,” Tem muttered. Vera knew quite well that she had never seen one, at least not in person. There were plenty depicted on the marble statues that lined the steps leading up to the church, but those were nothing to write home about. They looked like baby carrots. “What was it like?”

Vera leaned in, pursing her lips in a conspiratorial triangle. “It was firm,” she whispered. “Like a cucumber. But warm, and it fit perfectly in my hand.”

“You *held* it?”

Vera laughed.

Tem resisted the urge to hurl an egg at her.

“You don’t just hold it. You *play* with it. You stroke it up and down.”

Vera moved her hand to mimic the motion, and Tem memorized it instantly.

“Until he finishes.”

Vera giggled cruelly at the look on Tem’s face. “Oh, Tem,” she whimpered, her condescending tone unbearable. “Don’t worry. You’ll learn tomorrow night. That’s what the basilisk is for.”

Everyone knew what the basilisk was for.

“Of course,” Vera continued. “It doesn’t hurt to have an advantage. After all, the prince is going to pick the most skillful girl. I intend to get as much practice as possible.”

Only Tem knew the painful truth, which was that there was no one she could practice with. The boys her age didn’t talk to her, and if they did, it was only to inquire whether her mother’s farm had any spare roosters available. Gabriel was her only friend, and he wasn’t interested in girls at all. But it didn’t matter anyway. Tem had always known she wouldn’t have a chance with the prince, regardless of what the basilisk taught her. The prince was far more likely to choose an experienced girl like Vera to be his wife.

It was as if Vera knew what Tem was thinking, because she said, “You could always practice at home.”

Tem looked up. “How?”

“Touch yourself. If you know how to do that, you can better understand how to touch someone else.”

For once, Tem felt a small surge of victory.

She had already touched herself plenty of times in the privacy of her own room. She'd done it for as long as she could remember, and she knew exactly how to bring herself pleasure. Those solitary moments were important to her; they made her feel sexual and alive. She loved the euphoric weakness she felt after her orgasm, and she wondered if men felt a similar way when they finished.

"I'll try that tonight," Tem said, keeping her secret to herself.

Her superiority disappeared immediately at Vera's next words. "Of course, I was *so* pleased when Jonathan returned the favor."

Tem's jaw dropped. "He touched you too?"

Vera smiled widely, eager to perform for her audience. "He didn't just touch me. He *tasted* me."

Tem frowned. "I don't understand."

Vera laughed, the sound cutting Tem to her core. "No, you wouldn't, would you? You've never even been kissed."

Tem's embarrassment only deepened. If Vera wasn't referring to kissing, she must mean the other, more intimate act—the one Tem had only ever imagined and never expected to experience. Blush rose once again on her cheeks, dovetailing perfectly with her shame.

"What was it like?" Tem asked despite herself. She loathed giving Vera a platform but desperately needed to know the answer.

"Oh, Tem," Vera giggled again. "You'll find out eventually." She paused, and her mouth twisted cruelly. "Or maybe you won't. After all, who would want a girl who tastes like chicken shit?"

The insult was too great for Tem to bear. It hit her right in her insecurities, confirming every dark, horrible thing she had ever thought about herself—that she was nothing but a farm girl, that she was dirty and unlovable, that no man would ever look at her the way she dearly wished to

be looked at. It took enormous effort to keep those thoughts at bay, and just when she'd managed to do so, girls like Vera reinforced them.

Tem had had enough of this stupid conversation. "Do you want these or not?" She brandished the carton of eggs in her arms.

"Yes," Vera sighed, clearly disappointed they were no longer talking about her. "One moment." She grabbed the eggs and flounced away.

Tem used the time to gather herself. She felt ridiculous and pathetic every time she let Vera get the best of her. But it was impossible not to feel inferior when she'd never even kissed a boy. She would never be like Vera with her silky pink ribbons, dangled teasingly in front of the boys at the market. She would always be the girl who tasted like chicken shit.

When Vera returned with Tem's payment, she sneered one last time.

"Get some rest, Tem. You're going to need it."

On the walk home, Tem allowed herself to cry.

She took the roundabout way through the woods so nobody would see her tears, walking along the edge of the wall that encircled the entire village. Twelve feet tall and made of wood, the wall looked nondescript from the inside. But on the outside, it was sheathed in mirrors.

Centuries ago, when humans had arrived in this part of the world, they hadn't known that the basilisks were already here. The monsters weren't a problem at first; when they wore their human forms, they looked just like humans—*attractive* humans. Their sexual influence was undeniable, and it was the main reason the villagers were able to coexist with them for so long.

But when they wore their *true* form—when they turned into huge, ruthless snakes—they became a threat. The resulting war was bloody. The basilisks had magic that the villagers couldn't defend themselves against. That is, until they learned that the basilisks had weaknesses: the crowing of a rooster, the smell of a weasel. It wasn't until a snake dropped dead after

looking at itself in a puddle of water that the villagers realized they were also a threat to themselves. They'd won the war with mirrored shields. In exchange for the territory outside the wall, the basilisks agreed to use their seductive talents to train the prince's future wife to ensure she would bear him an heir. A tentative truce was formed, and the two groups had lived in relative peace ever since.

The small cottage Tem shared with her mother was nestled on the edge of the forest, and Tem felt a wave of warmth when she saw it. It had always been home to her, no matter what awaited her outside its walls.

Her mother looked up from the kitchen table when she walked in. "How did it go at the bakery, my dear?"

"Terrible," Tem said.

"With the eggs or with Vera?"

"With Vera."

"I told you to ignore that girl."

"She's like a gnat. Gnats are hard to ignore."

Tem's mother sighed, wiping her hands on her apron. "You must learn to shut out the noise, Tem."

"Like you do?"

It was a low blow, and Tem knew it. Her mother was the only person more affected by the town gossip than Tem was. Raising a child on her own in a village that revered fatherhood and idolized male heirs hadn't been easy. Add to that her occupation as a chicken farmer, and Tem's mother was a pariah. Which made Tem the daughter of one.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Tem said preemptively.

Her mother pursed her lips, clearly suppressing her hurt. "Think nothing of it, my dear. I know you're nervous for tomorrow."

Nervous didn't even begin to cover it.

Before she could put her foot in her mouth again, Tem retreated to her bedroom. It was her sanctuary in more ways than one: every time the world seemed too large, she knew she could end the day alone in her bed.

Tem hung her cloak in her wardrobe before lying down and staring blankly at the ceiling. She felt endlessly tired, like the weight of the entire world was on her shoulders. And it might as well have been. If she didn't do well tomorrow, she would let her mother down. They were humble farmers, and people like Vera looked down on them. They had nothing. If Tem were to win the prince's hand in marriage, their entire reputation could change.

Tem wanted nothing more than to make her mother proud, which entailed getting as far along in the training process as possible. She stood no chance of winning. But if she could make it past the first elimination round at least—maybe even the second, Kora willing—then maybe her mother would forgive her when the prince didn't choose her. There were matches available for girls who ranked highly in the training but didn't marry the prince. She could marry a duke or a lord of some sort. But even if the prince was impressed with her—an impossibility—she wouldn't have a true chance with him unless she was one of the final three girls. Those three girls would sleep with the prince, showing off everything they'd learned during the training. The prince would choose his wife after that.

Tem rolled onto her side with a sigh. She stared at the palms of her hands, which were sprinkled with freckles. The tiny dots of pigment trailed from the end of one palm to the other, forming a pattern across her skin not unlike a constellation.

“You hold the stars in your hands,” her mother had always said, rubbing Tem's fingers between hers. “Just like your father.”

But when Tem had asked to know more, her mother had grown quiet, and Tem had learned quickly not to dig any deeper. She knew her father was a sore subject. Her mother had left him before she was born, and that was the

extent of her knowledge. Tem had often wondered what he could have done to make her mother leave, especially given how difficult it was to run the farm without a man shouldering some of the burden. But it was useless to wonder. And Tem didn't care to know anyway. It wouldn't change the way the villagers whispered about them or the way Vera looked at her like she was some disgusting bug she needed to squash. Things were never to be fair for them. Tem had accepted that long ago.

The only thing that mattered was what would happen in the caves tomorrow.

Vera's words replayed in her mind: *Get some rest, Tem. You're going to need it.* Tem closed her eyes. By the time she woke, it was dinnertime.

Her mother was at the stove, tending a pot of stew. Tem pulled a loaf of bread from the cupboard and had barely begun to slice it when there was a knock on the door. Tem knew from the sound of it—five short, sharp *braps*—that it was Gabriel.

Her mother's head popped up from the pot.

“*Don't let that infernal boy in.*”

Tem rolled her eyes. The last time Gabriel came in, he'd accidentally knocked over the drying rack, shattering several of her mother's favorite serving platters. Tem had spent hours trying to glue the ceramic back together, to no avail. Gabriel couldn't help it; his limbs moved almost of their own accord, with utter disregard for inanimate objects—or people for that matter.

“I won't,” Tem said, already gathering her cloak. She'd forgotten Gabriel had wanted to drink tonight, and now that she had remembered, it sounded like the best thing in the world.

“And don't stay out too late,” her mother insisted.

“I won't.”

“And don't—”

“I *won’t*.” Tem placed her hands on her mother’s shoulders.

Her mother looked up at her. “Tomorrow is important, Tem. I just want you to—”

“Make an impression. I know. And I will.”

“I want you to make a *good* impression.”

“I *will*.”

Her mother didn’t look convinced. Tem wasn’t really convinced either.

Brap brap brap brap brap.

Tem glanced at the door. “I have to go. I’ll be back early, I promise.”

She pressed a quick kiss to her mother’s temple before throwing on her cloak and opening the door. There stood Gabriel, all six chaotic feet of him. He wore a long leather jacket, his caramel hair lightly tousled from the walk over.

“Leather?” Tem said. “Really? You said you weren’t trying to take someone home tonight.”

“I’m always trying to take someone home.” Gabriel stuck his head through the doorframe to give Tem’s mother a jaunty wave. “Hello, Mrs. Verus. You’re looking lovely this evening.”

Tem’s mother gave him a scalding glare.

Gabriel was unfazed. “What’s cooking? Smells delightful,” he crooned.

“We’ll be back soon,” Tem said hurriedly, pushing Gabriel onto the porch.

He threw his arm around her as they stepped into the garden. “Your mother doesn’t seem to like me anymore.”

“You terrorized her serving platters. The woman holds a grudge.”

“*Pah.*” Gabriel flicked his fingers as if that was of no concern to him. “Give me a week. I’ll be back in her good graces.”

Knowing Gabriel, he would be.

“But enough about me.” His arm tightened around her. “Can you smell that, Tem?”

“Smell what?”

He made an exaggerated show of sniffing the air. “*That* is the smell of your virginity disappearing into the wind.”

She shoved him as hard as she could, with little effect.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t be trying to get *you* laid tonight?” he continued without missing a beat. “It couldn’t hurt to get you some practice before tomorrow.”

“With who?” Tem asked bitterly.

“I’m sure we can find a lively bartender who would delight in your company.”

“The only bartender at the Horseman is Old Steve. You want me to fuck Old Steve?”

“No. But I’m sure Old Steve wouldn’t mind fucking a pretty young thing like—”

She smacked his arm. “Why don’t *you* fuck Old Steve?”

Gabriel gasped dramatically. “Please, Tem. I have standards.”

“Not that I can see.”

“Bit feisty tonight, are we?”

She smacked him again, and this time he threw his hands up in surrender.

“*Fine*, neither of us will fuck Old Steve. His loss. *I*, on the other hand”—he grasped the lapels of his leather jacket, snapping it down smartly against his shoulders—“am on a mission to get the stable boy to notice me.”

Tem frowned. “From what I saw last night, Henry already noticed you.”

“No, not Henry. Peter.”

“What’s wrong with Henry?”

“Nothing. He’s been commissioned for a travel assignment. He’ll be gone for the next two weeks.”

“What travel assignment?”

“He’s helping ferry people in for the eliminations.”

It was customary for the prince’s extended family to congregate for the duration of the training. Those with a high enough ranking would stay in the castle, while the rest would infiltrate the village’s inns. It was a notoriously fruitful time for the village economy. Even the homeliest bed-and-breakfast would experience a boost from the uptick in wealthy patrons.

“You seriously can’t go two weeks without kissing a stable boy?” Tem said.

Gabriel laughed. “I *could*. But why would I want to?”

She had no answer to that.

By the time they got to the Horseman, Tem was aching for a drink. The bar was busier than usual, which wasn’t a surprise. The entire village was on edge, anticipating the events of the next several weeks.

“Beers?” Gabriel said.

“You’re buying.”

“Anything for you, dearest.”

Tem slid into their usual booth and looked around the room. There was Vera, sequestered in a corner with Jonathan. She was sitting aggressively close to him, practically on his lap, with her breasts pushed together. Two tables over was a group of girls talking excitedly. Tem recognized them; they would be going through the training with her. She wondered if they were as nervous as she was. If the way they were laughing was any indication, she doubted it.

By the time Gabriel returned with the beers, Tem's stomach had worked itself into a fiddly knot.

“To Kora,” Gabriel said, raising his glass to hers. It was the traditional toast.

“To Kora.” Tem downed half her beer in one gulp.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “Thirsty?”

“Very.”

He followed her gaze to Jonathan and Vera, who were kissing each other like it was their last night alive. He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t they know they’re in public?”

“True love waits for no one,” Tem said bitterly.

Gabriel snorted. “That’s not true love. *That’s* an unplanned pregnancy waiting to happen.”

Tem had to laugh at that. She doubted Vera was stupid enough not to take the infertility herb, considering how much sex she had on a weekly basis. All the girls took it, including Tem, although it wouldn’t matter during the training; it wasn’t possible to become pregnant by a basilisk. At least that’s what everyone said. But the same stories had circulated the village for years that, in extremely rare cases, it *was* possible. And if it were to happen, the baby would be an abomination of nature: half human, half basilisk, forever caught between the two species, never fully fitting in with either. But that was nonsense. Nobody Tem knew had ever met such a creature, and there was no reason to believe the rumors.

Gabriel’s voice pulled her from her musings: “Who do you think will win?”

Tem looked up at him. “Win what?”

“The prince’s hand in marriage, of course. Who will be the lucky lady?”

Tem found it telling that he didn't automatically assume it would be her. Even her best friend had no faith in her abilities. She could only answer with the truth. "Vera. She doesn't even *need* the training."

"Hm," Gabriel said thoughtfully, taking a sip of his beer. "She's too easy. Men don't like that."

Tem cocked an eyebrow at Jonathan, whose hands were unashamedly down the front of Vera's dress. "It would seem that men do."

"That's not a *man*, Tem. That's a boy."

Tem could hardly tell the difference. "Who do *you* think will win?"

Gabriel shrugged. "You, of course."

Tem blinked. Maybe he did believe in her after all. "You must be joking."

"I'm not. Why shouldn't the prince choose you?"

"I can think of a hundred reasons."

"Name one."

Tem could've listed them all, but she chose the most obvious. "I'm inexperienced."

"That's what the basilisk is for."

It was the conversation at the bakery all over again.

Tem bristled. "I *know* what the basilisk is for. But even if I learn everything there is to learn, I'll never look like *that*." She jerked her head at Vera, who was barely distinguishable from Jonathan.

Gabriel scoffed. "If you ever look like that, I'm never hanging out with you again."

She shot him a glare. "Be serious, Gabriel."

"I *am* serious, Tem. You're too hard on yourself. You're a catch."

"It doesn't count when you say it."

“Does it count when Old Steve says it? Because I’m sure he would if we asked him.”

Tem resisted the urge to pour her beer on his lap. “The *prince* has to think I’m a catch. And I can assure you, he won’t.”

Gabriel tapped her twice on the nose. “You’ll never land a man with that attitude.”

“The prince is hardly a man,” she grumbled, swatting his hand away.

The prince was twenty years old, just like Tem. Only girls born in the same year as the prince were eligible for the training. She’d never seen the prince up close, although if Vera’s bullshit story about running into him in the town square was to be believed, his eyes were green. Tem didn’t believe the story, and she definitely didn’t care what color his eyes were.

“It could be worse, you know,” Gabriel said.

“What could?”

“The training. At least the prince will make his choice based on who he likes in bed. If it were based on other skills, you’d have no chance at all.”

Tem frowned. “What other skills?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Cooking, for example.”

“*Cooking?*”

“I’ve had your shepherd’s pie, Tem.” He wrinkled his nose. “Gamey.”

Thankfully, at that moment, Peter walked through the door.

Gabriel leaped to his feet, adjusting his jacket and running a hand through his hair. “Duty calls,” he said before making a beeline for the stable boy.

After that, there was nothing left for Tem to do but watch Vera and Jonathan test the bounds of what was appropriate to do in public. Two beers later, Tem was ready to go.

True to her word, she wasn't home late. But the cottage was quiet when she arrived, her mother already in her room, probably asleep in anticipation of an early morning on the farm. Tem washed her face in the bathroom before crawling into her bed and staring once more at the ceiling. Usually, she would touch herself before falling asleep, but the thought of meeting the basilisk tomorrow was so intimidating that she couldn't even do that. She tossed and turned violently, unable to settle.

When she finally slept, she dreamed of fire.

It didn't burn her. Rather, it warmed her gently, from the tips of her toes to the base of her skull. The fire felt familiar somehow, as if it were sent by someone she had known a long time ago. Flames licked her fingers, her palms, her arms. A single breath brushed her cheek. Then it was over.

The next morning dawned like any other. Tem went about her chores, delivering her eggs and helping her mother in the kitchen just as she always did. But in the back of her mind was the constant knowledge that in less than twelve hours, she would be face-to-face with a basilisk.

By the time evening arrived, she was taking her angst out on the potatoes.

“*Careful, Tem,*” her mother said. “You’re going to cut yourself.”

A cut was the least of Tem’s problems. She threw down the knife in exasperation. “I’m not ready, Mother,” she said. “How will I know what to do?”

Her mother sighed, brushing her hair from her face.

“You will learn what to do. The basilisk will teach you.”

“What if I’m inadequate?”

“All girls are inadequate when they go into the caves.”

“Not all girls,” Tem muttered, thinking of Vera with Jonathan.

“Trust me, my dear. You will do just fine.”

Tem sighed. It was no use—her mother simply didn't understand. Tem had absolutely everything to fear. Inadequacy was but a single feather on the wing of her insecurities. Tem couldn't imagine a scarier scenario than the one she was about to experience.

And yet the dream ran through her mind.

If what awaited her in the caves was anything like what had happened in the dream, she knew she had no reason to fear.

“It’s nearly nightfall. Why don’t you go get ready?”

Tem nodded. Anything was better than chopping potatoes.

She retreated to the bathroom, drawing a bath and washing quickly, trying not to think about every inch of her naked body. When she returned to the kitchen, her mother gestured to the bench.

“Sit.”

Tem sat.

Her mother tapped her on the knees. “Pull up your skirt, my dear.”

“Why?”

Her mother held up two amber glass vials. “We must apply oils to your thighs.”

Tem frowned. She didn’t want to go into the caves with oily thighs.
“What for?”

“Ylang-ylang is for bravery. Sandalwood for heat. They will give you courage and capture the eye of the basilisk.”

“Hopefully not literally,” Tem muttered as she pulled up her skirt.

“Of course not, my dear. You know what I mean.”

Tem sighed, watching as her mother took the stoppers from the vials and spread the oils on her thighs. She rubbed them in with warm fingers, leaving the skin shiny and bright. The rich, woodland softness of the

sandalwood was an appropriate mate for the floral depth of the ylang-ylang. Tem could imagine how the scents would entice a man.

But was it truly a man she was to entice?

“Mother,” Tem said tentatively as her mother resealed the vials. “What will it be like?”

She’d never asked her mother about her own time in the caves. But her mother had been just like Tem, born in the same year as a prince, and she had participated in the same training. The current king hadn’t chosen Tem’s mother as his wife, but Tem often wondered what her life would have been like if he had.

Her mother sighed deeply, and for the first time that evening, her brow softened. She looked like she was remembering something significant.

“It will be...transformative. You will take the first step to becoming a woman.”

“I thought I was one already.”

“Not nearly, my dear. You have barely begun to live. You cannot possibly fathom the journey you are about to embark on.” Her mother tugged Tem’s dress down, stepping back to look at her fully. “Now remember, this is but the first of many nights. Do not offend him, or else he may not allow you to come back.”

“How would I offend him?”

“Kora willing, you won’t. But knowing you, you’ll find a way.”

Tem sighed. Her mom wasn’t exactly wrong.

“You must remember to be polite,” her mother continued. “And to defer to him completely. You are the student, and he is the teacher. This is not the time for your headstrong nonsense. You will do as he says and try to learn something.”

Tem nodded, although her stomach had turned into a tangled mess. She was no good at following instructions—she never had been. Why would she be good at this most important, fundamental thing?

“I’m hopeless, Mother,” she whispered, her eyes on the ground.

“No, my dear,” her mother said kindly, placing her palms on Tem’s shoulders. “No girl is hopeless.”

Her words were of no comfort to Tem. She craved specificity from her mother—she wanted to hear that she, herself, wasn’t hopeless. But that was not what she expected, and it was not what her mother provided. There would be no specificity; there would be no coddling for Tem tonight or any night. There was only the task at hand and her willingness to complete it.

“It is nearly time,” her mother said. “Come.”

Tem nodded, following her mother out the front door and along the cobblestone path to the street. She could see Vera ahead of her, following her own mother out of their cottage. By the time they reached the edge of the trees, Tem was last in the line of fourteen girls and their mothers.

They walked as if in a trance, nobody speaking as they followed the long dirt path into the woods. It was a chilly night—one of the first nights of autumn. Tem tried to calm herself down, but it was no use. Her thighs were oily and her head was light; she felt as if she might be sick. She was seriously considering turning around and sprinting home when suddenly the wall loomed in front of them.

Tem had never been beyond it. She knew there were doors at various points along it but had never gone through one. They weren’t even locked—locks were unnecessary when the mirrored exterior was protection enough. But the thought of running into a basilisk in its true form—and risk being turned to stone by its deadly gaze—was plenty of motivation to stay within the wall.

Tem said a silent prayer to Kora as they passed through the door.

As soon as they were outside the wall, Tem saw that they were at the base of the mountain. The line of girls stopped before a long row of caves, each entrance a gaping mouth in the moonlight. For a long moment, nothing happened. And then, through the haze of the evening gloom, a figure emerged from the shadows.

Tem's heart caught in her throat. She was too far away to see it clearly but close enough to know that it was wearing its human form, as expected. That was part of the deal: none of the girls vying for the prince's hand would die in the caves. It would violate the truce. Of course, Tem found it hard to trust an agreement that was made hundreds of years ago. But she had no choice.

Beside her, Tem's mother grasped her wrist. "Be brave, child."

Tem didn't have to turn around to know she was gone. All the other mothers were leaving too, kissing and embracing their daughters before disappearing back down the path until only the girls were left standing alone in the cold.

Nobody said a word.

Tem realized that despite being told about the training nearly every day for the better part of her life, she had no idea what actually happened next. How would she know which basilisk she would be paired with? Would she be the one to choose, or would they?

Before she could ask the girl next to her, the basilisk stepped forward.

"You have come here to learn," he said, his voice echoing against the rocks. "At the end of the training, the prince will select one of you as his wife."

Silence.

It wasn't exactly new information. Still, it was jarring to hear it now, moments before it was about to begin.

“It is our job to prepare you for that honor.” His eyes flicked over them, and Tem flinched when they landed on her. “Proceed to your caves.”

Nobody moved.

How were they supposed to know which cave was theirs? They awaited further instruction, but the basilisk didn’t speak again. To Tem’s satisfaction, even Vera looked nervous.

Suddenly, the girl in front of her gave a short, garbled scream before turning and running back toward the wall. She disappeared through the door a moment later.

One down, thirteen to go.

Somehow, the deserter gave Tem strength. She was no coward; she would not run. She had come here to make her mother proud and, more importantly, to make herself proud. She may not care about the prince, but she *did* care about a life beyond the chicken coop. She owed it to herself to find it.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Tem stepped forward.

Everyone looked at her, but she ignored them. Instead she concentrated on the caves, staring at each of them in turn. Fourteen caves. Fourteen basilisks. It was no use. She closed her eyes. The second she did so, something came to her, unbidden. The sensation was like a light in the darkness, calling to her. She moved to follow it, walking toward the farthest cave, feeling a shadow of what she had felt in the dream—a soothing warmth that drew her in. She knew, somehow, that she was heading in the right direction.

She didn’t see whether the other girls followed her lead. Instead she clambered over the rocks to reach the entrance of the cave before slipping into the pitch-black. It was warm. Almost uncomfortably so. It took her eyes a moment to adjust, but once they did, she saw there was a dim light in

the distance. She walked toward it, eventually finding herself in a room lit by firelight.

In front of her stood her basilisk.